

Book Review



***From Comrades to Bodhisattvas:
Moral Dimensions of Lay Buddhist Practice in
Contemporary China***

By Gareth Fisher. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014, 263 pages, ISBN 978-0-8248-3966-6 (cloth), \$50.00 US.

Reviewed by Reviewed by Brian J. Nichols, *Mount Royal University*

Since the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the reform and opening of China under Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s, religious traditions have been revived and scholars have gained access to mainland China for the first time in decades. While there have been book-length studies of popular religion and Christianity in contemporary China, and edited volumes focused on religion in modern and contemporary China, there have been no book-length studies dedicated to Han Buddhism until now. The focus of this book is on lay Buddhists who gather in the outer courtyard of an important Buddhist temple in central Beijing during dharma assemblies (*fahui*), which are held four times a month. Fisher attended, in his words, “nearly every” dharma assembly during his 27 months of ethnographic research, conducted over a period of ten years from 2001 to 2012. This book provides a window into the aspirations, challenges, and failures of lay Buddhists who are establishing what Fisher describes as “islands of religiosity” (204-213) in contemporary China.

Having set out to study lay Buddhism in China, Fisher turned his attention to the large and lively “preacher circles” conducted, attended, and supported by self-described lay-Buddhists in the available spaces of the outer courtyard of the Temple of Universal Rescue (*Guangji si*) in Beijing. Fisher got to know members and leaders of these preacher circles and spent most of his time interviewing them at their homes and other sites. Fisher gained insight into what sort of Buddhism they practiced, what motivated them to embrace Buddhism, and the personal benefits they may or may not have derived from their beliefs and practices. The book is divided into six chapters, each one centered on a central trope of the lay Buddhist’s worldview. Through these tropes the reader comes to know important components of the moral and cosmological universe of these “comrades” turned “bodhisattvas.” The overarching framework for the book is the idea of “moral breakdown” (3-4), developed by Jarrett Zigon. In short, Fisher understands the Buddhists whom he studies to be using Buddhism to resolve personal “moral breakdowns” caused by economic, social, and ethical dislocations, which are in turn related to the transition from a planned economy to a more free-market economy. Buddhist concepts and

practices provide ethical resources that these marginalized individuals use to construct moral identities in a rapidly changing China.

Chapter one, titled “Chaos,” provides an overview of the temple, its history, its spaces, and the people who occupy those spaces. It focuses especially on the outer courtyard, which, four times a month, becomes a chaotic scene of preacher circles, akin to Speakers’ Corner in London’s Hyde Park. Since 2010, however, these preacher circles have shrunk in size as the temple has gradually taken over more of the outer courtyard, allotting more space for cars and stalls selling incense and other items. This chapter provides profiles of two lay Buddhists: a female college student and a middle-aged woman. The latter woman preferred Maoist-period moral values and longed for a message to help her resolve her own moral breakdown, a message that she found with the courtyard preacher featured in chapter six.

Chapter two addresses a guiding concern of the lay Buddhists: a search for balance (*pingheng*) in their heart/mind (*xinli*). This chapter distinguishes between three different approaches to achieving balance used by informants, and reveals the way in which class and level of education in part determine which approach is adopted. Younger, more affluent, better educated individuals are recruited by monks to work as volunteers. Some of these come to be counseled by the monks using a more cerebral (Chan-based) approach to resolving their problems. Members of the outer-courtyard crowd tend to be older, less affluent, less educated individuals who, on the whole, prefer to establish balance through countering the immoral inequality of post-Mao society by cultivating moral excellence. This latter approach Fisher labels “contradiction,” while the former he calls “synthesis.” A third approach is “anticipation,” in which an individual withdraws from sources of imbalance by imagining and anticipating the Pure Land of Amitābha (63-64). While I did not find these labels particularly helpful, the cases Fischer outlines provide insight into different deployments of Buddhist thought and practice in resolving breakdown and finding balance.

Chapter three explores the idea of *yuanfen*, which could be translated as karmic affinity, but which Fisher translates as “pre-fated bond” (83-92). In particular, Fisher highlights the idea of “Buddhic bonds” (*foyuan*), which he found to be important in the self-narratives of his informants. Fisher does an excellent job of unpacking how these bonds can help individuals fashion narratives of self-worth and “choseness” (93). In addition to being socially and economically marginalized, these practitioners often had their Buddhist identities challenged by non-Buddhists in the broader culture, in their workplace, or in their families. Buddhic bonds and miraculous narratives reflecting such Buddhic bonds enable individuals to develop narratives of their “choseness” as well as their heroic destinies (e.g., surviving being hit by a bus, 95-96).

In addition to showing how Buddhic or karmic bonds help individuals fashion Buddhist identities and self-worth, Fisher also reveals the role that these concepts play in proselytization. Despite Buddhism being one of the few major missionary religions, little work has been done on the mechanisms and doctrinal justifications that facilitate Buddhist proselytization. This chapter and chapter five provide

concrete examples of how individuals are brought into the tradition by being convinced of their pre-fated bond with it, while chapter five also goes into detail about the production and distribution of free Buddhist literature.

This chapter and others demonstrate the way in which Fisher evenly and accurately reveals the deployment of popular Buddhist ideas and practices. The delusional, the imaginative, and the critical all hang together: such is the existence of ideas in a chaotic sample of lay Buddhists in contemporary China. For example, some of the informants were clearly delusional, claiming the ability to communicate telepathically with geopolitical figures such as George W. Bush, Osama Bin Laden, and Saddam Hussein (100), some had genuinely unusual experiences (unscathed after being hit by a bus), others grew to question the motives of the preacher groups, but all built narratives integrating these experiences, delusions, and critiques with the help of Buddhist concepts like *foyuan*.

The fourth chapter examines how practitioners seek to break out of Chinese *guanxi*-based relationships (personal networks of connections built through exchanges of gifts and favors that are used for personal advancement). Traditionally, these relationships bring status, opportunity, and prestige, as well as obligations to one's in-group. The courtyard contained people who had lost at this game or who reject and criticize it as unjust, unfair, and corrupt; they consider it a contributing factor in their social and economic marginalization. Practitioners seek to use the alternative Buddhist framework of karma and consequence (*yin-guo*) to understand their situations and work towards a better future. This chapter includes an extended discussion of *guanxi* and how it produces problems of exclusion and inclusion, which courtyard practitioners seek to overcome through the just rationale of karma and its effects. I find the discussion of *guanxi* stronger than the treatment of *yin-guo*, and this chapter would have been strengthened with a more robust appreciation of *yin-guo* in Chinese thought and Buddhism.

Chapter five investigates the way in which the distribution of Buddhist moral literature serves as a means of creating bonds (*jiyuan*) among Buddhists and non-Buddhists in contemporary China. Fisher argues that networks of distribution create an imagined community which can be effective in resolving moral breakdowns. Resolution occurs for an individual if s/he is validated by the community and has few conflicts with relations outside the community. In this chapter Fisher provides a survey of much of the literature he collected, organizing it according to genre and rhetorical strategy. Not only does this chapter support Fisher's central thesis on resolving moral breakdowns, it also introduces readers to an important and unregulated dimension of Buddhist propagation in contemporary China.

The sixth chapter treats a particularly vibrant preacher circle that focuses on the *Lotus Sutra* and is thus known as the Lotus Group. The group's founder, a successful businessman named Mr. Zhang, was inspired by this sutra and became a zealous Buddhist after his mother became ill and his wealth proved to be useless in helping her. Mr. Zhang incorporated Chairman Mao, whom he portrayed as a bodhisattva, into his sermons. His use of Mao and communist values was attractive for those nostalgic for the Maoist era. Interestingly, however, when Fisher returned in 2010,

Mr. Zhang had moved into an elite housing development outside of Beijing, his audience had become younger and more affluent, and Mao had been dropped from his teaching and writing.

The book's conclusion helps make sense of how this community fits into contemporary Chinese religion more broadly. Fisher speaks of islands of religiosity in which resources to develop one's religious identity and practice are available to those who visit registered sites, like the Temple of Universal Rescue, or unregistered sites and groups. Both kinds of sites and groups, Fisher argues, have no effective means of influencing public discourse more broadly. Unfortunately, Fisher does not use Taiwan as a counter example of how Buddhists can dramatically influence public life, discourse, and morality; this would have enriched the book. Nevertheless, this was an excellent way to conclude this study, as it shows that even as these islands are part of a larger phenomenon, they often have a limited ability to break into broader, public discourse.

Throughout the book, Fisher smoothly transitions between discussing his interlocutors' views of Buddhist concepts and addressing their views of him. These transitions continually remind the reader of the presence and relationships of the doubly-other researcher (both a non-Buddhist and a foreigner). This back and forth contributes to the reader's understanding of Fischer's ethnographic encounters and his interlocutors' worldviews. For example, certain individuals were willing to share their stories with Fisher because they believed that Buddhist bonds or karmic connections had brought them together. This both aided his research and provided insight into the ways these tropes are understood and deployed. Others were interested in dialogue with Fischer in the hope of converting him; still others sought his aid in translating teachings for an English-speaking audience, something they believed would in turn earn them tremendous merit. Fisher was at times a strange and "wild animal" (82); at others he became a "preacher" (43). This book provides ethnographers with a model of how to negotiate reflexivity, how to establish positionality, and how to use one's first person encounters to bolster the authority of one's analysis.

Fisher's work demonstrates how an anthropologist can help advance our understanding of the Buddhist tradition beyond the limits of both the textual tradition and the voices of elites within the tradition. What does the Buddhism uncovered by Fisher look like? *The Lotus Sutra* becomes a living instrument of zealotry. *The Diamond Sutra* heals the sick. The notions of karmic and Buddhist bonds simultaneously encourage proselytization and conversion. The flexibility of the tradition is manifest with the incorporation of Mao as bodhisattva, and of Zhou Enlai and Jiang Zemin as dharma protectors. Miraculous events and visions generate faith and commitment in this tradition that has so often been associated with reason and rationality based on philosophically-oriented voices and texts. In short, readers come away with a refreshing, if bewildering, dose of lived Buddhism on the ground.

Readers may tire of the monothetic explanatory rubric of moral breakdowns which recurs throughout the text, serving, as it does, as the overarching explanatory framework of the book. Nevertheless, what seems an overly-broad framework that

easily fits so many cases may be justified, because it really does effectively capture specific characteristics of a widespread, if not global, situation. (John Nelson's framework for experimental Buddhism in Japan functions comparably). The state looms large in most studies of religion in China because it is arguably the single most powerful force conditioning the revival of religion. Fisher breaks free of the well-worn paths of religion/state/modernity, and the state recedes to the background until we get to the conclusion. This strategy enables the people, their ideas, their foibles, their delusions, their hopes, and their passions to take center stage. Fisher skillfully balances analytical rigor with his ethnographically rich accounts, achieving a balance often missing in the work of scholars less judicious with their descriptions or too ambitious with their theory.

The book is written in clear, engaging, and accessible prose, but it is intended for an informed readership; Buddhist concepts and terms not central to Fisher's analysis are generally not introduced or explained in the body of the text (e.g., Miaoshan, Guanyin, Samantabhadra). This book is essential reading for scholars of contemporary religion in East Asia and for anthropologists of Buddhism who will not need such exposition. The ethnographic, sociological, and psychological aspects of the book will interest a broader readership both popular (due to its readability, the self-deprecating humor of the author, and the interesting phenomenon of Maoist supporters turning to religion) and among scholars of Buddhism and Chinese religion (for its theoretically-informed reading of popular Buddhist ideas). This book is a welcome addition to the growing body of scholarship on religion in contemporary China, one that sets high standards for readability, originality, and narrative structure.