Review


Reviewed by: Hiroko Kawanami, Lancaster University.

h.kawanami@lancaster.ac.uk

Keywords: merit; monastic recipient; moral economy; reciprocity; religious gift; ritual services.

This volume examines the multi-faceted dynamics that exist between religious recipients (monks, priests and tantrists) and society at large, and provides a major contribution to the study of religious gift-giving by stating that money or offerings do not flow just in one direction. It is composed of eleven chapters written mostly by anthropologists and provides rich ethnography of lived religious practices from China, Japan, Mongolia, Russia, Sri Lanka, Tibet and Thailand. The chapters tell us that monks and priests are involved in a wide range of reciprocal exchanges with society rather than being aloof renouncers as idealized in the scriptures. Hence, there is a departure from the textually based analysis of dāna to understanding the socio-economic aspects of religious giving and receiving, exemplified in the distinction between the ‘front’ and ‘rear’ side of the religious gift.

The volume also raises a question about how monastic institutions and religious actors are increasingly affected by capitalist economy, and some chapters discuss the prospects of Buddhism in the context of globalization, advancement of communication technology, and secularism. Nonetheless, the impact of commercialism is most evident in large urban centres. Beata Świtek presents an example of funeral services run by Buddhist priests in Tokyo and observes how their advertising is done via Amazon as an effective means of connecting with their danka (lay donors of the temple) in an increasingly commodified society. As temples become increasingly stripped of their former social functions, the chapter reveals the tension in generating income in their ‘religious space’, as it could potentially make their tax-exempt status untenable. Thomas Borchert describes the economic activities of Thai monks in Bangkok, where opulent donations are offered,
and how their attitude to receiving dāna is changing. The author examines their conduct in the political discourse of corruption, but the chapter also highlights the disjunction between their monastic conduct regulated by the Vinaya and the absence of a viable financial management structure, which has made monks more vulnerable to accusations of corruption.

There are several chapters on Tibetan religious specialists who conduct ritual services in peripheral regions of the Himalayas. Nicolas Sihlé carried out fieldwork in the northeast of Tibet and discusses the religious roles of lay ritual specialists called ngakpa in tantric Buddhism. They receive remuneration for providing apotropaic ritual services in funerals, exorcism, divination, and in healing sessions, but their relationships with regular patrons could lead to the commodification of ritual services and undermine their moral qualities. It is evident that the socio-economic environment in which these monasteries are situated in the locality affects their religious standing. This is shown by Hannah Rosa Klepeis’s fieldwork in Yunnan, in the southwestern province of China. Due to the economic boom in China, she describes how large monetary offerings to monasteries have led to an accumulation of wealth but also to a ‘mistrust’ of religious recipients by the laity. The chapter contributes to the discussions about the impact, both positive and negative, of monastic members receiving large amounts of monetary donations, which could affect the fundamental position of the sangha in society.

Some chapters examine the practical arrangements of the sangha and the laity working together and their activities are understood in a series of exchanges that form a continuum. Kristina Jonutytè focuses on the relationship between the sangha and the laity in post-Soviet Buryatia, the capital of Siberia Republic, and describes how their relations are maintained in complex layers of reciprocal exchange. That is, since the late 1980s, the sangha has played an important role in bringing distinct groups together by pooling and redirecting their resources into a ‘social field’, contributing to their collective projects and enhancing Buryat ethnic identity. The chapter by Mark Mills follows a similar theme from his research in Ladakh in northeast India and describes how monasteries have become integrated as part of society through what he refers to as ‘collective work’. He examines a ritual called Leh Dosmoché, held annually in the capital of Ladakh, and describes the types of offerings in which the sangha becomes a ‘nexus’ of various redistributive transfers.

Roger Casas takes us to Sipsong Panna, a small prefecture in southwest China where the Tai Lue people practise Theravāda Buddhism. As minority communities in the borderland come under the influence of the wider market economy, economic possibilities are opening up for monks as well, but new wealth can also put a strain on them as they try to reconcile conflicting demands from their close-knit families and their responsibility to cater for the village monastery as a whole. Jane Caple describes a similar problem for monks in the northeast region of the Tibet plateau and provides examples
of monasteries ‘doing business’ and generating income to sustain themselves. The question is whether these monks can successfully maintain a moral economy despite the sense of unease they feel towards generating profit. In both chapters, the issue of public perceptions of the wealth accumulation of monks is discussed, and the risk of losing ‘trust’ expressed by many reveals a deeply felt anxiety over their monastic future. Similarly, Buddhism in post-Socialist Mongolia, as introduced by Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko, highlights the moral crisis surrounding the Mongolian sangha in Ulaanbaatar as a result of political instabilities and growing status disparities, as well as the lack of support from local Buddhist communities despite an influx of international funding since the 1990s. The chapter raises a fundamental question about merit-making activities, especially when offering donations in exchange for ritual services is no longer linked to the notion of ‘merit’ in people’s perceptions, which could also have a negative implication for the future prospects of the sangha.

On the other hand, there are forest monks who practise and follow an ascetic lifestyle and they are successful in appealing to the Buddhist imaginaries of wealthy urban donors. Alexander Horstmann examines the case of khruba, a new generation of ‘wealthy ascetics’ or charismatic monks, who attract a large following by conducting miracles in the Thai-speaking regions around the Mekong River in northern Thailand. Their prosperity seems to derive from skills in drawing on their meditational practices and using miraculous powers. Some of them have become the centripetal force in building patronage networks, redistributing resources, delivering local projects, and contributing to the vitality of Theravāda Buddhism. In contrast to such an ascetic way of life that generates power and wealth, forest monks in Sri Lanka, as described by Prabhath Sirisena from his personal experience as a monk in the Samsthā community, lead a solitary life of practice regulated by strict adherence to the Vinaya. Their virtuous lifestyle and the practice of meditation seem to attract much attention from the outside world, resulting in a continuous influx of donations in cash and kind from both local and international supporters. Nonetheless, most monks in the forest tradition seem to continue their practice completely oblivious to their inherent symbolic appeal, taking us back to the prototype of an idealized relationship between a detached monastic recipient and lay donors who continuously seek for an other-worldly monk, who could promise them prosperity and security in an increasingly precarious world.

The discussions in the volume could develop in so many interesting directions. However, it is unfortunate that the editors have not paid much attention to the role of Buddhist women—in their role as nuns or priest’s wives, or even as the frontline pious performing various roles bridging the sangha and the laity and lubricating their reciprocal exchanges.