Foreword: A Short Note on Buddhism (or Religion) as Infrastructure

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The four articles in this special issue originate from a two-day workshop entitled 'Engineering Buddhism: Infrastructure and Soft Power in Asia and Beyond', held at the University of Copenhagen in June 2022.[1] The workshop aimed to address the increasing visibility of Buddhist social activities in national and transnational contexts and to explore Buddhism's changing roles and relationships to societies, states and global politics. Not only traditional temples and monasteries but also various other types of Buddhist organisations, such as large and small charity groups and NGOs, have begun to actively engage with social and global issues, including education, poverty and medical care as well as environmental protections. Buddhism no longer appears otherworldly and detached from the bustling lives of ordinary people; instead, it has become more central to the vicissitudes of life that were once largely associated with the state and political sectors. The articles presented here, which are mostly drawn from long-term ethnographic engagements, provide vivid examples from various societies of how Buddhism has been integrated into the sociopolitical and economic fields and plays an enduring role as a driver, a platform and a conduit; by doing so, it has shaped and directed state policies, forms of interactions and the daily lives of people.

With different geographical and ethnographical emphases, the four articles present the 'new roles' of Buddhism in society by examining how sociopolitical and economic transformations occur with and through Buddhism and how these are different from other forms of social change. Dat Nguyen addresses how Vietnamese Buddhists renew and reinforce their national identity and morality by reforming Vietnamese Buddhism through spatial innovations, technological advances and social engagement initiatives. Justine Chambers shows how a political militia group in the Karen state in southern Myanmar occupies local

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lands and exercises paramilitary governance through its support of Buddhist temple building projects. While Nguyen and Chambers focus on Buddhism's role in domestic transformations, David Geary and Yasmin Cho address Buddhism's role as a conduit for promoting and navigating geopolitical advantage and soft power in transnational contexts. Geary analyses how the Indian government facilitates its leading role in the South Asian region through large-scale investments for developing and reactivating ancient Buddhist heritage sites, while at the same time attempting to promote cross-national Buddhist tourism. Cho explores the impact of charity activities and school building projects in southern Africa by groups of ethnic Chinese Buddhists (largely from Taiwan, but also from Chinese diasporas in southeast Asian countries as well as the People's Republic of China) and how their non-governmental engagement is supported by China's growing presence and exercise of soft power in Africa in recent decades.

We find that the sociopolitical and economic changes brought about by Buddhism's increased presence in people's daily lives have occurred first and foremost through its material engagements: constructing temples, schools, airports and monuments; renovating and rearranging physical spaces and mobilising human labour and mobilities. The aspect of contemporary Buddhism that we focus on, in other words, is intensely associated with built structures, objects and physical practices. It is also not an exaggeration to say that material, technological and capitalistic aspirations have led to a set of transformations and reformations within Buddhism. Nguyen introduces a new generation of Vietnamese Buddhists in Ho Chi Minh City who are attempting to create a modern Vietnamese Buddhism, different from the familiar Chinese tradition, by modernising temple spaces (air-conditioned rooms and cutting-edge recording equipment), reinterpreting Buddhist scripts, actively utilising social media platforms and hosting a global Buddhist assembly. This renovated Buddhist space and these modified Buddhist practices resonate with the country's rapid economic development in recent decades and the subsequent emergence of middle-class consumers who make up a new Buddhist public that is confident, outspoken and active in social, political and national affairs. Through equally material processes and in a top-down manner, the Indian government has reinvigorated ancient Buddhist heritage sites by, for example, building a new airport in the small town of Kushinagar, which is known as the Buddha's final resting place. Geary shows that, in India, where the religious majority

practices Hinduism and Buddhism is nearly invisible, the purpose of this deliberate effort by the state to invest in such large infrastructure projects is to gain geopolitical leverage and economic advantage (via tourism) in South Asia, which has strong Buddhist traditions. Geary points out that religion has been an overlooked driver of technological progress and other forms of development.

Buddhist material engagements are also strongly presented in Chambers's and Cho's research. In villages in the Karen State in southern Myanmar where several decades of prolonged conflict have devastated the livelihoods of ordinary people, Chambers shows how the widely circulated notion of *thathana pyu*, meaning to propagate religion, provides a rationale for the self-mobilisation in temple building—through labour, money and otherwise—that routinely and centrally occupy the lives of politically and economically marginalised residents. Militia leaders also actively participate in *thathana pyu*. While the militia group has its own agenda in supporting temple building—to ensure land occupations, for example—the residents and Buddhist leaders alike believe that their support of temple building, through which the Buddhist world is made and spreads, will bring peace and prosperity to the region. On the other side of the globe, far from Buddhism's traditional sites in Asia, Cho describes how a Buddhist boarding school has been built in Namibia by a Buddhist charity organisation founded and supported by ethnic Chinese Buddhist adherents in Taiwan and southeast Asian countries. The Namibian school is one of seven boarding schools built by this organisation to provide free education for vulnerable children in southern Africa. Through these schools and their Buddhist-informed spatial and material arrangements of dormitories, dining halls and temples on their campuses, traditional Chinese moral, cultural and religious values are being introduced to, or *moored into*, the lives of African students, staff and residents in nearby communities.

Buddhism's growing presence as material forms in these societies does not mean that Buddhism's spiritual and moral capacity has been altered in a significant way. Each article demonstrates how Buddhist spiritual participation or broader ethical concerns continue to be entangled with Buddhism's sociopolitical roles in material contexts. Chambers's work precisely points out how the local residents are devoted to disseminating the teachings of the Buddha (*sasāna*) through building and renovating Buddhist edifices and temples. They believe that spreading Buddhism by supporting temple building activities is a

way to overcome the current economic, social and political hardships they face. Nguyen shows how, in Vietnam, Buddhist advocates promote an organ donation movement as means to renew the Buddhist moral terrain over bodies and societies. Cho discusses how Buddhism is portrayed to the Namibian staff at the school as a set of Chinese moral principles and rules that emphasise how to live and how to become a good person (for example, through dietary regulations). Spiritual concepts, moral superiority, individual faith and a sense of devotion—crucial immaterial components of religion—are interweaved with Buddhism's material engagements in societies. This aspect of Buddhism is also discussed in Geary's study in which the state utilises Buddhism in developmental and diplomatic schemes that promote national wealth and spiritual or moral reputation. Buddhism, in other words, is not simply seen as the sole means for pursuing individual desires and wishes for this or future lives but is also integrated into the sociopolitical and material field as a useful method for achieving and maintaining prosperity, peace and morality.

The four articles share an understanding of contemporary Buddhism as a spiritual *and* material undertaking that enables the daily lives of people and facilitates forms of cooperation and development across national and transnational borders. The term 'engineering' that we have used in the title of the workshop is intended to capture to some extent how Buddhism is purposefully utilised by Buddhist leaders and adherents as well as by the state in shaping individual lives and in social and national development. To complement the idea of Buddhism as being 'engineered' for particular aims in particular sociopolitical contexts, we believe that the concept of 'infrastructure' captures the role that religion plays in the material, spiritual and sociopolitical contexts. The term points to structures in a society that shape its physical forms, practices, and norms, but are so deeply integrated into daily life that they remain unseen and unnoticed when they are functioning well. Each article picks up and expands upon selected definitions of infrastructure that are widely circulated in the social science fields. These include infrastructure as 'an assemblage of people, places, and materials' (Simone 2004); 'projects of spatial integration' (Carse 2016); 'relational and world-shaping formations' (Hoelzchen 2021) and 'repertory of practices' (Larkin 2016). While we acknowledge critiques that say the concept is too broad and too inclusive (Buier 2023) because nearly all social phenomena, activities, events and structures can potentially be included in these generous

definitions of infrastructure, we hold on to the concept because of infrastructure's distinctive role in enabling the ongoing circulations of people, objects and ideas.

What we have found so far tells us that contemporary Buddhism both engages with and works as soft and hard forms of infrastructure—in its ethical and moral concerns (soft forms) and in its physical structures and building activities (hard forms). Whether a soft form of infrastructure such as individual faith or a regulation that transforms the material or social world (Nguyen, Chambers, Cho) or a hard form of infrastructure in the shape of a new airport that supports political and economic gains (Geary), Buddhism itself has become *a platform* that upholds and facilitates the flows and circulations of people, money, physical objects and politics. With the framework of infrastructure, in other words, we believe we can more clearly see how contemporary Buddhism enables people's lives and what it enables. Such circulations and relationships created and maintained by Buddhism as infrastructure also provide a lens for seeing how alternative forms of politics are produced and evolve to connect things, people and faith. I hope the readers of this special issue will be as intrigued as we have been by the intersections between religion and infrastructure.

NOTES

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