

2016-2017 Graduate Research Grant Report
Religion and Diversity Project

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Thesis Title: Taiwan to PEI and Back Again: Global Buddhism and Soy Production

In 2007, a Taiwanese Buddhist community registered as a charitable organization under the name of the Great Enlightenment Buddhist Institute Society (GEBIS) in Little Sands, Prince Edward Island (PEI). They built a monastery that houses roughly 250 monks at any given time, and by 2013 over 800 monastics and 3000 lay practitioners had attended their retreats (GEBIS, 2014). The community in Little Sands has created projects focused on food, education, health, and the environment. For example, the community owns multiple animal sanctuaries, organizes local charitable food programs, and owns a vegetarian restaurant that also houses a Buddhist prayer hall. One initiative involves purchasing Island grown organic soybeans from local farmers and shipping them to Taiwan for production into soymilk that is eventually sold in GEBIS's Taiwanese Buddhist grocery stores. GEBIS's investment and interest comes at a critical time given the current state of farming on PEI. While overall farm sales have decreased, soybean crop production is increasing at an unprecedented rate (Statistics Canada, 2012).

My dissertation research explores if and how GEBIS, as a new transnational Buddhist community, is influencing the farm and agricultural practices on PEI via its soy venture and other food projects. My research pursues two main lines of inquiry: (1) How does the GEBIS venture of purchasing, processing, and selling island soybeans affect the economic, social and environmental landscape of PEI? Is Buddhist demand for organic soy reinvigorating PEI farming? What are the effects of the increased supply of soy at the receiving end, in Taiwan? Who is being affected and in what ways? (2) How does GEBIS balance its Buddhist beliefs and ethics, such as vegetarianism and animal protection, within a market that prioritizes profits? How important is the search for profit in this venture? Are Buddhist beliefs and ethics influencing the soy business in ways comparable to how "alternative food networks" promote food markets while also prioritizing care of the environment, animals, and humans?

Drawing from studies of food commodities, I will undertake a commodity-following strategy tracing how PEI soy connects Taiwan and Canada. By following a commodity, anthropologists and other scholars explore the connections and relationships among human and inanimate material objects as they pass through production, transportation, and disposal of a given commodity in a ground-up approach to globalisation (Knowles, 2014; Barndt, 2008; Collins, 2000; Jackson, et al 2006). At each stage and location along the soybean chain, I will examine the understanding and perspective of the various social actors involved in its operation. Following soy will provide insight into how the Taiwanese community has adapted to their PEI home and how Islanders have adapted to the Taiwanese. It will also illuminate how food embodies diverse values and practices for a variety of social actors. Following a specific food

commodity through intensified forms of globalization (Giddens, 1990; Harvey 1989) offers insights into the larger processes of exchange taking place within alternative food networks. Such networks often act as counter-political projects with utopian visions but remain entwined in the mainstream corporate economy (Goodman, Dupuis, & Goodman, 2014; Haugerud, Stone, and Little, 2000; Fitting 2011). This work will also add to transnational scholarship on how identity, community and ritual practices are both created and sustained at various stages of soy movement (Vertovec, 2009; Levitt 2001; Tweed, 2006; Basch, Szanton, & Schiller, 1999; Schiller, 1997). This project thus brings literature on Buddhist migration to Canada and the anthropology of food into conversation with each other. It will deepen our understandings of global Buddhism in Canada, while also contributing to the literatures on transnationalism, religious practices, and commodities.

Scholarship on Buddhism and food in North America largely concentrates on what is commonly referred to as “mindful eating” (Wilson 2014a, Wilson 2014b). While this is important research, my project innovatively moves beyond this focus on consumption, to examine how Buddhist beliefs and practices concerning food are transforming other aspects of foodways. Foodways encompass everything about eating: production, acquisition, preparation, display, and consumption. We know relatively little about ethnicity and religious food practices in Canada, particularly non-Western faiths, such as Asian traditions (Zeller, et al 2014). My research adds to the scholarship by attending to one community’s Buddhist-influenced food and animal welfare practices -- what some scholars describe as social justice or engaged Buddhism (Queen, Prebish, & Keown, 2003).

Canadian scholars contend that Buddhism must be understood as a global process within both multicultural Canada and a global framework (McLellan, 1999; Harding, Hori & Soucy, 2014). Research focusing on Taiwanese Buddhism has largely centred on the growth of global social justice Buddhist NGOs which followed changes in Taiwanese government policy in 1989; these changes removed restrictions on the creation of new Buddhist organizations (Jones, 1999; Jie, 2001; Hsiao & Schak, 2005; & Huang, 2003a). Recent Canadian scholarship has focused on a few of these organizations, such as Tzu Chi and Fo Guang Shan (Laliberte & Litalien, 2010; Verchery, 2010). My research on GEBIS will contribute to this new literature on Buddhist organizations by focusing on the beliefs, practices and exchanges that transcend borders in a province where little research on Buddhism has taken place.

This research involves multi-sited ethnographic research in PEI and Taiwan. Following soy as a commodity involves interviewing the social actors at different points along the journey from the PEI farm to processing and selling in Taiwan. My research thus employs four key methods: (1) analysis of PEI government records of land ownership and policy documents on both immigration and agriculture to understand the political and economic landscape into which GEBIS has settled; (2) participant observation as a rigorous and flexible immersion in PEI for 8 months and in Taiwan for 2 months, to provide a holistic view of the GEBIS community, especially with regard to GEBIS’s ethics, beliefs and practices; (3) interviews with local PEI farmers and agricultural organizations to understand the impact of the Buddhist activities within the PEI economy; and (4), interviews at the Buddhist Li-Jen grocery stores and GEBIS affiliated temples in Taiwan to round out my research of the soy commodity chain and those affected by it. Interviews will also provide information on the early history of this Buddhist community, placing it within the historical research on other established Taiwanese Buddhist transnational organizations in Canada.

In a similar vein as the Religious Diversity Project's goal of detailing religious diversity in Canada this research offers a unique perspective on how one new Buddhist community is making a home on PEI. Specifically my preliminary research indicates that the community's ethically driven animal welfare activities (multiple animal sanctuaries) and food projects (vegetarian restaurant, local food programs, and corporate organic agricultural businesses) have been successful avenues for integration and acceptance to an island with no previous visible Buddhist population. Funding from the Religious Diversity Project would help fund the first portion of my fieldwork on PEI travelling the island to interview Buddhist monks, lay members of the community, soybean farmers and other organic produce suppliers of the Buddhist community.

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