

**Thomas A. Borchert, *Educating Monks: Minority Buddhism on China's Southwest Border***

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017. xviii+210 pages. Hardcover, \$68.00; paperback, \$28.00. ISBN 9780824866488 (hardcover), 9780824866495 (paperback).

This splendid book's focus is the Wat Pājie, a major Theravāda Buddhist monastery in Sipsongpannā. Called Xishuangbanna in Chinese, Sipsongpannā is an autonomous prefecture (*zìzhì zhōu*), in theory, run by the Dai people in a part of Yunnan Province in Southwest China. Though the book's main emphasis is on Buddhism, it is actually quite broad in its coverage, dealing also with such major topics such as geopolitics, ethnic issues, and education. Most of the monastery's monks belong to a branch of the Dai called Dai-lue. The Dai are ethnically and linguistically related to the Thais of Thailand, as well as the Shan of Myanmar and other peoples. In contrast to most of the Buddhists of China, who are Mahāyāna, the Dai follow Theravāda Buddhism.

Borchert works in the Department of Religion at the University of Vermont. A specialist in the religions of East and Southeast Asia, he has already written widely on these topics, with the present book being his first authored monograph. He tells us that he already knew Chinese when he began his research but also learned Thai and through it the language of the Dai-lue.

A very large part of the methodology of this book is an examination of the situation by frequent visits to Sipsongpannā, especially its capital city Jing Hong, the longest period of fieldwork being fifteen months in 2001–02. He tells us: “Most of my research consisted of participant observation. . . . I learned a good deal simply by talking with students in the classroom. I also had the opportunity to travel to events around Sipsongpannā with the monks and to ask nosy questions. I conducted very few formal interviews” (21–22). This methodology has a lot going for it. Though formal interviews obviously have their place, it is often simpler and just as reliable to “ask nosy questions” in more informal settings.

The introduction explains such matters as the methodology, the book’s main themes, and the reasons for choosing Sipsongpannā as a place for examining monastic education. The main reason is that Sipsongpannā is the best possible example showing the experience of the Dai-lue in monastic education from the late 1970s onward. It saw reconstruction of village temples and the ordination of many Dai-lue men as novices and monks. Borchert also sees Sipsongpannā as a good example of how the Chinese state works with regard to religion. He explains that “the local Chinese state and Buddhists have had a relatively good relationship over the last several decades, certainly in comparison to other religious groups” (12). I return to this theme later.

The introduction is followed by six chapters in two parts, “Shaping Buddhist Lives in Sipsongpannā” and “Educating the Monks of Sipsongpannā.” The structure allows the presentation of a great deal of fascinating and innovative descriptive material, much of it from Borchert’s personal experience. It also facilitates raising some really important general issues and themes relating to Theravāda Buddhism, as well as to China and its ethnic minorities.

One such issue is “whether it is best to describe Sipsongpannā as being part of Southeast Asia or China” (33). Such geopolitical questions can be very controversial because they can lead to questioning China’s territorial unity. My own view is that Sipsongpannā can be regarded both as Southeast Asia *and* China, as the two are not mutually exclusive. It is Southeast Asian in several ways, including the sense that Buddhism in the area is both Theravāda and has Thai features, but also Chinese in the sense that the region is now internationally and universally accepted as part of China.

In studies of China’s ethnic minorities, the generalization is often made that religion occupies a higher priority in society than in that of the majority Han, and this is overall a valid comment. So, in researching Buddhism, Borchert also studies Dai-lue culture and society. One issue of great importance, especially in the discourse of the West in recent times, is the survival of local ethnic cultures in the context of rising Chinese influence and power. Reading this book leaves one in no doubt of the strong survival of Dai culture in Sipsongpannā. Borchert notes a curriculum agreement involving the Buddhist school at Wat Pājje and Jing Hong’s technical college: “there has also been a very clear ethos within the school regarding the need to foster and maintain an awareness of Dai-lue identity, and in particular one that links being Dai-lue to Buddhism” (148).

There is modernization going on all right, and the political impact of the Chinese Communist Party is very powerful. But Buddhist identity remains, and so does a degree of Dai-lue autonomy that includes Theravada Buddhism. At the same time, Borchert regards this autonomy as fragile and, based on my own experience, I would suggest that he may well be right.

An issue of crucial importance to religion is freedom. Borchert has a good deal to say on this subject. In contrast to what some American government personnel and some human rights activists contend, he believes:

the politics of religion in China needs to be seen not in terms of Manichean conflict between religious and state actors, but rather as a dynamic and flexible system that the state has established to maximize its own flexibility in addressing what it recognizes as a challenge. (55)

What this implies is that the Chinese state reacts to religion according to the degree of threat it feels in particular situations. In the case of the Dai-lue Buddhists, it is “not particularly threatened” (76), as a result of which the state leaves religion alone more or less, meaning that it is reasonably free. My experience in China, including in ethnic areas, suggests that Borchert’s formulation of the issue is fair and reasonable.

The documentation is excellent. It includes not only extensive experience based on fieldwork and on-the-spot visits and residence but wide-ranging written sources; these include textbooks in the Dai-lue language, as well as a substantial reference list, mostly of items in English language but also a few in Chinese, Thai, and French. There are a few pictures, all of them interesting and adding to the academic value of the content.

Overall, this is an excellent book on an important and fascinating topic. It is balanced and fair in its approach. It is sensitive toward the people it concerns. It is interesting to read, with a good intermixture of academic and personal style. I recommend it strongly not only for those interested in religion and Buddhism but also those concerned with China, Southeast Asia, ethnic questions, and education.

Colin Mackerras  
*Griffith University*