



Building the Largest Female Buddhist Monastery in Contemporary China: Master Rurui between Continuity and Change

Amandine Peronnet

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When a New Generation Comes up: *Buddhist Leadership in Contemporary China*

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**In Quest of the Legacy of Buddhist Monasteries
in Contemporary China:**

*Identification Processes of the New Buddhist
Leadership, between Historical Relevance and
the Challenges of Modernisation*

CARSTEN KRAUSE

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**Building the Largest Female Buddhist Monastery
in Contemporary China:
*Master Rurui between Continuity and Change***

Amandine Péronnet

Abstract

Born in 1957, Rurui 如瑞, the abbess of Pushou Monastery 普寿寺 on Mount Wutai, in Shanxi province, belongs to the generation of Buddhists that became monastics after the opening up of China in the 1980s and came to leadership afterwards. She has been building Pushou Monastery, and the Mount Wutai Buddhist Institute for Nuns (*Zhongguo Wutaishan nizhong foxueyuan* 中国五台山尼众佛学院) that it hosts, since 1991, as part of the institutionalised system, and negotiating with both the political authorities and the laity. As the leader of the largest institutions for Buddhist nuns in the contemporary People's Republic of China (PRC), Rurui also has a responsibility specifically to nuns, within the Buddhist community at large. Drawing from ethnographic data, this paper will look into the model that she built, and from that model and her individual trajectory, inquire into how she legitimised her leadership and authority. More generally, this will be an opportunity to ask ourselves about how one asserts oneself as a female Buddhist leader in contemporary PRC.

Introduction: Charisma in Context¹

What probably struck me most when I first met Rurui 如瑞 (1957–), the abbess of Pushou Monastery 普寿寺 on Mount Wutai 五台山, on 3rd July 2015, was her poised attitude, and the influence she seemed to have on lay Buddhists who came to visit her that day. Her aura at the time was what I would have characterised as charismatic. Other accounts of a first encounter describe her as “earnest and dignified” (*wenzhong er duanzhuang* 稳重而端庄), or as an ordinary person who still “resembled a reserved and earnest scholar” (*xiang yi wei shenchen wenzhong de xuezhe* 像一位深沉稳重的学者).² A later interview with a Pushou nun revealed that,

“[...] [visitors] always praise the abbot in practice, in preaching Dharma, in being very humble and discrete. People coming here, really, a lot of people coming here, they want to, they’re eager to visit our dean, the dean [...] in this academy. Because they have a lot of questions in their lives, in their study, [...] so they want to get good answer [...] to their problem. So, [...] after they listen to the preaching, as well as some special instruction from the dean, they, their life view and world view, it’s a degree of purified and upgraded.”³

Lay Buddhists and nuns alike indeed see her as someone particularly clear-sighted, as what she predicts usually comes true, and they also believe her to possess healing abilities resulting from her great compassion. In this way, Rurui can be said to have a charismatic nature, in the Weberian sense, meaning that she, as an individual, is being seen as having access to exceptional qualities that are out of reach for ordinary people. She can also, as she is affiliated to eminent nuns like Tongyuan 通愿 (1913–1991) and Longlian 隆莲 (1909–2006), inherit

¹ This paper is partly based on fieldwork data, and their collection has been made possible by financial support from the Università degli Studi di Perugia and from the INALCO since 2015. For their funding, I would also like to thank the EFEO (field scholarship in 2017), and the Confucius Institute (Joint Research PhD Fellowship in 2018). Furthermore, I wish to extend my gratitude to the reviewers of this essay for their insightful comments, and Callisto Searle for her careful proofreading and notes. Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to everyone who made this essay possible, in the field and in my professional and personal environments.

² Respectively Tan 2000: 42, and Zhang 2002: 69.

³ From an interview with one of the abbess’ assistants, conducted in English on July 7, 2015, in Pushou Monastery. For a better readability, the hesitations (“uh”) and agreement (“yeah”) marks have been taken out of the transcription, whereas the English has not been polished.

charisma that is associated with their prestigious lineages.⁴ Rurui's leadership and authority stems from these factors, authority that, according to Welch, does not need to be absolute for Buddhist leaders, but rather based on respect and support from peers and lay people.⁵

Looking further into the idea of charisma applied to contemporary religious specialists, there could be a discussion on whether or not she actually possesses this quality. Goossaert made a point of differentiating "charismatic authority" from the more common "charismatic potential" or "awe" among these specialists, in modern and contemporary Chinese society.⁶ In the case of Rurui, the idioms of self-cultivation and scholarship (based on individual qualities) seem to be reunited with the idiom of leadership, that would place her at the head of a community and/or a large group rather than only a monastic organisation. Based on these idioms, she has built a contractual relationship with her followers, and the Pushou community composed of both monastics and lay Buddhists grew up around her after her establishment of Pushou Monastery. As such, Rurui goes beyond simple awe, and fulfils the necessary conditions to create charismatic authority, as enumerated by Goossaert. Part of her legitimacy as a contemporary Buddhist leader is thus derived from her charisma, although it will be later noted that this is not the only factor behind it.

Rurui belongs to a generation of Buddhist leaders born before the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and ordained only after the opening of China and Deng Xiaoping's 邓小平 (1904–1997) economic reforms (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) which began in 1978. Like her peers, she had to adapt to and deal with changes in religious policies after Mao's era, and participated in establishing the new relationship between state and religion. She not only had to become a legitimate Buddhist leader within the institutional structure, but also earned legitimacy for her organisation, based on her capacity to negotiate with the political authorities and not on her charisma alone. This legitimacy has also been achieved with reference to tradition, implementing strict monastic discipline, and promoting higher education.

⁴ On charisma and charismatic authority, see Weber 1971. Moreover, he used the notion of inherited charisma in the context of the early Indian caste system, where individual charisma was being transferred to a lineage, and charisma attached to a lineage was being transferred to its heir in a mutually legitimating process. See Weber 2003: 135–136.

⁵ Welch 1967: 150.

⁶ Goossaert 2008.

Regarding issues of legitimacy, how did the process of becoming a female Buddhist leader influence her choices and the model she established? Although primarily a Buddhist, she also is one of the most visible nuns of her time, and as such needs to find ways in which not only Buddhism, but also more specifically Buddhist nuns can exist in post-Mao China.

Little biographical information or detail about her religious career can be found. She was born in 1957 in Taiyuan, Shanxi province. After the Cultural Revolution, she received a university degree in literature from the Taiyuan Normal University (*Taiyuan shifan xueyuan* 太原师范学院), and went on to study Chinese language and literature at Beijing Normal University (*Beijing shifan daxue* 北京师范大学). She was then employed as a secondary school teacher, and grew more interested in Buddhist education. The two eminent nuns mentioned earlier had a particularly great influence regarding her religious career. It was indeed her meeting with Tongyuan that encouraged her to receive tonsure in 1981, thus entering the Fahai Monastery 法海寺, Shanxi, as a novice. In the early 1980s, she also became Longlian's assistant, and followed her to the Aidaotang Nunnery 爱道堂 in Chengdu, Sichuan. She finally received full ordination (*juzu jie* 具足戒) in 1984 at Datong's Shanghuayan Monastery 上华严寺.⁷ A decade later, in 1991, at the age of 34, she accomplished what she came to be known for, the establishment of Mount Wutai's Pushou Monastery, and the founding one year later of the Mount Wutai Buddhist Institute for Nuns (*Zhongguo Wutaishan nizhong foxueyuan* 中国五台山尼众佛学院). Although she has received a number of distinctions over the years, the most recent and significant ones have been her nomination as "Chinese Cultural Personality" (*Zhonghua wenhua renwu* 中华文化人物) for the year 2016, and her honorary PhD degree in Buddhist Studies from the Thai Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU), which she obtained in November 2017.

Under her leadership, Pushou Monastery was designed to be a Vinaya centre, or a "Vinaya-centric institution",⁸ which meant that from then on it specialised in the study, interpretation and strict implementation of the monastic discipline, and that it was recognised as such by others. It currently hosts the largest community of nuns in the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC). The number of permanent residents amounts to approximately 600 people, but expands during the busiest season, the summer retreat (*anju* 安居), to reach about 800–799 precisely in 2019.

⁷ Some of this information is mentioned in Mao 2015: 2–3. Other items can be found on Pushou Monastery's website (www.pushousi.net), brochures and informative documents.

⁸ Chiu 2017: 154–155.

This last number accounts for nuns residing permanently in the monastery, as well as those who only join in yearly classes and activities, and is regularly changing. As for the Buddhist Institute, it is unsurprisingly the largest Institute for Buddhist Studies (*foxueyuan* 佛学院) providing a modern education for nuns in the PRC. It aims at training the next generation of Buddhist leaders within the institutional framework and in accordance with Vinaya regulations. Rurui is, to this day, the abbess of Pushou Monastery and the president of the Institute. She also occupies a high position within the institutional system, as vice-president of the Buddhist Association of Shanxi (*Shanxi sheng fojiao xiehui* 山西省佛教协会) since 1997, and as one of the Buddhist Association of China's (*Zhongguo fojiao xiehui* 中国佛教协会, hereafter BAC) Vice Presidents since 2010.

The first section of this paper will reflect on the processes of Rurui's affiliation to monastics' networks, and on the continuity it provides for a contemporary Buddhist leader, with its identity being built on the influence of eminent masters of the past century. The second section will then tie this legacy to Pushou Monastery's history, emphasising its distinctive characteristics and Rurui's own contribution based on her teachers' legacy. Her efforts to adapt the model she designed for nuns to the institutional context will also be examined, as well as her positions and responsibilities within the official institutions as a Buddhist leader, and as a nun. In summary, the paper will provide insight into a female Buddhist leader's individual trajectory, and the concrete model she established to give nuns the opportunity to become legitimate Buddhist leaders themselves in the future; this is further discussed in the last two sections of this article.

This paper is based on data collected during several periods of fieldwork in mainland China, in Pushou Monastery and its branch monastery (*fenyuan* 分院) Dacheng Monastery 大乘寺 in Taiyuan's suburban area, between 2015 and 2019. Using the ethnographic method, data were collected in the field through semi-structured open question interviews, participant observation, and by reviewing various print and digital fieldwork materials. During this period of time, individual meetings with Rurui herself were rare and only occurred in July 2015 and May 2017. Religious rituals and ceremonies, official meetings and Q&A situations were a more common setting for our encounters. The paper is also based on three formal interviews with Pushou nuns, two of them with the same informant in July 2015 and August 2019, and one with another in August 2019. A rich set of data was further collected over the years from onsite and online resources, and from observations of the monastic and lay communities surrounding Rurui.

1. Building Personal Ties: Continuity and Legitimacy through Networks of Nuns

Nuns, as well as monks, can become affiliated with networks that can influence their individual trajectories, and legitimise their role as Buddhist leaders. Even without looking into lineages in the strict Buddhist sense of the term (the “tonsure families” described by Welch, or “Dharma lineages”⁹), an abbot’s or an abbess’ position can often be traced back to their relationship with various masters, teachers, or colleagues. These networks of monks and nuns are built around eminent and influential figures, who bring legitimacy to them based on historical continuity and prestige or charismatic authority. In his last chapter to *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, Welch mentions that affiliation is achieved not only through religious kinship, but also through loyalty to a charismatic figure, or even through regional ties between monks.¹⁰ In modern and contemporary China, other criteria can be added as members of the Saṃgha can become affiliated with classmates or teachers within Buddhist institutes, or with work colleagues within Buddhist organisations or associations, and thus build transregional and transnational networks.¹¹

It is virtually impossible to look into Rurui’s accomplishments without mentioning her affiliation with the overlapping networks of two eminent nuns, Tongyuan and Longlian. Tongyuan is considered by the Pushou nuns as a founding figure of the community, a figure whose vision led Rurui to establish Pushou Monastery, and who was later described by one of my informants as a “flag”. Born Zhao Yaochen 翟尧臣, Tongyuan was from an educated family of Buddhist practitioners from Heilongjiang and received a modern education early on.¹² In 1930, she moved to Beijing as a college student, and between 1934 and 1937 studied economics at the Beiping University (*Beiping daxue* 北平大学). At the same time, she also deepened her knowledge of Buddhism by studying monastic discipline under the Vinaya master Cizhou 慈舟 (1877–1957) in Jinglian Monastery 净莲寺.¹³ It is worth noting that this particular monk was

⁹ Welch 1967: 276–281.

¹⁰ Welch 1967: 403–405, quoted in Nichols 2017: 261.

¹¹ DeVido 2015: 79–80, and Ashiwa/Wank 2005: 222.

¹² As she requested, there are very few texts, academic or otherwise, that provide biographical details on Tongyuan’s life. Most of the information used here is from Pushou Monastery’s website, and from an article published after Tongyuan’s passing in 1991, see Wen 1991.

¹³ As there are no Western academic publications on Cizhou yet, see his works in Chinese, Cizhou 2004.

influential in the Vinaya revival of the first half of the twentieth century, which consisted of modernising Buddhist monasticism by encouraging strict observance of discipline.¹⁴ Tongyuan received tonsure from Cizhou in 1940 and in the same year was conferred the full ordination in Guangji Monastery 广济寺. Between 1941 and 1955, she acted as teacher at the Tongjiao Monastery 通教寺 in Beijing, a monastery that was restored by three nuns to become a Vinaya monastery, under the influence of Cizhou.¹⁵ As she was the abbess of Tongjiao Monastery, Longlian came to stay there in 1955 while in Beijing for official duties, and this encounter is known as the beginning of a thirty-six years long friendship.

The same year, Tongyuan moved to mount Wutai, living at first a simple and withdrawn life in hermitages, and then residing in monasteries, before she had to leave the mountain in 1969 in the worst period of the Cultural Revolution.¹⁶ Only afterwards, in the second half of the 1970s, did she move back, but she kept travelling within China to perform her teaching duties, and promote Buddhist education for nuns and laywomen. She indeed thought that education was essential for them to gain recognition as active and legitimate participants in Chinese society,

“At the moment, the most important thing is not to build monasteries, but to train people; [...] if possible, a spiritual development school for women should be created on a national scale. Women are numerous today, but their spiritual life is insufficient, the quality of their faith is poor. If we create a school like this one to study and improve knowledge of the Buddhist teachings, they will be able, at the end of their studies, to help other people train to reach perfection in their practice.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Vinaya is a group of canonical texts dedicated to monastic discipline, regulating the life of monks and nuns. Several Vinayas have been followed in Buddhism throughout history, but today only three are still active; they are the Mūlasarvāstivāda, Theravāda, and Dharmaguptaka traditions. The last is the one used as a reference in China and called the “discipline in four parts” or *sifen lǜ* (四分律). On the rules for nuns contained in the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*, see Heirman 2002. There have been several movements launched to revive Vinaya practices and procedures over the centuries, one of them initiated in the 1930s by eminent masters and continued by their heirs in the contemporary era. It advocates the rejuvenation of monastic discipline and the reform of the Buddhist Saṃgha, by returning to standards that have been set aside or never implemented in China. See Campo 2017.

¹⁵ DeVido 2015: 80–81.

¹⁶ Qiu 2006: 22–23.

¹⁷ Personal translation from the original French in Cochini 2015: 293.

She finally managed to set up such a structure at the end of her life, in Shaanxi province, a place called the Jixiang Residence 吉祥精舍. There she taught both lay people and monastics between 1988 and 1990, and organised research classes on monastic discipline.¹⁸ After meeting her friend and colleague Longlian at Mount Emei 峨眉山, Sichuan, in 1990, she went back to Shanxi and passed away in March 1991. Although she focused on education throughout her life, it was not her only concern, and she was also involved in spreading what she believed to be the correct observance of the Vinaya, based on what she learned from Cizhou. Both she and Longlian shared the same interest in setting up modern educational structures and establishing orthodox procedures and practices for nuns according to the Chinese Vinaya.

Tongyuan applied throughout her life an ideology that was known as the “three no’s” (*sanbu* 三不): she decided not to take disciples, not to have her biography written, and not to write texts promoting her own interpretation of Buddhist doctrine. Although Rurui was not Tongyuan’s official Dharma disciple, she was her student, and their meeting in the 1980s had a decisive impact on Rurui’s individual trajectory. It was surely this encounter that made up her mind to receive the tonsure in 1981, and then the full ordination in 1984 in Datong, Shanxi, with Tongyuan acting as ordination master. When Rurui later established Pushou Monastery and the Wutai Buddhist Institute for Nuns, she was carrying out Tongyuan’s wishes, and Tongyuan is still revered by the Pushou nuns as the master whose legacy they keep alive. Her relics are kept in a specific hall of the monastery, the Hall for Remembering Kindness (*Yi’en tang* 忆恩堂), and her passing is commemorated annually on the twentieth day of the first lunar month. Even more significant is the threefold system implemented by Rurui at Pushou Monastery: “[...] Avatamsaka as lineage, Vinaya as practice, Pure Land as destination [...]” (*Huayan wei zong, jielü wei xing, jingtu wei gui* 华严为宗, 戒律为行, 净土为归),¹⁹ which was passed down from Cizhou to Tongyuan, and from Tongyuan to Rurui, providing the monastery with a sense of continuity as part of the Huayan school of Buddhism.²⁰

¹⁸ Li 1992: 258

¹⁹ A slogan that can be found in several texts about Pushou Monastery, for instance in Zhou 2012: 55, and on Pushou Monastery’s website.

²⁰ Wen 1991: 32, and Yang 2011: 24.

Longlian, whose lay name was You Yongkang 游永康, was called the “first nun of the contemporary era” (*dangdai diyi biqiuni* 当代第一比丘尼) by Zhao Puchu 赵朴初 (1907–2000), former president of the BAC.²¹ She was also from a learned family from Sichuan, who practised Buddhism. Like Tongyuan, she received a good education in a number of subjects. In the 1930s and the 1940s, she perfected her Buddhist education with several masters, Nenghai 能海 (1886–1967) being one of them. He was a master of Sino-Tibetan Buddhism, and participated in spreading Tibetan Buddhism in China during the twentieth century. He was also a specialist in monastic discipline and was recognised as such by his peers, being very insistent on the strict observance of the Vinaya in the monasteries he established.²² He was instrumental in shaping Longlian’s individual trajectory, just as Cizhou was for Tongyuan. In 1941, she received the tonsure from another monk, Changyuan 昌圆 (1879–1944), and took the full ordination the next year in Chengdu’s Wenshu Monastery 文殊院. At the same time, she officially became Nenghai’s disciple, and started to teach at the Lianzong Women’s Institute (*Lianzong nüzhong yuan* 莲宗女众院) that Changyuan had set up at the public monastery for nuns, Aidaotang Nunnery, where she would later become headteacher. At the end of the 1940s, she took on the position of abbess at both the Aidaotang Nunnery and the Tiexiang Monastery 铁像寺, which then became the first monastery for nuns to follow the Tibetan tradition in China.²³ She later went to Mount Wutai twice, in 1957 and 1959, to follow Nenghai’s teachings as he had set up his residence there, which also gave her the opportunity to visit Tongyuan.²⁴ After the Cultural Revolution, during which she stayed at Aidaotang Nunnery, Longlian managed to set up what she saw as her two greatest accomplishments: in 1984 she opened the Sichuan Buddhist Institute for Nuns (*Sichuan nizhong foxueyuan* 四川尼众佛学院) in Tiexiang Monastery, of which she became the Dean; and she also restored the dual ordination procedure for nuns (*erbuseng jie* 二部僧戒),²⁵ as Nenghai

²¹ Bianchi 2017: 272. She is one of the most famous nuns of her time; several biographical texts have already been published on her in English and Chinese. The information used in this paper mostly comes from the aforementioned paper by Bianchi. In addition, see, among others, her biography by Qiu 1997.

²² See Wen 2003: 31–34, and Bianchi 2017: 117–118. On Nenghai, see also Bianchi 2009.

²³ DeVido 2015: 82. Specifically on Tiexiang Monastery, see Bianchi 2001.

²⁴ Qiu 2006: 23.

²⁵ The dual ordination is the process through which a candidate becomes a nun, as prescribed in the Vinaya. To be considered a fully ordained nun, she should present herself in front of the

entrusted her to do. Indeed, by the end of 1981 and the beginning of 1982, she held the first full ordination ceremony for nuns since the end of the 1950s according to this specific procedure, and asked Tongyuan to act as head nun for the group of ten nun masters conferring ordination. Finally, during the last two decades of her life, she devoted herself to her official, teaching and management positions, and passed away in November 2006 at Aidaotang Nunnery.

Rurui entered Longlian's Sichuan network by becoming her assistant at the Aidaotang Nunnery after she received tonsure in the early 1980s, and thus participated in the establishment of the Sichuan Buddhist Institute for Nuns before its official opening in 1984. Although Longlian, unlike Tongyuan, did not play a crucial part in the founding of Pushou Monastery, she still influenced Rurui, especially with regards to her work on ordination procedures and modern education for nuns. Pushou Monastery's nuns still commemorate her passing with rituals, performed on the nineteenth day of the ninth lunar month.

The far-reaching influence of Tongyuan and Longlian on Rurui has one more aspect: In addition to being active in the field of Buddhist education and trying to set up a model of monastic discipline for nuns based on the Chinese Vinaya, both of these nuns occupied high positions in official institutions. Longlian worked from the 1950s with the Communist government, and in 1955 was appointed to sit on the council of the newly founded BAC. Among other positions, she also became president of the Sichuan Buddhist Association in 1981 and vice-president of the BAC in 1987. It was her involvement with the BAC, and the contacts she had within it, that underlaid her efforts to restore the Tiexiang Monastery and establish the Sichuan Buddhist Institute for Nuns as early as 1983.²⁶ Although to a lesser extent, Tongyuan also took on some official duties. In 1980, she served as a representative during the Fourth General Assembly of the BAC, then after 1981, she was successively appointed permanent member of the council of the Shanxi Buddhist Association, vice-president of the Mount Wutai Buddhist Association and of the Shanxi Buddhist Association, and permanent member of the BAC's Council.²⁷ These functions allowed these two leaders to represent Chinese nuns, and promote their interests based on what they deemed to be essential in order to build a strong and relevant community.

Samgha, and ask an assembly of ten nuns and an assembly of ten monks in succession if they would bestow the ordination upon her. This process is explained in detail in Heirman 2002: 75–79.

²⁶ Bianchi 2017: 289–294.

²⁷ Wen 1991: 33, and DeVido 2015: 84.

Although these two eminent nuns of the twentieth century and their networks have been significant in shaping Rurui's career, it should be noted that her affiliation to them is not based on kinship in the strict sense. While no mention is made to Rurui's tonsure master or to any member of her "tonsure family" either on Pushou Monastery's website or in the documents produced by the monastery, Tongyuan's and Longlian's legacy is made abundantly clear. Rather than kinship, affiliation with Tongyuan was achieved through a teacher-student relationship, and in the case of Longlian through loyalty to this particularly celebrated nun. Thus, Rurui's particular affiliation processes to both of these eminent nuns were able to provide her with the legitimacy she needed as a Buddhist leader, thanks to the continuity and charisma inherent in their individual networks. To sum up, Rurui's establishment of Pushou Monastery and the Wutai Buddhist Institute for Nuns has been based to a large extent on Tongyuan and Longlian's teachings, especially in terms of monastic education and discipline, as well as on their influential networks.

2. Establishing Religious Sites: Legacy and Innovation at Pushou Monastery and the Wutai Buddhist Institute for Nuns

While continuity can be found within networks of nuns, the Pushou Monastery in itself, as a physical building, currently seems to have no specific tradition attached to it. Supposedly built between 1086 and 1090, it had been a monks' monastery up until the Cultural Revolution; it was successively called Great Huayan Monastery 大华严寺 and Great Xiantong Monastery 大显通寺, and even identified as a monastery belonging to the Tibetan tradition.²⁸ During the Cultural Revolution, the monastery was partially destroyed, and requisitioned as a health centre, which marked a rupture of approximately twenty years with the previously existing religious tradition. In a document written by one of the nuns, describing the monastery's history, the restoration of the monastery's premises in 1991 is characterised as a process of "starting from scratch" (*baishouqijia* 白手起家). Similarly, Rurui herself told a lay visitor: "[...] when we had only just arrived [in June 1991] there was nothing, we drank unboiled water and slept on brick beds, there even wasn't any bedding."²⁹ Only then, in 1991, when Rurui started restoring it, was the monastery called Pushou Monastery, and turned into a Chinese monastery for nuns of the ten directions (*shifang conglin* 十方

²⁸ Bei 1994: 30, and Mao 2015: 1.

²⁹ "[...] *women gang lai shi shenme dou meiyou, he lianshui shui zhuankang, lian chuang beiru ye meiyou.*" 我们刚来时什么都没有, 喝凉水睡砖炕, 连床被褥也没有。Quoted from Tan 2000: 42.

丛林) or according to Welch a “public monastery” – a category of monasteries usually big in size and belonging to the broader monastic community.³⁰ This blank slate provided Rurui with an opportunity to start her own model, based on what she inherited from her teachers rather than any specific tradition attached to the monastery. Incidentally, no mention is made to the larger history of Pushou Monastery on its website, and the nuns themselves, when asked about it, are not familiar with it. This situation is not unlike the one experienced by the community of Taiwanese nuns studied by Yü. At their arrival on the site of what then became the Incense Light Monastery 香光寺 in 1974, the latter indeed benefited from the lack of preexisting tradition – several earthquakes prompted the monastery to be restored a number of times – and so they were able to create their own brand.³¹

Thus, the cleanly severed ties to the building’s history allowed Rurui to renew tradition, based on her teachers’ legacy and on her own interpretation of that legacy. The year 1991, which was both the year when Tongyuan passed away and the one when Rurui started restoring Pushou Monastery’s premises, is clearly transitional, and marks the beginning of the abbess’ individual career. Her first known and celebrated accomplishment is indeed tied to the monastery: it was her and her Dharma sister Miaoyin 妙音 (1957–) who led the restoration project of the monastery in 1991, financed only by the small amount of money they could put together, amounting to 105 yuan (approximately £12 in today’s money).³² They also received help in this enterprise from a group of Rurui’s disciples and lay students, about thirty people strong, and together spent the first year restoring the premises, erecting new buildings – on the whole rendering it liveable. However, these pieces of information might be disputed, as an article on Mount Wutai’s nunneries states that not only was the monastery allocated a restoration fund by the government, but also that more than fifty people participated in this enterprise.³³ Even if this is the case, the story surrounding the restoration project, as it is being told by the Pushou Monastery and its followers, highlights Rurui’s capacity to overcome obstacles in order to achieve her goals and certainly feeds into her reputation and charisma.

³⁰ See Welch 1967: 137. The ten directions are the four cardinal directions, the intercardinal ones, along with the zenith and the nadir. A monastery of the ten directions is then one that would follow a specific system to choose the abbot, not from within the lineage or tonsure family but from the outside, and thus from any direction. See also Buswell/Lopez: 804.

³¹ See Yü’s book on the Incense Light community, Yü 2013.

³² This anecdote features on Pushou Monastery’s website as part of the monastery’s history. See also Mao 2015: 3.

³³ Bei 1994: 30.

1991 was also the year when Rurui started developing the Mount Wutai Buddhist Institute for Nuns, and although the brand was only registered in 2011, it had begun hosting students as early as 1992. Providing a modern higher education for nuns, it is a direct result of the influence of Tongyuan, who in 1985 already endeavoured to establish a structure to serve that particular purpose. At the time, she was teaching at Dayuan Monastery 大愿寺 in Shaanxi, but because the monastery was hereditary, it could not host a seminary.³⁴ Tongyuan thought that only a public Buddhist monastery could foster capable and learned monastics, and would allow her to pass on her knowledge of Vinaya to her students. As she used to say to them: “[...] if you want to revitalise the Dharma, you need to call upon the entire community of nuns to establish a monastery of the ten directions. What the Dharma will lack most after that is talented monastics.”³⁵ Although Tongyuan was not able to achieve her ultimate goal, she still moved out of Dayuan Monastery, bought five village houses and established a place for religious practice (*daochang* 道场), the aforementioned Jixiang Residence. With its research classes on the Chinese Vinaya, and its teachers coming from Institutes for Buddhist Studies in Fujian and Zhejiang provinces, this was the precursor to the Mount Wutai Buddhist Institute for Nuns.³⁶

However, the Institute could only be established officially when Tongyuan’s students, Rurui and Miaoyin, were finally able to set up a public Buddhist monastery for nuns that was also a Vinaya centre, in order to host the Institute. Today, the Pushou Monastery and the Institute work together to provide nuns with both traditional monastic training and modern education. Although some Buddhist institutes received criticism for favouring “study” (*xue* 学) over “practice” (*xiu* 修),³⁷ Pushou Monastery and the Mount Wutai Buddhist Institute for Nuns have been successful in combining both elements since the 1990s. According to the monastery, they aim at “integrating study and practice, giving a monastic spirit to student-monastic life” (*xuexiu yiti hua*, *xueseng shenghuo conglin hua* 学修一体化, 学僧生活丛林化).³⁸

³⁴ Welch 1967: 137

³⁵ Quoted on Pushou Monastery’s website (Chin.: 如果想要佛法振兴, 就要号召全体尼众起来建十方道场。佛法以后最缺的是僧才), in the section regarding Tongyuan, from one of her talks to disciples in 1981.

³⁶ On the Jixiang Residence, see Wen 1991: 34, and Li 1992: 258.

³⁷ Ji 2015: 736.

³⁸ This slogan can be found on Pushou Monastery’s website, in the section regarding the “Three-Plus-One Project”. It was actually coined by Zhao Puchu and the BAC in 1992, and has been largely used by Buddhist Institutes ever since, even though what it refers to remains somewhat

Before joining the Institute, applicants must first receive full ordination, and then apply for a three month training program that takes place during the summer retreat. If selected, they enter the Institute and make their way through the three levels: the “general” (*putong ban* 普通班), the “intermediate” (*zhongji ban* 中级班) and the “advanced” (*gaoji ban* 高级班) classes, each level taking two years. During those six years, the curriculum is focused on one main mandatory subject, which is Vinaya, but also includes other Buddhist and secular subjects. The most persevering nuns can then join one of the three research departments called the Avatamsaka (*Huayan bu* 华严部), Vinaya (*Lüyan bu* 律研部) and Pure Land (*Jingtu bu* 净土部) departments, which refer to the threefold system Pushou Monastery inherited from Cizhou.³⁹ The teaching methods at the Institute are standardised and adapted from the Chinese secular education system (conferences, debates, oral presentations and so on), and the students also enjoy modern equipment and resources (mostly multimedia equipment and computer rooms). Finally, the Institute’s teachers can be either monastics or Buddhist laypeople, the former being chosen from inside the monastery, the latter coming from outside the monastery and staying only for the duration of their classes. In the course of almost three decades, the Institute has grown to become a leading institution for modern Buddhist nun education, aiming at training the next generation of Buddhist leaders in compliance not only with Vinaya regulations, but also with official expectations. Being dependent on government funding, it is indeed influenced by its institutional environment, reproducing the structure and rules of that environment, and staying in line with official directives and policies.⁴⁰

While still influenced by her teachers’ legacy, Rurui went even beyond their wishes and ideals by founding the “Three-Plus-One Project” (*Sanjiayi jiaoyu gongcheng* 三加一教育工程), which was launched in 2006. The project has three institutions working together: Pushou Monastery, that acts as the administrative centre and supervising institution; the Dacheng Monastery; and the Bodhi Love Association (*Puti aixin xiehui* 菩提爱心协会, hereafter BLA), both located in Jinzhong. Together, these institutions have been said to gather up

unclear. See Ji 2019: 196. See also the BAC’s website for the report of the 1992 meeting during which the slogan was first introduced, www.chinabuddhism.com.cn/js/hb/2012-03-15/493.html, accessed June 29, 2020.

³⁹ Part of the curriculum for the graduate and research programs is provided by Yang 2011: 41–43.

⁴⁰ Ji 2008: 239–240. On the institutionalisation of Buddhist education, and the position occupied by the Institutes for Buddhist Studies within this environment, since the establishment of the first one in 1922 by Taixu, see also Ji 2015.

to 1,200 nuns and novices. Shanxi. Dacheng Monastery was rebuilt by Pushou nuns from the ground up in 2005, after approval from the district authorities, as a branch monastery funded and supervised by Pushou Monastery. It currently accommodates between 200 and 300 nuns and novices. The philanthropic association, while administratively managed by Pushou Monastery, works solely on donations. It first operated from Dacheng Monastery and then moved to newly built premises just outside the monastery in 2018. Moreover, the “Plus-One” in the title of the project is a reference to the home for the elderly (*Qingtai anyang yuan* 清泰安养园), that was later built as part of the BLA. To each one of these three main institutions has been attributed a specific expertise: “cultivation” for Pushou Monastery, “education” for Dacheng Monastery – which also hosts part of the Buddhist Institute for Nuns, and is sometimes referred to as the “department of vast learning” (*Guangxue bu* 广学部) – and “philanthropy” for the BLA. Obviously, this only provides a theoretical framework, as in practice their roles often overlap, but these boundaries testify to what Rurui considered to be the three challenges of modern times: 1. finding orthodoxy in monastic practice, 2. promoting education for nuns, and 3. providing social relief through charity. Indeed, according to the project’s slogan, as displayed for instance on Pushou Monastery’s website, she intends to use “[...] Buddhist cultivation as a foundation, education as a guarantee, and philanthropy as a skillful means” (*yi xiudao wei genben, jiaoyu wei baozheng, cishan wei fangbian* 以修道为根本、教育为保证、慈善为方便). More generally, the project is according to Rurui the most effective way to meet two specific requirements of the time, introduced as “society’s need for the wisdom contained in the Dharma”, and “the need of Buddhism for outstanding elite monastics capable of administering a monastery according to the correct Dharma.”⁴¹

To summarise, from the establishment of Pushou Monastery and the Mount Wutai Buddhist Institute for Nuns, to the “Three-Plus-One Project”, the influence of Rurui’s teachers comes through fairly clearly: the key features of these institutions are built around strict monastic discipline and higher education for nuns, which were the main focus of Tongyuan’s and Longlian’s work. In this sense, what Chiu and Heirman called the “leader’s educational

⁴¹ This quote (Chin.: 社会需要佛法的智慧, 佛教需要优秀的僧才来住持正法) comes from a written document received in September 2019, aiming at answering questions that I transmitted to the abbess in August 2019 – a face to face meeting was not possible at the time.

influence”⁴² has deeply impacted Rurui’s individual trajectory. The similarity of her accomplishments to those of other contemporary Buddhist leaders⁴³ attests to the role of these networks, built around eminent monastics, in shaping these individual trajectories, and in providing contemporary Buddhism with historical context and legitimacy through continuity. However, building on this legacy, Rurui has also been able to develop her very own brand, as is made clear by the “Three-Plus-One Project”.

3. Setting up a Comprehensive Model for Nuns

In the context of the PRC, the main challenge for all Buddhist communities seems to lie in obtaining some form of legitimacy, but even more so in the case of female communities. Rurui’s efforts with regards to nuns’ education and discipline, after Tongyuan’s and Longlian’s, make clear that there is still need in contemporary times to prove nuns worthy of being a trusted interlocutor with the laity and the institutions. Nuns have indeed been discredited in the past, as Yü’s introduction to her book on the Incense Light community points out. According to her, they do not receive the same respect that monks do, mostly because their lifestyle and beliefs buck the traditional feminine ideal of the Confucian woman, and as such are subject to suspicion and mixed feelings, even in contemporary Taiwanese and Chinese societies.⁴⁴ During the first half of the twentieth century, that rather poor image was entertained by religious discourses on how the nuns’ lack of knowledge was discrediting the whole Saṃgha. Some high profile monastics like Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947) even thought that “[...] China’s illness is caused by the fact that the nuns do not uphold the Vinaya,

⁴² Chiu/Heirman 2014: 260.

⁴³ Others have been influenced by Tongyuan and Longlian, as both their networks ran wide. Let us take two examples. Rufa 如法 (1956–) was also a student of both Tongyuan and Longlian, and restored the Taiping Monastery 太平寺 of Wenzhou together with Rurui. She has been leading the Taiping Institute for Buddhist Studies (*Taiping foxueyuan* 太平佛学苑) ever since, and founded the Taiping Charities (*Taiping gongdehui* 太平功德会) in 2008. Ruyi 如意 (1963–), Longlian’s student, is president of the Sichuan Buddhist Institute for Nuns now located in Qifu Monastery 祈福寺 in Chengdu’s suburban area, a monastery that also has its own charity (*Qifusi cishan hongfa gongdehui* 祈福寺慈善弘法功德会) since 2009. Ruyi holds official positions as well, as she is vice-president of the Buddhist Association of Sichuan and permanent member of the BAC’s Council. See DeVido 2015: 85–86. See also the WeChat account of the Taiping Institute for Buddhist Studies at <https://wemp.app/accounts/fc552196-414c-4f18-83d4-3c0435d1aac9>, and the website of the Sichuan Institute for Nuns at www.nzfx.org/.

⁴⁴ Yü 2013: 1–29.

and thus corrupted the Samgha”,⁴⁵ and others, including nuns themselves, could be found saying that they were partly responsible for the moral decline of Buddhism, their ignorance leading them to commit faults and act against the precepts.⁴⁶ Paradoxically, nuns like Tongyuan and Longlian benefitted from these discourses, as it justified the effort to provide nuns with better education and teachings on discipline, thus giving them the opportunity to change that image. Taixu was one of the great promoters of women’s and nuns’ education, and established in 1924 the first modern Buddhist Institute for Female Buddhists in Wuhan (*Wuchang foxueyuan nüzhong yuan* 武昌佛学院女众院), as part of the Wuchang Institute for Buddhist Studies (*Wuchang foxueyuan* 武昌佛学院) which was set up in 1922.⁴⁷ It is in this context that Tongyuan and Longlian, also using this rhetoric of women’s “insufficient” and “poor” faith as mentioned above, devoted themselves to establishing a strong base for nuns to build on, rooted in education and monastic discipline. Developing these two aspects, as Rurui did at Pushou Monastery, is then also a way to promote a better image and provide nuns with tools to legitimise their place as Buddhist leaders.

With the founding of Pushou Monastery, its subsidiaries and the Institute, Rurui’s contribution to these goals became a concrete successful model, based on her teachers’ work. Three aspects appear as the main fields in which Rurui’s expertise could benefit the position of Buddhist nuns and participate in setting new standards, namely monastic discipline, education and philanthropy.

First of all, in terms of implementation of the Chinese Vinaya, Rurui is one of the Buddhist leaders promoting dual ordination as the orthodox full ordination procedure for nuns, following its restoration by Longlian in 1982. This procedure has since then been included into a larger system, the “Triple-Platform Ordination” (*santan dajie* 三坛大戒), according to which the novice, full, and bodhisattva ordinations are bestowed on a candidate in one single place and during a short period of time.⁴⁸ This system, first mentioned in the 1993

⁴⁵ DeVido 2015: 77.

⁴⁶ He 1998: 292.

⁴⁷ Yuan 2009: 382. On the Wuchang Institute for Buddhist Studies, see especially Lai 2017.

⁴⁸ The novice ordination consists in receiving the ten precepts of the novices, which are to refrain from 1. killing other sentient beings, 2. stealing, 3. engaging in sexual intercourse, 4. lying, 5. getting intoxicated, 6. eating at improper times, 7. using ornaments or perfumes, 8. participating in musical, theatrical, or dancing activities, 9. sleeping on high or luxurious beds, 10. accepting gold, silver or jewellery. See Soothill/Hodous 1937. During the full ordination, the candidate receives the *prātimokṣa* precepts, 250 for male candidates, 348 for females. They finally

“Administrative Measures for Ordination in Chinese Buddhist Monasteries” (*Quanguo hanchuan fojiao siyuan chuanshou santan dajie guanli banfa* 全国汉传佛教寺院传授三坛大戒管理办法), has been formally unified and defined as the normative framework for ordinations in the revised Administrative Measures of 2000, integrating the dual ordination as the standard procedure for nuns.⁴⁹ Thus, promoting dual ordination is now in line with both the Vinaya and the official regulations.

However, and in seeming contradiction with the standardised triple platform system, Rurui also advocates having separate ordination procedures for novices, and implementing an additional probationary period, an extra step in the female monastic career that has no equivalent for monks. After being tonsured, a female novice or *śrāmaṇerikā* (*shamini* 沙弥尼) in Pushou Monastery doesn’t receive the ten precepts for a year, which is why she is first called *xingtong shamini* 形同沙弥尼 or “novice in appearance”. After having received the precepts, she becomes a *fatong shamini* 法同沙弥尼 or “novice according to the Dharma”.⁵⁰ Only then can she be bestowed the probationer or *śikṣamāṇā* (*shichani* 式叉尼) ordination. This probationary period is supposed to last for two years, during which the *śikṣamāṇā* must follow a set of six precepts (*liufa* 六法) if she is to claim full ordination.⁵¹ At first glance, the necessary intervals between these stages, as prescribed in the Vinaya, would seem to jeopardise the standardised triple platform ordinations. Yet the case of Pushou Monastery proves that coexistence is possible: based on a customised system designed by Longlian,

receive the ten major (*shi chong jie* 十重戒) and forty-eight minor (*sishiba qing jie* 四十八轻戒) bodhisattva precepts (*pusa jie* 菩萨戒), which can only be found in the Mahāyāna tradition. On bodhisattva precepts, see Chiu 2019.

⁴⁹ Ji 2009: 11, and Bianchi 2019: 157.

⁵⁰ This was mentioned to me by one of my nun informants in Pushou Monastery, during a formal interview on August 16, 2019. See also Chiu/Heirman 2014: 258.

⁵¹ According to the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*, the six rules for probationers are: abstain from 1. engaging in sexual intercourse, 2. stealing, 3. killing other beings, 4. lying about one's spiritual achievements, 5. eating at improper times, 6. drinking alcohol. Heirman 2002: 67–75. Although the *śikṣamāṇā* only has to follow six rules (as opposed to the ten for novices), one of my informants, who had just received the full ordination, confirmed that she also had to learn and observe all the precepts for nuns. Moreover, any transgression during this particular period would mean that the probationer has to start over again, whereas only a confession is required during the novitiate. In that sense, the probationer can be seen as a step forward on the path to nunhood. According to Ann Heirman, this practice was never applied in the nunneries of the Dharmaguptaka tradition, but is currently spreading in the PRC, mostly due to the influence of Longlian, who advocated its implementation. See Heirman 2008: 133–134, and Chiu/Heirman 2014: 258–260.

and as two Pushou nuns have confirmed to me, the novice and *śikṣamāṇā* ordinations are taken beforehand, and once the probationary period is complete, the candidate simply receives the novice precepts once more during the triple platform ordination ceremonies. This does not contradict the official system, but merely complements it, as a doctrinally orthodox adaptation to the contemporary institutional environment in which Buddhism finds itself in the PRC. Thus, even though Longlian, who lived long enough to witness the standardisation of ordination procedures, had already devised ways in which to achieve this adaptation, it was Rurui, among others, who provided contemporary nuns with a concrete working model. As a new generation leader, she was faced with different circumstances from her teachers, and actualised their contributions to the present situation.

Secondly, in terms of monastic education and as mentioned above, the Wutai Buddhist Institute for Nuns was founded by Rurui in 1992 as a means to provide nuns with modern higher education. At that point, though, a lot had already been done in that respect. The Institute, like many others in the contemporary PRC, is indeed an heir to Taixu's Institutes for Buddhist Studies that sprang up in the 1920s. Similarly to them, the Mount Wutai Institute does tend to reproduce the secular education system and includes elements that go beyond the monastic sphere, for instance teachings on Chinese culture, English, computer skills, and training at the home for the elderly for fourth year students. Like the institutes of the modern era, it has been dealing with the involvement of the political to religious education, which provides institutional legitimacy, but also implies a certain standardisation and integration of patriotism within monastic education.⁵²

However, one peculiar aspect of the educational system devised by Rurui is the Institute's successful adaptation to contemporary institutional requirements. As Rurui occupies positions in high places, and the Institute is funded by the government, this gives nuns the opportunity to receive a "proper" education according to these requirements, and to be trained as legitimate Buddhist leaders in the eyes of the State. According to a 2010 article on the new leadership elected at the BAC's Eighth General Assembly, Rurui's reputation is tied to her designing of the Institute in conformity with the expectations of the "new era" (*xin shidai* 新时代) regarding Saṃgha education, and the Institute is introduced as "publicly praised" (*koubei* 口碑) and "approved" (*rentong* 认同) by both the

⁵² Ji 2011: 21–22.

Buddhist world and society.⁵³ In 2010, Rurui was the only nun vice-president of the BAC, and as her accomplishments are in the aforementioned article entitled “Nuns Enter the Leaders Group” (*biquini jinru lingdao banzi* 丘尼进入领导班子), the issue of nuns reaching high positions in the decision-making system could be raised.⁵⁴ In that sense, the Mount Wutai Buddhist Institute for Nuns has also been designed as a platform to produce nun leaders who can later take their place on the official stage and promote the interests of the community at large. According to the Institute’s teaching guidelines, and with a clear focus on nuns, “the Institute not only imparts knowledge of Buddhist culture, it also emphasises the studies and training of nuns within the Samgha group, by paying equal attention to studies and practice as an educational method, cultivating both students who possess essential ritual knowledge and monastic behaviour, as well as elite monastics capable of preserving the correct Dharma”.⁵⁵

The third field in which Rurui has set new standards for nuns is the one of institutionalised philanthropy. Its development by individual monks’ or nuns’ Buddhist monasteries seems to be a fairly recent phenomenon in modern and contemporary Buddhism⁵⁶ – although Buddhist philanthropy itself dates back to historical Buddhism. The late establishment of charities by Rurui’s and other nuns’ monasteries⁵⁷ might partly be explained by the changing framework in

⁵³ Li 2010: 18.

⁵⁴ As of today, Rurui doubles as one of the only nine female permanent members of the Ninth Council of the BAC (*Zhongguo fojiao xiehui dijiu jie lishihui changwu lishi* 中国佛教协会第九届理事会常务理事), out of 145 permanent members. She also is one of thirty-two women acting as committee members (*zhuanmen weiyuanhui* 专门委员会) of the Ninth Council, out of 273 members. These figures are displayed on the BAC’s website, respectively available at www.chinabuddhism.com.cn/js/hb/2016-11-11/12109.html, accessed May 20, 2020, and at www.chinabuddhism.com.cn/csl/2015-05-04/8823.html, accessed May 26, 2020.

⁵⁵ This sentence (Chin.: 佛学院不仅传授佛学文化知识, 更注重尼众在僧团中的学习和锻炼, 通过学修并重的教育模式, 培养具有基本出家僧仪及僧格的学僧和住持正法的僧才) is part of a detailed Word document that was given to me by a nun from Dacheng Monastery in 2017, in order to better introduce the “Three-Plus-One Project”.

⁵⁶ Laliberté 2009: 120.

⁵⁷ In addition to the BLA launched by Pushou Monastery in 2006, Rufa also opened the Taiping Charities in Wenzhou in 2008, as mentioned earlier, and a charity was established in 2009 in Ruyi’s Qifu Monastery in suburban Chengdu. They are not the only ones to follow this model of first setting up Buddhist institutes within monasteries, then charities; others have done so too, such as the nun Yinkong 印空 (1921–), abbess of the Dajinshan Monastery 大金山寺 in Jiangxi province. There she also founded a Buddhist Institute for Nuns in 1994, and later a charity, as well as a retirement home. On Yinkong and her accomplishments, see Campo 2020: 264–280.

which religious philanthropy finds itself in the PRC. It is indeed only in the 2005 amendment to the “Regulations on Religious Affairs” (*Zongjiao shiwu tiaoli* 宗教事务条例) that religious organisations were explicitly allowed to provide social welfare.⁵⁸ But specifically in the case of Buddhist nuns, this recent development towards philanthropy might also be a testament to the ongoing stability and growing legitimacy of the community. Up until the turn of the century, and in continuity with what masters from the Republican era set out to do, the main issue was to build a strong base for nuns to gain legitimacy from. For Pushou Monastery, this base was, and still is, constituted by a strict implementation of Vinaya practices and nuns’ ordination procedures, and by an emphasis on education, bequeathed to them by Tongyuan and Longlian. However, with the BLA, Pushou Monastery expands its activities, indicating, as others did, that the community is stable, legitimate and confident enough to turn its attentions outwards.

Then what differentiates Rurui’s model from other contemporary ones based on the three fields of Buddhist monastic discipline, education or philanthropy, is the combination of all these aspects within a specifically designed threefold structure, the “Three-Plus-One Project”, all under the supervision of the largest Buddhist monastery for nuns in the PRC, and in line with the political environment of the time.

4. Bringing Nuns’ Voices to the Institutional Stage

For a Buddhist leader in the contemporary PRC, government support is conditional on obtaining legitimacy, and high profile monastics often occupy positions within the administrative structure. Longlian’s and Tongyuan’s involvement in that structure made it easier for them to advance their goals, and the same goes for Rurui. Her most featured positions are the vice-presidency of the Shanxi Buddhist association since 1997, and the vice-presidency of the BAC since 2010, positions previously occupied respectively by Tongyuan and Longlian. However, according to one of her bibliographical records on the BAC’s website, she has also been named a Member of Council of the Buddhist Association of Shanxi in 1997, as well as Deputy Chief Administrator (*fu mishu zhang* 副秘书长) of the BAC in 2002.⁵⁹ She is also a member of the Chinese People’s Political

⁵⁸ Laliberté 2009: 123.

⁵⁹ Record available on the BAC’s website, www.chinabuddhism.com.cn/djc/jjlsh/2015-04-25/8619.html, accessed May 26, 2020.

Consultative Conference (*Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi* 中国人民政治协商会议).⁶⁰ More recently, in August 2019 in Mount Wutai, she presided over the Third Meeting of the Chinese Buddhism Educational Committee as part of the Ninth Council of the BAC (*Zhongguo fojiao xiehui di jiu jie lishihui hanchuan fojiao jiaowu jiaofeng weiyuanhui di sancui huiyi* 中国佛教协会第九届理事会汉传佛教教务教风委员会第三次会议), acting as Deputy Director (*fu zhuren* 副主任).⁶¹ This list is not exhaustive but serves as an example of her official positions and duties over the years.

As is also the case with Rurui, within the frame of institutional Buddhism, political ideologies and norms often resurface in the discourses and practices of Buddhist leaders. The well-known patriotic slogan “loving the nation, loving religion” (*aiguo aijiao* 爱国爱教) has become an integral part of their speeches.⁶² Rurui uses it in both administrative and religious contexts, when speaking to her fellow Buddhist leaders or to her followers, and is even said to have written it on a blackboard on her arrival in 1991 when she became aware of the desolate state of Pushou Monastery.⁶³ Recent developments also include holding flag ceremonies, an activity that is usually carried out by students of the Institute, and was displayed for the first time on the WeChat page of the “Three-Plus-One Project” in 2018. Another instance of Rurui’s discourses being influenced by institutionalisation processes can be found in her speech at the Eighth General Assembly of the BAC’s representatives (*Zhongguo fojiao xiehui di baci quanguo daibiao huiyi* 中国佛教协会第八次全国代表会议) in 2010, in which she uses the same wording as that of the Regulations on Religious Affairs:

“We firmly believe that: we have the solicitude and support of the Party and of the government; that the new leading group of the BAC will guide all of us as disciples, and will continue to write new and brilliant pages regarding the protection of national unity and unification, social stability and world peace.”⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Mao 2015: 2.

⁶¹ Li 2019: 25.

⁶² This is the slogan of a patriotic education campaign started in the 1990s which aims at developing patriotic behaviour in religious organisations and actors. Even to this day, religious institutions are supposed to comply with the requirements of this campaign in order to keep their regular religious practices going. See Cooke 2009: 141.

⁶³ Mao 2015: 3.

⁶⁴ Her speech was published in the official journal of the BAC, *Fayin* 法音 [Voice of Dharma], see Rurui 2010: 48.

我们坚信：在党和政府的关怀与支持下，新一届的佛协领导班子将带领我们七众弟子，继续为维护国家统一、民族团结、社会稳定、世界和平谱写出新的辉煌篇章！

This goes to show the influence of politics on Buddhist leadership in the contemporary PRC, and the concrete manifestations of patriotism within religious spaces. Religious organisations and individuals, but especially Buddhist leaders, are indeed required by constitutional provisions and more generally by legal policies to promote patriotism, socialism and socialist values, national unity and unification, respect for the law, and so on.⁶⁵

Like a number of her peers, Rurui understands the strategic advantages of staying in line with these requirements, in order to secure her position and her organisation's existence in post-Mao China, while enjoying a certain degree of autonomy. Being a Vinaya centre, Pushou Monastery carefully maintains an image of strictness, which answers to the laity's and the institutions' need for a Saṃgha beyond reproach. In the same way, the Institute produces BAC-approved monastics and potential leaders, and even the charity's work is carried out strictly in compliance with state expectations, is tolerated as long as it is localised, has no political claims, and does not substitute itself for social services.⁶⁶

However, adopting the "renewal paradigm" as described by Goossaert,⁶⁷ situations also arise in which Buddhist leaders, Rurui included, make creative use of their institutional environment to benefit their organisations or advance larger goals. Responses from Buddhist actors to this environment, far from being seen as a state of surrender, may rather be based on cooperation and negotiation. In the case of Longlian for instance, securing high positions within the decision making institutions was decisive in making progress for her own community and the entire community of nuns. In her aforementioned speech at the 2010 meeting of the BAC's representatives, Rurui included a part on nuns' role in contemporary Buddhism:

⁶⁵ Laliberté 2015: 200–201.

⁶⁶ Laliberté 2009: 129–130.

⁶⁷ Goossaert 2005: 19. He identified five paradigms in scholarly works on religion in China – namely the secularisation paradigm, the continuity paradigm, the repression and resistance paradigm, the dichotomy paradigm, the renewal paradigm – each one of them adopting a different approach to the relationship between state and religion in China.

“Nuns account for a good proportion of the contemporary Buddhist community; they are a vital force that cannot be ignored. We hope that in future work we can integrate every kind of advantageous resource in order to build more platforms for nuns; that when we participate in various activities we can benefit from the care of Buddhist associations at all levels, in order for nuns to strengthen themselves, and establish a good image that would facilitate requirements; and that nuns can display even greater positive action, in order to make a unique contribution to the great revival of the Chinese people!”⁶⁸

在当今的中国佛教界, 尼众占有相当的比例, 是一支不可忽视的有生力量。我们希望在以后的工作中, 能整合各种优势资源, 为尼众搭建更多平台, 并在参与各种活动时, 能得到各级佛协给予的特别关照, 为尼众加强自身建设、树立良好形象创造便利条件, 使尼众能更好地发挥积极作用, 为中华民族的伟大复兴作出独特贡献!

This section of Rurui’s speech makes clear use of official discourses regarding a Saṃgha beyond reproach and politically compliant, introducing nuns as both “adequate spiritual guides” and “authoritative interlocutors”.⁶⁹ It also emphasises nuns’ beneficial and constructive role in contemporary Chinese Buddhism and society as a whole. Just as the argument of moral decline was utilised in the first half of the twentieth century to legitimise nuns’ access to modern monastic education, Rurui makes use of the perceived need for a better image of the Saṃgha, and of nuns within the Saṃgha, to ask for recognition and resources. Being aware of her exclusive position as one of the few nuns to occupy high office in the institutional structure, she thus takes on the responsibility of being a spokesperson for contemporary Chinese Buddhist nuns, advancing a model that she deems appropriate for their development. However, it should be noted that the standards Rurui is setting in terms of monastic discipline, education, and Buddhist philanthropy, as well as her official position, are the result of her individual trajectory. Her perspective is not necessarily representative of that of the whole community of Buddhist nuns in the PRC, and is not to be understood as a nationwide model.

⁶⁸ Rurui 2010: 48.

⁶⁹ Bianchi 2019: 159–160.

Concluding Remarks

Rurui is currently one of the most prominent nuns in contemporary PRC, because she leads the largest monastery and Institute for Buddhist Studies for nuns, and also because of her position as a valid interlocutor with state institutions. Like other Buddhist leaders of her generation, she has been trying since the 1990s to adapt Buddhism to its new institutional environment, making changes according to religious policies and increased expectations from both the state and lay Buddhists. Therefore she first has had to stabilise her community by securing a strong base in continuity with what was accomplished by her predecessors, namely emphasising Buddhist monastic discipline and establishing higher monastic education. Actively drawing from her teachers' legacy, she was then able to create her own model, building Pushou Monastery and the Mount Wutai Buddhist Institute for Nuns from the ground up, and finally setting up the threefold "Three-Plus-One Project" in 2006. Thus she came up with a distinct "brand" for Pushou Monastery, while at the same time making sure that every aspect of this "brand", including the upcoming field of philanthropic activities, complied with state expectations for Buddhist institutions. Although she has not been engaging in discourses about gender equality, she has continuously promoted nuns' interests, arguing for better resources, combining doctrinally orthodox ordination procedures with the standardised system of the PRC, and training nun scholars, skilful religious specialists and reliable leaders who will be legitimate in the eyes of the state and of the laity alike.

Legitimacy for Rurui as a Buddhist leader rests not only on her personal charisma, but also on the continuity provided by affiliation to eminent masters' networks, and on the careful designing of Pushou Monastery and its subsidiaries as highly successful sites of Buddhist teaching and practice, setting up standards since 1991. By achieving legitimacy, she has been able to better serve her community, and to provide not only a theoretical model, but also a concrete structure through which nuns can be equipped to reach higher positions and have more influence in the future as Buddhist leaders of the PRC.

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