# In this Issue

The five articles in this issue deal with actors in China, Zoroastrians in Bombay, Theravada Buddhists in Nepal, Jataka tales in Thailand, and educational reform in Baroda. Their methodologies are as diverse as their subject matter, and yet they share some common concerns—all of the articles, for example, are concerned in some way with the circulation of texts, and all of them are interested in the problem of representation.

SOPHIE VOLPP's article deals with a series of poems written by literati in seventeenth-century China in admiration of a young actor. She shows the ways in which the circulation of these poems constituted a network of social exchange, a community of literati. The article combines a close reading of the poems with a suggestive analysis about the ways in which gift-giving forms communities.

MANU BHAGAVAN's analysis of the attempts to form a university in the colonial Indian princely state of Baroda in the first half of the twentieth century shows the delicate ways in which the elites of Baroda maneuvered within the framework set by British educational policies. His analysis shows the complexity of the quest for an educational system that would be both modern and Indian, as well as the complexity of the position of the princely states within the British empire.

PATRICK JORY looks at the ways in which a modernizing monarch in early-twentieth-century Thailand operates on the fringes of colonialism, and the ways in which western studies of Buddhism, particularly reinterpretations of the Jataka tales (tales of the past lives of the Buddha) served King Chulalongkorn as he devised ways of modern nation-building.

LAUREN LEVE deals with the ways in which selfhood is constituted by Theravada Buddhists in Nepal, which is legally constituted as a Hindu state. She argues that the production of personhood is always a political issue; in the case of these reformist Buddhists, the control of subjectivity is a matter of equal interest to both religious authority and the state.

TANYA LUHRMANN writes about ways in which Parsis have rejuvenated their religion—ways in which by going back to older forms they have created something quite new and remarkable. She further argues that to understand contemporary developments in Zoroastrianism, we must understand the position of the Parsis as a diasporic community.

All of the authors were sent copies of all of the articles and were asked to comment on resonances among the articles. The point of this exercise is not to stretch to find similarities, but rather to begin a dialog across geographical and disciplinary boundaries, and to entice you, the reader, to read articles that might lie far afield from your area of expertise.

Lauren Leve noted that all of the articles seemed "to converge beautifully around the complexity of the public/private religious/political nexus, demonstrating the



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richness of the kinds of theoretical and historical questions about sovereignty and power that these conceptual distinctions hide (and the fascinating ways that real actors have understood this and played with it over time to their own ends)" (Leve, e-mail, 25 May 2002). She continues:

> For example, both my paper and Jory's explore the religious ground of political authority. Jory's example shows the king intervening in the religious realm (to discredit the Jatakas) in order to legitimate political reforms which would reinforce his own power; my own shows how religious transformation is imbricated in political change. Luhrmann observes that the modern Parsi orthodoxy is not a political project per se, but her interpretation of the way that Zoroastrian Studies represents a modern defense of Parsi identity and community hinges on religion's ability to create individual and collective selves. Questions of power and sovereignty—to whom, ultimately, does the actor belong? who is the subject/object/author/addressee of the poetry?—lie at the center of Volpp's analysis of the circulation of poetry, power, and desire. Finally, Bhagavan's paper also demonstrates how political contests may be waged in what would otherwise be regarded as "private" domains. His conclusion, that there were "multiple public and private realms in colonial India," the fact of which allowed the Gaekwad of Baroda to use the university as a "decolonial" weapon without directly challenging British political ascendancy, illustrates this perfectly. To label any of these events public or private, religious or political would be, it seems to me, to miss some of the most interesting aspects of each, which have to do with the construction (or defense) of sovereignty in contexts where the putative distinctions between the public and the private, the religious and the political as domains are what makes much of the human action being analyzed socially meaningful and/or politically possible.
>
> (Leve, fax, 10 June 2002)

Manu Bhagavan found that Jory's analysis of King Chulalongkorn's reinterpretation of the Jatakas to find a non-colonial modern resonated with his own work on the search for non-colonial modern education in Baroda.

> Patrick Jory's paper touched on a number of themes that relate to my own work, especially in his illustration of the encounter between Thai kingship, religious discourse, and colonial modernity. He notes, for example, that the Thai court's "rejection of the Jatakas in the Fifth Reign—which conveniently converged with contemporary Western scholarship on the Jatakas—was directly related to the repudiation of a Thai Buddhist form of political organization in favor of a more centralized, bureaucratic model, modeled on that of the neighboring colonial regimes. It was this model which helped the Thai court survive the colonial era." The production of the Jatakas, then, becomes central to recasting Thai authority as the non-colonial modern, to taking possession of and remolding ideas perpetuated in Western scholarship. This is remarkably similar to the process I see unfolding in princely Baroda throughout the twentieth century.
>
> (Bhagavan, e-mail, 23 April 2002)

Jory too sees a commonality of concerns between his own article and that of Bhagavan. He writes:

> My article would appear to have most in common with "The Rebel Academy" in that both articles concern issues of colonialism and knowledge. Both look at responses during the colonial period by a still-independent indigenous elite to European attempts to dominate knowledge production and dissemination, as well as the efforts of these elites to modernize their states independent of colonial political control.

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> Indeed, in this regard Siam's King Chulalongkorn and the Gaekwad of Baroda seem to bear interesting similarities.
>
> (Jory, e-mail, 8 March 2002)

Bhagavan sees a parallel problematizing of notions of historical time in the work of Jory and of Luhrmann. The notion of historical time is relevant to Jory's article, Bhagavan suggests, inasmuch as it was historical time that separated the Jatakas from the modern reader and made text remote from reader. He sees this as a discussion in which Luhrmann too participates, writing that she "unravels a parallel narrative in Parsi history. According to Luhrmann, evil is reinterpreted in a number of temporal milieus, suggesting not only the dynamism of faith, but once again the reconstruction of native notions within the paradigm of modernity" (Bhagavan, e-mail, 23 April 2002).

Jory begins his discussion of similarities between his work and that of Leve by noting that both articles deal with connection between Theravada Buddhism and politics. But he notes a difference in the nature of those connections:

> However, where my article emphasizes the Thai court's revision of its Theravada tradition in response to European encroachment in the colonial period, Leve focuses on a relatively small minority group's recent attempts to find space for Theravada Buddhism within a Nepal where the dominant religion of Hinduism is apparently becoming increasingly politicized.

He does note a similar concern on the part of the state in both Nepal and Siam/ Thailand with drawing religiously defined distinctions, and suggests that the concern is new:

> One interesting similarity . . . is in the attempts in both countries made by the state to delineate more clearly the various different religious traditions where previously little distinction had been made by most of the population, as well as efforts to standardize and elevate a dominant religious tradition to stand as the religion of the nation: in the case of Siam/Thailand, Buddhism; in that of Nepal, Hinduism.
>
> (Jory, e-mail, 8 March 2002)

Jory further suggests ways in which Leve's work on Theravada discussions of the self has the potential to contribute to contemporary discussions of the self by looking "at how Theravada Buddhist principles challenge dominant ideas of personhood through its doctrine of non-self, which has interesting ramifications for identity politics, particularly when religious identity in Nepal appears to be becoming increasingly politicized. Indeed, Theravada Buddhism and Buddhism generally have much to offer contemporary debates—especially those influenced by postmodernism—about the constitution and construction of the self (see Clammer 2001) (Jory, e-mail, 8 March 2002). Jory later elaborated on Clammer's argument, which suggests that "Japan's Buddhist intellectual heritage . . . could be drawn upon to construct an 'alternative social science' to that of the west" (Jory, e-mail, 23 May 2002).

Bhagavan sees a conjuncture of sorts in the ways Leve and Volpp are concerned with community and identity:

> Leve additionally [and oxymoronically] elucidates the ambiguity of private and public domains in Nepal, revealing the ways in which religiously coded bodies become contested political ground wrapped in the identity politics of state and citizenship.

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> This is a point that, in an extended sense, is raised by Volpp as well. Specifically, Volpp examines "the circulation of poems as gifts [and how they] instantiated a community centered on Chen Weisong and Ziyun." The detail of the poetry, conflating the homoerotic with the homosocial, "is phrased as though it were private, but is in fact a public and sociable act." Thus, the public community in late Ming and early Qing China is mapped out of the private poetics of desire.
>
> (Bhagavan, e-mail, 23 April 2002)

Lauren Leve, after reading the above comments by Bhagavan and Jory, wrote:

> Like Luhrmann and Jory, I also examine a case with roots in the effects of European colonialism on indigenous religious knowledge. The type of modernist Theravada Buddhism that I describe taking hold in Nepal today is in a sense the direct product of what happened around the turn of the century in Sri Lanka, when the urban middle class reformulated Theravada Buddhism as part of its resistance to British imperialism, rationalizing it, among other changes, in response to Orientalist interpretations of Buddhism, and especially, the British missionary presence. (In fact, this reform was inspired in part by no other than the same Colonel Olcott who appears in Luhrmann's essay; her concept of "Protestant Zoroastrianism" is based on Gombrich and Obeyesekere's description of this Buddhist reform.) One reason that Theravada appealed to the early Nepali reformers—and that it was reviled by the state—was just this modern aspect, which allowed them to represent it as more orthodox and authentic than other forms of Buddhism in Nepal. In this, and in other ways having to do with its theological and organizational structure, Theravada Buddhism shares strikingly many of the elements of both of the modern forms of Zoroastrianism that Luhrmann describes. Likewise, King Chulalongkorn's efforts to reform Theravada Buddhism in Thailand entailed a kind of rationalization of Buddhism similar to what was taking place in Sri Lanka at about the same time. Moreover, in contemporary Nepal Theravada plays a parallel role in relation to other Buddhisms. Today, Nepali would-be Theravada monks and nuns go to both Thailand and Sri Lanka for training and return to Nepal from both places with similar messages about the corrupting influence of popular culture on customary Newar Buddhism in Nepal and the purity of the reformed Theravada that they preach.
>
> (Leve, fax, 10 June 2002)

Sophie Volpp, the only author whose article does not in some way tackle the problem of the construction of modernity, finds that one of the things that the articles have in common is the ways in which they "comment upon the circulation and consumption of texts, in particular, the distinction between their representational significance and their performative significance." She elaborates:

> Luhrmann, for example, describes a subject who discovers upon undertaking theological study that the prayers he has intoned so fervently are in fact the battle histories of the Iranian kings. Luhrmann and Leve both write of a desire upon the part of religious devotees—Zoarastrians in Bombay and Theravada Buddhists in Nepal—to engage more fervently with the ethical and theological aspects of their religious texts. Their subjects describe how their lives have been changed by a religion that demands integration of faith and action rather than the simple performative repetition of prayers and rituals. While the distance between such texts and the poems in tribute to boy actors that I consider is vast, this distinction between representational and performative significance is important to an understanding of the poems.

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> It helps us to see, for example, that the iteration of desire for the actor was governed by social and poetic convention; its importance lay in the instantiation of community. In this wise, the manner in which poems in tribute to boy actors is reminiscent of the type of performative invocation of texts that Luhrmann and Leve's devotees decide to move beyond.
>
> (Volpp, e-mail, 16 March 2002)

Tanya Luhrmann sees methodological as well as thematic commonalities among the articles. She writes that:

> They do share some common themes. Perhaps this is true of most humanistic writing these days, but they share an interest in representation and the manner in which representations of identity and self interweave with the political process. I suppose what I found most intriguing, writing from the social sciences as I do, is that the papers seem for the most part to underscore the argument that, as Leve put it, the production of personhood and subjectivity is a political process. And this seems perfectly reasonable to me. But the papers also seem to suggest, less explicitly, that the political process, with its institutions and structures, is also a product of local subjectivity, of the way people shore up their identities in response to fears and insecurities which have long-lasting implications that could not perhaps been seen at first. This seems to me to be part of what is interesting about Leve's paper; it is also part of the Bhagavan paper, which makes an argument (somewhat suggestively) that there is an experience of the private as opposed to the public, and that the fact of this opposition has consequences for the way that university life is configured as anxieties about that distinction begin to shift. Meanwhile, Jory argues that a genre of stories emerged as part of a complex response to colonial representations of the past, so that rather than the scholarly musings of a bookish monarch, as he puts it, they are a political response to a threat to the kingdom's independence. Again, the production of subjectivity is a political process: but the politics here really emerge experientially out of a sense of what a proper self is, with a proper past, and that self is experienced and reacted to, not produced from whole cloth with the political process in a unidirectional process. Finally, there is the article by Volpp. This close reading of a Chinese text describes the way circulation of poems as gifts creates a kind of community. This is an article that asks for more psychological analysis on what it is like to be the gift, rather than the circulator of gifts, although it points out the limitations of our sources in so doing. This is a fine and haunting essay.
>
> (Luhrmann, e-mail, 6 May 2002)

By way of conclusion, I would simply like to add, echoing Luhrmann, that it seems to me that one aspect of the richness of these articles lies in the ways in which they delineate process. They show us texts and their circulation (poems in China, Jataka tales in Thailand, Zoroastrian texts in Bombay); subjectivities and how they are formed (Buddhist concepts of selfhood in Nepal, Chinese male literati subjectivities); and the processes whereby western knowledge is put to a variety of strategic uses by elites in early-twentieth-century Bombay, Siam, and Baroda. You as a reader will doubtless find other connections.

## Works Cited

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