

call to not discard the chronicles as useful sources is important: whatever difficulties they contain, they preserve a unique history and worldview.

Finally, Volker Grabowsky examines a cultural revival among the Tai Lue of Sipsong Panna in the People's Republic of China. It is an extraordinary tale of survival of a centuries-old practice of manuscript production through the turbulence of the twentieth century. The revival is fuelled by cross-border Tai Lue communities in Kengtung in Myanmar, Chiang Mai in Thailand and Muang Sing in Laos, and involves everyone from lay persons to charismatic monks to Thai royals. Grabowsky brings together his formidable knowledge of such manuscripts with interviews of the dedicated individuals working to preserve the manuscripts and thereby save Tai Lue culture for future generations.

Because of the broad scope of the volume it is regrettably not possible to review everything in the space permitted. Following Martin Stuart-Fox one can regard this volume as a state of the field of Lao history. It shows the problems and prospects of studying one of Asia's lesser-known countries: what can be achieved when marshalling an array of sources and tackling difficult questions. It remains difficult at times to hear Lao voices from certain periods. Even with the more recent history of decolonisation and the Cold War the problem is how to maintain a critical distance from one's sources and present an unbiased, objective view. It is difficult for researchers working closely with their sources not to become trapped by the views of one side or the other. But these scholars hold a lot of promise and potential for the future. And these issues are not unique to Laos but rather are larger issues in the field of history. These difficulties call for more archival work, new methods and a more diverse source base, yet problems remain. Beyond the battle for supremacy between the two Cold War blocs one notes misrule, violence, violation of rights, exploitation, dehumanisation and even genocide in both blocs, pointing to deeper issues in modern history regardless of ideology.

Please note: this review represents my own personal views and not those of my home institution.

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## Myanmar

### *The Buddha's wizards: Magic, protection, and healing in Burmese Buddhism*

By THOMAS NATHAN PATTON

New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. Pp. 187. Photographs, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

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This book is based on Thomas Nathan Patton's extensive fieldwork among the Buddhist population of Myanmar on the world of wizards or *weizzā*, as they are known locally, in his quest to understand their widespread appeal. He provides a rich in-depth ethnography and intimate examination of the *weizzā* cult in its broader

historical, sociopolitical, and religious contexts, drawing on affect theory, material and visual culture, and testimonies in devotional literature, along with participant observation and interviews to understand how people come to believe in the powers of wizards.

The term *weizzā* refers to wisdom or knowledge and specifically points to someone who has mastery of alchemy, medicine, astrology, spells and incantations, or sacred diagrams. Patton states that *weizzā* could be considered a 'third category' (p. 15), between the monastic and lay worlds, as their status is neither other-worldly nor this-worldly, and they are endowed with magical powers that allow them to transcend time and prolong their lives until the arrival of the next Buddha Metteyya. Despite being shunned by Buddhist purists and monastic authorities, *weizzā* are believed to affect the world and bring benefits to the living, heal the sick, and provide hope to those living under political oppression or difficult personal circumstances.

*The Buddha's wizards* comprises of five chapters organised thematically and chronologically. Patton describes how people's relationships with *weizzā* transformed alongside sociopolitical changes in Burma between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chapter 1 starts by building a general image of *weizzā* by drawing on historical and literary accounts, and their own visual and oral representations. The role of *weizzā* is also described in the contexts in which they have manifested themselves to protect and defend the Buddha *sāsana* during historical junctures when there have been perceptions of imminent external threats.

Chapter 2 focuses on Bo Min Gaung, the most popular exemplar of the *weizzā* cult, who became revered as the 'chief *weizzā*' and continues to inspire and command respect. Patton unravels many personal stories circulated by Bo's followers about their special relationships with the wizard to understand how he came to such prominence.

Further details about people's relationships with *weizzā* are explored in chapter 3, including the various means by which they communicate with their devotees through possessions and dreams, by evoking visions or through spirit mediumship. Special attention is paid to the experiences of female devotees who are healed from various illnesses and who then channel the 'energy' of *weizzā* to heal others themselves. The beliefs and practices associated with this healing practice is described by Patton as a 'culturally sanctioned response' (p. 90) to the gender roles in a repressive society. The spirit possession experiences are seen as a channel through which poor and vulnerable women express their needs and desires, and eventually become empowered and valued as healers or clairvoyants. Spirit possession of women at the margins of society has been a central theme in the anthropology of religion; however, there has also been a re-evaluation of such 'deprivation theories' from a feminist perspective, since men and transgender persons may also resort to such experiences. Patton does not explore the difference between possession by *weizzā* and other types of possession experiences by *nats* (spirits), witches or sorcerers, also common in Myanmar, except for his mention of the differences in terminology. In fact, the experience for the possessed might not differ much whether one is possessed by a *nat* or *weizzā*, but it is made specific in the devotee's justification of the relationship in order to make sense of the extraordinary experience, and also to acknowledge the *weizzā*'s authority in the spiritual hierarchy accepted by many in a Buddhist culture.

Drawing on the case of the first *weizzā* pagoda constructed in 1958 in Allegany, New York, chapter 4 goes over some of the main themes described in the previous chapters, for example, on the role of *weizzā* in protecting and propagating the *sāsana*. It re-examines their specific position in the lives of Myanmarese in the diaspora, who continue to worship Bo Min Gaung and spread Buddhist sites that harness *weizzā* power further afield. Patton also situates *weizzā* in an era after the sangha reforms of the 1980s, followed by the state policy of the 1990s, propagating the *sāsana* for the legitimisation of the military government.

In the final chapter, Patton takes up the issue of the *weizzā* cult's marginality and explores why some Myanmarese publicly disparage those referred to as *bodaw* or *weizzā* and why their practices are criticised as 'not Buddhist'. Patton states that even his interlocutors were worried that his book on the *weizzā* cult might give his foreign readers a distorted impression of Myanmar's Buddhism (p. 116). Thus, there is a disjunction between the Theravada Buddhist orthodoxy propagated in Myanmar and the popular localised practice of *weizzā*; exemplified in the hostile public rhetoric and private adherence to the *weizzā* cult. Meanwhile, the lifting of censorship and popularity of social media under the former NLD government seems to have revived an interest in *weizzā*, especially amongst the affluent urban population as well as people in other Asian countries who are constructing *weizzā* pagodas and installing statues of Bo Min Gaung. In this respect, the book also offers a different perspective on the recent transformation of Myanmar society, especially when the world is presented through the lens of people's lived religious experiences.

Patton travelled around the country for a decade, collecting stories and testimonies from people whose lives have been touched by wizards and usually changed for the better. He has woven together events and stories of devotees from magazine articles, devotional literature, patients' reports and testimonials, and built up a comprehensive image of the *weizzā*. Their narrated stories seem to take a life of their own and continue to spread *weizzā* mystique in the popular media. And yet, Myanmar's wizards remain as elusive as ever, especially to those who do not share the affective or emotive experiences of their devotees.

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## The Philippines

*The Philippines and the International Monetary Fund negotiations on petroleum and imports: Toward a theory of negotiation*

By KENNETH FAULVE-MONTOJO

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Kenneth Faulve-Montojo provides a lucid and insightful narrative of the tough and gruelling negotiations between the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the