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Introduction: Chinese Buddhism in Transnational Contexts

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This special section began with a panel called ‘Dharma Tourists, Diasporas and Buddhist Transnationalism: Spreading the Dharma Under the Global Condition’ at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Conference in 2018. In the panel, we presented our case studies of contemporary transnational Buddhism and asked questions such as why and how Buddhists move and what it takes to formulate Buddhist border-crossing networks. The three papers selected here all relate to transnational Chinese Buddhism. The three papers are: Jack Meng-Tat Chia’s ‘Nanputuo Monastery and the Xiamen Buddhist Networks’, Jens Reinke’s ‘The Buddha in Bronkhorstspuit: The Transnational Spread of the Taiwanese Buddhist Order Fo Guang Shan to South Africa’ and my own ‘Transnational Buddhism and Ritual Performance in Taiwan’. Taken together, they provide a chronological picture of the development of transnational Chinese Buddhism since the modern period.

In this Introduction, I will explain, firstly, our choice to use a transnational approach over a globalisation approach for our analysis; and, secondly, the definition of Chinese Buddhism and the common determinants in transnational Buddhism that emerged from our three papers.

Globalisation versus transnationalism

‘Globalization, defined as the increasing flow of people, information, goods, services, and other resources across national boundaries, is altering social contexts in ways that influence religious practices’, write Wuthnow and Offutt (2008, 209). The statement implies that with the rapid advancement of technology in transportation and communication in the modern period, the pace of globalisation has increased. As such, the distance between different economies, peoples, cultures, etc. narrows, and there is an increasing homogeneity across the globe. In the field of religious studies, it has been noted

that globalisation makes it very difficult to speak of a religion in isolation or bounded within national borders (e.g. Beyer 1994).

As much as globalisation aptly describes border-crossing activities, a globalisation approach does not appropriately reflect the research findings in this volume. One reason is that such an approach tends to be macro-oriented and top down; it simplifies the role of individual agents (i.e. people) and units of societal formation (e.g. families, religions etc.; Faist 2010, 83–86). For example, one of the earlier theorists of globalisation, Immanuel Wallerstein, proposed in the 1970s that border-crossing activities can be analysed through the exchanges between the core (i.e. the West), the semi-peripheral (i.e. emerging economies) and the peripheral (i.e. the rest) systems (e.g. economic, political, cultural, etc.) (Wallerstein 1974). This is known as world-systems analysis.¹ The problem is that the border-crossing activities discussed in all three of our papers take place outside the so-called ‘core’ countries, making world-systems analysis (and, therefore, the globalisation approach) problematic for our case studies. The globalisation approach also places great emphasis on the role of the nation state, analysing border-crossing activities through the macro level of governance, questioning whether the influence of the nation state will remain in the face of globalising forces (e.g. Hirst and Thompson 1995). While this discussion is not invalid, and remains relevant in our case studies here in that broader political factors do play a role (below), our papers focus more on the micro level of societal units such as migrants. A transnational approach allows us to take a bottom-up perspective, to see migrants as agents in the flow of border-crossing activities, and to ‘look at processes of re-embedding the social in cross-border societal formations [e.g. families, tribes, etc.]’ (Faist 2010, 82).

One of the leading scholars in the study of transnational religion, Peggy Levitt, writes that ‘[c]ontemporary migrants extend and deepen these cross-border ties by transnationalizing everyday religious practice’ (2004, 2). She identifies three patterns of transnational religious organisations: extended, which ‘allows migrants who choose to do so to move almost seamlessly between sending- and receiving-country parishes and religious movement groups’ (2004, 2); negotiated, which ‘incorporates migrants into an emerging set of cross-border organizational arrangements’ (2004, 2–3); and recreated, which ‘strongly reinforce members’ ties to their home country’ (2004, 3). Her study shows the importance of micro-level analysis (i.e. seeing migrants as agents in border-crossing activities). In adopting a transnational approach for analysis, we will be able to see migrants as agents who initiate transnational activities and discuss our case studies in terms of transnational networking. We will see how each of the case studies fulfils one or more of the patterns identified by Levitt, and in addition, since Buddhism is a networking and proselytising religion in and of itself, offers services to the host cultures.

Furthermore, transnational Buddhism is not a modern product and, as Lee and Chang point out, it has a longer history than 'globalisation' and conceptualises the individuality of each connecting node better than a globalisation approach does (2013, 13). I will cite examples of Buddhist border-crossing activities before the mid-twentieth century to illustrate this point.

The particular Buddhist traditions concerned in this paper – Sinhala, Vietnamese and Chinese (more on the definition of 'Chinese Buddhism' later) – can all trace their border-crossing activities to pre-modern times. The Buddhist nuns' order in the Chinese tradition, for instance, can trace its lineage to a group of Sri Lankan nuns who travelled to China to transmit the nuns' higher ordination (*upasampadā*) in the year 433 CE (Shih Pao-ch'ang 1995, 53–54). The Theravada monks' ordination is also a product of border-crossing networking. According to Sinhala chronicles, the Buddhist monks' ordination was transmitted from India to Sri Lanka during the reign of King Aśoka in the third century BCE and also from Sri Lanka in later centuries, being both transmitted to and received from other Southeast Asian countries (Bechert 1970, 763–764). The current ordination lineages of Sri Lanka are all the result of these exchanges. By the mid-1700s, the higher ordination in Sri Lanka had died out. Pressured by the competition from European colonialism, Christian missionaries and a class of Buddhist householder priests named *gaṇinnānses* (literally, 'members of a collective'), a group of novice monks and *gaṇinnānses* travelled to Ayutthaya, the then capital of Siam (Thailand), to receive *upasampadā* in 1753, and thus established the Siyam Nikāya, 'the ordination lineage from Siam'. Similarly, during the climax of the reform movement in the nineteenth century, mainly out of the agitation against caste discrimination in the Siyam Nikāya and other kinds of infighting, the other two main nikāyas in Sri Lanka today – Amarapura Nikāya and Ramañña Nikāya – were introduced in Sri Lanka from Burma (Bechert 1970, 765).

In addition to monastic ordination, there are many other examples of border-crossing networking between Sri Lankan Buddhism and other Theravada communities. Goonatilake illustrates the vibrant interaction of scriptures, monastic ordination and teachers between Myanmar and Sri Lanka in pre-modern times (2009). Given the perception of righteousness and exclusiveness of Pali scriptures in Theravada Buddhism, Fräsch introduces the concept of the 'Pali cosmopolis' (2017), providing a rich description of the border-crossing networking among Theravada communities in Southeast Asia.

There were also vibrant border-crossing activities in pre-modern Vietnam. Perhaps because of the closer geographical proximity, Vietnamese Buddhism and Chinese Buddhism share many commonalities. China invaded and dominated Vietnam from the first century to the tenth century CE, and during that time, Chinese culture greatly influenced Vietnam (McLeod and Nguyen 2001, 15–16). In Vietnam, Chinese characters can be seen in many ancient Buddhist temples, and many Vietnamese rituals seem strangely familiar in the eyes of a

Chinese Buddhist like myself. Situated on the Indochinese Peninsula, within land and sea trade routes, it is speculated that Vietnam received Buddhism from multiple sources (Dinh et al. 2008, 14). Records show that many Buddhist missionaries stopped in Vietnam before travelling to China. One such case is K'ang Seng-hui. Said to be an ethnic Central Asian but probably born in India, K'ang Seng-hui had resided in Vietnam before taking up residence in China in 247 CE, where he was one of the earliest and most important Buddhist missionaries to China (Ikeda 1986, 20–30). An earlier example is an Indian monk named Mahājīvaka, who had stopped in Vietnam before travelling to China during the reign of Han Emperor Lingdi (168–189 CE; Dinh et al. 2008, 25–26).

As in the case of Sinhala ordination lineages, many Vietnamese ordination lineages are fruits of border-crossing activities. The Vietnamese Wu Yantong sect, for instance, was founded by the Chinese monk Wu Yantong ('Vo Ngon Thong' in Vietnamese) in the ninth century (Dinh et al. 2008, 65–67). Despite the connection with Chinese Buddhism, over time Vietnamese Buddhism localised and developed its own schools. Characteristics of Vietnamese Buddhism subsequently vary from those of Chinese Buddhism. One obvious difference is the attitude towards secular affairs. In feudal China, political ideology was dominated by Confucianism, whereas in Vietnam, Buddhism was used by a number of dynasties as the basis for political ideology (Nguyễn 2002, 231). While Vietnamese Buddhism developed native characteristics, the exchange of ideas and interaction of monastic members continued. One noticeable personality is Chinese monk Chuyet Chuyet (also known as 'Chuyết Công Hòa Thượng', 1590~1644), who was born in the Fujian province of southern China. At the close of the Ming dynasty he migrated to Vietnam where, supported by members of the Vietnamese royalty and aristocracy, he came to play a crucial role in the Buddhist revival (Dinh et al. 2008, 186–187; Tan 2005). Decades later, the monk Minghai Fabao (1670–1746), also a native of Fujian, migrated to central Vietnam and became a Ch'an Buddhist patriarch (Pham 2015). Intriguingly, both monks were connected with Fujian, which has a long history of contributing to transnational Buddhism that continues to this day. The significance of Fujian's port city Xiaman as the epicentre of Southeast Asian Buddhist networks of the early modern period is explored in Chia's paper in this volume. Additionally, the majority of the population of Taiwan are descendants of Fujian migrants, and monastic exchange with monasteries in Fujian once dominated Buddhist discourse in Taiwan (Shi 1996). We hope that highlighting the importance of Fujian in Southeast Asian Buddhist transnational networks over the centuries will inspire further research in this area.

By the twentieth century, Buddhist border-crossing activities became ever more frequent, so much so that '[s]ingle-country approaches to the study of Buddhism miss the crucial significance of international networks in the

making of modern Buddhism' (Turner, Cox, and Bocking 2013, 1). The introduction to their volume on global Buddhist networks of the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries highlights the dynamism and complexity of border-crossing Buddhist activities in and with Asia in the early modern period. Driven by the desire to reform and revive Buddhism, border-crossing activities were perceived as necessary by many Buddhist reformers. An important example is the Chinese reformist monk Taixu (1890–1947), who looked to Sri Lanka for what he considered 'Original Buddhism' (Ritzinger 2016). His idea is said to have subsequently influenced Buddhism in both contemporary Chinese Buddhist discourse (Pittman 2001, 255–298) and Buddhism in Vietnam (DeVido 2007). Another Buddhist reformist, Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933), native of Sri Lanka, travelled widely around the globe, attending the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, and subsequently establishing transnational networks to support and advance his Buddhist revival movement centred on reclaiming the Buddhist sites of India (Kemper 2015). There is also the interesting example of the Irish *bhikkhu*, U Dhammaloka (1856–1914). Having originally come to Burma as a sailor, he was ordained sometimes prior to 1900; as a monk, he networked with Buddhists in India, Nepal, Ceylon, Japan, China, Singapore and Thailand, and was a popular figure in the anti-colonialist movement in Burma in the first decade of the twentieth century (Cox 2010).

Rather than a modern phenomenon, the examples above indicate a long history of border-crossing activities in Buddhist Asia, such that adopting a globalisation approach, which is associated with modernity and suggests a rupture with the past, again does not seem fitting for our analysis. This is the second reason for our transnational approach, which aims to:

uncover, analyze and conceptualize similarities, differences, and interactions among trans-societal and trans-organizational realities, including the ways in which they bordered and bounded phenomena and dynamics across time and space. (Khagram and Levitt 2008, 10–11)

Chinese Buddhism

The overarching theme in our three papers is Chinese Buddhism in transnational contexts. Although my paper does not talk about Chinese Buddhism *per se*, the two case studies in my paper are located in Taiwan, a society where Chinese Buddhism is the mainstream form of Buddhism. Since Buddhism is very diverse – even Buddhism as practised by people in China has many different schools of thoughts, cultural traditions, etc. – it is necessary to explain the term 'Chinese Buddhism' or 'Han Chinese Buddhism' as used in our papers.

The term 'Chinese Buddhism' (*hanchuan fojiao*) or 'Han Chinese Buddhism'² in this volume refers to the dominant form of Buddhism as practised by the ethnic Han Chinese, the largest ethnic group in China and among overseas Chinese societies, including Singapore, Taiwan and Chinese communities in other Southeast Asian countries. The characteristics of Chinese Buddhism include the acceptance of the authority of Chinese Tripiṭaka, monasticism and so on. Ch'an monk Sheng Yen's (1931–2009) *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism* (Shi 2007), as the title suggests, gives a clue as to what the Chinese Buddhist establishment expects the 'correct' form of Chinese Buddhism to be. In other words, even though there exists a great degree of diversity in the schools of thoughts and cultural traditions within the narrative of 'Chinese Buddhism', there is still a common acknowledgement of what 'Chinese Buddhism' is. The term 'Chinese Buddhism' excludes other Buddhist traditions in China such as the form of Theravada Buddhism practised by the Dai people in Xishuangbanna, southern China. Defining the term as such allows us to look at Chinese Buddhism as a religious and cultural practice, without the limitation of geo-political boundaries.

The importance of transcending geo-political boundaries for the definition of 'Chinese Buddhism' can be seen in our three papers in this volume. Although we adopt a transnational approach in order to look at elements at the micro level for our analysis, we notice that there are common determinants at the macro level, namely economic and political factors. Both factors influence our case studies beyond geo-political boundaries.

Economic factors determine an individual's decision-making for migration and religious development in both the sending and receiving countries. Chia's paper, for example, looks at how the vibrant maritime trade, centred in the port city of Xiamen, brought about the large-scale Chinese migration to Southeast Asia from the late seventeenth century to the mid-twentieth century. The arrival of Chinese migrants in Southeast Asia contributed to the advent of Buddhism and the establishment of overseas Chinese communities. In time, remittances through this Xiamen–Southeast Asia network enhanced the Buddhist modernist movement in China, this additionally highlighting that transnational Buddhism is not a one-way passage. Reinke's paper also demonstrates the influence of economic factors. He discusses how the South African government of the Apartheid era, in an effort to attract foreign investment, gave Taiwanese industrialists favourable conditions for emigration and business and contributed to the funding and development of Fo Guang Shan's Nan Hua Temple in Bronkhorstspuit near Johannesburg.

Although not explicitly stated, economic factors are also an important determinant in the construction of transnational networks by the two groups discussed in my paper. The first group was founded by Sri Lankan monks. Transnational networking helped these monks to fund a Buddhist university in Sri Lanka by attracting donations from different countries. The second

group is Vietnamese. The majority of participants in the Vietnamese ritual discussed in my paper are Vietnamese women in Vietnam–Taiwan transnational marriages. Generally speaking, economic impoverishment is an important determinant for them to enter into transnational marriage and migration. Taiwan’s own demography, in which a growing number of Taiwanese women are opting out of marriage because of the persistent patriarchal values that coexist with Taiwanese women’s increasing ability to achieve economic independence (Yang 2015), constitutes a significant long-term economic factor, and also explains the reception of transnational marriages in Taiwan.

Political factors are another important common determinant. Chia notes how the Sino–Japanese war disrupted remittances being sent to China through the Southeast Asian Buddhist network and subsequently interrupted Taixu’s Buddhist reform movement in China. In Reinke’s paper, political factors such as the end of Apartheid and South Africa’s switch of diplomatic ties from Taiwan to PRC halted Taiwanese migration and changed the make-up of devotees at Nan Hua Temple, such that there is now an increasing number of devotees from PRC. In my paper, the lifting of martial law in 1987 that allows freedom of religious gatherings (Jones 1999, 178–183) and favourable migration policy determine foreign rituals to be organised in contemporary Taiwan.

Conclusion

Our papers present a chronological picture of contemporary Chinese Buddhism in transnational contexts and shed light on the development and dynamism of Chinese Buddhist discourse outside of mainland China since the early modern period. The issue begins with Chia’s paper, which recounts the development of Southeast Asian Buddhist networks in the early modern period. In his paper, the early modern reformist monk Taixu (mentioned earlier) is noteworthy. Taixu worked in Xiamen, Fujian. During Taixu’s tenure in Xiamen, he utilised the resources and connections of Xiamen-centred Southeast Asian Buddhist networks to advance his Buddhist reform movement in China. Taixu’s reformist ideas were succeeded by those of many Buddhist leaders of later generations, including the monks Yinshun (1906–2005), Hsing Yun (1927–) and Sheng Yen (1931–2009) and the nun Cheng Yen (1937–), all of whom – with the exception of Cheng Yen, who was born in Taiwan – migrated to Taiwan from mainland China after the Chinese Communist takeover in 1949. All four ended up becoming influential Buddhist leaders in contemporary Taiwan. The form of Buddhism that they propagate is called ‘*renjian* Buddhism’ (‘Humanistic Buddhism’ or ‘Buddhism for the Human realm’; for more, see Reinke’s paper in this volume); it promotes social service and has dominated Buddhist discourse in Taiwan since the mid-twentieth century.

Notable are the transnational networks built by three of them. The monk Hsing Yun founded an organisation called Fo Guang Shan, the monk Sheng Yen founded Dharma Drum, and the nun Cheng Yen founded Tzu Chi. All three have grown into massive transnational organisations, with branches across the globe and millions of followers worldwide. Reinke's paper in this volume discusses one of these, Fo Guang Shan. His paper highlights Fo Guang Shan's transnational development and the relationship with Chinese migrants in South Africa. My paper discusses the other dimension of Chinese Buddhism in the transnational network: rather than border-crossing Chinese Buddhist activities, this is about border-crossing activities of non-Chinese forms of Buddhism (i.e. Sri Lankan and Vietnamese) that took place in Taiwan, where Chinese Buddhism is the mainstream form of Buddhism. It shows the multifarious dimensions of contemporary transnational Buddhism in the context of Chinese Buddhist discourse. Each of the case studies highlights how, while there are common themes to transnational Buddhism, the specifics are shaped not just by the larger global economical and political situation, but also by the local contexts, the needs and the characteristics of multiple congregations and participants, including individuals.

Notes

1. Although it is common in academia to see world-systems analysis as a forerunner of globalisation theory, Wallerstein himself denies it. See Wallerstein (2013).
2. This is the translation used in my and Reinke's papers in this volume.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Wei-Yi Cheng obtained her PhD in the study of religions from SOAS (London) and is currently an associate professor in the Department of Buddhist Studies, Fo Guang University. Her research interests mainly focus on contemporary Buddhism including topics in gender, transnational Buddhism, etc.

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