Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China

The centrality of death rituals has rarely been documented in anthropologically informed studies of Buddhism. Bringing together a range of perspectives including ethnographic, textual, historical and theoretically informed accounts, this edited volume presents the diversity of the Buddhist funeral cultures of mainland Southeast Asia and China. While the contributions show that the ideas and ritual practices related to death are continuously transformed in local contexts through political and social changes, they also highlight the continuities of funeral cultures. The studies are based on long-term fieldwork and cover material on Theravāda Buddhism in Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and various regions of Chinese Buddhism, both on the mainland and in the Southeast Asian diasporas. Topics such as bad death, the feeding of ghosts, pollution through death and the ritual regeneration of life show how Buddhist cultures deal with death as a universal phenomenon of human culture.

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BUDDHIST FUNERAL CULTURES OF SOUTHEAST ASIA AND CHINA

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Preface

The centrality of death rituals has in anthropologically informed studies of Buddhism been little documented. The current volume brings together a range of perspectives on Buddhist death rituals including ethnographic, textual, historical and theoretically informed accounts, and presents the diversity of the Buddhist funeral cultures of mainland Southeast Asia and China. It arises out of the University of Bristol’s Centre for Buddhist Studies research project *Buddhist Death Rituals in Southeast Asia and China*, funded by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). This project involved extensive new research in Thailand, Laos and China. Other items from that project included several public exhibitions, extensive stills photographs and several video films. The project team produced two 30-minute films on the Ghost Festival in Laos and China, one on urban funerals in Chiang Mai (Thailand) and several shorter clips dealing with funeral cultures in Laos, Thailand and China. Most of this material (and an extensive bibliography on the topic) is available free of charge from the project website located at the webpage of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies (Centre for Buddhist Studies) at the University of Bristol.

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Funeral rites may not be a laugh a minute, but we hope the results – the ‘outputs’, as we are nowadays expected to call them – will still be informative, stimulating of further scholarly research, and perhaps even entertaining.

PATRICE LADWIG
AND
PAUL WILLIAMS