

[Cassaniti and Harchis on Schedneck, 'Religious Tourism in Northern Thailand: Encounters with Buddhist Monks'](#)

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Brooke Schedneck. *Religious Tourism in Northern Thailand: Encounters with Buddhist Monks.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021. 242 pp. \$28.50 (e-book), ISBN 978-0-295-74893-1; \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-74892-4.

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In *Religious Tourism in Northern Thailand: Encounters with Buddhist Monks*, Brooke Schedneck argues that personal interactions between Thai student monks and international tourists help to develop the religion in Thailand and propagate it at a global level. The book speaks to a growing attention in the field of religious studies to lived experience as a site of scholarly inquiry, and to an anthropological focus on local perspectives in the making and unmaking of culture. The book's title and its opening paragraphs first suggested to us that the main subject would be the tourists who are encountering Buddhism (on entering a monastery, for example, "the tourist usually finds a line..." p. 3), a topic Schedneck focuses on in her excellent *Thailand's International Meditation Centers: Tourism and the Global Commodification of Religious Practices* (2015). But it quickly becomes apparent that the bulk of the work—and its central theoretical innovation—lies with the monks, not the tourists, and importantly, with their impressions of the visiting tourists and the relevance the encounters have for the Buddhist religion.

Schedneck introduces the stakes of the book with an opening discussion of the historical context of tensions between international visitors and Buddhist monks in Thailand. This sets the stage for her broader theoretical intervention that meanings made of different encounters (or "frictions," in Anna Tsing's sense) provide opportunities for Buddhist monks to think about and develop their oratory skills.[1] Schedneck makes use of her long experience as a teacher and cultural exchange guide in Chiang Mai to walk us through many of the monastic settings in which these encounters take place. The Monk Chat programs at Wat Suan Dok and Wat Chedi Luang serve as central ethnographic sites, along with some of the volunteer tourist and cultural exchange programs across the province. In placing the personal conversations that take place in these settings within a broader historical and scholarly framework, she convinces us that the generative qualities of the conversations continue a long tradition of religion-making in the region.

Chapter 1 shows how Chiang Mai has grappled with religious "others" over time, in both its non-Buddhist past and its long interactions with Christianity. Christian missionaries have historically attempted to claim a superiority to Buddhism in Thailand, and this history of interaction has influenced some of the current frictions that monks experience. It is not just ideology that concerns the monks, however. Monks are often unsure of what to do about tourist behaviors in the monastery

that they deem inappropriate, from flashy clothes to disrespectful interactions with sacred monuments; these and other issues serve as a starting point for thinking about some of the complex ways that contemporary tourist encounters help to craft Chiang Mai as a modern Buddhist city. The city has long been thought to have been “tamed” by Buddhism, and the modern branding of Buddhism for and through tourism can be seen to continue this project.

In chapter 2 Schedneck argues that the relationship Chiang Mai has with tourism and implementation of temple fees and temples as sites of commerce demonstrates the agency of the monks, rather than simply demonstrating a changing of practices within Buddhism. We are brought into some of the contemporary lives and debates of the novice and senior monastics in a discussion about commerce: Should monks handle money? Should temples charge an entrance fee for foreigners? To what extent is it acceptable within the religion for monastic spaces to be places for commerce? These are, of course, important issues for Buddhism as a whole in Thailand, and to put the details of a specific monastic café or temple shop debate into its broader context, Schedneck takes us on a tour of some of the controversies and scandals that have taken place around them in recent years. She deftly uses these moments of friction, however, not to make claims about the state of the religion itself but to argue that discussions about monastic management reflect challenges and opportunities for monks to express their agency within the religion. Schedneck states that “the tourism industry and urbanization can seem like unstoppable forces that make local communities bend to their current preferences. But tourism and the urban environment are not simply altering Buddhism; instead, Buddhist monks creatively engage this new audience and opportunity, revealing their agency within transnational settings” (p. 44). Not only does this show how Buddhism as a lived ideology is far from static, but it further sets the stage for thinking about how encounters with others serve as places for which new ideas about Buddhism can develop. Schedneck invites the reader to recognize the monks’ agency and the constructive potential in their perspectives.

The generativity of these encounters become especially apparent in chapter 3, where Schedneck describes how student monks think about the tourists they are meeting with, and how tourists think about them. We found this chapter to be the heart of the book, as we are invited in to see some of the dynamics, or frictions, between the monks and different kinds of tourists. Schedneck classifies the monks’ perception of tourists into four different types: (1) Western tourists (which she calls the “beneficial other”), (2) Chinese tourists (the “familiar other”), (3) Muslims (the “distant other”), and (4) Christian missionaries (the “competitive other”). For instance, the “beneficial other” wants to know more about Buddhism in a general sense, whereas the “competitive other” wants to argue for the superiority of their own religion. Despite the fact that encounters with each of these types of tourists are clearly shown to vary significantly across the many conversations recorded in the book, she reports that the monks recognized the emergence of distinct patterns for each group, carrying with them different kinds of challenges and opportunities to craft their representation of the religion.

Western tourists are seen as curious and genuinely interested in learning about Buddhism, and although the monks must work to frame the teachings in simple terms, such encounters allow the monks to practice both their explanations of Buddhism and their English. Phra Maha Mitra tells Schedneck, “As I was trying to explain these Buddhist ideas, the foreigners looked at me like there were so confused. I think many Monk Chat monks start like this, with the highest teachings ... [but I] stick with the basics that relate to their lives and the level the foreigner is at.... We have to start with an easy topic, step-by-step, and put [the teachings] in the right order” (p. 84). This demonstrates how

the monks must reframe their dissemination of Buddhist teachings to Western tourists to ensure the information is accessible and intelligible. Restructuring the way in which the teachings are shared results in a mutually beneficial exchange for the monks and these tourists: the monks are afforded an opportunity to learn new ways of sharing Buddhist teachings and to practice their English, and the Western tourists gain new knowledge of the Buddha's teachings in a way that they can understand and connect with personally. Chinese tourists are considered by the monks to be less interested in learning about Buddhism, preferring instead to buy religious paraphernalia and take pictures, mainly because they are thought to be already familiar with Buddhism. Muslims are seen as impressive because of their commitment to their religion and are viewed with respect from afar, while also thought to be slightly intimidating to approach. Finally, Christian missionaries are felt to be argumentative and keen to debate, which can be alternately frustrating for the monks as well as exciting in the potential for interesting conversations. Schedneck includes a composite narrative of several monks' descriptions of their encounters with the "competitive other" Christian missionaries, pointing to an alternation between frustration and excitement: "They come up to us and seem like normal tourists.... At first, I think it is a friendly conversation, so I try to answer a little. But then they keep pushing about how there is no God in Buddhism.... I feel like I am being attacked and have to defend Buddhism.... I don't know English as well as they do.... But I keep trying and practice. So, the next time they come, I know who they are, and I can be prepared" (p. 92). Crucially, the monks report how each of these different kinds of conversations allows them to ply their trade and become better representatives of their religion.

In chapter 4 Schedneck suggests that these encounters are, in an important sense, sites of Buddhist missionization. There is some history of formal Buddhist missionary work in Thailand, both through international Thammathut missions, in which monks are sent abroad, and domestic Thammacarik programs. However, for many of the monks interviewed the term "missionary" is typically attached to other religions, like Christianity, and does not easily apply to the monks' activities. Even though the tourist encounters as described in the book are not typically or officially considered missionary ones by either the monks or scholars Schedneck suggests that they can very much be thought of as such, working as a "dynamic force motivating Thai Buddhism's interaction with the international community" (p. 127). She cites as evidence Monk Chat co-founder Phra Saneh Dhammavaro, who writes that the goal of the program is to "encourage [the tourists] in their pursuit of the essential teachings of the Buddha and lead them to achieve real peace, enjoyment, and happiness" (quoted, p. 116).[2] By engaging with curious outsiders, monks position themselves to share the religion with the global community.

Schedneck turns the focus onto the tourists in the fifth and final chapter, pointing to some of the ways that tourists' self-transformations gained from interacting with the monks and Buddhism as a lived experience help to spread Buddhism globally. Volunteer tourists, as well as those visiting the Monk Chat program, have a distinct kind of Western "tourist gaze," and Schedneck suggests this gaze is one that is often concerned especially with expectations of difference and authenticity. In talking with and watching the monks, these tourists are oriented to think about their own impressions of the religion, which come to be reflected in their own behavioral and bodily comportment. These engagements leave them with a sense of appreciation for the modern, lived experience of Buddhism. Through their encounters with "expected differences" and "unexpected familiarities" the tourists participate with the monks in the making of Buddhist modernity. Together, the tourists and the monks create new formulations of Buddhism that change and continue its lived presence in Chiang

Mai.

Religious Tourism in Northern Thailand is credible in its argument, with writing that is clear and engaging. We found the conversations between the tourists and the monks fascinating, along with Schedneck's analyses of them. Discussions of Schedneck's own conversations with them in carrying out the research give the book a personal feel and help to convince the reader that this is in fact a generative space for new ways to think about and continue the Buddhism in Chiang Mai. It also shows how Buddhism in Thailand is not in a state of decline, as some representations of it suggest, but alternatively that Buddhism is very much alive and well, as it morphs and grows to fit new social and economic landscapes. The analytic focus turned primarily toward young novice monks, as opposed to senior monks or only tourists, provides a novel approach for a scholarly field oversaturated with official discourses and outsider perspectives. As such it is a very welcome addition to the field of Buddhist studies, religious studies, and the anthropology of Thailand.

There are some limits in the argument in the ways that Schedneck demarcates her area of focus: not all student monks in Chiang Mai are Thai, for instance, and many tourists are. International tourists do not always neatly fit into the categories being suggested, and the grouping together of different sects of Buddhism and sites for conversation may create the illusion of a more homogenous situation than might in fact exist. In this sense the claims of the book about the influence of tourist encounters may be a little bit overblown; while the encounters no doubt help to create particular representations of Buddhism, there are many more kinds of encounters that do so as well. The specifics of what representations of Buddhism are being crafted, instead of arguing only that there are new representations being crafted, would also have been a nice addition to the work, though it was not the focus here. Within these limits, however, Schedneck does a lot to carefully lay out the contours of her fieldwork. She has crafted an extremely novel and insightful perspective on the creation of Buddhism's continuing global influence.

Notes

[1]. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[2]. Phra Saneh Dhammavaro, *Thai Buddhism: Monk Chat* (Chiang Mai: Mahachulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya Buddhist University, 2009).

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