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Lotus Blossoms and Purple Clouds: Monastic Buddhism in Post-Mao China

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BRIAN J. NICHOLS, *Lotus Blossoms and Purple Clouds: Monastic Buddhism in Post-Mao China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2022. XIII, 271 pp. USD \$68 (hardback). ISBN 978-0-8248-8900-5.

In this first monograph-length ethnography of a contemporary Buddhist temple in China to date, the Canada-based author Brian J. Nichols presents a vigorous scenario of the revival of monastic life at Kaiyuan Monastery 開元寺. Kaiyuan has long been a famous temple in China for its witnessing of and representing the thousand-year-long history of religious prosperity and diversity in its city, Quanzhou 泉州. However, the author is deeply aware of the fact that Kaiyuan is so far an “ordinary” (*putong* 普通) temple unable to dive into one or more cultivational traditions as seen in other remarkable Buddhist temples in history or the present (4).

Nichols approaches the changing historical and cultural landscape of this temple with a combination of archival sources and ethnographic data from his seven months living in Kaiyuan and visits to other comparable temples, all during his twenty-six-month stay in China between 2005 and 2019. Such a multidisciplinary design generates a history-embedded, thick description of the institutional dynamics of Kaiyuan, covering temple schedules, personal cultivation of monks, material culture, founding legends, and monastic autonomy. Nichols maintains a critical distance from the idealistic descriptions of Buddhist monasticism in its various forms and the reductionist blame assigned to commodification, modernity, or the state for causing the religio-moral decline of monasteries. As a result, he contextualizes all aspects of today's Kaiyuan in the living history of the social, political, and economic conditions of Buddhism in China, the contemporary nation of China, and of the temple itself. All these efforts make this monograph an invaluable window to look at broader dynamics such as post-Mao religious life in China and Buddhism facing modernity.

Nichols organizes the book into three parts: “History,” “Religious Life,” and “Material Dynamics.” The two chapters in the first part provide an all-encompassing historical background for the unfolding of the later parts. With the end of Maoism as the divide, Chapter 1 thoroughly reviews Kaiyuan’s history from its foundation in 686 in the Tang dynasty to 1975, while Chapter 2 specifies the key events and figures contributing to the revival of Kaiyuan at different stages from 1976 to 2019. Among the overwhelmingly rich details across more than 1300 years, Nichols identifies the consistent importance of two crucial external forces, the state and elites, throughout all the rises and falls of Kaiyuan (20). Elites usually play the role of patrons, but the state’s intervention can include both support and suppression. Despite their different attitudes, both elites and state actors tend to influence the temple through modulating material culture, often with the mediation of internal monastics. Nichols argues that even Kaiyuan’s fate in the Cultural Revolution, i.e., materially existing due to a local elite’s protection but religiously stagnating, is not an outlier of these historical patterns (49). These patterns have also been showcased again in Kaiyuan’s post-Mao revival. In the earlier decades, external sources of support, institutionally from Zhao Puchu 趙樸初 and financially from overseas Chinese, were both crucial. From 2000 to 2019, the internal leadership of Abbot Daoyuan 道元 has become more important in the revival process of Kaiyuan.

The second part, “Religious Life,” pays attention to the contemporary monastic life within Kaiyuan. In Chapter 3, the lens of temporal schedules reveals the life rhythms of contemporary Kaiyuan in daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly terms. Between phenomenological experiences, Buddhist traditions, and sociological analyses, Nichols confirms that Kaiyuan maintains the obligatory monastic forms and cultivation atmosphere through daily morning and evening services plus three communal meals, although many monks can be absent (78; 84). On larger time scales, Kaiyuan serves the local community by holding grander Dharma

services such as *nianfo* 念佛 (Buddha recitation), serving free noodles, and celebrating annual festivals—all open to the public. Although such outward activities may suggest monks' moral degradation or dereliction of duty, Nichols demonstrates the economic significance of these activities in sustaining the basic existence and religious normativity of Kaiyuan. Then, Chapter 4 continues to contextualize the lack of more devotional forms of Buddhist practices and cultivations at Kaiyuan through a closer look at the sangha. To avoid the biases in belief-centered approaches to religious life, Nichols centers on persons and practices in this chapter through the case studies of seven monks' life histories, covering their pre-ordination lives and current roles at Kaiyuan (120–27). This lens helps to show the institutionalized labor division among monks within a temple and the individual diversity of monks in their interests, degree of dedication, and comfort with different forms of self-cultivation. The two dimensions of the sangha prove an ordinary Buddhist temple's inclusiveness of various monks, which can tolerate monks' deviance in certain forms and the local community's criticisms based on idealistic temple images. Nevertheless, Nichols also emphasizes that this situation is embedded in contemporary China's shortage of qualified senior monastics to guide cultivation or lead the whole sangha in a way to emphasizes cultivation (129).

With the dynamics of material culture as a pivot, the third part probes into topics broader than the physical dimensions of Kaiyuan. Chapter 5 contemplates the architectural details and spatial characteristics of Kaiyuan to decipher the temple's meanings for visitors with different identities and motivations. Acknowledging the polysemy of temple space to evoke overlapping and even ambiguous feelings, Nichols generalizes three ideal types of Kaiyuan's spatial significance: Buddhist sacredness, secularist cultural values, and leisure surroundings. Chapter 6 further disturbs the boundary between past and present and between language and material by highlighting the auspicious events associated with Kaiyuan, especially its founding legends. Nichols encourages readers to break an

obsession with the authenticity of these legends and understand their longevity, materialization, and regeneration at Kaiyuan based on *ganying* 感應 (extraordinary correlative responses), a fundamental mechanism of Chinese cosmology (169–74). Through this mechanism, myths are not only legitimate but also imbue Kaiyuan’s physical space with *ling* 靈 (numinous power or efficacy), a quality welcomed by various visitors and thus a general resource for promoting different dimensions of Kaiyuan to them. Here, two crucial processes, “branding” and “sacralization,” can respectively mark Kaiyuan as a unique temple among others and a sacred space special from everyday lifeworlds.

Ultimately, Chapter 7 returns to the perspective of monastics. Nichols again uses ideal types to describe the power struggles within Kaiyuan. On one hand, “curators” include administrative bodies typically associated with the state, visitors who are not interested in Buddhism, and business actors seeking economic profits. On the other hand, “revivalists” are monastics and their external supporters who seek to revive religious traditions in the temple. With reminders that facts are always much more complex than such a dualism, Nichols maps all Chinese temples in a continuum of their degree of curator-led “museumification” (193–95). Among them, Kaiyuan is neither a museum without any monastics on one extreme nor a monastery with a fully autonomous sangha on the other. Nevertheless, Nichols considers Kaiyuan as a rare example that succeeds in reversing the museumification tendency with the monastics’ own efforts. Under the strong-arm and strategic leadership of Abbot Daoyuan, the sangha ended the forms of commodification set by two temple management organizations under state actors, such as entrance ticket selling, and retrieved their autonomy and power over the monastery.

Throughout the whole book, continuity stands out as a crucial perspective for understanding Kaiyuan and thus numerous ordinary but probably inconspicuous temples in contemporary China, whose current

situations are usually not unprecedented in history and have crystallized the past into the present. Nichols has a strong familiarity with Buddhism in the history of India, China, and other regions to map lots of isomorphisms across time and space, exemplified by his detailed tracing of the Buddhist temples' ownership of splendid cultural properties as a long-established tradition in Chapter 5 (140–42). This approach ensures this monograph's significant academic contributions to the broader discussions of Buddhism as a living tradition. Furthermore, it makes the book suitable reading material for introductory courses and above, able to illustrate the dynamic inheritance of Buddhist institutions continuously ongoing up to the present. The mass audience interested in Chinese religions, monastic Buddhism, and even religious tourism can also easily enjoy the author's vivid language that immerses one as if in Kaiyuan Monastery.

One possible point for discussion is that frequent attendees of daily morning and evening services in Chinese Buddhist temples may find the corresponding part in the book experientially resonant but expect more contextualizations. All components of the morning service marked as “added lunar first and fifteenth” seem to be everyday routines (79). It would be better to mention some case-specific variations as well. For example, the *Bashiba fo da chanhui wen* 八十八佛大懺悔文 (*Eighty-eight Buddhas Great Repentance Text*) can be part of the evening service in some temples' traditions. The author also mentions *suitang pufo* 隨堂普佛 (the “Universal Buddha” service alongside the morning or evening services) in later discussions of patronage by lay Buddhists and worshippers during the Chinese New Year (98). However, the earlier part about daily services does not cover *suitang pufo*, leaving questions such as how it changes daily services and how often it is performed at Kaiyuan.

Moreover, some Buddhist practitioners may consider *huixiang* 迴向 (transferring merits to others) crucial for most Buddhist liturgies and everyday practices, which is mentioned but is not an analytical focus of

the author (85; 105). In fact, a serious consideration of the commonality of *huixiang* in Chinese monastic life may raise a rather interesting question: what role do sentient beings, typically like the random, occasional, and even hedonistic temple-goers at Kaiyuan, play in Buddhist monasticism? Nichols sometimes implies that an urgent task for Chinese Buddhist temples today is to restore the strict and comprehensive discipline, training, and collective cultivations within the sangha, for which ordinary temple visitors are key economic supporters without the potential to contribute to the goal of monastics to reach enlightenment (e.g., 73; 107; 214). However, as mentioned already, benefiting all beings is the core of the bodhi-sattva path in Mahāyāna Buddhism and thus underlies many practices and discourses (e.g., 65; 103; 163–64; 215). In addition, some monks attribute their reasons for ordination to an occasional, fortuitous temple visit while living a lay life (121–22). These dimensions may make Kaiyuan-like ordinary temples' reception of tourists more understandable and acceptable, even suggesting a possibility of including "external" sentient beings from the beginning in understanding the seemingly "internal" Buddhist monasticism. Of course, such attempts are impossible without this monograph as the first step in examining Buddhist monastic life in contemporary China comprehensively, which has successfully called for more attention to relevant topics and laid a solid foundation for future studies.

Notes on the Contributor

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