

Title:

“Three Trees Make a Mountain”: Women and Contramodern Buddhist Volunteerism in Vietnam

Abstract:

This article examines how women adapt devotional Buddhist worldviews within popular charity movements in Vietnam. Buddhist volunteerism is on the rise across Asia. In Vietnam, government officials encourage religious philanthropy among policy shifts toward increasing economic privatization and decreasing state welfare. Promoting philanthropy is one way officials prompt citizens to assume new responsibilities toward the state and one another by sharing private resources. Researchers have examined how popular charity trends in Asia compel volunteers to navigate changing understandings of moral personhood by internalizing modernist concepts of “rational good.” I complicate these studies by using Casey Collins’ theory of “Buddhist contramodernism” to show how women in Vietnam adapt devotional Pure Land Buddhism in addressing modern social concerns without adopting modernist Buddhist values. This article also expands Collins’ theory by demonstrating how grassroots charity groups suggest the need for a broader definition of contramodernism.

Introduction

On Saturday, May 30, 2020, nine volunteers with a charity organization called the Bridge of Love Foundation traveled from Ho Chi Minh City to the rural *Tiền Giang* province to dedicate a bridge they had sponsored.¹ The Bridge of Love Foundation, established in 2005, collects funds from urban donors to support rural infrastructural development throughout central and southern Vietnam. During the drive to the bridge site, the group's organizer 48-year-old Chị Minh Lý, live-streamed a video to Facebook announcing that this marked the Foundation's 150th bridge. She explained how, despite the international financial uncertainties caused by the covid-19 pandemic, the Bridge of Love Foundation still managed to fundraise 90,000,000 Việt Nam Đồng, roughly \$4,000 U.S. dollars, to cover the total cost of construction. Chị Lý elaborated that the Bridge of Love Foundation's fundraising efforts were as strong as ever, owing to the incredible merit generated by the group's lay Buddhist volunteers. From a Buddhist worldview, merit is a beneficial result of good deeds that can improve the conditions of "karma" [*ngiệp chương; nhân quả*]. Karma is made up of the cumulative effects of one's actions across multiple lifetimes. Karma is constantly influenced by actions taken through the "body, speech, and mind" [*thân, miệng, ý*]. Good karma can have a protective effect against undesirable life circumstances such as poverty and illness. In Chị Lý's speech, she implied that her volunteers were spiritually protected from the negative effects of the pandemic by the merit they had generated through previous charity work.

"Prayers for these 'children of the Buddha' [*Phật tử*]," she implored, "that the merit of building bridges creates blessings for them and for their fathers and mothers, throughout many lifetimes, [and] many future incarnations! May those who transcend life [to the Pure Land] [*siêu sanh*], gain even more additional merit! Praise to the Pure Land Buddha *A di đà Phật* [Sanskrit: *Amitābha*]." Chị Lý's live-streamed speech was interwoven with references to places and spiritual

figures associated with Pure Land Buddhism [*Tịnh độ tông*], an element of devotional Buddhism widely popular among women in Vietnam (c. f. Soucy 2016, 128). Pure Land Buddhism is traditionally associated with chanting practices oriented toward securing a place in the otherworldly realm of Amitābha Buddha’s Pure Land after death (c.f. Le 2017). Practitioners also regularly invoke the name of Amitābha to summon compassionate supernatural support in everyday life. In her speech, Chị Lý used these terms to present philanthropic bridge construction as a merit-making practice that benefits both volunteers and their family members in this and future lifetimes, and which may help secure a place in the Pure Land after death.

Upon the group’s arrival at the bridge site, Chị Lý began a second livestream video showing dozens of local officials and villagers gathered under a canopy near the river. The new bridge had been festively decorated with red ribbons that matched several bouquets of miniature national flags. The Bridge of Love Foundation volunteers crowded together under the canopy in an array of brightly colored *áo dài* and *áo bà ba* – Vietnamese traditional clothes that indicated the event was a special occasion. Chị Lý positioned herself before the bridge and handed her smartphone to a local official to film while she delivered a second speech.

Chị Lý began her address by once again describing how, despite the financial pressures of the pandemic, volunteers with the Bridge of Love Foundation had the “predestined affinity” [*nhân duyên*] to fundraise for a spacious bridge that could help the village develop its local economy. She proposed that the bridge would allow villagers to export animal livestock for better sales in regional markets. Children would also have safer, easier access to nearby schools. Chị Lý swept her arm out, gesturing toward the cluster of volunteers, as she explained how these benefits to the community were all due to the dedicated contributions of the Bridge of Love Foundation members. These volunteers had “set aside a portion for society” [*dành phần cho xã hội*] to support national

development through philanthropic donations of their money and time. Because they had practiced generosity “following the Buddha’s teachings” [*theo lời Phật dạy*] these volunteers would gain merit and blessings from their good actions for many lifetimes. Their increased merit would also allow them to sponsor future bridges, further benefitting society by supporting continuous economic development. Chị Lý concluded by encouraging the crowd to regard the donors with the highest “respect” [*kinh trọng*], calling for a round of applause. She reclaimed her smartphone to film the reactions of the volunteers. The camera focused to reveal that all of Bridge of Love Foundation members in attendance were *Kinh* ethnic majority women between the ages of sixty and eighty-seven.² Just beyond the volunteers, two tables laden with food stood ready for event attendees to join together in making offerings to the Pure Land Buddha and local spirits. Through these offerings, the volunteers would petition for supernatural support to physically reinforce the bridge they were dedicating and to protect anyone who passed over it for years to come.

In this article, I examine how women in Vietnam assert themselves as fulfilling “responsibilities to society” [*trách nhiệm xã hội*] through devotional Buddhist approaches to charity work. While research on popular trends in Buddhist humanitarianism across Asia tend to frame charity programs as advancing Buddhist modernism, my study complicates these narratives by showing how women draw on devotional forms of Pure Land Buddhism to articulate the significance of “doing charity” [*làm từ thiện*]. My research traces how women, particularly elderly women, actively adapt devotional Buddhist practices to address emerging social concerns without turning to the more meditation-based, secularized forms of Buddhism which are also gaining popularity in Vietnam (c.f. Soucy 2016; D. M. Nguyen 2020). In so doing, my research documents how elderly women’s engagement with national development through devotional Buddhist practices exemplify what Casey Collins calls “Buddhist contramodernism” (2020).

Collins' theory of Buddhist contramodernism "challenges the traditional-modern binary" common in Buddhist Studies by showing how seemingly traditional forms of devotional Buddhism are used to address modern social issues raised by trends of secularization, scientific rationalization, and institutional formalization in Asia (Harding et al., 2020, 7). Collins' theory complicates scholarly narratives about the globalizing spread of Buddhist modernism by showing how contramodern Buddhist groups adapt non-modern supernatural and magical religious practices to navigate contemporary social concerns. I use and expand Collins' theory by analyzing how elderly women in Vietnam similarly use devotional Pure Land Buddhism to address modern concerns of performing ethical citizenship in a secular state through volunteering. Altogether, this research advances understandings of global Buddhism as developing in multiple, complex ways that are nuanced by local concepts of religion and gender.

Gendering Buddhist Contramodernism

Theorizing devotional Buddhist volunteerism as contramodern is helpful for emphasizing how traditional religious worldviews are highly adaptable, living ethical systems. The globalization of Buddhism has produced dualistic distinctions between "modern Buddhism" as an orthodox world religion compared with pre-modern Buddhist practices as "traditional" expressions of local culture (Soucy 2020, 57). Advocates for Buddhist modernism have used these binary categories to position traditional religious practices as primitive precursors to progressive, reformed global Buddhism. However, these distinctions are largely rhetorical, obscuring ways that traditional practices are also adapted to contemporary circumstances. Alexander Soucy analyzes how such binary categories often function to reinforce hegemonic power structures against marginalized groups, "particularly women" (Soucy 2020, 57). Much of Buddhist modernism has developed through male leadership

and male-dominated institutions (Ibid., 57). By analyzing how traditional Buddhist practices are also adapted in response to modern concerns, scholars can begin to better recognize the role of women in driving these alternative religious movements.

Collins' theory of "contramodernism" makes room to explore how women adapt traditional practices to address modern social concerns. Collins defines contramodernism as the rise of Buddhist groups that are "modern, but differently so... These movements are neither modernist (fully aligned with rationalism, science, egalitarianism, etc.), nor are they antimodernist (rejecting secular democratic values, science, technology, etc.)" (2020, 55–56). Collins' theory highlights ways that religious groups use traditional beliefs and practices in responding to modernization without internalizing modernist values or epistemologies. Non-rational, magical and supernatural religious practices may also serve as tools for addressing issues raised by cultural and political trends toward modernization. For example, volunteers with the Bridge of Love Foundation used devotional Pure Land practices of requesting and identifying supernatural support among everyday affairs through their infrastructure development programs. While concerns for supporting national development and fulfilling responsibilities of ethical citizenship in Vietnam's secular society show how the country has been influenced by modernization, volunteers' invocation of supernatural aid for their work shows a creative adaptation of "traditional" practices to address these concerns. As such, I propose that elderly lay women's charity work, as informed by devotional Buddhism, represents a feminine form of Buddhist contramodernism.

I offer one major modification to Collins' theory in order to make this argument. I propose that contramodernism need not follow the charismatic vision of a single individual. Collins builds his theory by analyzing several new religious movements which developed in Japan in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Collins proposes that, among the contramodern groups

he studies, charismatic leaders played a vital role by seeking to “reconfigure elements of ‘traditional’ Buddhism and ‘folk’ religion to meet the conditions of modernity” and by aiming to modernize Buddhism “through their own experiences and insights” (Ibid., 52–53). Rather than “excising” supernatural and magical elements of traditional rituals – a common move for modernist Buddhist reformers – contramodernist leaders instead reoriented pre-modern practices toward alternative modes of making Buddhism “relevant and vital within modernity” (Ibid., 55). Collins also differentiates contramodernist groups from anti-modernists, who rejected all influences of modernity through “isolation or violent opposition” (Ibid., 58). By contrast, he specifies that contramodernist communities “are often prosocial and at least nominally committed to progressive values (e.g. secular democracy, technology, egalitarianism)” (Ibid., 58–59). Contramodernist groups thereby adopt some social qualities of modernization without the wholesale adoption of modernist values such as rationalization, disenchantment, or formalization of organizational structures.

My research traces many of these same characteristics among the Buddhist charity groups I accompanied in Vietnam. However, as I will demonstrate, volunteers adapted traditional devotional Buddhist practices through community discourse and by circulating personal stories, not by following one charismatic leader’s mystical vision. While Chì Lý had charismatic qualities as the group’s main spokesperson, she did not position herself as a spiritually advanced being; did not use Buddhism to propose a specific ideological agenda; did not assert a claim to leadership through a capacity for mystical insights; and was in many ways equally influenced in her Buddhist discourse and practices by fellow volunteers in the organization. Rather, volunteers with the Bridge of Love Foundation collaboratively adapted devotional Buddhist practices to support charity fundraising while responding to changing state calls for ethical citizenship and experiences of

moral uncertainty caused by the nation's rapid development. I thereby modify Collins' theory by proposing that the Bridge of Love Foundation shows how movements of Buddhist contramodernism can occur without the mystical vision or experiences of a charismatic leader.

This article also nuances Collins' theory by exploring the gendered dimensions of contramodernism. Analyzing devotional Buddhism in charities as a form of contramodernism reveals how elderly women use religion to respond to rapid cultural, political, and economic change. In Vietnam, concerns for social "modernization" [*hiện đại hóa*] accompany shifting state discourse around ethical citizenship amid policy reforms toward economic privatization. Many Buddhist groups have responded to these trends by developing and promoting modernist, rationalized discourses of Buddhist ethics and moral selfhood. For example, Dat Nguyen's research on Buddhist youth in southern Vietnam traces how formal Buddhist groups associated with the "National Sangha" [*Giáo hội Phật giáo Việt Nam*] turn to secularized mindfulness programs to help young people navigate new civil and economic roles in society (2020). Soucy similarly traces how Buddhist modernism has gained influence among men and young people in northern Vietnam with the popularization of Zen meditation (2016; 2020, 64). However, these demographic trends still represent a minority compared to the elderly lay women who follow devotional Buddhism and constitute up to 90 percent of practitioners in many Buddhist communities (Soucy 2020, 64). Rather than dismissing elderly women's devotional religion as unchanging traditionalism, preserved by the nostalgic dedication of its practitioners, my research shows how elderly women are also important actors in adapting Buddhist worldviews to contemporary life.

This argument is significant because the forms of devotional Buddhism practiced by elderly women in Vietnam are often popularly dismissed as "superstitious" [*mê tín*] and positioned

as foils to growing trends of Buddhist modernism that have gained increasing state support since the early 2000s. Men use women's involvement in devotional Buddhism to justify gender hierarchies that subordinate women in society by arguing that women's susceptibility to beliefs in the supernatural prove they are "intellectually inferior and less rational" than men (Soucy 2012, 66–68). Anthropologists like Soucy and Lauren Meeker have explored how and why women maintain devotional Buddhist practices despite facing such intense scrutiny from both the state and men in their local communities. Meeker notes how women in Vietnam often struggle to balance expectations to uphold traditional cultural values and support state calls to advance modern progress. She describes how women paradoxically engage in devotional religious practices while striving to fulfill expectations to create "healthy and happy families" for the state and society, even as these devotional practices are stigmatized by government officials and local men (2019, 315).

Soucy has proposed that women maintain devotional practices despite such gendered marginalization and scrutiny because they gain symbolic cultural capital through feminine performances of religiosity (2012, 98–99; 2020). His research shows how devotional Buddhist practices are centrally relevant and meaningful for women's identities despite, and even in some ways because of, the gendered cultural discourse surrounding religion. By practicing devotional religion, women perform qualities of femininity such as reliance, weakness, and attentiveness to family care which can function as sources of meaning-making, community building, and cultural capital (Ibid., 13). Altogether, these examples show how devotional Buddhism in Vietnam has been framed as irrational and unorthodox in ways that reinforce female participants' marginalization in society, yet women continue to find personal significance and value in these enormously popular practices.

While recent studies by Le Hoang Anh Thu (2017, 2020), Meeker (2019), and Soucy (2012, 2016, 2020) emphasize how devotional, typically Pure Land-influenced, Buddhist chants and rituals are important spiritual resources for women in contemporary Vietnam, my research further explores how and why elderly women adapt these practices when joining popular Buddhist charity movements. I argue that elderly women mobilize traditional beliefs into an emerging form of Buddhist contramodernism by adapting devotional practices to address modern social concerns through charity. In the following sections, I first introduce information about the Bridge of Love Foundation's participant demographics, key terms, and fundraising projects. Then, I contextualize the group's role among growing popular trends of Buddhist volunteerism in Vietnam. I trace how these trends derive from shifting state definitions of ethical citizenship amid national economic restructuring. Finally, I offer a close analysis of ethnographic data from elderly female volunteers to propose that the group exemplifies an alternate form of Buddhist contramodernism.

Methodology and Key Terms

Private sponsorship of rural infrastructure has become a popular trend in Vietnam, particularly in rapidly growing urban areas. During twenty months of ethnographic research on Buddhist charities in Ho Chi Minh City, conducted from 2015 to 2019, I attended events hosted by three organizations that fundraised to sponsor infrastructure in rural areas throughout the Mekong Delta. For this article, I focus closely on data from the largest of these organizations, the Bridge of Love Foundation. I accompanied the Foundation for charity events at least twice each month after I met the lead organizer, Chì Lý, through a person introduction from a volunteer who participated with several of the total twenty-five Buddhist charities involved in my research. Data for this article comes from informal conversations I had with volunteers, recipients, and local officials during

events; formal recorded and transcribed interviews with regular Bridge of Love volunteers; and from interacting with volunteers and charity recipients over social media.

In describing the Foundation’s charity activities, I use the terms “donor” and “volunteer” interchangeably. For example, some participants with the Bridge of Love Foundation made regular financial donations but did not attend many events in person, while others regularly volunteered at in-person events but only occasionally gave small financial donations. When – as a non-native Vietnamese-speaking white American – I awkwardly sought to differentiate between “volunteers” as literally “people who *do* charity” [*người làm từ thiện*] and donors as those “who had contributed money” [*đã đóng góp tiền*], I was quickly corrected that in Buddhist understandings of “giving” [Vietnamese: *bố thí*; Sanskrit, Pali: *dāna*], charitable actions were not limited to giving money or energy through time and physical labor, but also included a wide range of intangible and emotional or affective forms of generosity. For example, charity also included any form of “teaching” [*pháp thí*] and positive emotional exchanges, like encouraging others to be fearless [*vô úy thí*]. In other words: volunteers were always donors, and donors were always “doing charity” (c.f. Thích T. S. 2007).

Breaking down these distinctions was an important way for participants to place event organizers on an equal social plane with financial donors. Le’s research with Buddhist charities in Ho Chi Minh City highlights how grassroots charity work is most commonly performed by lower class, self-employed, and retired people with limited incomes (2020, 5–6). Volunteer trends are emerging as economic stratification deepens class distinctions through Vietnam’s shift to a “socialist-oriented market economy” [*Kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa*]. Among these shifts, charity events offer a space for people from diverse income levels to collaborate and interact with one another. Le argues that definitions of class in Vietnam, as in other “late-socialist

societies” are not strictly dependent on one’s financial status or consumption patterns (Ibid., 16). Rather, “morality and knowledge” can also be key criteria for asserting oneself as an upwardly mobile, middle class citizen (Ibid., 16). Charity work therefore provides an important way for less wealthy volunteers to assert middle class status. While low-income and retired event volunteers cannot make the same levels of financial contributions as high-income major donors, all charity members engaged in moral performances of mutual respect by rejecting terminological distinctions between people who “donate energy” [*công sức*] and people who donate funds.

In attracting both organizing volunteers and financial donors, the social media platforms Facebook and Zalo were central tools for publicizing event information and new projects. Chì Lý had a social media following of nearly five thousand Facebook followers as well as an extensive email contact list for previous financial contributors. Most bridges were funded through more than a hundred small contributions from repeat givers. According to Chì Lý, in 2018, the average bridge cost approximately 325,000,000 VND to build – roughly equivalent to \$14,000 US dollars. However, depending on the necessary length and height of the bridge, some bridges could be constructed for 100,000,000 VND (\$4,000 USD). Typically, to support each bridge, fifty to 150 donors gave amounts ranging from 50,000 VND (\$2 USD) to 100,000,000 VND (\$4,000 USD). Most financial contributions were given in the range of 1,000,000 VND to 5,000,000 VND (\$40 to \$100 USD). Occasionally, bridges were also single-handedly sponsored by major one-time donors. Major one-time donors were often businesspeople who had heard about Chì Lý through elite social networks of company leaders, professors, and engineers, or by long-term foundation members who saved up for years to sponsor a single bridge.

Although construction projects drew on funds from a wide range of donors, weekly charity events typically attracted a much smaller number of five to twenty regular attendees. These

participants were not always immediate financial contributors to the project, but donated energy by accompanying Chì Lý to groundbreaking ceremonies, bridge dedications, and inspections of future building sites. Event attendees asserted the importance of their roles as Foundation representatives by repeating the adage, “One tree cannot form a hill; but three trees assembled together make a high mountain” [*Một cây làm chẳng nên non, ba cây chụm lại nên hòn núi cao*]. In other words, each small task was valuable for the program’s overall success.

Approximately 80 percent of regular event attendees were women over the retirement age of fifty-five. The median age of volunteers was about sixty. The group attracted many retired government officials and communist military veterans. Among event attendees, 64 percent were also first-generation migrants to Ho Chi Minh City. Half of these migrants had arrived shortly after the end of the war in 1975 to reestablish the city under communist government leadership. They had subsequently lived in Ho Chi Minh City for over forty years. While many retired women lived on modest pensions and savings, some had children and grandchildren who had gone on to successful business careers. In addition to their pensions and savings, these women also received money from supportive family members. Regardless of their incomes or abilities to make financial donations to the Foundation, event attendees positioned themselves as comfortably middle class.

Given their backgrounds in government service, retired women also maintained a high sense of responsibility toward civic engagement. In addition to describing charity work as meritorious in devotional Buddhist terms, they used patriotic language to emphasize the importance of charity as supporting national development. Volunteers incorporated national flags, colors, songs, and symbols into charity events. For example, several volunteers, including Chì Lý, always wore delicate silken *áo dài* or *áo bà ba* when attending charity events. The *áo dài* is Vietnamese formal clothing with nationalist cultural connotations (Leshkovich 2003). The *áo bà*

ba also has nationalist cultural significance. This common regional clothing style had been adopted as a uniform for women in the southern faction of the communist military during the war for national independence and unity fought from 1954 to 1975.

This colorful range of clothes cast the Bridge of Love Foundation's work in a generally feminine, patriotic light. In comparison with other Buddhist humanitarian aid programs gaining popularity around Asia, volunteers' casual incorporation of traditional clothing for charity events also alludes to ways the organization does not function to enforce a systematized group identity through required uniforms. By comparison, research on international Buddhist aid programs like the Taiwan-based Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation suggests that volunteers learn to internalize a "new subjectivity" through adopting groups habits, morals, slogans, appearances, and mannerisms. Members in these formal "industrialized philanthropy" programs adopt modernist Buddhist identities of moral personhood by learning to "[craft] rational action to contribute to the public good" through charity (Weller et al., 2018, 123). Wearing uniforms, maintaining specific hairstyles, and adopting prescribed greetings, gestures, and forms of etiquette while performing charity all reinforce an internalized group moral identity (Ibid., 120). As such, organizations like Tzu Chi both derive from and advance rationalized, systematized forms of Buddhist modernism through charity programming.

By contrast, the Bridge of Love Foundation reflected a significantly less formalized style of grassroots charity. Rather than adopting systemized forms of self-presentation or internalizing discourse of rationalized moral action, volunteers actively framed their work in traditional, devotional Buddhist terms of making merit and summoning supernatural support. Whereas Tzu Chi volunteers reportedly gain trust in the organization through its demonstrations of institutional transparency and professionalism (Ibid., 124), Bridge of Love Foundation members touted the

organization's moral efficacy through tales of inexplicable healings among volunteers, magical transformations of bad weather, and the supernatural longevity of bridges constructed by the group. Similarly, rather than praising the organization's routinization as a sign of its moral order, as found among Tzu Chi volunteers (c.f. Huang 2009, 183), Bridge of Love Foundation members shared stories of how they had overcome chaotic misadventures during charity events as evidence that the group was protected by the supernatural intervention of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Overall, the Bridge of Love Foundation demonstrates how Buddhist humanitarianism can spread through highly informal structures of grassroots charity programming, distinct from modernist groups like Tzu Chi. Elderly women's supernatural interpretations of events surrounding charity work, and their devotional motivations for volunteering to gain merit, also represent a form of women's Buddhist contramodernism in charity work. In the next section, I examine the political and economic conditions which have allowed for both modernist and contramodernist Buddhist charity movements to proliferate in Vietnam.

Context: The Rise of Religious Humanitarianism in Asia

Buddhist humanitarian movements have arisen across Asia since the 1980s among regional shifts toward increased privatization and decreased state welfare provisioning (Weller et al., 2018, 53, 71). The state has compelled many religious charity programs to form through modernist conceptualizations of the role of religion in society, emphasizing the responsibility of religious groups to contribute to the public good (Fountain and McLaughlin 2016, 6). In countries like China, Taiwan, and Malaysia, increased government regulation has caused Buddhist humanitarian aid programs to become systematically formalized, for example, through adopting meticulous record keeping subject to state audit (Weller et al., 2018, 5). These trends have overall resulted in

the promotion of “large-scale, well-financed modern organizations” that also advance values of Buddhist modernism among volunteers (Huang 2008, 33).

In Vietnam similar economic and political trends have fostered a popular boom of Buddhist volunteerism. Following the 1986 policy reforms known as *Đổi Mới*, the state began to decrease public welfare and social service provisioning while introducing economic privatization.³ Rejecting the term “privatization,” government officials use the term “socialization” [*xã hội hóa*] to emphasize how – under the emerging mixed-market economy – individual citizens must assume responsibilities to care for one another in the spirit of socialism (M. T. N. Nguyen 2018, 628). Under *Đổi Mới*, the state also loosened earlier restrictions on public religion, resulting in a resurgence of religious engagement (Taylor 2007). Government officials began to incorporate religious groups among calls for citizens to assume greater responsibility in practices of ethical citizenship by extending benefits to religious groups sponsoring charity (Hoang et al., 2018). For example, in 2013, the state offered tax reductions to “faith-based organizations” providing aid for “underserved populations” (Hoang et al., 2018, 1078). Buddhist groups in the Mahayana-majority country responded readily, expanding and creating programs to feed the poor, subsidize medicine for hospital patients, house people with disabilities, sponsor infrastructure, and treat mental health issues (c.f. H. Nguyen 2016). Buddhist charities now serve as the second most common providers of social services in Vietnam, following the state (Hoang et al., 2018, 1076).

In comparison with other Asian contexts, however, this surge in religious humanitarianism is not immediately linked with a corollary trend toward Buddhist modernism as encouraged by the state. This is likely due to the Vietnamese government’s weak capacity for regulation and surveillance over individual religious groups. Although the government favors the rationalist discourses of Buddhist modernism, because it “distances religion from superstition and most easily

fits with the humanistic ideology of the Communist state” (Soucy 2020, 62), state influence over individual religious communities is still relatively soft (Ibid., 67). Overall, modernist discourse has not gained a significant influence over everyday Buddhist practice in Vietnam. The loose correlations among resurgent popular Buddhism, religious humanitarianism, and state regulation has allowed for Buddhist aid movements to spread with a widely diverse range of practices, beliefs and moral discourses among volunteers.

Modernization and Emotional Motivations for Volunteering

Lay members of several Buddhist charity movements reported that they began volunteering as a way to cope with feelings of urban alienation and moral uncertainties caused by widespread social change. Vietnam’s comprehensive economic restructuring, widespread trends of domestic migration, and urbanization have sparked cultural changes unsettling to many residents of Ho Chi Minh City (c.f. Tran 2018). In other Asian contexts, the moral uncertainty of rapid development has mobilized volunteers join charities and internalize modern Buddhist understandings of moral personhood (Huang 1998, 380). However, in Vietnam, charity volunteering has instead sparked a proliferation of multiple Buddhist discourses around morality and what it means to “do good” [*làm điều thiện*]. In this section, I first describe how volunteers are drawn to religious philanthropy by experiences of moral uncertainty amid national development. Then, I consider how these common emotional motivations for joining charities can lead to both modernist and contramodernist adaptations of Buddhist worldviews in grassroots volunteer groups.

Among diverse types of Buddhist charity programming in Vietnam, lay members’ motivations for volunteering were similarly driven by experiences of urban alienation. Elderly women who volunteered with the Bridge of Love Foundation consistently reported becoming

involved with charity work to cope with feelings of loneliness and the moral uncertainties of life in Ho Chi Minh City. Volunteers described watching the city's rapid economic development with a combination of hope and anxiety. On the one hand, members of the Foundation explained that they viewed economic and infrastructural development as fundamentally beneficial processes which could improve the quality of life for everyone in the country.⁴ On the other hand, volunteers were critical of the ways people in Ho Chi Minh City took advantage of the opportunities created by privatization to serve self-interests. For example, Foundation members complained of how constant traffic jams, seasonal flooding, and air pollution were caused by the selfishness of city dwellers striving for individual gain without concern for others. These concerns for public welfare were mirrored and amplified by volunteers' personal fears of theft, violence, swindling, and health compromised by pollution.⁵

In addition to general feelings of urban anxiety and isolation, elderly women also described struggling with a sense of purposelessness after retirement. Women like the 64-year-old former accountant Cô An had initially entered retirement expecting to assume busy roles as caretakers for their children and grandchildren, only to find that their family members were preoccupied with work and education. Without work or childcare responsibilities to fill her time, Cô An described how she had been consumed by feelings of "boredom and sadness" [*chán, buồn*]. Four years into her retirement, a former co-worker invited Cô An to volunteer at a local monastery. Cô An accompanied her friend to help distribute dried goods to poor families around the neighborhood. Cô An became interested in volunteering but wanted to do something that she felt could have a broader impact in society by changing the living conditions of the poor. She was intrigued by the transformational possibilities of sponsoring infrastructure in rural areas, which she believed could boost local economies and provide better access to education for children. Such charity initiatives

were regularly lauded by news programs, such as in the state television documentary series “*Cặp lá yêu thương* [Pair of Affectionate Leaves]” (Le 2020, 6). Sponsoring infrastructure reminded her of the deeper sense of life purpose she had felt while supporting national development as a government employee. Since joining the Bridge of Love Foundation, Cô An described regaining a sense of purpose while also experiencing improved health, which she attributed to the “blessings” [*phước đức*] of merit she gained by doing charity. Before, she felt left out of her children and grandchildren’s busy lives, always waiting for them to have available time for her. Now, she laughed, they had to ask when she was available.

Elements of Cô An’s story mirror the motivations and experiences of moral uncertainty that compelled middle class women to become involved with volunteering among international Buddhist charities like Tzu Chi (c.f. Huang 1998). The modern social concerns produced through secular state calls to practice ethical citizenship, cultural changes accompanying economic privatization, shifting family roles, and experiences of urban alienation have generally contributed to the widespread popularization of volunteerism in Asia. The ways volunteers adapt Buddhist worldviews to address these modern social concerns, however, do not always advance modernist religious values and epistemologies, as found among many charity groups in China, Taiwan, and Malaysia. In the next section, I explore ways that Bridge of Love Foundation members adapted devotional Buddhist practices in creating contramodern responses to these modern concerns.

Miracles of Merit: Devotional Buddhism in Women’s Charity Practices

While Bridge of Love Foundation members sought to navigate the moral uncertainties of a changing society by organizing charity, they also articulated the causes of moral uncertainty and the significance of altruism for making merit in devotional Buddhist terms. Rather than using

modernist Buddhist discourse to explain the rational significance of philanthropy, volunteers collectively circulated narratives of inexplicable and magical occurrences during charity events as proof that buddhas and bodhisattvas were invested in the success of their meritorious work. As the 62-year-old military veteran Cô Thư once explained, by “advancing” [*tiến lên*] the nation through philanthropy, volunteers not only support economic growth, but also created merit which made “the people of Vietnam” [*dân Việt*] collectively “happier, healthier, and more beautiful.” Such claims derived from volunteers’ devotional Buddhist worldviews, in which karma manifested in the immanent conditions of daily life. Doing good through fulfilling citizenship duties and supporting development could create immediate, concrete benefits of greater wealth, physical attractiveness, and improved health for everyone involved (c.f. Swenson 2020).⁶

Volunteers reinforced such claims about Buddhist merit-making benefiting the nation through personal stories of experiencing the miraculous effects of improved karma. The 67-year-old Cô Tuyết, for example, shared how she began volunteering at her sister’s insistence that she needed more social activity in retirement. Cô Tuyết’s had suffered a steady health decline following a diagnosis of diabetes. After she began volunteering with the Bridge of Love Foundation, however, her karma dramatically changed. Not only did she feel herself becoming more naturally happy, compassionate, and generous – signs of her spiritual development – but her physical energy also greatly increased. Moreover, her doctors were astonished to report that she had recovered from diabetes. The disease had left her body. Cô Tuyết asserted that this was because of the blessings of merit she had accrued through donating to bridge construction.

Volunteers like Cô Tuyết proposed that bridge construction, specifically, was a uniquely meritorious type of charity because donors gained merit for every single person who used the bridge. By sponsoring a bridge, donors thereby secured a regular source of merit that would “create

blessings” [*tạo ra phước đức*] for multiple lifetimes and for several generations among their family members. Volunteers also explained that bridge construction was an important form of philanthropy because bridges were in pressing demand throughout the Mekong Delta. Geographically, the delta region consists of two major rivers and “a dense network of numerous natural and artificial channels” which covers a significant portion of southern Vietnam (Liao et al., 2016, 70). As such, water crossings are an essential part of village life in this region. Going to market, attending school, or visiting neighbors all may require multiple stream crossings within a single village. Water crossings become a particularly salient part of daily routine during seasons of cyclical flooding, when village activities are literally suspended over higher water levels (Ibid., 73).

Villages have been conventionally connected by makeshift bamboo-pole networks, often called “monkey bridges” [*cầu khỉ*], or by ferry systems. However, Chị Lý explained that bamboo bridge and ferry networks limit rural development because they cannot support industrial transportation needs. Only a few people can cross bamboo poles at any given time, and ferries have a prohibited capacity to move cargo. By contrast, Chị Lý asserted that building concrete bridges allows larger quantities of crops to be exported more quickly, boosting local incomes. Bridges also provide faster, safer river crossings for village residents, thereby granting children better access to regional schools. These modern concerns surrounding economic development, mobility, and education were a central focus for Foundation members; yet volunteers also consistently articulated and interpreted these concerns through language of making merit and securing supernatural support. Improvements to village life were cast not only as the rational outcomes of socialist citizens fulfilling duties to support one another through philanthropy, as

framed by the state, but also as signs that their charity work had been completed in a spiritually efficacious way that created merit.

Foundation volunteers cited the supernatural longevity of their bridges both as a testament to the quality of materials they used and as evidence that the construction materials were reinforced with supernatural support from bodhisattvas. In explaining the importance of bridges to rural development, Chì Lý emphasized that philanthropically sponsored bridges had to be well made – with sound materials, at appropriate heights – or else they would disintegrate within a year and block boat traffic, causing more problems than they solved. Unregulated bridge construction was a major concern for local officials. Although private sponsorship and charity support for new infrastructure is increasingly encouraged by the state, there is also growing public concern that philanthropic bridge construction is insufficiently regulated. One article from the popular state-media source *Tuổi Trẻ News*, for instance, called for charities not to ignore or avoid regional officials when implementing philanthropic projects (Trần 2017). The article proposes there is a problem with unregulated charities undertaking rogue development without consulting village leadership. Such media reports are reinforced by research on philanthropic infrastructure programs in Vietnam, which confirms that engineering quality occasionally goes untested by charitable donors and that there are widespread issues of embezzlement in funding allocation (Finley 2010; Giang and Pheng 2015; Ha-Duong et al. 2016).

Chì Lý suggested that the poor quality of such unregulated bridges was reflected by and compounded through the moral qualities of their sponsors. Donors who only sponsored bridges to attract public attention inevitably created hazardous infrastructure, as well as bad karma. Volunteers like Cô Thù illustrated critiques of the egregious carelessness of building weak bridges

by sharing stories about young children who died on the way to school when these bridges collapsed.

The Bridge of Love Foundation sought to confront the issue of unregulated bridges by volunteering to replace badly made infrastructure. For example, during one groundbreaking event I joined in August 2018, the donors in attendance explained that they were replacing an unstable bridge that had been installed by a different charity group from Ho Chi Minh City only a few months before. These replacements offered not only infrastructural, but also spiritual interventions for the villages they supported. Cô Thu and Chị Lý both described how, in contrast to dangerous concrete bridges constructed with cheap materials which rarely lasted a year, infrastructure built by Bridge of Love lasted reliably for up to a decade, even despite the intensive wear of seasonal flooding and constant use. The unusual longevity of Foundation Bridges not only reflected the high quality of construction materials, but also showed that their bridges were reinforced with the protection and support of bodhisattvas like *Avalokiteshvara* [*Quan Thế Âm Bồ Tát*].

Chị Lý and volunteers like Cô An, Cô Thu, and Cô Thuyết also shared personal stories as evidence of supernatural intervention from bodhisattvas during charity events. For example, Chị Lý described how, while visiting a construction site before an upcoming groundbreaking ceremony, she was almost severely injured by a sudden accident. Thanks to the “miraculous, magical” [*nhiệm mầu*] intervention of the Buddha, she was unharmed – a story she hoped would encourage others to also dedicate their lives to the good work of charity. Similarly, when dedicating a bridge at the beginning of Vietnam’s rainy season, a storm appeared from nowhere. The heavy clouds miraculously held off raining until the volunteers in their delicate *áo dài* had safely returned to the shelter of their rented van. Foundation members agreed the suspended weather was another sign of *Avalokiteshvara*’s intervention on behalf of their program.

One consistent way the Bridge of Love Foundation worked to incorporate devotional Buddhist practices in their charity programs was by making offerings to both the Pure Land Buddha and to local gods and spirits as part of groundbreaking ceremonies for new bridges. Volunteers collaborated with villagers and regional officials to prepare offerings of fruit, incense, and flowers for the Buddha. A second table typically featured offerings of candy, milk, rice porridge, and cigarettes for local spirits. Through these offerings, the women of Bridge of Love petitioned for supernatural intervention to ensure the safety of future bridge-goers. Through these rituals, the women also demonstrated feminine virtues of humility, dependency, and selflessness, publicly crediting the successes of their programs to blessings from buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Demonstrations of feminine virtue were also modeled by Chì Lý as the group's main spokesperson. For example, when volunteers praised Chì Lý's physical beauty as a sign of the merit she gained by working as a full-time charity organizer, she deflected such compliments by joking that – given how much she worked and how little she slept – she was only alive “thanks to pure supernatural energy” [*nhờ năng lượng sạch từ siêu nhiên*]. This way of deferring compliments reinforced Chì Lý's self-presentation as a humble, hardworking, and dedicated woman who used her position to promote Buddhism.

These stories show how women volunteering with the Bridge of Love Foundation interpreted charity work through supernatural, magical, and devotional understandings of Buddhism. Like religious volunteers in other Asian contexts, women became involved with the Bridge of Love Foundation seeking to broaden their social circles, occupy free time, and fulfill patriotic desires to support the nation. However, while charity involvement has caused volunteers in other contexts to shift toward internalizing values of Buddhist modernism, my research suggests that popular movements of Buddhist volunteerism and Buddhist modernism are not immediately

correlated across Asia – as evidenced among grassroots charities in Vietnam. In my conclusion, I return to Collins’ theory to propose that women’s devotional Buddhist volunteerism compels a broader definition of contramodernism, which also provides a framework for recognizing the dynamic diversity of grassroots Buddhist humanitarianism in Asia.

Conclusion

Members of the Bridge of Love Foundation drew on traditional, devotional understandings of Buddhism to craft responses to the modern social concerns that had compelled them to start volunteering. Vietnamese Buddhism is still practiced by an overwhelming majority of elderly women who follow devotional forms of religious practice. Local men disparage such devotional practices as evidence that women are naturally less rational and more emotionally dependent than men, justifying women’s subordinate position in society. Devotional Buddhism is also positioned as pre-modern, traditional, and feminized as irrationally laden with superstition. As such, devotional Buddhism is used as a foil for rationalized movements of Buddhist modernism that tend to be led by men. Despite the stigmatization of devotional Buddhism, however, women’s involvement is as popular as ever. Soucy has argued that women continue to practice devotional Buddhism because it allows them to publicly demonstrate feminine virtues of dependency, weakness, and nurturing care. These virtues grant women social capital and desirability by showing they fulfil culturally prescribed gender roles.

Women volunteering with the Bridge of Love Foundation similarly performed feminine virtues while demonstrating devotional Buddhist practices in their charity work. They circulated stories of supernatural interventions from buddhas and bodhisattvas during charity events and described the merit gained through philanthropy as having immediate transformative effects in

their personal lives. Rituals performed, filmed, and circulated on social media surrounding charity events also showed women deferentially petitioning for support from supernatural beings. Such devotional conceptualizations of charity stand in distinction to modernist forms of Buddhist charity gaining popularity in other Asian contexts.

Collins proposes that scholars need a more dynamic framework to consider how contemporary religious groups adapt traditional Buddhist practices to address modern social concerns. He introduces the term “Buddhist contramodernism” as an analytical category to complicate the binary positioning of traditional versus modernist Buddhist groups. However, Collins specifies that contramodern movements typically follow the vision of a charismatic leader. This qualification is meant to distinguish contramodernism from other Buddhist-influenced new religious movements as they developed in Japan (2020, 52). I adapt and expand Collins theory for a broader context by adding a gender analysis of women’s uses of devotional Buddhism in popular charity movements in Vietnam. By examining how whole groups of women adapt devotional practices together to address modern social concerns, I open his definition of contramodernism as moving beyond the visionary leadership of a single charismatic individual.

Grassroots Buddhist charity movements like Bridge of Love are arising in response to changing cultural, political, and economic conditions in Vietnam. Buddhist volunteerism is mobilized by the state as a way to practice secular, socialist forms of ethical citizenship. Religious humanitarianism in Asia has generally led to the popularization of modernist values and epistemologies among volunteers. However, the specific dynamics among devotional Buddhism, gender roles, and weak state regulation in Vietnam have allowed a diverse range of Buddhist practices to flourish among charity members.

Elderly women who join Buddhist charities adapt devotional worldviews and practices in describing the meritorious significance of their philanthropic work. Adaptations to understandings of devotional Buddhism occur as group members collectively interpret charity events and personal experiences as evidence of supernatural interventions in daily life. Unlike the Japanese contramodern groups Collins analyzes, women adapt traditional Buddhist practices to address modern social concerns through collective interpretations of stories, feelings, and events experienced together. Their uses of devotional Buddhism to promote philanthropy marks the emergence of new, distinctly contramodern Buddhist trends among charity movements in Vietnam, without the guidance of one charismatic leader.

By analyzing devotional Buddhist charities as contramodern, this article opens ways to consider the role of women in driving adaptations of contemporary Buddhism. Scholarship that reiterates categorical binaries between traditional and modernist forms of Buddhism may subtly reinforce gender hierarchies that position men as active religious reformers and women as passive religious followers. Rather, my research shows that women also adapt devotional Buddhist worldviews and practices for new social movements, such as the popularization of Buddhist volunteerism in Vietnam. Vietnam's distinct economic and political conditions have allowed a diverse range of Buddhist practices to flourish among national trends of religious philanthropy; however, scholars in other contexts may similarly find that a broader definition of contramodernism reveals a proliferation of ways that Buddhist humanitarian groups have developed and spread throughout Asia.

Notes

¹ All names of people and organizations, aside from major geographical locations, have been changed to pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of research participants.

² The *Kinh* ethnic-majority group constitutes 85.3 percent Vietnam's total population (United Nations 2019). There are wide disparities in access to financial resources for ethnic majority and minority populations in Vietnam. Ethnic minorities are generally isolated to rural areas with limited options for education and healthcare. Consistently throughout my fieldwork with Buddhist charities in Vietnam, I found that all volunteers were either ethnic majority *Kinh* or Chinese Han-heritage *Hoa* people.

I list these specific ages because I knew each member in attendance from previous fieldwork events.

³ Johnathan London's work more specifically explores how the state first withdrew from, then reasserted itself, in social service programs such as health care. See: London 2013.

⁴ Erik Harms noted a similar positive feeling toward economic trends of privatization and development in his ethnographic research in Ho Chi Minh City (2016, 95).

⁵ Volunteers often circulated news stories of horrific violence and theft happening among strangers in the city, such as the following report of how “yet another” motorbike taxi driver was stabbed in the neck and had his bike stolen (Tuổi Trẻ News 2018).

⁶ Correlations between virtues and aesthetics are common among Buddhist cultures. Ian James Kidd (2017) details how Buddhist morality is described as manifesting through physical appearances in other historical contexts.

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