Champions of Buddhism: Weikza Cults in Contemporary Burma offers new research into the relationship between orthodox Buddhism and the practices of *weikza* and spirit mediums. The book is divided into three parts and addresses several themes. The first involves a historical analysis of power and its distribution between royalty, the *sangha* and *weikza* and later with authorities that replaced the monarchy. Strains developed in the 1980s when Buddhist organizations refused to recognize *weikza* practices to disrobe charismatic monks. The power of the laity came to the fore when many followers, including powerful military officials, chose to protect them. They were not prevented from practicing, but maintained a low profile or went underground. The third chapter moves to the present and to Mount Popa to demonstrate how *weikza* cults have re-emerged and gained popularity among the general public and interestingly, among spirit mediums. The distinction between these groups is recognized in terms of gender, *weikza* (male), and spirit mediums (primarily female).

Part two begins with an examination of *ariya-weikza* associations as self-appointed defenders of Buddhism. Their power increased following a vacuum left when the king, the traditional protector of Buddhism, was banished by the British in 1885. This nationalistic movement, evidenced in *ariya-weikza* texts, presents the view that all foreign influence is evil and defies cosmic order. The texts attack scientific knowledge and technology and what are termed false political ideologies (Communism is cited) and heretical religions such as Islam. Rituals are held to exorcise these evils and restore cosmic order. Although it is argued that the movement has roots in the colonial era, this form of nationalism is evident in thirteenth century chronicles that contain incantations offered to ban all foreigners (*kala*) from entering sacred Buddhist space. Using the activity of pagoda building as a base for research, the following chapter analyses the role of *weikza* in a wider belief system that incorporates Buddhism and spirit forces with cosmology, astrology and numerology and the power of Nature. The approach is to analyze rituals and the role of ritual participants during foundation laying and construction of a pagoda and on completion, dedication rituals. The analysis identifies tensions between various supernatural forces and ritual participants involved in the process.

The final section begins with a chapter on sacred diagrams (*in*) and illustrations (*sama*), created on paper, cloth, metal, and wax, as well as tattooed into the skin. The author chooses as examples significant numbers and Buddhist incantations (*gatha*) represented inside individual cells of nine-square
diagrams. Interestingly, a number of more complex diagrams of this type have recently been de-coded by monks in Chiang Mai and the results made available on the web (www.borana@cmu.th). Cracking the codes does not mean their power is lost because these formulae are activated with repetitive chanting and breath exhalations known only to practitioners. The next chapter explores therapeutic cults in Arakan and presents healing power in terms of hierarchy with, at the lowest level human knowledge for astrological calculations, spirit meditation for divination and at the highest level, weizka intervention to negotiate with the most powerful negative force. The author describes the rise of weizka authority as a recent phenomenon, and notes the decline of the influence of astrologers and mediums that local people do not respect, or in some cases despise. This argument builds on previous chapters by giving an up to date view of supernatural power and its hierarchical distribution among practitioners with possible regional and gender variations. The final chapter addresses current issues of identity related to exorcist congregations established in the early twentieth century. With initiation rites involving the ingestion of in and sama and tattooing on the upper body using a symbolic system established by a named master, an initiate becomes a conduit for the transmission of power. To improve power, he must adhere to what the author defines as “a system of character values” although the power of the exorcist remains fragile and relatively low in the Burmese Buddhist hierarchy.

Throughout the historical period defined in this book, the power of weizka and other ritual experts is viewed as hierarchical and in a state of flux. Although only touched on, visual and written records of belief systems, rituals, and practices exist in palm leaf and mulberry paper manuscripts passed down through generations of practitioners. The information they contain is a fundamental resource and provides a visual perspective in answering questions raised in these chapters. Supernatural power may be illustrated in a top-down structure or presented in other ways—for example as a mandala with power radiating outwards from the centre.

Susan Conway
School of Oriental and African Studies
sc66@soas.ac.uk