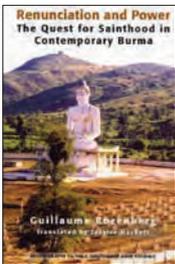


Burma



Guillaume Rozenberg, *Renunciation and Power: The Quest for Sainthood in Contemporary Burma*. Trans. Jessica Hackett

New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, Monograph 59, 2010. 180 pages. Cloth, US\$35.00; Paper, US\$20.00. ISBN 978-0-938692-93-5 (cloth); ISBN 978-0-938692-92-8 (paper).

THIS UNIQUE monograph is written by an author who claims that he has never been attracted to Buddhist doctrine or its philosophy and has been bored by its “tedious, excessively systematic, and technical manner wrought with repetition and endless enumerations” (vii). Nonetheless, Rozenberg seems to have found the world of “Buddhist sainthood” utterly compelling and pursued popular charismatic monks for several years in Myanmar, a country in which it is notoriously difficult to conduct research. Having examined their biographies and local narratives, and conducted interviews and participant observation, he provides valuable empirical information about the centripetal appeal of these extraordinary monks and contributes to a wider discussion in regard to what he calls the “the ideology of sainthood” in Myanmar

Buddhism. Although Rozenberg still insists on using the term “Burma,” I have chosen to use “Myanmar” in this review for reasons I have explained elsewhere; see “Introduction” in the special issue “Power, Authority, and Contested Hegemony in Burmese-Myanmar Religion” (*Asian Ethnology* 68/2, 2009).

The monograph is comprised of seven chapters that focus on various features of eight “great” monks, all deceased except for one, and explores how they have become the focus of people’s devotional worship in contemporary Myanmar. In vernacular terminology, those who are reputed to have achieved the highest level of moral perfection are perceived to be *yahanda* (*arahant* in Pali language of the scriptures), whilst those endowed with great supernatural potency are seen to be *weikza*. Although they may both manifest “saint-like” qualities in the eyes of an observer, the usage of “sainthood” is, however, problematic because the term not only evokes Christian imageries, but fails to explain the complexity of their local spiritual appeal.

Chapter 2 opens a fascinating sub-world of practitioners referred to as *weikza* who are seen to possess supernatural powers as a result of engaging in contemplative practices and unorthodox techniques. Rozenberg distinguishes between two kinds of *weikza*: mundane and supramundane in their practices and trajectories, and most monks in the monograph seem to fall somewhere on the spectrum between the two. The most contentious aspect of this extrapolation is that he tries to locate the two ideals, *yahanda* and *weikza*, as if they were opposite poles on the spectrum, ranking them according to the “proximity of their practices to those recommended by Buddhist teachings, and the personal goals they set themselves” (52). Although their respective paths may converge at some stage, it is misleading to conflate supramundane *weikza* and *yahanda* (merged at times; 53), simply because this is not how they are perceived by Myanmar Buddhists. It is even more baffling to see the term “aspiring saint” used repeatedly throughout the monograph. A *yahanda*, strictly speaking, is seen to have eliminated all his desires, whilst a *weikza* appropriates his power to realize his aspiration to meet or even himself become the next Buddha, Metteyya. In this sense, perhaps a *weikza* is aspiring, but a *yahanda* is not.

In the main chapters, Rozenberg explores three types of religious activities, many of which these monks are involved in the prediction, redistribution, and construction of religious edifices, and highlights the implications of reciprocal relationships that emerge between the monks and their devotees. Chapter 3 is most fascinating, and examines lottery practices and gambling that have gripped the Myanmar psyche for the last two decades and the monk’s role in the phenomenon. Nonetheless, such a relationship between a monk and his followers cannot be seen as normative since both parties are motivated by their secular interests; a monk by his desire to show off his spiritual prowess, and lay followers wanting to know the winning numbers. The lottery situation is described as a kind of test for the monk’s spiritual detachment and evidence of the laity’s store of karma (83), but it raises moral questions as to the monk’s involvement and highlights the danger of possessing supernatural powers that allows him to transgress boundaries, which can subsequently “destroy religion.”

Chapter 4 discusses Thamanya Hsayadaw, one of the most popular monks in recent times in the context of his birthday celebrations. It shows how his “greatness” is generated in a sequence of transactions and circulation of gifts in a tripartite re-

relationship between the monk, his lay donors, and other lesser monastic members. That is, the monk's centripetal position is what generates a large circulation of resources and the mobilisation of people, resulting in his overarching influence in the community. Chapter 5 explores this process of empowerment, which Rozenberg describes as "a cumulative process of sanctification" (97). As a result, many of these monks end up involving themselves in large projects such as restoring ancient pagodas and financing large buildings.

These chapters describe in detail how their spiritual capital is generated and built on, but Rozenberg appears perplexed by the latent tension between the Buddhist ideal of renunciation and the overarching worldly (and to an extent political) influence many of these monks can command. The paradox of the position of a Buddhist "saint" is acknowledged by the author in the following: "the more a person isolates himself from the world for spiritual ends, the more he incarnates the ideal of Buddhist renunciation in the eyes of the devotees, and the more the world will come to him" (69). If that is so, then it is the aspirations of devotees and society that generate the surge toward him, creating the whole phenomenon of what is referred to as "sainthood." In the process of "making religion," however, placing too much emphasis on the subjective agency of the monk appears to miss the point, since his power appears more vacuous than claimed.

The final two chapters discuss the role of the state in relation to the notion of "making religion." Chapter 6 gives a historical overview of the Sangha reform that started in the early 1980s and the national monastic organisation created as a result of state intervention in realizing its legitimacy. Rozenberg points out that the shift in state religious policy happened after the 1988 anti-government uprising and since then the government has been actively involved in its "Buddhicization" scheme (130). Since then, revered monks and nuns, and even unorthodox monks, have been co-opted into the state enterprise in promoting the Buddhist polity in its vision of nation-building.

There is an acknowledgement in Myanmar that the *thathana* or *sāsana* (in Pali language) is in decline and people are generally threatened by "the idea of the decline of the practice of Buddhism" (155). The onus of preserving as well as disseminating true *Buddhavācanā* (words of the Buddha) is placed on the large number of scholarly monks and nuns who are at the forefront of *thathana-pyu*. Erudite monk scholars, *Ṭipitakadhara*, are those who have memorized the whole of the *Ṭipitaka* canon, and although there are fewer than ten, these monks are revered as living embodiments of *thathana* on whom the preservation of Theravādin orthodoxy depends.

Nonetheless, the future of the *thathana* envisaged by those in doctrinal studies and the notion that guides practitioners in the *weikza* path seems to be fundamentally different since the former is "preserving religion," and the latter is, according to Rozenberg, "making religion." The kind of unorthodox monks examined in his case studies are very small compared to the majority in the monastic community; however the *weikza* ideal seems to inspire and evoke a kind of "free zone for imagination" (146), and allows lay followers in Myanmar to do the "aspiring" for a better and freer world.

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