



UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

Theravada and East Asia



Keynote Lecture by Thomas Borchert

28 June 2024, 5:30–6:30pm (BST)

Gillis Lecture Theatre, Balliol College, Broad St, Oxford OX1 3BJ

Conference Panels

29 June 2024, 9:00am–5:30pm (BST)

Lecture Theatre, Weston Library, Broad Street, Oxford OX1 3BG

Online attendance via [Teams Meeting](#).

Meeting ID: 322 159 655 540

Passcode: XA4kj8

For registration and updates, please visit: [Theravada and East Asia Eventbrite](#).

For any queries, please contact pyi.kyaw@ames.ox.ac.uk.



FACULTY OF
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印 YIN-CHENG
證 Conference Series

The University of Oxford and [Yin-Cheng Buddhist Studies Network](#) are pleased to announce a conference on Theravada and East Asia to be held on Saturday 29th June 2024 at the Weston Lecture Theatre, Weston Library, Broad Street, Oxford.

Theravada is closely associated with the Theravada Buddhist cultures and communities of Southeast Asia and as such the presence of Theravada in East Asia tends to be overlooked. In the other direction, East Asian influence on Theravada countries and cultures is similarly often overlooked. Yet, there is a long history of Theravada and Mahayana interactions in the region, which are becoming increasingly more relevant in the contemporary period in relation to efforts towards Buddhist revival in the region. Meanwhile there are often close interactions in the spread and establishment of Buddhism globally. While discussions of Theravada and East Asia are usually framed in terms of a juxtaposition between Southeast Asian Theravada and East Asian Mahayana Buddhism, we must question how meaningful these binaries really are, and how might they exclude communities, religious customs, and cultural exchanges that do not fit neatly into such categories.

Schedule

Times in British Summer Time

Friday 28 June 2024 Gillis Lecture Theatre, Balliol College	
5:00–5:30pm	Registration
	Chair: Olivia Porter
5:30–6:30pm	Keynote Lecture by Thomas Borchert <i>A Sangha of their Own? Theravada in China, External Knowledge Creation, and Buddhist Life Cycles among the Dai Lue of Sipsongpanna</i>
6:30–7:00pm	<i>Lik Long</i> performance by Sai Leang <i>Introduction to Lik Long and Recitation of Theravada Lik Long Texts from Yunnan</i>
7:00–7:30pm	Drinks in the Buttery, Balliol College, all welcome
7:30–9:00pm	Dinner at Sichuan Grand (for contributors)

Saturday 29 June 2024
Lecture Theatre, Weston Library, Broad Street

9:00–9:30am Registration

Texts Across Theravada and East Asian Canons

Chair: Ven. Tuan Huynh

9:30–10:00am Andrew Skilton and Kyungrae Kim
Presenting a mango to a King: bridging Theravāda abhidhamma and Chinese Tripiṭaka

10:00–10:30am Baba Norihisa
The Four Āgamas as Open Texts

10:30–11:00am Xinyue Xie
Dhamma and Its Heirs: Authority and Legitimation in the Aggañña Sutta Narrative Across Buddhist Traditions

11:00–11:30am Refreshments

Theravada in the Margins of East Asia

Chair: Kate Crosby

11:30–12:00pm Dipen Barua
Exploring the Theravada Monastic-like Community “Luri” and Its Religious Practices in Bangladesh

12:00–12:30pm Kittipong Vongagsorn
Moggallāna Lost in Another Universe: the Enduring Influence of Mahāyāna in a Thai-Lao Legend

12:30–1:00pm Olivia Porter and Jotika Khur-Yearn
Straddling the Shweli: Shan Theravada across the Myanmar-China Border

1:00–2:00pm Lunch provided for all attendees

Interplay between East Asian and Theravada Traditions

Chair: Maria Kekki

2:00–2:30pm Kira Johansen and Christoph Anderl
Chinese Guan Yin Temples in Bangkok

2:30–3:00pm Oliver Thomson
Tésagàn Gin Jae Vegetarian Festival in Thailand

3:00–3:30pm Wei-Yi Chen
Challenging Assumptions: Theravada Buddhist Transmission and Ethnicity in Contemporary Taiwan

3:30–4:00pm Refreshments

The Transmission of Theravada among Overseas Chinese

Chair: Andrew Skilton

4:00–4:30pm Yuanjing Huang
Dharmapala and the Chinese Buddhists at Crossroads

4:30–5:00pm Steve Kemper
The Sinhala monk Maliduve Mahaweera (1913-2002) who built four temples in Singapore for a now thriving community of Peranakan Chinese

5:00–5:30pm Closing Remarks by Kate Crosby
Chanting to close

5:30–6:00pm Drinks at The King's Arms (All welcome)

6:30–8:00pm Dinner at Chiang Mai restaurant, High Street (for contributors)

Keynote Lecture on Friday 28 June

Thomas Borchert, University of Vermont *A Sangha of their Own? Theravada in China, External Knowledge Creation, and Buddhist Life Cycles among the Dai Lue of Sipsongpanna*

Theravada Buddhism in China is often read through the eyes of other communities and factors. For example, in different ways, Thai, Chinese and English language scholarship talk about Theravada regions of Yunnan like Sipsongpanna (when they talk about it all) through civilizational lenses that represent them as poor, undeveloped and/or corrupt. This makes it difficult to interpret the Theravada communities that are present in the People's Republic of China on their own terms. In this paper, I will examine the challenges of such externally produced knowledge of the Dai-lue communities, primarily located in Sipsongpanna (Ch. Xishuang Banna), and suggest the importance of alternative models for studying Buddhism in the region, such as a focus on Buddhism in the life cycle of Dai-lue communities.

Thomas Borchert is a Professor of Religion at the University of Vermont in the United States. His primary research examines the ways that Theravada monks in Southwest China and Thailand navigate contemporary politics. He has published on the dynamics of the governance of monks in both China and Thailand, and on systems of monastic and Buddhist education in the twenty-first century. He is currently working on a book on the intersection of religious and national identities among Tai monks, and is the author of *Educating Monks: Minority Buddhism on China's Southwest Border* (University of Hawai'i Press 2017) and the editor of *Theravada Buddhism in Colonial Contexts* (Routledge 2018).

Lik Long Introduction and Performance on Friday 28 June

Sai Leang, British Library

Lik long or '*lik langka long*' is a highly specialised type of poetry in the Shan language, covering a range of topics and genres. This evening, I will recite from two *lik long* manuscripts from the Shan Theravada community in Yunnan, China. The first is the *Sutta Nibbana* composed by Zao Khan Zae, probably composed in the 16th or 17th century. This manuscript is written in a combination of the Tai Mao script associated with the Tai community in northern Shan State and in Dehong in China, and the Tai Long script associated with the Tai/Shan in Myanmar. Through this recitation, I shall demonstrate the two different styles of *lik long* composition and recitation within one manuscript. The second is the *Anāgatavan Arimittēyyawathu* (*Anāgatavaṃsa Ariya Metteyya Vatthu*) composed by Zao Dhammadinna in the Tai Mao script in the 19th century.

Myo Thant Linn (Zare Sai Leang) is a *zare* practitioner from Muse in northern Shan State, Myanmar. His work involves writing and reciting traditional *lik long*. He undertook his *zare* training at Paññālaṅkāra Tai Zawti Monastery in Kachin State, Myanmar. He holds a B.A. in English from Lashio University, and a B.A. in Lik Long from Shan State Buddhist University (2023). In 2023 he was selected as a Chevening British Library Fellow, which has involved cataloguing the Shan manuscript collection held at the British Library as well as other UK institutions.

Saturday, June 29th

Texts Across Theravada and East Asian Canons

Chair: Ven. Tuan Huynh

Prof. Kim Kyungrae, Dongguk University, Seoul and Dr. Andrew Skilton, University of Oxford

Presenting a mango to a King: bridging Theravāda abhidhamma and Chinese Tripiṭaka

The *Jie tuo dao lun* (JTDL) is the 6th-century Chinese translation of the text sometimes known as the **Vimuttimaggā*. Authored by Upatissa between the 2nd–5th centuries CE, it is often identified as a precursor to Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimaggā*. Scholars have disputed its source language, but we take it to be Pali. It has been translated twice into English (1961, 2021). In this presentation we discuss the text in detail, raising questions both over the existing translations and the transmission of the Chinese text itself. We focus on a short passage from the section on the *vīthicitta*, ‘the mind in its course’, that employs the analogy of a mango to illustrate this process. In this, the operation of *citta*, from quiescence through to active engagement with sense objects, is likened to the gift of mangos presented to a king as they travel from the gate through to his table. We will introduce the *vīthicitta*, explain the role of the mango simile, and explore variant readings in different editions of the Chinese Tripiṭaka. We conclude that proper attention must be paid to re-editing of the Chinese text for a successful translation.

Kyungrae Kim began to study Buddhism and Indian Philosophy in 1997, and obtained his PhD in 2012 at Dongguk University, Seoul. He began teaching at Dongguk University from 2013, interrupted by a spell as postdoctoral researcher at King’s College London in 2014. He is now an assistant professor in the Department of Buddhist Studies. He teaches and supervises in the History of Indian Buddhism, Pāli Literature and Theravāda abhidhamma.

His research is focused on Theravāda abhidhamma and Pāli literature. He has published articles in *Contemporary Buddhism* (2014, 2018), *Buddhist Studies Review* (2015), and *Journal of Indian Philosophy* (2016, 2018). Currently, with Andrew Skilton (University of Oxford), he is researching *vīthicitta* in the *Jie tuo dao lun* 解脫道論 (**Vimuttimaggā*), and revising the *Dīpavaṃsa*, Chapter 1, from new manuscript evidence.

Andrew Skilton was awarded his first degree at Bristol in 1988 and completed his doctoral thesis on the *Samādhirāja Sūtra* in Oxford, 1997. He has taught at a number of universities, including Cardiff, McGill, SOAS, King’s College London, Dongguk University Seoul, and now teaches Buddhist Studies, Pāli and Buddhist Sanskrit texts in Oxford. He was editor of *Contemporary Buddhism* for 10 years. He has published articles and books including a translation and study of Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (co-author Kate Crosby), *How the Nagas Were Pleased*, a translation of the Buddhist drama *Nāgananda*, plus *A Concise History of Buddhism*. Currently, he is writing an introduction to the study of Pāli, and researching aspects of the *boran kammathan* meditation tradition, the *vīthicitta* in *Jie tuo dao lun* 解脫道論 (**Vimuttimaggā*), and revising the *Dīpavaṃsa* from new manuscript evidence. He has recently been writing articles about rules on surgery in the vinaya, coercive control in the *Jātaka*, and monastic waterbottles.

Prof. Baba Norihisa, University of Tokyo

The Four Āgamas as Open Texts

While the Four Āgamas have often been regarded as a part of the early Buddhist canon, or scriptures belonging to monastic groups, this talk will shed new light on these collections. Based on research on the Four Āgamas transmitted mainly in Chinese and partly in Sanskrit and Tibetan from the viewpoint of the relative chronology of Pāli Texts, this paper will suggest that the Four Āgamas include doctrinal formulas parallel not only to the first Four Nikāyas, but also to three groups of later Pāli texts: the Abhidhamma, Post-canonical texts, and Commentaries. These findings show that the Four Āgamas were not a closed but an open canon, since they share textual sources with the other Buddhist traditions. This new approach is also used to elucidate the formation of one discourse (on Dependent Arising) in the Chinese *Ekottarikāgama*.

Norihisa Baba is a Professor at the Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia at the University of Tokyo. He received his Ph.D. in 2006 from the University of Tokyo. His research interests include Theravāda Buddhism; the relationship between Sri Lanka and East Asia; and Modern Discourse in Buddhism. His approach is comparative using the Pāli, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, and Japanese texts. He has published several English language articles such as “Buddhaghosa” (Oxford Encyclopedia of Religion) and Japanese language books including *The Formation of Theravāda Buddhist Thought: From the Buddha to Buddhaghosa* (2008). He is the recipient of several academic prizes such as the Japanese Association for South Asian Studies Prize and the Japan Science Promotion Society Prize. He serves on the editorial board of the *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* and is also editor-in-chief of the *International Journal of Asian Studies* published by Cambridge University of Press.

Xinyue Xie

Dhamma and Its Heirs: Authority and Legitimation in the Aggañña Sutta Narrative Across Buddhist Traditions

The academic study of Buddhism often confronts the dichotomy of “world renouncer and world conqueror.” However, my proposed presentation seeks to challenge this binary by exploring themes of religious authority through an examination of the figure of the Buddha as a spiritual sovereign. By investigating the *Aggañña Sutta* in the Pali Canon and the reception of this narrative in Chinese Buddhist traditions, I delve into how this narrative engages with and redefines the Vedic-Brahmanical discourse on power, in asserting the Buddha's spiritual sovereignty while also addressing questions of legitimacy.

Central to this re-evaluation of religious authority is a close reading of the *Aggañña Sutta*. By closely analyzing key passages and exploring intertextualities with Brahmanical literature, I aim to illuminate the intricate relationship between dharma, temporal power and authority in early Buddhism. Drawing upon Olivelle's thesis on the appropriation of dharma and its association with sovereign power, I show how the *Aggañña Sutta* asserts the Buddha's spiritual authority while legitimizing his teachings within the broader religious landscape.

Furthermore, this exploration extends to the East Asian reception of the *Aggañña Sutta* narrative, focusing on how Chinese Buddhists, self-styled heirs of dharma, interpret this narrative to legitimate their own religious and political authority. I analyse the significance of lineage, the construction of

orthodoxy, and the connection between the Śākya royal genealogy and the portrayal of the Buddha as a spiritual sovereign. I also touch on how the absence of a caste system in Chinese society influences interpretations of the myth.

In conclusion, by interrogating the spiritual sovereignty of the Buddha and its implications for religious and political life in ancient Buddhist societies, we enrich our understanding of the broader dynamics shaping these communities.

Xinyue Xie received her BA in Theology from the University of Cambridge and MPhil in Buddhist Studies from the University of Oxford. Xinyue will begin her doctoral studies in Religious Studies at Stanford University. Her research interests include Buddhist narratives, translation, and the concept of sovereignty in religious literature.

Theravada in the Margins of East Asia

Chair: Kate Crosby

Dipen Barua, University of Hong Kong

Exploring the Theravada Monastic-like Community “Luri” and Its Religious Practices in Bangladesh

The Buddhist community in Bangladesh is only 0.6% of the total population, making it a small minority in the state. The main form of Buddhism in Bangladesh is Theravada, which was revived in the 19th century under the influence of Burmese Theravada Buddhism while the previous standing tantric Buddhist practices in Bangladesh had disappeared. However, there is a small monastic-like community of Theravada Buddhists known as Luris, who predate Theravada reform. The Luris, who live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, practise a combination of Theravada, Mahayana, Tantric, and local cult practices.. Less study has been conducted on the Luri community due to both a lack of interest and a lack of access on the part of both local and international Buddhist researchers. The religious text of Luri, known as *Āgartārā*, is predominantly Buddhist in nature and written in a language that combines features of the Chakma script, bearing close resemblance to the Shan script of Burma, with traces of Pali and Sanskrit influence. Despite its Buddhist basis, the *Āgartārā* is not directly aligned with mainstream Pali literature. Adherents of the Luri belief system place significant emphasis on the worship of the supreme deity “Gozen,” prioritizing this figure over the Buddha in their ceremonies.

The cult of “Luri” is thought to have originated with the ‘Ari’, Mahayana-Tantric Buddhist monks, who thrived in Burma in the 11th century. The claim is supported by long-standing social, religious, cultural, and anthropological links between the people of Chittagong (or Chittagong Hill Tracts) and Burma. This paper aims to present an overview of the Luri community and their belief system, which is on the edge of extinction due to the prominence of Theravada Buddhism.

Dipen Barua serves as an Honorary Lecturer at the Centre of Buddhist Studies at The University of Hong Kong (HKU). He completed his Bachelor’s degree at Calcutta University and his first Master’s degree in Pali at the University of Pune (now Savitribai Phule Pune University) in India. He further pursued a second Master’s, MPhil, and a doctorate in Buddhist Studies at HKU. As an author of a book and numerous articles in both Bengali and English, Dipen Barua’s research focuses on Theravada Buddhism’s perspective on the mind and cognitive functions, Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia, and modern movements of Engaged Buddhism. Additionally, he contributes regularly to Buddhistdoor Global (www.buddhistdoor.net) on topics related to Buddhism and society.

Kittipong Vongagsorn, Ludwig-Maximilian University of Munich

Moggallāna Lost in Another Universe: the Enduring Influence of Mahāyāna in a Thai-Lao Legend

In contemporary Southeast Asia, Theravāda Buddhism stands as the predominant tradition. However, historical evidence attests to the once widespread acceptance and flourishing of Mahāyāna Buddhism in the region. Despite the subsequent decline of the influence of Mahāyāna due to revivals of Theravāda Buddhism since the thirteenth century, extant archaeological artifacts serve as compelling confirmation of its historical zenith. Beyond archaeological remnants, other evidence also persists until nowadays, such as folk beliefs, local practices, and literary sources. This paper scrutinizes a

specific Buddhist legend preserved in Thai-Lao manuscripts, positing it as indicative of Mahāyāna's enduring impact in the early- modern period. The narrative centres on Moggallāna, a disciple of the Buddha renowned for his supernatural powers, who travels to another universe and encounters another Buddha before he is sent back to Śākyamuni Buddha.

In this paper, I will argue that the legend was created under the lingering influence of Mahāyāna Buddhism, persisting in regional beliefs despite its wane over several centuries before the creation of the story. Furthermore, since the fifteenth century, Southeast Asian intellectual interest in cosmology has prompted the composition of numerous texts explaining Buddhist cosmology. Thus, the enduring influence of Mahāyāna, coupled with a comprehensive understanding of Buddhist cosmology, resulted in the formation of the Moggallāna legend that introduced another Buddha, contemporaneous with Śākyamuni. Though contrasting with Theravāda belief, the narrative gained widespread acceptance and underwent several developments in the Thai-Lao region. In contemporary Thailand, for instance, the legend continues developing with nuanced variations, with some additions associating it with Amitābha Buddha—a probable testament to new Mahāyāna influences introduced by Chinese immigrants in the later period. This paper traces the evolutionary trajectory of this Moggallāna legend, elucidating its origins and enduring development within the Thai-Lao region.

Kittipong Vongagsorn is currently a Ph.D. student in the Buddhist Studies program at Ludwig-Maximilian University of Munich (LMU), Germany. He is working on a project concerning semantic etymology (*nirutti/nirukta*) within Pali literature. His research focuses on the ideological history and functions of semantic etymology across canonical and commentarial texts. In addition to this, he is also interested in early Buddhist manuscripts in Central Asia as well as the literature of Theravāda Buddhism both in Pali and vernacular languages. He has also worked with several Theravāda Buddhist temples in Thailand, New Zealand, the United States, and Germany.

Olivia Porter, University of Roehampton, and Jotika Khur-Yearn, SOAS, University of London
Straddling the Shweli: Shan Theravada across the Myanmar-China Border

The Shweli river forms part of the boundary between Myanmar and China, demarcating where one nation ends and another begins. But, for the Shan (also referred to as Tai, Dai or Tay), who are an ethnic minority in both nation states, this border is home, it is where Shan Theravada and Shan culture more broadly, is disseminated, maintained, and preserved, not divided.

Shan Theravada Buddhism in China has historically been overlooked in scholarship on account of the association between China and Mahayana Buddhism and other forms of traditional Chinese religion. In drawing attention to the history and nature of Shan Theravada on both sides of the Shweli, we hope to highlight how Shan Theravada Buddhism crosses borders and challenges binaries. In this paper we will use Shan *lik long* manuscripts, Buddhist texts composed in traditional Shan poetic style and recited to the laity by ritual practitioners called *zare*, to highlight some of the distinctive features of Shan Theravada Buddhism that continue to be practiced across the Myanmar-China border today. Through exploring Shan *lik long* in its many scripts and forms, we will demonstrate how Shan Theravada has been practiced, maintained, and preserved in China by the Tai Nuea, Tai Mao, and Tai Lue, and in Myanmar by the Tai Long, sub-groups of the wider Shan family, for centuries.

We will touch on some common practices associated with the Shan literary tradition in the region as well as the traditional method of making the paper used to transcribe Shan *lik long* manuscripts, which may raise questions for further research on the areas of connection and interaction between the Shan and their neighbouring nations over the centuries.

Olivia Porter is a Visiting Lecturer in Asian Religions at the University of Roehampton and in Anthropology of Buddhism at the University of Oxford. In 2023 she completed her PhD at King's College London titled: 'Hidden in Plain Sight: The Tai Zawti Buddhists of the Myanmar-China Border' which coupled ethnographic fieldwork in Myanmar with traditional textual approaches to explore the Tai Zawti, a Shan Theravada Buddhist tradition. Before focusing on Shan Buddhism, her training was in Sanskrit and Pali (Oxford, 2016) and Social Anthropology (LSE, 2017). Her current research interests include vernacular texts, particularly texts on lay morality and ethics, and lay ritual practitioners.

Jotika Khur-Yearn is originally from Shan State of the Union of Myanmar. He lived a life as a novice and monk over twenty years, and hence has grown up through monastic education system and followed the traditions of Theravada Buddhism since an early age. He studied Pali and Buddhism in Myanmar and Sri Lanka before he moved to London to do his research for a PhD on Shan Buddhist literary traditions with a focus on a 19th century Shan poetic text on Mahasatipatthana Sutta at SOAS under the supervision of Dr Kate Crosby (now Numata Professor of Buddhist Studies at Oxford University), and an MSc in Librarianship at City University of London. While he works mainly as a subject librarian for SE Asia, History, Religions & Philosophies at SOAS Library, University of London, he is also a teaching fellow at the Shan State Buddhist University, Taunggyi, Shan State, Myanmar.

Interplay between East Asian and Theravada Traditions

Chair: Maria Kekki

Kira Johansen, Yale University, and Professor Christoph Anderl, Ghent University

Chinese Guan Yin Temples in Bangkok

The FROGBEAR (From the Ground Up: Buddhism and East Asian Religions) Cluster 3.4 Fieldwork Project sought to combine two unique and independent areas of study: Chinese Buddhism and the Thai religious landscape. Participants were split up into five groups, each examining different deities in Chinese-style temples in Bangkok, Thailand in May of 2024. This presentation focuses on the group that examined Guanyin (觀音) temples, and how this group investigated the niche space that these temples and their communities inhabit in the religious landscape of Bangkok and Thailand.

During fieldwork, participants discovered that not only were many practices of the temple goers and temple caretakers unconventional, but they were often removed from original Chinese Mahāyāna or Thai Theravāda roots and developed a character of their own. A key example of this is the various relationships these Chinese temples had with larger Theravāda entities, such as the case of the Yuegang Guanyin Temple (粵港觀音宮), whose Guanyin altar had originally been placed in a larger Theravāda temple next door, but had been removed at the request of locals, who called for Guanyin to have her own shrine. Furthermore, participants found many instances of Theravāda, Mahāyāna, as well as other religious deities inhabiting the same spaces within the temple, such as the patio altar of Phra Mae Thorani (พระแม่ธรณี), a Thai Theravāda Earth Goddess, in the Ancient Guanyin Temple (觀音古廟), or the frequent placement of Thai flower offerings, Phuang Malai (พวงมาลัย), on the figures of Guanyin. Beyond the sectarian divides, participants also found that the communities that surrounded these temples created their own special practices, such as giving strings of pearls to Guanyin (觀音). Thus, this presentation seeks to further expound upon the idea that certain religious spaces and phenomena are not quite packagable into clear boundaries, but are rather their own reconfiguration of inherited religious practices and norms.

Kira Johansen is a recent graduate of Florida State University with a Bachelor's Degree in International Affairs. Following her graduation from Florida State University in August of 2023, Johansen has been accepted and matriculated at Yale University as a Master's candidate in East Asian Studies starting in the Fall of 2024. Johansen's primary research focuses on translation and interpretation of the *Biographies of Nuns* (比丘尼傳), although she more broadly focuses on medieval Chinese Buddhism. Recently, Johansen has been heavily involved in the University of British Columbia's From the Ground Up: Buddhist and East Asian Studies (FROGBEAR) Cluster 3.4 Project: "Typologies of Text-Image Relations" as a fieldwork participant and metadata creator for Chinese temples in Bangkok, Thailand. She hopes to incorporate the fruits of this research into a larger research project in the future connecting Chinese diasporas and religiosity to the Thai religious landscape. Along with Christoph Anderl, Johansen is aiding in the compilation of an exhibition on Buddha's life at the Mariemont Museum (September 2024 – April 2025).

Christoph Anderl is a Professor of Chinese Language and Culture at Ghent University. He obtained his PhD from Oslo University (2005, "Studies in the Language of Zutang ji"). His research focuses on medieval Chinese, non-canonical Dunhuang manuscripts, Chan Buddhism, and Chinese Buddhist

narrative literature. During the last decade, he furthermore directed his scholarly attention to the relations between text and image in the development of *jātakas* and Buddha's life narratives.

Anderl is the editor-in-chief of a large collaborative database project, aiming to produce high-quality marked-up digital editions of non-canonical/vernacular Dunhuang texts, and to develop a depository of medieval variant character forms. As the leader of the research cluster "Typologies of Text-Image Relations" as part of the international project "From the Ground Up: Buddhism and East Asian Religions" (Frogbear, UBC), he has organized several fieldtrips to East Asian and South Asian Buddhist sites – both virtual (during the epidemic) and physical, and supervised the subsequent production of metadata for the UBC Library depository. Presently, he is one of the main organizers of an exhibition on Buddha's life at Mariemont Museum (Sept. 2024–April 2025) and an international conference on Buddha's life stories (Mariemont, Oct. 2024).

Oliver Thomson, University of Oxford

Tésagàn Gin Jae Vegetarian Festival in Thailand

Tésagàn Gin Jae is an annual Thai festival commonly called the "Vegetarian Festival." Despite its innocuous title, the Tésagàn Gin Jae, also known as the "Nine Emperor Gods Festival", is a complex Thai-Chinese-Daoist-Buddhist festival, where dietary restriction is only one practice amongst many, including the parading of various Daoist deities alongside self-mutilating spirit-mediums.

This paper seeks to explore the historical context behind the Tésagàn Gin Jae. I identify the development of the term '*jae*', tracing its roots and development in 5th-6th century China as a Mahayana Buddhist practice for self-purification, which then travels in the 19th century to Phuket, Southern Thailand, amongst Hokkien tin-miners, who first established the Tésagàn Gin Jae as a Chinese Daoist/Buddhist festival. From there, I explore the various practices of the Tésagàn Gin Jae, as both purification-centred, such as eating a '*jae*' diet, as well as devotional, with the '*ma song*' spirit-mediums undergoing ritual self-mutilation in the name of their gods, or as a sacrifice for the community.

Following this, I analyse the ways in which the Tésagàn Gin Jae and its practices, eating *jae* and self-mutilation, have been integrated from its Daoist / Mahayana roots into Thai religion and society as a whole. I identify and discuss tensions between the festival and conservative Thai Buddhist monastic and lay views, as well as against conservative Daoist views from Thai-Chinese communities, as well as exploring the attention given to the festival by the Thai government and Tourism Authority. Overall, this paper seeks to bring together textual, historical, economic and modern social media research to show the complexities and ongoing dynamics of an East Asian Buddhist/Daoist Festival into a majority Theravadin Thai context, wherein the latter seeks to adopt and adapt mechanisms of the former to be more recognizable and acceptable for a Thai Theravadin context.

Oli Thomson is a current first-year MPhil student of Buddhist Studies at the University of Oxford and holds an MA in Cognitive Science from the University of Edinburgh. Their current research interests are on the complexities of contemporary and historical Thai religion and culture – paying specific attention to how Theravada Buddhism interacts with other belief systems such as Thai-Chinese Mahayana and indigenous pre-Buddhist Tai folk religion; as well as with contemporary subjects such as consumerism, technology and environmentalism. Their methods include textual

studies, primarily via the Pali canon, alongside modern ethnographic and other social science research.

Wei-Yi Chen, Fo Guang University

Challenging Assumptions: Theravada Buddhist Transmission and Ethnicity in Contemporary Taiwan

This paper examines prevailing assumptions regarding the relationship between Buddhism and ethnicity within the Sinosphere, with a specific focus on the transmission of Theravada Buddhism to Taiwan. Because Taiwan is located within the Sinosphere, studies of Buddhism often oversimplify the landscape, emphasizing the dominance of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. By highlighting the multidirectional transmission of Theravada Buddhism to Taiwan, including modernist meditation movements, contributions from Theravada monastic migrants, and initiatives by ethnic Chinese from Theravada countries, this paper argues against simplistic categorizations. It explores the complex interplay of modernity and sociocultural dynamics in shaping Buddhist discourse within the Sinosphere, challenging conventional narratives.

Wei-Yi Cheng is an Associate Professor in the Department of Buddhist Studies at Fo Guang University in Taiwan. She obtained her Ph.D. from the Department of the Study of Religions at SOAS, University of London. Her research interests centre on Buddhism and gender, as well as transnational Buddhism. Recently, her work has primarily focused on the transmission of non-Chinese Buddhism to Taiwan. Her research also includes conducting ethnographic studies on a Chinese Buddhist nunnery in Shan State, Myanmar, and exploring Sri Lankan Buddhism in Taiwan.

The Transmission of Theravada among Overseas Chinese

Chair: Andrew Skilton

Yuanjing Huang, Dali University, China

Dharmapala and the Chinese Buddhists at Crossroads

Dharmapala visited China in 1893 in an effort to include China in his grand plan of reclaiming Bodhi Gaya and reviving Buddhism in India. Unwelcome, as he had always been, he failed to mobilize anyone but Yang Wenhui, a Buddhist lay leader who, in the following years championed Chinese Buddhist revival. The significance of this incident has been overlooked in scholarship, as scholars have been uncertain of Dharmapala's influence on Yang. By examining the connection between Dharmapala and Yang's causes, this paper suggests that Dharmapala had a lasting presence in Yang's Buddhist reforms in the early 20th century, and that their shared effort was instrumental in China joining the network of Asian Buddhist revival.

Their collaboration occurred just when the Chinese Buddhism was at a crossroads between retaining a pre-modern notion of Buddhism and engaging in a modern transformation that involved reconstructing the monastic institution, monastic education, and missionary methods. Under Dharmapala's influence, Yang not only ushered Chinese Buddhism towards the latter, but also sought to implement Dharmapala's ambition of spreading Buddhism in India and the West. There is no sign that their different religious backgrounds—Theravada and Mahayana—was obstructive in their communication in any way. This research also touches on how the "Protestant Buddhism" of Dharmapala was received or rejected by Chinese Buddhism.

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Professor Steven Kemper, Bates College

Theravada Buddhism in a Chinese World

In 1934 a Sinhala Buddhist monk, Maliduve Mahaweera, arrived in Singapore, settling in a Chinese shophouse that the small Sinhala community rented for him as both a temple and residence. The community wanted the ritual services a Buddhist monk could provide, but Mahaweera had been trained as a *dhammadhuta* in Colombo—he wanted to spread Buddhism not simply chant protective verses and "bless" weddings. Peranakan (locally-born) Chinese were eager to learn more about a Buddhism that was nominally their own, but one consisting in petitioning gods, burning incense, and bowing. Their eagerness to learn more about Buddhism was a product of the spirit of Buddhist reform that had spread from Lanka to Southeast Asia. But it also derived from Chinese living in what Anthony Reid called a "frontier" society, populated by people from elsewhere and less committed to traditional practice than they might have been had they remained on the south coast of China.

Mahaweera had great success in attracting Peranakan Chinese to Theravada teachings by insisting on Dhamma study for a community already committed to education. But the more instructive part of Mahaweera's success was at remaking old practices—downplaying ancestor worship—and inventing new ones such as laypeople chanting Pali *suttas* while also learning their meaning. Recasting ancestor worship—discouraging offerings of food to ancestors, burning the clothing of the deceased, and sacrificing paper money to guarantee the deceased's comfort in the afterlife—represents the central conflict between Theravada practice and Chinese tradition. Mahaweera's ingenious reconciliation made the Lord Buddha the beneficiary of merit offerings at funerals and on *cheng beng* (tomb-sweeping day), while allowing the Buddha to redistribute that merit to the ancestors. Doing so broke the direct tie between the living and the dead, but it also reframed death as instant rebirth and mitigated Chinese fear of hungry ghosts harming the living.

Steven Kemper is Charles A. Dana Professor of Anthropology, Emeritus at Bates College in the USA. His most recent book is *Rescued from the Nation: Anagarika Dharmapala and the Buddhist World* (Chicago, 2015). He is finishing up another book on the Buddhist Revival of the late nineteenth century, *A Larger Buddhism: Anagarika Dharmapala and the Making of a World Religion*. The latter attempts to widen the focus, addressing the role that other revivalists played in reforming Buddhism in three places, Colombo, Kolkata, and London. Dharmapala's role in redefining Buddhism in all three places is well-known; the new book pays attention to his relationship with three Buddhists who worked with him, while asserting their own redefinitions of the religion, D.B. Jayatilaka, the Barua Bhikkhu Kripasaran, and Christmas Humphreys. His interest in the Sinhala bhikkhu who spread Theravada to Chinese Buddhists is a product of a sabbatical spent at the National University of Singapore.

The conference is co-organised by Kate Crosby, (Numata Professor of Buddhist Studies), Pyi Phyo Kyaw (Tutor in Buddhist studies), Olivia Porter (see above), Isara Treesahakiat (PhD candidate in Buddhist studies) and Laura Andersen (MPhil candidate in Buddhist studies, all of the University of Oxford).

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Notes

