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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Reconstituting Boundaries and Connectivity: Religion and Mobility in a Globalizing Asia**

**Nanlai Cao & Sin Wen Lau**

Keywords: Religious Networks, Mobility, Migration, Translocality, Transnationalism, Religious Diaspora, Gender, Globalization, Asia

This volume examines the dynamic, mutually constitutive relationship between religion and mobility in the contemporary era of Asian globalization in which an increasing number of people have been displaced, forcefully or voluntarily, by an expanding global market economy and lasting regional political strife. Five case studies provide up-to-date ethnographic perspectives on the translocal/transnational dimension of religion and the religious/spiritual aspect of movement. Technological innovations and improvements in mass communications and air travel have promoted Asian religions to go global. International media headlines in the five years preceding 2012 are littered with incidents marked in one way or the other with religious overtones. In 2007, Buddhist monks in Burma led civil protests against the military junta in what became popularly known as the ‘Saffron Revolution’, a move that fuelled the hopes of Burmese in the country and around the world for an improvement to everyday lives in Burma. A year later, monasteries in the country played a critical role in distributing international humanitarian aid in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis. The incarceration of Venerable Ming Yi, a Buddhist monk who had abbotship of temples in Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong, for the misuse of donations and forgery in 2009, as well as ongoing investigations of alleged misappropriations of church tithes to finance the international singing career of his wife by Pastor Kong Hee, charismatic founder of the regionally active City Harvest Church, raised moral outcries against deteriorating

values in millennium Singapore. Periodic eruptions of sectarian violence between the Buddhist majority and Rohingya Muslims in Burma, the burning of churches in Muslim majority Indonesia and clashes between Muslim settlers and tribal groups in Assam, India, underscore the salience of religion in the region. Shouwang Church, the largest unregistered house church in Beijing, aroused much media and government concern in the Western world by staging high profile outdoor worship services in open defiance of the Chinese state's regulation of religious venues. Entangled with the cultural histories and socio-political realities of Asia, religion is hardly a peripheral activity performed in the private sphere but a vital force shaping state politics and everyday life in the region (Clammer 2009, Dubois 2010).

Implicit in this contemporary penetration of religion into the mundane is a sense of movement. Globalization and transnational Asian capitalism have prompted Asian religious actors and ideas to cross boundaries of nation-states and create new spaces of connectedness and mutuality. The unprecedented flow of peoples across territories has brought different groups into close contact with each other, Indeed, the sectarian clashes in Burma and India give voice to the tensions inherent in everyday struggles between the settled and newcomers in particular localities. The transnational reach of religious specialists in Singapore underscores the spread of religiosities across the region, even as it articulates moral critiques against the expansion of mega-religions in a spiraling world of market capitalism. Attending to this movement of peoples are flows of goods and money. The role played by Burmese monasteries as dissemination nodes for basic necessities after Cyclone Nargis, as with allegations of illegally channeling religious funds around the world by religious specialists in Singapore, exemplifies the materiality of regional and global religious connections in and out of Asia. The flow of ideas also attends to the movement of peoples across the region. Images of maroon-robed monks taking to the streets of Rangoon invoked a nostalgic yearning for home in the Burmese diaspora. These flows of people, goods and ideas bind Asia into a web

of interconnectivity that cuts across local, regional and global scales. As the tempo of life speeds up in this globalized milieu, familiar points of reference become unmoored and the making of life choices increasingly complex (Appadurai 1996). This complexity leads to an intensification of religiosities as the peoples of Asia make their way through this maelstrom and search for certainty and community.

Despite this intersection between religion and mobility, much of the scholarship on religiosities in Asia approach religion as situated practice (for notable exceptions, please see Taylor 2004 and Yang 2004)<sup>1</sup>. Two impulses undergird this literature. The first, following the Asian area studies tradition, sets out to document the cosmos of a particular group of people with an aim to understand how an indigenous way of life is constituted through religious beliefs and practices (Ahern 1973). These fine-grained ethnographies are referenced as baseline studies from which to understand the distinctiveness and transformation of Asian religious beliefs and practices as new ideas and influences enter the region. Building on this work, the second direction pursued in this set of scholarship demonstrates the ways through which religion is profoundly implicated with ideas of ethnicity (Gladney 1991), nationalism (van der Veer 1994), gender (Chong 2008, Robinson 2009) and modernity (Keane 2007). Exploring how indigenous ways of life are transformed through cultural encounters, these studies conceive of religion as enabling the accommodation of new ideas and values as people draw on their religious beliefs to make sense of socio-political shifts. These studies have done much to advance our understandings of how religious experience is embedded and mediated within specific socio-political contexts, the implications of which refract the complexities of Asian societies.

However, focused on religion as a locality-based practice, this scholarship produces a teleological understanding of Asia. Religious beliefs and practices are set up as pristine traditions evocative of an indigenous way of life and narrated as hybridized through

encounters with Western-dominated influences. In this understanding, primordial religious traditions constitute Asia as distinct, rooted and essentialised. Change is limited by these cultural bases and where it occurs, aspires towards a Western modernity. Silent on the flows of religiosities in and out of particular localities, this teleological understanding pays insufficient attention to the creativity through which the peoples of Asia are putting their religious beliefs and practices to work mediating the movements undergirding their everyday lives. It also eschews the extension of translocal religious networks as Asian religiosities circulate in the region and are exported into the world. Having tied religion to emplaced communities, too little is known about the contours, mediations and implications of religiosities on the move in Asia for meaningful comparative engagements with a wider literature on migrants and their translocal religious life (e.g. Ebaugh & Chafetz 2002, Levitt 2007, Warner & Wittner 1998, Werbner 2003). This limitation reinforces binary understandings of East and West by closing off the possibility of thinking about how the flow of Asian religiosities across territories (re)produces or challenges conceptions of Western modernity, play a part in shaping what it means to be modern in the context of a globalizing Asia, and articulate a discursive category of Asia in diasporic conditions.

It is our hope that this special issue takes a step towards broadening this conversation. The papers collected within aim to add to ongoing discussions of translocal and diasporic religiosities by offering ethnographic explorations into the ways religion is lived and reconfigured in motion. They take religion to be a social fact (Mauss 1990[1925]) and pay attention to the ways religious ideas, social formations, institutions, political identities, practices and beliefs coexist, and are embodied and meaningful for a large number of people in Asia. Taking mobility as an analytical trope seriously, the papers in this volume ask how mobility is made sense of by people on the move through their religious faiths and how religion is reconstituted by processes and experiences of mobility such as migration and

displacement. The papers draw on research into Buddhism, Christianity, and communal ritual as these religious beliefs and practices move in and across Singapore, Taiwan, China, Malaysia, Hong Kong, the upper Mekong region, the Thai-Burma border, and France. Taken collectively, the papers investigate how religiosities in motion engender universal subjectivities, assert boundaries of particularized identities, and enable multiple belongings through reconstitutions of locality, gender, circulations of ritual economy and interpenetrations of the rural / traditional / Asian into the urban / modern / Western.

With the exception of this Introduction and the Epilogue, the papers collected herein were first presented as a panel at the 2011 Association for Asian Studies and International Convention of Asia Scholars Joint Conference in Honolulu, Hawaii.<sup>2</sup> The panel included anthropologists based in Thailand, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Germany, and a discussant, Nicholas Tapp of East China Normal University/The Australian National University. The editors and contributors would like to dedicate this volume to the Department of Anthropology in the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University in celebration of its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

The first two papers, by Prasert Rangkla and Wasan Panyagaew respectively, deal with Buddhism with a conceptual focus on religious mobility, change and growth in the inter-Asian context of borderland politics. Prasert Rangkla discusses the place-making practices of Buddhist Karens in the town of Mae Sot on the Thai-Burma border. The Karens he discusses belong to the Mon-Burmese Buddhist order and are refugees who have settled in Thailand after fleeing civil war in Burma. Instead of presenting the Karens as helpless victims displaced by powerful nation-states, Prasert Rangkla portrays them as innovative agents who actively draw on a familiar religious tradition in order to engender a sense of belonging in forced mobility. His ethnography centers on a Burmese monastery and explores the ways the Buddhist Karens transform the border town into a place of hope by adroitly maneuvering

around Thai state authority in order to build the religious structure, constructing a magical pagoda that casts an aura of peace and protection onto the conflict-ridden landscape, and re-interpretations of Buddhist rituals and festivals that constitute a sense of a Karen community in exile. These religious practices, argue Prasert Rangkla, are a means through which displaced Karens have been able to be 'in and of their new place'.

Wasan Panyagaew provides a case of religious revivalism as he takes us on the wanderings of Khruba Khuen, a charismatic Lue monk through the frontiers of northern Thailand, eastern Burma and southwest China, an area traditionally the homeland of the Lue people. This historically rich and sensitive ethnography investigates the ways religion, mobility and social memory intersect as countries in the area push towards regional integration and the world for economic development. Ethnographically, Wasan Panyagaew illuminates the flows of Buddhist art and architecture, ideas and skills, disciples and followers, as well as donations that attend to the restoration of religious sites like monasteries, pagodas, monk huts and images of the Buddha as Khruba Khuen journeys across these borderlands. The installation of these religious structures reminds people of Theravada Buddhism as they conduct their religious activities at these sites. It is, as Wasan Panyagaew eloquently puts it, through these religious acts of 'remembering with respect' that members of the Lue diaspora reconnect with one another and create a sense of place and belonging in the upper Mekong region.

The next paper turns our attention to the effects of mobility on popular religion. Shuling Yeh's paper examines the impact of rural-urban migration on traditional religious practices through an exploration of communal ritual life amongst the increasingly mobile Austronesian-speaking Amis of Taiwan. Focusing on the *Miingay* ritual and the circulation of pig sacrifices and money surrounding it, Shuling Yeh asks how this ritualization of mobility sustains and reproduces a translocal Amis community in the context of Taiwanese state driven

capitalism and Amis conversion to Catholicism. Shuling Yeh's argument is intricate. On one hand, her ethnography demonstrates the revitalization of kinship sets in Amis villages through the consumption of sacrificial pigs during the *Miingay* ritual, a feasting that symbolically marks communion with Amis ancestors. On the other, she notes that the exchanges of money between the village she studied and the urban areas where Amis men have moved to as waged labour build enduring translocal connections and express Amis consciousness of their embeddedness within a wider world. Underscoring the reciprocity of these translocal ties, Shuling Yeh argues for the engendering of a synthesized cultural order that incorporates Amis on the move with their kin and home villages.

Chee-Han Lim explores the transnational dimension of Falungong by studying a group of mainland Chinese Falungong practitioners who have employed a spiritual narrative of their international migration. The ethnography shows how these Falungong practitioners consider their transnational migration a spiritual journey, specifically, how they resort to Falungong exercises in resolving life crises associated with transplantation and seeking a new authentic spiritual experience that was unavailable to them back in China. Lim pays special attention to the unique spiritual yearnings of these immigrants who reject a scientific, materialist interpretation of qigong and reclaim their Chinese spiritual legacy by searching for the true Buddhist Pure Land on earth in the new society

The remaining two papers on Christianity explore the social and economic implications of religious beliefs and practices as they are put into motion in regional and global configurations. Sin Wen Lau asks what it takes to be Christian in mobility for a Singaporean expatriate housewife. This woman has lived in a state of chronic mobility for close to two decades, circulating once every two to three years between Singapore, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Taipei and Shanghai as her husband is posted around the region by the multinational corporations he works for. Focusing on the private deliberations and



contemplations of this woman as she searches for church, Sin Wen Lau demonstrates how religious belonging for hyper-mobile elites in the region is fractured by concerns of class, language and nationality and suggests that this feminized form of overseas Chinese religiosity is shaped by a desire to be differentiated as a privileged woman on the move in Asia. This compact study underscores the unevenness of global Christianity and offers a case study into the challenges of sustaining faith in movement.

Nanlai Cao's contribution pushes the discussion beyond the region by tracing the export of an Asian religiosity into the West. His topic is the Christianity practiced by a group of entrepreneurial Wenzhou Chinese who have migrated to Paris, France. Vibrant in Paris, this Christianity was indigenized in Wenzhou and deeply intertwined with a regional culture of commercialism in coastal southeast China. Wenzhou migrants in Paris draw on this homegrown Christianity as a form of conservative patriarchal morality to reconstruct a distinctive Wenzhou mercantile identity, family and way of life in diaspora. They also use Christianity as a moral framework to talk about and legitimize their histories of illegal migration and morally ambivalent business practices. Nanlai Cao's ethnography suggests that this global Christianity as a universalist moral discourse is embedded in a transnational space and embodies connectedness to native-place and informal communal networks.

With these diverse and rich ethnographic cases on translocal/transnational Asian religious practices and subjectivities, the editors and contributors make a concerted effort to transcend the conventional nation-state centered framework to look into how mobile religious agents are redefining boundaries of local, regional, national identities and recreating translocal, transnational and interregional connectivity. In so doing, we hope to illustrate the importance of promoting a dynamic understanding of Asia not just as a geopolitical entity but as an ongoing social and religious formation in late modernity. The volume contributes to the

literature on religion and globalization, migration, transnationalism, diaspora and citizenship studies, and global anthropology.

### **Endnotes**

[1] Please see Taylor 2004 for a discussion of some reasons for this lack of attention to translocal religions in the context of Asia.

[2] We are grateful for funding support from the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Hong Kong that made our panel possible.

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