

State, and in addition to that earlier work, future study on Vietnamese politics must engage with this exceptional and leading volume.

Gainsborough turns back from earlier notions of the Vietnamese (or other states) to ask a more “deceptively complex” question: How do people “act politically” in Vietnam? Having explored that question in some detail, he is in a stronger position to try to identify the roles of the state within that complex polity. And what he finds is a state that functions as multiple entities generally not in sync with each other, “the persistent blurring of the relationship between public and private,” and “the importance of uncertainty as a principle of rule” (p. 181). The state that emerges is “little more than a disparate group of actors with a weak notion of ‘the public good,’ using uncertainty, not impartial rules, as the basis of order” (p. 182), yet capable of acting in concert when common interests are threatened. Gainsborough’s book shows these principles in action in a variety of settings, including the role of the Party, corruption, state business interests, local politics, and other themes.

Each of these volumes complicates our understanding of contemporary Vietnam in important ways. The subjects are different—urbanization and its margins, a broad view of modern Vietnam, the issues of memory, and the structures and roles of the state—but in each case nuance wins out. As we learn more about Vietnam, and as fine academics and writers such as these have the opportunity to conduct fieldwork in a variety of settings there, it is inevitable that our understandings of the nation will become more fine-grained and the level of analysis more sophisticated. That the field has made such great strides in a relatively short period owes much to these books and others like them.

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Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society. By JULIANE SCHOBEL. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011. xi, 207 pp. \$49.00 (cloth).

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In her book *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar*, anthropologist Juliane Schober explores the complex and often fraught relationship between Buddhism and politics in Burma. Starting with the precolonial situation in the nineteenth century and moving up to the present day, the work shows the multivalent position of Buddhist thought and practice in Burma, serving often as a prop to those in power, even as it offers others a resource for resistance. While Schober’s book appeared before the dramatic political changes that began late last year, including Aung San Suu Kyi’s election to a newly formed parliament, recent events only underscore the book’s valuable mapping of the long and

tangled history of religious and political dynamics in Burma. The comprehensive scope of the book will make it a useful resource for Burma specialists, and those interested in the relationship between religion and politics in Southeast Asia will find it an accessible study of the distinctive case of Burma.

Too often, Schober argues, observers of Burma have overlooked the substantive role of Buddhism in politics, thanks to the influence of an Orientalist vision of Buddhism that assumes it to be “otherworldly” and so removed from the realms of mundane power. Contrary to this perspective, the introduction of the book frames its project as an attempt to identify the changing but ever-symbiotic functioning of religion and politics in Burma. Inevitably, Buddhist actions have political consequences, and political acts carry Buddhist meanings. Schober echoes the thrust of recent works, such as Anne Blackburn’s *Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism and Modernity in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010) and Anne Hansen’s *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007), in her approach to Buddhism as a critical part of the formation of a local modernity. She makes a particular contribution in the succeeding chapters, which follow in roughly chronological order, by explaining the distinctive Burmese situation, in which “Buddhist communities have produced and reproduced historical formations that intertwined Buddhism with the moral claims of the state” (p. 10).

Chapter 1 describes the precolonial situation in Burma. Buddhism was an integral part of political life, as the king and court of the Konbaung dynasty (1752–1885) justified rule through a Buddhist “economy of merit” (p. 19). In this system, meritorious donations to the monkhood and other Buddhist projects tied the royal center to outlying communities, while placing the court at the pinnacle of a karmically construed hierarchy.

Chapter 2 describes how British colonialism massively disrupted this arrangement. The disruption, however, did not simply weaken Buddhism through a process of a secularizing modernization. On the contrary, colonial destabilization made Buddhism—the only social institution to survive the British takeover largely intact—all the more important, though the arrival of secular governance made its survival an issue of great anxiety.

Chapter 3 focuses on colonial-era educational reforms and the Burmese engagement with Western scientific knowledge to show in greater detail how a Buddhist value system butted up against the colonial project. Secular learning, alternate sources of knowledge, and transnational influences introduced by colonialism fragmented Buddhist communities, as they struggled in disparate and sometimes conflicting ways to balance tradition with change.

Chapter 4 explores the rise of lay authority and nationalism among Burmese Buddhists as a response to this challenging situation. Schober uses the case of the Young Men’s Buddhist Association to show the rise of nationalism and the further social fragmentation that developed as some Burmese moved toward secular organizations (particularly university students), while others embraced a traditionalist Buddhism that, at times, took on millennial aspects (exemplified in the Saya San rebellion).

This fragmentation bequeathed to the newly independent nation of Burma in 1948 both secular political institutions and a sense of Buddhism's indispensable role in governance. Chapter 5 looks at ways Burmese governments—U Nu's democracy, Ne Win's socialist state, and the later regimes of the military junta—used Buddhism, particularly control of the moral authority of the monkhood, to justify their power. But chapter 6 shows that Buddhism's polysemous role in society has allowed it to be used as a resource in resisting the state, too. Within an overview of forms of resistance since colonial times, Schober focuses on Aung San Suu Kyi and other recent activists to show ways people have aligned Buddhist doctrine to democratic ideals. Whether colluding with the state or resisting it, however, all actors have looked to the ordained as the ultimate source of moral authority.

Chapter 7 takes up the issue of how the moral authority of the monkhood has operated in politics, particularly in recent times, through an analysis of the nationwide protests of monks in 2007, called the Saffron Revolution. During that event, many monks, especially younger ones, challenged government officials by refusing to accept their donations, thus negating the economy of merit upon which the government depended for legitimacy. Schober argues that the confrontation between the monkhood and the military suggests that a genuinely pluralistic political system is unlikely, at least in the near-term, because Burmese have a deeply ingrained sense of Buddhism, and the monkhood in particular, as the necessary moral counterweight to amoral and coercive military might.

The final chapter considers what the situation described in previous chapters bodes for the political future in Burma. Schober argues that it is clear that the Burmese trajectory of development will not follow the Western (particularly European) model, in which religion becomes relegated to the private sphere. She presciently suggests the likelihood that scheduled elections could give at least the appearance of democracy and might cause the easing of international sanctions. This is exactly what has happened. But the thrust of the book's chapters indicates that such developments are not likely to undercut the important role Buddhism will continue to play in Burmese politics. Schober's observations, at a moment when Burma appears to be starting to develop somewhat democratic and accountable civil institutions, reminds us of patterns of religious response that are likely to surface again.

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