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Researching Buddhism in Australia

More research is needed to better understand the history and sociology of Buddhism in Australia.

By Anna Halafoff and Ruth Fitzpatrick

Next to Christianity, Buddhism is Australia’s second largest religion. This is mostly due to migration from Asia and also to conversion, given Buddhism’s popularity in Western societies.

Buddhist presence in Australia dates back at least as far as the 1850s Gold Rush period, yet despite this long history, relatively little research has been conducted on Buddhism in Australian society.

In our 2012 article in the Journal of Global Buddhism, we, together with Kim Lam, argued that Buddhism in Australia was an emerging field of study and that while there had been an increase in historical, anthropological, and sociological scholarship in recent years, a comprehensive analysis of Buddhism in Australia, and particularly its impact on Australian life and culture, was yet to be conducted.

We applied Paul D. Numrich’s framework for identifying an academic field to our study. Numrich stated that a distinct field of research needed to demonstrate a high degree of specialisation, organisation and proficiency in peer review publications. He also added that the capacity for internal debate and critical self-reflection was also a sign of developing maturity within a research field, as was cross-disciplinary collaboration.

When we published our paper we stated that Buddhism in Australia was an emerging multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary field of study as it satisfied many, but not all, of Numrich’s prerequisites. We also predicted that it was likely to fulfill all of his criteria in the near future.

With regard to specialisation, we demonstrated that a growing number of scholars considered Buddhism in Australia to be their primary, or at least one of their research interests, and that a new multidisciplinary framework for conducting research in this field was evolving. We also stated that in terms of organisation, the rise of interest in Buddhism in Australia within a number of prominent academic associations, such as the Australasian Association of Buddhist Studies and The Australian Sociological Association, indicated that the study of Buddhism in the Australian context was beginning to be taken more seriously. In addition, we noted that the number and quality of publications on Buddhism in Australia was also growing steadily, and that the level of critical self-reflection was increasing.

Since early 2012, these trends have been continuing. In particular, scholars at the University of Western Sydney, Deakin University, University of Sydney, Charles Darwin University, Monash University, the Nan Tien Institute and the Australian National University have held a series of workshops with Buddhist Councils and community leaders to identify areas of interest and community priorities for future research on Buddhism in Australia. Thus far these workshops have been held in Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney, and more are currently being planned in Perth, Hobart, Brisbane, Darwin and Adelaide.

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This has led to the formation of a Buddhism in Australia research network and one collaborative grant proposal has been jointly submitted thus far by the Buddhist Council of Victoria and Deakin University. The Network is in the process of preparing an additional two grant applications and a website describing our activities. There is no doubt that scholarly interest in Buddhism in Australia is building. However, more research is needed to better understand the history and sociology of Buddhism in Australia, particularly the role of Buddhist organisations in religious settlement, the contributions of Buddhists to Australian society and the global flows of Buddhisms both in and out of this land. Such research can also hopefully enable communities and state actors to better understand the history and sociological significance of Buddhism in the Australian context, in order to assist Buddhist diasporic and mainstream Australian communities with countering prejudices and building socially inclusive societies. It is therefore both timely and necessary given the large numbers of Buddhists in Australia, and as we have now entered the ‘Asian century’.

References

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Women-in-war conference

An international conference looking at the role of ‘fighting women’ in the Second World War—with a particular focus on China and Japan—will be held in The Netherlands in 2014.

Organisers are calling for papers (see Bulletin board) for the conference, Fighting women’ during and after the Second World War in Asia and Europe, by 1 September, 2013.

The conference will be held 12–13 June at the Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies in Amsterdam, and is being organised in close cooperation with Kwansei Gakuin University, Japan.

Professor Sonya Michel, Professor of History at the University of Maryland, College Park, USA, will deliver the keynote address.

The aim of the conference is to focus on what women did during the war and how their attitudes, scope of social and economic activity, and social status changed as a result. The conference seeks to go beyond a dichotomous ‘passive victim/pacifist’ portrayal of women in the Second World War.

The organisers are interested in ‘recovering the history of women who transgressed normative, peacetime gender boundaries by choosing to be masters of their own fate in abetting and perpetrating violence, in collaborating with or resisting aggression, or actively furthering or frustrating the war goals of their own side.’

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