



***Educating Monks: Minority Buddhism on  
China's Southwest Border***

By Thomas A. Borchert. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017, 230 pages, ISBN 9780824866488 (hardcover) \$68US; ISBN 9780824866487 (eBook) \$19.99US.

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**T**heravāda Buddhism has played a crucial role in shaping the social and cultural traditions of many ethnic minorities in China's southwest regions, especially in Sipsongpannā (Xishuangbanna) Dai Autonomous Prefecture and Dehong Dai/Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture. In Yunnan Province, ethnic minorities such as the Dai (Dai-lue and Dai-neua), the Bulang (Blang), the Deang (Ang or Palaung), and some branches of the Wa have been influenced by various strands of Theravāda Buddhism, as their ritual calendar and rites of passage clearly show. Based on in-depth, multi-sited fieldwork in Sipsongpannā, and in the eastern coastal cities of China, Thailand, and Singapore, *Educating Monks* is an insightful study of the Theravāda Dai-lue and their position in a network of monasteries that extends beyond Chinese borders.

Marked by an abundance of vivid stories and ethnographic vignettes, and making liberal use of theoretical work, this book achieves two important goals. Firstly, by tracing Sipsongpannā monks' movements within China and their travels to Southeast Asia, Borchert's work sheds light on Buddhist monastic education more broadly and its embeddedness in processes of globalization and localization. Secondly, although its focus is on Buddhist monastic education, the book provides a variety of vantage points on the connections between the saṅgha and the state as well as on the saṅgha's relationship with the laity. The book also addresses Theravāda's links to other Buddhist traditions in China and in Southeast Asia.

Borchert presents the outcome of his research in six chapters, the first three gathered under the theme "*Shaping Buddhist Lives in Sipsongpannā*," the second three under the theme "*Educating the Monks of Sipsongpannā*." Chapter one outlines the daily life of the monks and their monastic education at the village level. Here the author contextualizes Theravāda in the social milieu of Sipsongpannā. In chapter two Borchert draws on a large body of literature and on his own ethnographic research to explore the relationship between the Chinese government and the Dai-lue. He examines, in particular, the way in which the Chinese government deals with ethnic minority religions. Chapter three looks at Buddhist networks that link Sipsongpannā with other places in China. Chapters four and five discuss monastic education in village temples, as well as in the dharma school located in Wat Pājie, Sipsongpannā's

main temple. Chapter six examines transnational monastic education and the journeys and experiences of Dai-lue monks who travel within these networks. Borchert shows that the movement of monks and novices from Sipsongpannā, who travel within China and abroad in order to further their education, is an experience shared by Buddhist monks from other Asian countries. He argues that this reveals the way in which Buddhism enables both trans-local and trans-national movements (155).

Borchert raises two questions that are of great importance for scholars of Theravāda and ethnic minorities in China. First, he asks what is unique about the way in which religion in Sipsongpannā has changed due to China's rapid political and economic transformations. Second, he interrogates the way in which this specific area of study can contribute to the larger study of Theravāda Buddhism. Borchert answers these two complex questions by discussing three interrelated themes: the relationship between being Dai-lue and being Buddhist, the role of the Chinese government in shaping Buddhist education and other Buddhist affairs, and Buddhist education networks that connect the local with the national and transnational levels. I will summarize Borchert's answers.

Theravāda Buddhism has been undergoing a revival in Sipsongpannā since the late 1980s. However, this process has been part of a general resurgence of traditional Dai-lue culture, and it is not limited to religion. Together with the Dai-neua in Dehong, the Dai-lue are recognized by the Chinese government as belonging to the "Dai nationality" (*Daizu*). This official classification, along with over half a century's governance by the central State, have fundamentally shaped their own ethnic identity and their status in Chinese society. The Chinese government designates Theravāda as a "special ethnic minority culture" (*minzuwenhua*). The effects of this designation can be seen in Borchert's discussion of the role of Buddhism in the development of ethnic tourism in the region, as well as in his examination of monastic education in Sipsongpannā as compared to Southeast Asia. He skilfully argues that there are important distinctions between monastic education in Thailand and Burma, on the one hand, and monastic education in Sipsongpannā's Wat Pājie, on the other. While the Thai and Burmese systems are perceived as having established more efficient forms of education and effective ways of controlling the saṅgha, Wat Pājie plays an essential role in fostering the ethnic identity of Dai-lue (139). Borchert also provides an example of an institute in Kunming involved in transnational monastic education in order to illustrate that being Theravādin and being Dai-lue are intimately related. More importantly, he also shows that the Theravāda religion has been used by Dai-lue elites to construct a unique ethnic identity within Chinese society.

The various levels of Dai-lue involvement with the State (their status as an ethnic minority, their religious status as Buddhists, and their Chinese citizenship) make the Dai-lue an exceptionally striking example of how the Chinese government deals with religion both as a general phenomenon and as a particular one (12). Borchert argues that any analysis of religion in China must take into account that the legal, constitutional, and practical definition of religion (*zongjiao*) has never been transparent in China. The category of "religion" has ambiguous connections with other categories, such as "evil cults" (*xiejiao*), "superstition" (*mixin*), and

“popular religion” (*minjianxinyang*). In the particular case of Dai-lue Buddhism, the role of the State has therefore been ambivalent. On the one hand, the Chinese government carefully regulates the saṅgha and its affairs, but on the other hand, it is precisely this state regulation that facilitates the movement of monks beyond Chinese borders. Despite government efforts to control the monastic order and regulate its institutions in Sipsongpannā, this centralized system fails to achieve total control. Borchert shows that authority over the temples, especially at the village level, remains in the hands of temple committees and village headmen (76). The State’s top-down policies therefore do not determine what actually happens at the local level. Instead, religion on the ground is a result of complex negotiations between different actors. Borchert points to Wat Pājie as an example, showing how this temple’s saṅgha is able to maintain agency through building relationship (*guan xi*) with the government.

Borchert shows that nation-wide policies have a direct impact on Buddhist apprentice education (119). A public-school education and monastic education are somewhat at odds with each other. Because of this tension, Borchert concludes, Dai-lue children and novices realize that they are Dai-lue the very moment they enter the public-school system (123-124). Furthermore, Borchert also discusses the influence of the Chinese government on the monastic school of Wat Pājie, its mission, and its curricula. Government pressure has led to the dominance of a recently-invented, government-sponsored Dai-lue script (at the expense of a more traditional script).

Borchert explores local, national, and trans-national Buddhist networks using the concept of a ‘spoke’, a key term for analysing human networks previously used by Charles Kurtzman (81–82) to explore mosque networks in Iran. A spoke is a relation that connects social units within a network, and Borchert uses it to analyse the formation of education networks linking Sipsongpannā to other places in China and beyond. At the local level, merit-making rituals, the recruitment of abbots, and the educational facilities serve as the main spokes for network creation. At the national level, practitioners and their networks rely on the Buddhist ethnoscape in Sipsongpannā, and particularly on membership in the Buddhist Association of China and on their ethnic minority status (87-88). At the transnational level, the spokes for mobility are more diverse. Monks and laypeople undertake cross-border journeys for education, merit-making, kinship, tourism, and pilgrimage. Borchert’s analysis reveals the hierarchical structure of the Buddhist saṅgha, stretching from the villages to the central temple of Sipsongpannā. He shows that monasteries that have a close relationship to the centers of power, or a superior position in the hierarchy, have more flexibility and agency in creating their networks.

While individual monks might enjoy a high degree of mobility, their networks remain tied to their ethnic identity and to the State. The monks’ domestic travels continue to be shaped by national Buddhist institutions and education systems. Although the Chinese government tries to further integrate Dai-lue monks into the State by supporting their studies in China outside Sipsongpannā, to a certain extent the Dai-lue remain outsiders due to the visibility of their customs and their ethnic identity (167). Because dharma schools in Thailand are highly transnational and have a decades-long connection to Sipsongpannā (160), many Dai-lue senior monks

and novices want to pursue further studies there. However, the differing attitudes of the Thai saṅgha and the Thai government to foreign monks have affected the transnational education of novices and monks. The Thai government worries that the Thai saṅgha, in its efforts to promote Buddhism in Sipsongpannā, might illegally bring or accept monks from the Shan areas and from Burma. The Thai government has therefore become more adamant that Thai abbots provide valid papers for foreign monks studying in their temples. As a result, monks and novices in Sipsongpannā have encountered problems and are now less inclined to seek monastic education in Thailand (162-163).

Like all provocative studies, *Educating Monks* hints at important issues that lie slightly beyond its scope and the immediate interests of its core readership. For example, Borchert brings up three central questions regarding Theravāda in Sipsongpannā but does not answer them in detail. First, how and why do temples continue to play an important role in educating men in Dai-lue villages after the Cultural Revolution? Second, given the patriarchy of Buddhism in Sipsongpannā, what is and what will be the role of women in monastic education and other Buddhist practices? Finally, how do temple committees work with the saṅgha when dealing with Buddhist affairs, such as the general management of the temple, and in organizing large-scale rituals and temple renovations? Although Borchert's answers to these questions are incomplete, they may facilitate the work of other researchers.

There is, however, one important feature of Sipsongpannā that the book does not examine with the attention it deserves: the tremendous impact of the rapidly developing economy of the region. At one point Borchert briefly refers to “a rational choice” made by monastic educators that was “based on the development of the Chinese economy, and not compelled by the Chinese government” (151). One might look more deeply at this and add that the laity also make such choices. Continuous economic growth has affected Buddhist practices. For example, the number of young boys joining the saṅgha has been rapidly shrinking over the past two decades as they find profitable alternatives outside of the monastic order. Moreover, the large number of Burmese monks who are working (in the sense that they are paid a salary by villagers) in Dai-lue village temples has transformed both monastic education and Theravāda practice in Sipsongpannā. Although one cannot expect a book to cover every topic, it comes as a surprise that Borchert does not address these issues in greater depth. In addition, given that rituals are of great importance in monastic education, the book would benefit from a more detailed ethnographical analysis of how Theravāda is actually ritualized and thereby localized in Sipsongpannā.

Despite these reservations, I thoroughly enjoyed reading *Educating Monks*. The book engages with many themes central to Buddhist Studies and the anthropology of Buddhism that are seldom treated with adequate attention. Moreover, Borchert addresses these themes as they relate to the most neglected region of the contemporary Southeast Asian Theravāda world. This book should be read not only by those hoping to learn more about Buddhist education, but also by those with an interest in ethnicity in China, transnational Buddhist networks, and Theravāda Buddhism in general.