Problems of "Canon" and "Reason" in Theravāda Studies: Cultural Anthropology Encounters the Pali Canon (巴利文大藏經), From Cambodia to Yunnan

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The study of the most ancient written records of the Buddhist religion is both internally contentious and disputed in its application to the study of contemporary Buddhism (in the fieldwork of anthropology and other disciplines). The vast majority of academics who publish studies of Theravāda Cultures cannot offer comparative references to the primary source material of the Theravāda Canon and cannot read Pali, i.e., the ancient language this canon is written in; nevertheless, cultural studies do not hesitate to make comparative judgements that contrast contemporary practices to canonical ideals. This is a problem that hampers many of the best studies written by researchers with long and distinguished careers; for younger scholars, the effect can be quite baffling, because they neither have direct access to ancient texts, nor can they easily survey representative examples of modern cultural practices. Comparative statements that relate something known to something unknown will inevitably misrepresent both.

This essay attempts to address fundamental misconceptions about the canon (that are currently vitiating academic discourse) while offering positive examples of the ways that the ancient texts can enrich our understanding of contemporary cultural phenomena. This could be considered a sequel to my earlier work titled *Bālì Wén De Xiāo Shī Yī Ge Shí Yòng De Zhǐ Nán* (巴利文的消失　一個實用的指南) in that I am again providing scholars with "a practical guide" to using these historical sources; in another aspect, this could be considered a sequel to a more recent essay that I delivered as a lecture in Cambodia warning about the shortcomings of European scholarship on Theravāda Buddhism, and the difficulties that Asian scholars will have as they now inherit this legacy (titled, "The Opposite of Buddhism," and still in peer review). In all three essays, I imagine myself on the historical margin marking the end of an era wherein European scholars of Theravāda Buddhism

outnumbered the Asian scholars, and the start of an era wherein the Asian scholars will outnumber the Europeans.

In the next 100 years, I expect there will be more Chinese-language scholars of Theravāda Buddhism than Europeans. In this era, Yunnan could have a unique role as the one area of China where Theravāda is an indigenous tradition, and where the adjacent traditions of Southeast Asia are readily available for Chinese researchers of both ancient texts and contemporary cultures. Whereas Taiwan's unique importance in the last 100 years has been widely acclaimed in Buddhist Studies, this paper may raise the question of what its role will be in the next 100 years, indicating that new research into the Pali canon is requisite to further progress in the field.

§1.

Among European academics, the study of the Theravāda Canon is so contentious that the significance of "canonicity" itself continues to be disputed. This is a dispute that involves specialists of many different disciplines, and they have created the controversy for a variety of reasons.

A British scholar named Martin Southwold stated the matter with uncommon clarity in defending his work against criticism; his own view, he stated, is that "the results of ethnographic fieldwork 'must be the canon of what is authentic Buddhism'."[1] In a sense, this is the default assumption of many anthropologists trying to evaluate Theravāda Buddhist cultures: for them, fieldwork (田野調查) itself is the only "canon" (大藏經) and they dismiss (or ignore) the evidence gathered from the corpus of ancient texts (normally called a "canon" in plain English). Southwold rejects the assumption "that only 'nibbanic'[2] Buddhism is authentic ('normative', 'orthodox', 'pure', and so forth) and that the Buddhism of ethnography, which differs from it, is in some sense not quite the genuine article."[3] In a more recent article, Joanna Cook complains that any comparative reference to a "single, authentic Great Tradition . . . does not make sense for social scientists, who ought to be in the

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1. Martin Southwold, "Buddhism in Life: A Reply to Robert A. Paul," *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 89 (1987): 448.

2. The author quoted is creating an English adjective out of the Pali word *nibbāna*, variously transliterated into Chinese as 涅盘, 泥洹 and so on.

3. Southwold, "Buddhism in Life," 448.

business of observing what people do and reporting on it."[4] Cook offers this complaint immediately after a citation of Southwold's earlier work; the two seem to me completely consonant in demoting (or disregarding) the written canon in order to exalt the "observations" of ethnographic fieldwork (as if these were mutually-exclusive options, or else presuming that contrasts to a "more authentic" canon could only be an obstruction to their work).

While Southwold's position is extreme, it seems to encapsulate a set of assumptions that is very popular at the moment, having replaced the old-fashioned view that the philosophy of the written canon "is an 'incomplete religion,' which presupposes a complementary religion."[5]

The latter, old-fashioned approach allows fieldwork to reveal the ritual, social and superstitious aspects of "popular Buddhism" that were presumed to function as an augment to the written canon; this complementary approach entails the significant caveat that the "popularizations" may be invalidated by the same canon they are presumed to buttress. It is fair to say that this approach (of contrasting "folk religion" to the written canon) has gone out of vogue along with the theories of Max Weber (馬克斯・韋伯). Weber presented Buddhism as a religion "of the educated gentility [that] could not provide for the emotional and pragmatic needs of the masses."[6] The ethnographer, therefore, stood among the masses, and could take the inventory of cultural accretions that had developed as the "complementary religion":

> Yet, the sociological understanding of the sangha [i.e., monastic community], including its relations with the Buddhist laity, has remained relatively undeveloped compared to other fields of religious sociology. Part of this may be the result of an undue respect for the formative thoughts of scholarly 'ancestors' in the field. Max Weber was among the first to apply systematic sociological perspectives to the study of the sangha. In doing so, however, he set the terms of the debate in ways which may have limited rather than expanded inquiry. Even scholars who have written their own chapters in the sociology of Theravāda still perpetuate some of the same unexamined perspectives first introduced by Weber and others.[7]

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4. Joanna Cook, James Laidlaw, and Jonathan Mair, "What if There is No Elephant?: Towards a Conception of an Un-sited Field," in *Multi-Sided Ethnography*, ed.Mark-Anthony Falzon (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 66.
5. Hans-Dieter Evers, "Buddha and the Seven Gods: The Dual Organization of a Temple in Central Ceylon," *Journal of Asian Studies* 27 (1968): 549.
6. S. J. Tambiah, "Buddhism and This-Worldly Activity," *Modern Asian Studies* 7 (1973): 4.
7. Ivan Strenski, "On Generalized Exchange and the Domestication of the Sangha," *Man* (N.B. the publication was subsequently re-named *JRAI*), New Series, 18 (1983): 463.

Among those "unexamined perspectives" that Weber was so influential in establishing, I would draw attention to the broad assumption (among Western-educated researchers) that Buddhism was philosophically complete, but had lacked social aspects that Weber himself presumed to discover through theorizing and historical speculation. This framework was easily applied to cultural anthropology, whereby participant observation (參與觀察) could seemingly reveal the social structures that Weber had sketched out.

This type of theory may have seemed more compelling when Theravāda countries were remote and exotic places in the European imagination. Weber lived from 1864 to 1920; his impression of Buddhist philosophy (and history) relied upon pioneering translations of that era. Today, anyone conducting fieldwork in Thailand, Laos, or Cambodia would be more likely to surmise that Theravāda Buddhism is a religion entirely devoted to "the emotional and pragmatic needs of the masses." To quote a very pragmatic description:

> Indeed, in Cambodia the pagoda plays an important role in providing education for children, retirement homes for the elderly, and other social functions. This social role will be evident to the visitor, who will undoubtedly note the schools attached to many pagodas, or the many elderly people dressed in either white or black-and-white, living in the temple complex.[8]

> [The Buddha's] doctrine of detachment is reflected Cambodian pagodas. . . . Their beauty is not austere, however, and some are quite elaborate to the point of gaudiness. This reflects the fact that Buddhism is not basically an austere religion.[9]

The current fashion (that, I think, Southwold encapsulates neatly) asserts that the form of Buddhism revealed as "the results of ethnographic fieldwork" is a complete religion unto itself (eschewing any inquiry into its basis in the so-called "incomplete religion" of the ancient texts). Southwold quotes his own motto, "'Basically, I am reporting as Buddhism what the Buddhists I knew taught me'."[10] I know several researchers who would smile ruefully at such a motto, as Theravāda Buddhists will very often explain their own tradition as an attempt to enact something from a canonical text; often enough, informants will openly state their regret that

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8. Raymond A. Zepp, *A Field Guide to Cambodian Pagodas* (Phnom Penh: Bert's Books, 1997), 4.
9. Ibid., p. 3.
10. Southwold, "Buddhism in Life," 448.

they cannot consult the original text that they are trying to preserve, depict, or pay homage to. Quoted below is a very down-to-earth description of one of the most common scenarios encountered in fieldwork, demonstrating that such discussions often direct the researcher back to the written canon, even if what the researcher wants to know is (literally) written on the wall:

> Although the information depicted in the pictures and statues of Cambodian pagodas have at their root the Pali scriptures, or Triptiaka, they take on the flavor of folk stories when told by Cambodians. . . . Thus, there may be several versions of some stories, and it is impossible to state that one is right and another is wrong. Adding to this confusion of versions is the fact that most of Cambodia's monks were killed during the 1970s, and the young generation often have only vague ideas of the stories, if they recognize them at all. . . . A final confusion comes from the fact that many of the inscriptions on the paintings are written in the Pali language, or at least in old, difficult Khmer which the monks cannot read precisely. The visitor should not become too frustrated if he asks a monk to read an explanation of a picture [painted on the wall or ceiling] and is told that the monk cannot read it.[11]

§2.

Southwold's argument does not reject the written Theravāda canon entirely, but specifically rejects the written canon as it is known through European scholarship. This is what he calls "nibbanic Buddhism" (above) and he dismisses it as "largely the product of mainly western scholars."[12] For Europeans who only have access to these texts through European interpretations, dismissing the interpretation is tantamount to dismissing the canon. While Southwold admits that this written canon existed before Europeans started to translate it, "Western scholars distorted it by exaggerating its prominence and authority."[13]

The problem is that Southwold continues to make comparative judgements about canonical sources in reliance upon the same tradition of European scholarship that he reviles as "distorting." Southwold is not alone.

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11. Zepp, *A Field Guide*, 2.
12. Southwold, "Buddhism in Life," 448.
13. Ibid.

These views seem to be especially fashionable amongst European scholars who study Theravāda Buddhism but who cannot read Pali themselves:

> The Buddhism created by the text-centered study [of the Theravāda canon by Europeans] was rational, humanistic, validated by the apparatus of Western scholarship, and centered on the historical actuality of Gautama the man[14] and was unabashedly different from Buddhist practice. As T.W. Rhys Davids himself wrote, "The Buddhism of the Pāli Pitakas is not only a quite different thing from Buddhism as hitherto commonly received, but antagonistic to it."[15]

Although I sympathize with the general complaint that European interpreters have been biased and have misrepresented the canon (and I have published on this issue repeatedly), my response to this problem has been to study the ancient primary sources in their original language myself (i.e., I taught myself to read Pali, 巴利语); this overcomes the bias of secondary sources and enables me to challenge established assumptions when I differ from them. An extremely small number of Europeans have reading comprehension of Pali in the twenty-first century (and an even smaller number can combine this expertise in Pali as a dead language with knowledge of any one of the living traditions, such as Cambodia, Burma, Sri Lanka, etc.); for those who cannot read Pali themselves, asking for advice and assistance from those who can might seem like a reasonable compromise. Unfortunately, Southwold's uncompromising approach (now in vogue) provides an excuse for researchers to disregard these ancient sources or at least to demote their significance; there is a very significant degree of demotion in Southwold's claim that the "nibbanic Buddhism" of the written canon is "actually a minority tradition."[16]

It is misleading to contrast a written canon (in a dead language) *as a "minority"* to the plurality of local traditions (in living languages and contemporary cultures) encountered by anthropologists *as a collective "majority."* Texts do not have social authority because of the number of people who read them, nor even because of the number of people able to read them; on the contrary, the authority of the scriptures extends through

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14. This is the Pali clan-name Gotama, transcribed into Chinese as 瞿曇. In using the phrase "Gautama the man," Snodgrass draws attention to the European scholars' preference for this clan-name, i.e., regarding it as a more vernacular (and less supernatural) way to refer to the Buddha.
15. Judith Snodgrass, "Defining Modern Buddhism: Mr. and Mrs. Rhys Davids and the Pāli Text Society," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27 (2007): 198.
16. Southwold, "Buddhism in Life," 448.

the (much larger) number of people who defer to them *if and when* they are consulted. The question we should consider is *when* and *how* the texts are consulted (something that differs from one culture to another, and in one historical period in contrast to the next). An interesting example was observed in rural Cambodia by Kobayashi.[17] At one temple, he reports, the monks rejected a particular ghost-feeding ritual after consulting the writ of the Buddhist canon; the ritual they decided to reject was conducted at other temples the researcher had surveyed in the same area and is still generally accepted throughout Cambodia. I quote the justification for abolishing the ritual that Kobayashi reports from the head monk of the temple:

> If one wishes to transfer merit to the dead, rice should be offered to a monk as a source of merit. In Buddha's sacred words in the Tripitaka, we could not find any explanations about bân baybin [i.e., the Cambodian name of this ghost-feeding ritual]. Such practice is really meaningless, because merit must be transferred through Buddhist monks. Dogs eating rice on the field can't help anything.[18]

The final statement refers to the real outcome of throwing rice through the air in the ritual alluded to: regardless of personal religious beliefs, when the ritual is finished, the rice that was thrown through the air falls to the ground, and is often eaten by stray dogs. Although it is anecdotal, this is a useful example of the interaction between textual authority and religious tradition that is ongoing in Theravāda cultures. Although there may be a small minority of people who are able to consult the ancient texts (and an even smaller minority may be motivated to do so), the written canon remains an open resource for anyone who would question or challenge Buddhism as it merely exists.

The power of tradition exists in the habits of mind that deter such questions from arising; the study of culture is research into the sum of questions that are never asked. Whenever such doubts should arise, the priority of the texts over practice is proven, again and again, in tiny "reformations" of this kind: the reform may begin with a single monk's inquiry, and may end with a single temple's minor change in rituals. Meanwhile, nobody questions the fact that the Buddha is depicted on the temple walls with a full head of hair, whereas

17. Kobayashi Satoru (小林知), "An Ethnographic Study on the Reconstruction of Buddhist Practice in Two Cambodian Temples: With the [sic] Special Reference to Buddhist Samay and Boran," *Southeast Asian Studies* 42 (2005): 495–501.
18. Ibid., 501.

the ancient scriptures uniformly describe him as shaven-bald (an example I've discussed in a separate essay, titled "The Buddha was Bald"). Innumerable examples of this type of unquestioned contradiction could be offered, and this is the substance of what we call culture (as something distinct from belief or knowledge). Meanwhile, "The pre-eminence given to Sinhalese Theravāda Buddhism in mainland Southeast Asia has meant that, periodically, local traditions and texts are measured against the Pāli Canon, and if found lacking, reformed or suppressed."[19]

In this instance, I note, Kobayashi (the researcher quoted above) did not verify (and did not challenge) the monk's claim that the ghost-feeding ritual lacked any canonical basis. If we want to move beyond merely "reporting as Buddhism what the Buddhists I knew taught me" we need to be able to interrogate the original texts ourselves, to present original contrasts between precept and practice. Participant observation (參與觀察) is insufficient if all of the participants are equally ignorant of the written canon; conversely, the example I have just examined shows that the dynamic relation between text and practice can extend from the most ancient written records down to the minutiae of monastic rituals as they are conducted today. If an informant (interviewed in fieldwork) does claim to have some canonical knowledge and the researcher is merely credulous in reporting their claims, then the substance of the work still needs to be verified. In this sense, ethnography without philology leaves the task incomplete.

Even worse (but less readily visible) is the problem that a researcher who is unaware of the canon will be unaware of many questions that are worth asking and will be unable to distinguish recent innovations from (genuinely) ancient traditions. I was astounded to read Judy Ledgerwood's observation of a certain ritual (the *Uposatha*) being performed on the same days of the month now as they were observed 100 years ago; in fact, the significance of the dates (that she comments on) were an established fact of history more than two thousand years ago.[20] In addition to the evidence of the most ancient "core" of the Theravāda canon, this aspect of the religious calendar is also evident in

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19. Elizabeth Guthrie, "A Study of the History and Cult of the Buddhist Earth Deity in Mainland Southeast Asia" (Ph.D. diss., University of Canterbury), 3–4.

20. Judy Ledgerwood, "Buddhist Practice in Rural Kandal Province, 1960 and 2003," in *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Moral Order in Cambodia Today*, ed. Alexandra Kent and David P. Chandler (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008), 154.

pre-Buddhist traditions of ancient India.[21] Ledgerwood offers her comments on this (supposed) hundred-year old tradition without any reference to the written canon; if that is valid, it is at least incongruous to see the canon totally omitted in the comparison of her own observation to another Westerner's observations of a century past. The presentation of such observations (as "ethnography without philology") does indeed leave a most important task incomplete and would mislead many readers. A lack of interest in the ancient texts entails that important aspects go unnoticed both by the researcher in the course of their observations, and by the readers of their conclusions.

§3.

By the same token, ethnography and philology can be mutually illuminating in Theravāda Asia, because so many cultural assumptions and folk traditions have developed with constant reference back to the written canon: justifications are sought in the ancient texts (rightly or wrongly), coeval with the development of new cultural forms.

To offer a positive example in brief, consider the ubiquitous goddess called "Phra Thorni" in Cambodia ("Thoranee" in Thailand and Laos). The image of this goddess is found throughout Theravāda Buddhist temples of Cambodia, Thailand and Laos, very often on the pedestal of a Buddha statue, sometimes on the gateways to temples; she almost always appears in the (non-canonical) "biography" of the Buddha, and she is sometimes depicted as a statue unto herself in (secular) public monuments, outside of the temples. She is normally classified as an earth goddess, but could also be described as a goddess of water (rivers, floods, and rainfall, including the power of withholding or releasing the rain). She is linked to Buddhism by one specific narrative: in the folklore version of the Buddha's life story (common to Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos) this goddess is summoned by the Buddha touching the ground on the completion of his meditation, and she then releases a flood by twisting her hair, protecting the Buddha from an army of demons (thus "washing away" the enemies of Buddhism). Again,

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21. Bhikkhu Nyanatusita, *A Translation and Analysis of the Pātimokkha* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 2008), 64.

there seems to be no reason to identify her with earth more than water; her powers are linked to both.[22]

Zepp observes that this goddess, "does not appear in the Tripitaka or other Buddhist accounts outside Southeast Asia, and may have roots in an ancient pre-Buddhist figure in local mythology."[23] Zepp's account refers to her by an alternate Cambodian name, "Nieng Kang Hing," but the standard names "Thorni" and "Thoranee" are simply local attempts to pronounce the Pali name *Dharaṇi* (and her name is still spelled as such in Cambodian orthography).[24] Jaini similarly assumes that this goddess is of local origin, despite this canonical-sounding name: "The legend of *Dharaṇi*, as pointed out by Cœdès, is unknown to the canonical texts and is peculiar to Cambodia and Siam. The earliest image of *Dharaṇi* is found on a stele at Angkor Vat. It is likely, in view of this iconographical evidence, that the legend of *Dharaṇi* is of Khmer [i.e., Cambodian] origin."[25] In commenting on the ubiquity of this goddess in Southeast Asia, Guthrie remarks:

> I began to see the earth deity everywhere I looked: [depicted as a statue] standing with her crocodile in a main traffic roundabout in Phnom Penh [金邊], tattooed onto the arms of an old soldier, presiding over the Sanam Luang in Bangkok [曼谷], stencilled onto the walls of a wat in Luang Prabang [i.e., 老撾北方]. The one place I did not find her was in the Pāli Canon, the texts that Theravāda Buddhism is founded on.[26]

In contrast to these widely-held assumptions, I would point out the following:

1. The name *Dharaṇi* does appear in the Pali canon. In the illustration, I have quoted a passage in full, showing the minor variations revealed by the comparative study of the text.

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22. For much more detail, see Guthrie, "A Study."
23. Zepp, *A Field Guide*, 18.
24. Many more variations on the name are noted by Guthrie, whose detailed study of this goddess goes beyond the countries mentioned above, including evidence from India, Myanmar, Indonesia and elsewhere: "The earth deity's name changes in different countries, but is generally a form of a word for 'earth,' i.e. Pṛthivī, Kṣiti, Dharaṇī, Vasundharā, and so on. In Cambodia the earth deity is known simply by her title . . . (pronounced 'neang kongheng'). . . . In the Tai regions she is known as Nang Thoranee or Mae Thoranee: 'lady earth' or 'mother earth'" ("A Study," 2 n. 2).
25. Padmanabh S. Jaini, "'Mahādibbamanta': A 'Paritta' Manuscript from Cambodia," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 28 (1965): 63.
26. Guthrie, "A Study," 1–2.

2. In this passage, the phrase *Rahadopi tattha Dharaṇi. . .* appears immediately after a list of the names of gods, in a text that is dominated by lists of the names of numerous gods, demi-gods, and demons of various kinds. Many of the gods whose names are preserved in this particular text are no longer celebrated in any culture (i.e., many of the gods named here, though not all, have been forgotten by both Buddhists and Hindus in the intervening centuries).

3. While the primary source text, if correctly interpreted, states *Dharaṇi* as the name of a lake (not a goddess, apparently), there is no reason to assume that Cambodians interpreted it correctly: appearing immediately after a list of gods' names, it would be easy to mistakenly assume that this is one further god (or goddess) in that list.

4. The description of this lake (perhaps mistaken as a goddess) is only one sentence long, but states that *Dharaṇi* is the origin of both the rainclouds and the rain. If this description were applied to the Cambodian goddess (as we know her today) it would seem suitable enough: she controls the floods and the rains.

5. Although the reader might assume this is an obscure passage that I am quoting in the illustration, the particular canonical text quoted here (namely, the *Āṭānāṭiya-sutta*) was considered important and very frequently recited aloud in the pre-modern world. Throughout recorded history, this text was believed to have magical protective powers; indeed, in the preamble to the text itself, its purpose is explained as useful for allaying demons, and it is not surprising that the performance of this text became an important ritual in the medieval Buddhist world.

My conclusion is simply that the opinions I have quoted from Zepp, Jaini, and Guthrie (above) are not strictly accurate: the name *Dharaṇi* appears in the canon, and the peculiar context it appears in would offer an explanation for how this Cambodian goddess acquired her Pali name. I am not challenging the assumption that the true origin of the goddess (and the story of her releasing a flood, etc.) is Cambodian; however, if she is Cambodian, this means that her Pali name must have a separate origin. As mentioned, she also has Cambodian names that are entirely non-Pali, but these do not resemble (and do not provide an explanation for) the name *Dharaṇi*. If we presume that the Cambodians did have their own ancient

සෙබ්බේසාං සෙරිසානං සෙරිසො නාමසො යක්ඛො
රාජා ඇහොසි තේනේතං සෙරිසකන්ති වුච්චති
යදිදං වෙලුවනං සුඛදට්ඨං ... මයුරකොඤ්චාභිරුතා[1]

(Sinhalese script text continues)

... කොකිලාධිහි[2]

Sinhalese (BJT) DN vol. 3, p. 322 (Āṭānāṭiya-sutta)

(Cambodian/Khmer script text)

Cambodian Canon vol. 19, p. 108 (DN, Āṭānāṭiya-sutta)

1. The Sinhalese reads *bhagdlavatī*, but notes the variant *sālavatī* from the Burmese edition (the latter is presumably an error: (Sinhalese) vs. (Sinhalese)).

2. The Sinhalese reads *mayūrakoñcābhirutā* and notes the Burmese text as *mayurakoñcābhirudā* instead. The Khmer text (above right) has the same *-dā* ending as the Burmese edition.

1. In several places the Khmer text has a long *ī* ending where the Sinhalese has a short *i*.

2. The Khmer is clearly *suro*, whereas the Sinhalese apparently reads *sūro* ((Sinhalese) vs. (Sinhalese) is frequently unclear).

3. Whereas the Sinhalese ends *-tā* (see left, above left).

4. The Sinhalese has *kokilādhihi* (above-left) vs. the Khmer reading *kokilābhihi* (above).

goddess (of local origin) who controlled the rains and the floods, it would be fair to suppose that they selected this one-sentence description of *Dharaṇi* as an analog for their own goddess; they could do so either by misinterpreting the word "lake," or else by accepting it, and reading the passage as a lake personified as a goddess. If they had done so, their own goddess would suddenly be included in the pantheon of the most ancient Buddhist canon simply through the creative interpretation of one sentence (or, perhaps, through the sincerely inept misinterpretation of one sentence!).

Although it is a matter of inference, it seems impossible that this brief mention of a magical lake named *Dharaṇi* (that controls the rains, etc.) could have prefigured and inspired the Cambodian goddess and the stories surrounding her. Instead, it seems more likely that this passage simply provided an already-existing goddess with one additional epithet, and that the Pali name created a corroborative link between the ancient Indian pantheon and one of Cambodia's local deities.

I would offer this as a positive example of the nexus between ethnographic observation and the written canon. If the reader takes some time to stare at the illustration, they will see that this is slightly tricky work: comparative reading of sources preserved in a dead language is not easy. However, the results can be illuminating, and the only alternative to undertaking such work (for oneself) is to ask a Pali scholar to do it on your behalf.

§4.

Part of the blame for the confusion over the status of the written canon should be apportioned to scholars of the primary source texts: we have not made it easy for ethnographers to know what we mean by "the Theravāda canon." In two sections, I would here (in §4) describe the confusion arising from the relationship between the extant canons (in the plural), then explain (in §5) the confusion that is internal to our understanding of the Theravāda canon. Hopefully, I can also offer some constructive suggestions to alleviate this confusion for ethnographers and other interested scholars, even if this essay cannot be detailed enough to suit Pali specialists.

The first cause of confusion was the mere happenstance whereby the Buddhist canons were revealed to modern scholars in bits and pieces; the order

of the "rediscovery" (and re-printing) of the texts was arbitrary. Recent studies by Urs App discuss the intellectual reactions that accompanied the arrival and publication of the first (poorly translated) canonical texts in Europe[27]; this is much more dramatic than the history of the same period as told within the small circle of textual scholars whose job was to receive and evaluate these texts.[28]

When Europeans first received Chinese texts about Buddhism there were no clear guidelines as to what was of definitive importance and what was merely peripheral to the canonical tradition; the Chinese sources had their own claims to authority based on their (supposed) descent from more ancient Sanskrit (梵文) originals, and Europeans had no special advantage in scrutinizing these claims. As an instructive example, App points out that "the Forty-Two Sections Sutra [四十二章經] had for many centuries been hailed as one of Buddhism's earliest texts and as the first Sanskrit scripture to reach China and to be translated into Chinese, [but] this sutra is in reality a product of fifth-century China."[29] In this case, the Chinese were fooled many centuries ago, and then Europeans were fooled all over again when the text was transmitted across continents (and the text was influential: by happenstance, it was one of the first Buddhist texts to be translated into European languages). China was an important source of canonical texts, even if their importance derived from their (tenuous) connections to Sanskrit sources originating in India; Western scholars inherited these Chinese texts "bundled up" with many cultural assumptions they could hardly know how to question.

As another example, the Buddhist poet Aśvaghoṣa had his first European edition in 1893 (by E. B. Cowell) and then became massively influential due to a translation from Chinese into English by Samuel Beal (promoted as part of Max Müller's popular "Sacred Books of the East" series, starting in 1899–1900). The problem is not that this text went from Sanskrit into Chinese and was then translated again from Chinese into English; the problem is that Westerners have been credulous in assigning definitive importance to works that happened to arrive in Europe first, and then happened to become popular in translation. It is really just happenstance that Aśvaghoṣa became a best seller (in

27. E.g., Urs App, *Arthur Schopenhauer and China: A Sino-Platonic Love Affair*, Sino-Platonic Papers 200 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2010).

28. E.g., Akira Yuyama, *Eugene Burnouf: The Background to his Research into the Lotus Sutra* (Tokyo: The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, Soka University, 2000).

29. App, *Arthur Schopenhauer and China*, 10.

English translation) 100 years ago, but this seems to powerfully warp people's assumptions about the text's significance more than 1000 years ago (raising questions, moreover, about its significance here and now). Fashions in how history has been popularized are more powerful than bare historical facts; the translations of both the the Forty-Two Sections Sutra and Aśvaghoṣa's poetry became influential in the modern era, without any understanding of how these texts related to the historical development of the canon (or, we could say, despite the weakness of their relationship to the canon).

In general, researches into Chinese canonical Buddhism were much more advanced than contemporaneous Theravāda scholarship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but the Chinese canon itself contains only an echo of the Theravāda canon, with confusion (naturally) ensuing as to how all these sources relate to each other. The following opinion, I note, is now more than 80 years out of date, but still (in my experience) representative of what many researchers presume to be true:

> The Pali canon is not represented as a whole in Chinese. Only a few of the translations go back to Pali originals. The Chinese Tripitaka consists mainly of translations from Sanskrit and Prakrit, but the old Sanskrit canon itself is not found in Chinese as a unit, although most of it seems to be present in a scattered form.[30]

It is not surprising (in any era, modern or ancient) that Chinese researchers would be confused about the "scattered" correspondence between their own canon and its antecedents in ancient India. In Chinese, all of these canons are imprecisely called *Sān Zàng* (三藏, i.e., "the Tipiṭaka"); the term *Ā Hán* (阿含, "Āgama") is no less confusing.[31]

Westerners have not had much of an advantage, partly because we relied so much on Chinese scholarship as an intermediary: the Chinese canon became accessible before the Theravāda canon, but, more importantly, at every stage of the development of our understanding thereafter, we have had many scholars who could read classical Chinese (in both Asia and Europe) but very few who could read Pali. Classical Chinese has now become a mainstream subject in universities around the world, while the language of the Theravāda canon has

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30. Walter Eugene Clark, "Some Problems in the Criticism of the Sources for Early Buddhist History," *Harvard Theological Review* 23 (1930): 121–47.
31. Contrary to some expectations, this term (阿含) does not identify a text as non-Theravāda; the same term (Āgama) is used in the Pali commentaries, etc.

remained an obscure area of study. Although the form of archaic Chinese used in *Ā Hán* (阿含) literature is a special area of study unto itself (i.e., only a minority of Chinese classicists can read the texts that have putative analogues in the Pali canon) this sub-discipline is copious in contrast to Theravāda canonical research. Remarkably few people even know what the word "Pali" means in any given part of Asia today; both in Southeast Asia and within China there is still widespread confusion as to what the difference between Pali (巴利文) and Sanskrit (梵文) is supposed to be. Several times, Chinese professors have self-confidently (and incorrectly) instructed me that it was inappropriate to refer to Pali as a *wén* (文) because they assumed that Pali was merely a spoken dialect with no written tradition (and no literature) of its own. Of course, this is neither more absurd nor less absurd than what European professors of Buddhism say to me on the same subject; in many ways, we remain at "step 1" in introducing the Pali canon to both the East and the West.

Fomenting further confusion, Western academic attitudes toward the canon have gone through many fads and fashions; some of these have been responses to the emergence of new evidence, and some relate to changes in research methods. In the past, there had been some false hope that modern scholars were going to reconstruct a "pure" canon from the comparative study of Chinese and Indian sources. This benighted duty that Europeans assumed was "reconstructing, as far as possible, the old Sanskrit canon," with the further hope that the comparison of canons would reveal traces of "precanonical Buddhism."[32]

Either implicitly or explicitly, this approach tended to assume that a (non-extant) Sanskrit canon pre-dated the Theravāda canon; this assumption is false. Worse, the idea that scholars can compare two texts to reveal a third one that is more ancient than either of the first two is usually a delusion: in comparing the intact Theravāda canon to the fragments of canons from Central Asia, we primarily learn about the languages and cultures of Central Asia *in the same era as the unearthed fragments concerned*. In other words, when we compare different versions of the canon we do not probe any further backward into the history of the composition of the canon, but instead move forward into the history of its later dissemination. By "Central Asia," we mean the area that now includes Afghanistan (阿富汗), Turkmenistan (土庫曼), and most of the old

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32. Clark, "Some Problems," 138.

Silk Road (絲綢之路) linking this area to China, but the same argument could apply to other examples.

Some Western scholars have been able to "triangulate" fragments of

1. Non-Theravāda traditions (variously recorded in Sanskrit, Prakrit, Gandhārī, etc., with many fragments in languages of pre-Islamic Central Asia, such as Khotanese, Sogdian and Tokharian), with,
2. The Pali canon, and,
3. The "scattered" canons (as described above) partially preserved in Chinese translation.

There are some impressive examples of very detailed studies of this kind[33] but I would warn the reader that this research does not answer the type of philosophical and cultural questions that most people are interested in; I think it is fair to say that the findings arising from these studies are irrelevant to contemporary ethnography (although they are interesting to myself personally). In de Jong's detailed discussion of minor variations between fragments of a certain canonical text, perhaps the sole observation of interest to ethnographers is the conclusion that the text itself "must have been one of the most popular of Buddhist sūtras."[34] This type of finding is not trivial,[35] but it is a contrast to the grandiose expectations of "reconstruction" (such as I've quoted from Clark above) through comparative study. For the most part, these inter-canonical comparisons reveal extremely similar contents arranged in different (numerical) sequences, along with a great deal of evidence of the difficulties that translators struggled with in the ancient world. From the study of these differences, we can learn a lot about

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33. E.g., Valentina Stache-Rosen, *Dogmatische Begriffsreihen im älteren Buddhismus II: Das Saṅgītisūtra und sein Kommentar Saṅgītiparyāya*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1968); J. W. de Jong, "The Daśottarasūtra," in *Buddhist Studies*, ed. G. Schopen (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1979), 251–73.

34. De Jong, "The Daśottarasūtra," 252.

35. Indeed, it is very difficult (or perhaps impossible) for ethnographers to know what elements of the Buddhist canonical panoply were actually popular with audiences (in any given culture, in any particular historical period) without reference to "hard" textual (and archaeological) research of this kind.

the culture of translation and transmission (in the place and time of the excavated fragments), but very little about Buddhism.

The recent discovery of a large volume of non-Theravāda manuscripts in Afghanistan (only known to scholars from 1999 forward)[36] could have started a new era of such research through the "triangulation" of sources. Instead, I surmise that it will affirm the sense of disappointment with non-Theravāda sources that mounted during the last hundred years. The discovery of a Sanskrit analog to the Pali *Dīgha Nikāya* is "a dream come true" for many Western scholars, as both are analogous to the *Cháng Ā Hán* (長阿含) in the Chinese canon. Alas, palpable reality can rarely satisfy the fantasy that anticipated it. Contrary to the optimism of Clark, Central Asian fragments primarily teach us about the cultures that transmitted Buddhism in Central Asia. Secondarily, the type of information that we glean from comparing two different recensions of the same text (where they are the same text) only demonstrates two different strategies to preserve the same story; I use the term "strategy" because these are (in my opinion) intentionally employed by human authors. As an example, in one instance the Theravāda canon preserves two stories as two separate *sutta*s (經), one after the other, whereas the newly-discovered Sanskrit version has the two stories combined as one text[37]; if we accept that these are simply two strategies employed by storytellers, the difference becomes banal, and cannot provide the materials for any kind of reconstruction. This stymies the (benighted) quest for greater authenticity and authority in a subtle but pervasive way. For one further example, I do find it interesting that the Sanskrit version has transposed the *Brahmajāla-sutta* (梵動經) with the *Dasuttara* and *Saṅgīti* (十上經 & 眾集經), "and it is difficult to avoid the impression that the order of sections and texts within them has been reversed intentionally" in contrasting the Sanskrit to the Pali equivalents[38]; however, this type of intentional change only demonstrates that the non-Theravāda schools were revising their own canon with an awareness of the Theravāda canon, seeming all the more derivative in

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36. Jens-Uwe Hartmann, "Contents and Structure of the /Dīrghāgama/ of the (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādins," *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University* 7 (2004): 119–37.

37. The two texts alluded to here are the *Mahā-Parinibbāna-sutta* (analagous to the 大般涅盘 经) followed by the *Mahā-Sudassana-sutta* (i.e., the 16th and 17th texts in the *Dīgha Nikāya*); according to Hartmann (ibid., 4) the Sanskrit recension discussed presents both stories as one continuous narrative.

38. Ibid., 4–5.

so doing. Inasmuch as the Sanskrit corpus is derivative of the Pali, the study of the differences is banal; indeed, even when the Sanskrit derives from some other antecedent (prior to but sharing origins with the Pali) we still have no advantage in "authority" nor "authenticity" (but instead, just a separate set of errors). Thirdly, if we compare two texts that do not preserve the same story we have no basis for comparison whatsoever, and so all of the same hopes and pretensions (of "reconstruction," etc.) collapse. Although the discovery of a "new" story might be welcome for the casual reader, if we discover an allegedly-canonical text without any parallel in the other canons, it is a philological dead-end.

The same type of problem described in this type of "triangulation" of sources limits findings that are possible through the "two sided" approach of, e.g., a very careful comparative study of the Pali and Chinese versions of the *Brahmajāla-sutta* (梵動經) undertaken by Cheng Jianhua [n.d.]. We can either read the findings of such a comparison with a "forward looking" interest in the historical problems of the Chinese translation (and adaptation) of Buddhism, or else with a "backward looking" interest that simply stops with the Theravāda canon (because there is no earlier evidence to consider). In looking backward, the most we can hope to discover are the sectarian differences between the non-Theravāda schools showing up in revisions to the text; evidence of this kind is very much posterior to the creation of the Theravāda canon.[39] Conversely, these discoveries are of little interest to non-specialists (including ethnographers) because these non-Theravāda schools of Buddhism are now extinct.

We cannot infer anything about the canon's first composition from differences that arose in later stages of transmission and translation. The difference between first composition and later transmission involves a space of centuries and, in most cases, hundreds of kilometres. Culturally, this difference describes a shift from the attitudes of authorship to the attitudes of conservatorship. The culture of the conservator was that "[e]very measure [should be] taken to ensure that the early literature was as fixed and accurate as it could be under the circumstances" with the ideal of "word for word accuracy" in transmission.[40]

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39. Cp.: "we must admit that this evidence reflects a well developed literary tradition, and not the conditions which existed at the beginning of Buddhist composition" (Alexander Wynne, "The Oral Transmission of the Early Buddhist Literature," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 27 [2004] 120).

40. Ibid. 122–23, cf. 102–4.

In contrasting the Theravāda and non-Theravāda canons, we are merely studying slightly different strategies that were employed to preserve canonical Buddhism; the comparative method is only useful where these are derivative of the same antecedents (or wherein they attempt to tell the same story), regardless of whether they are written in Sanskrit or not. For all of these reasons, contrasting canons cannot reveal anything about "precanonical" Buddhism. These are fundamental facts that are, perhaps, forgotten in the enthusiasm for evidence that is simultaneously "new" and "ancient" (such as the newly discovered manuscripts from Afghanistan certainly are).

Any hope that Westerners formerly had of reconstructing a canon older than (and more authoritative than) the Theravāda canon is now over (even though the materials that are now available for this benighted quest are now much better than ever before). Viewed positively, this also means that the study of the Theravāda canon itself is more important than ever before (i.e., an attitude very much the opposite of the sources quoted in §1 and §2).

A recent publication reports that "the enterprise of reconstructing precanonical Buddhism" is still underway in Japan, and is still based on the method of comparing different canons, though this has been out-of-fashion for a long time in the West.[41] The same disparity between the trends seems to be evident in the Japanese contribution to debates about the date of the historical Buddha.[42] In many Mahāyāna countries, one of the major effects of the comparison of the Theravāda canon to the Chinese versions has been a renewed interest in the passages that were identified as relatively ancient and authentic by their correspondence to the Pali (whereas other texts, like the aforementioned Forty-Two Sections Sutra, were effectively demoted by modern scholarship). Reportedly, in modern Korea the Āgama (阿含) texts suddenly emerged from the confusing morass of the Chinese canon to come to the fore of scholarly discourse because modern Theravāda scholarship demonstrated their connection to the historical Buddha (in contrast to Mahāyāna texts of later origin, etc.).[43] None of the Buddhist canons were arranged in chronological

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41. Sungtaek Cho, "The Rationalist Tendency in Modern Buddhist Scholarship," *Philosophy East and West* 52 (2002): 435.

42. Charles S. Prebish, "Cooking the Buddhist Books: The Implications of the New Dating of the Buddha for the History of Early Indian Buddhism," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 15 (2008): 12–13. Online: http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2010/05/prebish-article.pdf

43. Cho, "The Rationalist Tendency," 427. I note that Cho himself is writing as an opponent of this tendency; he quotes from various Korean scholars and describes this historical reaction, but he is a

order; Theravāda scholarship revived interest in the Mahāyāna canon with the exciting possibility of separating the most ancient texts into historical strata. This, also, is a fashion that cannot last long (though it may come and go at different times in Japan, Korea, etc.).

I surmise that many scholars plunged into the study of non-Theravāda materials hoping to discover something "more ancient" and "more authentic" than the Theravāda canon (even if they are searching for a "proto-canon" that only existed in the modern imagination); in the end, for Japanese and Western scholars alike, I suspect, this quest will inadvertently demonstrate the unique philological significance of the Theravāda canon itself, in contrast to all of the (failed) attempts at the "reconstruction" of something pre-canonical. The hard work of textual comparison is praiseworthy in all of the examples I've mentioned, but it does not answer the type of expectation quoted from Clark above, nor, in my opinion, can it even broach simple questions such as the date of the historical Buddha.[44]
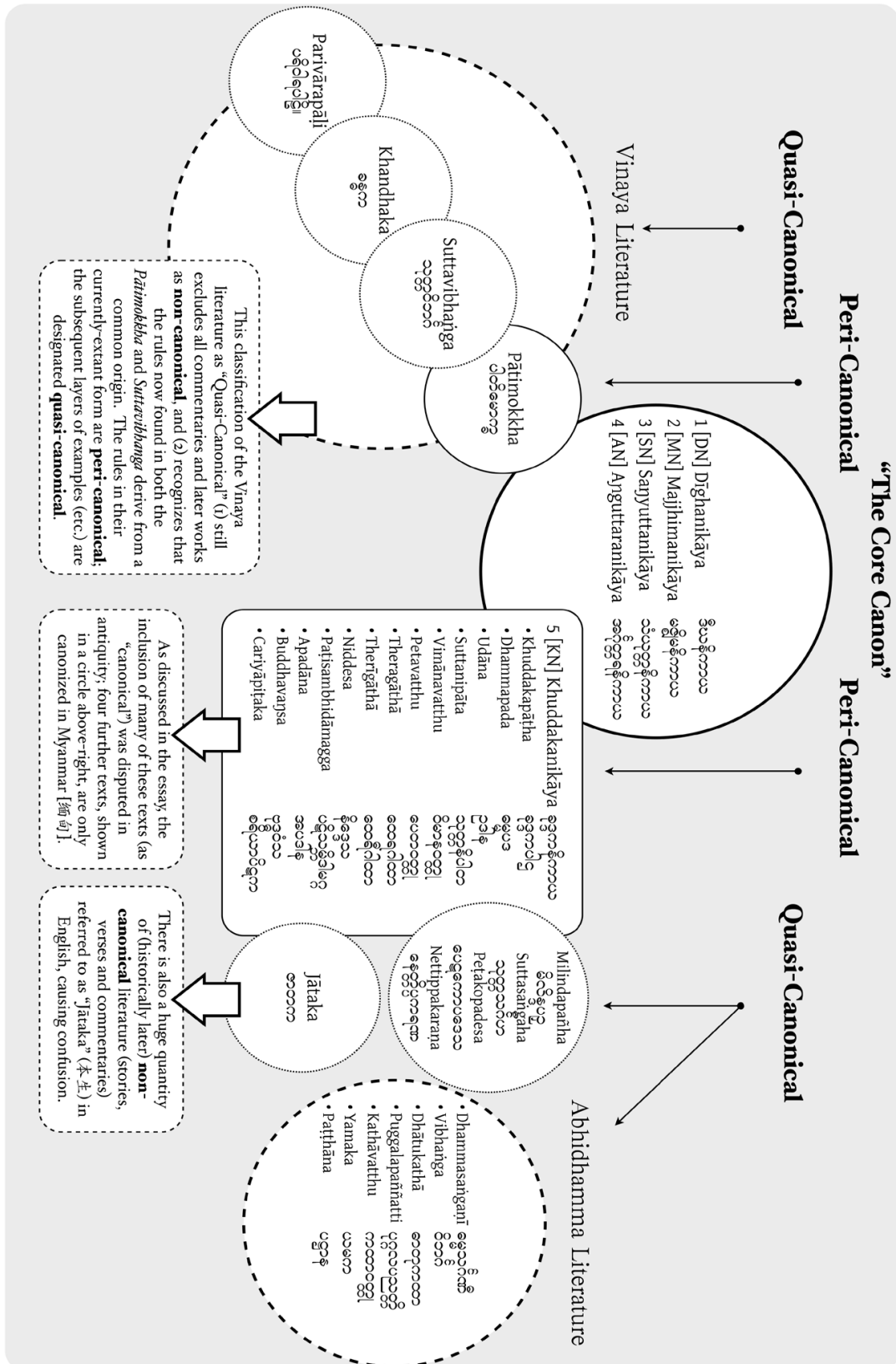
In this section I have tried to sketch out the reasons as to why the simple concept of "the canon" has remained contentious amongst specialists, and why it continues to be a source of frustration and confusion for non-specialists. One reaction to this situation has been the rejection of the word "canon" by some scholars, though it is an abolition proposed in a genial and sometimes jocular mood. Hallisey uses the terms "allegedly canonical" and "allegedly non-canonical," perhaps implying that we should refrain from judgement (as to what the canon is) due to lack of evidence[45]; similarly, Collins wrote an article with a slightly droll title, inviting us to question "the Very Idea of the Pali Canon."[46] This lack of consonance about canonicity can be seen in a positive light; for some, perhaps, it reflects a spirit of skepticism as new evidence becomes available (and as old assumptions go out of vogue). Unfortunately, many respond to the same discord by eschewing the canon entirely, or by denying its salience to their research, or by suggesting that the notion of the canon is somehow a fabrication of Western scholarly debate (as discussed in §§1–2, above, and in §6, below).

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critic of the resulting attitudes and assumptions about Buddhism.

44. Cf. Prebish, "Cooking the Buddhist Books," 1–21.

45. C. Hallisey, "Nibbānasutta: An Allegedly Non-Canonical Sutta on Nibbāna as a Great City," *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 18 (1993): 97–130.

46. Steven Collins, "On the Very Idea of the Pali Canon," *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 15 (1990): 89–126.

"The Core Canon"

Peri-Canonical

Peri-Canonical

Quasi-Canonical

Quasi-Canonical

Vinaya Literature

Abhidhamma Literature

Parivārapāḷi

Khandhaka

Suttavibhaṅga

Pātimokkha

1 [DN] Dīghanikāya
2 [MN] Majjhimanikāya
3 [SN] Saṃyuttanikāya
4 [AN] Aṅguttaranikāya

5 [KN] Khuddakanikāya
• Khuddakapāṭha
• Dhammapada
• Udāna
• Suttanipāta
• Vimānavatthu
• Petavatthu
• Theragāthā
• Therīgāthā
• Niddesa
• Paṭisambhidāmagga
• Apadāna
• Buddhavaṃsa
• Cariyāpiṭaka

Milindapañha
Suttasaṅgaha
Nettipakaraṇa
Peṭakopadesa

Jātaka

Dhammasaṅgaṇī
• Vibhaṅga
• Dhātukathā
• Puggalapaññatti
• Kathāvatthu
• Yamaka
• Paṭṭhāna

This classification of the Vinaya literature as "Quasi-Canonical" (1) still excludes all commentaries and later works as **non-canonical**, and (2) recognizes that the rules now found in both the *Pātimokkha* and *Suttavibhaṅga* derive from a common origin. The rules in their currently-extant form are **peri-canonical**; the subsequent layers of examples (etc.) are designated **quasi-canonical**.

As discussed in the essay, the inclusion of many of these texts (as "canonical") was disputed in antiquity; four further texts, shown in a circle above-right, are only canonized in Myanmar [缅甸].

There is also a huge quantity of (historically later) **non-canonical** literature (stories, verses and commentaries) referred to as "Jātaka" (本生) in English, causing confusion.

§5.

My second illustration tries to offer a positive remedy for the confusion I've already described, however, it will also illustrate some further misconceptions arising from the organization of the Tipiṭaka (三藏). Immediately after the chart, the four categories I have proposed are first listed and then explained (as briefly as possible). In reading the chart from left to right we see a breakdown of the three traditional "baskets" that the Tipiṭaka is organized into (1. *Vinaya*, 2. *Sutta*, and 3. *Abhidhamma*, although, in the discussion below some significant exceptions to this tradition are mentioned); at the top of the chart we see the three categories that I'm imposing onto the canon (from the top down) as follows, with the fourth remaining unstated.

1. The core canon, above the main circle in the middle of the chart.

2. What I have called peri-canonical texts, requiring the most explanation below, to the immediate left and right of the core.

3. Quasi-canonical texts, the furthest removed from the core (again, on both the left and the right).

4. Non-canonical Theravāda literature (i.e., texts with no claim to being included in the canon). These texts are not shown on the chart (as our purpose is to show what is included within the canon, not what is excluded by it).

What I refer to as "the core canon" includes only the first four *Nikāya*s (refer to the chart for details). This is the most ancient of what we now call *sutta* (經) material, and is (roughly) analogous to (some of) what the Chinese canon has (imperfectly) preserved as the Āgamas (阿含). Grouping these four together (and these four only) is not a novel claim, but simply clarifies an assumption that is often implicit (and applied inconsistently) in Pali studies; as Malalasekera says of the *Nikāya*s, "The first four are homogeneous and cognate in character."[47] This is a polite way of saying that the fifth one is, in some

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47. G. P. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Pali Text Society: 1937–1938), s.v. *Sutta Piṭaka*. Malalasekera's volumes are henceforth cited as DPPN, a standard abbreviation in Theravāda studies (i.e., a convention used by a small number of authors); it is an acronym from the title of this often-used reference work, which is now widely available as a digitized resource on the internet.

sense, excluded from being in the same category as the first four (a distinction discussed in the pages following).

The "peri-canonical" texts are shown on the chart both to the left and the right of the core canon. On the left-hand side, the monastic rules (具足戒) form the hypothetical bridge between the core canon and the *Vinaya* literature. These rules are found with minor differences in both the *Pātimokkha* and the *Suttavibhaṅga*; the rules provided the basis for the subsequent elaboration of the *Vinaya* texts (shown in circles further to the left in this chart). The basic sequence and priority of development of these texts is not controversial, because it is demonstrable from evidence internal to the texts, i.e., how they are derived from one another (as shown on the chart, the *Parivāra* is the last addition, and thus displayed as the furthest from the core canon, with the *Khandhaka* being subsequent to the *Suttavibhaṅga*, etc.).[48] The old-fashioned view of this history allows several centuries for the elaboration of the *Vinaya* literature, with the rules providing a nucleus common to all schools of Buddhism as late as 250 BCE[49]; both the details and the fundamental assumptions of this timeline are disputed in current scholarship.

The monastic rules had a peculiar priority both in shaping the *Vinaya* literature and also in re-shaping the *sutta* (經) literature into the form that is now extant; the concept of the *sutta* itself seems to have devolved from these rules[50] and, I would add, there is a reciprocal relationship between one portion of the *Vinaya* literature and the (*Dīgha Nikāya*'s) *Mahā-Parinibbāna-Sutta* (analogous to the Chinese *Dà Bō Niè Pán Jīng*, 大般涅盤經).[51] This is a recurrent feature of Theravāda scholarship: things that are separated in their origins are often united in their revisions.

Whereas the left-hand side of the chart shows an orderly progression, the right-hand side is fairly messy and confusing. To the right of the core canon (on the chart) is the fifth *Nikāya*, with a long list of texts that are considered part of the Theravāda canon in Sri Lankan orthodoxy today. I specify Sri Lanka (斯裡蘭卡) because a few texts are excluded by the Sri Lankans but are accepted as canonical in Myanmar (緬甸); these appear on the chart as "quasi-canonical,"

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48. Oscar Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 20–22.

49. Nyanatusita, *A Translation and Analysis of the Pātimokkha*, 24–25 and n. 11.

50. Ibid., 50–54.

51. E. Obermiller, "The Account of the Buddha's Nirvana and the first Councils according to the Vinayaksudraka," *Indian Historrical Quarterly* 4 (1932): 781–84.

grouped in a separate circle (to the right of the fifth *Nikāya*) with the first title being the *Milindapañha*.

Within the paradigm of Sri Lankan orthodoxy, the fifth *Nikāya* has a peripheral place and has been regarded with varying degrees of legitimacy in the history of Theravāda Buddhism. The Pali commentaries (of Buddhaghosa, written ca. 400–450 CE) record that many of these texts were rejected by certain schools of monks in (contemporaneous) Sri Lanka; reportedly, one school of monastic scholars (the reciters of the *Dīgha Nikāya*) rejected four of these texts as entirely non-canonical and relegated twelve of the remaining texts to the category of *Abhidhamma* literature.[52] The existence of debates of this kind in antiquity reflects the fact that Buddhist scholars were struggling with their own categories to separate out the "quasi-canonical" elements of the Pali corpus, in their own terms.

It is outside the scope of this essay to review current philological debates about each and every one of the texts on the chart (although, I note, Hinüber's *Handbook* attempts to provide such a survey); however, I would emphasize that the relative dating of these "peri-canonical" texts (as I have called them) most often relies on evidence internal to the texts themselves, and is thus non-controversial. For example, in Sri Lankan orthodoxy, the poems of the *Jātaka* (本生) are considered canonical, but not the prose: there is a clear contrast between verses (詩) and prose (散文) within the text and (therefore) this is not controversial (and is not offensive to anyone's religion), even if the assumption that the layers of prose were later additions may now be debatable. If we accept this first distinction, we must (therefore) accept that a third text quoting the prose layer aforementioned is even later in its origins (and is thus "less canonical" by degrees). This is not merely hypothetical: it has been demonstrated, e.g., with the last text in the fifth *Nikāya* shown on the chart, called the *Cariyāpiṭaka*.[53] Obviously, if the *Jātaka*'s prose is non-canonical, it would be contradictory to define an even later text (that is partly derivative of this non-canonical source) as "canonical." Contradictions of this kind exist within the fifth *Nikāya*, and thus, as I say, there were reasons for scholars of antiquity to consider these texts as less-than-entirely-canonical, without any intervention from modern researchers.

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52. B. C. Law, "Chronology of the Pali Canon," Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute 12 (1930): 176, 195; cf. DPPN, s.v. *Dīghabhānakā*, cf. s.v. *Cariyāpiṭaka*.
53. DPPN, s.v. *Cariyāpiṭaka*.

As one further example, I would note that another text in the fifth *Nikāya*, titled the *Apadāna*, allegedly quotes an *Abhidhamma* text called the *Kathāvatthu*[54]; the latter text is traditionally ascribed to the era of Emperor Aśoka (阿育王, i.e., ca. 250 BCE).[55] The fact that this is a "traditional" ascription does not necessarily mean that it is true, however, it does mean that the status of the text was already debated by monastic scholarship in pre-modern history, and its origins were decided to be very much subsequent to the death of the Buddha (without meddling from modern scholars, and, thus, we cannot be called controversial for pointing out the same thing now). In this case, the derivation of one text from another then marks both as dubious, without controversy: if the *Apadāna* post-dates the *Kathāvatthu,* in what sense can it be called "canonical"? Although I am proposing this new category of the "peri-canonical," my point here is that *only the term itself is new*: these texts were already marked-out as a sub-category (in some sense) by indigenous scholars, without any Western influence in the matter. It is neither novel nor offensive to affirm that (within the canon) some texts are more canonical than others.

In sum, inconsistencies of this kind are nevertheless consistent in marking the fifth *Nikāya* as a miscellaneous category at the periphery of the canon (whereas there is no such variation possible in the contents of the first four *Nikāya*s).

It is even more instructive to note that the Pali commentaries record an alternate method of organizing the entire canon by extending the fifth *Nikāya* to include both the *Vinaya* Literature and the *Abhidhamma*.[56] If this method had prevailed, it would allow a simpler two-category view of the Theravāda canon, with the core canon (of four *Nikāya*s) clearly set to one side, and "everything else" put into this miscellaneous category of the fifth *Nikāya*. I surmise that this could have been unpopular because it demotes the status of the monastic rules somewhat (i.e., if we have only two categories, we would seemingly "lower" the *Vinaya* rules to the same level as collections of poetry and apocryphal storytelling).[57] What is more fundamental is that the mere existence of this

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54. DPPN, s.v. *Apadāna*.

55. I am presuming the emperor's death to be 232 BCE and his reign to commence less than 30 years earlier, perhaps in 268 BCE (any debate on this point is outside of the remit of the current article).

56. DPPN, s.v. *Khuddaka Nikāya*.

57. To be more explicit: if the commentaries did allow both interpretations of the fifth *Nikāya* as equally valid (with one being a "narrow" interpretation and the other being a "wider" use of the term *Nikāya* itself, as according to Law, "Chronology," 184) and if this had been a widely-held view

type of ambivalence toward the canon's organization demonstrates that what we now think of as "the structure of the canon" has historically devolved from (changing) cultural attitudes toward the texts. Those attitudes are no longer susceptible to change because the Pali language itself is now dead, and remarkably few people are conversant in the literature.

I will not devote very much space to describing the third category of the quasi-canonical texts (可疑經典). The most difficult aspect to discuss is the structure of the *Vinaya* literature (on the left of the chart), and enough of this has already been explained above (in delineating the role of the monastic rules, etc.). It is less difficult but more contentious to speak of the *Abhidhamma* literature (on the right-hand side of the chart); this corpus of texts is simply and bluntly acknowledged by all specialized scholars as *the least canonical* of additions to the canon and, in relative chronology, it was added last.[58] Hinüber remarks, "The language of the *Abhidhamma* texts is clearly distinct from the usage found in the first two *Piṭakas*."[59] Evidence of this kind is obvious, but only for the tiny minority of people who work with primary sources.

Categorizing the Theravāda *Abhidhamma* as quasi-canonical is only "contentious" for two reasons that are worth mentioning (briefly) because they directly interfere with fieldwork in Southeast Asia today. The first is that the *Abhidhamma* texts are revered as magical in a wide range of cults and cultures of Southeast Asia, and almost none of these rituals involve reading comprehension of the texts themselves.[60] Very few people in Southeast Asia think of the *Abhidhamma* as a corpus of palpable texts; for most, the word suggests an impalpable ideal. Secondly, the term *Abhidhamma* is contentious simply because the word itself is now so commonly misused (and misunderstood) that people frequently get confused and take offense no matter how carefully we may speak about the subject.

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during that era of authorship (ca. 400–450 CE, as aforementioned) then we could surmise that one of the two interpretations has waned away due to its unpopularity since that time (leaving only this trace in commentaries, such as the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, etc.).

58. Law, "Chronology," 183; cf. DPPN s.v. *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*.

59. Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*, 68.

60. Many of these beliefs have no connection whatsoever to the content of the texts, and often invoke the *Abhidhamma* symbolically, e.g., through the recitation of magical formulas that are not meaningful in any language. Justin McDaniel has published on this subject in Lao and Northern Thai cultures (*Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words* [Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008], esp. ch. 8).

As I've noted on the chart, we have a similar problem with the word *Jātaka* today, but whereas contemporary Buddhists treat the *Jātaka* as a genre (defined aesthetically) their idea of the *Abhidhamma* is instead supernatural and rather nebulous. In a sense, there is nothing surprising about a story that resembles the style of a *Jātaka* being called by this same term, i.e., not even if the person telling the story knows that it was first written in medieval Thailand, with no connection to ancient India whatsoever. Indeed, it is not offensive to clarify that one text is a locally-written *Jātaka* (of some relatively-recent century), whereas another is considered "canonical" in origin, because the term is now informally used to mean a genre that is inclusive of the apocryphal and the ancient alike. By contrast, one Cambodian professor was very much offended when I explained to him that a text he regarded as "*Abhidhamma*" was, in fact, first written in twentieth-century Myanmar and had never existed in any language more ancient than modern Burmese (緬甸語). He was surprised because he had already been translating this text from English into Cambodian for several years. He had assumed that he was translating the canonical *Abhidhamma*, but he had no clear notion of what the word is supposed to mean. Both *Jātaka* and *Abhidhamma* texts, I would note, are performed as part of funeral rituals throughout mainland Southeast Asia; this is one very simple reason why they are taken much more seriously here than elsewhere (i.e., regardless of their contents).

In contrast to the tremendous reverence I've just described, many of the western scholars who devoted their time to the *Abhidhamma* literature left castigating remarks against the texts. After some 40 years of work of this kind (by her own estimate) C. A. F. Rhys-Davids described the European efforts to research the *Abhidhamma* as a hunting expedition that only captured "a bag of mice"; she repeatedly asks whether or not this entire venture had been a "waste of time."[61] She does also remark that the study of the *Abhidhamma* (as a corpus of texts entirely subsequent to the *sutta*s of the core canon) demonstrated some interesting intellectual developments in contrast to the earlier canon; Rhys-Davids calls these later developments a new "discipline in consistency of thought and language," and also "a kind of intensive and introspective growth" that took place "in the course of perhaps a few centuries."[62] However, her evaluation of the *Abhidhamma* literature as a whole was of a "cenotaph of

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61. C. A. F. Rhys-Davids, "The Abhidhamma-Pitaka and Commentaries," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2 (1923): 245–46.
62. Ibid., 247.

the works of a dead culture."[63] She clarified her meaning by drawing attention to the etymology of this word "cenotaph": she was not merely reviling it as a tomb, but as an empty tomb.

In discussing the *Abhidhamma* we have a clear contrast between the attitudes of modern scholars and (ongoing) Buddhist tradition. For the purposes of modern scholarship, these are blatantly non-canonical texts that were (somehow) added to the canon after-the-fact. While we have commentarial records of dissent about the canonicity of these sources within Theravāda monastic tradition (similar to the foregoing discussion of the fifth *Nikāya*), the supernatural myth that is offered as an excuse for including these texts in the canon is itself an invention of an even later era (i.e., the myth itself first appears in the commentaries, and has no basis in the canon).[64] The problem here is not the contrast between myth and reality, but the contrast between one era of mythology and another. Nobody who actually reads these texts can accept a theory that they are of simultaneous origin with the rest of the canon; it hardly matters if the theory is supernatural or not.

Without digressing further, I would note that the *Abhidhamma* is also the most variegated in comparing each version of the canon to the others:

> It may be noted that this Sanskrit canon contained seven Abhidharma texts, just as the Pali canon contains seven Abhidhamma texts. But these two sets of texts seem to be entirely unrelated. They are not variants from one common tradition but independent compositions.[65]
>
> Further, [the Chinese canon] contains seven Abhidharma texts, but these seem to differ in toto from the Pali Abhidhamma texts. . .[66]

In my opinion, this asymmetry was made much more important by relatively late scholars such as Xuán Zàng (玄奘) whose translations both preserved and promoted (non-Theravāda) Abhidharma texts in China (in the seventh century CE). Resultantly, works like the *Abhidharmakośa* (that have no analogy in the Theravāda canon) became popular in China (and were perceived as important components of the canon there). It is an overt fact that the text just mentioned was written by Vasubandhu (世親, a.k.a. 天親) in the fourth century CE, with

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63. Ibid., 245.
64. Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*, 66.
65. Clark, "Some Problems," 137.
66. Ibid., p. 127.

no possible connection to the historical Buddha; from a Theravāda perspective, it is a "pseudo-*Abhidhamma*" treatise; conversely, in light of all the facts we have reviewed above, the whole of the Theravāda *Abhidhamma* could be described as "pseudo-canonical." The proposed term quasi-canonical would encompass all of these texts that are overtly subsequent to the canon, and yet are (incongruously) included within it; this allows us to avoid statements about which texts are "pseudo-" from one perspective or another.

The main advantage of the foregoing "practical guide" to the canon is, in fact, inverse to all that I have said: while I have summarized historical distinctions that researchers should understand before fieldwork is undertaken, this also enables them to disregard many (spurious) historical distinctions that they will encounter both in print and in speech.

At present, Theravāda scholarship of every kind is extremely lenient about pseudo-historical claims that are offered about texts found within (what I have called) the core canon. Claims about specific texts (and even specific concepts) being "later" and "earlier" are made very lazily and informally, often without proper citation; learning when to disregard such claims (and when to take them seriously) is a science unto itself. As a remarkable example (from a remarkable scholar) G. P. Malalasekera contradicted his own better research in suggesting that King Yama (閻王, a.k.a. 閻羅) only performs judgement on the dead in "later literature"[67]; on the contrary, the same author's own article (written decades earlier!) informs us that King Yama appears in the most ancient part of the Theravāda canon.[68] There can be no debate whatsoever that King Yama appears as the judge of the dead (and the king of hell) in the most ancient stratum of Buddhists texts that exist in any canon (i.e., what I have called the core canon)[69]; nevertheless, in recent generations it has been routine for scholars to propose pseudo-historical distinctions of this kind *in passing* (without proof or even citations)—even if they know better themselves.

With all of these warnings having been offered (in the spirit of practical advice) I would reiterate that my message here remains positive: as with the example of the name *Dharaṇi* (§3, above) there are innumerable useful

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67. G. P. Malalasekera, "'Transference of Merit' in Ceylonese Buddhism," *Philosophy East and West* 17 (1967): 85.

68. DPPN, s.v. *Yama*.

69. For one example among many, see the *Devadūta sutta*, the 130th *sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* (PTS 3 [1902]:178–179).

applications of canonical materials to fieldwork, and what we discover in fieldwork should inspire new inquiries into the canon as well. Unfortunately, this is not in vogue.

§6.

Instead, the current fashion seems to be comparative claims about what the researcher presumes to be the "doctrinal rationality" of the written canon as opposed to "the diversity of cultural practices" and "performative ritual realities" that ethnographers can uncover in their fieldwork.[70] The central assumption (that I would refute here) is that the written canon is "rational" whereas contemporary culture is "irrational."

I have grave doubts that these researchers have studied the texts that they deem to be "rational" in these comparisons. In a recent article, Anne Hansen attempts to contrast a "rational" *sutta* ([71]經) to the *Jātaka* (本生) tradition in general[72]; she thinks that a canonical text called the *Mahā-Parinibbāna-sutta* exemplifies the "rational" tendency that Europeans exaggerated, in contrast to the Buddha as he is depicted in *Jātaka* literature. In fact, the *sutta* she has selected (and quoted) as an exemplar of this "rationalism" contains all of the same magical aspects of storytelling found in the *Jātaka*s: in the *Mahā-Parinibbāna-sutta* the Buddha remembers previous lives, predicts the future, magically causes earthquakes, interacts with demi-gods, demons, ghosts, etc., and he performs both psychic and physical miracles. Hansen neither quotes nor mentions any of these magical aspects of the story, creating the illusion that this *sutta* excludes the supernatural (and other *Jātaka*-like mythological elements) to which she would contrast it. She claims that this *sutta* she (selectively) quotes from shows the Buddha as a human, historical figure, "rather than the mythic character represented in Jataka narratives."

What really is the supposed difference between this *sutta* and the *Jātaka*s that equates to "modernist ideas of rationalism"?[73] It is simply not true that the

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70. Juliane Schober, "Communities of Interpretation in the Study of Religion in Burma," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 39 (2008): 261 (citing Collins).

71. Anne Hansen, "Modernism and Morality in the Colonial Era," in Kent and Chandler, eds., *People of Virtue*, 45.

72. Ibid.

73. Ibid., 37.

Mahā-Parinibbāna-sutta features "the demythologized historical Buddha,"[74] and I can only imagine that the author making this comparison has relied on biased secondary sources, or that she is somehow unfamiliar with the primary source she is quoting to support her argument. Similarly, I find Schober's contrasting claims about "[the] rationality of Pali and especially *abhidhamma* texts" extremely dubious.[75] The texts these scholars allude to (and dismiss as "rational") are, in fact, brimful of precisely the type of magic and mysticism that they presume to discover in their ethnography (and that they pretend such ancient texts are lacking). I surmise that the contrast they offer their readers is misleading because these authors are contrasting something known to something unknown.

There is an equivocation between "rational" and "scriptural" in many of these English-language studies of Southeast Asian Buddhism. Hansen quotes the term "scripturalism" from Tambiah[76] and then equates this with "rationalism" and "rationalized Buddhism" (in Cambodia, Thailand and Burma) without defining what she means by "rational."[77] Perhaps this can be explained as confusion between the "rational act" of consulting the written record and the presumed rationality of the content of the scriptures themselves. To return to the example quoted from Kobayashi (in §2, above), the act of the monks consulting the written canon (to either certify or invalidate a particular ritual) can be described clearly enough as "scripturalism"; however, I think it is wildly misleading to describe this as a "rationalist" opposition of "modernity" to "tradition." It would be utterly false to infer that the ancient texts are opposed to ghosts (or ghost-feeding) in general: in this example, the monks simply rejected one method of ghost-feeding for another, and the ritual remains a merit-transfer ceremony intended to benefit ghosts, particularly those in hell. Only minor differences in ritual are resolved in comparing current practices to the ancient texts. The contents of such scriptures (dealing with hell or any other topic) are neither well-known to the anthropologists, nor are they well-known to their informants (interviewed in fieldwork) in contemporary Southeast Asia.

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74. Ibid., 45.

75. Schober, "Communities of Interpretation," 260–61.

76. Anne Hansen, "Modernist Reform in Khmer Buddhist History," *Siksācakr* 8–9 (special issue 2006–2007): 34; cf. eadem, "Modernism and Morality," 41.

77. Hansen, "Modernist Reform," 38.

The problem for ethnographic fieldwork is that Theravāda Buddhist monks themselves are often enough proceeding with an assumption diametrically opposed to Southwold's hypothesis: the monks often believe that only the written canon "is authentic ('normative', 'orthodox', 'pure', and so forth) and that the Buddhism of ethnography, which differs from it, is in some sense not quite the genuine article."[78] In this way, the ethnographer who presumes to discover something indigenous, continuous, and unwritten in their fieldwork comes to regard the canon as an unwanted obstacle to their research: if they associate the canon with a "rational" and "modern" digression from the authenticity of local tradition, they will want to avoid it as a distraction from the imagined subject of their own inquiry. In a very simple sense, I reject this entire train of thought because I do not accept "rationalization" of Buddhism (and I do not think that any of the authors whom I have quoted offer a valid proof of this equation).

On first encountering Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka, former generations of Western scholars construed the dichotomy between "rational" and "irrational" aspects of Buddhism simply in order to praise the aspects of canonical Buddhism they preferred.[79] This peculiar use of "rationality" has been forgotten; it was used in the context of a very specific set of debates confronting Christian Missionaries in what was then the British colony of Ceylon, and had a very limited meaning in contrasting Buddhism to Christian doctrine (indeed, in this context, "rational" very often meant "not offensive to Christian morality").[80] This debate is of real historical significance, but it is wildly spurious to the academic context that the word "rational" is now employed in (as quoted from Schober, above, and introduced at length in §2). The argument that I now find repeated so often in academic literature employs this dichotomy to a very different purpose: the supposed "rationality" of the ancient texts is treated as a pretext to exclude them as if they were (therefore) irrelevant to the research of the living culture. As with Southwold and Cook (quoted above, §2) this tends to be rolled up in one ball with with insinuations that whatever we know about the canon is the factitious work of "rationalizing" Western scholars. Thus, "rational" is used to insinuate "inauthentic" and "unreal."

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78. Southwold, "Buddhism in Life," 448 (quoted above, §1).
79. Elizabeth June Harris, *Theravada Buddhism and the British Encounter* (London: Routledge, 2006), 214–15.
80. Ibid., 75, 107–8, 187, etc.

The primary sources that I have outlined (in §4 and §5) above are not the result of Western influence; they are the antidote to Western influence. For those who would complain about biased interpretations of the canon, the alternative is to understand the canon itself, without an interpreter.

To offer a very simple conclusion on a very complicated matter, it seems to me that "rationalism" is a term that is meaningful only if it is understood as something internal to (European civilization's) Christian discourse, whereas "scripturalism" has a clearer meaning in the Theravāda milieu (i.e., the verification of practice by consulting the canon). We should be very wary of the uncritical acceptance of any claims about "modernity" made by any side in these debates, precisely because so many Asian Buddhists have now appropriated the same terms:

> At present the "rational" greatly influences our reading of Buddhist texts, confining it within the limits of scholasticism. The mentality involved in such a selective reading is, on the one hand, the overestimation of the explanatory power of human reason and, on the other, a tendency to separate the realm of religion from the human existential realm. Western scholarship arrived at this standpoint from the traumatic experience of the dominance of the Church during the Medieval period. Failing to see the historical context of concepts like "rational" and "scientific," East Asian scholars accepted them as part of modernity, and the East Asian tradition began to be reinterpreted in the light of the Western legacy.[81]

The solution here is not to attempt to ignore the canon (because of its presumed entanglement with this mess of modernity) but instead to develop the acumen to discern what is truly canonical, and what is merely modern opinion about the canon. Why would the importance of the Buddhist canon itself be challenged by this antagonism, that "Buddhism as hitherto commonly received"[82] may be a very different thing from what we find in the most ancient texts? Why would that diminish the salience of the canon to cultural anthropology? The study of modern Greek culture is not invalidated by its lack of resemblance to ancient Greece; the study of modern China is not impaired by the study of ancient Chinese texts. Contrasts of this kind should not impair research, but should enable it

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81. Cho, "The Rationalist Tendency," 434.
82. Snodgrass, "Defining Modern Buddhism," 198 (quoted above, §2).