

A Word from the Guest Editor: Sharing the same River: Southeast Asian Buddhism in Strengthening Cultural Dialogue and Crossing Boundaries

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The Mekong River is the third longest river in East Asia, after only to the Yangtze River and the Yellow River, and is known as the "Buddhist River" (see Tran 2016; Dhammhaso and Peoples 2018; Hongsuwan 2011). The river is 4,909 kilometers long and flows from Qinghai through Yunnan of China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and southern Vietnam, providing water and sediment to Buddhist communities on both sides of the strait. The Tibetans and others in the upper reaches follow Vajrayana Buddhism (i.e. Tibetan Buddhism), the peoples in the middle reaches and parts of the lower reaches such as Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia adopt Theravada Buddhism, and the Vietnamese and the ethnic Chinese people in the lower reaches believe in Mahayana Buddhism. Regardless of their Buddhist affiliation, people along the Mekong River share a common humanistic spirit, concepts of karma and samsara (cause and effect), and especially a spirit of uniting local communities to overcome historical challenges. This is why Southeast Asia is known as the land of friendliness, smiles, and hospitality (see Stanton 1956), although it does not need any embellishment of luxurious concepts in philosophy.

However, since the Middle Ages, changes in socio-political movements throughout the region (including but not limited to the formation and/or development of monarchies, the spread and/or formalization of different political and cultural ideological schools from abroad, such as Hinduism from India, Islam from West Asia, Confucianism from China, the rise of Western colonialism since the mid-19th century and regionalism during the Cold War) have caused Southeast Asia to become more diverse and polarized, led to many disagreements and even conflicts. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in August 1967 on the platform of this polarization and gradually transformed its mission to become a common home that unites Southeast Asia, but it has not yet completed its mission due to the cultural

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diversity of the region and the intervention of external superpowers. Fortunately, Southeast Asia's communal solidarity and cultural spiritual foundations, including Buddhism—have ensured that the region has remained relatively stable despite the turmoil of recent decades. Arguably, Southeast Asia needs a combination of different political and cultural solutions to transcend borders, connect communities, and become a stable, developed, and prosperous region.

With the interaction and support of many mainstream cultural trends in the contemporary world (i.e. modernity, postmodernism, etc.), Southeast Asian Buddhism and world Buddhism in a broader sense have been screened, discovered and developed, forming a universal ideological line for all mankind and directly promoting common values and norms such as Humanistic Buddhism, Engaged Buddhism, Buddhism into Life, Buddhism for Environmental Protection, etc. (see Dalai Lama 1999, Sheng 2013, The Rubin Museum 2018).

This issue of Southeast Asian Buddhism and Politics includes six articles by Southeast Asian authors (and one co-author from Taiwan) that analyze and dissect core constructive issues in the Buddhist community in mainland Southeast Asia and other countries in order to seek common perspectives that can help strengthen cultural dialogue and enhance unity among different cultural communities. At the same time, by addressing different specific research questions these articles can vividly portray the interaction of Buddhist stories in the political, economic, and social life of the Mekong countries and the Malay Peninsula, highlighting how the Buddhist community expresses its views and telling stories (narratives) about the implementation of Buddhist missions in the local area.

In this issue, Phengphouvinh, Nguyen and Huynh present the current status of the use of Buddhist heritage for tourism development in Luang Prabang, Laos, in the context of booming urbanization and commercialization, and point out the risk of losing the cultural soul. Due to demographic disturbances (immigration, large numbers of tourists, policies that favor the preservation of tangible artifacts over intangible heritage, etc.), the recent tourism development has directly harmed the direction of local Buddhist institutions. Thai scholars Siriwong and Khamsa-ard tell the story of Thai amulets (mainly Buddhist amulets), exemplifying how cultural heritage can adapt to the demands of contemporary consumers while retaining its spiritual and cultural significance, and demonstrating the important role of state management in balancing the preservation of traditions and the pursuit of commercial value. Toh focuses on the spread and development of Humanistic Buddhism rooted in China in the Chinese society on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula, emphasizing that the regional and global contexts have enabled the secular development of Malaysia's "universal" Humanistic Buddhism, and that close social intervention does not imply the establishment of a new sect or separate organization. Ku, Nguyen, and Chiang conducted a comparative study on the spread and consequences of the figure of Monkey King (Sun Wukong, 孫悟空) in Chinese tradition in Malaysia and Vietnam

to discover the laws and characteristics of cultural acceptance in Southeast Asian Buddhist communities. In Malaysia, where Muslims dominate society, local Chinese have gradually transformed the image of the Monkey King into one that unites the community and supports education and charity; in southern Vietnam, this image has been integrated into Buddhist customs and local folk traditions, forming a broader religious pattern. Authors Phan and Truong focus on the belief systems and practices of Liên tông Tịnh độ Non bông Buddhism (Lotus Pure Land Buddhism at Penglai Mountain) in southern Vietnam and, in the process of making Buddhism relevant to everyday life, affirm the universality of Humanistic Buddhism in the region. Finally, the study of social philanthropy among Hoahao Buddhists in the Mekong Delta by Vo, Nguyen, and Nguyen shows that the humanistic spirit of sharing emotions and materials has become an integral and organic element of this Buddhist community, rather than simply "investing" in good deeds with certain expectations. Due to some objective reasons, Burmese and Cambodian Buddhism are not covered in this special issue, so further efforts are needed from the regional academic community to tell the systematic story of contemporary Southeast Asian Buddhism in the process of global localization.

The world today is full of instability and uncertainty, and many political operations and negotiations are beyond the capabilities of local societies. Geopolitical issues and external interference in Southeast Asia are becoming increasingly prominent, posing a direct challenge to the future of the people of Southeast Asian countries. In fact, local communities always have their own internal power, and if they find common ground in ideology and beliefs (including Buddhism), they can come together and sing out their internal voices through similar symbolic interpretations and ritual experiences (see Seligman and Weller 2012). Their own blueprint for the future is something they can draw themselves, not something that can be given by any external force. Humanistic Buddhism, Engaged Buddhism, Buddhism into Life, and upcoming waves of 'Anthropocosmic' Buddhism, Buddhism for Facing Climate Change, Buddhism for Gender Equality, etc. can continue to be the common concepts of Buddhist movement and development in Southeast Asia and the world.

That being said, Buddhist communities in Southeast Asia are nurtured by the same river, the Mekong River, and shares the same basic Buddhist concepts and a common future. We hope that all parties will conduct more in-depth cultural dialogue and interaction and jointly build a peaceful and prosperous Southeast Asia.

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