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## Buddhism After Mao: Negotiations, Continuities, and Reinventions

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JI ZHE, GARETH FISHER, and ANDRE LALIBERTE, eds., *Buddhism After Mao: Negotiations, Continuities, and Reinventions*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020, 355 pp. CAN \$34.95 (pb). ISBN 978-0-8248-8834-3

*Buddhism After Mao: Negotiations, Continuities, and Reinventions* is a collection of multi-disciplinary works that provides insight into the predicament of contemporary Buddhism in the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC). In their introduction, the editors situate the significance of this volume in light of the size of the PRC's Buddhist community: "In China today resides the largest community of people who identify Buddhism as an important source of meaning in their lives" (1). This community is located in the world's largest communist, atheist party-controlled state. These details and their dialectical nature are elaborated throughout this book, exploring Buddhist developments, movements, and trajectories in Buddhism from the period after Mao Zedong's ruling until the present day.

The volume presents a collaboration of authors who specialize in the study of Buddhism in Chinese society. The advocacy of different anthropological, sociological, and historical approaches employed in this book overweigh the difficulties and challenges of reflecting Buddhism's complicated state in the PRC. The volume presents a wide spectrum of case studies in contemporary China, allowing insight into various forms of Buddhist life-worlds. This includes laypeople and monastics, grassroots Buddhist groups, and official Buddhist monasteries and temples, which

are registered, acknowledged, and supervised by the state.<sup>1</sup> The volume presents a diversity of traditions, modalities, and paths of Buddhist players, while also taking the Chinese state and its different authorities as an essential part of the Buddhist world of modern China. The volume encompasses the following questions: Since the Mao era, who are the agents of Buddhism today? How do these agents work together? The work entangles the different relationships between lay Buddhists and monastics, lawmakers and local officials, Buddhist human and non-human agents (such as robot-monks and deities),<sup>2</sup> and the relationships formed with Buddhist actors outside of China.

Given its methodological orientations, this volume would be suited for sociologists and anthropologists with an interest in contemporary studies of Buddhism in China. Scholars and graduate students who study Chinese religions or other religious traditions in China will also benefit tremendously from the findings, methodologies, and approaches presented in this volume. The different “negotiations, continuities, and reinventions” applied to Buddhism are also relevant to other religious traditions in the PRC. As the contemporary case studies are contextualized within China’s economic and social reforms, this volume would be an essential read for those with an interest in China’s cultural, social, and economic sphere. For instance, religious tourism, technological developments, and their application in the cultural sphere are among some of the issues reflected in the chapters. Lastly, the volume can serve as an ad-

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<sup>1</sup> Through bodies such as the Buddhist Association China (BAC) (Zhongguo fojiao xiehui 中國佛教協會), and the United Front Work Department (UFWD) (Zhonggong zhongyang tongyi zhanxian gongzuobu 中共中央統一戰線工作部).

<sup>2</sup> In some of the studies, I recognize a very bright and essential framework that includes these non-human agents as crucial to Buddhist dynamics in China. See, for example, Susan K. Maccarthy’s chapter in which she explores the robot-monk Xian’er (302).

vanced reader for undergraduate students with some background in Chinese religion, who want to broaden their knowledge of Buddhist institutions, modalities, and research methodologies.

The chapters are divided into three sections that are organized thematically, but a prominent statement is expressed in the project as follows: The contemporary Chinese sphere of Buddhism cannot be rendered in a straightforward narrative. The division reflects a broader statement made earlier by scholars in this volume that rejects a dichotomic view of China's religious sphere.<sup>3</sup> Bottom-up or grassroots-up approaches are necessary to comprehend the political dimensions of the different actors engaged in the revitalization of Buddhism in the PRC. Examples include the regulation of religion, and how and if it is being applied de-facto. Taking these needs into consideration in different regions of China, the volume presents a diversity of geography and breadth of religious phenomena.

In the first chapter, André Laliberté suggests a framework to view Buddhism's developments in the past decades (e.g., under General Secretaries Jiang Zeming, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jing Ping). His chapter presents an overview of Buddhism's dynamics, focusing on the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP) and the Buddhist Association China (BAC). To that end, Laliberté looks at religious policies, developments in the relationships mentioned above, the establishment of public rhetoric regarding the place of Buddhism in society, and the differences between policies and implementation. The chapter presents four main policy domains of importance for the CCP, which are 1) local economic development, 2) diplomacy, 3) internal security, and 4) relations with the Republic of China (ROC) also known as Taiwan. Through these

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<sup>3</sup> For example, suppression of religious culture or religious freedom and revitalizations would not be sufficient frameworks to discuss the period in question.

prisms, Laliberté explores the extent of how Buddhism may be of value to the state, given the relative support it receives from the PRC. He gives an extensive analysis of the changes instituted by the different leaders in each domain.

In the first domain, Laliberté explores the Buddhist economy in the context of China's economic reforms. He shows the change of attitude of the current regime with the CCP's shift from its earlier attempt to show foreigners that Buddhism can flourish under socialism, to a focus on how Buddhism can generate significant revenue from Buddhist tourism (40). The second domain explores how the PRC harnesses Buddhism to administer "soft power" in its diplomacy. Laliberté explores the potential successes and failures in the economic domain. In the internal security domain, Laliberté looks at the shifts of public narrative dictated by the CCP and explains how different narratives are applied by each regime in its treatment of Buddhism. Finally, Laliberté engages the issue of national unification with Taiwan and looks at how Buddhism plays a part in this dynamic. He explores the multi-directional efforts from different Buddhist actors on the Taiwan-strait. For example, he describes the cooperation between Taiwanese and Chinese Buddhist associations, and the collaboration between China and Taiwan in the World Buddhist Forums. Moreover, he shows Buddhism as a shared element of Han Chinese society within the rhetoric of Chinese political leaders. Laliberté attempts to survey the contribution of Buddhism to national unification and its corresponding degrees of success.

The second chapter presents findings from Claire Vidal's dissertation, presenting an in-depth ethnography of Buddhist practices at Mount Putuo (Putuoshan 普陀山). The study is an extensive exploration of one of the most vibrant Buddhist pilgrimage sites dedicated to Guanyin, the bodhisattva of compassion (Guanyin pusa 觀音菩薩). Though it has been an active pilgrimage site since the eighth century CE, Vidal argues that

the building of new structures and the growth of local tourism have inspired new pilgrimage practices. These developments, which were initiated by local governments as part of “Putuoshan Buddhism” propaganda, began to appear in 1980. These transformations involve lay people, state officials, and monks. “Today, books addressed to devotees, tourist guides, and journals about culture and Buddhism at Putuoshan connect the famous tales of monks and pilgrims from many different places throughout Asia with contemporary accounts of travellers from Asian countries” (45).

Through the case study of Mount Putuo, Vidal also discusses key terms necessary for understanding contemporary Buddhism in the PRC such as “religious culture” (*zongjiao wenhua* 宗教文化) and “religious tourism” (*zongjiao luyou* 宗教旅游). Her study recalls the individual experiences of pilgrims and provides a top-down ethnography of the site's structural dynamics. She further explores how the various administrative entities responsible for handling religious affairs in the PRC play a part in the political and financial structure of Mount Putuo. The hierarchical charts that she presents are not universal models that can be applied to all Buddhist institutions in the same way. Nevertheless, the discussion of these charts is an excellent introductory layout for the reader regarding the administrative entities involved, which are mentioned in nearly all chapters of this volume. The charts are based on an informant, a civil servant from Mount Putuo, who outlines the different administrative levels and the relationships between organizations that are involved in religious affairs. Vidal uses them as ethnographic material, asserting their simplistic nature, which she further compares to other field findings that she collected on the island of Mount Putuo. For example, she indicates how a local government official may fulfill two roles at a time, which is displayed on a chart as two separate administrative bodies.

The third chapter is based on a case study of the Beijing-based Ren'ai Charity Foundation (Ren'ai Cishan Jijinhui 仁爱慈善基金會), a lay charity affiliated with Master Xuecheng and one of many Buddhist philanthropic groups established in the past several decades. Susan McCarthy studies the ways in which charity serves a variety of spiritual and secular purposes for both lay and monastic Buddhists. Officials in China have long stressed the need for religions to “mutually adapt” (*xiang shiying* 相適應) to modern socialist society and exhorted them to allocate resources to help people in need, instead of building big Buddhist monuments. Buddhist adherents are encouraged to offer assistance through philanthropy and social service, by cultivating compassion for all sentient beings, by contemplating the non-duality of self and others, and by accumulating merit. According to McCarthy, both the Ren'ai Charity Foundation and the Longquan Temple, which are affiliated with the charismatic and later notorious monk Master Xuecheng, manifest an “embrace of modernity and an effort to marry Buddhist spirituality with the concern for the public good” (80). Faith-based charities appeal to the public because they are a “secularised” mode of religiosity, that in theory focuses adherents' attention on the problems of this world, rather than salvation in the next. These efforts and activities embody the core idea of Buddhism for the human realm (*renjian fojiao* 人間佛教) advocated by Master Xuecheng. In the chapter, she argues that Ren'ai finds creative ways to reach out to a broad public through nuances of Buddhist rhetorical and behavioural strategies. Ren'ai's endeavours have civic and cultural dimensions which are congruent with socialist norms. For example, while the basic idea of Ren'ai's Loving Heart Congee (Aixin Zhou 愛心粥) program is based on the principle of Buddhist Compassion, the organization forbids volunteers from handing out Buddhist tracts, playing Buddhist music or engaging in conversations about Buddhism.

“Buddhist monasteries and temples are rebuilt throughout China on a scale unmatched in recent centuries” (98) states Brian Nichols who,

in the fourth chapter, discusses the negotiations and conflicts between secular authorities and monastic leaders regarding these Buddhist sites. The relationships between these actors are often intense. The themes of the legitimacy, significance, the purpose of temples and monasteries have been a source of conflict. Due to the CCP's secular view on religion, these sites are often framed as artifacts of the past as opposed to being seen as living Buddhist realities with a future. Within this dynamic, Nichols recognizes three types of revivals for Buddhist sites; the first involves "curators" who work on the restoration of temples to preserve their cultural heritage, in some cases outside of the development of tourism. The second involves "revivalists" who strive for the renewal of religious practice around these sites. The third is a combination of the first two types. In curatorial forces, he refers to the State Administration of Religious Affairs or SARA (Guojia zongjiao shiwu ju 國家宗教事務局) and various bureaus, and their employees.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Nichols points out signs of "museumification" in some case studies, wherein the temple moved away from worship and religious cultivation, becoming a spectacle, a focal point for display, and a source of secular education for the public.

The fifth chapter by Daniela Campo deals with questions and themes regarding the continuation of dharma lineages throughout the twentieth century. Her research includes private dharma lineages from the Tiantai 天台 and Chan 禪 schools, taking the case of Chan Master Xuyun 虛雲 and Tiantai Master Dixian 諦閑 as examples. The chapter analyses the socio-political and religious effects of private dharma transmission and their role in Buddhist reconstruction in the post-Mao period. Campo asserts that this kind of religious kinship is a highly structured system that its "long-standing authoritative stance has contributed to insuring a connection between religious legitimacy and political power" (124).

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<sup>4</sup> Other bureaus include the Culture Bureau (Wenhuan ju 文化局) and the Tourism Bureau (Luyou ju 旅游局).

For example, she takes the case of Xuyun's dharma lineages and shows how the interrupted dharma of two surviving lineages in the Chan schools (*Linji* 臨濟 and *Caodong* 曹洞) have legitimized the continuity of three other Chan lineages (*Weiyang* 為仰, *Faya* 法眼, and *Yunmen* 雲門). Campo shows how Xuyun's dharma transmissions kindled a long-lasting bond among the dharma heirs towards the memory of his person and fostered a sense of belonging to different Chan traditions since the Mao era. Campo also explores the case of Dixian dharma heirs and argues that they play a role in the continuation and reconstruction of Chan lineages in the PRC, Hong Kong, and internationally.

The sixth chapter by Ester Bianchi deals with the ordination procedures of monks and nuns in China after the Mao era. According to Bianchi, these procedures lean on traditional criteria, "transmitting the precepts in conformity with the Dharma" (*rufa chuanjie* 如法傳戒). However, she conveys that "the restoration and adaptation of ancient rituals and rules have further involved a process of standardization and unification" (152) explored in the chapter. According to Bianchi, the standardization and ordination procedure (which began in 1980 but originated in 1950), holds political and religious implications. For example, the contemporary Vinaya resurgence is, as she argues; "an important aspect of the 'Buddhist Revival' (*fojiao fuxi* 佛教復興)", but also as a "reaffirmation of a disciplinary strictness . . . necessary for the subsequent regeneration of the monastic community and Chinese Buddhism as a whole" (159). Contextualizing the theme in the political sphere, Bianchi states that the Chinese government has been using ordination platforms to control the institution of Buddhism. Lastly, Bianchi relates the issue of ordination to its international dimension by showing how the ordination process takes place within the discourse of a "Pan Asian" or Global Buddhism. For example, the modern phenomenon of "dual ordination" (wherein nuns are required to be ordained in front of a crowd of monks and nuns) became a precedent and a widespread occurrence in Taiwan, later in the PRC, and other countries.

The seventh chapter, written by Ji Zhe, deals with the Sangha education of the Buddhist Academy of China or BAC (Zhongguo fojiao xueyuan 中國佛教學院) in Beijing, providing an overview of the academy's evolution in the Post-Mao PRC. Buddhist academies began to appear at the beginning of the twentieth century, exemplifying the modernization and reformation movements that occurred among the Buddhist intellectual elite. These institutions became distinguished from monasteries by placing less emphasis on monastic discipline and religious services, in favour of studying philosophy, theory, history, geography, and foreign languages. According to Ji, "The aim of the education in these institutions was no longer to uphold the tradition of a particular monastery or locality, but rather to reform Buddhism under changing social conditions and to expand its influence" (172). Methods of reforming Sangha education have not only survived the Mao era but some methods are still applied today, albeit in secularized forms. Ji claims that significant changes within Buddhist studies institutions have enabled them to play a continually significant role throughout the PRC's history, with the exception of the Cultural Revolution. Ji's study shows that the PRC's involvement in the Buddhist Academy, which was established during the BAC's founding in 1956, was different from the republican period academies. First and foremost, it resulted from Buddhism's "etatization," where elements of Buddhism were controlled, appropriated, and used by the secular party state for its political purposes.

In chapter eight, Ashiwas Yoshiko and David L. Wand present a study on the status of "lay nuns." The research is based on Caigu 菜姑, a group of lay Buddhist women in the province of Fujian. The women led a communal, celibate vegetarian lifestyle centered on the worship of Guanyin Bodhisattva, but they are not ordained as nuns nor do they shave their heads. Historically, the positions of lay Buddhist women were ambiguous; regardless of how rigorous lay people were in their practices, they were not officially classified as monastics by the government.

However, lay nuns belong to the official class of “religious professionals” according to the local government in Xiamen. In the chapter, the authors examine different explanations for the premodern origins of lay nuns in neo-Confucianism (Lixue 理學), the secretion religion<sup>5</sup> called Zhaijiao (齋教), and the local customs of women’s communities. The authors later focus on the history, changes, and trends of the phenomenon in the twentieth-century, presenting case studies of two lay nuns. They also examine lay nun halls in Xiamen and explore the halls’ adaptations to local government regulations. For example, they argue that the current recognition of lay nuns as “religious professionals” is indicative of the Buddhicization of local cultural traditions (243). Furthermore, it shows the localized nature of Buddhism due to the efforts of local governments to institutionalize the status of lay nuns, while keeping in line with state policy.

In the ninth chapter, Huang Weishan narrates her research of Jing’an temple (Jingan si 靜安寺), located in a busy commercial center in Shanghai. She explores the different dynamics between Buddhist and state institutions, which took part in the process of the temple’s reconstruction. Huang presents the different actors who assisted and supported the temple (at the time including the Chinese state), after the catastrophic damages of the cultural revolution. The study discusses how the central position of abbot Huiming was amplified, representing the temple’s general agency as a whole. Huang’s chapter is situated in the section “Reinventing the Dharma” and indeed, Huang asks critical questions about why the term “renovating” was chosen over the term “rebuilding,” despite the fact that a single stone had not been left in place from the original temple.

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<sup>5</sup> The term “sectarianism” refers to “organized folk religious movements that are salvationist and millenarian, as distinct from ancestral lineage worship, local deities, and Buddhism and Taoism” (244).

Huang's long-term field research of the temple and its surrounding neighborhood reveals a fascinating process of how the temple, which was closed during the cultural revolution, was rebuilt. Her study further discusses how the temple became an important religious and cultural monument in Shanghai, overcoming the challenges of restoration despite the hurdles posed by a changing society and the involvement of the state.

In the tenth chapter, Gareth Fisher explores the dimensions of the public and sacred spaces of three temples, the Bailin Temple (Bailin si 柏林寺), Guangji Temple (Guangji si 廣濟寺), and the Mingfa Buddha Hall (Mingfa fotang 明法佛堂). Unlike Huang, however, Fisher takes a bottom-up approach to view the revitalization of temple worship in post-Mao China. He explores the crucial differences between the temples. While the Bailin temple is an approved Buddhist religious site, the Guangji temple was established by grassroots lay Buddhist activities. The discourse is one of few studies about underground Buddhist organizations in China. Fisher raises the question of how public space is used and marketed in Buddhist sacred spaces. What is the hierarchical structure and their corresponding levels? Moreover, when does authority prevail over religious charisma, in regard to lay people and monastics, and men and women? With respect to institutionalized temples such as Bailin and Guangji, monastic personnel embody religious charisma, acting as a source of inspiration for devotees; in the case of the Mingfa Buddha Hall, however, Fisher shows the centrality of the lay leader who is the embodiment of religious authority for lay people. Fisher also questions how these different modalities affect the diversity of hierarchical levels and the freedom of Buddhist practices. His research shows that the Mingfa Buddha Hall, which was built through a bottom-up approach by lay practitioners, is more extensive in its facilitation of religious diversity.

In the last chapter, Travagnin relates an in-depth study of digital Buddhism in China, aiming to reflect, present and assess contexts, and

modalities of online Buddhist ritual practices in the Chinese sphere. Travagnin's study sheds light on a relatively new phenomenon, which has not been sufficiently studied given the accelerated change at which technology has advanced in the last decades. The implications of these changes have transformed religion globally, and Buddhism in China is not an exception to them. Travagnin identifies four contexts for consideration for the field, as follows:

1. The context of the legal and political system, namely the overall policies on religion implemented by the Chinese government and Chinese attitudes towards religious practice.
2. The context of the media and the recent emergence of "mediatized" Chinese religions.
3. The context of tensions, possibilities, and interactions between offline and online religion.
4. The context of online religious rituals.

Travagnin argues that there are challenges and contestations within the above stated contexts. For example, the government's attempts to interfere with religious freedom are challenged by the openness and possibilities of the internet. Furthermore, the authenticity and efficacy of online rituals are often challenged and criticized. Travagnin asks the essential questions, how is Buddhist ritual discourse affected by online rituals, and how do these modalities complement or strengthen the CCP's patriotic agenda? Aside from the restrictions the CCP places on Buddhist institutes, Buddhism is often dictated to and molded into the CCP's discourse, in which Buddhism is a cultural tradition and not a religion. In this discourse, Travagnin analyzes online Buddhist participation and ritual practices in

consideration of the government's call for civilized (*wenming* 文明) behaviour. The chapter focuses on the Online Buddha Hall (Zaixian fotang 在線佛堂 and the Memorial Worship Site (Wangshang jisi 網上祭祀) of Nanputuo Temple (Nanputuo si 南普陀寺). The study concludes that the ability to engage in ritual performances in the online spaces have led to a crucial transformation of cardinal pillars in Chinese Buddhist ritual practice. Travagnin's work constitutes as an important analysis, not only in its contribution to understanding Chinese Buddhism but also in her methodological usage of online ethnography.

Altogether, the works presented in this volume create a meaningful and elaborate caption inside Buddhist institutions, networks, and associations. Some of the case studies exemplify the PRC's restrictive religious policies, government legislation and the religious lifeworld of Buddhist actors. Other case studies show a creative and resilient expression of how Buddhist actors defy state regulations in their activities. The remaining case studies show how Buddhist actors cooperate with the state and propose a vision for the structure of Buddhism, highlighting the fact that all stakeholders enjoy the fruits that this dynamic offers.

The inclusion of the personal experiences of lay people and their practice of Buddhism would further enhance this volume. While most of the studies are dedicated to the systems, developments, and organizations operated by lay Buddhist actors, there are questions that remain about individual Buddhist perceptions. In other words, more insight about how Chinese Buddhists feel, think, and experience Buddhism in post-Mao China would be an invaluable addition to this volume. As lay Buddhists comprise a majority of the Buddhist sangha in China, more attention could have been directed to their predicament and how the different developments in institutions, regulations, and religious trends have affected them personally. A significant phenomenon within lay Buddhism in China

is the appearance of lay grassroots Buddhist groups who operate in different non-institutionalized modalities.<sup>5</sup> Such groups are understudied and while their presence is connected to the processes discussed in the volume, lay grassroots Buddhist groups are scarcely mentioned apart from the case study of the Mingfa Buddha Hall in Chapter Ten. The inclusion of case studies on lay grassroots groups would contribute to a complete picture of Buddhism in Chinese society.

To conclude, the volume puts a few general subjects on the table that have not been thoroughly explored in the form of a complete book on Buddhism in China. For example, the subjects include the gaps between state regulation and its implementation, and modern popular Buddhist practices. The volume's introduction provides a helpful background to the different chapters. The chapters are all thoroughly researched and very well articulated, and express familiarity with the important research on Buddhism in the PRC, which makes for a fascinating read. The volume presents an impressive number of primary sources mainly in fieldwork interviews, official state documents, and field observations by the contributors. Alongside versatile research methodologies, these sources are especially valuable.

### **Notes on the Contributor**

Kai Shmushko is a Ph.D. candidate in the School of Historical Studies at Tel Aviv University. Her fields of research are anthropology of religion in Chinese societies, and Chinese philosophical and religious traditions. Her Ph.D. research focuses on lay Buddhism in contemporary China and Taiwan, engagement in aspects of material religion, ritual economy, and the dynamics of state and religion.

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