

# Buddhism and the Political Process

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Edited by

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*In memory of Ian Harris (1952–2014)*

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# Preface

The edited volume is the brainchild of the late Professor Ian Harris, who passed away on 23 December 2014 in a beautiful village in rural north Yorkshire. Ian's pioneering work in exploring the interface between categories often portrayed as mutually exclusive in Buddhist contexts—namely, religion and politics—has demonstrated that such divisions are actually artificial. Instead, his work has shown clearly how Buddhism and politics are intertwined in the socio-political reality of Buddhists and Buddhist countries in Asia. In an earlier edited volume, Ian stated, 'Any presentation of Buddhism as a tradition that focuses on its quietistic, meditation-oriented dimension alone will necessarily be one-sided.'<sup>1</sup> He was interested in the political dimensions of Buddhism, especially how it 'played a substantial role in the formation of specific states as well as in less formal ways of interpreting and informing social and political processes.'<sup>2</sup> He conducted research on Cambodia and wrote books such as *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice* (2008) and *Buddhism in a Dark Age: Cambodian Monks under Pol Pot* (2012), as well as editing several volumes on Buddhism, and in such work he challenged and showed the problems of the Weberian assumption that Buddhism was a world-renouncing and anti-political religion. As will be described in his Introduction to this volume, Ian considered that this 'apolitical' reading of Buddhism had its historical roots in the European thought of the era in which European colonial rule of much of Asia developed. In contrast to the relationship between religion and politics that, in Western secular states, have become separated in modern times, Ian saw Asian Buddhism as operating as a 'total culture,' a holistic tradition that continues to provide people, both lay and monastic, with moral values and a specific world view to engage with the political processes in their respective countries.

The title of this volume, *Buddhism and the Political Process*, comes from an international conference convened by Ian Harris during his visiting professorship at the University of Toronto, Scarborough, in April 2012. It was hosted by the Department of Humanities at Toronto and generously sponsored by Tung Lin Kok Yuen Foundation. In his original proposal, Ian wrote that the aim of the conference was to 'construct a bridge between the disciplines of Buddhist studies and political science, ... on the relevance of Buddhist categories and practices for the

political process.<sup>3</sup> Conference participants were invited after a rigorous selection process by the committee as he wanted to bring quality scholars together and make them engage in cutting-edge discussions on the interplay between Buddhism and politics. However, this book does not cover the conference proceedings, but it is an edited volume examining the themes and issues that emerged from the discussions at the conference and that were further developed afterwards. It unravels the dynamic interplay between Buddhism and politics in Thailand, Myanmar-Burma, Sri Lanka, India, Bhutan, Tibet, China, and Japan, and the approach is interdisciplinary; some contributors have adopted a sociological and empirical approach, while others have engaged with a historical or philosophical inquiry.

Ian's inquiry into the intersection between Buddhism and politics began after he was first commissioned to update the early work of Jerrold Schecter (1967), which examined the 'fusion' of Buddhism and politics in Asia, although Schecter's approach was mainly on Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> As a result, Ian produced an edited volume entitled *Buddhism and Politics in the Twentieth-Century Asia* (1999),<sup>5</sup> and this served as a catalyst to take his research inquiries further. He told me that since he could not find anyone to write on Cambodia for the volume, he ended up writing the chapter himself about a country he had not known before, and this eventually developed into an enduring commitment that lasted his lifetime.

I came to know Ian since my appointment, in 1994, to the Department of Religious Studies at Lancaster University, where he had studied and obtained his doctoral thesis. He was teaching Buddhism in the neighboring institute of St Martin's College (now the University of Cumbria) and lived in a nearby village. Through the activities of the UK Association for Buddhist Studies, I was fortunate enough to share many social occasions, seminars, and conferences with, and often organized by, Ian, and to learn from his wide range of knowledge that spanned diverse areas and eras, from medieval European history to Chinese prints. Sadly, Ian was diagnosed with mesothelioma soon after the Toronto conference in 2012, and although he continued to work and was always full of optimism, he was increasingly exhausted. As a result, in September 2014, Ian resigned from all his positions and commitments and entrusted me with the heavy responsibility to continue with the editorial work of this volume.

In his 'sixfold typology' (see Chapter 1), Ian sought to summarize the interactions between Buddhism and politics into two subsets, and although he could not complete his work due to his untimely passing,

his original aim was to draw from past examples and find a way to identify recurrent models of political processes in the classical and modern history of Buddhism. In the first subset, he presented the interaction between Buddhism and politics to be in 'states of equilibrium' over an extended period, and in the second, he focused on the 'conflict' or antagonism that manifested between the two 'subsets,' especially paying attention to the positions taken by monks in their dealings with secular authorities.

Contributors to the volume were asked to engage with Ian's typology in their explorations of issues at the intersection of Buddhism and politics in their respective regional or historical contexts, but it is inevitable that their engagements vary according to their focus and the contexts in which they work. Some put more emphasis on Buddhism, and others more on politics; some examine how the ancient Indian notions of kingship are brought into line with Buddhist ethical norms, while others explore whether Buddhist-inspired violence comes from the state or is in reaction to secular power. Nonetheless, it is generally acknowledged that Asian Buddhists retain a holistic notion of the political and religious, the temporal and the spiritual, and the this-worldly and the other-worldly, as contributors see both domains to be an integral part of the political process. At the same time, many problematize the basic premises of Western political discourse that impose secular and 'universalist' values to the understanding of Buddhist politics, and attempt to provide a local perspective on the socio-political landscape of Buddhist countries. Thus one of the challenges addressed by contributions to this book is to deconstruct some of the fundamental concepts we take for granted in our political debates and to introduce alternative views on such areas as citizenship, democracy, governance, political power, religious authority, and communalism.

Modernist readings of 'Buddhism' are also put under scrutiny via a concerted attempt to understand Buddhism beyond dogma or doctrine. Some of our contributors explore why many of the recent movements instigated by Buddhist monks in Myanmar-Burma or Sri Lanka, for example, promote a xenophobic type of political rhetoric rather than opening a dialog for citizens regardless of their faith or ethnicity. In this context, too, attention is paid to devotional aspects of Buddhism and to the ways they could lead to a form of 'communalism' that evokes a heightened sense of chauvinism against those who are not part of the Buddhist community. As such, concepts of the 'other' and examinations about why Asian Buddhists act in certain ways and make certain decisions in the political processes of these countries are part of the focus,

and it is hoped in this respect that this volume can foster deeper understanding of how these processes occur. In addition, attention needs to be paid to the ways in which Buddhism provides people with a distinctive understanding of their historical past and gives them visions for constructing their future, and this, too, is an area that contributors have sought to explore.

In the chapters that follow, contributors explore different countries and Buddhist contexts. Thomas Borchert examines the notion of modern citizenship by focusing on the legal status of Buddhist monks in Thailand and China, and shows how the concept of national identity can come into conflict with religious or ethnic identity even for monks who have renounced and left their secular persona. He focuses on the precarious standing of Buddhist monks from Sipsongpannā, a Theravada Buddhist group treated as minorities in southwest China, but who are culturally closer to ethnic groups in northern Thailand. He describes how their opportunities to study in Thailand are disadvantaged, despite being Theravada Buddhists, due to their legal status as Chinese nationals. Moreover, the elevated position of Buddhism in Thailand, according to Borchert, affects the public perception toward these monks who are expected to behave in a certain way in Thailand, one that is in contrast to monks in China who do not come under a similar kind of public scrutiny. Borchert raises questions on the notion of legitimacy as he explores whether their religious status is authorized by the monastic community or the state, or whether it is determined by public perceptions of what a Buddhist monk should be.

Many acknowledge the socio-political influence of Buddhist monks (priests) and the roles they perform in public life, although at the same time recognizing that some have incited violence and promoted a chauvinistic view toward non-Buddhists. However, sangha politics can be complex and monks are comprised of many different groups engaged in the process of reform and democratization.<sup>6</sup> Matthew Walton argues that there are variations in both the conceptualization and implementation of local understandings of the notion of democracy. He examines how 'democracy' is adapted and reinterpreted in Myanmar even though the concept may generally be assumed to imply freedom of speech, electoral participation, protection of human rights, and so on. He looks at how 'democracy' has come to be appropriated to imply 'moral action' as described in Buddhist teachings and how Buddhist rhetoric and symbolism have been an essential part of the political discourse in Myanmar's modern history. Buddhist monks in particular have been the key proponents in propelling nationalism at crucial historical points, and they

have also been active in current political debates since the start of political reforms in 2010. Walton also notes that there has been an absence of explicit reference to Buddhism by the government or by Aung San Suu Kyi, the opposition leader. In contrast, Buddhist monks have been increasingly influential in shaping the political discourse by asserting the centrality of Buddhism as a moral resource for democracy.

In my (Hiroko Kawanami) chapter, I highlight the political culture in Myanmar embedded in traditional Buddhist values that continue to affect the orientations and aspirations of the majority of Buddhists. The chapter takes us back to the early decade of democratization after 1948 and examines the political experience of U Nu, the first democratically elected prime minister, who drew moral inspiration from Buddhism to promote parliamentary democracy in the country's post-independence nation-building. I draw the attention of readers to the kind of 'Buddhism' adhered to by the majority Buddhist population that often provoked intense communal responses in contrast to the reformed rational Buddhism subscribed to by U Nu. He later adopted the Asokan model in his attempt to appeal as a 'righteous ruler,' but compromised his democratic ideals to accommodate the incessant demands made by monks and eventually made Buddhism the 'state religion.' I also point to the political culture in Myanmar that has long been ruled by elements of 'occult' and supernatural beliefs, which are at odds with secular ideals and democratic principles. I argue that despite U Nu's concerted endeavor to secure legal and religious rights for all citizens, he—and the state he spawned—failed to co-opt the monks in his liberal democratic vision as they continued to make demands for a lateral and preferential treatment of Buddhism on the pretext of protecting the welfare of the *sāsana*.

The complementary relationship between the Buddhist king and sangha, which used to provide the locus for social order and stability in a traditional society, no longer exists in Buddhist countries such as Myanmar or Sri Lanka after kings were deposed by European colonial powers in the nineteenth century. In Sri Lanka, Iselin Frydenlund examines the deep tension that exists today between secular democratic aspirations that seek to promote civil and political rights, and the political culture of Buddhism inherited from pre-colonial times that continues to affect the political orientation of Sinhala Buddhists. She investigates the political participation of Buddhist monks by focusing on the activities of Jathika Hela Uramaya, the National Heritage Party, and argues that monks in Sri Lanka negotiate between 'universalist' and 'particularist' values, between the ancient concept of Buddhist kingship

and modern democratic notions of rights and equality. As they navigate between these opposing ideals, Frydenlund asks questions that pertain to some of the main themes of this volume, such as the meaning of Buddha *sāsana*, Buddhist secularism, and the nature of the civil or political rights of Buddhist monks.

Buddhist monks are ‘renouncers’ by profession, but they have also been a force in generating Buddhist nationalist sentiments and mobilizing people to take part in their movements. In Burma, Mabatha, a nationalistic Buddhist organization of monks, is gaining strength in demanding more legal rights for Buddhists, while in Sri Lanka, Bodu Bala Sena has been controversial in perceiving itself to be a ‘Buddhist army.’ Mahinda Deegalle examines the causes behind the rise of militancy of Buddhist monks and takes up the case of Bodu Bala Sena in the religious, cultural, and social contexts of Sri Lanka. He focuses on the Five Resolutions that shaped its activism and examines its anthem to understand the Buddhist activist movement in its local milieu. Although Deegalle describes the movement as a religious crusade that aims to preserve ‘pure’ and authentic Buddhism, he also points out that the local Buddhist community is not a monolithic entity. Among a variety of views held by Sinhala Buddhists, he thus situates Bodu Bala Sena at the end of a spectrum of those who represent the conservative wing of Buddhists in Sri Lanka.

Tomas Larsson, in contrast, examines the universal application of civil and human rights in contemporary Buddhist countries and problematizes the legal disenfranchisement of Buddhist monks in countries such as Bhutan, Myanmar-Burma, and Thailand. He explores the historical origin of their legal positions in these countries that exempt monastic members from the principle of universal suffrage and argues that their ‘disenfranchisement’ is one aspect of ‘guardian states’ that view the democratization process to be a threat to their national essence. Larsson considers that such ‘disenfranchisement’ contravenes the notion of human rights in the international community, and he explores the ways in which international actors have advocated that Buddhist monks should be formally (and legally) part of the electoral process. His chapter raises the question as to whether their renunciatory position can be reconciled with the secular notion of civil and political rights as monks come under the jurisdiction of Vinaya, and he further asks whether giving them voting rights would quell the xenophobic tendencies of militant monks or make the situation worse.

Michael Jerryson continues with the current discourse of Buddhism and violence and states that Buddhism like any other religion has had

a long history of aggression and violence. He points to a powerful political mechanism that lurks behind the Buddhist-justified warfare, which the German political theorist Carl Schmitt called the ‘exceptions to the rules,’ and states that Buddhist states have capitalized on such exceptions that allowed them to commit acts of large-scale violence at the expense of human rights and the teaching of compassion. Jerryson examines doctrinal sources in the Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions that have condoned violence or even promoted the notion of ‘just war.’ In understanding ethical exceptions in Buddhism, he lists variables of intention and the statuses of the victim and of the person who kills, which apply differently to people according to their professional duties and social statuses. He also refers to the Mahāyāna ideals of skill in means and emptiness, which have in some cases been appropriated to justify violent acts.

Bruce Knauff takes up the case of Tibetan political culture and emphasizes the importance of knowing the motives and cultural values (especially religious and spiritual) in understanding the actions of their politico-religious leaders. He describes the tension created by the so-called enlightened leadership of *lamas* and refers to Tibetan religious politics that have often resulted in factionalism and sectarian strife. He reveals that his Western political assumptions do not sit comfortably with Buddhist beliefs and traditional values that justify the high political position that Buddhist leaders occupy in which authority is passed down through lineages and reincarnations. His chapter refers to the Trans-Himalayan Nalanda Initiative spearheaded initially by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, with the aim of protecting the legacy of Tibetan Buddhism across the region. The project eventually foundered despite the best intentions of those involved. From his own experience, Knauff highlights the gap between international expectations for transparency and the opaque devotionism associated with high Tibetan Buddhist leadership. While many were uncertain or left in the dark, insiders engaged in ‘behind the scene’ politics that reveal how stigma and prestige were attributed, including through rumor and suspicion.

In contrast to Buddhism in Southeast Asia that has long endured colonialism and religious scrutiny by Christian missionaries, the political aspirations of modern Japanese lay Buddhists and Indian Buddhist converts appear to be more open to accommodating Western political ideas and applying them to their own socio-political realities. James Mark Shields examines what it means to be ‘political’ in Western political discourse and then takes us to Japan and India to explore the political notions aspired to by two ‘Buddhist politicians’: Seno’o Giro

and B.R. Ambedkar. Seno'o was the founder of the Japanese Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism and protested against imperialism, social injustice, and poverty in the 1940s, following the vision for human liberation of the thirteenth-century Buddhist monk Nichiren. Ambedkar, on the other hand, displayed a commitment to humanism and turned to Buddhism to take his people, the Mahar untouchables, out of misery by initiating a mass conversion during the 1950s to a new form of Buddhism called *Navayāna*. Shields explores the link between Marxist socialism, which both Seno'o and Ambedkar drew from, and Buddhism as they tried to implement new Buddhist visions for social reform in Japan and India.

Buddhism was also important for its perceived associations with the acquisition and use of magical powers to bring practical benefits to this world. In Japan, for example, a key reason why the imperial court was drawn to import Buddhism from continental Asia was that it viewed Buddhism as offering magical protection to the state and those in power. The court from early on relied heavily on Buddhist practitioners, some of whom exerted considerable authority over the political life of the court, for their ritual services. Similarly, in China, Buddhist monks gained influence for such reasons. Martin Lehnert, in his chapter, describes the religio-political life of an eighth-century Buddhist monk, Amoghavajra, who exerted considerable influence by offering apotropaic (evil-averting) ritual services to the imperial court during the Tang dynasty. His chapter takes us back to the 'medieval' era when Buddhism was revered for its 'magical' qualities that could subdue secular powers in its ability to protect and offer security to the state. Lehnert questions the modern and (possibly Western) scholarly assumption that separates political and religious functions. By contradicting the efficacy of Amoghavajra's apotropaic rituals in relation to Max Weber's account of the imperial state in medieval China, he examines the nature of patronage the emperor bestowed on a Buddhist priest. Lehnert also examines the nature of Amoghavajra's political influence in terms of his appropriation of institutionalized authority based on his reputation as a ritual master and attempts to understand how a Buddhist practitioner came to exert such a dominant position in safeguarding the survival of a country. This case study in the context of medieval China may stand in opposition to modern concepts of the sovereign state, governance, and authority, and yet it helps us realize how some of the relationships in Asian Buddhist countries (such as Tibet until the 1950s) are still shaped and maintained by beliefs in the divine right of a monarch mandated by heaven or by some kind of pre-destined entitlement rather than mandated by the populace.

The chapters in this volume reveal and touch upon different paradigms and visions, and as a result challenge long-held assumptions about the central political tenets of citizenship, democracy, and governance, as influenced by European 'Enlightenment.' The volume acknowledges that people adopt various measures to implement democratic principles and achieve advancement in their societies, sometimes not abiding by the progressive principles or transparent procedures that are normative in the international community. The volume highlights values and aspirations that Buddhists have inherited from their past experiences and hopes to contribute to cross-cultural debates that expand our horizon and promote understanding of 'others' who are also striving for peace and justice in their respective societies.

\* \* \*

The responsibility to bring this volume into fruition was daunting to start with, but I have been helped by the goodwill and camaraderie of all the contributors, who have made palpable their commitment and enthusiasm to configure and publish the present volume. They have supported me at every stage of the production, and I want to thank them all.

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I would like to believe that Ian would be pleased not only that the book is finally published but for the manner in which everyone came together to bring his original vision to fruition.

## Notes

1. Harris, I. ed. (1999) *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-Century Asia* (London: Cassell), p. vii.
2. Harris, I. (1999) 'Introduction—Buddhism, Power and Politics in Theravada Buddhist Lands,' in I. Harris (ed.) *Buddhism, Power and Political Order* (London: Routledge), p. 1.
3. See <http://buddhism.arts.ubc.ca/2011/10/23/0413/>

4. Schecter, J. (1967) *The New Face of Buddha: The Fusion of Religion and Politics in Contemporary Buddhism* (London: Victor Gollancz).
5. Harris, *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-Century Asia*.
6. Kawanami, H. (2009) 'Charisma, Power(s), and the Arahant Ideal in Burmese-Myanmar Buddhism,' *Asian Ethnology: Special Issue on Burmese-Myanmar Religion* 68, 2: 214–16.

# Contributors

**Thomas Borchert** is Associate Professor of Religion at the University of Vermont, USA. He holds a PhD from the University of Chicago, USA, in 2006, and has conducted ethnographic research on monastic education in China, Thailand, and Singapore. In 2014, he received a Fulbright grant to conduct research on 'monastic citizens' in Thailand. His work has been published in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, and *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*.

**Mahinda Deegalle** is a reader at the School of Historical and Cultural Studies at Bath Spa University, UK. He is the author/editor of *Popularizing Buddhism: Preaching as Performance in Sri Lanka* (2006); *Vesak, Peace and Harmony: Thinking of Buddhist Heritage* (2015); *Dharma to the UK: A Centennial Celebration of Buddhist Legacy* (2008); *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka* (2006); and co-editor of *Pali Buddhism* (1996). His current research topics cover ethics of war, violence, Conflict Studies, and applied ethical themes.

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**Ian Harris** was Professor Emeritus at the University of Cumbria, UK, and held several visiting positions at the University of Oxford, University of British Columbia, University of Toronto, National University of Singapore, and Dongguk University. In Cambodia, he led a team of researchers at the Documentary Center of Cambodia, investigating the fate of Buddhist monks during the Pol Pot regime. In 1996, together with Peter Harvey, he founded the UK Association for Buddhist Studies and was president until September 2014. His publications include *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice* (2005), *Buddhism under Pol Pot* (2007), and

*Buddhism in a Dark Age: Cambodian Monks under Pol Pot* (2013). His edited volumes are *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-century Asia* (1999) and *Buddhism, Power and Politics in Southeast Asia* (2007).

**Michael Jerryson** is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Youngstown State University, USA. His research interests pertain to religion and identity, particularly with regard to gender, race, and class. Some of his publications include *Buddhist Fury: Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand* (2011) and *Mongolian Buddhism: The Rise and Fall of the Sangha* (2007). He is co-editor of the *Handbook of Religion and Violence* (2013) and *Buddhist Warfare* (2010).

**Hiroko Kawanami** is a senior lecturer in the Department of Politics, Philosophy, and Religion at Lancaster University, UK. She is the author of *Renunciation and Empowerment of Buddhist Nuns in Myanmar-Burma* (2013), editor of *Religions in the Modern World* (2009, 2016), and co-editor of *Buddhism, International Relief Work, and Civil Society*. She is currently co-writing a book on communal jurisdiction of non-ordained female renunciants in the Southern Buddhist tradition.

**Bruce M. Knauft** is Samuel C. Dobbs Professor of Anthropology and former Director of the Comparative Post-Conflict Recovery Project and the States at Regional Risk Project at Emory University, USA. He has conducted ethnographic fieldwork concerning spiritual and socio-political life among the Gebusi people of the Western Province, Papua New Guinea. His recent work concerns post-conflict and post-crisis developments in countries in the Altai-Himalayas as well as in Southeast Asia, and West and East Africa. He is the author of eight scholarly books and numerous journal articles and chapters. His most recent volumes include *Mongolians after Socialism: Politics, Economy, Religion* (2012, co-edited with Richard Taupier) and *The Gebusi: Lives Transformed in a Rainforest World* (2013, 3rd edition).

**Tomas Larsson** is a senior lecturer in the Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Cambridge, UK, and a fellow of St John's College, Cambridge. He is a scholar of Southeast Asia, with research interests in political economy, state formation, and religion and politics. He holds a PhD in Government from Cornell University, USA. His recent publication is *Land and Loyalty: Security and the Development of Property Rights in Thailand* (2012). During the 1990s, he worked as a freelance journalist based in Thailand.

**Martin Lehnert** is Professor of East Asian Religion and Philosophy at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. He holds a PhD from Albert Ludwigs University of Freiburg, Germany, on the reception and reproduction of Sanskrit Buddhist exegesis in Chinese commentarial literature of the early Ming period. His recent publications deal with the doctrinal and institutional organization of Buddhist commentarial work, the religious implications of the normativity of Chinese sūtra translations, and the communicative properties of Chan-Buddhist casuistry (*gong'an*). His research interests include the formation of authority in religious systems of meaning; Tang-period esoteric Buddhism; and narratives of transmission, secrecy, and incommunicability as aspects of religious communication.

**James Mark Shields** is Associate Professor of Comparative Humanities and Asian Thought at Bucknell University, USA, and Overseas Collaborative Researcher at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, Japan. He conducts research on modern Buddhist thought, Japanese philosophy, and comparative ethics. In addition to various published articles and translations, he is the author of *Critical Buddhism: Engaging with Modern Japanese Buddhist Thought* (2011) and is currently completing a book on progressive and radical Buddhism in Japan.

**Matthew J. Walton** is Aung San Suu Kyi Senior Research Fellow in Modern Burmese Studies at St Antony's College, UK. His research focuses on religion and politics in Southeast Asia, with a special emphasis on Myanmar. His current book (2016) explores Burmese Buddhist political thought and its influence on Myanmar's political transition. His analysis of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar (co-authored with Susan Hayward), *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar*, was published in 2014, and his articles have appeared in the *Journal of Burma Studies*, *Asian Survey*, and *Journal of Contemporary Asia*.

# Abbreviations

*Following ISO 639–2 code*

Bur.	Burmese
Chi.	Chinese
Jpn.	Japanese
Pli.	Pāli
San.	Sanskrit
Sin.	Sinhalese
Tha.	Thai
Tib.	Tibetan