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Special Focus: Translating Buddhism

Introduction: Translating Buddhism and the Politics of Ownership: Between Asia(s) and West(s)

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All the articles within this volume deal, in some way, with the multi-dimensional and multi-scalar translation and transference of Buddhist practice that takes place between Asia and the West. The title of this volume is key to the methodological approach of all its contributors: translations *between* Asia(s) and West(s). Translation, as viewed by the authors here, is not a linear movement from point A to point B (reaching its zenith at point B) but a dynamic interaction which functions to provide a meeting place for exchange between cultures, communities, ethnicities, in-religious traditions, and between religions themselves. An interest in uncovering these varied points of cultural convergence underpins the approach which we as authors have applied in our research. Like many scholars of contemporary Buddhism, we have found theoretical grounding in the work of Thomas Tweed. His *Crossing and Dwelling* (2006) enacts our own approach to the study of Buddhism, and to and religion more generally, because it views religions as constantly changing in response to the specificities of location and culture. He notes within his definition that:

> Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries (Tweed, 2006: 54).

Accordingly, this collection of articles is underpinned by travel, flux, and multi-dimensional dynamic exchange. Thus, when Buddhism moves from its homelands within Asia and travels to new continents it is forced to do what Tweed describes: "make homes and cross boundaries" (ibid.). But, importantly, it is also translated. In analysing this ongoing process of translation, the overarching questions that we seek to address in this special issue are: how is Buddhism translated in response to cultural, political, geographical and economic pressures? What happens when different religious practices cross borders, and what are the connections that are made and the dissonances that arise? How do these affect the everyday lives of Buddhists (and non-Buddhists)? At this precise moment in time, what does "home-making", to use Tweed's metaphor, look like for Buddhism, Buddhists, and the owners of Buddhist objects?

This special issue comprises papers originally presented at the conference *Translating Buddhism*, held at York St John University, UK, in July 2016. The notion of translation

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explored within the conference as a whole was divided into three broad themes: (1) the translation of texts, (2) the translation of Buddhism between Asian contexts, and (3) the translation of Buddhism between Asia and the West. As the title of this special focus issue indicates, the articles presented here address the third conference theme.

Whilst an interest in the translation and adaptation of Buddhism in different locales has long been a concern of scholars (and a core focus of the *Journal of Global Buddhism* as a whole), the articles in this collection trouble the boundaries of our existing scholarship and reject a tidy or sanitised analysis. Instead, they seek to provide an open space to air the conflicts which arise when Buddhism(s) cross borders, understanding that these challenges may never be satisfactorily resolved. We are interested in the specificities of everyday interactions from within a range of subjects and foci, thereby facilitating an investigation of the complex *politics of ownership* involved in the process of translation. As Wallinder-Pierini asks explicitly in her contribution, and other articles in this volume consider implicitly, "who owns the Dharma" and what impact does this ownership have on contemporary Buddhist practices in different social and cultural milieus? As a partial response to the complexity of evaluating the politics of ownership, we (alongside other scholars of contemporary Buddhism, such as John Strong) rely on plurals—'Asias', 'Wests', 'Buddhisms', reflecting that there can never be one 'Asia' from within which a singular Buddhism exists, nor one homogenous 'West'. Reflecting this multi-locality, we consider it imperative to move beyond a reductive and bounded understanding of geography. Indeed, in the articles that follow an emphasis on the presence of Buddhism within online and digital worlds also very much captures our attention. As Daniel Veidlinger remarks in his introduction to *Buddhism, the Internet and Digital Media*, Buddhism itself has always used the latest technological developments to its advantage (Veidlinger, 2015: 5). As such, not only the analog but also the digital are inherent to the continuing translation and transference of Buddhism across the globe. So, too, the study of Buddhism itself has also engaged in technological developments in worldwide communication. As Prebish (2014) notes, the *Journal of Global Buddhism* and the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* were among the first online, open-access, peer-reviewed journals. To fully understand the translation of Buddhism, we must also look to ourselves as scholars—our approach, our position, our presence, our politics—and attempt to understand the varying impacts that we, too, have on the process of translation.

Jonathan Walters, whose keynote at our conference *Translating Buddhism* began with a 'trigger warning' that he would be drawing attention to some of the most vulgar and inappropriate translations of Buddhism, helped us to think more clearly about the significance of certain types of evidence that we, as scholars, use to understand these translations of religions across and within cultures. Some of the depictions that Walters included in his article, which focused on Buddhism and Western popular culture, included Homer Simpson as Buddha; a silhouette of a Buddha placed over the crotch of women's underwear; beer bottles shaped to depict a Chinese Buddha; 1920s Buddhist-themed erotica; and memes of Donald Trump as the Dalai Lama captioned with the following: "What was my mantra? Om yea... Donald Trump, Donald Trump, Donald Trump." One could argue that this type of populist engagement with Buddhist imagery

is becoming increasingly politically charged in a Western context because Buddhism is becoming more established and familiar. On the contrary, Walters showed that these engagements have a long and complex history, extending far beyond the modern context. Indeed, political questions about the ownership of 'Buddhism', in various forms, have been asked since the death of the Buddha. While the evidence Walters provided might be both entertaining and confronting, it is by no mean insubstantial. Examining these seemingly trivial small examples of translation and, in turn, taking seriously their analytical potential for understanding Buddhism, its global spread and increasing embeddedness in different geographical locales (including the virtual) should not be assumed automatically to be somehow less rigorous or significant than more traditional linguistic and textual approaches.

Under the overall subject of the politics of ownership, three themes are notable across the five articles: the relationship between geographic and cultural locality and translation; the bringing of real and virtual, abstract and practice-based, border crossings into conversation; and, finally, the relationship between faith and creativity. Each of the contributions engages with these themes in different ways, bringing finely grained and unfamiliar evidence to bear on the central question of translation. *Richard Ollier* looks in detail at the connections between the contemporary British Pureland teacher Dharmavidya (David Brazier) and the Japanese master Honen (1133–1222). Undertaking a close comparative textual and content analysis, juxtaposed with theories of the post-secular, Ollier challenges certain preconceptions about the trajectories of Western Buddhism, particularly as they relate to the translation of doctrine.

In his article, *Matt Coward-Gibbs* examines the political working of reparative theatre practice in Sri Lanka, highlighting that translations of religion and culture occur in complex ways in conflict and post-conflict settings. By exploring how Boal's Forum Theatre has been adapted for the Sinhala audience, Coward-Gibbs draws attention to the connections between this Western theatrical approach and Sinhala exorcism rituals and, importantly, the necessity of these points of connectivity in the successful implementation of this drama practice. *Susan Darlington* is equally concerned with movements between geographic and cultural contexts. Focusing on Buddhist environmental activism, she introduces a framework to more easily conceptualise and articulate these types of border crossings. In particular, she is concerned with assessing whether, and how, different Buddhist communities share resources for environmental activism through a detailed examination of the physical translation and movement of a particular environmental education manual through Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, and the development of activist pilgrimages and ritual walks. Turning the subject focus to art history, *Linda Wallinder-Pierini* considers whether, in the age of the internet, a Buddhist image might be copyrighted. Looking specifically at the ways in which Nichiren's *mandala* is represented, shared, bought, and sold online, Wallinder-Pierini raises broader questions about the ownership of Buddhist images and the political debates that arise when these images are shared (and culturally translated) in ways that were not envisaged by their original creators. Finally, *Middleton and Plá* explore the ways in which Western theatre practice and training engages with Buddhist monastic dance

and practices of bodily and mental awareness. They highlight the shared conversations that are happening between Buddhists and performance specialists and the embodied ways in which translations of Vajrayāna Buddhism are brought to bear on creative practice.

Although each of the articles tells an important story in and of themselves, they can and should be seen as a part of a collaborative conversation about the politics of religious translation across geographies and cultures. What we offer here is a series of unusual lenses through which to view a complex and changeable picture, and we welcome the conversations and discussions which may arise from them.