

Buddhism after Mao: Negotiations, Continuities, and Reinventions. Edited by Ji Zhe, Gareth Fisher, and André Laliberté. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019. viii + 355 pages. Hardcover. ISBN 9780824877347. US\$72.00.

James Madison (1751–1836), arguably expressing a belief that religion is the greater beneficiary of state-church separation, wrote that “religion and government will both exist in greater purity, the less they are mixed together.” As numerous academic studies and news reports have made clear, the status of religion in China runs counter to Madison’s views on the matter. That is, while a wide array of religious activity experienced a dramatic revival in the country starting in the late twentieth century, mere popularity did not in any sense place it beyond the secular state’s surveillance and control. It would also be hard to deny that lack of state support often limits religions’ development, and Buddhism in China is no exception to this. *Buddhism after Mao* is a masterful attempt to understand how Chinese Buddhism’s revival, amounting to its “destiny” in some believers’ eyes, has become entangled—indeed, interdependent—with the government of the post-Mao People’s Republic of China.

An outcome of the international research initiative “Buddhism after Mao: Religions, Power and Society in China since 1980,” the book consists of a thoughtful arrangement of contributions from the fields of sociology, anthropology, political science, and religious studies, covering politics, state administration of temples, philanthropic activities, religious tourism, monastic lineages, ordination, education, laynuns, temples’ spatial arrangements and restructuring, and digitization of rituals. Laudably, despite this disciplinary and topical diversity, the volume never loses sight of Buddhist institutions as active agents, and its three thematic foci—“Negotiations,” “Continuities,” and “Reinventions”—not only complement one another, but also distinguish clearly between micro and macro levels of analysis in a logical and illuminating manner. Moreover, the wide array of institutions studied implicitly answers Holmes Welch’s warning against over-generalizing variation in the character of Chinese Buddhist monasteries.¹

Part 1, “Negotiating Legitimacy: Making Buddhism with the State,” begins with an examination of how Buddhist institutions in China have negotiated between state entities and religious agents since the 1980s. While the Chinese government and Communist Party are officially atheist, the latter has in recent decades reoriented its religious policies and attitudes toward acceptance of

1 Holmes Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism, 1900–1950* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 126–128.

the revival and growth of Buddhist institutions, and André Laliberté sheds light on the reasons for this in chapter 1. On the one hand, his analysis suggests that Chinese Buddhism is just a pawn in the PRC authorities' political gambit to enhance their leverage in as many domains as possible, including the "local economy; diplomacy; internal security; and relations with Taiwan" (23). On the other hand, however, Chinese Buddhism and its clergy are beneficiaries of state-facilitated expansion—even if the CCP may, in the long run, be the biggest winner. In chapter 2, Claire Vidal uses valuable primary ethnographic material to explore the administrative system of Putuoshan, the focus of one of the best-known Buddhist pilgrimage sites in China, and analyzes how Buddhism is being revived and developed within the complex framework of the communist regime's national, provincial, municipal, and local bureaucratic layers. Vidal also offers a detailed account of how monastic communities on this sacred Buddhist mountain operate as a special tourist zone, and how this has ironically led them to deviate from their chosen path of renunciation and toward worldly practices, notably including the accumulation of wealth. In chapter 3, Susan McCarthy examines practical issues arising from Buddhist philanthropic activities, in particular their potential to cross boundaries between the religious and nonreligious spheres. She particularly focuses on the private Ren'ai Charity Foundation, which, although officially secular, is closely affiliated with Ven. Xuecheng and headquartered in Longquan Temple. McCarthy describes it as unsurprising that Ren'ai downplays Buddhist ideas while engaged in its charity work, given that PRC law "forbids proselytizing in public" (83), thus effectively limiting Buddhist philanthropic services to the collection and distribution of donations. On the other hand, Ren'ai strategically utilizes Lei Feng, a socialist "icon of Maoist self-sacrifice and devotion," to smooth the way for its charitable activities and reduce suspicions on the part of the state and other charities. In chapter 4, the last in part 1, Brian Nichols introduces the reader to three different types of Buddhist temples that have been reconstructed or restored in Mainland China since the 1980s. The first of these categories consists of those curated by government officials as heritage/tourism sites—a process often critiqued as "freezing" living religious practices. The second category comprises clergy-led revivals, whereby temples are operated out of concern for spiritual cultivation and the restoration of monastic practices. The third type is the coexistence of the former two, under a "two-track management model" (102) whereby abbots negotiate, compromise, or even battle with curators to maintain a balance between tourism and religiosity, with Kaiyuan Temple being an important case in point.

The next four essays form part 2, "Revival and Continuity: The Monastic Tradition and Beyond," and address how leading Buddhist clergy and lay

practitioners have endeavored to bridge Mao-era discontinuities by reinstating former Buddhist practices. In chapter 5, Daniela Campo introduces the history of monastic lineages and *dharma* transmission in Chinese Buddhism and explores how two important masters of the Republican era, Ven. Xuyun of the Chan lineage and Ven. Dixian of the Tiantai lineage, expanded and spread their *dharma* tradition and heirs both within Mainland China and beyond its borders. Crucially, Campo shows how these *dharma* heirs and overseas extended-lineage networks now play key roles both in the funding of temple and monastery reconstruction and in the retransmission of orthodox ritual practices back into the PRC. Next, Ester Bianchi (chapter 6) details the revival of Buddhist ordination procedures according to ostensibly “proper and correct” models and standards (152). Specifically, dual-ordination for nuns (i.e., by both *samgha*-orders) has been strictly implemented in the revival of contemporary Chinese Buddhism, even though it was nearly absent in Chinese Buddhist tradition for centuries. Moreover, as Bianchi shows, such standardizations and unifications of ordination procedures are closely related to the PRC political sphere. Chapter 7, by Ji Zhe, explores Buddhist *samgha* education in post-Mao China in relation to the revival paradigm of monastic training, which was first introduced in the Republican period through institutes of Buddhist studies. The number of cross-provincial *samgha* educational organizations is growing rapidly, and unsurprisingly, they too operate under the PRC government’s close supervision. In particular, Ji examines these Buddhist academies’ politically oriented curricula, as well as their potential impact on their monastic graduates’ religious positions. In the process, he helps the reader form a clear picture of how the contemporary Buddhist academy system has evolved and is controlled. Chapter 8, jointly written by Yoshiko Ashiwa and David Wank, offers a highly informative account of laynuns (*caigu* 菜姑, “vegetarian women”) via detailed historical and ethnographic data. From the Republican era to the present, these “vegetarian women” have played influential and respectable roles in the Minnan region of Fujian, and they received the Xiamen government’s official acknowledgement as “religious professionals” in 2012. While the tradition of laynuns inevitably faces challenges, as national religious policy increasingly favors fully ordained nuns for enrollment in Buddhist academies, several exemplary laynuns’ stories presented by Ashiwa and Wank illustrate the empowerment some have achieved through striving for their educational rights and long-term continued existence.

The three essays in *Buddhism after Mao*’s final thematic section, “Reinventing the Dharma: Buddhism in a Changing Society,” take the reader on a tour of the dynamic process whereby Buddhist structures, practices, and institutions have been mobilized in pursuit of a wide range of agendas. In chapter 9, Huang

Weishan breaks the stereotype that monastic renunciants only focus on spiritual cultivation and avoid the civil authorities and secular society in general, using the example of Ven. Huiming, abbot of the Jing'an Temple. Ven. Huiming has made extensive use of his social capital and other resources to cultivate and negotiate with Shanghai's officials on the way to fulfilling his ambition of expanding and reconstructing his temple. Huang also notes how local authorities have adopted ambiguous attitudes toward the temple's role as a "cultural" or "religious" site, particularly when it helps them to forestall dissent and maintain social order. Adopting a comparative perspective, Gareth Fisher (chapter 10) investigates the physical space of Guangji Temple and Bailin Temple, notably including their division into monastic and nonmonastic areas, with the latter hosting a wide range of lay devotees' and tourists' religious and nonreligious activities in which resident monastics seldom participate. This has the effect of creating a hierarchal boundary between monastics and devotees that is contrary to Fisher's third case: the small-scale Mingfa Buddha Hall, all of which is open to the public, and which is marked by better communication and more interaction between its founder and lay practitioners. Lastly, in chapter 11, Stefania Travagnin introduces approaches to online worship and shows how digitalized virtual spaces are emerging as new venues for and mediators of Chinese Buddhists' religious practices. Focusing on the website run by Nanputuo, the best-known monastery in Minnan, Travagnin shows how online Buddhist ritual practices, such as virtual bodhisattva offerings, online sutra chanting and copying for merit-making, and virtual worship of ancestors or eminent monks, have not only intensified the Chinese government's surveillance of religious websites and internet users but also raised issues of desensitization and disembodiment.

In short, this excellent edited volume effectively draws our attention to how state policies have played central roles in the evolution of Chinese Buddhism and its institutions in the post-Mao years. On the one hand, it remains rather difficult to foresee the PRC government's future directions in this sphere, especially amid recent intensification of state control and the imposition of overt patriotism at various Buddhist temples via flag-raising ceremonies since 2018. On the other hand, the Chinese Buddhist clergy's recent focus on reviving authentic traditional practices, even ones that passed out of use centuries ago, may yet emerge as a new front in the war that Mao's socialist regime fought against "superstition." As such, I see clear opportunities for further research on the cultural dimensions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy that goes beyond what *Buddhism after Mao* provides. This volume would also have benefited from the inclusion of more perspectives from outside Buddhist institutions: the voices of outsiders and bystanders. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, more

attention could have been paid to gender issues, especially in light of how Buddhist nuns are “utterly dependent on [the] patrilineal political hierarchy’ of the Communist party-state and its Buddhist Association.”²

Those few shortcomings aside, however, this is a great book: not only a valuable addition to the literature on the development of Han Buddhism in the post-Mao era of PRC governance, but also a worthy successor and much-needed update to the groundbreaking mid-twentieth-century work of Holmes Welch, *Buddhism under Mao*.³

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² Elise Anne DeVido, *Taiwan's Buddhist Nuns* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 7).

³ Holmes Welch, *Buddhism under Mao* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972).

