

## Southeast Asia

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**Ward Keeler, *The Traffic in Hierarchy: Masculinity and Its Others in Buddhist Burma***

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017. 331 pages. Hardcover, \$65. ISBN: 9780824865948.

Ward Keeler's book rewards patience and perseverance. His thesis, that Burmese society "is characterized by the principle of relative standing, not rights," represents an important intervention to engage with the empirical reality of persistent hierarchical thinking in contemporary Myanmar (2). The presumption that egalitarian norms and values are universally shared undergirds both social policy interventions and research in Myanmar, sometimes problematically so. Keeler's reorientation of analysis of social interactions according to idealized practices of autonomy—disproportionately accessed along gendered lines—foregrounds a set of beliefs that scholars ought to take more seriously. In taking on this big question of broad social and comparative consequence, he has made an important contribution, although one that is sometimes challenging in navigating.

The book begins with a few vignettes of "Everyday Forms of Hierarchical Observation," the flows of traffic, attendance at *dhamma* talks (monastic sermons), and tea shop interactions. These are followed by an extended ethnographic chapter on his

monastery field site and another on social relations between monks. It is not until chapter 4 that he fully introduces his primary theoretical touchstone, Louis Dumont, whose positing of “hierarchy” vs. “egalitarianism” Keeler attempts to rescue and reformulate in a Burmese context. Acknowledging a range of critiques of Dumont’s arguments in *Homo Hierarchicus* (1970), Keeler still rightly cautions that the (largely unexamined) normative privileging of scholars’ own egalitarian commitments makes it “hard for us to think clearly about any other take on social relations” (114).

His primary insight in adapting Dumont’s work is to argue that, in Myanmar, hierarchical patterns—and the behaviors that correspond with and sustain them—are constructed around “the value of autonomy” (128). In subsequent chapters of the book, he looks at how autonomy is idealized against a less desirable condition of attachment, in ways that are reinforced by (if not generated from; he is reluctant to comment on causality) Buddhist beliefs. Laymen and Buddhist monks embody the two main idealized forms, each theoretically able to keep their attachments minimal and discretionary, an aim that is largely denied to women. Keeler describes the complex decision-making processes that guide men as they strategically choose to pursue particular relationships, either of dominance (which can still generate mutual dependence) or subordination (to someone with greater power that can still help maintain relative autonomy). His overall argument here is convincing and has a seemingly very wide explanatory range.

As one of only a few books on Myanmar by an anthropologist in recent decades, the ethnographic content is often strikingly rich and compelling, as in chapter 2, where he describes in great detail the activities in and around the Mandalay monastery that was his primary field site. This alone is a welcome contribution, as there is very little like it, especially in contemporary writing on Buddhism in Myanmar (although the coming decade should see a proliferation of ethnographic work from younger scholars who have been enabled by recent relaxing of restrictions on fieldwork). Yet the shift from the particular to the general is sometimes troubling, with regular pronouncements on what “Burmans” do or believe. Much of his analysis of Buddhist ideas and practices (especially as they inform his reading of hierarchical dynamics) seems to come from a single senior monk at this monastery, and there is virtually no consideration of the import for his more generalized statements of the fact that this monastery belongs to the strict Shweigyin order; Jake Carbine’s (2011) book on the order is only sparsely cited. His relatively brief accounts of nuns and transwomen—two of “masculinity’s Others”—are structured around nicely detailed encounters and relationships in the field, but the section on women relies mostly on generalized narratives.

One of the surprising errors of the book is Keeler’s indiscriminate use of the terms “Burman” and “Burmese.” Academic convention specifies the latter as a descriptor for all of the people in Myanmar, regardless of ethnicity, while the former refers specifically to the ethnic majority group, yet he seems to use both in the first sense. There is a brief mention of other ethnic groups (ix)—with a problematically uncited estimate of ethnic demographics—and of Shan monks at his fieldwork monastery (85–86), but no explanation of the usage of these terms. By the middle of the book, he seems to have settled into the consistent use of “Burman,” but a reader wonders whether he only means to refer to the majority group and whether the conditions and dynamics he describes regarding hierarchy, autonomy, and attachment pertain to other groups in Myanmar, particularly non-Buddhists. This imprecision misses a productive opportunity

to engage with a growing literature on gender and women's roles in Myanmar among non-Burmans, which could further illuminate the spectrum Keeler describes; just one example of many would be Jenny Hedström's (2016) analysis of Kachin women's participation in and support for ethnic armed struggle, in which gendered insecurity in the midst of conflict seems to both disrupt and reinforce gendered roles in different social contexts.

In an academic world where research on gender and sexuality continues to be marginalized, it is encouraging to see these subjects given prominence in Keeler's book (although there is, perhaps, reason to push back against the structure of the book, which places the idealized accounts of masculine and monastic autonomy at the center and relegates women, nuns, and transwomen to a single, combined chapter). While he cites the work of scholars Chie Ikeya and Tharaphi Than, he ignores Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi, whose 2013 dissertation engaged extensively with constructions of masculinity in Burma. He dismisses Jessica Harriden's (2012) book on gendered power in Burma in a footnote and pays no attention to her reading—or that of Nilanjana Sengupta (2015) in her book—of the outputs of female Burmese writers and political figures across the twentieth century who struggled to come to terms with their situatedness in a hierarchical order that they alternately supported and chafed against. Also, when it comes to considering how LGBTQ populations are situated within the autonomy-attachment spectrum, he does not consider any of Lynette Chua's (2018) important work on the topic (while her book was just published this year, several earlier articles would be relevant to Keeler's discussion).

I mention these omissions to highlight what I see as one of the problematic consequences of Keeler's primary (and still welcome) insight. In pressing the case that we need to analyze Burmese social interactions with the understanding that their behavior is rooted in the recognition of status difference, he too often attributes (implicitly and sometimes explicitly) an adherence to egalitarian thinking to "Westerners." By pushing back against the perceived imposition of a set of "foreign" (non-hierarchical) values, he effectively dismisses or ignores the active spaces across Burmese society where this system is being challenged, sometimes on egalitarian terms (both "imported" and "indigenous") and sometimes in other ways.

In this sense, it is not that Keeler is wrong to draw our attention back to hierarchical ordering and its effects and justifications, but rather that the dynamics of social order in Burma/Myanmar have for a long time been contested on the terrain *between* hierarchy and egalitarianism, even if the former remains dominant. The LGBTQ activists that Lynette Chua describes as adhering to "human rights as a way of life" should not be denigrated for developing their arguments through a derivative discourse but understood as engaged in a struggle that critically navigates existing structures and practices of hierarchy (Chua 2018). The female farmers described by Hilary Faxon and Pyo Let Han (2018) are not simply excluded from a social environment that cannot adequately categorize their labors; they upend the autonomy-dependency dyad in disruptive and complex ways.

Keeler, to be clear, is not explicitly dismissing these groups. They are simply a few examples among many that are absent from his otherwise rich narrative. He does not attend to this vibrant space of contestation and reformulation that can be found in far more than elite urban settings and that seems to be the more empirically and analytically appropriate way of integrating scholarly attention to hierarchy. Keeler has

boldly rescued a crucial framework that is essential to our understanding of Buddhism, society, and so much else in Myanmar, but the compelling picture that he paints is also incomplete.

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