

Guillaume Rozenberg, translated by Ward Keeler, *The Immortals: Faces of the Incredible in Buddhist Burma*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. 316 pages. Hardback, \$75.00; paperback \$35.00. ISBN 978-0-8248-4096-9 (paperback).

“Should one believe in *weikza*?” asked one of his main informants, called Hpay Myint (20). This question formed a central thread for Rozenberg in exploring a unique religious phenomenon: the cult of the four *weikza* that emerged in the 1950s in the central part of Burma (Myanmar). The term *weikza*, which is a Myanmar vernacular derived from the Pali word *vijjā*, points to the magical or an esoteric form of knowledge revealed by the practitioner. A *weikza*, described by the author, is not a divinity, but a human being endowed with extraordinary powers, who is virtuous and “completely of this world and completely outside this world” (47). In other words, a *weikza* can bring about the synthesis of both the mundane and the supra-mundane, and engage in magico-religious practices, which appear to be beyond the ordinary human comprehension.

The book is a fascinating ethnographic account by Rozenberg, a French anthropologist, who conducted short bursts of intensive fieldwork in several sites between the period of 1997 and 2006 and collected twenty-five stories of *weikza*, both past and present. His “thick” descriptions of the unusual events involving the four *weikza* and local protagonists who engaged in them are interwoven with his personal commentaries and analyses. Rozenberg does not shy away from his struggle to make sense of what develops in front of his eyes, but what challenges him the most (in the beginning at least) is what goes on in the minds of Burmese devotees who buy into the *weikza* cult and believe in the extraordinary claims of those practitioners who have “exited” the world. Rozenberg oscillates between his rational self as a European intellectual and as an embedded anthropologist who feels obliged to represent the emic perspective.

The book is organized into five chapters. In Chapter 1, titled, “From Belief to Believing,” he spends a great deal of time grappling with this timeless question of what it means to “believe,” and is exasperated at times by the gulf between his and their belief systems. However, to his credit, he has tried to avoid the pitfall of making the Burmese mind appear less rational or more exotic, and described the cultural process of *weikza* cult in detail by accepting their indigenous discourse.

In Chapter 2, the author turns to describe an aspiring *weikza* who happens to be a former Major during Ne Win’s government and lists an inventory of his empowering items, one of which is an “energy ball.” He describes the “energy centre,” a monastery in an ordinary village, where both laymen and monk adepts congregate to practice alchemy, some for decades, to master the complex technique of transforming an alloy into a special “energy ball.” Although the process is often helped by the four *weikza*, only those who can master the process through a long arduous journey and maintain the mental discipline can access their extraordinary powers, which can make

them “invulnerable.” Women, often disadvantaged in attaining the spiritual heights in mainstream Buddhism, are called upon as mediums and some are renowned disciples of *weikza*, but rarely become *weikza* themselves.

Chapter 3 describes how the *weikza* possession takes place and how it leads to mediumship. The person who becomes possessed, usually an ordinary man or a woman, becomes the “transmission channel” (163) of the *weikza*’s speech, but the medium does not have any control over the acquired power. There is also no initiation ritual or outward transformation of the medium and the possession can take many different forms. Nonetheless, it can be a life changing event for the medium since it frees one from the psycho-physiological disorder or a misfortune he/she suffered and comes to perform a key role as the worldly representative of the *weikza* in the cult.

Chapter 4 describes the proselytizing activities of an ex-army man who founded the Tactical Encirclement Group (TEG), which recruits vulnerable young men through the demonstration of martial arts, and trains them into the “Buddha’s soldiers” (199). Practices such as martial arts, ingesting cabalistic diagrams, and adhering to Buddhist precepts, are all special techniques believed to enhance internal resistance against social and moral corruption. In other words, this chapter reveals a manual for young recruits to obtain the protection of the *weikza* and eventually become “invulnerable.” However, by pointing to the close affinity between the national identity and Buddhist religion deep in the Burmese psyche, Rozenberg associates the activities of TEG and the historical rhetoric of humiliation and colonial servitude, which is used to motivate young men into their collective mission to counter the supposed decline of the Buddhist religion (207). It seems to concern him that the TEG functions as an apparatus to reproduce another kind of servitude and communitarian ideals, which lays the ground for tyranny.

It seems most of the ethnographic materials and interviews were collected during the decades of Burma’s military rule, and the paranoid and claustrophobic atmosphere that prevailed then provides the backdrop for the last chapter. The scene in 2004, awaiting the life-prolonging ceremony to take place, reflects the confusion of not knowing and the anxiety of coming under surveillance in an oppressive political climate. After all, the ceremony does not materialize due to many “disturbances” (245), and it ends with the arrest of one of the main mediums, Saturday’s Son. Instead Rozenberg introduces the trial by fire that took place in 1976 by drawing from the chronicles documented by the *weikza*’s lay disciples who attended it. The narration, full of symbolism, recounts sequence by sequence how the trial took place, which was made possible by the community of disciples working together, although some were injured. There is a heightened sense of optimism as the *weikza* comes out of the trial unscathed, surpassing death and achieving an eternal life. The lack of control, fear, and anxiety Burmese people experienced during the dark days of the military junta perhaps underlay the cult’s millenarian tendencies. It was also their strong aspiration for a new order after decades of military rule that fueled the popularity of the cult of the four *weikza* during that time, the energy of which somehow seems to have dissipated with the recent new opening of Myanmar.

The book can be a difficult read for those who are unfamiliar with the Burmese religious landscape and may be baffled by the different time span in which the author moves around. Nonetheless, for a specialist reader, the book provides valuable ethnographic and etymological details and makes a significant contribution to the study

of esoteric Buddhism in Burma, which has not been fully studied. The book has also been supported by the excellent translation by Ward Keeler who has made the result remarkably polished.

The cult of the four *weikza* is ultimately about how local adepts and followers have lived through extraordinary events, how they retell them through their first-hand accounts, and how these become embedded in their collective memory. The author has questioned the basic principle of anthropology throughout the book and emphasized his aspiration towards maintaining neutrality, but ultimately the anthropologist can never be free neither of his value judgement nor of the mark he has left in local myth construction.

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