



BEYOND INDIANIZATION: BUDDHIST KNOWLEDGE CIRCULATION IN SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: The concept of "Indianization" has long shaped scholarly understandings of cultural exchange between South and Southeast Asia as a largely unidirectional process through which Indian religious, political, linguistic, and cultural forms spread into a receptive Southeast Asian periphery. Although this framework has contributed significantly to the study of early Asian history, it has also encouraged hierarchical representations in which India appears primarily as a source of civilization and Southeast Asia as a recipient. Such a framework can obscure the historical agency of Southeast Asian societies in selecting, transforming, and circulating cultural and religious knowledge. This study has three objectives. First, to reassess the concept of "Indianization" and the diffusionist assumptions that have historically shaped interpretations of cultural exchange between South and Southeast Asia. Second, to examine how Buddhist knowledge in Southeast Asia was transmitted, localized, and transformed through processes of adaptation, reinterpretation, and materialization. Third, to propose a framework of multidirectional knowledge circulation to explain how religious and technical forms of knowledge moved across interconnected regional networks in early Asia.

Methodology: The study employed an interdisciplinary integrative literature review drawing on scholarship from history, archaeology, epigraphy, Buddhist studies, anthropology, and art history. The literature was selected for its relevance to debates on cultural diffusion, convergence, circulation, localization, and connected histories, as well as for its empirical evidence concerning the movement and transformation of cultural and religious forms. The analysis examined secondary scholarship on inscriptions, textual traditions, iconography, architecture, ritual practices, and mathematical notation. The selected cases were compared to identify recurring patterns of transmission, localization, transformation, and possible re-circulation.

Main Results: The findings showed that Buddhist formations in Southeast Asia were not simply reproductions of Indic models but were actively localized and reconfigured within particular sociopolitical, cultural, and cosmological contexts. Epigraphic, textual, artistic, architectural, and anthropological evidence demonstrated that Buddhist doctrines, ritual practices, visual forms, narratives, and religious figures underwent selective appropriation and reinterpretation across the



region. The analysis further identified the encounter between the Śrīvijayan teacher Dharmakīrti and the Indian Buddhist scholar Atiśa as an important example of knowledge moving from Southeast Asia into wider Buddhist networks. The discussion of early Southeast Asian inscriptions containing zero notation likewise demonstrated that mathematical knowledge circulated through complex regional networks, although the lack of definitive empirical evidence rendered both cases largely speculative and, thus, served mainly to pave the way for further interdisciplinary research.

Involvement to Buddhadhamma: This manuscript falls under the scope of Applied Buddhism, focusing specifically on Buddhism and globalization, since it applies Buddhist history and the concept of upāya to modern transregional and anthropological theories. The findings showed that the circulation of Buddhadhamma involved more than the movement of fixed doctrinal formulations. Buddhist teachings were transmitted through textual, ritual, intellectual, and embodied practices and were repeatedly interpreted and adapted within different cultural and historical contexts. In this respect, the Buddhist principle of upāya, or skillful means, provides a useful interpretive perspective for understanding how Buddhist teachings could be expressed in forms appropriate to particular contexts while maintaining broader ethical and soteriological orientations.

Conclusions: This article proposes multidirectional knowledge circulation as an alternative to rigid center-periphery models of South and Southeast Asian cultural exchange. It foregrounds Southeast Asia as an active site of Buddhist knowledge production, interpretation, preservation, and transformation while avoiding the opposite claim that Southeast Asia was the sole or primary source of regional innovation. The article thus contributes to the decolonization of Asian historiography by shifting analytical attention from singular origins toward the movements, transformations, and historical agencies through which knowledge was produced and circulated across interconnected Asian worlds.

Keywords: Indianization, Re-circulation, Localization, Southeast Asia, Local Agency

Introduction

The concept of "Indianization," most prominently associated with George Coedès, has long shaped scholarly understandings of cultural exchange between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. Throughout much of the twentieth century, it provided one of the most influential explanations for the widespread presence of Indic religious traditions, political ideas, languages, and cultural forms across the region. At the same time, the concept also shapes how Southeast Asia is positioned within broader narratives of Asian history, often representing the region as a receptive periphery rather than as an active participant in the production and transformation of knowledge. Although this perspective has generated important insights into historical connections between South and Southeast Asia, it also risks reproducing a hierarchical model of knowledge production in which agency is unevenly distributed (Chakrabarty, 2000); (Subrahmanyam, 1997).

Indianization nevertheless remains influential because it provides a convenient shorthand for describing the widespread presence of Indic religious, linguistic, political, and artistic forms across Southeast Asia. It is therefore important to distinguish between Indianization as a historical process and Indianization as an academic interpretation. As a historical process, the term refers



broadly to the circulation, adoption, and transformation of cultural forms associated with South Asia across different parts of Southeast Asia. As an academic interpretation, however, Indianization often functions as an explanatory model that emphasizes diffusion from an Indian center toward a Southeast Asian periphery. It is primarily this latter interpretation, rather than the existence of historical interactions between the two regions, that this article reassesses.

Recent scholarship has increasingly challenged unidirectional models of cultural influence by emphasizing transregional connectivity, local agency, and convergence. Within Buddhist studies, particular attention has been given to the mobility of texts, rituals, monastic networks, and religious specialists, as well as to the processes through which Buddhist ideas were translated, localized, and reconfigured across different social and political settings. These developments resonate with broader critiques of diffusionism in the social sciences, which emphasize agency and negotiation in the movement of cultural forms. Appadurai (1996), for example, highlights the indigenization of global cultural forms, while Lieberman's (2003) analysis of "Strange Parallels" suggests that similarities across regions may emerge through convergent historical processes rather than through direct transmission alone.

Despite these developments, existing approaches give comparatively less attention to what happens after cultural forms are localized. Scholarship generally focuses on diffusion, interaction, or convergence, while the possibility that locally transformed forms of knowledge could subsequently move beyond their immediate contexts and enter new circuits of transmission has received less systematic attention. This issue is particularly important in the study of Buddhism, where Southeast Asia has often been treated primarily as a site of reception rather than as a site of religious knowledge production. Such a perspective can obscure the role of Southeast Asian communities and teachers in preserving, transforming, and, in some cases, transmitting Buddhist knowledge beyond the region. Similar questions arise in non-religious domains, where the circulation of technical and intellectual knowledge has also often been described through relatively linear models of transmission.

To address this gap, this article develops a framework of multidirectional knowledge circulation based on three related processes. Transregional circulation refers to the movement of texts, practices, ideas, and cultural forms across interconnected regional networks. Localization refers to the selective appropriation, adaptation, and reinterpretation of circulating knowledge within particular social and historical contexts. Re-circulation refers to the subsequent movement of locally transformed forms of knowledge beyond their immediate contexts, creating the possibility of recursive or multidirectional flows. The framework therefore shifts attention from fixed centers and peripheries toward the movements and transformations through which knowledge acquires new forms and trajectories.

The article develops this framework through two complementary cases. The first examines the circulation of Buddhist ethical and practical knowledge through the encounter between Atiśa Dīpaṅkara Śrījñāna and the Śrīvijayan teacher Dharmakīrti. This case is particularly significant because it documents the movement of an Indian Buddhist scholar to Southeast Asia in search of Buddhist teachings and therefore provides a concrete example of knowledge moving from Southeast Asia



into wider Buddhist networks. The second case examines the historical development of zero notation and the decimal system as a comparative example from outside the explicitly religious domain. Both cases do not demonstrate definitive reverse transmission; Rather, they serve to illustrate the importance of examining knowledge through broader networks of circulation rather than assuming a single linear pathway.

Objectives

This study has three objectives. First, to reassess the concept of "Indianization" and the diffusionist assumptions that have historically shaped interpretations of cultural exchange between South and Southeast Asia. Second, to examine how Buddhist knowledge in Southeast Asia was transmitted, localized, and transformed through processes of adaptation, reinterpretation, and materialization. Third, to propose a framework of multidirectional knowledge circulation to explain how religious and technical forms of knowledge moved across interconnected regional networks in early Asia.

Methodology

This article was a conceptual-historical study based on an integrative literature review that synthesized scholarship from history, archaeology, epigraphy, Buddhist studies, anthropology, and the history of science. An integrative review sought to synthesize and reinterpret findings from diverse bodies of literature to generate new conceptual insights (Baumeister & Leary, 1997); (Torraco, 2005). In this context, it enabled the study to trace how Buddhist practices had been interpreted across disciplines and to re-situate them within a framework of multidirectional circulation.

This study was guided by three research questions: 1) How had the concept of "Indianization" structured interpretations of cultural exchange between South and Southeast Asia, and what were its limitations? 2) How were Buddhist forms of knowledge transmitted, localized, and transformed across Southeast Asian contexts? and 3) To what extent could patterns of multidirectional circulation, including possible re-circulation, be identified across both religious and non-religious domains of knowledge?

The corpus of sources examined in this study was deliberately interdisciplinary, drawing on research from history, archaeology, epigraphy, and anthropology. This reflected the broader orientation of area studies, which was particularly well suited to analyzing complex regional formations such as Southeast Asia by foregrounding connections across disciplinary boundaries (Pye, 2001). At the same time, particular emphasis was placed on scholarship that engaged with Buddhist materials, such as inscriptions, textual traditions, ritual practices, and visual culture, in order to understand how religious knowledge was produced, transmitted, and transformed across contexts.

More specifically, sources were selected when they provided either 1) Theoretical discussions relevant to diffusion, convergence, circulation, or connected histories, or and 2) Empirical evidence capable of illuminating how cultural and religious forms moved across regional networks. This selection strategy was guided by the need to ensure analytical comparability across cases rather than representativeness of all available literature. Sources were excluded when they lacked



clear relevance to debates on cultural exchange between South and Southeast Asia, did not engage with questions of transmission, localization, or circulation, or provided insufficient empirical or theoretical material for comparative analysis. The study therefore focused on scholarship that directly contributed to understanding processes of knowledge movement and transformation across regional contexts. This article, moreover, did not involve original analysis of primary historical materials. Instead, it relied on secondary scholarship that interpreted primary sources such as inscriptions, manuscripts, archaeological remains, iconography, architectural structures, and ritual traditions.

The analysis followed a structured three-stage procedure. First, the selected literature was reviewed to identify major interpretive frameworks used to explain cultural exchange between South and Southeast Asia, particularly diffusionist, convergence-based, and circulation-oriented approaches. Second, empirical cases drawn from Buddhist studies, archaeology, epigraphy, and the history of science were comparatively examined in order to identify recurring patterns of transmission, localization, transformation, and possible re-circulation. Third, the recurring patterns identified across the cases were synthesized into a broader conceptual framework of multidirectional knowledge circulation that was capable of accounting for both continuity and transformation across regional settings.

Finally, this study adopted a reflexive methodological stance informed by recent discussions on decolonizing knowledge production (Moosavi, 2023); (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). It critically reflected on the use of analytical categories such as "Indianization" and their implications for representing cultural exchange and historical agency in South and Southeast Asia. This reflexivity also extended to the ways Buddhist knowledge had been categorized and interpreted in modern scholarship, thereby contributing to a more critically informed understanding of transregional cultural and religious processes.

Results and Discussion

1. Rethinking "Indianization" as Theoretical Framework: Convergence, Circulation, and Buddhist Knowledge in South and Southeast Asia

This section developed the analytical framework through which the article reassessed the concept of "Indianization" and examined the circulation of Buddhist knowledge between South and Southeast Asia. It brought together three strands of scholarship: Critiques of diffusionist interpretations of Southeast Asian history, convergence approaches to South-Southeast Asian interaction, and theories of transregional circulation. Taken together, these perspectives provided a framework for addressing the article's first objective: To move beyond models that conceptualized Southeast Asia primarily as a recipient of cultural forms originating in India.

The literature was organized thematically rather than according to disciplinary boundaries. Historical and historiographical critiques of Indianization were considered first, followed by archaeological and inscriptional perspectives on regional interaction and, finally, philological, art-historical, and anthropological approaches that examined the circulation and localization of Buddhist and Sanskrit forms. These bodies of scholarship were treated as complementary



perspectives on a common problem: How cultural and intellectual forms moved across regions, and how they were transformed through processes of local appropriation.

1.1 From Diffusion to Convergence

Earlier interpretations of Southeast Asian history were strongly influenced by the concept of "Indianized States," most prominently associated with Coedès. This framework generally understood the appearance of Indic religions, political institutions, languages, and cultural forms in Southeast Asia in terms of influence originating from the Indian subcontinent. More recent scholarship challenged this model by drawing attention to its implicit hierarchy between cultural "Sources" and "Recipients." Manguin (2023), for example, argued that such interpretations often reproduced an Orientalist tendency to position India and China as primary sources of civilization while reducing Southeast Asia to a receptive periphery. From a broader postcolonial perspective, Chakrabarty (2000) similarly demonstrated how historical narratives could reproduce asymmetrical models in which particular regions were treated as normative centers of historical development.

This critique did not require denying the substantial presence of Indic cultural forms in Southeast Asia. Rather, it raised questions about the analytical assumptions through which their presence had traditionally been explained. Terms such as "Greater India" and "Indianization" could therefore be understood not simply as descriptive labels but also as historiographical categories that privileged particular directions of cultural influence. Archaeological and epigraphic evidence further complicated such models by demonstrating that Southeast Asian societies possessed their own trajectories of political, technological, and cultural development. The significance of this evidence lay not in establishing complete cultural autonomy, but in demonstrating that the incorporation of Indic forms occurred within societies that already possessed established cultural and political institutions.

An alternative approach was provided by the convergence hypothesis. Kulke (2023) argued that cultural interaction between South and Southeast Asia was facilitated not simply by geographical proximity or unilateral influence but by forms of socio-political and economic interaction that brought different societies into sustained contact. Earlier work by Wolters (1986) and Smith (1999) similarly emphasized the active participation of Southeast Asian actors in establishing and maintaining connections with the Indian subcontinent. From this perspective, cultural similarities across the region were better understood as outcomes of interaction than as evidence of straightforward cultural transmission from a single center.

Applied to Buddhism, the convergence perspective shifted analytical attention from the question of where a particular teaching or cultural form originated to the social and historical networks through which it circulated. Shared doctrinal, ritual, linguistic, and artistic forms could consequently be understood as evidence of participation in overlapping transregional networks. Local actors were not merely recipients of already-formed traditions, for they participated in selecting, adapting, institutionalizing, and transmitting them.

1.2 From Convergence to Circulation

The convergence approach nevertheless left open a further question. If cultural forms were actively localized in Southeast Asia, could those localized forms subsequently travel



beyond the contexts in which they were initially received? Addressing this question required moving beyond the opposition between diffusion and local agency toward a broader conception of circulation.

Subrahmanyam's (1997) concept of "Connected Histories" provided one useful basis for such an approach by emphasizing historical processes that crossed conventional regional and civilizational boundaries. Pollock's (2006) concept of the "Sanskrit Cosmopolis" similarly conceptualized Sanskritic culture as a transregional formation in which linguistic, political, literary, and religious forms circulated across different societies and were repeatedly localized. Appadurai (1996), meanwhile, emphasized the processes through which cultural forms were appropriated and transformed as they moved between social contexts. These approaches directed attention away from fixed centers of cultural production and toward the routes, institutions, actors, and practices through which knowledge became mobile.

The framework adopted here therefore built upon convergence theory while extending its analytical implications. The article agreed with Kulke, Wolters, and Smith that Southeast Asian agency was constitutive of cultural exchange. It further proposed that agency should not be conceptualized only as the capacity to receive and transform external cultural forms. Localized forms of knowledge could themselves become mobile, enter new networks, and acquire significance beyond their original contexts.

The distinction was important for understanding Buddhist history. Buddhism was not treated here as a fixed body of doctrine that originated in India and subsequently spread into Southeast Asia. Rather, it was approached as a mobile and transformable field of knowledge comprising texts, ritual practices, ethical techniques, artistic forms, and institutional arrangements. These forms could be transmitted, localized, recombined, and, under particular historical conditions, transmitted again. Multidirectional circulation therefore provided a way of conceptualizing cultural exchange without replacing the diffusionist model with an equally rigid model of Southeast Asian autonomy.

The following sections examined this proposition through three sets of evidence. The first concerned the localization of Buddhist and Indic forms within Southeast Asia. The second examined the *Atiśa-Śrīvijaya* encounter as a case in which knowledge associated with Southeast Asia subsequently became significant beyond the region. The third considered the history of decimal notation as an exploratory comparison from outside the religious domain.

2. Neither Indianization nor Indianized Asia

The concept of the Sanskrit cosmopolis provided an important starting point for reconsidering the spatial assumptions embedded in "Indianization." Pollock (2006) described the Sanskrit cosmopolis as a transregional cultural formation in which Sanskrit circulated across South and Southeast Asia and became embedded in political, literary, religious, and intellectual practices. Unlike a model of imperial expansion in which a political center directly imposed its institutions on peripheral territories, the Sanskrit cosmopolis operated through processes of mobility, appropriation, and localization.

Buddhist texts, inscriptions, ritual practices, and intellectual traditions circulated through many of the same networks. Monastic communities, pilgrimage routes, scholarly exchanges, and



inscriptional practices provided overlapping channels through which religious and linguistic knowledge moved across regions. The circulation of Buddhist knowledge was consequently embedded within wider processes of Sanskritic interaction rather than occurring as an isolated movement from India into Southeast Asia.

This perspective also complicated the assumption that the geographical categories involved in these exchanges corresponded neatly to modern territorial boundaries. Premodern references to "India," for example, did not necessarily designate a territorially bounded political entity equivalent to the modern nation-state. Kaye (1919) noted the fluidity of geographical conceptions of India within historical sources, suggesting that the category could encompass broader cultural and commercial networks. Such fluidity made rigid center-periphery models difficult to apply to premodern Asian interaction.

The historiographical problem nevertheless persisted in colonial scholarship. Coedès's (1968) formulation of "Indianized Asia" placed Southeast Asian societies within a conceptual framework in which Indic civilization appeared as the principal source of cultural development. Such terminology encouraged interpretations of Southeast Asian traditions as derivatives of Indian models rather than as historically situated formations produced through processes of selection, adaptation, and recombination. Postcolonial scholarship subsequently challenged this hierarchy by questioning the privileging of particular regions as historical centers (Chakrabarty, 2000); (Wolf, 1982).

Archaeological evidence provided an additional basis for questioning this interpretation. Evidence of autonomous cultural development in Southeast Asia, including independent Bronze Age traditions, demonstrated that the region possessed complex trajectories of social and technological development before and alongside its sustained engagement with South Asia. Peleggi (2016), among others, showed how such evidence complicated earlier assumptions that Southeast Asian cultural development depended fundamentally upon external intervention.

Taken together, these findings indicated that the presence of Indic forms in Southeast Asia could not adequately be explained through a simple model of cultural replacement or unilateral transmission. The evidence instead pointed toward sustained interaction between societies with their own institutional and cultural trajectories. The theoretical implication was that "Indianization" was most useful not as a description of a completed historical process but as a historiographical problem whose assumptions needed to be reconsidered.

The convergence and circulation approaches developed above offered such an alternative. They retained the importance of South Asian cultural and intellectual connections while allowing Southeast Asian actors and institutions to appear as participants in the production, transformation, and movement of cultural knowledge. The issue therefore was not whether "Indian Influence" existed, but how such influence operated within networks in which cultural forms were repeatedly recontextualized.

3. The Localization of Indian Culture

The evidence examined in this section demonstrated how Buddhist and other Indic forms were transformed after entering Southeast Asian contexts. Three domains were particularly



significant: Epigraphic and textual evidence, visual and architectural culture, and ritual and narrative practice. Across these domains, the evidence indicated that cultural transmission did not consist of simple replication. Instead, textual, artistic, and religious forms were selectively appropriated and reconfigured within particular social, political, and cosmological settings.

3.1 Epigraphic and Textual Evidence

One example was provided by Skilling's (2015) study of a Sanskrit verse preserved in multiple lithic inscriptions across Southeast Asia, including the Malay Peninsula, Brunei, Kalimantan, and Java. The verse had not been identified in known Indian, Chinese, or Tibetan textual traditions. It incorporated Buddhist doctrines such as *paṭicca-samuppāda* and *kilesa* while giving particular prominence to *karma* (Tsong-kha-pa, 2000).

The geographical distribution and doctrinal configuration of the verse indicated that Buddhist ideas were articulated in Southeast Asian inscriptional contexts in forms that could not simply be reduced to the reproduction of an identifiable Indian textual source. At the same time, the geographical spread of the inscriptional tradition demonstrated that a form of Buddhist knowledge articulated within Southeast Asia could itself circulate across different parts of the region.

The significance of this evidence therefore extended beyond the question of textual origin. It demonstrated that localization and circulation were not mutually exclusive processes. A Buddhist formulation could acquire a distinctive regional form while simultaneously becoming mobile within Southeast Asian networks. Localization, in this sense, could generate rather than inhibit further circulation.

3.2 Visual and Architectural Localization

Comparable processes were evident in Buddhist visual and architectural culture. Revire (2015), for example, identified iconographic features at Chedi Chula Prathon that displayed connections with Indonesian, particularly Śrīvijayan, artistic traditions. The presence of Sanskrit narrative forms within a predominantly Pali-oriented environment demonstrated that Buddhist traditions circulated across Southeast Asia through multiple regional routes rather than following a single India-to-Southeast Asia trajectory.

Woodward (2015) provided a further example through his analysis of a tenth-century Cambodian stele depicting Avalokiteśvara. The image employed the *pretasantarpita* gesture, which had no known equivalent in Indian iconography, and placed Avalokiteśvara within a triadic configuration involving the Buddha and *Prajñāpāramitā*. The absence of a clear Indian textual or iconographic precedent suggested that the configuration was not simply a reproduction of an imported model, but perhaps pointed toward a local esotericization of Buddhist traditions (Woodward, 2004).

These examples demonstrated that localization operated materially. Imported or circulating Buddhist concepts were translated into visual arrangements whose meanings were shaped by the contexts in which they were produced. The resulting images were neither straightforward copies of Indian prototypes nor isolated local inventions. They were products of interaction in which external forms became meaningful through local artistic and religious conventions.



A similar process was evident in Java and Bali. Aciri (2015) identified forms of Hindu-Buddhist synthesis that represented a "Progressive Departure" from Indic points of origin. Such configurations illustrated how religious traditions could be recombined after entering new social and cultural environments. Romain's (2011) study of the Dieng temples similarly demonstrated that, although South Indian Pallava influences were visible in their architectural forms, the temples exhibited distinctive Javanese characteristics. Indian influence therefore appeared less as a process of direct replication than as a polymorphous process of adaptation within the wider Sanskrit cosmopolis (Aciri, 2017).

3.3 Ritual, Myth, and Narrative

Localization was not restricted to textual or material forms. It also occurred through ritual practice, mythology, and narrative traditions. Strong (1992), for example, demonstrated how the Buddhist figure Upagupta, originally associated with North Indian traditions, was reinterpreted in mainland Southeast Asia through connections with local guardian deities. Tambiah (1970) similarly showed how Upagupta in northeastern Thailand could be conceptualized simultaneously as a monk and a naga, thereby occupying a symbolic position between cultural and natural domains.

The transformation of the Rāmāyaṇa in mainland Southeast Asia provided another illustration. Sahai (2011) showed how the Lao Phra Lak Phra Lam involved more than linguistic translation. The narrative was geographically and culturally relocated into the Mekong environment, where it became embedded within local moral and ritual worlds.

These examples demonstrated that localization involved changes in meaning as much as changes in form. Buddhist figures and narratives could be incorporated into existing cosmologies, acquire new ritual functions, and become meaningful through relationships that were not necessarily present in their earlier contexts.

Across the epigraphic, artistic, architectural, ritual, and ethnographic evidence, localization therefore emerged as a generative process. Buddhist knowledge was not merely transferred from one geographical context to another and then preserved unchanged. It was repeatedly reformulated through local institutions, aesthetic conventions, ritual practices, and moral concerns. Crucially, these localized forms could subsequently enter wider circuits of exchange. Localization and circulation were consequently best understood as mutually constitutive rather than sequential processes.

4. Upāya and the Srivijaya-Tibet Connection

The preceding section demonstrated how Buddhist knowledge was localized within Southeast Asia. The Atiśa-Dharmakīrti encounter provided a different kind of evidence: A case in which a Buddhist scholar from India traveled to Southeast Asia to acquire knowledge and subsequently carried that knowledge into another intellectual and religious environment. This case was particularly important because it provided comparatively direct evidence for movement in a direction that could not be adequately described as India-to-Southeast Asia diffusion.

4.1 The Evidence: Atiśa and Dharmakīrti

Historical accounts indicated that Atiśa Dīpaṅkara Śrījñāna (982 - 1054) traveled to Suvarṇadvīpa, commonly associated with Śrīvijaya, where he studied under the Buddhist teacher



Dharmakīrti. Although details of the journey differed across sources, scholarship generally agreed that Atiśa traveled to Southeast Asia specifically to receive teachings that he considered important for his Buddhist training (Chattopadhyaya & Atiśa, 1967); (Samuel, 1993); (Apple, 2019).

Atiśa was already an accomplished Buddhist scholar associated with Vikramaśīlā and had been trained in major Indian intellectual traditions. His journey therefore could not easily be interpreted as the movement of an uninformed recipient toward a culturally superior source. Rather, the evidence indicated that an established Indian scholar considered Southeast Asia an important site of Buddhist learning.

The teachings associated with Dharmakīrti were particularly connected with the cultivation of bodhicitta, the altruistic intention to attain awakening for the benefit of other beings. This emphasis subsequently became important within Tibetan Buddhist traditions, including the lojong, or mind-training, tradition. As Jinpa (2011) explained, lojong was concerned with transforming Buddhist insight and wisdom into lived practice.

One important practice within this tradition was tonglen, or "Giving and Receiving," through which practitioners imaginatively took upon themselves the suffering of others while cultivating and extending compassion. The practice illustrated the practical dimension of Buddhist knowledge: Teachings were not merely transmitted as propositions but could travel as techniques of ethical and contemplative cultivation.

4.2 Discussion: From Reception to Re-circulation

The historical significance of the Atiśa-Dharmakīrti encounter lies precisely in this reversal of the conventional direction of cultural transmission. The evidence does not demonstrate that every element of Tibetan lojong originates in Southeast Asia, nor does it establish that all practices associated with later Tibetan traditions are transmitted directly from Śrīvijaya. Such claims exceed the available evidence.

What the case does demonstrate is more specific. An Indian Buddhist scholar travels to Southeast Asia because a particular form of Buddhist knowledge is regarded as valuable there. That knowledge is subsequently incorporated into a broader intellectual and religious trajectory that extends beyond Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia therefore appears not merely as a location where Indian Buddhism is received and localized, but as one node within a larger network of Buddhist knowledge production and transmission (Aciri, 2018).

This distinction is important for the theoretical framework developed in this article. The case does not require replacing the concept of Indianization with a simple Southeast Asia-centered model. Instead, it demonstrates why both models are inadequate when treated as exclusive explanations. Knowledge can move from South Asia to Southeast Asia, be cultivated or reformulated there, and subsequently move onward to other regions. Cultural circulation is therefore potentially sequential, recursive, and multidirectional.

The concept of upāya is particularly useful for interpreting this process because it draws attention to the practical dimension of Buddhist knowledge. What Atiśa seeks is not simply additional textual information but a mode of cultivation capable of transforming ethical and



contemplative dispositions. The transmission of such knowledge therefore involves the movement of practices and techniques as well as doctrines.

The Atiśa-Dharmakīrti encounter consequently provides a relatively strong historical example of the article's broader argument. It shows that cultural circulation cannot be adequately represented as a linear sequence in which India functions as source and Southeast Asia functions as recipient. At least in this instance, Southeast Asia occupies a position within a wider Buddhist network in which knowledge can be sought, cultivated, transmitted, and subsequently recontextualized elsewhere.

5. Zero and Decimal System: An Exploratory Comparison Beyond Buddhism

The Buddhist cases above demonstrated multidirectional circulation within religious and intellectual traditions. The history of zero and the decimal place-value system provided an opportunity to examine whether a similar analytical framework could illuminate a non-religious domain. This comparison was exploratory rather than intended to establish a direct parallel between Buddhist and mathematical transmission.

5.1 The Evidence

The development of zero and decimal place-value notation represented a major transformation in the history of mathematics. The system eventually entered European mathematical practice through a complex process of transmission involving the Islamic world, with Leonardo Fibonacci's *Liber Abaci* (1202) playing an important role in its subsequent European dissemination (Kaplan, 1999). The conventional designation "Hindu-Arabic" reflected the widely accepted association of the system with developments in South Asia and its subsequent transmission through Arabic-speaking intellectual networks.

Evidence from South Asia demonstrated the early development of decimal and place-value concepts. Aryabhata (476 - 550 CE), for example, articulated mathematical principles consistent with place-value notation. Explicit epigraphic evidence, however, was more difficult to date. One of the most frequently cited examples was the Gwalior inscription of 876 CE, which provided clear evidence for the use of a zero symbol in a decimal system (Ifrah, 1998). Salomon (1998) emphasized the value of inscriptions for establishing chronological evidence because their material form provided a relatively secure basis for dating.

Evidence from Southeast Asia introduced a further chronological and geographical complication. The Kedukan Bukit inscription of 682 CE was interpreted as containing numerical notation in which a zero-like symbol appeared in the representation of "604" (Diller, 1995). A roughly contemporaneous inscription from Trapang Prei in Cambodia was also discussed in relation to the use of a dot as a zero symbol.

These examples did not, by themselves, establish that the decimal system originated in Southeast Asia or that it was transmitted from Southeast Asia to South Asia. The evidence was insufficient for such a conclusion. They did, however, demonstrate that numerical practices associated with decimal representation were in use in Southeast Asian inscriptional contexts earlier than some of the most widely cited explicit epigraphic evidence from India.



The chronological relationship generated debate. Kaye (1919) cautioned against assuming the direction of transmission solely on the basis of later or earlier surviving evidence and considered the possibility that aspects of numerical notation may have circulated from regions east of the Indian subcontinent. Coëdès (1931) rejected this possibility, characterizing it as "Strange." Needham (1959) likewise drew attention to the geographical distribution of early zero notation and argued for the importance of considering a wider zone of interaction. More recent accounts continued, in many cases, to emphasize the development of the system in India and its subsequent transmission outward (Dalrymple, 2024).

5.2 Discussion: Circulation Without a Claim of Reverse Origin

The evidence does not warrant the stronger claim that Southeast Asia invented zero or that the decimal system was transmitted from Southeast Asia to India. Such a claim requires substantially stronger chronological, epigraphic, and comparative evidence than is currently available.

The significance of the Southeast Asian evidence lies elsewhere. It demonstrates that numerical notation is already embedded within regional administrative and inscriptional practices and that the history of decimal representation cannot be reconstructed solely through a linear sequence of Indian invention followed by passive Southeast Asian adoption. The existence of early Southeast Asian evidence raises the possibility that numerical knowledge circulates through interconnected networks whose precise directions cannot always be reconstructed from surviving sources.

This point is methodologically important for the concept of multidirectional circulation. Circulation does not necessarily imply that every region contributes equally to the invention of a particular cultural form, nor does it require demonstrating a direct reverse transmission in every case. It instead directs attention to the movement, appropriation, stabilization, and re-use of knowledge across interconnected spaces.

The decimal system therefore functions as a deliberately cautious comparative case. Unlike the Atiśa-Dharmakīrti encounter, where the historical movement of a scholar from India to Southeast Asia is relatively well established, the direction of early numerical transmission remains uncertain. The mathematical evidence should consequently be understood as demonstrating the need for a circulation-based framework rather than as proving a case of reverse diffusion.

6. From Indianization to Multidirectional Circulation

Across the cases examined above, the evidence suggests that the cultural relationship between South and Southeast Asia cannot be adequately represented through a simple model of Indianization. The archaeological and historiographical evidence demonstrates that Southeast Asian societies possess their own trajectories of cultural and political development. The epigraphic, textual, artistic, and ethnographic evidence further shows that Indic and Buddhist forms are selectively appropriated and transformed within Southeast Asian contexts. Finally, the Atiśa-Dharmakīrti encounter provides evidence that Buddhist knowledge associated with Southeast Asia can acquire significance beyond the region.

These findings support a shift from a diffusionist framework toward one centered on circulation. A diffusionist model asks primarily where a cultural form originates and how it moves



outward from that origin. A circulation-based approach instead asks how knowledge travels, who carries it, which institutions facilitate its movement, how it is transformed in different settings, and whether localized forms subsequently enter new circuits of exchange.

The evidence also indicates that localization and circulation should not be treated as separate stages. The Sanskrit verse discussed by Skilling (2015), for example, appears in multiple Southeast Asian contexts while displaying a doctrinal configuration that cannot readily be traced to a single known Indian source. Visual and architectural traditions similarly reveal processes of regional recombination. The Aśoka-Dharmakīrti encounter then demonstrates that Southeast Asia can function as a site from which valued Buddhist knowledge enters wider intellectual networks.

The article does not deny the importance of India as a major source of Buddhist, Sanskrit, and other intellectual traditions. Nor does it seek to replace one civilizational hierarchy with another by presenting Southeast Asia as an alternative "Center." Instead, it conceptualizes South and Southeast Asia as interconnected historical spaces in which cultural forms move in multiple directions and acquire different meanings through successive processes of localization and recontextualization.

Such an approach also allows Buddhist knowledge to be understood as more than a collection of doctrines transmitted across geographical boundaries. Buddhist knowledge consists of texts, concepts, images, rituals, ethical dispositions, contemplative techniques, and institutional practices that can move through different social and material infrastructures. Their meanings are transformed through these movements, and those transformations can themselves become historically consequential.

The broader implication is that cultural exchange in premodern Asia is better understood through connected processes of movement, localization, and re-circulation than through fixed distinctions between origin and periphery. In this framework, the historical significance of Southeast Asia lies not merely in how successfully it receives Indian cultural forms, but also in how it transforms those forms and participates in their subsequent movement across the wider Asian world.

Originality and Body of Knowledge

This article advances a model of multidirectional knowledge circulation for understanding South and Southeast Asian interactions. Moving beyond diffusionist frameworks such as "Indianization," it conceptualizes cultural exchange as an iterative process of transmission, localization, transformation, and possible re-circulation rather than as unilinear transmission from a single civilizational center. The originality of the model lies in explicitly incorporating the possibility of re-circulation.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the model begins with the circulation of transregional knowledge, including Buddhadharma and related cultural forms. Through interaction between South and Southeast Asia, texts, doctrines, rituals, and artistic traditions become embedded within new historical settings. Rather than being passively adopted, these forms are selectively appropriated, adapted, and reinterpreted through processes of localization. The examples discussed in this article, including Buddhist inscriptions, Cambodian iconography, Hindu-Buddhist syntheses in Java and Bali, and

reinterpretations of figures such as Upagupta, demonstrate how circulating traditions acquire new meanings within local cosmological, political, and ritual contexts.

Localization, moreover, does not mark the end of the process. The inclusion of both Buddhist and mathematical examples serves a comparative purpose. The Buddhist cases illustrate multidirectional circulation within religious traditions, while the history of the zero and decimal system provides a non-religious example. If similar patterns of transmission, localization, transformation, and possible re-circulation appear in both domains, multidirectional circulation may represent a broader historical process instead of one limited to Buddhism.

From this perspective, Southeast Asia appears not merely as a recipient of external influences but also as a site of knowledge production, preservation, and transformation. The model therefore shifts attention from questions of origin and influence toward questions of interaction, transformation, and historical agency.

In relation to Buddhaddhamma, the model reflects the principle of upāya, whereby teachings are adapted to particular socio-cultural contexts while retaining broader doctrinal significance. The circulation of Buddhaddhamma therefore involves both continuity and transformation: Teachings remain recognizable across regions, but their practical expression and social significance are continually reshaped through local engagement. The model thus highlights both the mobility of Buddhist knowledge and the creative role of Buddhist communities in its ongoing renewal.

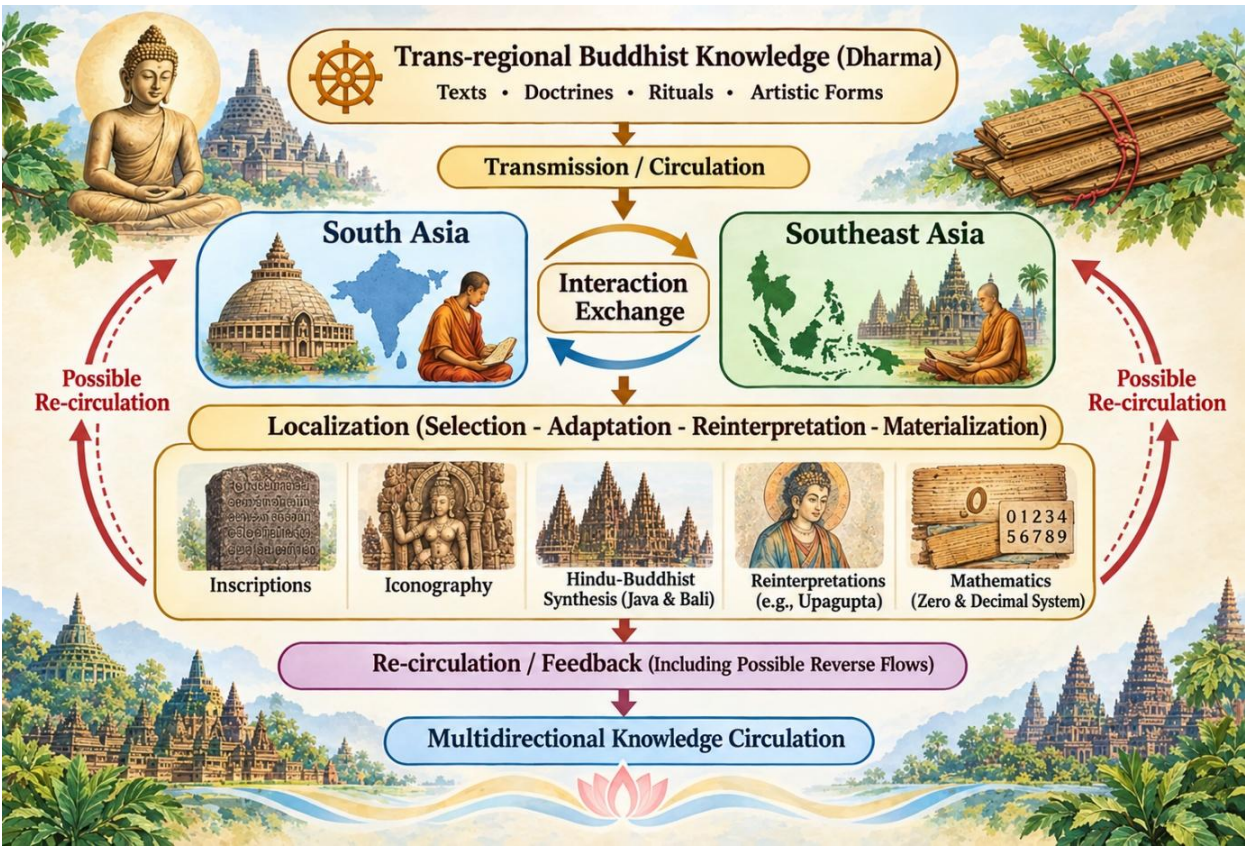


Figure 1 A model of multidirectional circulation showing how Dhamma moves through processes of transmission, localization, and re-circulation across South and Southeast Asia



Conclusions and Recommendations

This article reconsiders the historiographical legacy of "Indianization" by examining how cultural and intellectual forms associated with South Asia are received, transformed, and, under particular historical circumstances, transmitted beyond Southeast Asian contexts. Concerning the last point, the two cases discussed in the article vary considerably in their evidentiary strength: The Atiśa-Dharmakīrti encounter offers comparatively clear evidence of an Indian scholar seeking Buddhist knowledge in Southeast Asia, whereas the evidence concerning early mathematical notation is insufficient to establish a direction of reverse transmission and should therefore be treated as a prompt for further investigation rather than as proof of Southeast Asian priority. The principal contribution of the study is consequently to demonstrate the usefulness of tracing how particular forms of knowledge acquire different meanings and trajectories as they move through changing institutional, linguistic, material, and intellectual environments. This approach also opens several directions for future research. More systematic comparison of inscriptions, manuscripts, archaeological remains, artistic traditions, and documentary sources can clarify the routes through which particular concepts and practices travel, while network-based approaches may help identify the monasteries, scholarly communities, commercial connections, and political institutions that sustain such movements over time. Similar investigations can extend to fields such as medicine, astronomy, law, political thought, and technology, where the direction and mechanisms of transmission may likewise prove more complex than conventional historiographies suggest. Ultimately, the value of a circulation-based perspective lies in its capacity to redirect historical inquiry from the search for singular origins toward the study of movement, transformation, and the conditions under which knowledge becomes consequential in new contexts.

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