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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

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology, The University of Auckland, 2009
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), 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.

1 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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This PhD has been my main preoccupation between mid-2001 and early 2009. I am
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supportive, especially Ian, Judy, Lillian, Noel and many others for their patience with my
curiosity and awkwardness. I am aware that some FPMT readers may find aspects of my
interpretations irrelevant or puzzling. My aim has been to explore the social and cultural
dimensions of the stupa project and in so doing I must stress that I have no wish to pass
judgement on the FPMT, the stupa project or any of the organisation’s members and their
admirable motivations. As listed in the Appendix, I have adopted pseudonyms for those
who shared personal thoughts with me unless I had specific permission to use their names.
I use the real names of public figures, leaders and those with identifiable positions within
the FPMT, stupa project and Atisha Centre.

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and Ayers Rock image), Ven. Roger Kunsang (photograph of Mahamudra retreat banner),
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I am indebted to the many people have assisted me in my research and writing endeavours, but naturally I take full responsibility for my own interpretations, with sincere apologies for any misunderstandings, omissions or errors that have made it into the final version. The Anthropology department and the Association of Social Anthropologists of Aotearoa/New Zealand has provided a supportive learning environment. I thank Anna-Lisa, Haralambos, Peter Heggie and Rebekah Williams for computer help, everyone who read and gave feedback on draft sections of the thesis, including Penny Kennett, Venerable Gyälten of DCI, Judy Green in Bendigo, and participants in the PhD writing group. Last but not least, I thank Adrian Croucher, who has not only edited and proof-read most of the thesis and developed my sketch maps into publication-quality graphics, but also been a great support through the ups and downs of this long journey.
Table of contents

1 “This site is under construction”  
   Zones of intercultural engagement 5  
   Materialising Tibetan Buddhism in Australia 14  
   Following the connections in the contact zone 18  
   Landscapes of contact, power and otherness 26  

2 Thinking big 29  
   The Foundation and its origins 36  
   From concept to construction 50  
   Arising in-site/sight 64  

3 Traditional and transcultural 67  
   The people 71  
   Buddhist orientations 74  
   A “sensible philosophy” 81  
   Preserving and / or adapting tradition 89  
   Inner peace, world peace 94  

4 The “power of the object” 97  
   Discourses of iconism and aniconism 99  
   The “unimaginable purification” of holy objects 101  
   A source of empowerment or a mere support to practice? 110  
   Holy object(ive)s 113  

5 “Piece of land” or “peace of mind”? 115  
   Realising the vision 119  
   The stupa as utopia 136  
   “Piece of land” and “peace of mind” 140  

6 Building connections 143  
   Multicultural enrichment 145  
   A “great drawcard for our great city” 156  
   The stupa in multicultural Australia 169
7 The stupa on the songline 171
   Planting Buddhism and propitiating spirits 173
   Songlines, totems and country 178
   The stupa as a vehicle of reterritorialization 192
8 A travelling contact zone 197
   Exhibiting Buddhism 198
   Iconic and aniconic perspectives on relics 213
   What is found in translation? 219
9 Entangled object(ive)s 221
   Juxtapositions 223
   For all sentient beings 228
Appendices 231
References 237
Photographs and diagrams

Frontispiece  Aerial photograph of stupa site in 2004  1
Figure 1.1.  Computer-generated image of the Great Stupa  1
Figure 1.2.  Map of Australia showing location of Bendigo  4
Figure 1.3.  Map of Bendigo and Melbourne region  5
Figure 2.1.  Courtyard at Atisha Centre with small stupa  29
Figure 2.2.  Map showing layout of Atisha Centre  33
Figure 2.3.  Main gompa at Atisha Centre  34
Figure 2.4.  Aerial photo of stupa site in 2007  35
Figure 2.5.  “Blueprint for a Total Society” concept drawings  52
Figure 2.6.  Concept drawing for stupa  53
Figure 2.7.  Australian-style stupa design  53
Figure 2.8.  Gyantse stupa in brochure promoting the Great Stupa  55
Figure 2.9.  Plan of exterior of Great Stupa  62
Figure 2.10.  Section of Great Stupa  63
Figure 3.1.  Central shrine of Atisha centre’s main gompa  67
Figure 3.2.  Kangaroos and Dharma Wheel  92
Figure 4.1.  Animal liberation at stupa at Thubten Shedrup Ling monastery  97
Figure 5.1.  Padmasambhava statue and stupa frame  115
Figure 5.2.  Padmasambhava statue with butter sculptures  117
Figure 5.3.  Ceremonial gateway to stupa site welcoming the Dalai Lama  118
Figure 5.4.  Eight auspicious symbols painted on path  118
Figure 6.1.  Mayor greets the Dalai Lama at the stupa site  143
Figure 7.1.  Painting depicting Padmasambhava over Uluru  171
Figure 7.2.  The four treasure vases at the stupa site  175
Figure 7.3. A treasure vase is buried in the stupa site 175
Figure 8.1. Meditation involving circumambulation of the relics display 197
Figure 8.2. Information table at relic exhibition 201
Figure 8.3. Close-up of the benefactor forms, tsatsas and model stupas 201
Figure 8.4. Statue and relics of Lama Yeshe 204
Figure 8.5 Relics of Geshe Lama Konchog 204
Figure 8.6. Procession of relics arrive at Quang Minh temple 212
Figure 8.7. Trunk of relics taken in procession 212
Figure 9.1. Artist’s impression of the third stage of the stupa construction 221

Tables

Table 1.1. Baumann’s processive modes of transplantation 12
Table 1.2. Baumann’s strategies that facilitate transplantation 14
Table A1. FPMT Dharma Centres in Australia 231
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.

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

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 geshe instead of “Geshe-la”); see also La

Gelugpa (Tib. dGe-lugs-pa) one of the four main Tibetan Buddhist orders

geshe 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 geshe at Kopan monastery, now deceased

Geshe Konchok Tsering resident geshe of Atisha Centre

gompa (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 Sūtra 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. bKa’rgyud-pa) one of the four main Tibetan Buddhist orders

karma (Skt) notion that intentional actions have corresponding moral consequences

khata (Tib.) silk prayer scarf, used in ceremonial greetings

Khensur Rinpoche (Khensur Kangur Lobsang Thubten Rinpoche) Adelaide-based lama 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 (geshe-la, ani-la) to imply endearment (“our precious geshe”) or respect.

Lam-Rim (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

mantra (Skt) verbal formula with sacred powers that is used, inter alia, to invoke a tantric deity

Māori indigenous people and language of New Zealand

nāga (Skt) benevolent serpent-like nature spirit, often associated with watery environments (Keown 2003:185)

nirvāna the end of existence in samsāra, which for bodhisattvas is a collective rather than individual goal (Keown 2003:194-95); see also “enlightenment”

Nyingmapa (Tib. rNyin-ma-pa) 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.

Pākehā (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. Sa-skya-pa) 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

samsāra (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

sangha (Pali) spiritual community, in FPMT often referring exclusively to ordained monastics

stupa (Skt: stūpa) Buddhist reliquary, ranging from thumb-size to “Great Stupas” that are several storeys high

śunyatā “emptiness,” a core concept associated with Mahāyāna teaching on Dependent Origination

sūtra / sutta (Skt / Pali) text recording the Buddha’s teachings

thangka (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** | (triratna; Three Refuges) Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha |
| **tsa-tsa** | (Tib.) small plaster or ceramic statue or stupa, sometimes containing cremation ashes; sometimes spelt sa-tsa or tsha-tsha |
| **Tsong-khapa (Lama)** | (1355-1417) reformer of the Kadampa school and founder of Gelugpa order |
| **Vajrayāna** | a branch of Buddhism |
| **vipaśyanā / vipassanā** | (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 lama; 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” |