Universiteit Leiden
The Netherlands

Buddhism, an urban village and cultural soft power: an ethnography of Buddhist practitioners in Wutong
Shmushko, K.

Buddhism, an Urban Village and Cultural Soft Power: An Ethnography of Buddhist Practitioners in Wutong

Kai Shmushko

Tel Aviv University School of Historical Studies, Israel; Leiden University – Institute of Area Studies (LIAS), Netherlands

ABSTRACT   The article presents an ethnography of Buddhist practice groups in Wutong village, an urban village in the Shenzhen metropolis area, relating to the village's predicament through the 1990s and until 2019. It discusses the relationship between two intertwined forms of soft power employed by the Chinese regime: 1) The push for cultural consumption within the framework of the re-development of urban villages. 2) The PRC's re-definition of Buddhism as a culture instead of a religion. The author examines different lay Buddhist actors in the village, which operate within the current restrictive government policy towards religious groups. The ethnography of Wutong shows the non-dichotomic dynamic of suppression and support articulated by the state towards Buddhism's cultural and religious consumption. It focuses on the dynamic between state control and people's agency over their spiritual and religious realities, especially on the urban fringes. The article suggests that the urban art village can be understood as a sphere where lay Buddhists subvert state regulation by creating alternative Buddhist spaces for lay practice, in the form of cultural commodities. However, the article addresses the liminality of such urban spaces, which, aside from opportunities for religious entrepreneurship, also creates a state of precariousness for urban village inhabitants, including Buddhist practitioners.

KEYWORDS   Urbanization, Buddhism, religion, culture, soft power, religion and the state, Chinese religion

Introduction

During Chinese New Year (*nongli xinnian* 农历新年) 2019, the urban village Wutong (梧桐)   [1] was relatively quiet. Chinese New Year is a time for leisure and rest, family, and gatherings. Therefore, similar to the rest of the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC or China) during holiday seasons, most small businesses, cafés, and shops in the village were closed. During the holiday days in Wutong, not many tourists came to hike up the Wutong mountain (*Wutong shan* 梧桐山) or enjoy what the small shops and studios in the village offer, as is the case in the

rest of the year. I took this opportunity for meetings with "temporal locals"—people whose home regions (*jiaxiang* 家乡) are various places in China but who live in the village, making its social fabric one of "fixed temporality" (Kochan 2015). Despite the relative stillness that characterized Wutong during these weeks, walking the village's streets entailed witnessing various cultural and religious scenarios: a nun and her protégés walking in the afternoon sun, a Chan Buddhist Abbot coming down from the neighboring Hongfa temple (*Hongfa si* 弘法寺) to visit his disciples in their tea house, and a gathering of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners with their master in a quiet garden space. The article will explore these short descriptions in more detail, stressing that a Buddhist ethnography of an urban village can provide insight to the state's use of soft power through culture, and the predicament of lay Buddhism in the PRC.

Religion and Spirituality in Wutong Urban Village

Wutong village is an urban area located in Luohu district (罗湖区), one of eight "urban villages" (*chengzhongcun* 城中村) in the Wutong mountain scenic area.[1] Aside from the quiet streets and rural mentality, Wutong is a place of attraction for visitors and travelers. Firstly, it resides under the Wutong mountain, which is considered Shenzhen's 'green lung' and attracts hikers and travelers from neighboring areas to come for weekend trips.[2] The water streams coming down from the Wutong mountain waterfall and the mountain's scenic view are two inspiring elements in Chinese art and philosophy, appreciated by visitors and residents of the area. These elements protect the land from urban development and create an appeal that attracts artists and spiritual practitioners seeking a relaxed environment and living close to nature (Malcolm 2018). Indeed, in recent years, the village has become known as an "artist village" (*Wutong shan yishu xiaozhen* 梧桐山艺术小镇). The village has roughly fifteen thousand inhabitants—of them, many are artists who live on narrow lanes and alleys in traditional-style houses. The village, from an initial point of view, seems to go against all stereotypes about the modernity of Chinese living that characterize Shenzhen.

[2]

The mountain, water, quiet nature, and the described special atmosphere of the village, combined with low-rent housing options have drawn the attention of many artists and independent workers to the village in the past decade. Many residents describe the village as a getaway from the fast pace of city life in Shenzhen or elsewhere in China. Mr. Liu (age 48), who owns a tea house, conveyed that he "prefers to raise his daughter in slow pace" by the river.[3] His tea house looks out on the river which runs through the village, where his daughter was playing while we were having tea on the terrace. He had quit his job and left the city a few years ago to follow the dream "to make tea for people and live a more spiritual life."

[3]

According to Annie Malcolm, unlike Dafen Oil Painting Village (*dafen cun* 大芬村), another urban village in Luohu district, whose booming industry was born out of copying Western art, the art in Wutong is more inward, looking at Chinese philosophical and aesthetical traditions. Accordingly, people in Wutong mix Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian forms of thought (2018). My field notes and interviews confirm these impressions. Wutong is a temporal home for Buddhist cultural production of sorts, yet not exclusively. It is a fertile space for various religious and traditional practices. Walking the streets in the mornings, I also encountered

[4]

---

1   For a detailed description of the phenomenon of "urban villages," see below.
2   China.org.cn (2021): "Thriving ecology an integral part of Luohu's development plans." September 24, 2021. Last accessed October 24, 2021. http://www.china.org.cn/china/2021-09/24/content_77773791.htm.
3   To protect the anonymity of my interlocuters, all names used in this article are pseudo-names.

Daoist dancers with their teacher and a group of Hakka traditional martial art (*Kejia gongfu* 客家功夫) practitioners displaying their practice for long hours, circling the village's streets, wearing dragon costumes, and combining fireworks in their act.[4] The fireworks, for me, were one of the distinct characteristics of Wutong being a village. The traditional practice of fireworks (*fangbianpao* 放鞭炮) used to be practiced widely across China, especially on festivals and special traditional and religious occasions. However, in the current political discourse, like other traditional practices, it is considered superstitious, messy, and polluting and therefore banned in most urban centers in China.[5] In Wutong, fireworks were still lighted in the holiday days of 2019, filling the streets with smoke and red paper shreds.

Despite these descriptions, which more aptly fit a typical depiction of rural China, getting to Wutong village entails only a twenty-minute bus ride from the center of Shenzhen. Stepping onto the dirt road which leads from the bus station to the village, I barely began my route to my hosts before being welcomed by Ms. Dong (age 45). She did not know me but nonetheless approached to see who I was looking for. I told her the name of the family, and she escorted me through the alleys of the village to my hosts. During our walk Ms. Dong shared her life philosophy and shortly told me about her trajectory related to the village. When we parted, Ms. Dong could not give me her WeChat contact because she had no phone, wallet, or computer. When she left Shanghai, her hometown, a few years ago, she was determined to "get by without material things, with only the clothes on my back."[6] When she heard I would be staying there for a few weeks, she said she would find me if she wanted to contact me. Indeed, a few days later, we met while I was visiting a nun's Buddhist center in the village. Seeing me for the second time a few days later, she said that this proves we do not need technology and that our meeting was destined (*yuanfen* 缘分).

[5]

In this article, I will argue that Wutong, as a liminal space (Kochan 2015), is not only a place where old forms of art are revitalized but also one where religion, supervised and suppressed in the present-day PRC, finds new formulated modes of expression. This article focuses on different Buddhist traditions; some have gone through a revival in the past decades, and their forms of manifestation are visible among lay practitioners in Wutong urban village. During research, several key questions guided me. What does 'doing' Buddhism look like in the setting of an urban village? Are there particular limitations on Buddhist practice there? Are these limitations similar in different Buddhist traditions? Or alternately, is the state less involved in religious practice in these liminal spaces?

[6]

In the following paragraphs, I will contextualize Wutong in the trajectory of Shenzhen and the re-development paradigm. I will focus on the project of art villages and suggest that this form of re-development (*chongjian* 重建) is an act of cultural soft power employed to 'solve' the problem of some urban villages. Next, I will explore the state of the discourse regarding Buddhism in the political sphere of the Deng Xiaoping (邓小平)and Xi Jinping (习近平) eras. The following sections will describe the ethnography of several Buddhist practitioner groups

[7]

---

4   The rich religious and spiritual environment is diverse. While this article focuses on the Buddhist people, teachers, and groups in Wutong, in my fieldwork, I encountered other religious and spiritual traditions, sometimes also with a degree of hybridity.

5   Recently, some municipalities in North China have begun considering another ban on the practice of burning paper money for the ghosts of ancestors: Asia News (2021): "Qingming Festival: Ban on Burning Ghost Money Because of Pollution concerns." March 26, 2021. Last accessed October 21, 2021. http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Qingming-festival:-ban-on-burning-ghost-money-because-of-pollution-concerns-52716.html.

6   Exchanging one's WeChat ID is a common practice when meeting someone intending to keep in touch, even if not on a very personal level, similar to exchanging a business card.

based in Wutong. I argue that Wutong as a case study is an important example, representing an in-between place where Buddhist activities take place on the edge of urban society. Furthermore, through Wutong I will show that Buddhism as articulated in contemporary society is intertwined with cultural consumption. This reality, I suggest, is connected to the state's reframing of religion (*zongjiao* 宗教), and the striving to mould it into Chinese [material] culture (*zhongguo wenhua* 中国文化). Overall, the research explores two lenses: the urban redevelopment lens and the control and discourse on religion lens. By so doing it sheds light on the predicament of lay Buddhist groups and offers a glimpse of the material realities of urban development in twenty-first-century Shenzhen.[7]

Shenzhen's Urban Villages Redevelopment

The rapid urbanization of China since the mid-1980s has led to the development of a new [8] spatial category, the urban village or village-in-the-city, which describes rural villages that have been absorbed by urban spatial or administrative growth (Kochan 2015). Urban villages are, in fact, informal urban developments. In Shenzhen, these are indigenous villages, which existed before the massive urbanization process and continued to be constructed independently from the state's regulatory planning framework. They are typified and recognized by their appearance—dense clusters of poor-quality buildings (containing housing, factories, and commercial units) and a degraded environment. Since their development, they have served as low-cost housing for migrant labor. They are spread across the city, with some occupying high land value sites in central locations, and are estimated to house half of Shenzhen's population (O'Donnell 2017). Urban villages have an enormous amount of regional variation; one thing that is common among them is that they are home to a fringe population of city life and that they have increasingly been seen as informal, transitional, and flexible spaces (Wang and Wu 2009; Liu et al. 2010; Wu, Zhang, and Webster 2013).

Shenzhen has evolved from an agricultural and fishing-based region of 300,000 inhabitants [9] to a 'factory of the world', and subsequently into a high-tech global metropolis with 20 million residents. In 1979, as part of Deng Xiaoping's "Opening and Reform" (*Gaige kaifang* 改革开放), the village and the area were made a special economic zone (SEZs, *jingji tequ* 经济特区). Shenzhen was the first place where people could "jump into the sea of private markets" (*xiahai* 下海) and experiment with capitalism during the reform years of the 1980s (Fan, Whitehead, and Whitehead 2004). China's first special economic zone offered tax benefits and preferential treatment to foreign investment, which encouraged a rapid growth rate. Shenzhen's growth had become widely known, establishing its name as an innovation hub and global example for fast urban growth.

The urban villages of Shenzhen are a by-product of this trajectory, and while they have [10] played a crucial part in the city's rise (Wang 2020), they have been regarded throughout the decades as a problem. Some scholars and policymakers have regarded urban villages as "diseases" (*guji* 痼疾), or think of these spaces as a corner of the city (*chengshi jiaoluo* 城市角落) or chaotic slums (*zanluan cha de lei pinminku* 脏乱差的类贫民窟) (Kochan 2015; Zhan 2017).

Since this phenomenon began, local governments have generally turned a blind eye to urban [11] villages' development or have retroactively authorized them (Wang and Wu 2009), implicitly

---

7   The research is based on fieldwork, including participant observation and interviews conducted in Wutong Village Luohu district, Shenzhen, The People's Republic of China, in 2019. All names of practitioners and teachers, whether monastic or lay, are pseudo-names.

acknowledging their own inability to produce adequate housing for the migrant population and the centrality of urban villages to urban development (*Chengshi fazhan* 城市发展) (Liu et al. 2010). In the past decade, various solutions have been proposed to re-configure urban villages in various regions of China. This process entails various and changing policies which differentiate between local governments and projects aimed to solve some of the societal problems that arise in this these urban spaces. Within the Shenzhen area, different villages are going through two main forms of change: large-scale demolition (*Da guimo chaichu* 大规模拆除) or micro-renewal (*Wei gengxin* 微更新). The past decade has seen the city waging large-scale gentrification campaigns through land appropriation and the demolition of old neighborhoods, resulting in the financialization of the urban property market (Zhan 2021).

Around these forms of change, debates have taken place concerning cultural heritage and historic preservation which are connected to renewal approaches (O'Donnell 2017). Since 2018, however, a new gentrification scheme under the rubric "comprehensive improvement" (*zonghe zhengzhi* 综合整治) has been introduced in Shenzhen, in which the rehabilitation and formalization of informal housing arrangements in urban villages, instead of sweeping demolition, have become the focus (Zhan 2021).[8] Such an attempt at gentrification took place around the time of my fieldwork in Wutong. The village was part of reconfiguring a few urban villages into "art villages." This was a process that took place with the support of the local government. However, it had mostly materialized through families and individuals actively settling in the village, creating a particular social, cultural, and commercial environment. [12]

While the spatial, economic, and societal attributes of Shenzhen's urban villages have been explored in the literature mentioned above in this section (though not exclusively), the religious sphere in these spaces was less explored. Major Chinese cities are, in fact, vibrant, prominent locations which reshape the modern religious sphere (Vermander, Hingley, and Zhang 2018, 4). Therefore, more attention should be paid to the developments Buddhist actors go through in urban villages. Notable is Fan, Whitehead and Whitehead's study, which points out that Shenzhen presents a compelling site for examining the impact of social change and religious awareness (Fan, Whitehead, and Whitehead 2004, 84). Their impressions of religious revitalizations still echo the living realities of the Shenzhen area. However, the particularities of religious life in China have transformed since their study, conducted two decades ago, and so has the religious landscape of Shenzhen. [13]

Soft Power

More recently, roughly in the past decade, Beijing has declared a push for soft power. In politics, soft power is the ability to co-opt rather than coerce (contrasted to hard power). Using soft power entails shaping the preferences of others (a public or individuals) through appeal and attraction. Moreover, a defining feature of soft power is that it is non-coercive; the currency of soft power includes culture, political values, and foreign policies. In the Chinese context, soft power aims to make the country prominent in the public eye and attractive as a nation (Lai 2012). While this is largely acknowledged in foreign relations, this process is also aimed inwardly, namely at Chinese citizens and how they perceive their country. [14]

Initially, the Chinese state used soft power in the form of large-scale industrial production and political force. Gradually, soft power is also being wielded through culture and values. [15]

---

8   "The Plan of Comprehensive Improvement in Shenzhen's Urban Villages, 2019–2025" made the new gentrification scheme official.

Recently, culture (*wenhua* 文化) has also become an important policy instrument, constituting an integral part of municipal governments' "landscape beautification" (*Jinguanmeihua* 景观美化), urban development, and regeneration programs (Wang 2012; Zhong 2009). In Shenzhen, for instance, cultural development is seen as a strategy to revitalize the "three olds": old industrial sites, old villages, and old towns.[9] In January 2003, the Shenzhen Municipal Government introduced the initiative "Build the City on Culture." To nurture a "cultural economy" (*Wenhua jingji* 文化经济), the Shenzhen Municipal Government has designated the cultural industry to be the fourth pillar of industry, after high-technology, finance, and logistics (Li, Hungha, and jun 2014).

The initiative to transform some of Shenzhen's urban villages into art villages can also be viewed through the lens of cultural soft power. The Art Village is an area for cultural production and consumption and a resident location for many of the artists active in it. The designation of Art Villages sometimes involves building structures like museums, art villas, and theaters, all adding up to the transformation of the public space into a recognizable site of the creative industry. In Wutong, unused warehouse spaces, abandoned after decades of iron and steel production, have been converted into artist studios. These various branding strategies aim to draw domestic tourism and encourage the consumption of art objects and leisure goods. The government designated Wutong as a creative industry site to produce original art in 2011; however, according to Malcolm (2018), it does not actively fill the spaces with programs or exhibitions. Motivated to enjoy the inspiring landscape and low-cost housing, many artists moved to the village. The government began utilizing that trend to fit within the national soft-power agenda (Malcolm 2018). [16]

While Wutong is an alternative to fast-paced city life, where people wish to live a quieter and more artistic or spiritual life, it maintains Shenzhen's innovative and entrepreneurial spirit. Along the streets of Wutong are various artist spaces, galleries, and many small businesses, such as organic produce, hand-made textile, pottery, traditional silk garments, and other artistic objects. Some of my research interlocutors have moved to Wutong, quitting jobs and finding alternative ways to make a living, aside from their different aspirations, which will be discussed further.[10] [17]

Buddhism Under Deng and Xi

In the past decade, Buddhism had been harnessed, directed, and re-defined within the Chinese cultural and political sphere. As a vast conglomerate of traditions, beliefs, material manifestations, and sects, since its arrival in China Buddhism has had an immense impact on culture in its broad sense. Moreover, scholars point out an acceleration of soft power employed on Buddhist actors and institutions to regulate and control religion's influence in the country. Since 1949, the PRC has been ruled by the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP), a political party with an atheist ideology that forbids its members from believing in a religion and predicts religion's demise. The CCP has recognized five religions in the PRC since its found- [18]

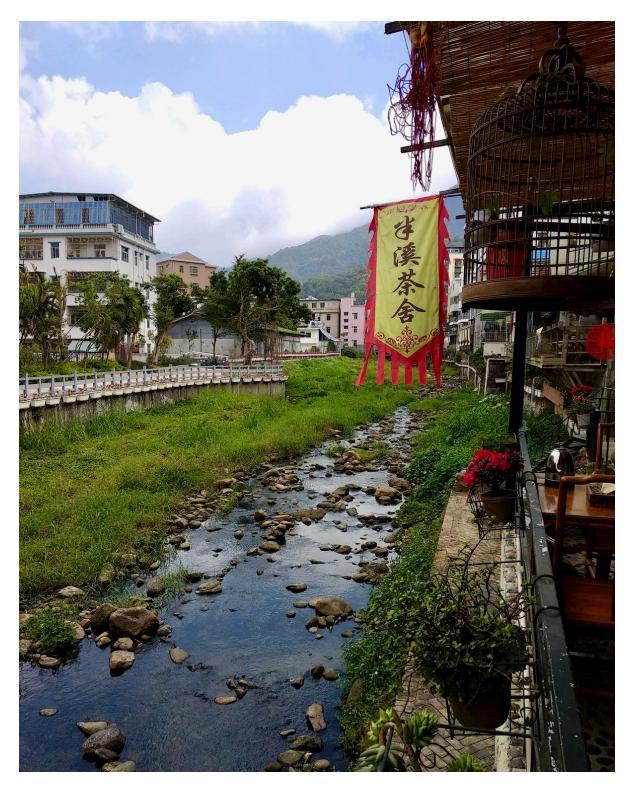
9   People's Government of Shenzhen Municipality (2008): *Shezhenshi Renmin Zhenfu guanyu yingfa Shenzhenshi guli sanjiu gaizao jianshe wenhua chanye yuanqu(jidi) ruogan chuosi(shixing) de tongzhi* [The measures of Shenzhen on encouraging reconstruction of "three olds" e old industrial zones, old villages and old urban areas and constructing cultural industrial park (base)(for trial implementation)]. Last accessed une 01, 2022. http://www.szlgnews.com/zfzx/content/2009-03/02/content_3608602.htm.

10 The term (*xiahai* 下海), mentioned regarding Shenzhen, is also relevant to Wutong, for it is also used to leave a secure job.

Figure 1   Wutong village streets.

Figure 2   View of Wutong mountain from a tea house in the village.

Figure 3 Hakka traditional martial art.

ing, Buddhism among them, and the constitution protects freedom of practice. Nevertheless, various limitations, attacks, and prohibitions of religious practices have been implemented by the state throughout the years, even towards these protected religions. Under Mao Zedong, the PRC experienced several decades in which almost all religious forms of expression were eliminated (Welch 1969, 130–31). Following the end of the Cultural Revolution, Buddhist institutions began a slow renewal process (Fisher 2020, 38). As mentioned earlier, Deng Xiaoping used robust social and financial reforms to initiate extraordinary changes in China. From 1978 onwards, religion began a new revival stage (*fuxing* 复兴). In the early 1980s, different laws were promulgated that softened the rigid religious policy of the Cultural Revolution, allowing religious communities to resurface and flourish (Chau 2011, 1–4). Buddhism began to recover and gain clout in society, exhibited through different manifestations of modern religious culture (Goossaert and Palmer 2012, 24).

However, in sharp disparity to Deng Xiaoping's relative tolerance of religion, Xi Jinping's recent policies signal a significant regression of religious freedom (Leung 2018). Under his rule, we witness different measures to reinforce new limitations and restrictions on religious activities. Furthermore, during the Xi era, essential documents have been issued to control and monitor religion.[11] These documents offer insights into how lawmakers see religion and what aspects of religious life they consider essential (DuBois 2017, 92–97). They show a significant change in policy and religious enforcement, along with reported crackdowns, surveillance, and police checks on official and underground religious organizations. As a result, any activity in unregistered places and with unregistered staff might be subject to penalties. Furthermore, under the justification of national security[12] of Xi's administration, the Chinese government is imposing tighter control on religious groups. As of 2020, new administrative measures for Chinese religious groups are in place. Every aspect of the life of religious communities, from formation and gatherings to annual and daily projects, is subject to approval by the government's religious affairs department (Leung 2018, 377).

[19]

Soft Power Through Buddhism

Xi Jinping's conduct towards religion contains harsh restrictions, but when it comes to Buddhism, the strategy is not only attacking and prohibiting religion directly. Contemporary Buddhism is used as an element of soft power by the state in internal affairs and as a cultural resource for external politics (Ji 2012). The CCP had not opposed the expansion of Buddhism and even formed what Laliberté calls a "passive form of support" to control the influence of Buddhism and use it for the state's objectives (2016). The CCP's current attitude not only uses religion for its means and agenda but is also trying to situate Buddhism in a more strategic place in terms of its role in society (Shmushko 2022, 19).

[20]

One example of the state's uses of religion is Xi Jinping's ongoing emphasis on framing Buddhism as a part of the cultural heritage of Chinese people. The CCP now considers Buddhism as a core of Chinese civilization (Xi 2014). The party's current line is moulding Buddhism in Chinese society into cultural activities and expressions. Influenced by this approach, prominent Buddhist clerics propagated forms of Buddhist cultural activities to show people appropriate

[21]

---

11   For example: "revised religious regulations law" (*xiuding zongjiao shiwu tiaoli* 修订宗教事务条例).

12   For example: "The Blue Paper on National Security: a report on national security 2014" (*zhongguo guojia anquan yanjiu baogao* 中国国家安全研究报告 Bluebook of national security). According to this document, security in religious matters should be included in ideological security, which comes under national security.

ways to combine belief in Buddhism with loyalty to the CCP. Synchronizing with the state, they have shifted from broadcasting "Buddhism as religion" (i.e., dharma talks, chanting) to "Buddhism as culture" (Ashiwa and Wank 2020).[13]

In recent years, several arguments have been made by Xi Jinping regarding Buddhism being a tradition (*wenhua* 文化), not a religion (DuBois 2018). In his speeches, he expresses a will to blend religion into culture: "[…] we must continue to walk the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics; actively practice the core values of socialism, promote Chinese culture, strive to fuse the religious teachings and Chinese culture" (Xi 2016)[14]. We also see the Buddhist Association China (BAC) emphasizing three discursive forms of Buddhism in its promotion. One of them is "Buddhist culture." This refers to Chinese Buddhist-inspired values and practices that people can pursue as lifestyles and hobbies without questioning beliefs or understanding Buddhist teachings (Ashiwa 2020, 6).   [22]

This treatment of Buddhism can be seen as part of a broader discourse regarding contemporary globalized societies. Religion is harnessed as a cultural resource or as "symbolic capital" in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu (1984). However, such resource deployment varies among different nation states and social groups. In China, not only has culture become an element of the entrepreneurial outlook of the state, consumer citizenship and leisure culture have become officially promoted. This affects and encourages a new social section of urban consumers (Pun 2003). This is what Elisabeth Perry refers to as the "cultural governance of China," applied when the state deploys symbolic resources and power as an instrument of political authority. Accordingly, in post-reform China traditional Chinese cultures are integral to a repository of symbolic resources. A sort of cultural governance is realized by mobilizing cultural nationalism and emotional experiences or controlling meanings and discourses communicable to and among the public (2013). This method also employs religious traditions, most prominently Buddhism (Qian 2019).   [23]

I argue that this attitude of the CCP impacts lay practitioners of Buddhist traditions. The revival of Buddhism as a religion in contemporary China is materialized by the reconstruction of the monastic tradition and the reorganization of lay Buddhists. However, besides this institutional revival, there is also a re-flourishing of Buddhist symbols in the enlarged and diversified secular cultural and social spaces of the reform era. These include areas such as literature, art, bodily and spiritual practice, the human sciences, tourism, and even political mobilization. Modern Chinese people no longer limit their religious activities to temples, and often aim for a more extensive practice than visits in the temple. Moreover, the temple-centered model of Buddhist practice is to many degrees restricted by the government (Ji and Jia 2018, 27). In this context, lay Buddhist activities and communities are emerging throughout China. As the state outspokenly supports this kind of Buddhism, laypeople adopt that framework to engage in rituals and practices within a setting which, to the outside, emphasizes culture, consumption, leisure, etc. (Shmushko 2022, 115). This phenomenon is not unique to urban villages, but I suggest that the wide scope of it is visible in Wutong. In Wutong, the frequent appearance of such individuals and groups is intertwined with the transformation of the urban village to an artist village and the support of the local government in that process. In other words, Buddhist culture is supported by the state in its attempt to make Wutong a cultural, art tourism and leisure destination. The next sections of the article will discuss selected cases   [24]

---

13   The largest is the Buddhist channel of *Fenghuang wang*, a private media company. The channel features global coverage of Chinese Buddhist temples and events, articles on "Buddhism as culture" (i.e., architecture, music, tea ceremony), and has made clerics into Buddhist media stars (Ashiwa 2020).

14   All translations by the author unless indicated otherwise.

from the Wutong Buddhist sphere and how various Buddhist groups, and individuals play a role in the dynamic presented here so far.

Ms. Li's Fermented Lemons and Tibetan Buddhism

Ms. Li (age 56) resides in one of the first houses close to the entrance of the village. Apart from a place of residence, Ms. Li uses her courtyard as a store and a tea house where she offers a special homemade recipe of fermented lemons and vinegar drink (*ningmengcu zhi* 柠檬醋汁). On my first visit there, she took the time to show me around in the back room, where she keeps dozens of big jars of the drink on shelves, explaining to me the health benefits of the drink. On one of the walls between the shelves there hung a rolled Thangka (*tangka* 唐卡)[15] of Guru Rinpoche (Sk. Padmasambhava Ch. *lianhuasheng* 莲花生), the perceived founder of the Tibetan Buddhist lineage, which is the foundation for Ms. Li's Buddhist practice. Next to that was a photo of another renounced monk, the teacher of Ms. Li's teacher.

[25]

After a few days of passing by her courtyard, which is decorated with Tibetan Buddhist prayer flags, I learned it has another function, apart from serving as a drinks store. On a weekly basis, Ms. Li, her teacher master Qiuye (*qiuye shangshi* 秋耶上师), and his other disciples meet in the courtyard for study sessions, conversations, chanting, and meditation. The first time I was present at one of these meetings, master Qiuya arrived together with a group of eight disciples, who all came back from a New Year retreat (*biguan* 闭关) taking place in the Master's home.[16] On their arrival, Ms. Li cleared her place to let master Qiuye sit down at the head of the tea table. Master Qiuye is trained in the Nyingma lineage. He is originally from the Tibetan areas of Qinghai province but spends part of the year in Wutong, teaching his predominantly Shenzhen followers.[17]

[26]

This grassroots practice group, active in Wutong, is connected to a broader trajectory; the past thirty years have witnessed an upsurge of interest in Tibetan Buddhism among Han Chinese. In an astonishing pace, Chinese people turn to Tibetan masters, referred to as Lamas (Shangshi 上师, Tib. *bla ma*), for guidance in their practice, and come to Tibetan Buddhist institutions or communities for practice, Buddhist festivals, and initiations (Bianchi 2017; 2018; Jones 2011; Caple 2020; Shmushko 2022). This process began what is known as the Tibetan Buddhism Revival among Han Chinese parallel to the Chinese economic reforms discussed earlier.[18] By the 1990s, Buddhist practices in the Tibetan areas of Qinghai and Sichuan had become widespread, and Tibetan-language books, prayer manuals, music, and guidance videos had appeared in bookstores across these regions (Terrone 2012, 107).[19] Buddhist monasteries

[27]

---

15   Thangkas are scroll paintings used for meditation.

16   From my study on Nyingma Lay practitioners in other fieldwork (conducted in Shanghai and Shenzhen in 2017 and 2018), the private day-to-day practice of Nyingmapa followers contain activities such as chanting (fanbai 梵呗), doing prostrations (*guibai* 跪拜), meditating（*dazuo* 打坐）, and reading scripture (*nianfo* 念佛), which take place in their own private homes. However, some practices take place in a group form, or with guidance, e.g., extensive devotional retreats (*biguan* 闭关) and doctrine classes and pilgrimage (*xingjiao* 行脚).

17   Here I use the term "laypeople" broadly, referring to individuals who are actively devoted to Buddhist traditions but are not nuns or monks (*zaijia xiuxing* 在家修行). However, throughout this article I draw on Fisher's distinction, referring to the laypeople included in this study as "practitioners," in recognition of the fact that laypersons have committed their lives to mastering the teachings of the Buddha (Fisher 2020, 36).

18   The reforms began in 1978 and continued throughout the 1990s. Although Deng Xiaoping died in 1997, the reforms continued to be carried out by his successors, roughly until 2005.

19   These Chinese regions are parts of Kham and Amdo, two traditional regions of Tibet over which the Communist state assumed official control in 1958.

in many Tibetan areas have reopened their halls to monastic enrolment, public worship, and religious teachings and ceremonies (i.e., after being closed or destroyed during the Cultural Revolution [1966-1976]). Throughout this revival, the Chinese regime aggressively acted against the revival and continuity of monastic life and culture in the Greater Tibet areas (Central Tibet, Amdo, and Kham), trying to minimize the political strength of Buddhism [Cabezón (2008); Powers (2016); Oostveen (2020)). The restrictions in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (hereafter TAR) slowed but did not stop its revival there.

Tibetan monastics can provide a source of direct spiritual guidance where otherwise Han Chinese would have none (Caple 2020, 54; Yü 2012). Most Han Chinese living outside of ethnically Tibetan areas do not have opportunities to engage in Tibetan-based practices in temple settings, with rare exceptions, such as the Lama Temple (*Yong he gong* 雍和宫) in Beijing. Therefore, these practices often occur instead in private homes or office spaces (Fisher 2020, 51; Shmushko 2021, 2022). Master Qiuye and his group of followers are therefore part of a growing phenomenon related to the popularity of Tibetan Buddhism among Han Chinese. [28]

However, this phenomenon has a political aspect. As explained in the previous section, all religious traditions in the People's Republic of China today are subjected to a series of restrictions, including the limitation of religious activity to officially registered "religious sites" (*Zongjiao huodong changsuo* 宗教活动场所) and the ban on religious teachers from outside of China.[20] The activity of Buddhist lay groups is therefore ambiguous, and manifests what Yang Fenggang (2006) considers the "grey market" of contemporary Chinese religion.[21] Nevertheless, as I encountered in my fieldwork in Wutong and other cities in China, groups of devotees practice their religion in many visible, out-in-the-open ways (Shmushko 2021, 2022). [29]

In the meeting at Ms. Li's garden, among other themes the practitioners discussed the retreat they had just done and shared their experiences. After a round of tea made by Master Qiuye, a few more people arrived at the courtyard; some were residents of Wutong, some arrived from other parts of Shenzhen. Among the guests in the courtyard was a nun who lives in the village and was intrigued by my interest in Buddhism. After the conversation was over, she invited me to come to see her house the next day, where she also operates a Buddhist center. Before leaving that meeting, I asked the nun for the address, said goodbye to the group, scanned the QR code taped on the table, and paid for the lemon drink.[22] The courtyard of Ms. Li was after all, a shop for fermented lemon drinks. [30]

I argue that this is a form of Buddhist ritual economy (a concept I will explore in the next section) motivated by the atmosphere Wutong village offers, combined with the spiritual need to conduct worship and practice in a group-based model. Moreover, this can be viewed not only as a micro-case of the revival of Tibetan Buddhism, but also for its relationship with merit economy. This group is a part of a larger phenomenon of urban Han Chinese who practice Tibetan Buddhism, using creative forms of business entrepreneurship to form urban communities outside institutional Buddhism (Shmushko 2021, 2022). [31]

---

20   Although Tibetan teachers are not technically from outside China, the state is uncomfortable with their attempt to gain disciples among Han Chinese.

21   Yang's socio-economic theory divides China's contemporary religious market to black, red, and grey zones. Accordingly, the red marks permitted organizations, activities, and believers. The Black marks illegal organizations, activities, and believers, and the grey marks religious-spiritual organizations, activities, and practitioners with an ambiguous legal status—namely, between legal and illegal (Yang 2006, 100–106).

22   A standard paying system available throughout China is WeChat pay. A wallet is connected to a social media application called WeChat. It is common in institutionalized establishments and systems and small entrepreneurship projects or small-scale business owners.
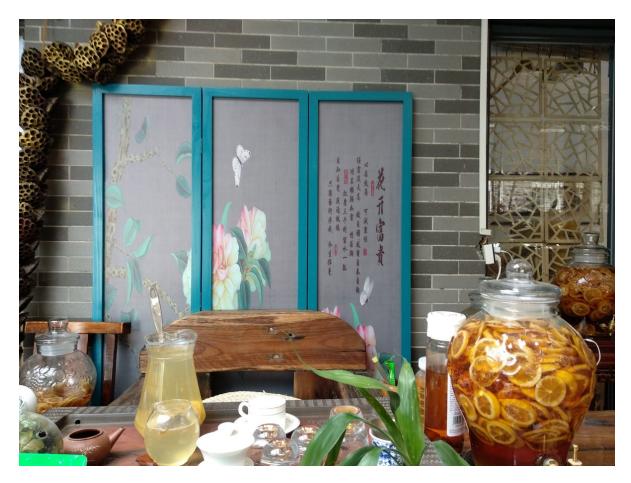
Figure 4   Ms. Li's fermented lemons garden.

Figure 5

Buddhism and Material Culture

To suggest that a lemon juice store owned by a Buddhist lay follower is part of the revitaliza-   [32]
tion of an ancient Buddhist tradition, it is crucial to briefly present the dynamics of material
exchange in Buddhism. According to Kieschnick, Buddhism attacked the material world ex-
tensively (2003, 2). Nevertheless, Chinese material culture has been impacted by Buddhism
immensely. With Buddhism's arrival and assimilation on Chinese soil came objects, ideas,
and behavior associated with objects. This array of materiality has continued to change and
evolve, responding to the demands of a constantly changing society (Kieschnick 2003, 3).
Tibetan Buddhism, its practice and trajectory in contemporary China, consist of a dynamic
relationship between materiality and spirituality. Tibetans and Han practitioners of Tibetan
Buddhism aspire to achieve spiritual progress, but also material blessing through esoteric
practices (Dodin 2002; *Buddhism Between Tibet and China* 2009).

Esoteric practices are central to Nyingma Buddhism, and they offer spiritual merchandise,   [33]
material prosperity, and wealth. Accordingly, with the involvement of Han Chinese in Tibetan
Buddhism, the presence of money is overwhelming. This is seen in the worship of Chinese indi-
viduals, as they materially support gurus, tulkus, and monastic communities in Tibet (Caple
2015, 464). Han Chinese also give money and gifts in exchange for teachings, initiations,
and spells. On the whole, it has also been argued that practicing the "Great Perfection" (Tib.
Dzogchen, Ch. *Da yuanman* 大圆满) requires more time and resources than other forms of
Buddhist practice (Yü 2012, 121; Shmushko 2022).[23]

Ms. Li's courtyard can be seen as one of the models which regulate the religious economy   [34]
around lay devotees and offers them some of the resources (space) to uphold the practice.
From a soteriological perspective, material exchanges are considered an accumulation of merit
for Buddhist lay groups. I see this as part of a dynamic which can be referred to as a ritual
economy: In the words of Mayfair Hui Yang, "expenditures of wealth on ritual, religious,
ethical, and social bonding practices as forms of consumption that do not directly lead to
profit accumulation and often eat up profits and savings for nonutilitarian ends" (Yang 2020,
281). A ritual economy involves interaction and transactions between humans and the divine
world, while diverting a segment of wealth from the material economy. However, the ethos
of the ritual economy is generosity and not wealth accumulation (2020, 282).

This aspect of materiality is not limited only to Tibetan Buddhist traditions. According to   [35]
Tarocco, material culture is fundamental to Chinese Buddhists, no less than rituals and re-
ligious texts. "A deep and persisting belief in the accumulation of religious merit and the
efficacy of merit transference to others, and especially to the deceased, coupled with a preoc-
cupation with materializing such merit and venerating sacred objects, can be seen as elements
central to the practice and understanding of Chinese Buddhism" (Tarocco 2011, 628).

The Ru Family Tea House and Chan Buddhism

Another Buddhist practice group I include in the ethnography of Wutong is associated with   [36]
the Chan school of Buddhism *(chanzong* 禅宗*)*. The group gathers in a facility owned by the Ru

---

23   The "Great Perfection" is the central philosophical teaching in the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism
      (Karmay 2007, X). The practice of the Great Perfection is aimed at discovering the ultimate ground of
      existence. In the context of Nyingma practitioners, there is a prevailing use of the concept of Bodhicitta
      (*pusaxin* 菩萨心), which is the enlightened mind that strives towards awakening, but also empathy and
      compassion for all sentient beings. See Van Schaik (2004).

family tea (and guest) house for their meditation and study sessions. The tea house is located on the end of the long main dirt road of Wutong, where the village ends and the route up to Wutong mountain begins. The Ru couple just finished a tea-drinking session with a monk who regularly comes from his residence in Hongfa temple, situated just a few kilometers away, at the foot of Wutong mountain. According to the couple, the old monk is not strictly or exclusively their teacher, but he is ordained in the Hongfa Temple they regularly visit.[24]

The current trajectory of lay Chan Buddhists operating private practice groups is quite different from the Tibetan traditions discussed above. When it comes to conducting their practice in private spaces, it is not necessarily the centrality of a master or teacher to the formation of the group. The steady group of practitioners who come to the Ru's tea house looks for a more extensive practice method (*xiuxing* 修行). They gather, drink tea, chant sutras, discuss Buddhist notions, and read texts as an addition to their visits to the temple. As Fisher notes, "There are both 'push' and 'pull' factors that lead practitioners to organize activities away from temple spaces" (Fisher 2020, 50); and these, in my impression, vary between different Buddhist traditions and from group to group. As discussed before, in the case of Tibetan Buddhism, the lack of temples or monastic communities which represent the lineage pushes practitioners to gather in alternative groups. However, for this group, the central motivation is the functionality of a space where they can study, hold sessions of chanting sutras, and conduct tea meditation leisurely and according to their schedule. Therefore, their activities are less structured and without a teacher to guide the meetings. Nevertheless, they are not completely disconnected from temple worship and monastic authority; they visit the temple regularly on weekends and holidays but treat the tea house gathering as a complimentary daily practice, strengthening their involvement in Buddhist personal cultivation (e.g., scripture reading, meditation, deepening philosophical principals of the Chan school through conversation).[25]

[37]

Nevertheless, the appearance of groups such as these resonates, in general, with the modern development of lay Chan Buddhism. Within contemporary lay Chan communities, lay people manifest agency and leadership at various levels. All groups on this broad-spectrum are confronted with a challenge: managing the diversity and alterability of lay Buddhist individuals' identity. Therefore, they develop strategies to facilitate the alternation between religious community life and secular social life (Ji 2016, 200). The relatively new development of private spaces as sites for Buddhist practice, which also pertains to a section of lay Chan Buddhists, is, in my opinion, one strategy employed by charismatic lay Buddhists to tackle this challenge. Many lay Buddhists currently explore the grassroots method of meeting for practice in private or designated spaces, varying in constellation and characteristics.

[38]

These two case studies of Buddhist groups meeting in private spaces are examples of a broader transformation of lay Buddhism that is not limited to Tibetan and Chan Buddhism, (Ji and Jia 2018, 13). I suggest that the ethnography of these two Buddhist groups, Ms. Li's courtyard and The Ru Tea House, shows how Buddhist actors are *de facto* going through a process of "creative assimilation" (Chau 2011) to the cultural entrepreneurship encouraged by the atmosphere of the village of Wutong. As in other urban villages, its streets are "innu-

[39]

---

24 Hongfa Temple (*Hongfa si* 弘法寺 is located a few kilometers northeast of Wutong village. This temple and monastery complex is associated with the Linji school of Chan Buddhism (*linji zong* 臨濟宗) and it is arguably of the biggest temple in the Shenzhen area.

25 Tea drinking in a ritual or group setting is in and of itself intrinsically connected to Buddhism in the historical and contemporary sense. This topic is beyond the scope of this article. See Benn (2015) and Hinsch (2016).

Figure 6   The Ru family tea house.

merable route choices that can be used interchangeably, while each combination provides for a different set of possible social, spatial and economic interaction" (Kochan 2015, 935).

These forms of ritual economies presented through these two groups are well-fitted to the   [40]
conditions of Wutong, especially in its branding as an art village. Wutong had gained a name for itself for the alternative, creative products, and crafts it offers. In this framework, these small, grassroots lay Buddhist groups also play along with the state's soft power, using it to withhold their religious traditions. I suggest that these groups active in Wutong demonstrate a relationship between Buddhist activity and PRC state control which practitioners continuously reshape.

Nun Niangu's Buddhist Center

However, not all forms of Buddhist practice in Wutong should be framed as ritual economy   [41]
or consumption goods. Visiting the Buddhist facility of the Nun Nianggu (mentioned earlier in this article), I witnessed another structure of the Buddhist community completely based on charity. Nun Niangu became a nun (*chujia* 出家) and was ordained in Chi Lin Nunnery (*Zhi lin zheng yuan* 志莲净苑) in Hong Kong. A few years ago, she moved to the neighboring Wutong village. On the third floor of a residential building in the village, she operates a Buddhist

community and activity center. When I asked why she left the nunnery to open this center, she said she wanted to "spread the Dharma outside the monastic community and help people in need." She was able to find a low-cost, spacious, low-maintenance apartment to operate her center. The center offers a bed and a meal to anyone who requires it.

Like the other two groups, nun Niangu's facility was quite patchy-looking, almost temporary. There were around ten lodgers in the center at the time, most of them women. During my visits there, nun Niangu enthusiastically introduced me to what the house offers. Besides a warm bed and meal without any questions, the nun enthusiastically shares her Buddhist ethics and religious concepts. Mornings open with sutra-reading and chanting; throughout the day there are also meditation and yoga classes. The nun does not ask for anything in return for her talks, sutra readings, or meals. According to her, the place is sustained with the help of occasional donations. Within the particular economic, social, and spiritual space Wutong had become, she can maintain her philanthropic grassroots Buddhist initiative. I suggest that places like this can exist in Wutong, where the government does not question and sanction religious communities because they fall under the government-encouraged cultural production. [42]

Conclusion

This article has explored a few aspects of the contemporary sphere of Buddhism in China and how they are contextualized in the phenomenon of the urban village. I have explored how lay Buddhists and Buddhist institutions maintain their active engagement in spreading their doctrines and Buddhist worldviews by producing and connecting through an expanding economy of Buddhist experiences and objects. I further elaborated on the role of soft power in shaping this Buddhist sphere. I conclude that Buddhism's commodification of spiritual, religious material objects in China is part of an entangled relationship between Buddhism and the state. This consumption dynamic can be seen as what Jane Bennet (2001) refers to as "commodity enchantment." This process, according to her, also suggests a subversion to other entities within society. [43]

Buddhist consumption of commodities and the creation of a merit economy in Wutong is used as a "language of the invention with which radical groups can think about, refine, and ultimately advertise their ideologies" (McCracken 1988, xv). Creating a network of spaces and commodities that express their religious beliefs, different Buddhist actors react to the states' acts and cultural soft power efforts. In that sense, "commodities enchantment" works as a creative power structure that responds to state soft power. [44]

Moreover, I have related this social process in Buddhism to another form of soft state power employed by the PRC regime in the re-development of urban villages. I found that these two uses of soft state power in urban development and religion are connected to how the state uses culture to influence different processes. I discussed how culture is used to reframe the sphere of Buddhism in the PRC and how it is used to solve the problem of urban villages. [45]

Nevertheless, my conclusion is that soft state power cannot be simply rendered as a top-down process. Chinese individuals and groups seem to have agency in this process, as they take advantage of the liminal, ambiguous elements of culture and space. Rural-urban migration is also seen as a component in the Chinese path to individualization (Yan 2010). In Wutong, I suggest that people can create spiritual and religious worlds despite various challenges. This resonates with other studies which convey that urban villages are marginal spaces where Chi- [46]

nese people hold agency over their own living spaces. Multiple contradictions and loopholes within the PRC's use of state power have left room for the formation of informal markets. The creation of urban villages is in fact such an informal process (Zhan 2017). These loopholes in the state's power over spatial configurations of Shenzhen lead to more loopholes in state power over religious configurations.

Urban villages allow opportunities for religious configurations in the marginal urban sphere. These liminal, marginal spaces bring new social contacts and economic opportunities, but they also reopen the imposed socio-spatial striated space that limits social and spatial mobility. However, this fluidity is also characterized by a degree of precariousness (Kochan 2015). The relationships between actors in the creation of Wutong urban village are a form of "assemblage." This includes the state, the residents, the consumers and visitors, and religious practitioners. They are not stable or fixed and can instead be displaced and replaced (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

[47]

Since conducting my fieldwork there in 2019, new discussions regarding the future of Wutong have taken place. Wutong has been chosen along with seven other urban villages to be part of a pilot for urban renovation "Wutong AI Ecological Town" (Wutong AI *shengtai xiaozhen* 梧桐 AI 生态小镇). The plan is to weave artificial intelligence into its revitalization plans—the town will focus on incubating a new generation of AI technology.[26] These new plans are a reminder that Wutong, as another urban village, is a liminal place with a spatial fabric that is fluid and changing. I hypothesize that the Buddhist groups I studied in Wutong in 2019 will go or have already gone through various changes in their modalities, locations, and means. Wutong is a drop in the sea of urban development in China. I suggest that more research on the religious developments and dynamics in urban villages should expand our understanding of religious life in a changing urban China.

[48]

Funding

[49]

References

Ashiwa, Yoshiko. 2020. *The Chinese State Global Promotion of Buddhism*. Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power Policy Brief 4. Georgetown: Berkeley Center for Religion Peace & World Affairs / Brookings Institution. https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/the-chinese-state-s-global-promotion-of-buddhism.

Ashiwa, Yoshiko, and David L. Wank. 2020. "Special Report: COVID-19 Impacts Chinese Buddhism, State Control, and Soft Power." *Religion and Diplomacy*, no. April 20 (April). https://www.hluce.org/news/articles/covid-19-impacts-chinese-buddhism-state-control-and-soft-power/.

Benn, James. 2015. *Tea in China: A Religious and Cultural History*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

---

26   Recently, some municipalities in North China have begun considering another ban on the practice of burning paper money for the ghosts of ancestors: Asia News (2021): "Qingming Festival: Ban on Burning Ghost Money Because of Pollution concerns." March 26, 2021. Last accessed October 21, 2021. http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Qingming-festival:-ban-on-burning-ghost-money-because-of-pollution-concerns-52716.html.

Bennett, Jane. 2001. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics. Rights, Action, and Social Responsibility*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bianchi, Ester. 2017. "Sino-Tibetan Buddhism: Continuities and Discontinuities. The Case of Nenghai's Legacy in the Contemporary Era." In *Chinese and Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism*, edited by Yael Bentor and Meir Shahar, 300–318. Leiden: Brill.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Buddhism Between Tibet and China. 2009. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

Cabezón, José. 2008. "State Control of Tibetan Buddhist Monasticism in the People's Republic of China." In *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, edited by Mayfair Yang, 261–91. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Caple, Jane. 2015. "Faith, Generosity, Knowledge and the Buddhist Gift: Moral Discourses on Chinese Patronage of Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries." *Religion Compass* 9: 462–82.

———. 2020. "Rethinking Tibetan Buddhism in Post-Mao China, 1980–2015." *Review of Religion in Chinese Society* 7: 62–71.

Chau, Adam Yuet. 2011. *Religion in Contemporary China: Revitalization and Innovation*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Deleuze, G., and F. Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Dodin, Thierry. 2002. *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, et Fantasies*. Boston: Wisdom Publ.

DuBois, Thomas David. 2017. "China's Religion Law and the Perils of Counting Consciousness." In *Disturbances in Heaven*, edited by Ivan Franceschini, Kevin Lin, and Nicholas Loubere, 92–97. Canberra: ANU Press.

———. 2018. "Religious Freedom in East Asia: Historical Norms and the Limits of Advocacy." *Journal of Religious and Political Practice: The Politics of Religious Freedom in the Asia-Pacific* 4 (1): 46–60.

Fan, L., E. E. Whitehead, and J. D. Whitehead. 2004. "Fate and Fortune: Popular Religion and Moral Capital in Shenzhen"." *Journal of Chinese Religions* 32: 83–100.

Fisher, Gareth. 2020. "From Temples to Teahouses Exploring the Evolution of Lay Buddhism in Post-Mao China." *Review of Religion in Chinese Society* 7: 34–61.

Goossaert, Vincent, and David A. Palmer. 2012. *The Religious Question in Modern China*. Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press.

Hinsch, Bret. 2016. *The Rise of Tea Culture in China: The Invention of the Individual*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Ji, Zhe. 2012. "Chinese Buddhism as a Social Force." *Chinese Sociological Review* 45 (2): 8–26.

———. 2016. *Religion, modernité et temporalité: une sociologie du bouddhisme chan contemporain* [Religion, Modernity and Temporality: a Sociology of Contemporary Chan Buddhism]. Paris: CNRS.

Ji, Zhe, and Zhang Jia. 2018. "Lay Buddhism in Contemporary China: Social Engagements and Political Regulations." *The China Review* 18 (4): 11–39.

Jones, Alison Denton. 2011. "Contemporary Han Chinese Involvement in Tibetan Buddhism: A Case Study from Nanjing." *Social Compass* 58 (4): 540–53.

Karmay, Samten Gyaltsen. 2007. *The great perfection (rDzogs chen): a philosophical and meditative teaching of Tibetan Buddhism*. 2nd ed. Leiden: Brill.

Kieschnick, John. 2003. *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kochan, Dror. 2015. "Placing the Urban Village: A Spatial Perspective on the Development Process of Urban Villages in Contemporary China." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 39 (5): 927–47.

Lai, Hongyi. 2012. "China's Cultural Diplomacy Going for Soft Power." In *China's Soft Power and International Relations,* edited by Hongyi Lai and Yiyi Lu, 83–103. London: Routledge.

Leung, Beatrice K. F. 2018. "Xi Jinping's Religious Freedom Policy Vs. Human Rights." *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal* 4 (2): 369–92.

Li, Siming, Cheng Hungha, and Wang jun. 2014. "Making a Cultural Cluster in China: A Study of Dafen Oil Painting Village, Shenzhen." *Habitat International* 41: 156–64.

Liu, Y., S. He, F. Wu, and C. Webster. 2010. "Urban Villages Under China's Rapid Urbanization: Unregulated Assets and Transitional Neighbourhoods." *Habitat International* 34 (2): 135–44.

Malcolm, Annie. 2018. "Why Is China Creating Utopian 'Art Cities' in Its Former Wastelands?" *QUARTZ,* 2018, January 6 edition. https://qz.com/1172433/why-is-china-creating-utopian-art-cities-in-its-former-wastelands/.

McCracken, Grant. 1988. *Culture and Consumption*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

O'Donnell, M. 2017. "Laying siege to the villages: The vernacular geography of Shenzhen." In *Learning from Shenzhen: China's Post Mao Experiment from Special Zone to Model City*, edited by M. O'Donnell, W. Wong, and J. Bach, 107–23. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Oostveen, Daan F. 2020. "Rhizomatic Religion and Material Destruction in Kham Tibet: The Case of Yachen Gar." *Religions* 11 (10): 533. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11100533.

Perry, Elisabeth. 2013. *Cultural Governance in Contemporary China: "Re-Orienting" Party Propaganda*. Harvard-Yenching Institute Working Paper Series. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.

Powers, John. 2016. *The Buddha Party: How the People's Republic of China Works to Define and Control Tibetan Buddhism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Pun, Ngai. 2003. "Subsumption or Consumption? The Phantom of Consumer Revolution in 'Globalizing' China." *Cultural Anthropology* 18 (4): 469–92.

Qian, Junxi. 2019. "Redeeming the Chinese modernity? Zen Buddhism, culture-led development and local governance in Xinxing County, China." *Economy and Space* 51 (1): 187–205.

Shmushko, Kai. 2021. "On Face Masks as Buddhist Merit: Buddhist Responses to COVID-19. A Case Study of Tibetan Buddhism in Shanghai." *Journal of Global Buddhism* 22: 19–28.

———. 2022. "Enchanted Commodities or Cultural Elements? Lay Han Practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism and the 'Living Hall' Model (*Shenghuo guan* 生活馆)." *Review of Religion in Chinese Society* 9: 101–36.

Tarocco, Francesca. 2011. "On the Market: Consumption and Material Culture in Modern Chinese Buddhism." *Religion* 41 (4): 627–44.

Terrone, Antonio. 2012. "Messengers from Tibet's Past: The Role of Buddhist Charismatic Leaders in the Spread of Tibet an Buddhism in Contemporary China." *Asiatica Ambrosiana* 4: 103–21.

Van Schaik, Sam. 2004. *Approaching the great perfection: simultaneous and gradual approaches to Dzogchen practice in Jigme Lingpa's Longchen Nyingtig.* Boston: Wisdom Publications.

Vermander, Benoît, Hingley, and Liang Zhang. 2018. *Shanghai Sacred: The Religious Landscape of a Global City.* Seattle: University of Washingtion Press.

Wang, J. 2012. "Evolution of Cultural Clusters in China: Comparative Study of Beijing and Shanghai." *Architectoni.ca: Journal of Canadian Centre of Academic Art and Science* 2012 (2): 148–59.

Wang, Xiaowei. 2020. *Blockchain Chicken Farm: And Other Stories of Tech in China's Countryside.* New York: FSG Originals.

Wang, Y., and J. Wu. 2009. "Urbanization and Informal Development in China: urban villages in Shenzhen." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33 (4): 957–73.

Welch, Holmes. 1969. "Buddhism Since the Cultural Revolution." *The China Quarterly* 40: 127–36.

Wu, F., F. Zhang, and C. Webster. 2013. "Informality and Development and Demolition of Urban Villages in the Chinese Peri-Urban Area." *Urban Studies* 50 (1): 1919–34.

Xi, Jinping. 2014. "Speech by Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China at UNESCO Headquarters." March. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1142560.shtml.

———. 2016. "Quanmian tigao xinxing shixia zongjiao gongzuo shuiping 全面提高新形势下宗教工作水平 [Comprehensively Improving the Level of Religious Work According to the New Situation]." xinhuanet. April 23, 2016. http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-04/23/c.

Yan, Y. 2010. "The Chinese Path to Individualization." *The British Journal of Sociology* 61 (3): 489–512.

Yang, Fenggang. 2006. "The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China." *The Sociological Quarterly* 47 (1): 93–122.

Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui. 2020. *Re-Enchanting Modernity: Ritual Economy and Society in Wenzhou.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Yü, Dan Smyer. 2012. *The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in China: Charisma, Money, Enlightenment.* London / New York: Routledge.

Zhan, Yang. 2017. "The Urbanisation of Rural Migrants and the Making of Urban Villages in Contemporary China." *Urban Studies* 55 (7): 1526–40.

———. 2021. "Beyond Neoliberal Urbanism: Assembling Fluid Gentrification Through Informal Housing Upgrading Programs in Shenzhen, China." *Cities* 112: 103–11.

Zhong, S. 2009. "From Fabrics to Fine Arts: Urban Restructuring and the Formation of an Art District in Shanghai." *Critical Planning* 16: 118–37.