

Tani H. Sebro  
 Assistant Professor of Global and Intercultural Studies  
 Miami University, Ohio  
[sebroth@miamioh.edu](mailto:sebroth@miamioh.edu)

## Transboundary Buddhism: The Politics of Exile, Aesthetics and Nationalism

### Project Summary

This project considers the emergence of a transboundary Buddhism in the southern hinterlands of China (Sipsongpanna, Yunnan) and along the Thai-Myanmar border amongst the Tai/Shan/Dai/Tai Yai. Via the lens of aesthetic nationalism, intangible arts – such as music, dance and theatre are understood as forms of *upāya* (उपाय) that promote somatic understandings of repetition and difference through observation and experience, or as “responsive virtuosity.” For Tai exiles, ethnic nationalism is produced through the work of dance and through shared rhythmic and aesthetic structures of sentiment towards ‘the nation’ and towards Buddhism – which produce powerful political affects and effects. Displaced peoples do not necessarily maintain their sense of nation primarily through capital and reading publics, but rather through the complex transmission of what may be called “aesthetic nationalisms,” which involve performances and cultural practices that produce enduring bonds to an imagined homeland.

### Three Areas of Study Across Three Planes (Teacher-Scholar-Practice Model):

- I. **Transboundary Buddhism**
  - a. Obscure boundaries between Theravada and Mahayana.
    - i. Buddhist lineages and traditions have been interactive, creative and coeval.
  - b. Phyoo court dancers brought from Burma to China.
  - c. The Tai as a transboundary people
    - i. Successive persecutions: imperialisms, colonialism and the nation-state
      1. Scott: *The Art of Not Being Governed*
    - ii. Livable life made possible by transboundary mobility

Barber, Richard, 1991, "Buddhist Pilgrimage: Pilgrimage as Quest," in his *Pilgrimages*, Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, pp. 103-131.

Bernstein, Richard, 2001, *Ultimate Journey: Retracing the Path of an Ancient Buddhist Monk Who Crossed Asia in Search of Enlightenment*, New York, NY: A.A. Knopf/Vintage Books.

Davis, Sara. 2005. *Song and Silence: Ethnic Revival on China's Southwest Borders*. Columbia University Press.

Eberhardt, Nancy, 1988, *Gender, Power, and the Construction of the Moral Order: Studies from the Thai Periphery*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Harrell, Stevan. 2011. *Cultural Encounters on Chinas Ethnic Frontiers*. University of Washington Press.

Kalmanson, Leah, and James Mark Shields. 2014. *Buddhist Responses to Globalization*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Ku, Samuel C. Y., and Kristina Kironka. 2016. *Migration in East and Southeast Asia*. World Scientific.

McCarthy, Susan. 2011. *Communist Multiculturalism: Ethnic Revival in Southwest China*. University of Washington Press.

Munsi, Umimala Sarkar. 2008. *Dance, Transcending Borders*. New Delhi: Tulika Books.

Ong, Aihwa, 2003, *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, The New America*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Scott, James C. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. Yale University Press.

Spiro, Melford E., 1982, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Veidlinger, Daniel M., 2006, *Spreading the Dharma: Writing, Orality, and Textual Transmission in Buddhist Northern Thailand*, Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai`i Press.

## II. Buddhism and the Politics of the Nation (State)

- a. State sponsored Buddhism – Buddhist state sponsorship: a cyclical relationship
  - i. Gen. Khun Sa of the Shan State Army-South sponsors traveling Buddhist musicians and performers.
  - ii. Rebel army takes on ancient role as patrons of the arts = as political project.
- b. Nations under duress form strong extra-textual publics.
  - i. Aesthetic Nationalism
- c. Kinesthetic Empathy
  - i. the somatic understandings of repetition and difference through observation and experience.
  - ii. Mudras: flexible and responsive synchronicity -> becoming proprioceptive (Kasulis)

Anderson, Benedict. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition. Revised edition. London; New York: Verso.

Ji, Zhe. 2004. Buddhism and the State: The New Relationship: Increasing numbers of believers bring great changes to the monastic economy in China. *China Perspectives*.55.

Jordt, Ingrid. 2007. *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Moore, Matthew J. 2016. *Buddhism and Political Theory*. Oxford University Press.

Skidmore, Monique. 2012. *Karaoke Fascism: Burma and the Politics of Fear*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Taylor, J.L., 1993, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State: AN Anthropological and Historical Study in Northeastern Thailand*, Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies.

Walton, Matthew J. 2016. *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar*. Cambridge University Press.

### III. Intangible Buddhist Aesthetics

- a. In Asia religion and aesthetics are irrevocably intertwined. The Aesthetic repertoire is preoccupied with a connection to the divine and the cosmological.
- b. Art, images and texts are completed when understood and EXPERIENCED in their ritual context (Szostak).
  - i. A Buddhist political theory of aesthetic and kinesthetic responsiveness.
  - ii. Rooted in PRACTICE
    1. Poy Sang Long
    2. Deer dance and Kinarree/Kinnara

Beida, Li. 2006. *Dances of the Chinese Minorities*. Beijing: China Intercontinental Press.

Eberhardt, Nancy. 2009. Rite of Passage or Ethnic Festival? Shan Buddhist Novice Ordinations in Northern Thailand. *Contemporary Buddhism* 10(1): 51-63.

Greenstein, M.A., 1990, "Dancing in to Empty Space: The Role of Dance in Contemporary American Buddhist Studies," *Anthropology of Consciousness* 1(1-2):1-2.

Mabbett, I.W., 1993/4, "Buddhism and Music," *Asian Music* 25(1/2):9-28.

Nor, Mohd Anis Md. 2008. *Dancing Divine Iconographies*. In *Dance, Transcending Borders*. Umimala Sarkar Munsri, ed. Pp. 19-34. New Delhi: Tulika Books.

Redfield, Marc. 2003. *The Politics of Aesthetics: Nationalism, Gender, Romanticism*. Stanford University Press.

Rhys Davis, Caroline A.F., 1929/1989, *Stories of the Buddha: Being Selections from the Jataka*, New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc.

Sebro, Tani. 2016. Necromobility/Choreomobility: Dance, Death and Displacement in the Thai-Burma Border-Zone. In *Event Mobilities: Politics, Place and Performance*. Kevin Hannam, Mary Mostafanezhad, and Jillian Rickly, eds. Pp. 95-108. New York: Routledge.

Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja, 1984, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

**Films:**

"The Buddhist Dance" (35 min.) VHS 16538

"The Music of Buddhism" (sound recording, slides) KIT 286