

Editor's Note: The following is a collection of three essays by authors with extensive knowledge of Thai Buddhist Monastic Schools. Brooke Schedneck wrote the conclusion of the article.

Thai Buddhist Monastic Schools and Universities

Buddhist Education and Temple Schools in Thailand

By Brooke Schedneck

The relationship between temple education and Thai society is organic and adaptive, creatively responding to changing political environments.¹ Education has been an important component of the vital, ongoing relationship between lay Buddhists and the monastic institution within Thailand. Traditionally, Buddhism and education were intimately linked through monastic schools for novice monks. Buddhist education was broadly founded in traditions of Indian civilization, with students learning grammar, fine arts, law, medicine, arithmetic, and astronomy. Young boys learned reading, writing, and basic principles of religion. Since reforms to the Thai education system in the early 1900s, secular education has become more mainstream. Because of this, the temple school adapted to the needs of Thai society. In these essays readers are provided an introduction to the early history of Buddhist monastic education in Thailand, an overview of contemporary Buddhist temple schools, and accounts by two professors who teach at one of the Buddhist universities in Chiang Mai, Thailand, recounting their experiences as educators.

For hundreds of years, sending young boys to a nearby Buddhist temple in order to learn the doctrines of their religion, along with reading and writing, from senior monks was a common practice in Thailand. Buddhist temples were centers of learning and the only formal educational institutions for more than seven centuries.

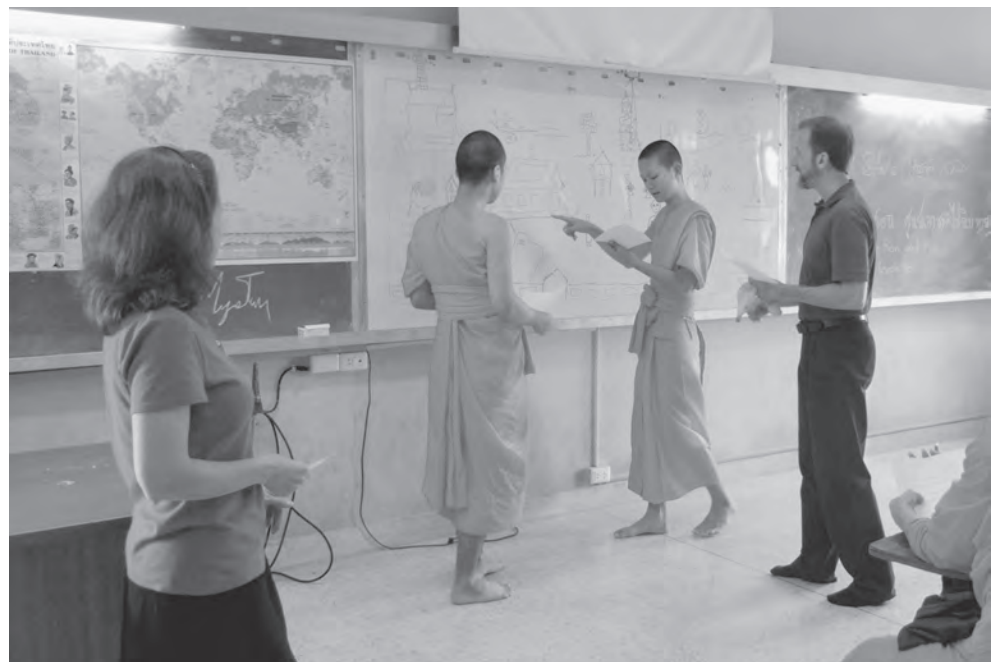
This changed in the late nineteenth century in Thailand when King Chulalongkorn, or Rama V (1853–1910), began to initiate the creation of a public education system. This idea was conceived in 1875 but only began to be implemented in 1898, when Rama V's half-brother, Prince Wachirayan (1860–1921), who was a Buddhist monk and prominent figure of monastic education reform, was asked to lead the introduction of primary school education in the provinces. Because of the long-term connection between Buddhism and schooling, the first step in creating educational institutions open to the public was to use the preexisting monastic structures.² This attempt to merge the state's educa-

tional interests with the Buddhist temple structure functioned well at first. The goals of the state and monastic schools aligned when Prince Wachirayan gave monastic leaders in the Thai provinces government textbooks and autonomy over how they should be used.³ The wide-ranging knowledge in the textbooks themselves was an incentive for many monastic schools to join the government program.⁴ This merger of government and temple worked, as the state did not have the resources to support a new educational infrastructure, and it made sense to utilize the support of the Buddhist temple school facilities.⁵

However, this union waned toward the end of King Rama V's reign, as the government eventually created its own institutions for lower and higher education.⁶ The Thai government, in the end, only regarded the temple as a steppingstone to a separate public educational system. However, temple schools remain a place for learning modern, secular subjects, the Buddhist Dhamma (teachings of the Buddha), and Pali, the sacred language of Theravada Buddhism. Today, temple schools are places where families from disadvantaged backgrounds send their sons when they have no means to provide for their children or afford the supplies and uniforms necessary for state education.⁷ It is also common to ordain temporarily in Thailand. Because of this, many

young men leave the monastic life once they graduate. In this way, Buddhist temple schools continue to provide education for the masses.

Currently in Thailand, families can choose between public schools, temple schools, and other private schools.⁸ In Chiang Mai, one of the largest cities in the country and capital of northern Thailand, and the geographic source for the two firsthand accounts that follow, some Buddhist temple schools, categorized as *Pariyatitham Saamun* (general education schools), are similar in goals to the ones first developed by King Rama V and Prince Wachirayan. An example is Thammarat School, located at Wat Phra Singh in the old city of Chiang Mai. This school educates students from first grade until the end of high school and is open to both monks and nonmonks, girls and boys. But other *Pariyatitham Saamun* schools like Pali Satit at Wat Suan Dok, also in Chiang Mai, teach from middle to high school and only allow ordained boys. The second type of school, such as ones found at Wat Buppharam and Wat Doi Saket, focuses on teaching the Pali language and the Dhamma in their curriculum. These schools offer classes designed to prepare monastic students for the examinations on these subjects administered by Thai monastic institutions. Monk and lay students can attend these classes, but for



The monk students of MCU Chiang Mai campus are practicing to explain about the temple through drawings under the guidance of foreign teachers. Source: Photo courtesy of MCU staff.



Thai and foreign teachers take a photo with monk students after English class. Source: Photo courtesy of MCU staff.



MCU Chiang Mai lay students participate in freshman welcome activities, supervised by some senior monk students. Source: Photo courtesy of MCU staff.

the most part, ordained students take advantage of these institutions. In Chiang Mai, there are fourteen Pali schools and six Pariyatitham Saamun schools.

The Pariyatitham Saamun schools normally teach a curriculum of general subjects, including Thai language, mathematics, science, social sciences, physical education, technology, art, and English. These students study additional subjects about Buddhism, including religious practice, *Dhamma Vinaya* (teachings of Buddhism and monastic discipline), and Pali language. The curriculum is divided into six grades (or years), as in Thai public education. Grades one through three are *Matthayom Ton* (middle school), and from grades four to six is called *Matthayom Plaay* (high school). At one Pariyatitham Saamun school, where I conducted research, a teacher told me that most of the boys attend for three reasons: (1)

their families are poor, (2) they are orphans or minorities, or (3) their parents want them to be novice monks because they think their sons will be safer in the temple and their monastic robes will protect them from any trouble.

The Pali exam system has nine levels. When a monk graduates from the third level, his title changes to include “Maha” (“Great”) before his name. The first three levels focus on testing Pali grammar, but levels four through nine test accuracy of translation. The tests move successively higher in levels of difficulty. Levels four to six use the poetry of the *Dhammapada* (collection of sayings by the Buddha), and the student is expected to translate from Thai to Pali. The student must also translate selected Buddhist *suttas* (discourses of the Buddha) from Pali to Thai. In the higher levels, eight and nine, students translate more philosophical texts such as the

Visuddhimagga and *Abhidhamma* from Thai to Pali, and Pali to Thai, respectively. Monks will typically begin the exam as novices. Although young boys can ordain when they become seven, most novices will ordain by twelve or thirteen. There is no typical age of finishing the exam; it all depends on their ability to pass each level. For some monks, it might take over twenty years to pass some levels. But some bright students can even pass Level 9 within eight or nine years. At Pali schools, both monks and Buddhist laity can also study for the Dhamma, or *Naktham*, exams, which consist of three levels of proficiency in understanding the Buddhist teachings. These tests include essays about the story of the Buddha, Vinaya (rules of the monks), and stories of the Buddha’s disciples.

At the university level, there are more educational opportunities. The two sects of Thai Buddhism, Mahanikai and Thammayut, have distinct styles of education. The Thammayut sect’s university system is *Mahamakut* Buddhist University (MBU). In Chiang Mai, the branch is located at Wat Chedi Luang. The curriculum most popular here is the bachelor of education program in teaching English and is taught in Thai. Many of these graduates go on to teach English in public schools or Buddhist temple schools. Along with instruction on English grammar, phonetics, English, and pronunciation, courses in Buddhism include History of Buddhism, Meditation Practice, and Sanskrit for Buddhist Research. The university opened its programs to lay students in 2001.⁹ Usually, only about half the students in the teaching English program are ordained, and because of the language of instruction, almost all of them are from Thailand.

When I volunteered to teach a Buddhist English class at Mahamakut in 2016, most of

the nonmonastic students were young men and women from the indigenous hill tribe groups of Thailand and were Christian. The monks I spoke with about this population stated proudly that the university's educational programs were open to all. Because of the cost of study—2,475 Baht (THB) per semester for monks (about US \$75) and THB 4,850 for lay students (about US \$147)—there are many young women and men from poor backgrounds studying at Mahamakut. I asked one of the monks if he felt it distracting to have female students in the classroom. His response was that because monks will have to interact with laypeople, including women, after they graduate, it was a good idea not to cut them off from this experience. My interview subject went on to comment that the monastic students who remain as monks might eventually become abbots of temples and work with laypeople on fundraising projects. If they disrobe, the experience of interacting with many different kinds of people will help them adjust to lay life.

In some Buddhist temple schools, the student body may exclusively consist of male Buddhist monks, but other classrooms can be quite diverse and include students from different religions and ethnicities.

The Mahanikai's university system is *Mahachulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya* (MCU), which King Rama V founded in 1887. Its purpose is to maintain a higher education institute for Buddhist monks, novices, and laypersons with an emphasis on Buddhist studies and secular subjects. The Chiang Mai campus is housed at Wat Suan Dok. The curriculum has many options for bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees. However, the most popular program is the bachelor of arts in English. Ordained monks from many parts of Asia come to Chiang Mai in order to study for this degree, taught in English by foreign and Thai faculty. These monks learn secular subjects such as language, communication, introduction to linguistics, and basic mathematics, but also Buddhist subjects including Pali composition and translation, *Tipitaka* studies (the Buddhist canon), and Buddhist meditation, among others. Out of 140 credits, forty of them are devoted to Buddhism and applied Buddhism courses.

Although there are mostly monks in this university, the campus has opened up its degree programs to lay students (including female students and members of other religions), starting with a master's degree program for lay students

in 2004. Per semester, the undergraduate tuition for monks is THB 4,000 (US \$120) and THB 6,500 (US \$196) for lay students. The classrooms of MCU in Chiang Mai are dynamic and diverse. To get a sense of what education is like for Buddhist monks, two professors share their stories of teaching in this unique setting. ■

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An Overview of MCU Chiang Mai Campus

By Samran Khansamrong

I have been teaching at MCU, Chiang Mai campus, since 1998. The Chiang Mai campus was established in 1984 with only thirty-five students and one Buddhist studies major. Presently, the Chiang Mai campus provides ten undergraduate majors, two master's degrees (Buddhism and philosophy), and one doctoral degree in Buddhism.

The majority of students are monks and novice monks.¹⁰ Lay students have been allowed to study for master's and doctor's degrees in the same class with monastics since 2001. As of 2009, undergraduate classes have also been open for lay students. Currently, there are 1,132 undergraduate students, 826 monastics, and 506 lay students. Out of the 181 postgraduate students, eighty-three are monastics and ninety-eight are lay students. I am responsible for the English major curriculum, which is the only program that is exclusively in English. There is also a bilingual program at our campus. The English program enrolls students who often have a basic English background knowledge but show potential for completing the major, and a bilingual program is provided for those who have potential but very little English knowledge background. Some students come from Pariyatitham



Novice monks studying in Wat Suan Dok's Pali Satit classroom. Source: Photo courtesy of Brooke Schedneck.

Saamun schools or courses in Pali, others are from secular schools, and some are from non-formal schooling.

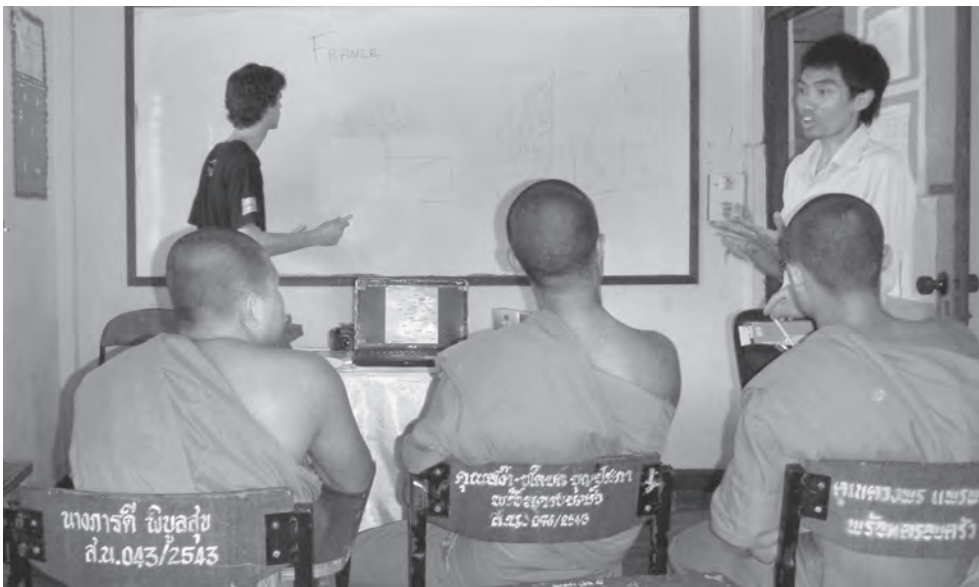
During the first two years, students who have poor English can improve by enrolling in special courses provided by the university, or they can take courses or self-study in order to catch up with their classmates. The teachers are presented with students who have very different English abilities within the same classroom and must tailor their lessons to this reality. Although there is an entrance exam that might theoretically screen out those who are not suitable to study in English, in reality, the supply

of competent English-language recruits is low. Moreover, the main policy of the university is to give an opportunity to those who really want to improve their knowledge, though they are not quite adept enough yet in the field they wish to study.

For example, I am from Nakhorn Ratchasima Province and ordained as a novice monk at the age of twelve after finishing public primary school. I started to study Dhamma and Pali at the temple located in the city then. When I was eighteen years old, I graduated from nonformal education (equivalent grade twelve). I was accepted for study at the university, so I decided



Novice monks studying in Wat Suan Dok's Pali Satit classroom with a volunteer teacher. Source: Photo courtesy of Brooke Schedneck.



Classroom at Wat Doi Saket with Thai and foreign volunteer teachers. Source: Photo courtesy of Dave Poppe.

to move to Bangkok to study at MCU and major in English. With little English background knowledge from primary school, I had to study harder than my fellow classmates who completed formal education. I graduated as an English major within four years, just like my classmates, and later received my MA (linguistics) and PhD (English) in India. The university provided me with an excellent initial opportunity. Therefore, though it is challenging for the lecturers to manage a class with students of various English comprehension abilities, often those students who arrive with limited educational backgrounds can succeed. Teachers understand that students might take longer to develop their study and language skills, and strongly encourage students to persevere.

Teaching styles for monastics must be sometimes adjusted because educational activities appropriate for lay students are inappropriate for monks, according to the Vinaya or Thai cultural expectations. For example, dancing or playing musical instruments has to be avoided. In contrast, activities that are suited for monastics like practicing meditation and Buddhist chanting also include lay students. Our meditation retreat is compulsory for both monastics and lay students. Ten-day meditation retreats for BA students, one-month retreats for MA students, and three-month meditation retreats for PhD students are required each year.

Most of the bilingual program students, both monastics and lay, are Thai and enroll in the bilingual course of study because they do not

have the confidence to negotiate university work using only English. In 2018, there was one lay student from the US who wanted to study as a Buddhism major, but this course was only open to Thai speakers. We decided to enroll him as an English major with a Buddhism minor. Though this solution was imperfect, MCU showed its *metta* (lovingkindness) in providing an opportunity for a motivated student.

Monastic students have an advantage over laypeople in learning Buddhist subjects since they are familiar with Buddhist teachings and terms, which are derived from the Pali language. Why should the lay students study religious subjects and the monks study secular subjects? In the past, the *Sangha* (community of Buddhists) supported only the traditional system of education, mainly focusing on religious subjects (Dhamma and Pali). King Rama V (the founder of the Buddhist universities in Thailand) realized that the knowledge of the Buddhist scripture alone was not enough for the monks to be spiritual leaders; they also needed to know modern academics as well. Also, the decision was made that only secular knowledge was not enough for laypeople. If the laypeople studied at a Buddhist university, they could benefit from Buddhist teachings and become more familiar with Buddhism. ■

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Steve Epstein teaching at MCU, Chiang Mai campus. Source: Photo courtesy of MCU staff.

Teaching in the English Program at MCU, Chiang Mai Campus

By Steve Epstein

I have a master's degree in teaching English to students of other languages (TESOL) and have taught English for over forty-five years in Asia to a wide range of students and populations. I have taught a classroom of ninety-two Nepali fifth-graders, illiterate Hmong refugees, senior officials of the Lao Ministry of Justice, and navy shipbuilders. I moved to Chiang Mai in 2003 just as the Chiang Mai campus enrolled the first class for its English program. The students in the English program at MCU are Buddhist monks and novices from Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Việt Nam, Bangladesh, Nepal, and India. Most students are between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five, although I once taught a seventy-three-year-old student who graduated at the top of his class.

The vast majority of the students are from rural farming communities, children of parents with little or even no education. In my current class of twenty-three students, not one has a parent who has finished high school. If the students needed to fly to Chiang Mai, it was usually their first time on a plane and, for most, their first experience living in a city.

The students come from poorly funded high schools and often studied in the dominant language of their country, not their mother tongue. Memorization was the key skill to success in

these classrooms. Critical thinking and creativity were discouraged. Our freshmen arrive with extremely limited English skills. And though most students are ill-prepared for the academic rigors of the university, they arrive with great hope and deep motivation. They have taken a leap of faith that they will be able to study and graduate with a bachelor's degree from a university offering an English-language course of study. Most succeed in their goal. More than 90 percent of entering freshmen graduate, and many speak excellent English. One of our students, Noem Chunny, is a famed motivational speaker in Cambodia, and five graduates are now monks in temples in the United States.

When you enter an MCU classroom, the most apparent observation is that the students are all male, have shaved heads, and wear saffron robes. And as they are monastics, their life experience is, by definition, limited in accordance with the Vinaya. They don't do the usual things that students their age do. They don't sing, dance, play sports, go to movies, go on dates, or go shopping for clothes. This has implications for the classroom.

Teaching monastics at a Buddhist university presents challenges that I had never encountered in my forty-plus years of teaching English as a foreign language in secular schools. In one of my lessons in my first years at the university, I played John Lennon's "Imagine" and handed out the lyrics. I asked the students to listen to the song and follow along with the handout, and, sure enough, some of the students began to sing along. After class, one of the students told me

that this exercise made him feel uncomfortable because, although he really wanted to sing, it was against the Vinaya. I never taught songs again.

It is clear from the Vinaya that monastics are not allowed to sing. However, there are some activities that are gray areas in the realm of the classroom. Although I have been a practicing Buddhist for many years, I do not have a nuanced understanding of what is and what is not acceptable to ordained Theravada monastics. The Vinaya consists of 227 rules of conduct. In addition, there are traditional "rules" handed down within cultures, which are in the spirit of the Vinaya. But these traditional rules are often contradictory in different cultures. For example, monks in Myanmar can ride bikes, while monks in Thailand cannot. It is considered appropriate for monks from Cambodia to give and receive items from a female hand, while for Thai monks, this would be inappropriate. And when there is a conflict between these traditional rules in a multicultural classroom, what do classroom teachers do? What happens when there is no agreement on these rules?

Three years ago, I was teaching storytelling in our Speaking and Listening class. The goal of the class was for the monks to develop their storytelling skills as a way of presenting Buddhist teachings to children. I arranged for our students to present their stories to younger primary school students at a local Buddhist bilingual English/Thai school. The students were divided into groups, and each was tasked with telling a traditional Buddhist teaching tale. They worked hard practicing and perfecting their storytelling,



Seminar room with monk students, MCU Chiang Mai campus. Source: Photo courtesy of Brooke Schedneck.

often acting out the story. One week before we were to present, one of the students from Rakhine state in Myanmar said that he and a few of his compatriots were uncomfortable with these plays and would not participate because monks were not allowed to act. Students from other countries disagreed and said that it was appropriate for monks to act in these tales for the intention of education with an audience of children. I conferred with the head of our department and the head of the primary school, and we decided that we had to cancel the activity because we did not want anyone to feel uncomfortable.

It has become a cliché of teachers that we learn more from our students than they learn from us. But as a teacher of monastics, I have on so many occasions had some profound teachings from our students. To give just one example, one of my students returned from a two-week absence after returning home for his father's funeral. Yet he was the same jolly student as he was before. After the class, I gave him my condolences and asked him how we was doing. "I am fine now. I was sad, but we know that we will all die. When you are born, the future is old age, sickness, and death. I understood this better now." And then he smiled. I am very grateful that I have had this opportunity to teach monastics. It has had a profoundly positive influence on my life.

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Conclusion

As seen from Samran Khansamrong's and Steve Epstein's firsthand accounts, Buddhist universities in Thailand are interesting places to work. These institutions are not isolated from society, with only Buddhist monk teachers and students learning religious texts. Instead, temple schools are part of the symbiotic nature of the relationship between Thai laity and Buddhist monastics. There are public and private school options for students living in Thailand; however, having the Buddhist schooling option is important in Thai society, especially for disadvantaged populations. Because the costs are low or free for students, the Thai Buddhist educational system relies on donations. The Buddhist idea of merit takes effect here. From a Theravada Buddhist perspective, a donation to a Buddhist educational institute is a positive action, which helps others and Buddhism. This action makes merit for one's future good karma in this lifetime or future ones. When lay Thai Buddhists contribute to the education of monks, this allows monks to fulfill one of their roles in society—that of religious teachers. However, it is not only monks who gain education in some of these schools, but also laypeople. Creating educational opportunities for the wider society is also considered an important way to make merit.¹¹ ■

NOTES

1. David Wyatt, *The Politics of Reform in Thailand: Education in the Reign of King Chulalongkorn* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1969), 1.
2. Khammai Dhammasami, *Buddhism, Education, and Politics in Burma and Thailand: From the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (London and Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2018), 140.
3. Dhammasami, 141.
4. Wyatt, 130.
5. Wyatt, 306.
6. Phra Kru Arunsutalangkarn, "Buddhism and Education in Thai Society," *Journal of Buddhist Education and Research* 2, no. 1 (2016): 8–16, 10.
7. Arunsutalangkarn, 11.
8. The information in this paragraph until the end of the section is taken from Brooke Schedneck's observations from living and working in Chiang Mai, from 2009 to 2017, as well as research assistance from Phra Maha Milan Shrestha.
9. I would like to thank Phra Chanomkorn Praphakaro for the information on this date and Phra Artit Dhammaphani for the information on tuition at Mahamakut Buddhist University, which appears later in the article.
10. A fully ordained monk is over twenty years old and keeps 227 precepts. A novice monk is usually under twenty years old and follows ten precepts.
11. To view the curriculum for MahaChulalongkorn Buddhist University, see <http://tinyurl.com/y38hdbvu>. The curriculum for Mahamakut Buddhist University is available at <http://tinyurl.com/y3ybek6q>. For information on the statistics of Dhamma Study and Pali Examination of North Thailand, see: <http://tinyurl.com/y5j55uuj>. The general education section of Phrapariyattidhamma School in Chiang Mai Province is available at <http://tinyurl.com/y38c39mo>.