

Constructing a Buddhist Infrastructure: Nationalist Politics and the Transformation of Buddhism in Contemporary Vietnam

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Abstract

Since the late 2000s, anti-China sentiments have increased across Vietnam, with large public protests against China's encroachment in the 'South China Sea' or the 'East Sea'. Such sentiments have raised important questions about Vietnamese sovereignty and cultural identity. Among Buddhists, the 'China' question has motivated endeavours to construct a 'Vietnamese' Buddhism that maintains a critical distance from 'Chinese' religious influences. Based on extensive fieldwork in Vietnam, this paper examines Vietnamese Buddhism as a form of soft power, particularly its ability to shape public understanding of Vietnamese identity and geopolitics. In analysing a few initiatives linked to a prominent Buddhist temple in Ho Chi Minh City, including a Buddhist public health campaign to promote organ donations and the organisation of the United Nations Day of Vesak, I explicate the intense efforts by Buddhists to create a religious infrastructure aimed at broadening the scope of Buddhist influence on Vietnam's public life and international diplomatic relationships. I argue that this emerging Buddhist infrastructure signals transformations within Vietnamese Buddhism as it becomes increasingly entangled with local and transnational socio-political concerns.

Keywords: Engaged Buddhism; public health; nationalism; geopolitics; Vietnam

Introduction

In late May 2018, the National Assembly of Vietnam discussed the draft proposal to develop 'special economic zones' (SEZs) in three northern, central and southern Vietnamese provinces, with the hope to attract foreign direct investment and promote economic development. In addition to this proposal being discussed around the same time when the controversial cyber security law was being finalised,

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the main issue surrounding the SEZ proposal was the stipulation that the SEZ lands will be leased to potential foreign investors for the maximum of 99 years. While the proposal did not explicitly mention China, recent geopolitical tensions with China over Vietnamese sovereignty in the 'South China Sea' (Kerkvliet 2019; Vu 2014)—known in Vietnam as the East Sea (*Biển Đông*)—led many Vietnamese to grow especially wary of the potentiality that Chinese businesses and corporations would outbid other foreign investors to take over these SEZs, thus furthering the scope and reach of Chinese imperialism. On 10 June 2018, people across Vietnam took to the streets to protest the proposal. In a few locations, the protests turned violent, with clashes between the protesters and the police, and some protesters were jailed.

Soon after the proposal discussion was announced and before the protest, the abbot of *Giác Ngộ* (Enlightenment) temple (hereby GN temple)¹—one of the few Buddhist institutions in Ho Chi Minh City in southern Vietnam where I conducted my fieldwork from 2016 to 2019—posted a criticism of the SEZ plan on his Facebook page. In this post, the abbot contended that the SEZs would not be sufficient in generating economic growth for Vietnam, and that there needed to be structural improvements in terms of systems of management, administration and infrastructure. Most specifically, he warned that the government must not, under any circumstances, give the SEZs to Chinese investors. 'Vietnam has suffered from 1000 years of Chinese occupation and 60 invasions within the last 3000 years. And that's enough for Vietnam', the abbot wrote in the post.² Allowing Chinese investment in Vietnam, he argued, would be akin to legalising Chinese migration to Vietnam, and this could lead to 'population assimilation' (*đồng hóa dân số*) and the loss of Vietnamese cultural identity, national security and sovereignty. The Facebook post received over 1000 shares, 2000 likes and more than 300 comments in which the majority of people supported the monk's stand and praised his intellect and analysis.

About one month after the protests, the abbot addressed the issue of SEZs and public protests to a group of young Buddhists in a Dharma Q&A live streamed and recorded on the temple's social media channels. He encouraged the young people to practise their right to express their political perspectives. However, the abbot warned that they should engage with politics critically, use their analytical minds, stay within the frameworks of the law and refrain from getting

carried away by strong emotions and involved in violent protests. Rather than participating in protest, which according to the abbot is not the solution, people should analyse the situation and communicate their critical perspectives using available means of political participation, including letter writing and social media. As Buddhists, the abbot argued, these young people should not be afraid to bring Buddhist teachings to bear on political debates:

In many Dharma talks, I have encouraged lay Buddhists, particularly young people, to participate in three key areas, namely politics, education and communication. There should be many intellectual and country-loving lay Buddhists engaging in politics, especially as members of the Communist Youth Organisation and of the Communist Party. These lay Buddhists need to participate in the National Assembly and in local governments, where they can raise the voice of lay Buddhists, debate social issues and policies and bring the political thoughts of the Buddha to create positive improvements in Vietnamese politics But unfortunately, many Buddhists don't care about politics, and that is a grave mistake.

In the collections, 'Sutras for Lay Buddhists' and 'Buddhist Sutras on Morality and Society',³ I selected sutras in which the Buddha taught about politics [he then listed the themes of these sutras] ... The cultural imperialist policy of the Chinese, who occupied Vietnam for ten centuries from the first to the tenth century, had resulted in Vietnamese Buddhists not having the opportunity to read these important sutras. Many Confucian scholars, who claimed themselves to be great intellectuals, even made a mistake in thinking that Buddhism has no [interest in] politics, and that politics belongs to Confucianism. The sutras I just mentioned are not inferior to theories on family management, state governance and peace-building of Confucianism. They are even better! These sutras need to be propagated, read, chanted and put into practice. And lay Buddhists need to voluntarily participate in politics both at the national and international level. Just like when it was in the Lý-Trần dynasties when Buddhism was the national religion, and when Vietnam was the most powerful, with Vietnamese politics, military, education, culture and economics all independent of China.⁴

The perspective of the abbot above highlights two important transformations within contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism that I discuss in this paper. First, Buddhism is playing an increasingly important role as a form of 'soft power',⁵ especially in its ability to

shape public understanding of Vietnamese cultural identity and Vietnam's diplomatic relationships with other countries in Asia. Second, this Vietnamese Buddhist soft power is predicated on the development of a new Buddhist infrastructure, particularly one that involves the wide-spread utilisation of social media, the strategic investment in constructing 'modern Vietnamese' Buddhist spaces, cultural resources and subjects, as well as the cultivation of a 'dialogic relationship' (Luong 2007) among Buddhist institutions, the Vietnamese state and the new middle-class.⁶ In considering these two dimensions, I argue that the emerging Buddhist infrastructure facilitates a project of ethical 'coordination' that brings together Buddhist ethical discourses, new middle-class values and personhood and nationalist historical narratives into a kind of 'morality system' (Keane 2016: 200). Within this system, lay Buddhists are encouraged to not only adopt a much stronger modernist Buddhist identity via their commitments to Buddhist learning, ethical cultivation, meditation and social engagement, but also see the growth of Vietnamese Buddhism as essential to the cultural and political development of the country.⁷

In using the term 'Buddhist infrastructure', I take inspiration from recent scholarly works that have brought the study of infrastructure to the realm of religion. Particularly, in her study of mosques as religious infrastructure in Kyrgyzstan, Yanti Hoelzchen (2021: 370) approaches infrastructures as more than 'mere visible physical structures', but rather as 'relational and world-shaping formations, constituted via the goods, people and ideas they circulate, and which are generative of specific desires, hopes, aspirations and imaginaries' (see also Appel, Anand and Gupta 2018; Larkin 2013; Schwenkel 2020). Religious infrastructure in Hoelzchen's (2021: 371) study entails the 'interconnected variety of institutional, material and social dynamics of circulation and exchange' that fashions moral selfhood and forms of sociality. In this paper, I am particularly interested in elucidating how the emerging Buddhist infrastructure in Vietnam contributes to shaping Buddhism as soft power by assembling a particular 'Buddhist public'⁸—one in which Buddhist institutions, their monastics and middle-class lay followers make claims on Vietnamese cultural and political identities, particularly through their visions of a renewed Vietnamese Buddhism that is modernist and 'purified' of what some Vietnamese monastics perceive as Chinese religio-cultural influences.

To unpack this process, I draw on my fieldwork from 2016 to 2019 at GN temple, a prominent Buddhist temple in Ho Chi Minh City. The temple's abbot, as well as his fellow monastics and lay followers, have been playing an important role in transforming urban Vietnamese Buddhism through their efforts to reformulate Buddhist temple spaces and social engagement initiatives. I analyse three sites where one can see the configuring of Vietnamese Buddhism as soft power: the conscious design of GN temple as a 'modern Vietnamese' temple; the temple's organ and body donation campaign; and the intense efforts by local Buddhists, including those at GN temple, to organise the United Nations Day of Vesak (UNDV) in Vietnam in 2019. Following the suggestions of the scholarship on infrastructure above, I approach these three sites as relational socio-material arrangements where physical temple spaces, individuals' physical bodies and various networks of exchange (social media and economic networks, in particular) engender, materialise and inspire the cultivation of moral selfhood and nationalist imaginaries. While the initiatives at GN temple allow us to see how recent debates about Vietnamese cultural identity and the role of Buddhism (and Buddhist infrastructure) in geopolitics operate at the temple level, the organisation of the UNDV shows how they can get scaled up at the national and international levels.

Buddhist Infrastructure, Semiotic Ideology, and the Construction of 'Vietnamese' Buddhism

At GN temple, 'Vietnamese Buddhism' is constructed out of the marriage between Buddhist modernism—in which Buddhism is portrayed as a world-affirming philosophical and ethical tradition compatible with science and modernity (McMahan 2008)—and various 'Vietnamese' semiotic forms, including language, dress and architecture.

Throughout my fieldwork, the abbot of the temple was vocal about the need to reform how Buddhist Dharma is taught and propagated to lay Buddhists. He contended that the current overemphasis on devotional practices at the majority of Buddhist temples in Vietnam, including the chanting of a limited repertoire of Buddhist texts from 'Chinese' Buddhism written in difficult Sino-Vietnamese, has resulted in most Buddhists' lacking a basic understanding of Buddhist teachings and approaching Buddhism as a performance

of religious beliefs (*tín ngưỡng*) or even superstition (*mê tín*). To address what he referred to as 'Dharma illiteracy' (*mù chữ Phật pháp*), since the early 2000s the abbot had initiated a comprehensive lay Buddhist educational program, including the production of newly compiled and translated volumes of Buddhist sutras for the laity, and the organisation of weekend retreats and weekly Buddhism classes.⁹ While sutras and chanting texts commonly used in Mahayana Buddhist temples in Vietnam entail a combination of vernacular Vietnamese, Sino-Vietnamese and romanised transcriptions of Sino-transliterated Sanskrit mantras, the sutra collections produced by GN temple predominantly use vernacular Vietnamese (minus certain Sino-Vietnamese Buddhist terms that are more commonly used in daily parlance). Moreover, these sutra collections focus more on sutras from the *Pali Tipiṭaka*, the *Āgamas*, instead of popular devotional sutras, such as the Lotus Sutra and Amida Buddha Sutra.

Besides the usage of vernacular Vietnamese in textual publications, GN temple communicates and reinforces 'Vietnamese-ness' through its architecture and design of lay Buddhists' dressing style. While a typical Vietnamese temple will have Chinese characters carved on its structure, GN temple only displays Vietnamese romanised *quốc ngữ* script (see also Soucy 2022: 54 for a discussion of the use of *quốc ngữ* at other Buddhist temples in northern Vietnam). Once visitors pass the front gate made of heavy stones and adorned with Buddhist motifs of the lion and the Dharma wheels propagated by King Asoka, they are greeted by the entrance steps guarded by two dragons on the left and right sides. The stone dragons take the form of a dragon motif from the Lý dynasty in the eleventh century, the period of time that the abbot referred to in his Dharma talk cited in the introduction when Vietnamese Buddhism has been argued to be the most prosperous and to have played a central role in nation-building efforts (Nguyễn Thế Anh 2002: 227-234). This dragon motif (Figure 1) – commonly celebrated in Vietnam to be different from the Chinese dragon and reflect the artistic ingenuity of the Vietnamese people – is engraved on many of the temple's structures, including its room and hall doors, ceiling and windows. Besides the architecture, lay Buddhists often wear an *áo dài* (Figure 2), the tight-fitting silk tunic worn over a pair of trousers, and a *nón lá*, the conical hat, to important Buddhist ceremonial events inside and outside of the temple. Both of these items are considered the national fashion symbols of Vietnam.



Figure 1. The Lý dragon motif on the temple's ceiling. *Source:* Photo by Dat Manh Nguyen, 2016.



Figure 2. Women wearing the temple's light blue áo dài in front of the temple's bookstore. *Source:* Photo by Dat Manh Nguyen, 2016.

The semiotic forms of Vietnamese-ness, reflected in the temple's architecture and dressing style, are juxtaposed with the temple's modernist aesthetics. Contrary to the stereotypical image of a one- or two-storied Buddhist temples with a large courtyard adorned with trees, GN temple is a skinny, nine-storied structure (including a basement for parking and a rooftop). There is a small courtyard in front of the temple, big enough to accommodate a statue of *Quan Âm* (the Bodhisattva of Compassion) and a small incense urn. The outside courtyard is the only space at this temple where incense burning is allowed. Inside, there are two elevators connecting the different stories. The main worship hall, located on the first floor, is air-conditioned, and it houses three large golden statues of Shakyamuni Buddha in three iconic positions (touching the earth, meditation and turning of the Dharma wheel). With its wall laden with hundreds of smaller golden Buddha statues, the space is big enough to house more than 300 people. If there is not enough space, which is typically the case for the temple's weekend retreats, the second floor, designed as a mezzanine, provides extra seating. Every floor is equipped with recording cameras, TVs and projector screens and a high-tech sound system, all of which are used to record and broadcast the temple's events and weekend retreats on its multiple social media channels. The temple's modernist aesthetics thus promote a sense of orderliness, as retreat participants are arranged to sit in columns of brown plastic chairs and 'church-like' pews.

One can argue here that the marriage of identifiably Vietnamese semiotic forms and modernist aesthetics at GN temple constitute a 'representational economy' (Keane 2007: 18-19) in which modernist Buddhism is co-articulated and co-imbricated with Vietnamese nationalism and late-socialist imperatives of 'modernisation' (*hiện đại hóa*) and 'urban civility' (*văn minh đô thị*) (Harms 2011). On the one hand, the re-translation and re-compilation of Buddhist texts using vernacular Vietnamese, as well as the incorporation of Vietnamese cultural symbols in the temple's architecture and uniforms, reflect a conscious endeavour of the abbot to construct a distinctively Vietnamese Buddhism, particularly amid rising anti-China sentiments that have prompted many Vietnamese Buddhist institutions to distance themselves from perceived Chinese religio-cultural influences. For GN temple, the mobilisation of different semiotic forms to communicate and reinforce Vietnamese-ness exemplifies the effort to render Buddhism Vietnamese, while also mobilising Buddhism and

investing it 'with political power to sacralise the nation's territory, unity and history' (Ngo 2019: 31).

On the other hand, by marrying the Vietnamese cultural symbols and modernist aesthetics, GN temple promotes a normative vision of what contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism should be. It should be purified of many popular 'Chinese' religious beliefs and practices (e.g., no excessive incense burning, no votive paper burning, no inclusion of non-Buddhist deities and other Buddhist guardian figures). Moreover, it should be clean, orderly and technologically driven, qualities that are in consonance with the late-socialist vision of 'modernisation' and 'urban civility'. Such a vision of Vietnamese Buddhism, as I will now turn to demonstrate, relies on the mobilisation of the new middle-class, whose participation in the temple's programs and personal endeavours at ethical cultivation contribute to the broader re-articulation of Buddhist identity.

Body and Organ Donation Campaign: Reconfiguring the Ethical Body

In the quote from the Dharma lecture cited in the introduction, the abbot of GN temple called upon the young Buddhists in the audience to actively participate in politics, not through protests, but through critical thinking, debates and membership in the communist party and governmental organisations. He also emphasised that in order for lay Buddhists to engage Buddhism in the country's social and political life, they need to read and study Buddhist sutras, particularly those focusing on social governance and ethics. In a nationalistic manner, the abbot argued that the lack of knowledge of Buddhist political thoughts among Vietnamese Buddhists was due to Chinese imperialist policy in the past and to the Confucian treatment of Buddhism as apolitical. He then harkened back to the Lý-Trần dynasties, when Buddhism was the national religion of Vietnam, as the model period for Vietnam.

With this perspective, the abbot, while mobilising Buddhism as the key to bolster contemporary Vietnam's development and political sovereignty, espouses a model of middle-class Buddhist subjectivity. At GN temple, lay Buddhists are encouraged to dedicate time and effort not only to the formal study of Buddhist teachings and reading of sutras, to Buddhist meditation and ethical cultivation, but also to various social engagement programs. Throughout my fieldwork, the temple offered a wide range of programs for lay

Buddhists, including weekly Dharma classes, meditation programs, weekend retreats for children, young adults and the elderly, as well as a myriad of volunteering activities and philanthropic projects. In many Dharma lectures and publications, the abbot has instructed lay Buddhists to refrain from engaging in popular religious practices, including votive paper burning and giving offerings to the inauspicious stars (*cúng sao giải hạn*). In fact, during my fieldwork, these activities were discouraged from being performed in Buddhist temples by the National Vietnam Buddhist Sangha and, in the case of the latter, considered as not belonging to Buddhism, but rather to Daoism.¹⁰

GN temple's modernist framing of Buddhism and programs have attracted a large number of lay Buddhists, the majority of whom were university-educated young adults, educators, professionals and entrepreneurs—members of the new middle-class in post-reform Vietnam (Earl 2014; Leshkovich 2014). During my fieldwork, the weekend retreats saw the participation of 500 lay Buddhists on average. In my interviews with many of the young Buddhists and patrons of the temple, they approached Buddhism in a distinctly modernist fashion. While they commonly expressed interest in reading Buddhist sutras, debating philosophical concepts, practicing meditation and participating in volunteering activities, they often described popular devotional religious practices of their older family members, colleagues, petty traders as superstitious or non-Buddhist.

Although very few of the lay Buddhists at the temple with whom I talked explicitly addressed the topic of anti-China sentiment or participation in governmental offices (those who did viewed the abbot's strong nationalist sentiments with some ambivalence), they generally supported the abbot's endeavour to reformulate Vietnamese Buddhism and to expand the influence of Buddhism in local and national public life. One example of this is the temple's successful campaign to encourage lay Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike to sign up for organ donation (*hiến tạng*) and body donation after death (*hiến xác*). In late 2019, the temple successfully mobilised more than 1000 people, including the temple's followers, to sign up and earned a national record for being the first Buddhist institution in Vietnam to have organised such a campaign. The temple first initiated the program in 2014 in partnership with a public medical university in Ho Chi Minh City and managed to recruit 215 monastics and lay Buddhists to sign up. Since 2016, it also partnered with the National Centre for the Coordination of Organ Transplants in Hanoi and

one of the medical universities in Ho Chi Minh City to organise a yearly event at the temple—known as the ‘ceremony for organ and body donations’—to promote and raise awareness about the cause. The event provided a platform for the abbot and state medical officials to address certain socio-cultural fears about body and organ donation. The event was live-streamed on the temple’s social media platforms.

The uneasiness toward organ and body donation can be attributed to a myriad of reasons. The pervasive fear stems in part from different religio-cultural concerns about the relationship between one’s physical body and spirit. There is a belief that the body of the dead needs to be complete and remain intact at the moment of burial to guarantee his/her complete entering to the afterlife and/or having a good rebirth.¹¹ Concurrently, as one member of the audience in the 2017 ceremony for organ and body donation, which I was able to attend, shared, there is also a theory taught by many Buddhist monastics that if one donates his/her organs to another person, those organs remain alive upon one’s death. This will cause attachments and prevent one from being reborn. Moreover, there is a concern that in accepting someone else’s organs, the recipient will take on some of the attributes, both physical and spiritual, of the donor; this is particularly a concern when the donor was a criminal, for example.¹²

Besides these religio-cultural concerns, organ and body donation can provoke other ethical issues. For example, at the 2017 event, participants expressed concerns over who would be the recipients of the donated organs. One participant revealed that despite her efforts to encourage her friends and family members to consider donating their organs and blood, she met with much scepticism from these individuals who thought that only the rich and government officials can afford the medical procedures for organ and blood transplants, and that the poor cannot access these previously freely donated resources. Furthermore, people were wary of news and stories about organ and blood trafficking, particularly as these activities were rumoured to be committed by Vietnamese/Chinese organ trafficking networks.

Responding to these issues, the abbot argued during the Q&A portion of the 2017 ceremony that the religio-cultural fears toward body donations in Vietnam stemmed partly from Chinese folk religions and ‘fundamentalist’ (*cực đoan*) understandings of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism. In proper Buddhist understanding, he explained,

upon the moment of death, one's consciousness (*tâm thức*) transmigrates to another foetus and gets reborn in a new physical body after nine to ten months. As such, one cannot feel the pain or get attached to the physical body left behind because one's consciousness already moves on to be embedded in the next physical manifestations. Moreover, the abbot instructed that in classical Buddhist texts, the Buddha discusses how the gifting of physical materials, including both monetary and bodily donations to those in need, constitutes *Dāna pāramī*, or charitable gifting, one of the ten marks of ethical perfections. In fact, the abbot argued, those who are willing to give and donate a part of themselves practice and embody the Buddhist teachings of non-self and impermanence, thus generating good merits for themselves and others.

Pertaining to the issues of organ trafficking and of who can gain access to the medical resources for blood transfusion and organ transplants, both the abbot and the state representatives encouraged people to focus more on the positive and ethical importance of donations, rather than on the negative stories. During the 2017 event, the representatives from the state medical institutions argued that even though instances of organ purchasing and trafficking had happened, that should not be a reason to deter one from performing the good deeds. Organ transplants are complicated procedures; whether an organ can be used depends on the quality and the fit. The head abbot further added that when one donates his/her organs and body for medical purposes, the intention and the desire (*tâm nguyện*) to do so are what matter:

In the worst-case scenario when, in one way or another, the organs we donated are bought and sold, we should still think: the act of gifting has been done, and at least the organs have been put to use no matter whether they were bought or given freely. The important thing is that we have the desire for others to continue living, and our genuine wish has been fulfilled. From the perspectives of karma, those who did wrong will be subjected to the punishment of the law, and even when they escape the law somehow, they can never escape the law of karma.¹³

By drawing on the universalising Buddhist teachings of non-self, karma and impermanence, the campaign promotes a vision of ethical subjectivity and citizenship predicated on a notion of 'unlimited

goodness’ (Weller et al. 2018: 124; 200): potential donors perform the ethical act of gifting to and caring for ‘strangers’ beyond their immediate social and familial networks. In fact, one can argue here that virtues associated with Confucian familialism and filial piety are downplayed, criticised as ‘non-Buddhist’ and deemed as not desirable as the Buddhist virtue of ‘non-self’ and *Dāna pāramī*. As the quotation from the head abbot above indicates, in the performance of organ and body donations, what matters is the donor’s genuine desire and intention to give up and sacrifice a part of oneself to save others, whatever the eventual result might be. Organ and body donations then become an exemplary practice of Buddhist virtues. The physical body, within this context, becomes an important component of the emerging Buddhist infrastructure: it is shaped by, but also embodies and conveys, the imaginary of a renewed Vietnamese Buddhism, one that is modern, socially engaged and purified of ‘Chinese’ religio-cultural influences.

The success of the campaign—based on the noticeable increase of the number of people who have signed up for organ and body donation within the span of five years (from 215 in 2014 to more than 1000 in 2019)—could be attributed to a variety of reasons, including the appeal of the ethical discourse of ‘unlimited goodness’ among Buddhist followers of the temple, the use of social media and generous funding from the temple’s patrons. It is also important to acknowledge that the campaign has received enduring support from the state medical institutions, particularly one of the public medical universities in Ho Chi Minh City and the National Centre for the Coordination of Organ Transplants in Hanoi. This partnership between GN temple and the state medical apparatus should not be seen as what Weller et al. (2018: 70) conceive as ‘defensive’ political merit-making—that is, religious institutions attempt to get on a good side of the state by using philanthropy to contribute to the state’s economic and political agendas—as in the case of China. Rather, I would argue that the case of the organ and body donation campaign at GN temple resembles more of what Weller et al. (2018: 74) identify as state-religion mutualism, but not quite to the same extent as the mutualism found between Buddhist institutions and the state in Taiwan.

Contrary to the case of the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi in Taiwan that has managed to establish its own hospital and medical schools and successfully run campaigns to call for organ

and body donations (Huang 2017: 77-87), Buddhist institutions in Vietnam are not allowed to establish their own medical institutions. As such, to become an active player within the field of medical care, Vietnamese Buddhist institutions have to partner with the state medical apparatus. At the same time, in the case of organ and body donations, the public medical university in Ho Chi Minh City and the National Centre for the Coordination of Organ Transplants in Hanoi need to rely on the religious authority of Buddhist institutions to address religio-cultural taboos and prohibitions surrounding death and burial.

The close-knit collaborations between GN temple and the state medical apparatus, however, do engender some public suspicion and discomfort. During the 2017 ceremony, as the event was being live-streamed on Facebook, a few online viewers expressed their disagreement with the campaign via live comments. While some comments criticised the abbot and his teaching, saying that 'the Buddha did not promote any kind of donation', others focused on the futility of bodily donations because, as these viewers claimed, Vietnamese people had all been poisoned by Chinese chemicals, and on how the donation effort was a conspiracy driven by the Chinese communist party.

In many ways, the increased proximity between many Buddhist institutions and the state has become an important component of the emerging Buddhist infrastructure in Vietnam. I will now turn to the large, coordinated effort to organise the United Nations Day of Vesak (UNDV) in Vietnam in 2019 as a site where Buddhism, nationalistic imaginaries and debates surrounding socio-economic development and wealth became entangled.

The United Nations Day of Vesak: Scaling up Vietnamese Buddhism

Among the international Buddhist communities, the United Nations Day of Vesak is an important cultural festival and academic conference organised to celebrate the birth, enlightenment and passing-away of the Buddha. It is also an international relations event where Buddhist and political leaders around the world gather and engage in discussions on how Buddhist communities can advance the United Nations' developmental goals. After the first international celebration at the UN headquarters in New York City in 2000, UNDV has been organised and celebrated annually in other Asian countries,

with Thailand being the regular host of the event, followed by Vietnam as host three times and Sri Lanka once.¹⁴

The 2019 celebration was the third time that Vietnam had been selected as host, a fact widely celebrated by the Vietnamese government, the National Buddhist Sangha and the media. The abbot of GN temple was a key member of the organising committee, and he was tasked with the organisation of the cultural events and the international academic conference. Throughout the preparation of the UNDV, the abbot mobilised his networks of patrons and followers at the temple to contribute to the organisation of the academic conference. Many patrons and lay Buddhists voluntarily dedicated time, money and effort into the printing and editing of the conference materials (both in English and Vietnamese), as well as communication with international delegates.

UNDV 2019 took place between 12-14 May 2019 in Ha Nam province in northern Vietnam, about 50 km from the capital of Hanoi. During the last few months leading up to the UNDV, I observed an air of excitement, but also intensity, within the Buddhist community. At GN temple, the small team of UNDV staff—predominantly, well-educated, professional women ranging from mid-30s to 60s recruited to assist with the event—and other lay Buddhist volunteers worked around the clock to process the registration and accommodation requests of international delegates. The UNDV organising committee was keen on increasing the number of countries represented at the event, so the team had to contact Buddhist organisations from all over the world. Meanwhile, to celebrate Vietnam's being selected as host of the event and to create wider public awareness, the temple's monastics incorporated the teaching of the Vesak celebratory song and dance in their weekend retreats for children and young adults.

Beyond GN temple, organising and coordinating efforts were also in full swing in Hanoi and Ha Nam. Because of UNDV's international scale, monastics from the National Buddhist Sangha had to work together with different governmental offices, embassies, immigration bureaus and police forces to ensure the success of the event. A large number of volunteers, particularly university students in Hanoi, were recruited and given training by Buddhist institutions in the area. In Ha Nam itself, the construction of a brand-new temple complex called *Tam Chúc*, with an impressive convention centre (Figure 3), was sped up to be able to accommodate the expected thousands of national and international delegates. The complex, occupying an

area of around 5000 hectares (50 square kilometres), was constructed by an infrastructural company run by a well-known Vietnamese billionaire. The company was also responsible for constructing the *Bái Đính* temple complex in the adjacent Ninh Binh province, the location of the 2014 UNDV when Vietnam hosted the event the second time. The long-term plan of the company was to connect the two temple complexes and a few other spiritual sites together, creating a long stretch of ‘spiritual road’ (*con đường tâm linh*) where tourists can visit these important sites and the beautiful landscape, while enjoying the available luxurious facilities, such as hotels, restaurants and well-being resorts.



Figure 3: Tam Chúc Temple’s Convention Center before the start of UNDV 2019. *Source:* Photo by Dat Manh Nguyen, 2019.

The construction of such a ‘spiritual tourism’ (*du lịch tâm linh*) infrastructure, of which the *Tam Chúc* Buddhist temple and its convention center were a part, received some criticism from the media. In early 2019, a few months prior to the start of UNDV, various articles appeared on different domestic and international Vietnamese news sites, questioning the nature of these new, large Buddhist complexes. While one article raised concerns about the sources of monetary

investments (how much was public funding and how much was private), others criticised these large temple complexes as a form of money-making using spiritual and religious means.¹⁵

Responding to these critiques in an interview with another major newspaper, the abbot of GN temple argued that even though Vietnam currently has more than 18,000 Buddhist temples across the country, the majority of them are small and cannot accommodate a large number of people. When one compares the *Tam Chúc* temple complex to other major religious structures around the world, particularly those of the Christian or Islamic traditions, the abbot contended, it is still smaller in size:

As Vietnam is escaping poverty, we collectively need to cultivate an ambitious outlook and mind set (*tâm nhìn lớn, tư duy lớn*) ... We need to have impressive spiritual centres, with the capacity to accommodate thousands of people, so that we can provide more [social] services (*phụng sự*) within that same amount of time and dedication. This is because we are living in an era of the 4.0 revolution,¹⁶ the fourth industrial revolution, where everything is changing and developing at a breakneck pace.¹⁷

The abbot, however, was careful in pointing out that he does not support attracting people to Buddhism based on impressive material infrastructures alone. Buddhist temples, he argued, need to also convey other spiritual, moral and therapeutic values, and offer people new knowledge and ways to alleviate their sufferings. These components would naturally bring people to these sites, he contended. Nevertheless, the abbot held that Vietnam needs these sites to attract tourists and improve the country's economy. 'We have been trying to do that for decades Why don't we build larger infrastructures, in many aspects, from a 4.0 mind set to a 4.0 infrastructure? If we continue to think in a 0.4 manner, how can Vietnam reach further regionally and globally?' asked the abbot in the same interview.

The UNDV came to a successful closing on 14 May 2019. It welcomed more than 1650 international delegates from 112 countries and regions, as well as more than 3000 domestic delegates, according to the official reported statistics.¹⁸ UNDV 2019 also won two world records – one for the largest assembly for the prayer of peace and one for a Buddhist tower with the most advanced golden bell system – as well as ten other Vietnamese national records for programs and activities related to Buddhist culture and academic conferences.¹⁹ It was also at the

UNDV 2019 that the National Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam introduced their official social media network, *Butta*, with a website and multiple smartphone applications where lay Buddhists can access not only Buddhist studies resources (including sutras, live-streamed Dharma talks, remote learning), but also official updates from Buddhist institutions.

The short snippets of the UNDV organisational efforts demonstrate three important aspects of the emerging Buddhist infrastructure in Vietnam. First, as the response of the abbot highlights, investments in Buddhist infrastructure, including large temple complexes, social media networks and the organisation of large international Buddhist cultural events, show how Buddhism has been discursively and materially connected to Vietnam's (future) economic prowess and socio-political position within the region. The emerging Buddhist infrastructure thus indexes Vietnam's willingness to engage with the market and the 4.0 Industrial Revolution, along with the central role of Buddhism and the Buddhist establishment in helping Vietnam move forward to the future.

Second, the hosting of the UNDV in Vietnam in 2019 contributes to the recognition of Buddhism as a form of soft power in Vietnam. Despite its commitment to secular atheist ideologies (Ngo and Quijada 2015), the Vietnamese state has shown strong support to the organisation of the UNDV, an international Buddhist event. Considering the fact that it has not provided such support for other religious groups, one can argue that Buddhism occupies an important role in Vietnam's socio-cultural and political diplomacy to other countries, particularly those in Asia. The hosting of UNDV in Vietnam solidifies Vietnam's status as a country with a strong, distinctive Buddhist culture and history. Moreover, it demonstrates, on an international stage, Vietnam's commitment to advancing the United Nations' development goals, to international peace-making/keeping, as well as to religious freedom (at least for those organisations deemed to have made significant contributions to the country's economic and social development).

Last but not least, the successful organisation of the UNDV points to the dialogic relationships among the state, Buddhist institutions, private businesses and the middle-class. Here, Buddhism becomes entangled with nationalist and diplomatic interests, international tourism, economic development, as well as market logics. As the critiques toward the *Tam Chúc* temple complex where the UNDV was

organised show, these entanglements have been subject to scepticism and suspicion, particularly as to whether these grand Buddhist events and infrastructures reflect an authentic Buddhism or simply a means for political and economic gains. The response of the abbot and the support of the government, local corporations and businesses given to UNDV suggest a relationship of mutualism. While Buddhist infrastructure has been mobilised as a venue through which certain visions of economic prosperity and nationalism can be achieved, Buddhist institutions rely on the support of the state, businesses and the middle-class to further solidify their status and role in national cultural and geo-politics.

Conclusion

Writing about religion and nationalism, Peter van der Veer (2013: 660) makes the following observation about the role of religion in forming the relations between society and state and between society and individual: 'On the one hand religious institutions enable notions of individual conscience and civilised conduct; on the other hand notions of public awareness, the public, and public opinion are produced by religious movements'. Bringing an infrastructural view to this analysis, I have shown that the emerging Buddhist infrastructure in Vietnam facilitates the constitution of a particular public, one in which Buddhist ethical discourses and practices play a central role in shaping Vietnam's national culture and its future socio-economic and political development, including its relationships to China and other Buddhist heartlands in Asia.

As the examples of the GN temple's programs and the organisation of UNDV 2019 in Vietnam demonstrate, this public is predicated on a project of ethical 'coordination' (Keane 2016) that brings together Buddhist ethical discourses, middle-class values and personhood and nationalist historical narratives. On the one hand, the process of coordination entails the delineation and transformation of boundaries between what constitutes 'Vietnamese-ness' and 'Chinese-ness', but also between what is Buddhist and non-Buddhist. On the other hand, it incorporates class distinctions through the strategic targeting, recalibrating and mobilising of the new middle-class in Vietnam in furthering the emerging Buddhist infrastructure and Buddhism's role in Vietnamese cultural and geo-politics. Throughout the paper, I have shown instances where this project of ethical coordination might be critiqued or resisted by lay

Buddhists or certain media channels. These perspectives demonstrate that while becoming increasingly strengthened, the mobilisation of Buddhism for nationalistic and economic purposes is an incomplete project and has uneven effects on lay Buddhists and Vietnamese society.

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NOTES

- 1 All translations of Vietnamese materials are my own.
- 2 Thích Nhật Từ 2018. 'Visao "Dự luật Đơn vị Hành chính – Kinh tế Đặc biệt" bị phản đối' (Why is the 'Proposal for the Special Economic Zones' Opposed?). <https://www.facebook.com/ThichNhatTu/posts/1944288075595147> (accessed 28 December 2019).
- 3 These are the sutra collections that the abbot compiled and edited himself. These collections are distributed for free at his temple and used for chanting during rituals at the temple.
- 4 Đạo Phật Ngày Nay (Buddhism Today) 2018. 'TT. Thích Nhật Từ trả lời về cuộc biểu tình "Luật đặc khu kinh tế"' (Most Venerable Thich Nhat Tu Answers Questions about the Protest against the "Special Economic Zones" Proposal). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdXp73VozaY> (accessed 01 June 2020).
- 5 I rely here on Joseph Nye's (2008: 94) classic definition: 'Soft power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcome one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment. A country's soft power rests on its resources of culture, values, and policies'.

- 6 My use of the term ‘the new middle-class’ here follows Anne Marie Leshkovich’s (2014: 182) distinction between the ‘old middle class of petty traders’ and the ‘new middle-class’ of well-educated, white-collar professionals and entrepreneurs (see also Earl 2014: 17). It is important also to recognise that there is diversity within the Vietnamese new middle-class, with people having differential access to wealth, education, social power, as well as connections to governmental offices.
- 7 Alexander Soucy (2022) has written about a similar trend in his study of the Trúc Lâm Zen organisation in Vietnam, where lay practitioners are taught to approach Buddhism as a form of ‘total life practice’, and where Trúc Lâm Zen has been portrayed as a uniquely Vietnamese tradition. The temple discussed in this paper is not part of the Trúc Lâm Zen organisation, and as such, represents another (though not completely separate) approach to how Buddhist organisations can make claims on Vietnamese cultural identity.
- 8 For a theoretical look at the relationship between infrastructure and publics, see Anand 2017 and Appel, Anand and Gupta 2018.
- 9 I have written more extensively elsewhere about the abbot’s comprehensive plan for a new approach to lay Buddhist education, including new forms of weekend retreats for lay Buddhists. See Nguyen 2022.
- 10 Vietnam National Buddhist Sangha 2018. ‘Công văn Số: 031/CV-HĐTS V/v tăng cường nét đẹp văn hóa truyền thống dân tộc tại các cơ sở thờ tự Phật giáo’ (Dispatch: 031/CV-HĐTS on Enhancing the Beauty of People’s Traditional Culture in Buddhist Worship Spaces). <https://phatgiao.org.vn/ghpgvn-cong-van-huong-dan-to-chuc-le-hoi-nam-2018-d29979.html> (accessed 27 December 2022); Vietnam National Buddhist Sangha 2019. ‘Công văn Số: 033/CV-HĐTS V/v tổ chức nghi lễ nguyện cầu bình an cho Phật tử và nhân dân tại các chùa nhân dịp đầu Xuân mới’ (Dispatch: 033/CV-HĐTS on the Organization of Peace Praying Rituals for Lay Buddhists and the People in Buddhist Temples on the Lunar New Year) <https://phatgiao.org.vn/giao-hoi-phat-giao-viet-nam-chinh-thuc-ra-thong-bao-ve-viec-dang-sao-giai-han-d33953.html> (accessed 27 December 2022). In Dispatch 33, the Sangha argued that the offering ritual to the inauspicious stars is not a Buddhist ritual, but it comes from ‘Daoist philosophy that has been integrated with Buddhism via the tradition of Three Teachings (*Tam Giáo*).’ While the tradition of the Three Teachings has been widely recognised as the religious foundation of Vietnamese culture, Dispatch 33 reflects a conscious attempt of the Sangha to delineate the boundaries among the religious traditions.
- 11 Scholars of East Asia have attributed this belief to the Confucian emphasis on *xiao*, or filial piety, and have seen this emphasis as a prohibition against body donations (see Jones and Nie 2018 for a review of the literature). In the case of Vietnam, the importance of the intactness of the dead body for rituals can be seen in concern over the ‘bad death’ of soldiers during the Vietnam War (Kwon 2008).
- 12 In the 2017 event, the abbot discussed the case of a recent prisoner in Vietnam who, prior to his execution, expressed the wish to donate his organ and body for medical purposes. There continued to be a debate about the laws and ethics of body donation from prisoners on death penalty. The abbot considered the desire of prisoners to donate their organs as an ethical act that can help transform their karma and allow them to repent for their wrong doings. See the case here: Nguyễn Huệ 2017. ‘Thông tin từ tù Nguyễn Hải Dương được hiến tạng cho y học: Bộ Y tế lên tiếng’ (On the News that Convict Nguyen Hai Duong can

- Donate Organs for Medical Studies: Ministry of Medicine Responds). <https://baomoi.com/thong-tin-tu-tu-nguyen-hai-duong-duoc-hien-tang-cho-y-hoc-bo-y-te-len-tieng/r/23988938.epi> (accessed 1 November 2019).
- 13 Đạo Phật Ngày Nay (Buddhism Today) 2017. 'Ngày hội đăng ký Hiến mô, tạng cứu người và hiến xác cho khoa học' (Ceremony to Sign up for Organ Donations to Save People and Body Donations for Science). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JSyT2nyell> (accessed 1 November 2019).
 - 14 Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the UNDV did not take place in 2020. In 2021, it was celebrated virtually. In 2022, it was celebrated both virtually and on-site in Thailand.
 - 15 VietNamNet 2019. 'Nhập nhèm phía sau ngôi chùa lớn nhất thế giới' (Behind the Largest Buddhist Temple in the World). <https://vietnamnet.vn/nhap-nhem-phia-sau-ngoi-chua-lon-nhat-the-gioi-510127.html> (accessed 22 May 2022); BBC News Tiếng Việt 2019. 'Ý kiến: "Xây chùa hoành tráng nhưng vô hồn"' (Opinion: "Building Grand, but Soulless, Buddhist Temples"). <https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam-47301899> (accessed 22 May 2022).
 - 16 Since 2017, the Vietnamese government has called attention to and initiated a series of socio-economic policies to prepare Vietnam for the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution', or 'Industry 4.0' – a concept used by Klaus Schwab to encapsulate the intensity, breadth and velocity that new digital technologies and artificial intelligence are transforming and disrupting the various domains of human lives (2016). The term has caught the attention of the Vietnamese Buddhist community. One of the conference themes at the UNDV 2019 was, 'Buddhism and the Fourth Industrial Revolution', where panellists were asked to reflect on the ways that new technology has changed Buddhism and Buddhist Studies, but also how Buddhism can contribute to social life under the fourth industrial revolution.
 - 17 Đạo Phật Ngày Nay (Buddhism Today) 2019. 'Vì sao VN cần có những ngôi chùa lớn như Bái Đính hay chùa Tam Chúc – TT. Thích Nhật Từ' (Why does Vietnam Need Large Temples like Bai Dinh or Tam Chuc Temples – Most Ven. ThichNhatTu). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYCKDqbgw1E> (accessed 6 June 2022).
 - 18 Báo Thế giới và Việt Nam 2019. 'Đại lễ Vesak 2019 thành công rực rỡ'. (Vesak 2019 is a Big Success) <https://baoquocte.vn/dai-le-vesak-2019-thanh-cong-ruc-ro-94136.html> (accessed 6 June 2022).
 - 19 Báo Tin Tức 2019. '12 Kỷ Lục Được Xác Lập Tại Đại Lễ Vesak 2019' (12 Records Established at Vesak 2019). <https://baotintuc.vn/infographics/12-ky-luc-duoc-xac-lap-tai-dai-le-vesak-2019-20190515100214485.htm> (accessed 6 June 2022).

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