Introduction

On a Saturday morning in the summer of 2017, I left my Shanghai Fudan University residence, and cycled on a public shared bicycle, to reach a neat, modern residential neighborhood in Shanghai. I had been invited to a group practice session by Ms. Lin, to whom I had been introduced by a common acquaintance. As per the instructions that I had received on the previous day in the WeChat group that I had been added to, I went up to the sixth floor of the multi-story building. Ms. Lin welcomed me into a spacious loft. Ms. Lin is an enthusiastic Buddhist practitioner and a resourceful young woman and is one of the founding members of the community that I delve into in Chapter Two of this book. Our initial encounter was marked by *her* fascination with *my* interest in Buddhism, which prompted her to invite me to participate in a Saturday afternoon practice session. Generally, my interest in my interlocutors' practices have been, in most cases, quite passionately welcomed from their side. They were happy to share their knowledge and thoughts, and they often considered it to be a Buddhist moral act to share the Dharma, regardless of me being a researcher and not a practitioner. My positionality was easy to express to them. I am not Chinese, and I was a stranger to the life of Shanghai, Taipei, and Shenzhen. However, as discussed lengthily by Gareth Fisher, many lay Buddhists are, in fact, quite passionate proselytizers.[1] This meant that even though the communities which I visited saw me as an outsider, some of the people whom I met nevertheless tried, and some continue to this day, to convince me that their way of living Buddhism would be good for me too.

The gathering itself in that loft in 2017 appeared to be unremarkable at first glance. It lacked the pomp and extravagance typically associated with Buddhist festive occasions, and was devoid of vibrant rituals, elaborate offerings, or impassioned Dharma lectures. Nonetheless, it left a profound impression on me. What particularly piqued my curiosity about this community was their choice of practice venue—a high-rise modern apartment block, in an expensive neighborhood in East Shanghai. This prompted me to ask: why did they opt for a residential setting rather than a traditional temple?

As I delved deeper into reflecting on that first gathering and attended more of the same community's meetings that summer, I started to realize that there were other aspects that challenged my preconceived notions about the spaces and modes

[1] Gareth Fisher, *From Comrades to Bodhisattvas: Moral Dimensions of Lay Buddhist Practice in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014), p. 19.

for the practice of Buddhism in China. It made me consider the possibility that as I had encountered this community, who felt the need to build an independent house of practice in a neighborhood in eastern Shanghai, maybe there were more everyday places throughout China where Buddhism was similarly being practiced. These initial thoughts were simply, "what are the odds?" kind of reflections. Delving into the literature on Buddhism before the communist period, I learned that Shanghai was, in fact, a formative hub for the development of modern lay Buddhist modalities at the beginning of the twentieth century, as Brook Jessup had shown.[2] As I was pursuing my research, seeking other sites for fieldwork, it slowly became clear to me that the landscape of Buddhist practice in China may be far more diverse and widespread than the official sites for Buddhist practice, which one can easily find on a map. This understanding correlated with scholarship on contemporary Chinese religious life, which will be discussed throughout this book.

The scene before me was rather straightforward: a group of individuals of different ages, gathered in a modern loft located in a residential neighborhood in Shanghai. They were seated on the floor, engaged in collective chanting and meditation, all dressed in light-colored linen clothing. If this same event had taken place in a European or American city, some scholars witnessing the scene might have been inclined to associate it with a New Age practice group or a New Religious Movement. However, in the context of China, as I will delve into further, such interpretations would be overly simplified. The home practice modality of religion in China is not limited to Buddhism. Throughout the past decades, there have been various unregistered groups representing different religious sects, traditions, and denominations. These groups include Bahá'í Faith study groups, unregistered groups of the Teaching of the Orthodox Unity (*Zhengyi dao* 正一道), popular forms of Daoism, such as Yiguandao (一貫道), and Catholic and Protestant Christians of various denominations. These unregistered groups engage in religious practices, study, and community-building activities within the context of the home.[3] However, when it comes to the Buddhist religion, this particular model of unregistered home-based practice remains less explored.

Encountering the home-based Buddhist practice in Shanghai marked the beginning of my research journey into contemporary lay Buddhism in China. It

[2] James Brooks Jessup, "The Householder Elite: Buddhist Activism in Shanghai, 1920-1956," PhD diss., (University of California, 2010).

[3] Jie Kang, "Rural to Urban Protestant House Churches in China," in *Handbook on Religion in China*, ed. Stephan Feuchtwang (Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020), pp. 407–430; Marie-Eve Reny, "Informality as Resistance Among Catholics and Protestants in China," in *Handbook of Protest and Resistance in China*, ed. Teresa Wright (Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), p. 308; Sebastien Billioud, *Reclaiming the Wilderness: Contemporary Dynamics of the Yiguandao* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 3.

revealed a gap in the traditional image of Buddhism, which is typically centered around monasteries and temples. Over the years, I have delved deeper into this topic, culminating in the completion of this book. It was only later that I realized that this residential apartment gathering was just one example of how Buddhism is practiced in modern Chinese society, beyond the confines of traditional religious institutions. The facet of spatiality in lay Buddhism remained a significant element of my inquiry, later expanding into the study of cyberspace. However, contemporary lay Buddhism turned out not to be only a spatial issue, but a complex entanglement of spiritual aspirations and political considerations, as well as orthopraxical dilemmas, which activate lay practitioners. These features have fascinated me throughout this research.

Hypothesis and Research Questions

The main research question that guided my preliminary fieldwork in 2017 was: How do Chinese groups and individuals practice Buddhism under the socio-political and cultural circumstances of contemporary China? After my preliminary research period in 2017, I hypothesized that the lay Buddhist revival of the past decades exists in diverse forms outside of religious institutions, and that Buddhist practitioners employ various modalities to create practice forms that suit their particular circumstances. I further presumed that to uncover and understand these lay practices, one would need to look beyond temples and monasteries, which led me to the methodology used for this research.

Throughout the course of this project, I have been guided by several sub-questions aimed at unpacking my initial research objective. These questions helped me navigate my exploration of the main research question, and I referred to them constantly as I was analyzing the data, building my inquiries for contact with my interlocutors, and observing in the field. As I collected and interoperated the ethnographic accounts, historical accounts, and existing literature, I frequently revisited these questions. Some of the key questions that have shaped my research include: How do groups operate within the social-political framework of China under President Xi's "new era"? Are there unregistered forms of practice which operate outside the government's oversight? How does the government regulate and supervise these unregistered communities and groups? Has there been a greater intolerance of their activities in recent years compared with the past? Are these lay groups inherently political in nature? Is only the group modality possible for lay practice outside the temple, or are there other modalities?

By answering these questions during the years of my research, I learned that the Xi era presents some key changes with a wide extent of impact on lay

Buddhists. Fisher's work, for example, became a base case for comparison as it built on fieldwork from the decade before Xi's rise to power. *From Comrades to Bodhisattvas: Moral Dimensions of Lay Buddhist Practice in Contemporary China* is a study based on Chinese Buddhist devotees who frequented the courtyard of a temple in Beijing, to engage in various religious activities, including preaching and distributing Buddhist booklets and other media.[4] Several aspects of the lay Buddhist modalities that I explore in this book resonate with Fisher's findings from the early years of the twenty-first century, such as lay agency and the use of media and commodification. Nevertheless, the ways in which these elements play out today are quite different. Social media applications have become a part of Chinese people's everyday experiences. Following people's dependency on the internet, modalities of communication for practicing religions have extended in the past decade. Furthermore, while the burst of lay agency described by Fisher is still dominant in Buddhism, it is challenged in other ways than it had been in the early 2000s and 2010s, as it is more harshly and sophisticatedly censored and regulated. The commodification of religious activities, as has been argued by Adam Yuet Chau, has also become more extensive in the past two decades.[5]

The structural organization of lay groups has also been a significant area of investigation. How do they operate? Where do they worship? What methods of communication do they employ, such as online applications, newspapers, posters, and online lectures? What is the impact of modern technology on religious practices? So, another area of inquiry focuses on the various modalities of practice facilitation that I have encountered. How do these modalities differ? What factors influence the choice of a particular practice method, such as group practice, online engagement, or solitary practice at home? How does Buddhism manifest in the online realm? How do these practices adapt to government restrictions? Navigating these inquiries, I wanted to add, for example, to the scholarship on internet-based digital modalities of Buddhism. Stefania Travagnin and Huang Weishan (for example) have critically explored different facets of the use of WeChat as a mode of lay practice for Chinese Buddhists, looking both at how this space serves laypeople and the extent of agency that laypeople have in various online spaces, as well as at the role of other Buddhist agents and the State in the facilitation of these spaces.[6]

[4] Gareth Fisher, "*From Comrades to Bodhisattvas.*"

[5] Adam Yuet Chau, "The Commodification of Religion in Chinese Societies," in Modern Chinese Religion II, eds. Jan Kiely, Vincent Goossaert, and John Lagerwey (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2016), pp. 949–976; see also Yang Mayfair Mei-hui, *Re-enchanting Modernity: Ritual Economy and Society in Wenzhou* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

[6] Stefania Travagnin, "From Online Buddha Halls to Robot-Monks: New Developments in the Long-Term Interaction between Buddhism, Media, and Technology in Contemporary China," *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* 7 (2020), pp. 120–148; Francesca Tarocco, "Technologies of Salvation: (Re)

Delving into my case studies, I also aim to discuss the particularities of online modalities, while also examining The Little Red Book, a social media application that has received little attention in studies on Buddhism in China.

Furthermore, a line of inquiry is dedicated to economic practices. Do lay individuals and groups engage in business activities related to Buddhism? Adam Yuet Chao explains that religious institutions are ultimately social institutions that require maintenance. Chau delineated three possible basic business models available to religious institutions. The first is the "full subscription model." In this model, all the members of a particular community are members of the religious institution, and therefore all religious activities within the community are free to the members. The second business model can be called the "tithe model," according to which the members of a religious organization pay a percentage of their income to maintain the organization and its related expenses. The third business model can be called the "ritual service model." In this model the religious specialists provide ritual services for a fee, and their clients—individuals, households, or communities—pay for these services.[7] These three basic business models are helpful to explore the kind of financial dynamic that lay Buddhists engage in, in order to learn about their contemporary modalities of practice.

Another central aspect of my research has been the examination of materials and material culture. How do lay Buddhists utilize materials in their practice? What significance do these materials hold in the broader context of lay Buddhism? This inquiry stems first and foremost from situating this study in the framework of "lived Buddhism." The lived religion approach attempts to theorize religion in modern times by focusing on how religion is practiced.[8] More specifically, in the last two decades, more attention has been paid by scholars to examine the interaction between religion and material culture.[9] Notably, John Kieschnick has examined the historical relationship of material culture and Buddhism in China.[10] Kieschnick explains that Buddhism had altered the material world of the Chinese, introducing new sacred objects, new symbols, buildings, and ritual implements, as well as

Locating Chinese Buddhism in the Digital Age," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 18 (2017), p. 158; Weishan Huang, "WeChat Together about Buddha: The Construction of Sacred Space and Religious Community in Shanghai through Social media," *Religion and Media in Religion and Media in China: Insights and Case Studies from the Mainland, Taiwan and Hong Kong*, ed. by Stefania Travagnin (London: Routledge, 2017).

[7] Chau, "The Commodification of Religion," pp. 949–950.

[8] Kim Knibbe and Helena Kupari, "Theorizing lived religion: introduction," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 35, 2 (2020), pp. 157–176.

[9] Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer, *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), p. 4.

[10] John Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 20–21.

new ways of thinking about and interacting with these objects. Chinese Buddhist monastics and laypeople across history were in many senses "materialistic," and material culture is as much a part of religion as language, thought, and ritual. Kieschnick's research provides, I maintain, a basis for an emphasis on research into objects and their relationship with Buddhist modalities in contemporary times; my exploration of the material dimension of lay Buddhism is aimed at contributing some new empirical elements to that field of inquiry. All in all, by addressing these questions through my case studies, I aim to provide a window to understand how Buddhism is practiced, communicated, and articulated, and to shed light on some of the complexities and nuances of lay Buddhism in China.

Methodology and Research Strategy

This book utilizes qualitative, mixed methods research, combining multiple sources to study lay Buddhism in China. It draws on ethnographic data (observations and semi structured interviews), historical records, religious texts, state news outlets, official regulations, and secondary academic literature. The ethnographic accounts presented in this book were gathered during several fieldwork trips conducted between 2017 and 2023. More specifically, my working methodology is based on the approach of grounded theory, aiming to give priority to the state and development of lay Buddhism rather than aiming for a description of a setting.[11] My approach was to collect data to understand the social situation of lay Buddhists in contemporary China, and not to focus, pre-conditionally, on one aspect of the groups and individuals (for example, focusing only on belief or hierarchy). Due to explaining the process incorporated in the phenomenon, I hoped to show the discussed cases studies from different perspectives and views.

Another relevant element of the data gathering for this book is my division of the "ground" into two types: "physical ground" (or traditional ground) and "digital ground." Working on the physical ground involved collecting data through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and informal conversations. The digital ground encompassed working with various social media platforms used by the groups and individuals studied, such as Weibo, WeChat, and Xiaohongshu. Additionally, online-based archives from the PRC and ROC Buddhist organizations were also utilized. While the second type of ground for ethnography is exciting in regard to the possibilities that it sets forward, and epistemologically novel, it also presents some challenges. Importantly, digital ethnography, and more particularly

[11] Kathy Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis. (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), p. 84.

the study of religion online is a new field, and accordingly, there have been less guidance and theoretical frameworks for such research than regarding the traditional ground. Nevertheless, some sources, such as, for example, *the Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*—which is a comprehensive volume divided into topical sections, including methodological debates—did assist in forming my methodological approach to some issues.[12] Practical challenges that I encountered were, for example, ethical issues, such as what is public information and what is private? Are comments on photos public, and how would I go about asking permission to use private conversations from my interlocutors? In some cases, I aspired to stay as close as I could to what I would do on the physical ground, as with the issue of asking permission, and being transparent with my interlocutors. Concerning visual data, the case is hard to compare with the physical ground, and so I often actively consulted the advice of colleagues with more experience in this new methodology, as well as new empirical studies that presented viable options for methodological directions.

The degree of contact that I had with my interlocutors varied, both qualitatively and quantitively. With some communities, such as the one discussed in Chapter Two, I had two field trips lasting several months, and a continuous online relationship in between my physical fieldwork, in total lasting approximately five years. In other cases, such as with the communities discussed in Chapter Seven, I had an intense period of one-and-a-half months of frequent on-site research work, which was followed by a few months of online supplementing of small questions and details. Concerning other respondents with whom I spoke, I was not able to reach out to them in mediated forms later, and some communities, such as the ones discussed in Chapter Five, did not retain their structure, which I learned about through online communications. The majority of my interlocutors, both on site and online, were questioned using a semi-structured interview method. A total of 40 such interviews were conducted with lay Buddhists at the locations where I was conducting the study, as well as online. Beyond that, I have had shorter "corridor talks" with more people, who often assisted in filling in various gaps regarding small details related to the group modalities that they took part in or specific details in practice.

The incorporation of digital ethnography and sources was driven by two main factors. First, while conducting fieldwork, it became evident that a significant amount of Buddhist activity was taking place online. Therefore, exploring the digital realm became essential in order to capture the full scope of the phenomenon.[13] Second, the COVID-19 pandemic, which coincided with the writing of this book, presented challenges for physical fieldwork. I felt that I had two choices.

[12] Larissa Hjorth et al., eds. *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).

[13] Sarah Pink et al., *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2016), pp. 4–5.

One involved focusing on the disadvantages. I had planned to spend much more time in China, feeling, touching, and smelling each location once more. I also see great importance in face-to-face conversations, from which I still believe that many nuances can be gleaned. The other option was to accept this new reality that immensely affected our global community, and to see not only how I could get around it, but also what it could teach me about doing research and about my research topic. I believe that what began as a hindrance, also opened up new opportunities to delve into the digital sphere and uncover a wealth of empirical data that proved relevant to this study. Alongside the fieldwork conducted before and after the travel restrictions, these digital sources provided insights into how Buddhism outside of temples manifests itself in private, public, and online spaces. While online research provides only partial data, it is a good way to triangulate data from other sources.[14] In some cases in this book, the online and offline, and other official sources, such as religious regulations, were cross compared, helping me to solidify the conclusions of the case studies.[15]

Furthermore, this work includes an analysis of the regulatory environment and shifts in the political attitude towards Buddhism in the decades leading up to the study period and during the research. It also engages with the existing body of academic literature on religion in China, reflecting on frameworks and approaches, while shaping the conclusions and analysis of the fieldwork. In addition to considering the broader guidelines, regulations, and political contexts, this book also contextualizes the case studies and trends within their specific local circumstances. This approach allows for an exploration of the aspects of urbanism in China, environmental concerns, and the economic and material realities of contemporary Chinese society. These specific themes were not chosen but were excavated from the data from my case studies as they were emerging. Regarding the choice of participants and cases studies, I often carefully used snowball sampling as I was contacting my interlocutors and choosing sites for fieldwork.

Regarding the ethnographic accounts, it is essential to acknowledge that my interlocutors' preferences and political contexts were varied. Consequently, to respect the privacy and wishes of some participants, their names, as used in this book, are pseudonyms, with no addition of Chinese characters. I am incredibly grateful for their invaluable collaboration. Similarly, the community that I discuss

[14] Jenna Burrell, "The Fieldsite as a Network: A Strategy for Locating Ethnographic Research," in *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*, eds. Larissa Heather Hjorth et al. (New York NY: Routledge, 2017), pp. 54–55.

[15] Anne Beulieu, "Vectors for Fieldwork: Computational Thinking and New Modes of Ethnography," in *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*, eds. Larissa Heather Hjorth et al. (New York NY: Routledge, 2017), pp. 30–31.

in Chapter Two preferred a pseudonym for their mention in this book and other publications. Aside from these, various participants, communities, and groups appear in this book under their original names. All direct quotations from interlocutors and online users appearing in this book were originally in Mandarin Chinese, and the English translations are my own.

Another tool that I employed in this research is visual ethnography, which recently became more central in qualitative research toolkits.[16] This book includes a significant number of images taken during my on-site and online fieldwork. In some cases, mostly with the online images used in Chapters Four and Six, my analysis refers directly to these images, while in some cases, the images are used to indirectly support my descriptions and arguments regarding the practices, materials, and spatial settings of laypeople. I find that images can add a dimension to the understanding of lay Buddhists' lived experiences and can serve as another source of data for analysis, juxtaposed with what my interlocutors revealed. I do, however, take into account the caveats related to the subjectivity of images recorded in the field and how they can affect the conclusions drawn from the research. As with observations, this point is never fully solvable, and I did my best to compare and contrast what I visually experienced and produced (in the form of photos) with what lay participants and other agents online and on the ground explained. Another important point pertaining to this method was the issue of consent concerning images containing people, which I took very seriously when selecting the images to use in this book.

In terms of Chinese characters and transliteration, it is worth mentioning the specific considerations that arise from this geographical division. Although the majority of the work focuses on Chinese terms and data from mainland China, there are instances where texts, names, and terms from the Republic of China (*Zhonghua minguo* 中華民, hereafter ROC or Taiwan) necessitate the use of traditional characters. Therefore, for the sake of consistency, I have chosen to employ traditional characters throughout the entirety of the work. Regarding transliteration, I predominantly employ the pinyin romanization system for Chinese terms and translations, following the established convention in the academic field, and for personal convenience. However, I make an exception when referring to the names of institutions and teachers in Taiwan, as their transliteration is widely recognized in the Wade–Giles writing method.

16 Sara Pink, *Doing visual ethnography* (Thousand Oaks, SAGE, 2020), p. 18; see also Lisa-Jo K. Van Den Scott, "Visual Methods in Ethnography," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 47, 6 (2018), pp. 719–728.