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# A “STUPENDOUS ATTRACTION”

## Materialising a Tibetan Buddhist contact zone in rural Australia



Aerial photo of stupa foundations, courtesy of Wayne Maconachie

Sally Ann McAra

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## Abstract

When people, ideas or things migrate across cultural *milieux*, many opportunities for cultural transformation arise. The focal point of this thesis is a large stupa/temple (Great Stupa) being built at Atisha Centre, a Buddhist retreat near Bendigo in Australia, by members of an international organisation called the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT).

I approach the planning, promotion and construction of the stupa as an instance of the transplantation of religious material culture, arguing that Atisha Centre and particularly the stupa play a constitutive role by acting as a contact zone (Pratt 1992). Since the Centre is a site of alternate social ordering in which the Buddhists attempt to actualise their universalist ideals in a specific place, I also conceptualise it as a heterotopia (Foucault 1986, Hetherington 1997).

The contact zone entails engagement between different socio-cultural domains. One of the key domains is the globalisation of contemporary Buddhism and its permutations in new locales. Stemming from this is the question of how the Buddhists and their imported material culture engage with wider concerns such as various non-FPMT Buddhist, Anglo-Australian and Aboriginal locals' responses towards the transplantation of a Tibetan temple into a rural Australian locale. The complex and shifting relationships between different kinds of Buddhism feature in relation to different ideas about the value of holy objects. The FPMT conforms to the enlightenment-oriented ideals of "Buddhist modernism" (McMahan 2008) but appears to depart from it in its pronounced emphasis on merit-making and holy objects. However, the project's proponents consider the stupa a method for enacting their enlightenment aspirations. I attribute the stupa project's relatively smooth passage through local planning application procedures to proponents' prior social and cultural capital, which I link to positive public perceptions of Buddhism, aspirations for Bendigo to become more culturally diverse and the economic development the stupa is expected to bring. The literally concrete structure of the stupa not only provides Buddhists with a tangible focal point for their ideals, but also serves as a vehicle for the establishment of Tibetan Buddhism in a new land.



## Preface

The places where the Buddha was born, attained enlightenment, first taught and died constitute Buddhism's primary pilgrimage sites. As Buddhism and its institutions spread around the world, new sacred places are created, linking the new land to the key symbolic sites of its heartlands (Granoff and Shinohara 2003: 2-3). These sacred places are often marked by the presence of one or more stupas, which are among the most distinctive and important structures of Buddhist architecture. They take a variety of forms, but the archetypal model is a dome on a cuboid base, surmounted by a spire. The Great Stupa of Universal Compassion, the focal point of my research, is based on a more complex, multi-tiered design whose interior hall will serve as a shrine room for teachings and meditations. The organisation under whose auspices this structure is being built is the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), a worldwide network of around 140 centres and study groups in the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism. The stupa is being built on land belonging to the FPMT's Atisha Centre, a retreat for Dharma study in Northwest Central Victoria, near the city of Bendigo.

This thesis grew out of my interest in the role of material culture in the spread of Buddhism. I was already familiar with another antipodean stupa at a retreat centre in New Zealand (McAra 2007b),<sup>1</sup> but the FPMT's Australian one was on a far larger scale, requiring greater resources. It is also potentially much more controversial, given its scale and cost, and its visual difference from the surrounding cultural landscape. So when I first learnt that a replica of an elaborate medieval Tibetan stupa was to be constructed in the Australian countryside, I wondered: how would such an unfamiliar structure change the central Victorian countryside? Would it be adapted for the Australian context? How would non-Buddhist locals respond to the project? What kinds of intercultural engagements would the project provoke?

In Chapter One I introduce my key concepts for investigating the intercultural engagements entailed by the transplantation of Tibetan Buddhism in Australia – “contact zone” and “heterotopia.” While this thesis is primarily anthropological, I also consider the extent to which my FPMT case study meshes with Martin Baumann's identification of key themes in the adoption and adaptation of Buddhism by converts in Western societies. I introduce the stupa project, Atisha Centre and the FPMT in Chapter Two. In Chapter Three I show how the FPMT participates in and contributes to the phenomena collectively labelled Buddhist modernism, despite its emphasis on upholding a particular Tibetan tradition.

In discussing the Tibetan Buddhist emphasis on holy objects that underlies the stupa project in Chapter Four, I consider the religious motivations for building the stupa and show how its proponents argue that an object of concrete and steel can have salvific powers. The FPMT's goal is to relieve the suffering of all sentient beings by helping them to become enlightened and the spiritual power of stupas assists in this daunting task. I locate the FPMT's interest in holy objects within a wider Buddhist history of iconism and aniconism (Swearer 2003), concepts that intersect with discourses of Buddhist traditionalism and modernism.

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<sup>1</sup> Built by members of an organisation called the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) at Sudarshanaloka retreat centre.

In the remaining chapters I consider how people in various domains interact with the stupa project. The contingencies and “friction” of intercultural engagement (Tsing 2005) mean that the Buddhists’ utopian motives result in sometimes unanticipated consequences. I begin, in Chapter Five, by looking at what FPMT members themselves say about holy objects and link this with the intersection of distinct worldviews in the contact zone. I examine how the stupa builders seek to establish a Buddhist utopia that must, despite the Tibetan-ness of the design, find a degree of grounding in the rural Australian locale. His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s 2007 visit to the stupa site provides an opportunity to explore how Western liberal idealism continues to interact and engage with key aspects of Tibetan Buddhism.

However, the ideal to benefit all beings cannot be realised in exactly the ways that the protagonists hope. In all remaining chapters I thus analyse the dialogue between the stupa’s proponents and recipients and explore the relationship between the intentions of the stupa builders and the outcomes, so far, of their ambitious project. For many non-Buddhist Australians, stupas (if they have heard of them) are exotic Asian monuments that seem out of place in the Australian landscape. Despite this, as I show in Chapter Six, the stupa’s promoters have had a relatively easy time in winning acceptance through the formal planning application process, in contrast with the difficulties encountered by various proposals by ethno-religious minorities. I explore how the Great Stupa, as a strikingly foreign object, is rendered appropriate to the Bendigo public and local government through its alignment with dominant discourses of multiculturalism and economic development. In this discourse, the stupa will “enrich” Bendigo, making it a more cosmopolitan and less provincial city by contributing to its cultural diversity and economic growth.

One area that has received scant attention in scholarship on the spread of Buddhism is that of the implications of settler-indigenous relations for the localisation of Buddhism. In Chapter Seven I focus on a dialogue between the stupa developers and an indigenous woman and her followers who expressed a sense of grievance about what they considered to be the harm done by the earthworks for the stupa to the land and the songlines which they said intersected there. In the protestors’ view, the stupa was another form of harm wrought on a land stolen from indigenous owners. The contact zone, then, is a place where the differences in power relations (whether between immigrant and Anglo-Australian Buddhists or between Anglo-Australian Buddhist and Aboriginal activist) highlight the complexities of realising one set of ideals in conjunction with another.

Chapter Eight investigates another dimension of the interface between FPMT ideals, local understandings and the difficulties of putting ideals into practice in the contact zone. I discuss a touring relic exhibition that is intended to promote and raise funds for the stupa and show how the practice of relic veneration complicates claims by some scholars (and some Western Buddhists) that Western Buddhism discards magical/devotional practices as cultural baggage. Here the interaction with members of one immigrant Buddhist group, associated with a Vietnamese temple in Melbourne, shows that the FPMT Buddhists are a much smaller group with a far less developed sense of community and cohesion, an important reason why the relic tour was a very different affair in FPMT-organised venues than it was in the Vietnamese one.

Each of the main chapters also unearths some of the unexpected contingencies of the zone of engagement, such as how middle-class Euro-Australian privilege and positive media representations of Buddhism shape people’s responses to the stupa project. On

closing, I discuss the Dalai Lama's address to a crowd of around 2000 people at the stupa during his 2007 visit to the site, a highly significant moment in promoting and advancing the project. The construction of a multi-million dollar, multi-storey religious structure designed to last a millennium, is bound to claim attention and interest. But as I illustrate in this thesis, although it is a key symbol for Tibetan Buddhists, in the Australian setting the stupa is open to a broad range of meanings and consequences, giving rise to the need for considerable translation and renegotiation.

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## Note and Glossary

Where using Sanskrit words I do not use the full diacritical markings because they are more specialised than is necessary for this work and in quoting passages with Buddhist terms I use the spelling of the source text, even if they vary (e.g., *bodhicitta/bodhichitta*). With regard to the spelling of Tibetan words, the FPMT usually uses Anglicised or phonetic spellings and I follow suit, using the more accurate but less pronounceable Wylie transcription only where the source did not provide phonetic spelling. In quoting interview transcripts I edit for flow and clarity, reducing repetition and filler words such as “um” and “sort of” unless they show a hesitation or other non-verbal message that I consider significant. For similar reasons I edit spelling and other errors or inconsistencies when quoting from textual sources.

Atisha (Atīśa)	famous Indian scholar (982-1054) who went to Tibet in 1038, founded the Kadampa school that preceded the Gelugpa order; see also Tsong-khapa
Avalokiteshvara (Avalokiteśvara)	A buddha / Bodhisattva personifying compassion
BADAC	Bendigo and District Aboriginal Council
Bodhgaya	site where the Buddha attained enlightenment and thus a key Buddhist pilgrimage site (in the state of Bihar, India)
<i>bodhi</i>	(Skt) “awakening,” the supreme knowledge or attainment of the Buddhist path (Keown 2003: 36, 87); often translated as “enlightenment.” An enlightened mind is free from negativity and has perfected its positive qualities.
<i>bodhicitta</i>	(Skt) “the will to enlightenment” (sometimes spelt <i>bodhichitta</i> ), a state of mind
Bodhisattva	(Skt) (a) buddha, saint or archetypal being who works to benefit all beings (b) person who has vowed to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings
Bön, bonpo	Tibet’s indigenous religion, although it shares many characteristics with Buddhism; Samuel (1993: 271) considers it a quasi-Buddhist order
Buddha	(a) title given to man who attained enlightenment and then taught other people to do so; also known as Śākyamuni Buddha; first aspect of Triple Gem (b) with a lower case “b,” any awakened or enlightened being
Buddhist	one who “takes refuge” in the Triple Gem
Chenrezig	(a) Tibetan name for Avalokiteshvara (b) FPMT centre in Queensland
<i>Chorten</i>	(Tib.) “stupa”; name of Atisha Centre newsletter
<i>Chorten Stupa Edition</i>	newsletter for Great Stupa of Universal Compassion
Dalai Lama. His	(Tenzin Gvatso) Exiled spiritual leader of the Tibetan people. born

Holiness the XIVth	1935, trained in Buddhist philosophy between ages 6-25; left Tibet in 1959 and now based in Dharamsala, India but tours the world to teach and meet political and other leaders, engage in dialogue with scientists and with other religions
Dharma	(Skt) teachings of the Buddha that help one to reach enlightenment; second aspect of Triple Gem
Eaglehawk	suburb of Bendigo (former borough town) near Atisha Centre
enlightenment	English translation of <i>bodhi</i>
FPMT	Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition; founded by Tibetan Lamas Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche in the 1970s
FWBO	Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, founded in 1967
Gen-la	(Tib.) term referring to or addressing the teacher (at Atisha Centre it is used for their <i>geshe</i> instead of “Geshe-la”); see also La
Gelugpa	(Tib. <i>dGe-lugs-pa</i> ) one of the four main Tibetan Buddhist orders
<i>geshe</i>	academic qualification of Gelugpa teachers, usually available only to monks and involving 1-3 decades of study entailing memorisation of texts and rigorous debate; used as a title
Geshe Lama Konchog	former resident <i>geshe</i> at Kopan monastery, now deceased
Geshe Konchok Tsering	resident <i>geshe</i> of Atisha Centre
<i>gompa</i>	(Tib.) meditation hall (can also refer to a whole monastery)
guru	(Skt) spiritual teacher
Gyantse	city in southern Tibet where the Great Stupa of Gyantse is located
Heart <i>Sūtra</i>	Buddhist text on Emptiness
International Mahayana Institute (IMI)	community of monks and nuns of the FPMT; established by Lama Thubten Yeshe in the early 1970s; now has over 200 monks and nuns
Jaara, Dja Dja Wrung / Wurrung	Aboriginal people recognised as traditional owners of the land in Bendigo region
Kagyupa	(Tib. <i>bKa’rgyud-pa</i> ) one of the four main Tibetan Buddhist orders
karma	(Skt) notion that intentional actions have corresponding moral consequences
<i>khata</i>	(Tib.) silk prayer scarf, used in ceremonial greetings
Khensur Rinpoche	(Khensur Kangur Lobsang Thubten Rinpoche) Adelaide-based <i>lama</i> who has conducted consecrations at the Great Stupa site
Kopan	FPMT/IMI monastery in Kathmandu where retreats are held for lay Westerners
La	(Tib.) appended to name or title ( <i>geshe-la</i> , <i>ani-la</i> ) to imply endearment (“our precious <i>geshe</i> ”) or respect.
<i>Lam-Rim</i>	(Tib.) class of literature providing a systematic and graduated approach to studying key Buddhist teachings (Keown 2003: 154).

lama	(Tib.) spiritual teacher (guru); title used for esteemed monks
Lama Ösel	born 1985, Granada, Spain, to Maria Torres and Paco Hita, students of Lama Yeshe; recognised as reincarnation of Lama Yeshe and expected to become future FPMT spiritual director.
Mahāyāna	branch of Buddhism to which FPMT belongs, associated with Northern and Eastern Asia
Maitreya	future Buddha; FPMT plans a 152-metre high statue of Maitreya in Uttar Pradesh, India
Mandala	Indo-Tibetan religious symbol (sacred circle); in FPMT usage, the international FPMT community; title of FPMT magazine
<i>mantra</i>	(Skt) verbal formula with sacred powers that is used, inter alia, to invoke a tantric deity
Māori	indigenous people and language of New Zealand
<i>nāga</i>	(Skt) benevolent serpent-like nature spirit, often associated with watery environments (Keown 2003:185)
<i>nirvāna</i>	the end of existence in <i>samsāra</i> , which for bodhisattvas is a collective rather than individual goal (Keown 2003:194-95); see also “enlightenment”
Nyingmapa	(Tib. <i>rNying-ma-pa</i> ) one of the four main Tibetan Buddhist orders
Padmasambhava	hero of Tibetan Buddhism believed to have been instrumental in introducing Buddhism to Tibet during the 8th century CE.
<i>Pākehā</i>	(Māori) New Zealander of European, especially British, ancestry
puja	(Skt) devotional / merit-making practice; offerings are made and sacred texts chanted
Quang Minh temple	Vietnamese temple in Melbourne, affiliated to Sydney-based patriarch Thich Phuoc Hue
Rinpoche	title used for high lamas
Sakyapa	(Tib. <i>Sa-skya-pa</i> ) one of the four main Tibetan Buddhist orders
Sakya Trizin, HH	41st Patriarch of Sakya order; born 1945, Tsedong, South Tibet; visited Great Stupa site in 2003
<i>samsāra</i>	(Skt) cyclic existence; uncontrolled rebirth due to delusions and karmic conditions
Sandhurst Town	former open-air museum near Atisha Centre, undergoing conversion into a Buddhist lay community
<i>sangha</i>	(Pali) spiritual community, in FPMT often referring exclusively to ordained monastics
stupa	(Skt: <i>stūpa</i> ) Buddhist reliquary, ranging from thumb-size to “Great Stupas” that are several storeys high
<i>śūnyatā</i>	“emptiness,” a core concept associated with Mahāyāna teaching on Dependent Origination
<i>sūtra</i> / <i>sutta</i>	(Skt / Pali) text recording the Buddha’s teachings
<i>thangka</i>	(Tib.) religious painting treated as a sacred object

Theravāda	pre-Mahāyāna form of Buddhism with contemporary expressions that originate in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia
Thich Phuoc Hue	Patriarch of United Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation (UVBC) in Australia and New Zealand
Triple Gem, the <i>tsa-tsa</i>	( <i>triratna</i> ; Three Refuges) Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha (Tib.) small plaster or ceramic statue or stupa, sometimes containing cremation ashes; sometimes spelt <i>sa-tsa</i> or <i>tsha-tsha</i>
Tsong-khapa (Lama)	(1355-1417) reformer of the Kadampa school and founder of Gelugpa order
Vajrayāna <i>vipāśyanā</i> / <i>vipassanā</i>	a branch of Buddhism (Skt / Pali) “insight”; Pali term refers to a meditation practice around which a Theravādin-derived movement has developed, involving intensive retreats of a minimum of ten days; Sanskrit term refers to meditative practices seeking to cultivate a direct, intuitive understanding of the Dharma
Lama Thubten Yeshe	(1935-84) founder of FPMT; born near Lhasa; educated Sera Monastery (Je College); often referred to in FPMT as “Lama” or “Lama Yeshe”
Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche	Gelugpa <i>lama</i> ; born 1946 to Sherpa parents; current spiritual director of FPMT; often referred to in FPMT as “Rinpoche” or “Lama Zopa;” sometimes the title “Kyabje” is added before “Lama”