Mooring Buddhism: Chinese Infrastructures and Buddhist School Building in Central Namibia

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Abstract

This article addresses the introduction of Buddhism to southern Africa in recent decades as part of the growing Chinese infrastructure on the continent. Based upon over thirty months of in-depth ethnographic research conducted at a Buddhist NGO in Central Namibia between 2021 and 2024, this article argues that, rather than serving as a source of spiritual inspiration and fulfilment, Buddhism in this context has become a form of (Chinese) infrastructure that enables and disables specific ways of acting, speaking and living among the Namibians who work at the NGO. It shows how Buddhism as a form of infrastructure slowly, subtly, yet surely becomes moored in the daily lives of the local people.

Keywords: *Chinese infrastructure; religion as infrastructure; Buddhist school building; mooring Buddhism; Namibia*

Introduction

A group of 18 children from Namibia, ranging from ten to 14 years of age, was on a large stage in Kuala Lumpur on 28 July 2023, giving a Buddhist-themed kung fu performance to the audience (Figure 1). It was their ninth and final performance during a southeast Asian appreciation tour (*gan'enzhilü* in Chinese) that had lasted for the past two months. Since early June, these children had been touring around cities in Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as Singapore, meeting current and potential donors and presenting dances, songs and martial arts that they had learned and practiced for years before this trip (Figure 2). One of the main purposes of the tour was to confirm and reinforce a 'mutual caring relationship', often

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described as a child-parent relationship, between the children from Africa and the donors from Asia. In doing so, they could secure continuous flows of money, resources and faith from Asia for the sake of Buddhism's successful transmission to the African continent.

Figure 1: The Namibian children's kung fu performance in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. *Source*: Photo by Yasmin Cho, 2023.

Figure 2: Southeast Asian Appreciation Tour poster. *Source*: Photo by Yasmin Cho, 2023.

These children were from a boarding school in Namibia founded by a Taiwanese Buddhist charity organisation called Amitofo Care Centre (ACC, *Amituofo guanhuai zhongxin*). During the tour, apart from their performances, the children were also participating in various other activities such as visiting local Buddhist temples, corporations, schools and theme parks. All the activities were organised and sponsored by ethnic Chinese devotees and their networks in each country, and the main language spoken during the tour was Mandarin Chinese.[1] Later that same year, between December and January, 22 children from Namibia once again toured around Taiwan and Hong Kong for the same purpose.

For the past 20 years, the ACC's charity work in Africa has been an example of Chinese Buddhism's unique ability to draw ongoing financial support from its devotees across Asia, or from what Fenggang Yang (2018) calls the 'global East'.[2] Venerable Huili, a former member of the Taiwanese *renjian* Buddhist lineage, Foguangshan,[3] built the ACC's first school (which was more like an orphanage at the time) in Malawi in 2004. Since then, his school-building project has extended to neighbouring countries, making for a total of seven schools across six countries in southern Africa; the school in Namibia is his fourth campus.[4] The ACC focuses on children from vulnerable environments and provides them with free education from pre-primary to high school—and, in some cases, college—so that these children will grow up to be, as the organisation often phrases it, 'a new generation of Africans (*xinyidai feizhouren*) who are equipped with knowledge of Chinese language and culture, a strong sense of morality [largely Confucian moral values], and Buddhism'. Several thousand children in southern Africa have attended these schools; currently, over 1500 children are receiving an education at the ACC's seven campuses. One of the ultimate goals of Ven. Huili and his followers is to establish a Buddhist college (*foxueyuan*) populated and run by African monks and nuns. This is also how Ven. Huili differentiates the ACC's mission from other Buddhist organisations and activities on the continent, which largely focus on fulfilling the religious and cultural needs of Chinese immigrant populations.[5]

To facilitate intensive participant observation, I worked and lived at the ACC in Namibia (hereafter, the Centre), in an overseas volunteer capacity, for two years and seven months beginning in 2021. Since the ACC is run by a small number of overseas staff (largely from Taiwan),[6] I was asked to fulfil various kinds of tasks as

needed; these ranged from being an administrative staff, an afternoon teacher, a purchasing agent, a driver and an organiser of meetings, training sessions and workshops. The nature of the work was often spontaneous and need-based. The overseas staff are not always hired for their work-related abilities, but often for their willingness to live in Africa for a long-term period. A combination of ACC's staff shortages and generous expectations about my expertise culminated in a unique opportunity to become involved in cross-divisional tasks that might not have been possible in other large charity organisations. By jumping between departments and duties and by working side-by-side with both Namibian and overseas staff, I was able to closely and flexibly observe the day-to-day affairs at the Centre for an extensive period of time.

What I noticed continuously during these long-term ethnographic engagements was the essential role that 'China' has played at each step of the ACC's operation and expansion. The meanings of 'China' are multilayered, with connotations ranging from the economic to the cultural. These include the People's Republic of China's recent, visible economic presence on the African continent; the economic stability and cultural bonds of Chinese diasporic communities in southeast Asia; and the emergence and global influence of Taiwanese *renjian* Buddhist organisations such as Foguangshan, Fagushan and Tzuchi over the past several decades.

Using 'China' as a keyword to understand the ACC's existence and development, as I worked closely with the Namibian staff and observed the children's daily lives, I also began to think about how Buddhism plays a role at the Centre beyond being the source of donations from overseas. More specifically, I began to wonder if Buddhism has started 'spreading' in Namibia as Ven. Huili and his followers have envisioned it would. Perhaps it is premature to ask such a question because the ACC's work of introducing Buddhism in Africa is still in a nascent stage and its impact as a source of spiritual inspiration in host societies is meagre. This is even more obvious when one compares the ACC's 20-year history with the centuries of Christian missionary and evangelistic activities in southern Africa (Milk 2022). Although the ways in which Namibian lives and worldviews have become deeply saturated with Christianity is a topic for another paper, the contrast between Christianity and Buddhism provides a useful comparative point for the argument I make in this paper: first, that Buddhism in Central Namibia functions

as a form of infrastructure that is being 'moored' in the lives of the local people, rather than as a spiritual experience that can 'spread' and inspire souls; and second, that Buddhism is socioeconomically and culturally bound to the emerging Chinese presence in Africa and around the globe.

This article defines infrastructure as extending to include not only physical materials but also the accumulated knowledge, practices and activities (Simone 2004) that are in circulation and that facilitate daily life in various ways. In other words, I consider infrastructure in both its hard and soft forms, where hard infrastructure includes physical objects such as pipes, wires and roads, and soft infrastructure is made up of the invisible networks, systems and practices that constitute the routines and rhythms of daily life. Infrastructure is comprised of the things, practices and ways of interacting that, once they are acknowledged, established and deemed proper and natural, eventually fade into the background to become a platform that shapes spaces and forms of transaction. In doing so, they enable the daily lives of people in specific ways.[7] Infrastructure encompasses the material, social and value-generative interactions and exchanges that are accepted and moored in life over time.

In the Namibian context, Buddhism functions as both hard and soft infrastructure. For most of the Namibians I associated with, Buddhism does not convey spiritual messages that spread out to their wider networks and neighbourhoods, but it has slowly become part of the background of their lives, just like the underground water pipes or the routine habits and practices that shape how things are done. Infrastructure catches our attention when it malfunctions or 'attacks' (Chu 2014), when we are forced to realise the inconvenience or anomalies of not having it in our lives. Buddhism's introduction in Central Namibia has been similar to this, becoming 'moored' in daily life as it slowly begins to dictate the daily rhythms and habits of those who live or work at the Centre or in the nearby town. When Buddhist-informed daily behaviours (such as the no-killing principle, which will be discussed later in this article) are disrupted, people suddenly sense the presence of the Buddhist components in their lives more strongly than usual. Buddhism usually remains submerged as part of the routines at the Centre; but it surfaces occasionally and renews itself in the awareness of the Namibian staff members when its core principles are violated, or when the staff is reminded that Buddhism is, in fact, still foreign (of the outside, alien in character) to conventional Namibian life.

In the sections that follow, through my ethnographic experiences in town and with the local staff, I look at how Chinese economic development merges with Buddhist discourses and vice versa in the ACC's operation, and how this amalgam makes Buddhism part of the Chinese infrastructure in central Namibia.

The Infrastructural Presence of the Centre and of Buddhism

The ACC's Namibian campus is located on an isolated piece of farmland that is 70 kilometres north of the capital city of Windhoek. It is on the outskirts of the nearby town of Okahandja, which has a population of approximately 25,000.[8] The campus includes several large structures that serve as the main office building, kitchen and warehouse. There are also several two-story dormitory buildings for the staff and the children. The school complex is separated from these main buildings by a large dirt soccer field. While the Centre's buildings differ in size depending on their function, a few stand out for their imposing size and distinctive Chinese-style roofs (Figure 3). The campus functions almost like a gated village, with its own solar powerhouse and several underground water sources. The construction materials used to build the campus are not impressive in themselves (mostly prefab metal and cement), but the Centre's colossal size—both some of its buildings and the land that they sit on—makes it discernible from a distance. However, due to its isolated location, the campus does not immediately register in the awareness of the residents in Okahandja. Although the public recognition of the Centre is growing slowly each year, most people in the town still do not know about its existence. Those who say they have heard of the Centre refer to it as the 'Chinese school', and they think that the school is for Chinese children, which is not true. Few residents have actually seen the school and even fewer (almost no one) know that it is a Buddhist organisation.

Figure 3: Large, red, Chinese-style roofs at the Centre. *Source*: Photo by Yasmin Cho, 2023.

The Centre accepted its first group of Namibian children in 2016, and as of 2024 it houses over 250 students from pre-primary to grade 8. The approximately 35 children that the Centre accepts each year are chosen through a rigorous selection process. The most important criterion for selection is the level of financial, familial or environmental vulnerability the child experiences. More than half of the children who are selected are from far northern regions where the population density is higher and the economic situation is overall direr than in the other parts of the country; the rest of the children come from the various central regions. Only a small number of children are from the vicinity of the Centre. The Centre dispatches a home-visit team to the northern and central regions each year to visit the children's homes, assess their living situations, and meet and talk to the parent or guardian who made the application for their child's admission. For most of the year, except for an end-of-year vacation when they return home, the children stay on campus where they go to school, have meals, play and sleep. For this reason, the children at the Centre are also virtually invisible to the people in town.

Despite this invisibility, however, traces of the Centre register in Okahandja in another, more concrete way. On a regular basis each month, the Centre purchases several hundred kilograms of groceries, including rice, spaghetti noodles, maize flour, cooking oil, sugar and so on, from the town's shops and vendors. More than 300 loaves of bread, over 1000 eggs and the same number of pieces of fruit are ordered and delivered each week. In addition, when the Centre's water pump breaks down, which happens frequently, 400-500 litres of filtered water must be purchased from the town's water shop. When the Centre's solar electricity system malfunctions, several hundred litres of diesel and petrol for fuel generators must also be purchased from the town's gas stations. School supplies and toiletries for the children must be bought regularly, including stationery, hats, mufflers, school bags, water bottles, shoes, soap, buckets, toothpaste and so on. As a volunteer worker, I routinely helped to procure these essential items by driving to several local shops and vendors to order and purchase goods. After a few weeks of running around the town with a list of items to buy, I could sense that when I walked into the shops, some of the clerks would approach and greet me immediately and begin 'getting ready' because they knew that this woman (from the Chinese school) would always buy in bulk. Since the Centre's opening in 2014, its material presence in town has been largely unassuming because of its isolated location, but its economic impact is real and continues to increase. In other words, the Centre may not appear to be vividly present in the daily life of the townspeople, but its steady purchasing power and daily procurement of goods, as well as the employment opportunities it provides (with currently around 40 full-time Namibian employees and the number keeps growing), have a concrete and steady economic impact in this small town.

Because the Centre is known as the 'Chinese school' to many of the local residents and because of the Centre's cautiousness about religious proselytisation, its Buddhist aspect remains equally unobtrusive in town. Inside the campus, however, a set of Buddhist routines is strictly upheld, and these distinctive routines dictate the daily rhythms of the Centre. Twice a day (early in the morning and right before dinner) for half an hour, all the children attend mandatory Buddhist classes in which they chant, meditate and sometimes listen to a short lecture prepared by Chinese staff.[9] If a monk or a nun from Taiwan is residing on the campus, these Buddhist classes are led and guided by this monastic figure.[10] Furthermore, the Centre implements

a strict vegetarian policy as one of its foundational regulations. Given Namibia's predominantly meat-centric cuisine, vegetarianism has one of the most striking and immediate effects on the lives of Namibians working at the Centre (this topic will be discussed in the later sections of this article). Many Namibian visitors to the campus find the Centre's strict vegetarian policies enigmatic; they often pose questions about it and express their concerns about proper nutrition for the children's meals. Another Buddhist practice on campus is the strict gender-divided living arrangements that apply not only to the dormitories for the staff and the children, but also to the sitting arrangements in the dining hall.

Vegetarianism and gender-segregated living arrangements reflect the basic Buddhist teachings and way of life. The Centre deliberately implements these rules as a Buddhist organisation; these rules signal the Centre's Buddhist identification and its spiritual basis (and moral superiority to some extent), which in turn guarantees continuous donations from Buddhist devotees in Asia. But for the Namibian employees, these arrangements seem nothing more than a set of foreign moral principles, rules and regulations imposed on them as a condition of their employment in a workplace run by a Taiwanese (Chinese) organisation. For instance, when vegetarianism was explained as an unnegotiable rule that must be followed on campus because Buddhism respects all living creatures and prohibits the killing animals for food, many of the new employees I met were puzzled. It is not that they could not grasp the concept of 'respecting living creatures' but this rule was simply too different from the conventional lifestyles and foodways that have reflected specific Namibian geographic, climatic and socioeconomic environments for millennia. Employees who had no other job opportunities and took up positions at the Centre eventually accepted the rule. Vegetarianism has been a frequent site in which the Namibian employees and the Centre's Buddhist principles clash on a daily basis.

Both the Centre and Buddhism, merged in the simple description of being the 'Chinese school', have become a specific form of Chinese infrastructure that is arising in central Namibia. While the Centre and Buddhism are often unseen or drop out of people's awareness, they constitute a 'system of substrates' (Star 1999: 380) that has become a backdrop of life with functions and impacts that are real and substantial for the staff at the Centre and the local residents. This infrastructure is more than a material background; it is also a set of practices, a way of

doing things, that is slowly being accepted and settling in as a means of enabling (or disabling) the daily lives of the people at the Centre and in the town.

Prosperity, Buddhism and China

On the surface, the PRC's involvement seems to have a less direct impact on the ACC's charity work in Africa than the donors from Asia (largely Taiwan and southeast Asian countries) who are strongly associated with Taiwanese *renjian* Buddhism.[11] However, the PRC's reputation as a rich and powerful country is nonetheless indispensable. Ven. Huili believes that China is the model that countries in Africa should follow in order to achieve national and personal economic prosperity, and that China, along with the societies and countries with significant ethnic Chinese populations, is a predominantly Buddhist or Buddhism-friendly country.[12] The implied message, regardless of its logical validity, is that Buddhism brings wealth, and this explains why China has become prosperous. Ven. Huili has stated in his many recorded speeches circulated through social media that: 'It used to be English [English-speaking countries] that led the world economy, but in the future, China will take over this role and the ability to speak Chinese will therefore be an incredible asset to the children in Africa'. His passion for providing hope and a brighter future through Buddhism to vulnerable children in poverty-, disease-, or war-stricken countries in Africa converges with practical messages to 'learn Chinese', 'hop onto' the Chinese train, 'emulate' the Chinese economic miracle and 'grasp' the opportunities that China offers. When Ven. Huili refers to 'China', he sometimes means all the small and large socioeconomic regions and countries dominated by Chinese-speaking populations in Asia and elsewhere, and at other times he means the PRC.

In Ven' Huili's statement, Buddhism, far from being presented as a pathway for achieving enlightenment or the truth of life, is implicated in the message of Chinese economic prosperity; Buddhism is treated as if it were a spiritual fast track for obtaining national wealth.

Some might say that this may be a 'skilful means' taken by Ven. Huili for introducing Buddhism to African countries that have few or no prior Buddhist traces. Regardless of whether Ven. Huili's approach for introducing Buddhism in Africa is a skilful means or not, the portrayal of China as a model country, a rich cultural reservoir or a solution to the problems (such as poverty) faced by many young Africans is undeniable in the ACC's operation. Outside the campus,

the Namibian parents and guardians I talked with mostly welcome the fact that their children will learn Chinese at the Centre. Perhaps they believe that the ability to speak Chinese may lead to a reliable job in the future. This is, in fact, often the case in other, older Centres (such as in Malawi): after finishing their education, many graduates find jobs as interpreters in Chinese-owned companies and shops.[13] When Namibian staff members from the Centre introduce Buddhism to Namibian parents and guardians during the home-visits, they explain Buddhism as a Chinese practice of meditation and vegetarianism. This is in part because of the staff's lack of understanding about Buddhism, as well as the limited exposure to and dearth of interest in Buddhism for most Namibians; it is also in part because the Centre and the staff are cautious about any activities that might come across as proselytisation attempts.[14] It is simply convenient and safe to package Buddhism as a Chinese cultural practice that involves some meditative rituals (daily Buddhist classes) and dietary restrictions (vegetarian policies).

For the long-term project of transmitting Buddhism on the continent, Ven. Huili believes that it is much more effective to begin the process with young children whose worldviews are still being formed and who have greater potential for creating change in the future. In this futuristic scheme, China becomes an example and a model for the rapid accumulation of national wealth; the practitioners of Buddhism represent individuals who achieve prosperity in life; and Chinese moral and cultural values signal the ethics of hard work, assiduity and trustworthiness, all of which will bring wealth to individuals and countries. At the Centre, because of frequent visitors (both lay and monastics) who are typically long-term donors or potential donors from places like Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia, and through the encounters that the Namibian staff and children have with these Chinese-speaking Buddhist visitors, the nexus of Buddhism and prosperity appears to gain firmer authority over time. When they arrive at the Centre, one of these visitors' routine activities is to go to the poorest neighbourhood in town and create a large-scale charity event for the local people. These Asian visitors, who are all assumed to be simply Chinese by most local Namibians, always bring generous gifts, such as food items and toiletries, and distribute them to poor residents. On such occasions, the notions of wealth and China are naturally tied together.

In addition, the selected children's appreciation tours in Asia, mentioned at the beginning of this article, also serve to reinforce to

the children on the tours the probable connection between China and prosperity. During their travels, the children are exposed on a daily basis to national and personal wealth in Asian countries; they experience this first-hand in a variety of ways, from seeing modern airports, highways, expensive vehicles and skyscrapers to witnessing the tremendous sum of donations made by individuals, corporations and organisations every time they perform on a stage. To these Namibian children and the Namibian employees on the campus, as well as to the townspeople in Okahandja, China and economic prosperity have long been inseparable notions. Ven. Huili's remarks resonate well in this context: 'China used to be very poor like many African countries, but within just a few decades, it became a powerful and rich country'. In his mind, by arming African children with Chinese language, Buddhist practices and Chinese cultural and ethical values, the ACC can help produce 'new Africans' who will be able to escape the vicious circle of suffering that arises from poverty, disease and war.

Buddhism in this context is appreciated and branded specifically as representing the ideal Chinese values of being a (good) person (*zuoren*) who works diligently; who takes responsibility for oneself, one's family and one's nation; and who will not compromise one's morality. By practicing Buddhism, a person becomes this ideal being who will eventually thrive. Max Weber's (2003) famous argument about the relationship between Protestant ethics and capitalistic development is starkly resonant; even though Buddhism itself does not evoke a work ethic in the same way that Protestantism does, the message is similar. For most of the Namibian employees at the Centre and the parents of the children I talked with, being Buddhist and being Chinese are not clearly distinguishable—Buddhism to them, as a little-known notion, is a part of Chinese (or simply foreign) culture that is not likely to interfere with their Christian faith. Likewise, the Chinese staff members at the Centre, who are either sincere Buddhist practitioners themselves or moderate supporters, do not seem to consider Buddhism and Chinese culture as independent of one another either. The entanglement between Buddhism and the ideal Chinese values of being good and being prosperous has become a driving principle in the operation of the Centre. Just as Weber's (2003) work assigns to Protestant ethics and the West a superior status compared to the rest of the world, in the Centre's operations, Buddhism and Chinese culture are explicitly and implicitly positioned as superior and therefore worthy of emulation by the host societies.

Mooring Buddhism and (Chinese) Infrastructure

A prominent example of Chinese infrastructure in Africa has been China's active involvement in the economic sector of African countries.[15] These economic activities impact the host countries in complex ways and have led scholars to begin examining the nature of 'Chinese capital' in Africa (see Lee 2017). This active Chinese economic involvement in the continent has popularised various tropes about China as a global powerhouse, a generous benefactor or a new coloniser. In Namibia, in addition to large-scale construction projects such as highways, ports and mining structures built largely by Chinese state-owned companies, smaller Chinese economic activities that more directly affect local lives exist in the form of individual shops, small-scale companies, factories and farms near towns and cities. Such economic activities have given rise to specialised commercial districts such as the Chinatown (*zhongguocheng*) in Windhoek where Chinese and Namibian traders, companies and shops engage in bustling business with one another. Both as physical facilities and as platforms and networks that promote business activities, Chinese infrastructure has become a part of economic life in Namibia.

Yet the Centre as Chinese infrastructure encompasses more than being part of these tangible construction projects and highly visible economic platforms; it also includes practices, moral values and approaches to doing things that become moored in local life as forms of 'soft' infrastructure. That the Centre (and Buddhism) operates as part of this Chinese infrastructure highlights the role that infrastructure plays—beyond its physical and visible structures—in providing guidance for how things are done. For instance, traders and consumers in Chinatown have learned that all transactions are cash-based (just as in many Chinatowns in the world). They have also learned what items they can find and order there, as well as what range of quality those items will have. People act and react according to how business activities are done in the district. Mutually shared practices emerge and grow among traders and consumers, while soft infrastructures—specific forms of knowledge, practice and familiarity with how to get things done—settle into place in the process.

Both as material structures and as invisible networks and systems, infrastructure slowly yet firmly makes certain ways of thinking, talking, acting and living seem proper or natural. This may be what Caroline Humphrey (2005: 40) means by saying that a 'built environment …

made material certain precepts and did continue actively to contribute to the conceptual worlds of … people'. Buddhism in Namibia has begun to function like a built environment in this sense because it enables and disables specific ways of thinking and living (including eating, talking and dressing) on the campus and provides specific ways of dealing with issues through its Buddhist-informed rules, policies and structural layout of the campus (dorms, offices, schools, etc.). These 'specific ways' of living and doing are not shaped and nurtured through spiritual inspiration and religious teachings but are simply *moored* in daily life through repeated reminders and implementations of these rules, policies and arrangements. These mooring processes often take place through subtle, nuanced and rather personal interactions, and they grow and become concrete over time. I present two ethnographic events I experienced to demonstrate these slow yet ongoing processes of mooring Buddhist principles in the lives of Namibian employees at the Centre.

No Killing, No Meat

One Sunday morning, I gave a ride in the Centre's pickup truck to two Namibian security staff who had just finished their night shift. On the way, we saw a dead antelope lying on the road (the body looked clean and unbloodied). I drove around it. The two men in the back seats began yelling, 'Meat! Meat! We want meat!' They were asking me to stop so that they could pick up the antelope. I stopped the car. One man ran back and returned with the dead animal on his back. He put it in the open cargo, sat next to it and covered it up with his jacket, fearing that the police at the checkpoint would stop them and confiscate the animal if they discovered it.[16] We passed the police checkpoint safely. They asked me to drive them right to the front of their shack in the informal settlements (they usually disembarked on the main road and walked home) because if they carried this animal home on foot, they would likely be robbed on the way. I dropped them off at their shack and returned to the campus, thinking that they would have full and happy bellies that day. I simply thought that I had helped them. A few days later, I shared this story with a Chinese staff at the Centre, who said, 'They were lucky to have you in the driver's seat that day! If I had been there, I would have never allowed it'. I was clueless and asked her why. She said, 'I would never let a dead creature be carried in a car bearing the ACC's logo'.

The ACC has implemented a strict policy of Buddhist vegetarianism throughout all its branch schools and at all events.[17] It is acceptable to be non-vegetarian, but only outside the campus's physical boundary. My 'good' action of allowing the security staff to carry the dead antelope in the ACC's vehicle would be considered an act of bringing a dead creature to the campus. From a utilitarian or secular perspective on charity, one might reason that the antelope was found dead, and it was not a creature that had been killed for food by these men. If they had not picked it up, then someone else would have. But from the Centre's perspective, picking up the dead creature and carrying it in the ACC's vehicle was a violation of one of the basic Buddhist principles. The two security men did seem to have filled their stomachs so well that they even skipped their dinner on campus for the next two days or so, which had never happened before. A few times after that day, they brought dead animals when I gave them a ride in the morning. I do not know whether they found these animals dead or killed them overnight. Finally, I told them that it was difficult for me to help them anymore. They nodded without further questions or protests.

Had I not been driving a vehicle with the ACC's logo that day, the same event would not have been an issue, and I might have continued to help them carry the animals as an act of kindness on my part. Yet with the ACC's vehicle, I increasingly felt that I should not be carrying dead animals in the car. The incident kept me occupied for a while and made me think and act more cautiously about the ACC's regulations. I was not asked specifically to correct my actions (even the Chinese staff I shared my action with didn't ask me to do anything). What the incident made apparent to me was the existence of a set of regulations and proper ways of doing things that was quietly circulated and implemented on the campus. The fact that the two night guards accepted, without protest, my refusal to help them further suggested that they were aware of these regulations as well.

At the Centre, some regulations and guides for proper action are clearly spelled out as rules to follow; but others are not—for example, only very broad guidelines are given for what kind of attire is appropriate or inappropriate on the campus. If an employee's attire on a particular day doesn't seem proper according to Buddhist standards, they will be told so by the management staff. A set of criteria, or a 'repertory of practices' (Taylor 2007: 107 in Larkin 2016), exists at the Centre about how things are done and how things should be assessed for small and large matters; for significant issues, right and

wrong are clearly articulated by the head of the Centre and certain administrative consequences may follow for improper behaviour (such as stealing). But for the majority of small daily matters, things are dealt with through individual understandings based on 'a repertory of practices'. The security staff who had worked at the Centre for more than five years could sense, however vaguely, what was appropriate and inappropriate when dealing with dead animals on the campus; and I, the late joiner, also slowly recognised it as well. Both parties eventually, semi-mutually, stopped bringing and carrying the dead animals in the ACC's vehicle. Regardless of whether it was right or wrong, agreeable or disagreeable, a certain Buddhist way of thinking and acting was asserting itself over us.[18]

Cabbage and Spaghetti

There is a common joke made about the Centre's food (as well as the Centre's work conditions) among the Namibian staff. The joke is about one of the most frequently served dishes—a bowl of spaghetti noodles with bland cabbage soup. It shows up at least five times a week in the dietary plan for the Namibian staff and the children. When I asked about their experience of working at the campus, some Namibian staff responded with a joke: 'How do you feel about eating cabbage and spaghetti every day?' Or when I asked whether they liked Chinese food (because I had heard mixed messages about this), one staff member said, 'I love it as long as it's not cabbage and spaghetti'. I soon learned to use this phrase myself as I got closer to the local employees. When I was getting ready for a two-week home visit trip to the north, I said goodbye to the staff, saying, 'I will miss the cabbage and spaghetti!' They laughed. The circulation of the phrase 'cabbage and spaghetti' indicates a shared sense of the work conditions at the campus as being tedious and as being 'Buddhist', or indistinguishably to the Namibians, as being 'Chinese'.

On a surface level, 'cabbage and spaghetti' point to the simplicity of the food options that are the result of the ACC's limited budget as well as its Buddhist commitment. Yet in another sense, the fact that the phrase circulates among the Namibian employees as a joke indicates that in the lives of the Namibian staff, Buddhism does not stand for spiritual enlightenment or some deep religious wisdom. Instead, it refers to their unsatisfactory working conditions at the Centre; or if it does refer to a religious principle in any sense, that principle is one they do not approve of. As such, the joke reflects how Buddhism is

received and interpreted by the staff. In this case, Buddhism (or, more precisely, vegetarianism) is nothing more than an unpleasant fact of their work life that they must adapt to in order to keep their jobs at the Centre. One of the core Chinese Buddhist principles that the ACC has implemented and requires its employees to abide by has become the object of a bittersweet joke that represents what some of the Namibian staff think of their workplace, Buddhism and Chinese culture.

Vegetarianism has become a steady fact for the Namibian staff members at the Centre. Vegetarianism and its association with the no-killing principle provide the Namibian staff with their most frequent and immediate exposure to the definition of Buddhism. In other words, for most of the staff, vegetarianism becomes synonymous with Buddhism; and since most of them are not pleased with vegetarianism, neither are they pleased with the Buddhism that endorses it. For this reason, it is highly unlikely that any Namibian worker from the Centre goes out and voluntarily spreads Buddhism (or vegetarianism per se) to their neighbourhood. At present, Buddhism is a daily routine, with little spiritual meaning attached, that has slowly become moored in the lives of the Namibian staff.

Conclusion

Buddhism offers principles for how and why certain things should be done in one way rather than another. But the deeper philosophical or soteriological reasoning behind such Buddhist principles is rarely raised; such reasoning is simply no one's concern, including the Centre's management. Yet Buddhist rules (via daily classes and policies) continue to settle into the lives of the people. Buddhism, which is considered by the Namibians to be nearly equivalent to Chinese culture, is slowly mooring itself—rather than spreading as a form of religious practice—in the daily lives of the staff as well as the children at the Centre, and in some cases in the life of the town. Buddhism elicits minor yet concrete changes that become habitual and enduring in these daily lives. The changes may come as a subtle reminder of a no-killing principle or in the form of joke, but they provide a direction to follow, however disagreeable that direction may be. One of the lessons that comes from the studies on infrastructure in recent years is that to think of something infrastructurally is to pay attention to what it enables (Hoelzchen 2021), rather than what it is. This requires us to look at what in particular becomes moored in people's lives and

the ways of acting, talking and interacting with one another and with one's surroundings that are enabled.

Instead of looking at the role of religion from a spiritual perspective—as a path for achieving enlightenment, redemption or psychological fulfilment—this article focuses on how religion has become a form of infrastructure in the daily lives of the people involved. More specifically, by drawing upon ethnographic research about a Taiwanese Buddhist NGO in Namibia (as part of a larger project extending across several countries in southern Africa), I have examined how Buddhism has been engineered through the unilateral and purposeful importation of ideas, materials, funds and personnel from Chinese-speaking Buddhist regions in Asia. Yet, this 'engineered' Buddhism in southern Africa does not work exactly in the way that its engineers (namely, Ven. Huili and his followers) initially imagined. Buddhism as a spiritual path is often snubbed, either strategically or culturally, and often simply ignored by the local people. Yet, if we switch our attention to the infrastructural role that Buddhism plays in the local society, one can see it mooring itself in and shaping the daily lives of the local people. Buddhism endures as a process that supports specific actions, speeches and responses that are aligned with ideal Chinese ethics, and it continues to grow as part of the Chinese infrastructure project in southern Africa and in Namibia. Buddhism, in other words, is at present shaping the local Namibian lives in some way without 'inspiring' them.

As I mentioned earlier, however, ACC's work on the continent has been going on for only two decades, and it has been only eight years since the Namibian Centre accepted their first group of children. As the first children to attend are becoming young adults and as the Centre itself evolves, the local and global politico-religious dynamics remain open to change. A proper assessment of the full impact of the ACC, whether in southern Africa and beyond or on this particular Namibian campus, remains for the future and would require additional long-term research. The more modest goal of this article is to present one plausible approach for thinking about how some Africans are taking in Buddhism in the context of growing Sino-African economic connections; and on a more ambitious note, it invites us to reflect on how, at very nascent stages, a religion might actually gain a foothold in a new society.

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NOTES

1 The Namibian children on the tour were fluent in spoken Chinese.

2 This concept was introduced by Fenggang Yang (2018), who argued that the existing notion of the 'global North' cannot properly describe the distinctive historical, social, religious and economic developments that have occurred in East Asian countries and in the regions and ethnic communities that maintain East Asian traditions. Given that the overseas supporters of the ACC are largely from Chinese-speaking countries and regions, I believe that Yang's idea of the 'global East' offers a more accurate description of the organisation's supporters than the aid models that rely on the idea of the 'global North' do.

3 *Renjian* can be translated as 'this world' or 'terrestrial' and *renjian* Buddhism can mean Buddhism for this world, or Buddhism for humans and the human world. For this reason, *renjian* Buddhism is often translated as 'humanistic Buddhism'. Because of its focus on worldly concerns, *renjian* Buddhism can be also seen as an 'engaged' Buddhist tradition. For further discussions regarding the development of *renjian* Buddhism in Taiwan, see Pacey (2005), Schak and Hsiao (2005). For discussions of *renjian* Buddhism in relation to Foguangshan's temple building in South Africa, see Reinke (2020).

4 https://www.amitofocarecenter.org/ (last accessed on 28 December 2022).

5 There have been traces of Buddhism, largely through temple-building, in Africa in recent decades in countries such as South Africa, Tanzania, Botswana and Madagascar. See Clasquin-Johnson (2017); Reinke (2021); Shi and Li (2022). However, Buddhism in these countries largely serves overseas Chinese populations in the host countries rather than appealing to local people. The Buddhist population in Africa remains low, less than 0.1 per cent of the total population in most countries. See Pew Research Center at https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/04/02/buddhists/ (last accessed on 2 November 2024). The background stories about how and why Ven. Huili left the Foguangshan lineage and started the ACC independently from it are complicated. This paper will not examine those stories here, but one thing that should be mentioned is that one of the reasons that Ven. Huili left Foguangshan was because his approach to the role of Buddhist organisations in Africa—to serve local populations—was different from Foguangshan's approach at that time.

6 The ratio between overseas workers versus local workers shows some variations among different ACC's campuses from 1:5 to 1:12 approximately, but a general shortage of overseas workers has been an ongoing problem of the organisation. The ACC in Madagascar, for example, was run by a single Taiwanese director for several years who did all the administrative work and also served for a

Chinese teacher. The overseas workers usually take more or less the roles in administration (except for Chinese and kung fu teachers), or the head of the department that allow them to directly and indirectly manage affairs in finance and human resources. Local staff rarely takes these roles.

7 See Anand, Gupta and Appel (2018); Harvey and Knox (2012); Harvey, Jensen and Morita (2016); Hoelzchen (2021); Larkin (2013); Rest and Rippa (2019); Simone (2004).

8 Info Namibia. https://www.info-namibia.com/activities-and-places-of-interest/windhoek-surrounds/okahandja#:~:text=Okahandja%20has%20about%2025000%20inhabitants,of%20Windhoek%20along%20the%20B1 (last accessed on 2 November 2024).

9 The duration of the Buddhist classes and whether they continue over the weekend are different at each Centre, but the existence of morning and afternoon Buddhist classes is consistent throughout all the campuses. In the Namibian case, the Buddhist classes rest on Sunday and resume on Monday.

10 Ideally, the ACC plans to dispatch at least one professional Buddhist teacher, usually an ordained monk or nun in the Chinese Buddhist tradition (*shifu*), who can stay at each Centre for an extended period of time so that Buddhist teachings can be introduced and transferred in a more systematic and steady fashion. However, for various reasons, it has been increasingly difficult to find qualified Buddhist teachers, especially from Taiwan, who can play such a role. This is the major reason that Ven. Huili recently began reaching out to Buddhist organisations in the PRC. The Namibian Centre in recent years has had no Buddhist teachers other than an occasional visiting teacher for a few months at a time.

11 Most of the donations made to the ACC are from Taiwan, with some from Hong Kong and southeast Asian countries as well. Although donations from the mainland China are relatively low when compared to other regions, more and more personnel are being recruited from China; this includes not only staff but also Buddhist masters. In the near future, the position of Buddhist teacher on each of the ACC's campuses will likely be held by monks and nuns from China rather than from Taiwan.

12 Many Namibian employees with whom I talked at the Centre mistakenly assumed that all Chinese are Buddhists and, sometimes, that all Chinese are vegetarians. This is because the Centre is usually their only opportunity to directly encounter Chinese people and Chinese culture.

13 Although the fact that the graduates from the ACC in Malawi have good job opportunities as interpreters in Chinese-owned shops, factories and companies can be seen as positive, these opportunities may also come with a negative side effect. A Malawian employee at the ACC told me of his concern that many graduates think that, because of their ability to speak Chinese, they are automatically guaranteed a job at a Chinese company once they graduate, and because of this they entirely cease to pursue other careers.

14 n Namibia, the Centre does not, or more precisely is not allowed to, proselytise about Buddhism to its staff (this applies to both Namibians and overseas staff from Asia) or to the children. The rules may be different from campus to campus, depending upon the country, but in the case of Namibia, the local government's monitoring of any religious proselytisation attempts by the Centre and the deeply rooted Christian faith and Christian worldview of ordinary Namibians make it very challenging for the Centre to attempt any direct missionary activities.

15 Research on the relationships between China and African countries often focuses on economic impacts and political relationships, and the discussions are largely divided about whether the growing Chinese presence on the continent is a form of invasion or an opportunity for African countries. I do not offer an exhaustive review of that literature here due to the scope of this article, but for a good review of the scholarship produced so far, see Siu and McGovern (2017) and Kamoche, Gunessee and Kufuor (2021). For some book-length studies that represent major perspectives and trends on the subject, see Alden (2007); Alden, Large, and Oliveira (2008); Brautigam (2009); Lee (2017); Monson (2009); Sylvanus (2016). In the case of Namibia, news outlets reported in 2024 that Chinese companies are the largest holders of foreign direct investment stock in the Namibian economy, and China's Husab Uranium Mine project in the country's west costal region has been reported as the single largest mining project in Africa since 2017. See the following news reports: Mariud Ngula. 2024. 'China Accounts for Nearly 30% of the Total FDI'. *Namibian Sun*.https://www.namibiansun.com/business/china-accounts-for-nearly-30-of-total-fdi2024-06-13#:~:text=China%20remains%20the%20largest%20source,trading%20partner%20after%20South%20Africa (last accessed on 2 November 2024); and Mariud Ngula. 2024. 'China's mining investment in Namibia'. *Namibian Sun.* https://www.namibiansun.com/advertorial/chinas-mining-investment-in-namibia2024-08-08 (last accessed on 5 October 2024). For studies on individual Chinese traders' economic activities in Namibia more broadly, see Dobler (2008a; 2008b; 2009).

16 Namibia imposes strict hunting laws; the hunting season is officially between February 1 and November 30, and a permit is required. It was January when the two security guards obtained the animal, and they did not have a hunting permit. See Hunting Portal Namibia. 2023. 'Hunting Laws'. https://www.hunting-portal-namibia.com/jagdgesetze.html (last accessed on 2 November 2024).

17 Buddhist vegetarianism is usually an indication that one practices in the Mahayana tradition that prohibits the five pungent spices (*wuxin*): onion, garlic, shallot, chive/leek and asafoetida. The tradition allows eggs and dairy products.

18 I would like to point out for readers who are familiar with the concept of 'religious socialisation' in the sociology of religion that what the security guards and I mutually agreed upon was not the result of religious socialisation as it is defined in that literature: 'an interactive process through which social agents influence individuals' religious beliefs and understandings' (Sherkat 2003: 151). In fact, my ethnographic experience demonstrates the opposite of this: the sense of mutual and tacit understanding between the security guards and I occurred not because of the influence on us of the Centre's religious beliefs and understandings *qua* religious beliefs and understandings, but because of our growing realisation about how things should be or should not be done as a matter of workplace rules within this Buddhist organisation.

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