



**Buddhism after Mao: Negotiations, Continuities, and Reinventions, edited by Ji Zhe, Gareth Fisher, and André Laliberté. University of Hawai'i Press, 2019. 355pp**

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This collective volume explores the fate of Chinese Buddhism since the 1980s, especially as a result of negotiations with the economical, political and social spheres, transmission strategies being continued or discontinued, and localized practices and spaces being reinvented in relation to their changing environment. Obviously referencing Holmes Welch's last book, *Buddhism under Mao* (1972), this volume is as much intended as a homage as it is a continuation of Welch's extensive research on Buddhism in twentieth century China. In a similar way, it focuses on Buddhist institutions, although in a broader sense, going beyond the physical space of the temple, academy or organization to also look into the production of "norms, rules, and memories" in post-Mao China. While coming from various academic disciplines, the eleven contributors seem to mostly agree on the paradigm of Buddhism being influenced by the State and vice versa, as evidenced by interactions ranging from cooperation to confrontation showcased in each chapter. The various case studies contained in this book, whether ethnographic or not, certainly highlight this complex State-Buddhism relationship, as well as the interactions between religion and contemporary Chinese society. They more specifically draw our attention to the many responses designed by Buddhists to obtain legitimacy through negotiations, continuities and reinventions, which constitute the three main sections of the volume. By looking specifically into the agency, motivations, and strategies of dynamic Buddhist actors, this book has definitely opened my eyes to their ability to create the necessary conditions for their own existence, as well as to reshape Buddhism in post-Mao China.

As part of the first section on negotiations, André Laliberté's "Buddhism under Jiang, Hu, and Xi: The Politics of Incorporation" gives an overview of the various positions towards Buddhism adopted by the CCP leadership since the 1990s, and thus provides necessary context for the following chapters. The political climate of these past few decades has certainly allowed Buddhism to develop, provided Buddhist institutions are incorporated into a system of governance led by the Buddhist Association of China (hereafter BAC). According to Laliberté, party leaders are somewhat favorably disposed towards institutional Buddhism mostly because of the part it plays in developing local economies. It can also help secure support from abroad as part of China's "soft power," keep social peace by promoting socialist values and offering social services, and improve cross-Strait relations

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on the premise of cultural similarities with Taiwan. However, this position should not be mistaken for an active promotion of Buddhist growth from the part of the political authorities, or even for neutrality, but only understood as a negotiating strategy to gain economical, social and political advantages.

The second chapter, by Claire Vidal, “Administering Bodhisattva Guanyin’s Island: The Monasteries, Political Entities, and Power Holders of Putuoshan,” gives a more concrete example of what this State-Buddhism relationship might produce on the island of Mount Putuo (普陀山). Dedicated to the worship of the bodhisattva Guanyin (观音), it has been a pilgrimage site for more than ten centuries, and since the 1980s has been developed in a way that capitalises on religious tourism, now at the core of the local economy. Although tensions can sometimes arise between Buddhist interests and business-oriented political decisions, in the case of Mount Putuo a mutually beneficial arrangement has been reached. Indeed, although religious practices are shaped by collective discourses based on official ideology, temples are also being restored, and new spaces are being created in the interstices between administrative categories. The administration of this sacred turned touristic site certainly testifies to the ability of local actors, whether administrative agents or religious leaders, to negotiate their position within this economy-based cooperative system, in order to redefine the religious field and local governance.

Susan K. McCarthy’s “Spiritual Technologies and the Politics of Buddhist Charity” instead focuses on the social and moral norms produced by the collaboration between the political and religious fields, taking the Ren’ai Charity Foundation (*Ren’ai Cishan Jijinhui*, 仁爱慈善基金会) as an example. Operating from Longquan temple (龙泉寺) in the outskirts of Beijing, this lay-run organization entertained close ties with Xuecheng (学诚), abbot of the temple and former chair of the BAC—that is, before his demise in 2018. His position as a Buddhist leader and senior executive in an official institution partly accounts for Ren’ai’s success as a model charity, serving as a platform to practice and spread Buddhism while still catering to State expectations. But legitimacy also comes from Ren’ai’s ability to tone down its Buddhist influences, to show compatibility with socialist values and promote a morally sound model based on secular ideals of self-sacrifice and civic-mindedness. At the same time, the author reminds us that more “religiously” oriented grassroot initiatives, such as releasing animals back in their natural habitat (*fangsheng*, 放生), also occur in public space and can prove challenging to the secularized, civilized ideal of the State.

To bring this section to a close, Brian J. Nichols’ “Tourist Temples and Places of Practice: Charting Multiple Paths in the Revival of Monasteries” paints a rather different picture of negotiation. The chapter underlines the confrontation that can also arise from forced interactions between Buddhism and the State, especially in the context of tourism and the religious economy. This paradigm brings light to the several management options available to temples with cultural and historical capital, ranging from “museumification” to “revivalism” of religious practice and cultivation. Some institutions, such as the Kaiyuan temple (开元寺) examined by Nichols, are also administered by both secular “curators” and “revivalist” monks. It is the author’s opinion that these diverging forces coexist only because of the resi-

dent clergy's capacity to stand its ground, and assert its need for spaces dedicated to Buddhist practice within what is now a tourist site. In this instance, as opposed to the previous two chapters, negotiation is driven by necessity and is often adversarial.

Looking into continuities between Buddhism prior to the founding of the PRC in 1949 and following Mao's rule, the next section starts off with Daniela Campo's "Bridging the Gap: Chan and Tiantai Dharma Lineages from Republican to Post-Mao China." In this chapter, the author investigates both the processes according to which monastic lineages of the Chan (禪) and Tiantai (天台) traditions have been revived in Republican China by masters such as Xuyun (虛云) and Dixian (諦閑), and the mechanisms of dharma transmission from one era to the next. Building on their masters' legacy, disciples have been able to rebuild temples and secure positions of power. By affiliating to vertical and horizontal networks of monastics, they have spread Buddhism in Hong Kong, the US, or Malaysia, making these lineages contemporarily relevant and competitive. In their case, resorting to continuity can be seen as a strategy to legitimise authority and expertise through inherited charisma, to accumulate symbolic capital and, ultimately, to access resources. The dharma lineages under enquiry thus continue to influence the practice of contemporary Chinese Buddhism and its ties to the social and political spheres.

The next chapter, by Ester Bianchi, "Transmitting the Precepts in Conformity with the Dharma: Restoration, Adaptation, and Standardization of Ordination Procedures," also delves into the restoration of transmission procedures, but focuses on ordination ceremonies. During the Republican era, there was a concern for reforming the sangha by establishing moral standards in line with Vinaya texts. This concern has been raised at several points in the history of Chinese Buddhism and once again in the 1980s after ordinations resumed. As a result, procedures such as the "triple platform" (*santan dajie*, 三坛大戒) and the "dual ordination" (*erbuseng jie*, 二部僧戒) for nuns have been restored, not only as a way to elevate the sangha and preserve the dharma, but also as part of a State-designed project to standardize the production of morality within institutional Buddhism. This search for orthodoxy, whether based on religious or political doctrines, reveals various agendas that ultimately coincide to bring forth properly ordained Buddhist monastics, who can serve as legitimate interlocutors to institutions, society and the Buddhist community alike.

Ji Zhe's contribution, "Schooling Dharma Teachers: The Buddhist Academy System and Sangha Education," then enquires into the organization of modern Buddhist education. Buddhist academies are institutional inventions that were born at the beginning of the twentieth century, discontinued after 1949—except for the Buddhist Academy of China (*Zhongguo foxueyuan*, 中国佛学院) under investigation—and revived in contemporary times, albeit under different management systems. Continuity between the academy systems of pre- and post-Mao China is to be found in the modern curriculum and teaching methods, in the choice of alumni teachers, or in the symbolic restoration of former Buddhist academies. Discrepancies still exist though, mostly brought on by the change in political regimes and their will to centralize and secularize Buddhist education. Nowadays, academies provide the State with a pool of patriotic monastics from the new generation, and Buddhist

institutions with high-learned leaders. In sum, they produce Buddhist elites with recognizable symbolic capital, most of whom now run temples, occupy positions of power within the BAC or its subdivisions, or head their own academies.

Last but not least is quite an extensive survey of a more localized phenomenon by Ashiwa Yoshiko and David L. Wank, “A Study of Laynuns in Minnan, 1920-2010s: Buddhism, State Institutions, and Popular Culture.” The term *caigu* (菜姑), or “lay-nuns,” refers to lay Buddhist women who live communally, follow a vegetarian diet, are celibate, but work and are not ordained as nuns, a population found only in the Minnan region of Fujian province. Stemming from complex sociocultural factors, this tradition was first recognized as Buddhist in the first half of the twentieth century. At the time, laynuns received support from the local society and benefited from the modernization of Buddhism in terms of education and social position. However, as Ashiwa and Wank’s research on several laynun halls show, they have had to face decline, progressive marginalization and incorporation within more clearly defined categories in the post-Mao era. Whether laynuns tried to adapt or to differentiate, and even as the local Xiamen government enthroned them as “religious specialists” in 2012, this particular case study has made it clear that the continuation of local traditions is easily endangered by processes of centralization of Buddhism in contemporary China.

The final section outlines creativity in Buddhist responses to political and social change by asking how local Buddhist actors reinvent religious spaces in post-Mao China. The first chapter by Huang Weishan, “Urban Restructuring and Temple Agency—a Case Study of the Jing’an Temple,” details the specific answers designed by the abbot of Jing’an temple (静安寺), Huiming (慧明), to meet with the challenges of urban reorganization in contemporary Shanghai. Since its reopening in 1985, the temple has witnessed part of the local community being displaced and the neighborhood changing drastically to accommodate business-oriented interests. However, by negotiating with urban planning authorities and real estate developers, offering community services and social relief, and juggling between its cultural and religious identity, Huiming has succeeded in reinventing Jing’an temple’s role as part of the local fabric. Importantly, Huang’s research reminds us that the resilience of Buddhism results not only from reactions to its external environment, but also from active and strategic choices by Buddhist leaders to establish legitimacy.

Gareth Fisher’s “Places of their Own: Exploring the Dynamics of Religious Diversity in Public Buddhist Temple Space” then moves on to explore grassroots rather than institutional Buddhism, and the reinterpretation of religious spaces by lay Buddhists since the 1980s. The author investigates three sites in which such a phenomenon occurs, two of them being large temples restored from the “top-down,” and the third being a Buddha hall built from the “bottom-up” by local lay practitioners. On temple grounds, the physical separation between public and private spaces, which results in very few interactions between temple-goers and monastics, constitute a surprisingly fertile ground for a wide range of lay Buddhist activities and opinions to develop. While these particular lay Buddhists are indeed mostly free of any outside influence, those of the Buddha hall depend on their

leader's vision for sources of morality, and rely exclusively on her authority, which seems to be less conducive to religious diversity. But this research is really about attesting to the capacity of lay Buddhism in post-Mao China to invent new forms of religious expression within confined spaces, or to create new spaces altogether.

The final chapter, by Stefania Travagnin, "Cyberactivities and "Civilized" Worship: Assessing Contexts and Modalities of Online Ritual Practices," is particularly fitting as it opens the discussion to even more recent and innovative ways to practice contemporary Buddhism. In the past few decades, the use of virtual spaces by Buddhists has dramatically increased, and the author's research on Nanputuo Temple's (南普陀寺) online "Buddha hall" and "Memorial Worship Site" aptly identifies the challenges it creates in relation to more traditional forms of offline practices, and to religious policies. Ritual and devotional practices are indeed subjected to transformations in order to be digitized, which can call into question their efficacy and authenticity, as well as the role of the sangha as a spiritual guide. Moreover, such websites can be seen as a way to supervise Buddhist practice by promoting legitimate State discourse on "civilized worship" while diminishing the influence of temples. However, Travagnin shows that while online practice can be defined in contrast to its offline counterpart, it still provides the practitioner with novel ways to express religiosity that can be efficient and authentic in themselves.

In conclusion, this volume sheds some much needed light on the space that institutional Buddhism has managed to carve out for itself in post-Mao China. It offers social and political scientists, anthropologists, scholars in Chinese studies, and more generally all those interested in modern Buddhism, China, or the interactions between State and religion, a glimpse into a Buddhism that is currently being practiced, revived, and reinvented by its actors. While I thoroughly enjoyed reading about individual initiatives and learning about Buddhist actors' agency, I feel like the choice to focus solely on institutions—similarly to Welch's work—might leave the reader hungry for more personal narratives and research on grassroots Buddhism. Providing a more complete view of Buddhism as "made" by Chinese Buddhists outside of the institutional sphere would stand to enrich this volume further. Moreover, almost no mention is made of nuns (with the exception of chapters by Bianchi, Campo, and Ashiwa and Wank) when they in fact make up for at least one third of the monastic population. Buddhist nuns are certainly worthy of serious consideration, as they currently make their way into official institutions and academies, negotiate with the authorities and reinvent practices and discourses in the same way as monks—all the while putting forth their own agendas. This substantial volume is nonetheless essential to anyone wanting to explore the many facets of institutional Buddhism in post-Mao China, and paves the way for future research on many more aspects of lived Buddhism.

### Bibliography

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