



Buddhifying the landscape

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Holy objects such as relics, statues and sacred texts play an important part in the migration of Tibetan Buddhism into new places. However, as with human migrants, the new cultural contexts into which they journey are not always receptive; the new cultural context and its value systems are inevitably different from those in which such relics were originally circulated, providing opportunities for misunderstanding and mistranslation.

The Great Stupa of Universal Compassion is currently being built near Bendigo in Victoria and is promoted as "the largest stupa in the Western world." It is one of several ambitious structures being planned or built by an international organisation called the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT). Because stupas are typically built in prominent places and designed to stand out, these Buddhist monuments have the effect of marking their builders' presence in and occupation of a place. Thus stupas, like other monumental-scale Buddhist objects, "buddhify" the land, that is, they create a visible Buddhist presence in a previously non-Buddhist place.

In this paper I investigate the Great Stupa as an important agent of the buddhification of Australia and explore why, despite the fact that the stupa is an unfamiliar architectural form in this rural setting, the project has met little opposition. I suggest that the success in winning support and avoiding opposition is in large part because of the social capital of those promoting the project and the positive public image that Buddhism has in Western societies today.