

Review Article

Rendering visible monks in the shadow of power: A review essay on *The Irish Buddhist* and *Monks in Motion*

Thomas Borchert

The Irish Buddhist: The forgotten monk who faced down the British Empire

By ALICIA TURNER, LAURENCE COX and BRIAN BOCKING
New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 320+xv. Illustrations, Timeline, Glossary, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

Monks in Motion: Buddhism and modernity across the South China Sea

By JACK MENG-TAT CHIA
New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 275 + xxi. Illustrations, Appendices, Glossary, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

A few years ago, while teaching an intermediate level course, I asked my students to do a research report on a pre-twentieth century ‘Buddhist’ figure. I teach at a medium-sized public university that has a respectable library, but not particularly rich archives from Asia, and my students rarely have a command of Asian languages anyway. They struggled to find people that they were both interested in writing about and fulfilled the goal of being visibly Buddhist and pre-twentieth century. They mainly ended up with royalty of various places as well as monks or nuns who showed up in biographies of eminent monastics from East Asia. One of the (only partially intentional) object lessons that my students got from this is that most Buddhists who have lived are invisible to us. This is true not just of the people who lived prior to the twentieth century, but is also true—surprising to my students—of people late into the twentieth century.

There are several reasons for this, some of which involve the current information age of the Internet, and some of which are obvious but worth repeating.

Wide knowledge of the lives of Buddhists is limited by records that have been kept (or not), and the availability of the records. Knowledge is also limited by the languages of these records, what other languages they are translated into, and the status or prominence of the archives where they are housed. It is also limited by the types of stories that scholars—historians, anthropologists, political scientists,

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sociologists, and scholars of religion—artists, and politicians (all non-mutually exclusive categories) have chosen to tell. The (re)telling of stories are constrained and shaped by both political and intellectual projects that privilege certain narratives, again by language of scholar or politician, and even intellectual inertia. It is easier to tell the stories of monks and nuns, and lay men and lay women who one already knows something about than it is to tell stories from scratch. All of this adds up to many absences in the historical record about the lives, the movement, and the institutional work of many Buddhists. It is thus with significant appreciation that I receive two recent books on little-known Buddhist lives of the twentieth century, *The Irish Buddhist: The Forgotten Monk who Faced Down the British Empire*, by Alicia Turner, Laurence Cox and Brian Bocking and *Monks in Motion: Buddhism and Modernity across the South China Sea*, by Jack Meng-Tat Chia.

Both monographs focus on the lives of some important and not-so-important monks. *The Irish Buddhist* tells the story of the life of U Dhammaloka, a wandering labourer from Ireland who emerges (kind of) into the historical record at the start of the twentieth century. Dhammaloka, who was ‘forgotten’ according to the authors and whose given name remains a mystery, was among the first White Europeans to take the higher ordination in colonial Burma and to live as a monk. During the twelve years or so of his monastic career, Dhammaloka travelled around Burma on speaking tours, as well as across Asia, from Ceylon to Japan. In addition, he founded schools and a printing press, and was put on trial by an imperial court for attacking Christianity, a story that frames the book. Turner, Cox and Bocking have tracked down the traces of this man’s life, to complicate what we know of Buddhist life at the turn of the twentieth century. *Monks in Motion* tells the story of the expansion of Chinese Buddhism into Island Southeast Asia over the second half of the twentieth century by focusing on the professional lives of three important monks, Chuk Mor (Malaysia), Yen Pei (Singapore), and Ashin Jinarakkhita (Indonesia). All three men were institution builders who set up schools, sects and associations to create what Chia refers to as ‘South China Sea Buddhism’. Not all natives of Southeast Asia, they laboured on behalf of the ethnic, diasporic Chinese communities of the region.

These four men—U Dhammaloka, Chuk Mor, Yen Pei and Ashin Jinarakkhita—have all been absent from the scholarly record of Buddhism in Southeast Asia for different reasons. Dhammaloka was a marginal figure who emerged into history seemingly through sheer force of will (and the authors’ incredible detective work). He came from a subaltern world of vagabond, beach-combing labourers, and while he intersected with some important figures in Buddhist history such as Anagārika Dharmapāla and had pretensions of greatness, his life belonged to the messy world of the imperial underclasses which has been largely invisible to the historical record. His efforts to build a Buddhism that served the Burmese against the Christian British empire—if this was his primary goal—were ultimately unsuccessful. And while his life story and work intersected meaningfully with Burmese nationalists—his ordination was sponsored by important monks and his defence against the charges of attacking Christianity was mounted by important Burmese lawyers—a White man, even a monk, did not quite fit in with nationalist narratives of the Burmese anti-colonial

movement.¹ Chuk Mor, Yen Pei and Ashin Jinarakkhita were far more successful than Dhammaloka at creating lasting Buddhist institutions, but their achievements are part of the Buddhist world that has been heretofore largely ignored by the academic study of Buddhism in Europe and North America—they are Chinese Buddhists, but in Insular Southeast Asia. With few exceptions (such as that of Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng), scholars of Buddhism in Southeast Asia have focused on Mainland Southeast Asia, especially the forms of the religion we now call Theravāda. Where Dhammaloka was forgotten in part because he belonged to the wrong class, the wrong race and did not fit neatly into anti-colonial narratives, Chuk Mor, Yen Pei and Ashin Jinarakkhita have been invisible to the international academic community because they belonged to a minority ethnicity living in an overlooked geographic location that until recently lacked a robust contemporary Buddhist tradition.

In both cases, these books expand our understanding of Buddhism in Southeast Asia in the twentieth century. I do have criticisms of both books, which I shall discuss below, but I also found them insightful and rich in describing aspects and parts of the Buddhist world that have been hidden from us. Clear and well-written, *The Irish Buddhist* and *Monks in Motion* are valuable for those of us in Buddhist Studies, both scholars and students. These books bear reading together because they point to some important scholarly trends, but in order to give each of them their due, let me focus first on them separately. I begin, chronologically, with *The Irish Buddhist*.

Reading *The Irish Buddhist*

The Irish Buddhist reads something like a mystery. Turner et al. begin with a sedition trial that Dhammaloka went through in Burma in 1910, and they end with the results of this trial (which I won't reveal—no spoilers!), and the disappearance and perhaps death of Dhammaloka in 1912. In between they tell the story of his life as an ordained monk which spanned a little more than a decade, beginning with his full ordination in 1900. Prior to this, the man who became Dhammaloka left few traces that can concretely be identified as the person who became the Irish monk. In this decade however, the monk was incredibly busy in his efforts to build or rebuild Buddhism: he went on speaking tours in colonial Burma; established Buddhist educational institutions in Thailand and Singapore; set up a publishing company that provided cheap copies of Dhamma texts as well as free thinking and republican tracts; and travelled around Buddhist Asia—to Japan where he was a witness and perhaps a participant in (ultimately failed) efforts to establish an international Buddhist association (in 1902), to India (where he showed up in a best-selling travelogue), and colonial Ceylon, where he travelled on a speaking tour with the inimitable Anagarika Dharmapāla. He travelled and did so much that in some ways he seems something like a Forrest Gump of the early twentieth century Buddhist world—always appearing in places where important things were happening. In all of these contexts, according to Turner et al., the Irish monk preached and published and fought against the legitimacy of the British Empire in Asia and elsewhere, hence the subtitle, 'The Forgotten Monk who Faced down the British Empire'.

1 Alicia Turner, Laurence Cox and Brian Bocking, *The Irish Buddhist: The forgotten monk who faced down the British Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 23.

Pretensions aside, U Dhammaloka was not an important figure, but he left surprisingly robust traces of his life and activities. Notices of his speeches and/or sermons and his travels appeared in newspapers around Asia, as well as those published in seemingly random places around the world. A substantial part of the work that Turner et al. have done is to discover and recreate a timeline of the events of his life. Fitting together the puzzle of Dhammaloka's life has necessitated speculation by the authors, particularly pre-ordination, as well as to uncertainty around his death (indeed, Dhammaloka seems to have spread news of his own death for reasons that remain murky). It is also clear that the Irish monk spent a good deal of time creating his own publicity, and seeking to be the central figure wherever he found himself. The portrait that the authors paint is of a cheeky rogue, driven by a dislike of the British Empire, as well as a desire to uplift the Buddhist communities of Southeast Asia. He was also clearly a bald-faced liar, making claims about his position in ways that were out of step with his status as a fully ordained monk who in other contexts seems to have followed the Vinaya faithfully. The authors seem driven in part just by the desire to figure out who this guy was, and if they are perhaps a trifle too taken with the monastic scamp (or at least more than I was), their attention reveals some fascinating parts of the story of Buddhist Asia that have been less visible to (or seen by) scholars writing in English at least.

There are two things in particular that Dhammaloka reveals to us according to Turner et al. The first is that he provides a window into a world of non-elite Buddhists. Dhammaloka travelled occasionally among elite circles, whether in colonial Burma (among high-ranking monks and lay elites who sponsored his ordination and supported his defence in order to foster their own agendas) or Ceylon (travelling with Anagārika Dharmapāla). Nonetheless, he was a lower-class monk and traveller, and his concern seems to have been for those on the lower end of society. (Because of the power and authority of the British Empire which he seems to have detested, it is not clear, at least to me, how he understood the way class worked within Burmese and other Southeast and South Asian societies.) His people were not simply to be pitied, but were thoughtful and critical Buddhists who travelled, wrote and published. Turner et al. refer to this social milieu as a plebian cosmopolitanism, a cosmopolitanism born of lower- and under-class interactions that had a transnational scope. These interactions took place along the transport networks built by empire, whether of the United Kingdom or United States, of rail and steamship, connecting the colonial entrepôts of Southeast Asia. The writings of this community also travelled and the literary works of Dhammaloka—his speeches, essays, publications of his press—also travelled such that Turner et al. found evidence of Dhammaloka in archives around the English-speaking world. Such archival artefacts enable us to see the movements of someone like Dhammaloka, but they also point to the existence of broader social networks and discursive communities that have not been preserved or only preserved in a highly fragmentary form. Moreover, they point to the way in which Buddhist communities were shaped by class dynamics. Within Buddhist Studies, attention to class has been limited at best, and as the authors point out, discussions of nineteenth and twentieth-century Buddhist networks and movements have often uncritically and unintentionally described elite and higher-class forms of Buddhism as if they

represent Buddhism as a whole. *The Irish Buddhist* thus expands the questions we need to be thinking through.

The second aspect of the early twentieth-century Southeast Asian Buddhist world that Dhammaloka points to is the way racial barriers undergirded the Empire. In many ways, Dhammaloka seems to have ignored and bashed through racial and class borders as a monk, and this clearly sometimes made those in power uncomfortable. ‘The ideological apparatus of empire —with its myths of strict racial, colonial, ethnic, and religious divisions—was only ever a thin veneer over the pluralist and cosmopolitan interactions taking place at the height of British colonialism ... Colonialism in reality ran on interactions and interconnections between different ethnic and religious groups’.² Dhammaloka complicated colonial racial practices, however. He makes common cause with the residents of the Tavoy monastery outside of colonial Rangoon, as well as with Chinese Buddhists in Singapore. In Turner et al.’s portrayal, Dhammaloka crosses racial, ethnic, class, and sectarian boundaries fairly fluidly, and his deep and consistent criticism of the British Empire is also, plausibly, a criticism of the racial boundaries that undergird it. As with the idea of the underclass, Dhammaloka’s actions point to the possibility of greater fluidity than scholars have realised.

At the same time, I wonder if the three authors miss some of the ways that Dhammaloka relied on his race to avoid trouble. Indeed, one suspects that it was not just his chutzpah, but also his Whiteness that enabled Dhammaloka to do so much. (Thanks to Anthony Irwin who helped me see this point). He was an oddity, a White guy in Buddhist robes, and this strangeness probably opened doors for him. Japanese Buddhists probably would not have taken him in had he not represented both the original forms of Buddhism and a presumed civilisational superiority of the White race. One also suspects that he may not have been particularly deeply connected to Buddhist communities in Asia, either in terms of local lay communities or Sangha officials and hierarchies. This served him and his Burmese allies well in some ways. He was able to say things that they would have been less likely to; he was also paid attention to in a way that few junior monks would have been. At the same time, his Whiteness may have manifested in more troubling ways. Turner et al. tell a story of Dhammaloka criticising—‘defeating in debate’, he says³—an Indian Christian convert. The story that they quote has the Indian Christian slinking away in defeat from the proud Irish Buddhist. I have no way to judge how much of this encounter may have happened as described or how much is a dramatic recreation for the sake of the travel memoir it came from. I have little doubt that there was real argument and contestation between advocates of religious communities in early twentieth-century India. Yet I found this ‘triumph’ to raise more questions than it answered. Does the fact that the White guy is wearing Buddhist robes and the Indian guy is a Christian convert erase the violence of a White man harassing an Indian?

There is a related issue having to do with Turner et al.’s choice to focus on Dhammaloka, a White, transplanted monk, when so many Buddhists of this period remain unknown to the academic community. They address this squarely in the

2 Turner et al., *The Irish Buddhist*, p. 16.

3 Ibid., pp. 166–7.

Introduction when they point to the issues that Dhammaloka opens and complicates, pointing both to plebeian cosmopolitanism and the threat people like him posed to the imperial governing strategy of separating races and religions.⁴ I find this partially convincing: these are very important issues, but at the same time I am struck by the effort and labour that went into recovering the history of one European. That this is a problem is visible in the authors' choice to include an 'interlude' between chapters 5 and 7 interrogating the identity of the 'First Western Buddhist Monk'. In particular, its separation from the argument—interlude rather than chapter—suggest that the authors are not sure how to handle Dhammaloka's status. This was one of the questions they were really interested in, but what it does is to highlight the importance of White Buddhists, when their core argument is much more about the ways that someone like Dhammaloka sought to minimise or at least cross the lines of race demanded by the imperial state. This may be an irresolvable tension in the book. By focusing on the White monk, they unintentionally magnify something that he may have opposed.

Reading *Monks in Motion*

Monks in Motion does many interesting things. The book is generally about the emergence of independent, local Buddhist communities in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia in the second half of the twentieth century. The Buddhisms of these places are deeply shaped by Chinese forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism, especially through the lineages and networks established by Taixu in Southeast China in the 1920s and 1930s. Chia documents how Buddhism in these places relied on networks and ties between greater China and maritime Southeast Asia. He does this primarily by providing micro-biographies of three central figures in the Buddhism of each country, Chuk Mor (1913–2002), Yen Pei (1917–1996), and Ashin Jinarakkhita (1923–2002). In different ways and contexts, these three monks established temples and built institutions and practices in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia over the fifty years of the Cold War. The first two monks in particular demonstrate the central point that Chia emphasises. Chuk Mor and Yen Pei were both born in Mainland China, studied with Taixu at the Minnan Buddhist Institute, and left China with the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, travelling to Hong Kong and Taiwan, before ending up almost by accident in Malaysia and Singapore. In these places, the monks brought variations of humanistic Buddhism (from both Taixu and Yinshun) to bear in their efforts to establish and propagate Buddhism in peninsular Southeast Asia. Chia describes these Buddhisms as modernist, relying on Anne Hansen's understanding of forms of Buddhism which have 'a rationalist shift in Buddhist intellectualist sensibilities about temporality and purification, a shift that gave a heightened significance to the everyday actions and relationships of ordinary individuals in the here and now of modern life' as well as David McMahan's argument that Buddhist modernism was shaped by national particularities.⁵ Chuk Mor and Yen Pei were both involved in establishing educational institutions and

4 Ibid., pp. 14–15.

5 Jack Meng-Tat Chia, *Monks in motion: Buddhism and modernity across the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 3.

federations in their respective communities, and Yen Pei in particular became a driving force of social activism in Singapore in the 1980s and 1990s until his death.

Ashin Jinarakkhita, born in Indonesia, had a different trajectory than these other two monks. A Peranakan, he was born in Dutch colonial West Java within an indigenised Chinese-Indonesian community. While he travelled extensively, his 'motion' was not from one country to another but rather around colonial and postcolonial Indonesia, trying to foster Buddhism as an indigenous Indonesian religion. His Buddhist roots were not Buddhist modernism in the vein of Taixu. Attracted to Buddhism as a child, he was drawn into Theosophical circles, becoming an *anagārika* who was focused on restoring Borobodur and turning it into an active, international religious site.⁶ He took novice ordination in a Chinese Mahāyāna community in Indonesia in 1953, and because of disruptions caused by the victory of the Communist Party in the Chinese civil war, he took the higher ordination under Mahasi Sayadaw in Rangoon in early 1954. He spent the first fifteen years of post-colonial Indonesian history trying to build lay and monastic communities. While seemingly successful, these efforts went through a significant shift in the late 1960s when the politics of the New Order compelled him to develop a form of Buddhism that fit into the monotheistic requirements of the state ideology of *Pancasila*. While successful in having Buddhism recognised as a monotheistic religion in the early 1970s, this ultimately led to a splintering of his institutions, as well as conflicts with a number of Indonesian Buddhists who had been his students.

Chia's book is very revealing of Buddhist communities and institutions that have been heretofore ignored by scholars, but there are a few conceptual choices that weaken what is otherwise an excellent book. First, I do not think the clarity of what 'South China Sea Buddhism' refers to is as sharp as Chia implies. The three figures at the heart of Chia's book do not fully work together to create a single, geographically shared form of Buddhism. Chuk Mor and Yen Pei do, but Ashin Jinarakkhita was engaged in a very different project. The first two are transnational monks who end up in Malaysia and Singapore and find communities. They travelled a great deal and would have known each other. Their project is a similar kind of Buddhism, though it manifested in slightly different ways in the two countries. Ashin Jinarakkhita was committed to an indigenised, and yet universalist form of Buddhism. It is a modernist form of Buddhism by Chia's discussion, but in a very different way than is the Taixu-derived Buddhism of Chuk Mor and Yen Pei. Moreover, its universalism seems to me to be much more shaped by the Theosophism of his youth (which probably enabled him to shape it to the demands of the *Pancasila*, regardless of the politics). Consequently, his Buddhist modernism is very different, as is his way of relating to Chinese forms of Buddhism. As a result, even as Chia points to the Buddhisms that these men fostered as 'localized forms',⁷ it remains unclear to me if the forms of Chinese Buddhism that we find in Insular Southeast Asia should be thought of as a singular, linked phenomenon, or as three separate ones.

6 Ibid., p. 121.

7 Ibid., p. 157.

Second, and related, I think there is an insufficient explanation or thinking through of China, as a place, as an idea, as a source of ethnic identity, and as a source of fear and anxiety. On the one hand, all three of these men were 'Chinese' but in very different ways. They had different relations to the Republic or the People's Republic, spoke different languages, and their ethnic identity was produced very differently. Chia seems to understand China (or 'China?') as located in the mainland, because he invokes Southeast Asia as the Chinese periphery.⁸ This perhaps makes sense for Taixu's students who were in exile, but Chia's retelling of Ashin Jinarakkhita's life-story does not suggest that he saw Indonesia as part of the Chinese periphery. This reproduces a centre-periphery model of the world that is consistent with both Cold War scholarship and the vision of the contemporary Chinese government, but it is not clear to me that this is the way these three men understood their own lives. Worse, it potentially normalises one way of being Chinese (which the English word also does), while rendering invisible the ways that region, language, and ethnicity complicate the concept.

Third, I wish there had been more theorisation of the way that politics shaped these monks' lives. Chia is clearly aware of and references politics to greatest effect in discussing Ashin Jinarakkhita's development of a monotheistic Buddhism, as well as in his discussion of Yen Pei's move towards social activism in Singapore. However, in general politics is mostly undertheorised. For instance, Chia talks a lot about the 'institutionalization' of Buddhism in these places but ignores the conditions—meaning the political, national ecosystem—that inspires or requires certain choices over others. We have very little understanding of what the political and legal requirements of working in Malaysia and Singapore were, or what kinds of religious institutions were allowed and not allowed. For example, it may be that Yen Pei's shift to social activism, while consistent with his humanistic Buddhism, was primarily driven by requirements by the (fairly heavy-handed) Singaporean government, or limits put on his institution building. Similarly, and perhaps more important, the majority of this book takes place during the Cold War, and yet there is relatively little discussion about how Cold War politics shaped the choices of these figures (in this Chia is not alone; the Cold War remains an undertheorised frontier in Buddhist Studies). In part I suspect this is because Chia relies on autobiographical writings, hagiographies, and interviews with disciples, all of which are likely to downplay the way these monks were also political actors (or shaped by politics). But this means that the way 'religion' worked in the politics of the Cold War across maritime Southeast Asia is only addressed obliquely. One concrete example of this elision arises in the description of how in April 1955 Ashin Jinarakkhita led a Vesak celebration at Borobudur.⁹ Although Chia does not mention this, this ritual occurred two weeks after the Bandung Conference which brought together the leaders of countries from across the Third World and established the Non-Aligned Movement. It is certainly possible that there was no impact, but given the way Ashin Jinarakkhita later responded to the politics of the New Order, I would be surprised if he was unaware of or unaffected by such an important world event taking place a few hours away. This

8 For example, see *ibid.*, p. 51.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

third point is perhaps less critique than it is a call for us to attend more carefully to the role that politics may have played in these monks' lives.

Reading the books together

These are very different books telling stories about very different men. They are set in different times (the apex of colonial Asia and the era of the Cold War); they are focused on different kinds of Buddhism (Theravāda and Mahāyāna); they are centred around different kinds of monks (a charismatic scamp and three very serious students of Buddhism); and they tell different kinds of stories (a mystery and a series of intellectual biographies). Yet as I have noted, they open our collective eyes to Buddhist communities that scholars should know and understand better. That is, it would be better if our collective scholarly understanding of the development of Buddhism in the last two centuries knew more about the underclass and non-elites that populated and populate the Buddhist world as represented, intriguingly and problematically, by U Dhammaloka. Similarly, it would be better if we collectively knew and understood the ways that Chinese monks and Chinese forms of Buddhism have flourished in Island Southeast Asia, both those emerging out of local diasporic Chinese communities and those arriving via mainland Chinese missionaries. Despite these differences, reading these books together also makes clear some trends I see as mattering in the study of Buddhism in the last two decades. I want to focus on three issues that call out for rethinking: the strengths and weaknesses of biographical approaches to Buddhist history; the limits of Buddhist modernism as a concept; and the examination of Buddhist networks.

Both of these books are essentially biographies. In this, they are examples of a type of study that has become common in Buddhist Studies focused on modern forms of Buddhism in the last few decades—that is biographies of monks, nuns (to a lesser extent) or even lay individuals who have played singular or special roles in the development of Buddhism in contemporary Asia. Exemplary of this are Anne Blackburn's study of Hikkaduve Sumangala, Eric Braun's study of Ledi Sayadaw, and Stephen Kemper's study of Anagārika Dharmapāla.¹⁰ These books are varied—some are focused around the institutional and political lives of monks, others around the intellectual traditions that they followed or developed, but importantly they are not hagiographies. Rather they rely on the conceit that the lives of the Buddhists in question tells us something central about Buddhism either in a particular place and time or more broadly, such as the fact that there was a plebeian underclass that inhabited the Burmese Buddhist world that has been ignored, or that ethnic Chinese who created Buddhist communities and institutions during the Cold War have remained invisible to scholars because we think that Southeast Asian Buddhism is only Theravāda (even when we know that is not a sufficient understanding). This type of biography-based scholarship has been very productive—just as these two books are.

10 Anne Blackburn, *Locations of Buddhism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Erik Braun, *The birth of insight: Meditation, modern Buddhism, and the Burmese monk Ledi Sayadaw* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Steven Kemper, *Rescued from the nation: Anagarika Dharmapala and the Buddhist World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). We might also include the collected volume of short essays on Buddhist lives, *Figures of modernity in Buddhist Asia*, ed. Jeffrey Samuels, Justin McDaniel and Mark Rowe (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016).

However, I think there are some limits to this genre (just as there are to all genres of scholarship) that the books under discussion here both exemplify. In particular, in focusing as much attention as they do on particular figures, it can be difficult to also maintain a broader understanding of the sociological context within which the given figure lives and which both shapes them and is in turn shaped by them. For example, in Chia's discussion of Chuk Mor, a monk who became prominent in Malaysia, he dedicates significant attention to Chuk Mor's version of 'human life Buddhism' (*rensheng fojiao*). This makes sense both because Chuk Mor was a student of Taixu, one of the key monks in the development of this 'modern' form of Buddhism prevalent in Chinese Buddhist communities, and because Chia claims that one of Chuk Mor's key achievements was to 'displace existing forms of Buddhism in Malaysia with his interpretation of Human Life Buddhism (*rensheng fojiao*)'.¹¹ He does this by examining Chuk Mor's writings, the schools and other institutions that he founded, and the curricula that he developed. All of this is appropriate, but in talking about this and attending closely to Chuk Mor's writings, interviews with his followers or hagiographical volumes produced by his followers, Chia does not always help us understand what it was about Chuk Mor's work that was convincing to people, or even how broad his success was (or as noted above the legal context in which his efforts took place). There is a similar kind of problem that I see in *The Irish Buddhist*. In chapter 5, 'Multiplying Buddhist Missions: Singapore, Bangkok, and Penang', Turner et al. discuss Dhammaloka's travels around Southeast Asia where some of the highlights include the founding of schools in both Bangkok and Singapore and the creating or reinforcing of religious networks among a variety of Buddhist and ethnic groups. While again appropriate and interesting, their focus on Dhammaloka's movements means that they are not also asking questions about the institutional milieu or legal regimes governing these groups and networks—positively or negatively. The point is not that Chia, Turner, Cox and Bocking are engaged in bad scholarship—quite the contrary—but rather that their close attention to the lives that are their focus closes off or makes more difficult attending to the sociological environments that structure these lives and which need to be examined as well.

A second issue that emerges from reading these books together has to do with the problem of modernity and Buddhist modernism. These books deal with this differently. For Chia, it is a central issue, part of his subtitle ('Buddhism and Modernity across the South China Sea'), and one of the ideas that unifies his discussion of these three monks, as he argues they were all involved in propagating forms of Buddhism that 'the monks claimed were relevant to modern society and modern life'.¹² The three figures do this in very different ways, however, with Chuk Mor emphasising 'this worldly practice of Buddhism grounded in a particular vision of religious orthodoxy', while someone like Ashin Jinarakkhita fostered visions of Buddhist modernism 'based on a combination of doctrinal innovation and institutional building that were in line with national discourse'.¹³ Yen Pei's version of Buddhist modernism was also different, focusing on social activism, and utilising

11 Chia, *Monks*, p. 47.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 158–9.

Buddhist doctrine to find practical solutions to issues such as organ donation and drug addiction and rehabilitation. All of these strategies are familiar threads within the literature on Buddhist modernism, though I am struck by their differences from one another, which Chia locates primarily in national differences.

In *The Irish Buddhist* on the other hand, ‘the modern’ is not a central problematic; the authors are (as it would seem Dhammaloka was) much more concerned with opposition to imperialism. And yet, ‘modern’ filters in and out of their discussion. For example, in discussing a tour Dhammaloka took around Burma where he ‘won Burmese hearts’, they refer briefly to a ‘Society for Promoting Buddhism’, which they then refer to as a ‘modernizing organization’.¹⁴ What is interesting though is that as they describe it, the Society is primarily focused on protecting Buddhism by having the British recognise the legitimacy of the *thathanabaing*, an ‘archbishop’ or the head of the Thudhamma monastic lineage. This is a very interesting project and an important one in understanding the development of Burmese Buddhism over the nineteenth and early twentieth century in its development along with and in opposition to the British.¹⁵ But it is unclear what describing the Society as ‘modernizing’ actually tells us. Similarly, in their chapter on Dhammaloka’s press, they refer to ‘Modernist Buddhist organizations’ of the early 1900s as utilising publishing as a vehicle for fostering their vision of the world.¹⁶ Throughout the chapter, they are describing the kinds of tracts that Dhammaloka printed, which were both Buddhist in content, but also broadly democratic (such as the writings of Thomas Payne) and focused on international freethought. What makes these ‘modernist’, however, remains untheorised or even discussed. There is discussion of Dhammaloka’s critiques of Christianity as unscientific as opposed to Buddhism,¹⁷ another common thread in Buddhist modernism discourse. Yet at the same time, Dhammaloka’s modernism seems to be taken as self-evident and not in need of interrogation.

It is this taken for granted aspect of ‘modern’ or ‘modernist’ Buddhism that first gave me pause in reading these two books. It is frankly unclear to me if these books really benefit from their use of ‘the modern’, either in Chia’s more focused way or Turner et al.’s incidental version. My concern here is not really with the books—both of which I hope it is clear I think do valuable work in expanding our understanding of Buddhist communities in the twentieth century—but rather I think that it is time that scholars of Buddhism really focus on what we mean when we deploy the category of the modern and/or Buddhist modernism, and whether it is doing the work we hope it is. ‘Modernity’ has been a major catch-all within the field for describing both a time period (roughly the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) and an attitude or set of strategies within Buddhist communities centred on ‘adapting’, ‘accommodating’, or ‘remaining relevant’ within a world shaped by novel technologies and governing practices (‘Buddhist modernism’ has also been a major institutional

14 Turner et al., *The Irish Buddhist*, p. 65.

15 Alexey Kirichenko, ‘The *Thathanabaing* project: Monastic hierarchies and colonialism in Burma’, in *Theravada Buddhism in colonial contexts*, ed. Thomas Borchert (London: Routledge, 2018); Alicia Marie Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The impermanence of religion in colonial Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2014).

16 Turner et al., *The Irish Buddhist*, p. 175.

17 See, for example, *ibid.*, p. 55.

category, driving job descriptions, journal decisions and book series). Yet I would argue that it is also built on normalised visions of what Buddhism as a form of religion is through Cold War practices and categories that I find increasingly problematic. Buddhists have always been engaged in the world, so does it make sense to think about the kind of innovations of Yen Pei in trying to solve social problems as particularly ‘modern’? It is different when Buddhists themselves deploy these categories, declaring a practice to be modern. Then this becomes an issue for us to interrogate. Otherwise, it seems to me that the field would benefit from fewer references to ‘modernity’ and more attention to specific problems such as how Cold War discourses impacted religious innovations, or how demographic conditions conditioned the horizons imaginable to lay and monastic Buddhists. Indeed, this is what Turner et al. are doing when they think about the plebeian cosmopolitanism. We need more of this, and less of the focus on a modernity that was never as coherent or singular as our scholarship has assumed it to be.

The third issue that reading these books together highlights is the need to investigate and generalise about Buddhist networks, lay and monastic, both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and in the preceding historical eras. Both of these books, in different ways, are investigations of travelling monastics and the consequences of that mobility. This is obvious from the get go in *Monks in Motion*, not just in the title, but in the fact that Chia’s larger story is about the emergence of Chinese forms of Buddhism in the island nations of Southeast Asia primarily through the travel of eminent monks from Taiwan to Malaysia and Singapore. It is also a prominent narrative element in *The Irish Buddhist*, which is about a man who comes to Burma from Ireland, and then spends much of the book travelling around Buddhist and/or imperial Asia. Part of what I found myself wondering as I read these books is how the different transportation, communication and social networks within which they travelled were constituted. Some aspects of this are straightforward: Dhammaloka clearly followed imperial trade routes;¹⁸ Yen Pei and Chuk Mor received invitations from Chinese ethnic communities in Singapore and Malaysia. Other aspects are less clear, though. We know that the Cold War opened doors to some types of movement even as it closed down others. One suspects that language and sectarian affiliation also shaped religious networks, enabling certain movements and constraining others. Both of these books are filled with tantalising glimpses of the kinds of networks that these monks were a part of, such as Yen Pei’s visits to Thailand where he was met by members of the ethnic Chinese community in the country, but where he also seems to have met the Supreme Patriarch (*sangharāja*).¹⁹ Yet these remain tantalising glimpses, and we are still struggling to understand which Buddhists travelled where and when, who they encountered and found it useful to engage with, and which encounters were one-off rather than producing enduring relationships. Indeed, I wonder if we were to develop a richer understanding of imperial

18 Such as those described in Mark Ravinder Frost, “Wider opportunities”: Religious revival, nationalist awakening, and the global dimension in Colombo, 1870–1920’, *Modern Asian Studies* 36, 4 (2002): 937–67. For a recent discussion complicating the way we think of networks, see Anne M. Blackburn, “Circulations” in *Routledge handbook of Theravada Buddhism*, ed. Stephen Berkwitz and Ashley Thompson (New York: Routledge, 2022).

19 Chia, *Monks*, pp. 88–9.

and Cold War era Buddhist networks, it might provide us with better ways of thinking beyond the issues of modernity referred to above.

As my initial remarks should make clear, part of what I found valuable about these books is that they uncovered the stories of Buddhist monastics that previously had been invisible. Part of why these stories were invisible was that they represented category problems within the way the study of Buddhism in Southeast Asia has been conceptualised. That is: Southeast Asian Buddhism is Theravada, and Chinese Buddhism is the concern of Northeast Asia. The ethnic Chinese communities of Southeast Asia are thus peripheral and unimportant to Southeast Asian Buddhist worlds.²⁰ In a different vein, but to the same effect, a figure like Dhammaloka does not really have an obvious community to remember him: the British are happy to forget him, and Burmese are more interested in telling the stories of Burmese anti-colonial nationalists.²¹ The authors of these two books have done significant service to our field in uncovering their stories. These stories are part of the much larger narratives of Buddhist worlds constructed during the last two centuries in the wake of European imperialism, the formation of the nation-state system and its entanglements with and governance of religious communities, Buddhist and otherwise. I hope that it inspires us to build on the foundations of these books, to uncover more of the stories of forgotten people, but then also to embed them more fully in the political contexts and institutional milieus within which they practised their particular visions of Buddhism.

20 This is a point Chia is explicitly writing against. See *ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

21 Turner et al., *The Irish Buddhist*, p. 23.