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ARTICLE

When planetary cosmopolitanism meets the Buddhist ethic: Recycling, *karma* and popular ecology in Singapore

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Abstract

By thinking with and through Buddhist cosmology, this paper explores the emergence of an ethical sensibility—what we call planetary cosmopolitanism—that is based on not just a spatially expanded ethic of care to ecological worlds, but also a temporally extended sense of justice to the future Earth. This transtemporal sense of ethical becoming reflects how the possibility of future 'rebirth' and accountability for past actions can motivate new ecological consciousness in the present. We forge these ideas through an empirical focus on popular Buddhist ecological practices in Singapore, where green recovery visions have primarily been driven by a secular and technocratic ethos. In negotiating the prevailing modernist ecological discourses, many Buddhists tap into an alternative imagining of cosmological time that regards Earth not simply as a place to be left behind at the end of one's life, but a permanent home for all future beings. This reading of human–ecology relations emphasises a causal responsibility to secure planetary well-being, moving the making of cosmopolitan sensibilities from the realm of beneficence into justice. Yet, this renewed cosmopolitan sensibility to Earth is not simply a prescriptive ethical framework articulated on an abstract level, but materially performed and negotiated at the level of everyday life. Recycling becomes a site of rapprochement that allows Buddhists in Singapore to promote and negotiate their ecological consciousness within the strictures of the secular state. In doing so, it opens up new spaces of postcapitalist possibility that enable Buddhists, alongside people of other or no faith, to imagine alternative ways of inhabiting the planet. By developing an alternative account of cosmopolitanism grounded in Buddhist cosmology, we identify Buddhism as a decolonial lens through which we can critically reimagine human–ecology relations, and illuminate diverse modes and practices of ethical becoming in this age of ecological crisis.

KEYWORDS
Buddhism, decolonisation, planetary cosmopolitanism, recycling, Singapore

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The current ecological crisis is a defining moment of the twenty-first century. It has ushered in a philosophical moment that challenges us to radically rethink our existence in the cosmos, and to reorientate ourselves to the complexities and messiness of becoming-with-others (Schmidt, 2019; Stengers, 2010; Yusoff, 2013; Woods, 2022). More-than-human worlds—those occupied by animals, plants, mountains, oceans and more—are increasingly recognised as being ecologically vulnerable, and thus objects of moral consciousness. In this sense, being a citizen of the Earth is no longer about extending responsibility to a 'worldwide community of *human beings*' (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 10; emphasis added), but also to non-human worlds. In light of these ecological shifts, scholars have developed various concepts and lexicons to draw attention to more diverse modes of cosmopolitan becoming. Centred on ideas of the more-than-human (Barua, 2014), the posthuman (Narayanan & Bindumadhav, 2019), and green and ecological cosmopolitanism and citizenship (Sáiz, 2005), these studies reflect a '*spatial* widening of inclusivity, care, and tolerance to non-human species' (Narayanan & Bindumadhav, 2019, p. 408; emphasis added). By taking a more-than-human reading of cosmopolitan life, these efforts seek to delineate the changing 'spaces of cosmopolitan responsibility' (Popke, 2007) and our ethical ties to other worlds amidst ecological crisis.

Advancing the more-than-human turn in cosmopolitan thought, this paper develops an understanding of what we call 'planetary cosmopolitanism'. This understanding extends prevailing theorisations of cosmopolitanism that are often concerned with both the *spatial* dimensions of cosmopolitan life, and its human dimensions. Offering a different perspective, planetary cosmopolitanism emphasises its *temporal* dimensions and more-than-human qualities. This is a transtemporal[1] sense of ethical becoming that expresses how our ethical ties to the planet are not just confined to the temporal frame of a single life—or what historians call the 'biological timescale' (Armitage, 2015, p. 211)—but instead spans a longer, trans-lifetime horizon. To this end, we suggest that Buddhist ontologies[2] can provide a basis for developing such planetary cosmopolitan ethics by pushing beyond the spatial and temporal bounds of modern cosmopolitan thought. According to Buddhist interpretations of the cosmos, the Earth is not simply a temporary home to be left behind at the end of one's life, but the *only* permanent home for many lives. By connecting the past (past actions) with the future (future ecological well-being), a Buddhist rendering of the cosmos can elicit critical thought about the far-reaching consequences of human action. Specifically, it highlights how the possibility of 'rebirth'[3] in the future and accountability for past actions (*karma*) can reframe perspectives of our ethical ties to the future planet, which can motivate new ethical behaviour and consciousness to the planet in the present (Becker, 2002).[4] Such a rendering of the cosmos considers different locatives; that is, not just the '*here and now*', but the '*there and then*' (Schmidt, 2019, p. 724). Planetary cosmopolitanism aims to illuminate not just a spatially expanded sense of care to a more diverse array of lives and beings, but also a temporally extended sense of responsibility to all current and future beings.

We forge these ideas through an empirical focus on popular Buddhist ecological practices in Singapore, a development-oriented city-state with a majority Buddhist population (see, however, our later exposition of the syncretic nature of 'Chinese religion' in Singapore in Section 3). Due to land scarcity, Singapore's environmental management has long been a political endeavour. Green recovery visions have been driven by a decidedly techno-deterministic ethos (Teo & Amir, 2021; Wong, 2012). This is an ethos where developmental and economic aspects of the environment are often prioritised at the expense of its other moral, affective and social dimensions (Kong & Yeoh, 1996). This raises questions about the divergences that emerge between the state-endorsed secular worldviews, and spiritual ways of knowing and inhabiting the planet (Chan & Islam, 2015), while keeping in view the possibilities and realities of convergences in ecological actions. Such divergence-amidst-convergence is most acutely and palpably felt amongst Buddhists, who tap into an alternative imagining of human–ecology relationships that diverges from the prevailing secular, technocratic discourse of the state (Gao et al., 2021; Swearer, 2006). Buddhism thus emerges as a nexus through which the dominant modes of environmentalism are negotiated and entwined with the (re)production of cosmopolitan subjects.

Against this backdrop, the contributions of this paper are twofold. First, by developing an account of planetary cosmopolitanism based on Buddhist cosmology, we draw attention to a transtemporal sense of justice to future planetary well-being that extends normative theorisations of cosmopolitanism (Popke, 2007). This allows us to elucidate more diverse modes of ethical becoming that do not share the assumed division of society from ecology, and instead, emphasise a unique form of interdependence based on a belief in a cyclical understanding of life's existence in human–ecology relations. In moving beyond Western cosmology and conceptualising Buddhist ontologies as a planetary ethic, we also extend decolonising efforts in cosmopolitan thought and Geography that hitherto remain largely focused on the critiques around 'the whiteness of the Anglophone discipline, indigenous geographies, and the reception of theoretical work from Latin America' (Jazeel, 2011, 2017; McFarlane, 2022; Radcliffe, 2017; Sidaway, 2022, p.16). In so doing, we address recent

calls to develop new vocabularies that can articulate a reimagined belonging to a transformed planet from and through spaces of alterity (McEwan, 2021; Schmidt et al., 2016; Spivak, 2003).

Second, by thinking through and with everyday Buddhist ecological practices in Singapore, this paper extends prevailing geographical research on religious ecology, environmental ethics, and environmental theology. This work has predominantly focused on Judeo-Christian religions (e.g., Kidwell et al., 2018; Lee & Kong, 2015; Proctor, 2006; Wilkins, 2021). Specifically, we seek to advance a new understanding of the emancipatory potential of recycling practices by examining recycling as a space of theo-ethics that allows Buddhists to promote and negotiate their faith-motivated ecological consciousness within the strictures of Singapore's secular state (Cloke & Beaumont, 2013). Equally importantly, we demonstrate how recycling comes to be mobilised as a site of postcapitalist possibility by enabling Buddhists, alongside other faith and non-faith groups, to imagine alternative ways of inhabiting the planet despite, and beyond, dominant modes of 'capitalist production, consumption, and accumulation' (Wong, 2012, p. 97). Exploring how Buddhist moral claims to nature are performed and negotiated at the level of everyday life can offer a more contextually nuanced account of religion's role in adapting to the contemporary ecological crisis, extending recent debates on green Buddhism often contextualised in the West (Kaza, 2005; see Lee & Han, 2015 for an exception).

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on cosmopolitanism in human geography and the social sciences, as well as the role of Buddhism in human–ecology relations. It argues for the importance of reimagining cosmopolitanism through planetary ethics,[5] and considers the role of Buddhism in forging ecological sensibilities and subjects. Section 3 offers a contextual overview of the prevailing green recovery visions in the multireligious society of Singapore. Section 4 consists of two empirical sections, which investigate (1) the role of Buddhism in mobilising alternative imaginings of the cosmos and ecological consciousness—what we call planetary cosmopolitan sensibilities—amidst the dominant state-led modernist ecological discourses, and (2) how such sensibilities are materially performed and negotiated in everyday life amongst Buddhists through recycling practices. We conclude by considering what it means to inhabit the world in this age of ecological crisis.

2 | PLACING THE PLANET AT THE CORE OF COSMOPOLITANISM

For a long time, cosmopolitanism has attracted considerable attention in human geography and the social sciences. The first subsection discusses how cosmopolitanism has been theorised in the literature and gained renewed understanding in light of the contemporary ecological crisis. The second conceptualises Buddhist cosmology as a planetary ethic that provides a pathway to incorporate ethical sensibilities emanating from non-human ecological worlds into cosmopolitan theory.

2.1 | Reimagining cosmopolitanism in the age of ecological crisis

As a concept, methodology and ethical orientation, cosmopolitanism is concerned with imagining 'alternative ways of life and rationalities' beyond the national perspective (Beck, 2002, p. 18). Underpinning this dominant understanding is a Kantian notion of cosmopolitanism that posits the individual as a 'citizen of the earth' beyond a 'citizen of a state': one who pledges membership to a universal community regardless of social and political affiliation (Hayden, 2005, p. 13). Despite emerging attempts at particularising and pluralising cosmopolitanism, several problems with the representation of humanity and the cosmos undermine the explanatory value of these studies.

First, Kantian cosmopolitanism remains grounded in an anthropocentric view of the cosmos. In this view, other beings, understood to be less-than-human according to the Western concept of humanity, are excluded from the spheres of ethical treatment and cosmopolitan engagement (Harvey, 2000; Latour, 2004). Second, cosmopolitanism in these accounts—variously termed as 'rooted', 'situated', 'subaltern' and 'vernacular' (Harvey, 2000, p. 530)—has been criticised for being too frequently defined in scalar terms, where 'the "global" is assumed to supersede and encompass the local, regional, and national' (Hörschelmann & El Refaie, 2014, p. 444). As Elden (2005, p. 8) argues, the globe diagnoses 'a particular way of grasping place ... as something extensible and calculable, extended in three dimensions and grounded on the geometric point' (see also Cosgrove, 2001). By taking the globe and globalisation as a reference point in approaching the worldwide, these hyphenated versions of cosmopolitanism remain firmly rooted in the orbit of Western colonial ontology, and are ultimately 'proscribed by a centre that sets the parameters for difference' (Jazeel, 2011, p. 77; Sidaway et al., 2014; Woods, 2021). Consequently, not only are such accounts often limited in problematising the 'irredeemably

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European and universalising set of values and human normativities' underlying cosmopolitan thought (Jazeel, 2011, p. 77). More than that, they have been criticised for reproducing the same structures of power that they attempt to destabilise (Cosgrove, 2001).

Expanding the breadth of cosmopolitan thought involves decolonising its epistemological structures by 'opening out some of the concept's more restrictive geographical imagination' beyond the centuries-old Eurocentric knowledge economies (Harvey, 2000; Jazeel, 2011, p. 92). One such pathway involves departing from familiar anthropocentric (and often Euro/ethnocentric) notions of the cosmos, such that cosmopolitanism is not simply about the person whose allegiance is to the 'worldwide community of *human beings*' (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 10; emphasis added). A common referent here is Stengers' (2010) idea of cosmopolitics that takes seriously other forms of knowledge beyond the human. Rather than limiting the number of entities on the negotiating table, the cosmos in Stengers' (2010) cosmopolitics acknowledges 'all the vast numbers of non-human entities making humans act' (Latour, 2004, p. 454). In extending Stengers' theorisation, scholars have sought to reconceptualise cosmopolitanism through a more-than-human lens. This involves attuning to a much more diverse array of geographies—of beings, things, elements, and forces—that have not only dramatically altered social life, but have also emerged as key objects of moral consciousness today. Amongst this array are the ecological worlds of flora and fauna, geophysical forces of tectonic plate movements, melting glaciers, and rising sea levels—what Yusoff (2013) calls 'inhuman' geographies that were believed to lie beyond the bounds of Western conceptions of cosmopolitan life. These more-than-human conceptualisations of cosmopolitan life can be observed from, for instance, Barua's (2014) study of elephants as participants in and subjects of cosmopolitanism that enrol diverse social actors into complex assemblages of conservation. However, the aim is not to decentre humans in favour of non-humans. Instead, what these efforts do is correct the long-standing privileging of the human, and show how a multiplicity of beings cast as human and non-human actively participate in the co-production of socio-political life (Srinivasan, 2022).

2.2 | Conceptualising Buddhist cosmology as a planetary ethic

Building upon these ideas, we argue that Buddhist cosmology offers a unique pathway that can be used to incorporate ethical sensibilities emanating from non-human ecological worlds into cosmopolitan theory. As scholars have argued, one of the key intellectual challenges of the contemporary ecological crisis is to 'reimagine how humans make connections between planetary and everyday life in ethical, sustainable, and ecologically just ways' (Houston, 2013, p. 440; cited in Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2010). As such, dealing with the ecological crisis requires a 'planetary environmental ethic' based on embeddedness, situated knowledge, and 'intergenerational and interspecies obligations' (Adelman, 2021, p. 74): justice obligations to all species in current and future generations and the Earth as a living entity.[6]

Buddhism provides a powerful lens through which we can develop a planetary environmental ethic by pushing beyond the spatial and temporal bounds of modern cosmopolitan thought. Here, we draw from Spivak's (2003, p. 73) notion of planetarity that implores us to think from and through spaces of alterity to account for linguistic and cultural diversity, accordingly to 'imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents'. In this sense, conceiving a planetary cosmopolitan ethic involves a rethinking 'deep into the times and spaces of the Earth' that exceeds the prevailing cosmopolitan thought embedded in a Eurocentric cultural and political particularity (Clark & Szerszynski, 2020, p. 4). As scholars note, modern conceptualisations of cosmopolitanism are primarily derived from the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries of Western modernity—a time when 'questions of difference between Europeans and a world of other peoples [were] intensified into a temporal narrative that cast non-Europeans as developmentally anterior' (Clark & Szersynski, 2020, p. 112). Whilst cosmopolitan thought gestures towards an understanding of the 'self' that embraces a 'society of strangers', Buddhist ontologies conceive 'a cosmopolitan self in which all inscriptions of cultural, ethnic, national and other forms of identity, on the body and in the mind, are empty [and] impermanent to begin with' (Ward, 2013, p. 149). From this perspective, Buddhist thought emphasises a qualitatively different idea of interconnectedness, not only amongst humans, but between humans and other species as well.

By insisting on going 'beyond the conventional terrain of the social, through the contact zone of human and non-human processes' (Clark & Szerszynski, 2020, p. 4), this spatial reimagination of cosmopolitan life is not unique to Buddhist ontologies. Prevailing discussions on environmental ethics such as 'reverence for life' (Schweitzer, 1923), 'Gaia hypothesis' (Lovelock & Margulis, 1974), 'deep ecology' (Naess, 1984), and 'biocentric egalitarianism' (Taylor, 1983) similarly advocate for ethical consideration towards ecological worlds. However, what Buddhist ontologies offer to biocentric approaches and more-than-human theorisations of cosmopolitanism is its emphasis on (inter-)dependent origination based upon a cyclical understanding of life's existence. Whilst recognising the diversity of Buddhist ontologies (which includes

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the major Mahayana, Theravada, Tibetan/Vjrayana traditions), a common tenet amongst these traditions that distinguishes Buddhist cosmologies from others is a 'non-dualistic, non-hierarchical and holistic worldview' (Swearer, 2006, p. 127). Echoing Kaza (2000, p. 336), '[t]hroughout all cultural forms of Buddhism, nature is perceived as relational, each phenomenon dependent on a multitude of causes and conditions'. This is a Buddhist worldview that posits all lives and realms as fundamentally interdependent connected via karmic ties, instead of treating human and ecological worlds as distinct and autonomous entities that simply co-exist on Earth (Whatmore, 1997). The subject is shaped by connections, actions and by history, each co-constituted by and within the wider environment. In this view, the relational account of the self and the world espoused in Buddhist thought is arguably 'more radical than that currently advocated in cosmopolitan thought' (Ward, 2013, p. 137).

Following this understanding, the Buddhist conception of all lives as *interdependent*, rather than simply *co-existing*, thus shifts the making of cosmopolitan sensibilities 'from the territory of *beneficence* into the realms of *justice*' (Dobson, 2006, p. 172; emphasis added). Compared to appeals to membership of common humanity or planet based on beneficence in current environmental ethics, a recognition of causal responsibility for planetary well-being and suffering can arguably produce a thicker connection amongst all beings—what Dobson (2006, p. 165) calls a 'thick cosmopolitanism'. Here, the Buddhist ideas of *karmic* merit and rebirth provide an intellectual resource to consider how human–ecology relations are conceived in terms of causal responsibility and mutual interdependence. In Buddhism, *karma* expresses a relationship between intentionality and consequences—where all things are subject to the laws of cause and effect—such that the quality of our actions (*karma*) determines one's future destiny, including the possibility of birth again (Lin & Yen, 2015). This reading of human–ecology relations posits the planetary condition as inseparable from one's intentions, and grounds accountability for planetary well-being and suffering in the here and now, unbidden by any consideration of an afterlife (Ward, 2013). Where Judeo-Christian traditions differ is the belief in life's existence as a unidirectional, linear process: once a period has passed, there is no possibility of return. As such, critics argue that this worldview can engender a sense of 'disposability' towards their living environments, where humans, like actors on a stage, have little responsibility to preserve their stage set (Earth) for the next season/life (Becker, 2002, p. 116). Indeed, White (1967, p. 1206) has critiqued the traditionally hierarchical and dualistic view of human–ecology relations in Judeo-Christian traditions, calling, instead, to 'find a new religion, or rethink our old one'.[7]

This paper thus considers Buddhist cosmology as a basis for developing a planetary cosmopolitan ethics that mobilises 'a resource of hope for a new planetary consciousness' (Sidaway et al., 2014, p. 10). By suggesting the possibility of future rebirth and accountability for past actions (*karma*), Buddhist cosmology raise novel questions about the temporality of 'our' being with and in the world. As Jazeel (2011, p. 88) argues, 'Buddhist attainments of non-selfhood' express a way of 'knowing and being in the world that is radically incompatible with the Apollonian image and cosmos'—an imagination that is fundamentally realised 'through Christian discourse of mission and redemption' (Cosgrove, 2001, p. 257). Reimagining the making of the cosmopolitan self through and from Buddhist cosmology can reveal alternative imaginations of human relationships with the Earth based upon 'epistemologies of humility' rather than 'domination and mastery' (Adelman, 2021, pp. 81–82; Becker, 2002). This is a cosmopolitan ethic conceived in terms of 'chains of cause and effect that prompt obligations of justice' for planetary well-being, instead of simply a principled recognition of (non-human) others co-existing alongside humans sharing the same planet (Dobson, 2006, p. 178).

In what follows, we think through this concept of planetary cosmopolitanism using the case of Singapore. We first present a brief history of Singapore's environmental management efforts. This provides a contextual backdrop for understanding the dominant logics underpinning human–ecology relationships in Singapore, and how such worldviews are increasingly engaged and negotiated amongst the public, particularly Buddhists.

3 | SECULARISING ECOLOGICAL CRISIS IN MULTIRELIGIOUS SINGAPORE

Singapore is a secular city-state with a multireligious population. These two characteristics reveal the divergences and convergences between the state-endorsed secular and developmentalist approaches to the environment, and spiritual ways of knowing and relating to nature (Chan & Islam, 2015). Processes of 'state-led ecological modernisation' began as early as the late 1960s amidst rapid industrialisation and urbanisation (Wong, 2012, p. 95). The government implemented the country's first formal plan—the Singapore Green Plan—in 1992 and outlined the 'pragmatic' policy directions that it would take to 'approach nature conservation ... [and balance] the needs of development and the preservation of our natural heritage' (Ministry of the Environment Singapore, 1992, p. 49). More recently, the Singapore Green Plan 2030 echoed

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this utilitarian framing of nature. Noteworthy is the continuing, if not growing, emphasis on 'science and technology as important enablers for the Green Plan … to unlock possibilities for a low carbon future' (Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment, Singapore, 2022). In these discourses, the environment is treated as a resource to be managed for developmental needs, where 'economic growth can be reconciled with the resolution of environmental problems through technical and procedural innovation' (Hajer, 1996, p. 251). Such an instrumental approach to environmental protection, articulated by the state, invariably informs the normative understandings and practices of environmentalism, and can obscure alternative ways of imagining, knowing and inhabiting the Earth.

Within this context of development-oriented environmentalism, Buddhism in Singapore emerges as a site for multiple and sometimes divergent claims to nature. Characterised by a high degree of religious heterogeneity, Singapore has more than 80% of the population composed of Chinese religionists, Christians, Muslims and Hindus (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2021). As the largest religion in Singapore, Buddhism accounts for approximately 30% of the population, most of whom are Chinese (ibid.). Buddhism in Singapore has tended to be an inclusive religion, embracing both canonical Buddhist teachings and Chinese syncretic religious practices that incorporate elements of Confucianism, Taoism and ancestor worship (Wee, 1976). Research has shown how 'Buddhists' in Singapore often engage in what are traditionally known as 'non-Buddhist' Taoist practices, such as burning joss papers, drawing divine lots, fortune telling and spiritual mediumship (Kuah-Pearce, 2009). Given the complexity of Buddhism in Singapore, the everyday ecological practices informed by Buddhist teachings are often much more nuanced, and do not sit neatly within major traditional schools of thought, such as Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism (Gao et al., 2021).

The empirical discussion draws on in-depth interviews with members of a Buddhist organisation—the Buddhist Benevolence Foundation[8] (BBF)—between 2021 and 2022 in Singapore. The interviews were conducted as part of a larger project that sought to understand the role of religious groups in facilitating social integration in Singapore (see Woods & Kong, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). Since its establishment in the late 1960s, BBF has been widely regarded as an international non-governmental humanitarian organisation for their efforts in disaster relief and environmental work. BBF is not formally associated with a specific Buddhist tradition in their foundational statements (e.g., Theravada or Mahayana tradition) but identifies itself as a humanistic Buddhist organisation.[9] Variously termed as 'Buddhist-in-action' or 'this-worldly Buddhism', humanistic Buddhism is a form of Buddhist modernism concerned with the relevance of Buddhist philosophy to the evolving needs of modern society, or 'this-worldly' realm (Kuah-Pearce, 2009). BBF's philosophy thus reflects a form of modern religiosity, which rarely relies on settled, programmatic religious identities, but configurations compatible with modern living (Hervieu-Léger, 2002).

We conducted in-depth interviews in English and Mandarin with 19 BBF members, including six senior representatives and staff, and 13 volunteers. Except for one interviewee, all were ethically Chinese who engaged or self-identified as Buddhists. They come from all walks of life, encompassing working professionals, tradespeople, students, retirees and homemakers. Recognising the heterogenous nature of Buddhism in Singapore (Kuah-Pearce, 2009; Wee, 1997 [1976]), this sample is not meant to represent the views of Singapore's Buddhists, nor do they reflect a particular Buddhist tradition. Rather, these everyday stakeholders provide a counterpoint to the elite voices of religious leaders and policy experts to better illuminate the complex ways in which ecological crises are imagined, lived and responded to in everyday life (Gao et al., 2021; Lee & Kong, 2015).

4 | WHEN PLANETARY COSMOPOLITANISM MEETS THE BUDDHIST ETHIC

The empirical findings comprise two subsections. The first explores the role of Buddhism in mobilising planetary cosmopolitan sensibilities. It discusses how individuals' consciousness towards the environment (ecological consciousness) intersects with faith, and how this triggers the formation of new ecological sensibilities. This is a cosmopolitan sensibility to Earth that shares certain divergences—amidst convergences—with the dominant top-down utilitarian framework that largely characterises human-ecology relations in Singapore. The second considers how such ecological consciousness is materially performed and negotiated within the secular conditions of Singapore society in everyday life through recycling practices.

4.1 | Reimagining human–ecology relations through Buddhist cosmology

For a long time, ecological issues in Singapore have been framed through a pragmatic, utilitarian view that foregrounds the instrumental aspects of nature. By understanding the environment as a resource to be managed for economic

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developmental needs, this dominant worldview risks perpetuating an asymmetrical relationship between humans and ecological worlds (Hajer, 1996). Equally importantly, it can also normalise humans' domination over ecological worlds, obscuring alternative ways of knowing and adapting to a transformed planet in the age of ecological crisis (Chan & Islam, 2015).

Yet, dominant environmental discourses in Singapore are not passively internalised by the public. Instead, they are often engaged with, and negotiated, differently on the ground (e.g., Teo & Amir, 2021). Buddhists, in particular, often interpret and negotiate their understanding of these issues through a cosmological framework. However, rather than articulating a coherent, unitary form of faith-motivated ecological sensibility espoused by the organisation, many Buddhists in our study expressed a more complex and fluid sense of religiosity drawn from their personal experiences. Yong, a Chinese Malaysian Buddhist volunteer of BBF's environmental protection team in his 50s, explained that BBF is different from those 'conventional main branches like Mahayana, Tibetan [and] sub-branches like Zen, chanting …'. In his view, BBF 'is not only faith-based, in fact we're more action-based … and [BBF] has officially announced that we are not among those sub-branches, we are our own … we are exclusive[ly] Buddhist-in-action'. Interestingly, Yong's sentiment diverges from Shan's, a Chinese Singaporean BBF's environmental protection team leader also in her 50s who personally identifies with Theravada Buddhism. Shan shared that 'on the outside, [BBF] may look more like Mahayana Buddhism'. However, she felt that 'the practices and teachings of our founder are very, very close to Theravada teachings … which is why I can relate to it very well'. Rather than defining the worldviews espoused by BBF through a particular Buddhist thought, these sentiments suggest how religious spaces of meaning have become increasingly diverse and complex as religions are practised and lived in the contemporary age of modernity (Hervieu-Léger, 2002). They also highlighted the 'flexibility' and freedom that Buddhism offers practitioners, which pose challenges to 'fixing' their faith-motivated ecological sensibilities to a predetermined category or Buddhist tradition (Loy, 2003, p. 16).

Despite these divergent interpretations, there are some core tenets shared by all forms of Buddhism which shape how Buddhists understand their relationships with ecological worlds and the Earth. One such tenet is the belief in a mutual *interdependence* of all human and non-human beings, grounded in a cyclical understanding of life's existence (Gross, 1997; Kaza, 2000). This can be observed from Yen's account. Brought up in a Taoist family, Yen is a Chinese Malaysian professional in her early 40s who joined BBF two decades ago. She acknowledged that her environmental consciousness was 'not strong' until being exposed to Buddhist teachings. This helped her realise that 'humans [have come] to a situation where, recently, we realised that we [have] overdo[ne] it, where our actions as humans jeopardised the living of other sentient beings … we are paying the price now because we used too much before'. Similarly, Hock, a Chinese Malaysian professional in his 50s, had little awareness of environmental issues before joining BBF three decades ago. He asserted that:

> If we don't recycle, we [will] hurt Mother Nature. And then, they will react, and you have adverse effects on the environment. That's why I believe this is a cause and effect, and maybe, *karma*. You can see that quite clearly.

According to Buddhists like Yen and Hock, the ecological consequences that we are experiencing now are intimately intertwined with human actions. By suggesting human actions have 'jeopardised' and 'hurt Mother Nature', Yen and Hock emphasised a strong sense of responsibility for the ongoing suffering in the non-human ecological worlds, a point rarely acknowledged by the capitalist economy that often sees human utilisation of nature as necessary or even legitimate (Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2010; Kaza, 2000). Further, by understanding current ecological issues are the 'price we pay now' and '*karmic* retributions' based on human actions in one's past life, they suggest that the ecological consequences that we are experiencing today are not simply a result of actions incurred in one's current lifetime or a single generation. Rather, these consequences are inextricably connected to collective human actions accrued over multiple past lives and generations (Swearer, 2006). What they expressed is, therefore, a profoundly transtemporal worldview of human–ecology relationships that span across infinite number of pasts and futures. For Yen and Hock, the actions today not only have individual consequences—whether one is reborn as a 'higher' lifeform, but can also produce impacts on a planetary scale that affect the well-being of current and future generations and the planet (Lin & Yen, 2015).

Whilst we may know our past actions by examining our current planetary condition, there is also a possibility of shaping the future Earth by taking actions today. Drawing on Buddhist doctrines of *karma* and 'rebirth', Wei, a 37-year-old Chinese Singaporean engineer who has been volunteering at BBF for 15 years, explained:

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> As Buddhists, we believe in reincarnation. If I don't start to spread all this kind of good information, what kind of world will it be next time? Wouldn't you like to return to a world which is clean and good?

By suggesting the possibility of 'return[ing] to [this] world', Wei revealed an imagination of life's existence as cyclical and indefinitely open, which points to new forms of allegiances and belonging to Earth. According to this Buddhist worldview, Earth is the only permanent home for all beings, rather than a temporary world to be left behind or disposed at the end of one's life (Becker, 2002). The possibility of 'rebirth' in the future to bear the consequences of their actions today serves as a timely reminder about the far-reaching impact of individual actions: our future condition might be different if we do something now. For Wei, at least, this possibility of 'returning' to Earth provokes a calibration of how he should act in the here and now, in turn motivating an urgent, transtemporal sense of moral responsibility to alleviate planetary suffering for future generations (Kaza, 2000).

The possibility of future 'rebirth'—as a human or something other-than-human—can elicit critical thought about the temporality of 'their' being with and in the world, and their relationships with other ecological worlds. For example, Yen suggests that 'as Buddhists, we believe that we all share the same fate. Everybody, not only humans; animals, all these ... We call them sentient beings. We are all the same'. Similarly, Qian, an Indonesian Chinese Buddhist undergraduate in her 20s, explained, 'why we do not eat meat is because [animals] are sentient beings who have feelings and emotions as well ... So I think that really builds up a sense of compassion in me, and that's why I believe more in environmental protection'.

Rather than seeing humans as separate from, or simply co-existing with, other non-human sentient beings like animals (e.g., Narayanan & Bindumadhav, 2019; Wilson, 2022), these Buddhists, instead, view their lives as interdependent, 'conjoined' in a karmic continuum through shared suffering (Swearer, 2006, p. 127). According to major Buddhist philosophies, sentient beings—those capable of feeling pain and articulate consciousness—have been reborn numerous times over innumerable time-cycles. Due to the limitless age of the universe, all sentient beings are related by karmic ties from past lives, and have been in some kind of previous relationship with each other—as parents, family members or friends (Gross, 1997). According to this Buddhist worldview, humans and animals are thus not distinguished by substance (e.g., rational capacity, able to possess or assert rights), but the degree of suffering. By regarding humans and non-human sentient beings as, in Yen's words, 'all the same' because 'we share the same fate', these accounts reflect a worldview that challenges the longstanding duality between human and ecological worlds, and the anthropocentric tendency in dominant modernist conceptions of social life (Whatmore, 1997). This sense of interdependence is also often expressed by many Buddhists in our study, who, in referring to Earth as 'Mother Nature' or 'Mother Earth', suggest Earth 'not only [as] our home but our mother' (Loy, 2003, p. 172). Understanding human–ecology relations as interdependent and fundamentally inseparable can motivate new ethical sensibilities to protect the non-human others, as Qian mentioned, in building up 'a sense of compassion' in her.

Some Buddhists may limit their ambit of responsibility only to sentient beings in accordance with dominant Buddhist positions on non-violence and animal welfare (Schmithausen, 1997). Yet, others expressed a more encompassing view of their relationships with the planet. Ting, for example, is a Chinese Buddhist office executive in her late 30s who joined BBF 10 years ago. Recognising the escalating 'deforestation' and 'mining to produce more phones and technologies' which led to 'a lot of natural disasters on Earth', Ting maintained that:

> One of the key values in Buddhism is respect ... not only respect between humans to humans. Respect is also [extended] to the animals, anything with life or without life. We need to respect our natural life, our trees and Earth.

What Ting has identified is a more expansive form of 'interbeing' with entities that are not often thought of as 'sentient', such as trees and nature more broadly, but are considered home to sentient beings. However, this 'interbeing' involves more than just a principled recognition of humans' embeddedness in constitutive relations with the non-human world, but also an accountability for their suffering to meet current and future human (capitalist) demands (Dobson, 2006). By extending moral responsibility to non-human others beyond the bounds of sentience, Ting's anecdote thus reveals the highly complex and diverse spaces of cosmopolitan responsibility amongst the Buddhists—what could be understood as a form of 'relational ethics' (Whatmore, 1997). Such spaces exceed normative or universal codes of ethics that attempt to determine what is right or wrong based on rational thought of autonomous human individual. Instead, it seeks to account for our 'inter-being' with other species through individual's affective capacities, connections, and responsibility inherent in these relationships (Luo & Gao, 2022; Popke, 2007).

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Taken together, these accounts illustrate how Buddhism is mobilised as a 'domain of belief, knowledge, and cosmology that influences the ways people affectively connect to nature/environment' (Gao et al., 2021, p. 5), which motivates the formation of new and diverse spaces of cosmopolitan responsibility. Despite this diversity, however, a common thread amongst our participants is a renewed sense of accountability to secure future planetary well-being in the here and now: a trans-temporal ethic of justice towards Earth. This planetary cosmopolitan sensibility is based on a belief in the mutual *interdependence* of human and ecological worlds, not least because all species are interconnected via karmic ties from past lives. Understanding their relationship with Earth in terms of causal responsibility shifts the making of cosmopolitan sensibilities from the realm of beneficence (e.g., caring for others just because we share the same planet) to that of justice (e.g., obligated to alleviate the suffering and disadvantage of others because we are responsible for it in some degree) (Dobson, 2006). This Buddhist cosmological worldview also diverges from the dominant top-down, utilitarian worldview in prevailing modernist ecological discourses in Singapore that often legitimise human dominance over nature (Kong & Yeoh, 1996; Wong, 2012). The next section discusses how such planetary cosmopolitan sensibilities can lead to practical contexts for action in adapting to and living with the transformed planet.

4.2 | Performing planetary cosmopolitanism in everyday life: Recycling as a site of theo-ethics and postcapitalist possibilities

Whilst Buddhist faith—particularly through its emphasis on the cyclical existence of life and mutual interdependence of human and non-human beings—can engender new spaces of cosmopolitan responsibility, the ethical consciousness that many Buddhists expressed is not simply an abstract, prescriptive moral framework, but is often materially performed, reproduced, and negotiated at the level of everyday life. Understanding how this faith-motivated ecological consciousness is practised on the ground serves as an important intervention in disrupting the prevailing apocalyptic narratives of ecological crisis (Katz, 1995). This section foregrounds the agency of social actors in inhabiting, adapting and responding to the ecological crisis, highlighting the 'practical exigencies' of this situation (Kong, 1990, p. 366; Rarai et al., 2022).

To this end, recycling has emerged as a critical space of 'theo-ethics' through and from which our Buddhist participants perform faith-motivated justice to diverse human and non-human ecological worlds. Whilst primarily conceptualised in the Christian context, the notion of theo-ethics stresses the role of theological notions and precepts (e.g., Christian notion of *agape* and Catholic *caritas*) in shaping the behaviour of faith-motivated groups and actors in the age of secular modernity (Cloke, 2015). As Ben, one of the leaders of BBF's volunteer department, emphasised, 'we are not asking people to recite or to chant all the *sutra*, but to execute, to practise what is written in the *sutra* ... Buddha doesn't want you to be Buddhist, he just wants to pass down the values of compassion and kindness and love'. For these Buddhists, recycling thus provides a practical avenue to perform values of 'compassion', 'kindness' and 'love' on two fronts: to people of other and non-faith, and non-human ecological worlds.

On the one hand, recycling efforts can open up new collaborative ethical spaces that enable people of various faiths and non-faith to perform their ecological sensibilities for a common cause. This is a space that involves a 'crossing-over between the religious and the secular in the form of broad-based alliances' with non-human worlds (Cloke & Beaumont, 2013, p. 44). Echoing Ben, Ed suggested, recycling is one of the 'few areas where [people] don't find this kind of ... religious involvement. As long as it does not involve any Buddhist chanting or *dharma*, there [will be] a lot of people [who] are willing to join in to play a part for the environment'. Andy, a community leader in his late 50s, further elaborates:

> Because the environment affects everyone, regardless of your faith. And it is becoming a major, global movement. Now that today's youth are very concerned about the sustainability of Mother Earth. And the way we promote [recycling], we did not connect that with any religion. So that's why it can attract people of all faiths.

These anecdotes reveal the potential of recycling efforts in opening up new spaces where diverse religious, humanist and secular voices intersect in a dialogic manner. Even if they do not share the same frameworks of morality, these Buddhists are able to find common ground with other faiths and non-faith sharing similar concerns for planetary well-being (Lee & Han, 2015). This is particularly important in the context of Singapore, where the restrictions on proselytisation and sharing religion with others in the multireligious society of Singapore compel religious groups to de-emphasise the religious character of their engagements with the secular public (Shee, 2024).[10] By mobilising people of other faith and non-faith, BBF's recycling efforts are thus vital in developing a cosmopolitan self in which all inscriptions of cultural, ethnic,

national identities and more 'are empty [and] impermanent', in line with a Buddhist relational understanding of the self (Ward, 2013, p. 149).

More than just an avenue for conceiving a cosmopolitan self based upon a planetary ethic, recycling, on the other hand, can also be read as an emancipatory frontier of postcapitalist possibilities. This is a collaborative space of rapprochement that opens up avenues for people of diverse backgrounds and dispositions to collectively imagine and perform alternative ways of inhabiting the planet despite, and simultaneously, beyond the dominant logics of capital and accumulation in society. For Ed, recycling is 'more than just recycling things. It's to help us realise how to curb ourselves. This is part of the Buddhist monastic teachings'. Similarly, Shan emphasised that collecting recyclables enables her to 'see a purpose beyond a physical action', or it will be 'just another kind of physical exercise without learning how this work relates to Buddhist teachings'. Hock also viewed recycling in a similar light:

> [W]hen we try to clean up the environment, that helps us to reflect on our spiritual minds as well ... So we just try to recycle our stuff, cut out all those negative values, and then we can actually get recycled.

For many Buddhists, recycling represents a shift from consumptive to sustainable ideals, from a linear 'use and dispose' to a cyclical 'reuse and recycle' process (Becker, 2002). More than just a secular practice, recycling can be read as an ecological practice fundamentally motivated by a belief in the circularity of life's existence—a basic presupposition of Buddhist philosophy (Lee & Han, 2015). Whilst human life is inescapably predicated upon consumption and the taking of life, recycling enables non-human lives to be maximised, such that the many plants, animals and non-sentient entities such as water and minerals used for each human life will not have been sacrificed without meaning. Rather than changing the Earth to sustain existing modes of production, these Buddhists advocate for changing their lifestyles (e.g., material frugality) and social structures to alleviate suffering of others. In this sense, recycling enables Buddhists to perform their faith-motivated ecological consciousness based on an ethic of responsibility, reciprocity and deep humility to treat resources provided by the Earth with great care, or, in Ed's words, to 'curb ourselves' (Adelman, 2021).

In advocating for recycling used items, BBF's practices align with the national recycling programmes in Singapore (Neo, 2010). Yet, despite these parallels in their green recovery visions, what arguably differs are the logics underpinning BBF's and the dominant state-led recycling efforts, shaped by different worldviews of human–ecology relationships. According to Neo (2010, p. 876), the Singapore state's support for recycling is primarily motivated by economic and developmental necessity, compounded by space scarcity: what he calls 'a perception of landfill crisis'. As a 'quintessential consumerist society', Singapore emphasises less on waste production and minimisation (ibid, p. 877). This differs from the ecological practices advocated by BBF, which goes beyond simply recycling used items. In particular, many Buddhist volunteers, such as Ping, stressed that it is more important to 'educate people don't buy things first'. She explained, 'for us, actually recycling is the last resort. What we want to educate is refuse, don't buy. So we don't generate waste'. Similarly, whilst Hock believes that current state-led efforts in 'reducing one-time use of utensils and plastics ... are growing slowly', he thinks that such efforts 'may not be that aggressive' as they hoped. In addition to the 3Rs (reduce, reuse, recycle) in Singapore's state-led Zero Waste vision, BBF members have recently advocated for a more comprehensive 5Rs plan that emphasises *refuse*, reduce, reuse and *repair* before finally recycling.

The addition of 'refuse'—specifically in refusing overconsumption—signals the values of eliminating the desire for material goods, cultivating mindfulness, as well as minimising harm and reducing suffering for all beings. These values are underpinned by Buddhist concerns for 'proper, ethical and ascetic behaviour' (Sørensen, 2013, p. 92). Taken together, these sentiments suggest the increasing engagement by faith groups in extending care and justice to beings beyond the bounds of humanity. It extends recent discussions on theo-ethics and postsecular rapprochement that have remained primarily focused on faith groups' role in providing care for humanity at the margins, such as the homeless and the poor (Cloke, 2015; Williams, 2015).

Rather than seeing the current ecological crisis as an imminent collapse of the world or an apocalyptic end point (Houston, 2013; Katz, 1995), these anecdotes suggest that the ecological consequences are often a matter of everyday life that are lived, acted on and negotiated in the mundane. Thinking about how such planetary cosmopolitan sensibilities are performed in everyday life thus draws attention to the agency of social actors in inhabiting, adapting and responding to the transformed planet, whilst keeping in view the secular strictures of society that shape their contexts of action. This sensibility not only involves ongoing negotiation of, and resistance to, the capitalist logics of accumulation and consumerism in contemporary society, but also, more crucially, a hope in achieving justice for all future beings sharing the Earth.

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5 | CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the emergence of a new ethical sensibility in the current age of ecological crisis, what we term 'planetary cosmopolitanism'. By thinking through and with Buddhist cosmology, planetary cosmopolitanism foregrounds an ecological consciousness based not only on the 'spatial widening of *care*' to ecological worlds (Narayanan & Bindumadhav, 2019, p. 408; emphasis added), but also on a trans-temporal ethic of *justice* towards the planet. By conceiving life's existence as cyclical, this transtemporal sense of ethical becoming captures how concerns over the future planetary well-being and accountability for past actions can elicit the formation of new ecological sensibilities in the present. The mobilisation of such planetary cosmopolitanism can be observed amongst Buddhists in Singapore, who often express a palpably affective sense of responsibility to the Earth. More than just a prescriptive moral framework, this planetary cosmopolitan sensibility is actively practised through recycling used items. Recycling, therefore, comes to be mobilised as a site of rapprochement that allows Buddhists to promote and negotiate their faith-motivated ecological consciousness within the strictures of the secular state. In so doing, it also opens up new spaces of postcapitalist possibility by enabling Buddhists, alongside people of other faith and non-faiths, to imagine alternative ways of inhabiting the planet beyond dominant modes of capitalist consumption and accumulation in society.

Whilst the implications of this paper for Geography and the wider social sciences are manifold, we highlight three here. First, this paper extends ongoing decolonising efforts in Geography and cosmopolitan thought by moving beyond Western cosmology as the default site of theorisation (Jazeel, 2011, 2017; McFarlane, 2022; Radcliffe, 2017; Sidaway, 2022). By thinking with and through Buddhist cosmologies, planetary cosmopolitanism seeks to elucidate an ethical consciousness that is extended not only to multi-species worlds over space, but also an accountability to future beings and lives. This paper emphasises that Buddhism is not the only path to developing planetary cosmopolitan sensibilities. Rather, elements of the Buddhist ethic and worldview can aid the construction of such ecological ethics. By elucidating a more dynamic understanding of ethical becoming over time, planetary cosmopolitanism points to new allegiances to the transformed planet centred on justice. Future research can consider how planetary cosmopolitanism is forged and negotiated through other means beyond the bounds of Western cosmological thought. Second, this paper contributes a more contextually situated understanding of Buddhism's role in human–ecology relations. It demonstrates how Buddhist environmentalism is not necessarily inimical or isolated from secular forces; instead, it is often negotiated within the secular conditions of Singapore society (Cloke, 2015; Williams, 2015). Third, this paper contributes to scholarship on cosmopolitanism by foregrounding its ontological dimensions. More than a moral rhetoric articulated on an abstract level, planetary cosmopolitanism is actively practised and negotiated on the ground through recycling practices. This focus thus extends current explorations of the epistemic geographies of ecological changes, to unveil more nuanced ways of inhabiting a transformed planet (Rarai et al., 2022).

Looking ahead, this paper invites geographers and scholars in cognate disciplines to critically consider the implications that ecological crises have on people in diverse geographies. Situating everyday geographies of cosmopolitanism would be an analytically productive way of yielding more contextually sensitive insights into the diverse modes of imagining, understanding, and inhabiting the transformed planet. Only by broadening our epistemological horizons to attend to the plural conditions of becoming in this world can we develop a truly emancipatory project of cosmopolitanism that befits our universally shared ecological condition.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

[1] 'Transtemporality' stresses the connections between one time and another. It involves not just broadening temporal horizons beyond the biological timescale of 20–50 years that characterised much of historical writings, but also recognises the fluidity between what we know as the 'past', 'present' and 'future' (Armitage, 2015, p. 211).

[2] By identifying Buddhism in its plural form ('Buddhist ontologies'), we acknowledge the difficulties of articulating Buddhism as a single discourse given the diversity of Buddhist traditions. That said, there are some common tenets amongst various Buddhist traditions that distinguish Buddhist ontologies from others, such as the topic of self and the existence of life (Kaza, 2000; Swearer, 2006), which is detailed in the literature review.

[3] Some Buddhist philosophers assert that there is no rebirth or reincarnation, but merely continuous births (and deaths): 'birth is happening all the time, but it is never the same person being born a second time. Since every birth is new, it is not entirely correct to refer to this process as "rebirth" or "reincarnation"' (Lin & Yen, 2015, p. 14). We denote this understanding by using single quotation marks in our first mention of 'rebirth'.

[4] When considering how moral consciousness is extended to other beings in Buddhist philosophies, humans are often considered both a moral agent who extend moral standing to others and a patient who receive moral standing. Yet, which beings deserve moral standing (e.g., non-human species as moral patients), and to which degree should moral consideration be extended, remains highly subjective, as expressed by Buddhists in our study (section 4.1).

[5] Ethics refer to individuals' conduct and behaviour in specific situations; morals are guiding principles of 'right' and 'wrong'. An ethical code is a set of rules that defines permissible action and correct behaviour, and a moral precept is driven by the desire to be or do good. To speak of a 'planetary ethics' in this paper is to evoke a sensibility concerned with justice obligations to all species sharing the planet in current and future generations and to Earth as a living entity.

[6] Whilst intended to exceed the notion of a globe/globalisation in apprehending the worldwide (Sidaway et al., 2014; Spivak, 2003), the planetary ethic that scholars discussed has been critiqued for its Earth-centric position and is increasingly juxtaposed with 'comocentric' ethics. This cosmocentric ethic requires us to consider 'the realm of candidates to be *all* the beings in the universe, even in the absence of knowledge concerning what *particular* things in the universe contains' (Wilks, 2016, p. 183; original emphasis) with the growing awareness of the possibility of extra-terrestrial lives.

[7] For White (1967, p. 1205), Christian traditions have 'not only established a dualism of man (sic) and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends'. Whilst White's view of Christianity might be overly reductionist (see Derr, 1975, for an example of critiques), the stewardship ethic that emphasises the biblical mandate for humans to take care of the Earth tends to position humanity above nature, and treats living, non-living and even supernatural beings as distinct and separate domains.

[8] The names of the organisation and participants have been changed to ensure anonymity.

[9] Whilst some foundational statements on the BBF's website are found to be inspired by the Lotus Sutra—an influential Mahayana Buddhist text, many members in our study demonstrated diverse interpretations of Buddhist beliefs. This will be elaborated in Section 4.1.

[10] Proselytisation is not legally prohibited in Singapore. Every individual has a constitutional right to practise and profess his/her religion and to propagate it. However, aggressive proselytisation is discouraged where it offends other religious groups.

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