

Review of Richard K. Payne's & Fabio Rambelli's *Buddhism under Capitalism*, Bloomsbury Academic 2023, viii+269 pp.

Ernest C. H. Ng

University of Hong Kong

Over the last decade, significant attention has been given to interdisciplinary research in Buddhism and economics. This surge in research over the last few decades in faith and market, spiritual and business—or most recently sustainability—may have to do with concerns as to whether our capitalist society has lost its compass. A major challenge in these studies, however, is to meaningfully define the subject matter. *Buddhism under Capitalism* addresses this challenge carefully with great editorial brilliance. It covers a diverse collection of Buddhist segments (Tibetan, Chinese, Theravadin, Kuan Im, among others) as well as a range of business sectors (secular services, mental health, tourism, small business, technology, Gross National Happiness, and so forth), across many regions (including the U.S., East Asia, Thailand, Ladakh, Bhutan, and Europe). Editors Richard K. Payne and Fabio Rambelli have taken a wide range of paper presentations over a five-year seminar series at the American Academy of Religion on “Economics and Capitalism in the Study of Buddhism” and gathered them into a cohesive compilation.

Given the broad coverage of this book, the attempt to apply a narrow definition of Buddhism or Capitalism may seem rather ambitious. This expansive landscape invites readers to reflect more deeply on the meaning of “Buddhism” and “Capitalism.” For example, though mindfulness and reiki discussed by Brown in Chapter 2 may have strong connections to Buddhism because of their connections with Buddhist teachings and practices, as well as the founders’ affiliations, could these practices be considered “Buddhist”? However, it may be equally unfair to proclaim them non-Buddhist by applying the strict standards of the Three Seals of Dharma. In the contemporary multicultural world, a person could well be a ‘Buddhist’ without proclaiming this publicly, while another is a self-declared ‘Buddhist’ without adhering to core Buddhist values. This may equally apply to the challenges in reviewing the authenticity of Buddhist clergies, tourist sites, or operations (as expounded in Chapter 5). Marchman offered an in-depth analysis of the visitors’ experience in the three Buddhist sites, Mt. Emei, Mt. Wutai, and Nanshan Park, and concluded with a deep reflection on how the “dichotomy of commoditized and genuine” may break down.

As Thich (1995) argues, Buddhist wisdom of interbeing suggests that Buddhism comprises “non-Buddhist” elements, as much as there are “Buddhist” elements in “non-

Buddhist" traditions. Perhaps the middle path is to admit with humility that any attempt to define or label Buddhism precisely is considered a fabrication, since it is highly contextual. Instead, we might more fruitfully focus on whether these definitions are "skillful": i.e. supportive of our cessations of suffering or not. It may equally be beneficial for us to reflect on what we mean by "Capitalism." At the introduction, the editors acknowledged capitalism in its predominant neoliberal ideology, not as "monolith but comes in different forms and degrees". Indeed, some of the monopolistic, anti-competitive behaviors currently observed in the markets are more anti-capitalist than capitalist. The risk herein is that the subjects of these interdisciplinary studies may or may not (depending on the definition applied) be strictly "Buddhist" or "Capitalist". For example, the Tibetan monastic institutions explored by Dewey in Chapter 1 are irrefutably "Buddhist" but are also closely tied to the local socio-cultural structures. The pursuit of power and wealth is inherently social, cultural, and political—or simply "human." It is an exploration of Buddhism under capitalism "as it is" without considering the changing influence of Buddhism in the community, such as any decline in Buddhist population or Buddhist activities in lieu of capitalist behaviors.

As this book sets out to explore the ways in which capitalism would affect the economics of Buddhism, the editors position the book to explore "capitalism's impact on Buddhist in its various facets—Buddhist organizations, beliefs, practices, practitioners, scholars, and scholarship (p. 12). The book analyzes the impact of capitalism on Buddhism, including scholarly research in Buddhism. I argue that the research of "Buddhism under Capitalism" cannot be separated from the research of "Capitalism under Buddhism." The former is the core focus of this book, what the editors define as the "Economics of Buddhism," while the latter is identified by the editors as "Buddhist Economics." However, when it comes to exploring how "Buddhism could offer ways to think and act differently," this book may unavoidably touch on some "ethical projects" under Buddhist economics which the editors attempt to carve out. Although the editors admit that this distinction is academic, it might run the risk of overlooking the contributions of Buddhist economic scholars such as Schumacher (1989), Zsolnai (2011) and Brown (2017) as ethical projects simply at the individual level, without much societal or environmental significance. Field research by Speece and Roenjun in Chapter 6 offers strong qualitative records among *Kuan Im*'s small business followers, which may be a good case study of the "Small is Beautiful" ideals proposed by Schumacher (1984).

Indeed, there are many interactions between the economics of Buddhism and Buddhist Economics. For example, some of the Buddhist pilgrimage sites are substantially commercialized under capitalism. If through certain adaptations the Buddhist temples attempt to uphold Buddhist values amidst the challenges of a capitalist society, we may perhaps argue that the subject of discussion is still Buddhism "under capitalism." However, if Buddhist elements are simply being appropriated for profit-making purposes, then being "Buddhist" is only a means to capitalist ends. If the public identity of Buddhism is well-understood, then commercialization should have no significant adverse impact on Buddhism

(i.e. the non-Buddhist depictions of Buddhism by the capitalist intention should stay capitalist and non-Buddhist). That intention, though hardly quantifiable, could arguably serve as a guide of what is serving what. Capitalist society affects Buddhist practices because Buddhism is not a rigid permanent concept. The Buddhist-look-alike could dilute the understanding of the Buddhist traditions. Buddhist wisdom proclaims that all phenomena arise together with the proper conditions. Williams-Oerberg's reflection in Chapter 7 reminds us that even with the strongest intention, outcomes are hardly predictable because "karmic connections" are valuable and immeasurable, not easily evaluated by short-term pursuit of profit in the market sense. For example, the operations of Buddha-bar involve the commercial appropriation of Buddhism with more capitalist objects than religious. However, it is difficult to assess the impact of these commercial appropriations, including "McMindfulness" to the propagation of Buddhism.

In Chapter 3, Helderman provides an in-depth discussion of this murky dynamic between the secular and sacred in the adoption of Buddhist practices into psychotherapy. It is a good review of how difficult it is to segregate Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements in real life. The "prescription of Dharma" by psychotherapists is the integration of Buddhist teachings into the psychotherapists' professional practices and economics, which may or may not add credits to the Buddhist traditions. Meanwhile, even when Buddhist organizations begin to offer Buddhist-inspired care or psychotherapy, such initiatives operate with limited economic or operational scale (unlike the healthcare institutions established by some Christian denominations worldwide).

As Obadia proposes in Chapter 10, the intertwined relationship between Buddhism and Modern Capitalism suggests that both are evolving concepts and systems, and that Buddhists living and engaging in a capitalist society are part of the systems, and contribute to them. As Halkias (2013) and Ng (2019) argue, individual moral decision-making could be driven by Buddhist principles and hence have an impact on capitalism at the societal level. After all, most capitalist economies are not "Buddhist", nor is it straightforward to determine the Buddhist influence in capitalist society even with the Buddhist majority in the population (Daniels 1998). Shields posits in Chapter 11 that Buddhist responses to capitalism are not new. Capitalism is inherently social—and society is inseparable from individuals and their relationships. The transformations of individuals, their relationships, and hence societal transformation, is possible. Buddhist teachings and practices could serve as a "compass" to better understand and leverage *social power* contributing to a social economy. This also resonates with Bruntz's exploration of Buddhist technological advancements in Chapter 4 by taking the approach of moving from sociology to economics. This approach recognizes Buddhist institutions as social institutions with agency, i.e. the capacity and "opportunity to drive changes." By building "thick" engagement in addition to the "thin" ones, Buddhist institutions can design and execute their ethical projects to make an impact on the socio-economics system—including production and consumption behavior.

The introduction section offers a thorough review on the historical study of the Economics of Buddhism. Despite the editors' best attempts to clearly define the scope of research and the book's understanding of Buddhism under Capitalism, it is understandable that each chapter may have different interpretations of the subject and scope. In this respect, I wonder whether readers might benefit from reading upfront the chapters in Part III, the Theoretical Reflections, to better understand the context before applying them in Part II Contemporary Studies. Yet, the case studies are the core treasure of this book, illustrating the theories behind. In Chapter 9, Mitchell as a scholar appears to hold up a mirror to reflect on how capitalism affects Buddhists, Buddhist scholars, or scholar-practitioners who are propagating the teachings and practices of dharma with an economic reward.

It is my opinion that some chapters could have been more focused by keeping background or introductory materials to the minimum with proper reference to the existing literatures. This could have meaningfully enhanced readability and shed light on the core contributions of each chapter. For example, many of the chapters begin with a definition of capitalism. Similarly, I would argue that the introductory discussion on Gross National Happiness (GNH) on pages 151-2 of Chapter 8 by Clayton and Duncan could be condensed. Nevertheless, their illustrations of GNH as a Buddhist response at the national level to the demand for growth, and the challenges faced by GNH in the markets offer a unique contribution to limited existing research. Overall, this book presents compelling theoretical research and practical case studies in the interdisciplinary field of Buddhism and Capitalism. Even though it follows the pioneering work of Gernet (1995) to position itself in the domain of "economics of Buddhism," it contributes to the field of Buddhist Economics and inspires us to engage with capitalism differently under the compass of Buddhist teachings and practices.

References

Brown, Clair. 2017. *Buddhist Economics: An Enlightened Approach to the Dismal Science*. New York: Bloomsbury Press.

Daniels, Peter L. 1998. "Economic Change, the Environment and Buddhism in Asia." *International Journal of Social Economics*, 25, nos. 6-8: 968-1004.

Gernet, Jacques. 1995. *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Halkias, Georgios T. 2013. "The Enlightened Sovereign: Buddhism and Kingship in India and Tibet." In *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, edited by Steven M. Emmanuel, 491-511. Place: Wiley-Blackwell.

Ng, Ernest C. H. 2019. *Introduction to Buddhist Economics: The Relevance of Buddhist Values in Contemporary Economy and Society*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schumacher, E. F. 1989. "Buddhist economics." In *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, 56-66. Hoboken: Sphere Books.

Thich, Nhat Hanh. 1995. *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Zsolnai, Laszlo. 2011. "Buddhist Economics." In *Handbook of Spirituality and Business*, edited by Luk Bouckaert, & Laszlo Zsolnai, 88-94. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.