



## Book Review

# Multiple Liminalities of Lay Buddhism in Contemporary China: Modalities, Material Culture, and Politics

By Kai Shmushko Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2025, 297 pages, ISBN 9789087284565 (hardback) € 117,00.

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Most major studies of contemporary Buddhism in China have concerned themselves with institutionalized Buddhism. A significant body of scholarship centers on elite Buddhist traditions, focusing on famous monks and nuns, or on prominent lineages and monastic training systems. In contrast, purely lay-led Buddhist movements have often been dismissed as less organized, logically inconsistent, spiritually inefficient, and thus unworthy of scholarly attention. *Multiple Liminalities of Lay Buddhism in Contemporary China* is a treasure in making a significant contribution to the emerging field of Chinese lay Buddhism. The first pioneering, book-length study of Han Chinese Buddhism in post-Mao China, Gareth Fisher's (2014) seminal anthropological monograph *From Comrades to Bodhisattvas*, was grounded in single-site ethnography. It reflects an earlier stage of reality regarding Chinese lay Buddhism in post-Mao China, one that primarily examined lay practices through doctrinal, lifestyle, and moral concerns in the context of rapid economic development before the proliferation of social media in China. Building upon Fisher's work, Shmushko advances the field by conducting multi-sited ethnographic research and offering valuable empirical data, revealing the complex and intriguing mosaic of contemporary Chinese lay Buddhist movements in the Xi era.

This book delves into the ways lay Buddhist actors navigate various realms of in-betweenness to preserve and revitalize traditions, while cultivating both old and emergent forms of religiosity, at times through remarkably innovative and creative means. The exploration centers on religious actors and materials that occupy ambiguous spaces: between the state and grassroots, legality and illegality, rural and urban contexts, physical and digital environments, and spiritual and material realms. The book makes a significant contribution to theory in centering lived Buddhism, rather than some Western-centered, religious studies framework. Shmushko thus engages with critiques from scholars such as Fisher, Paul Katz, and Francesca Tarocco, who have highlighted a persistent bias, rooted in inherited Western frameworks of "secularization" and "Weberian modernity," often masking the complexity and dynamism of lay Buddhist developments in China today (67). By contrast, this book seeks to analyze what emerges organically in situ, grounded in ethnographic observation and participants' lived experiences.

The book's attention to how lay practitioners "do" Buddhism across various sectarian lineages and traditions is both comprehensive and richly textured. It covers esoteric Tibetan Buddhism, Chan Buddhism, and other Han Chinese Buddhist traditions across Shanghai, Shenzhen, Taiwan, and cyberspace. More importantly,



it documents a critical moment during the COVID-19 lockdown in Shanghai, when laypeople (confronted with unprecedented restrictions) found innovative ways to sustain their faith through a merit economy. These practices may not conform to orthopraxy in the conventional sense; however, the multiplicity and diversity of Buddhist expressions presented here offer an honest and nuanced reflection of the broad spectrum of contemporary Chinese lay Buddhist practices. The book also succeeds in situating lay Buddhism at the critical historical and socio-economic turning point: when China's rapid development reached its apex and began to decelerate during the COVID-19 pandemic. This temporal framing is crucial, as it marks a shift away from earlier scholarly concerns with doctrinal and ethical orientations toward concerns with consumerism, commodification, political pressure, and the digitalization of religion in contemporary Chinese Buddhism. In this regard, the book effectively builds upon and extends Fisher's work by demonstrating how lay Buddhist agency navigates and responds to these transformations, which are shaped not only by state regulation and market logics, but also by rapidly evolving technological infrastructures.

A second standout feature of the book is its deliberate effort to amplify the voices of grassroots practitioners and to shed light on traditionally less recognized Buddhist regions in China. While much of the existing research has concentrated on cities like Beijing and Shanghai (urban centers often associated with middle-class practitioners and long-standing Buddhist traditions), here we observe field sites such as Shenzhen City and the "urban villages" of Wutong (former rural villages, now surrounded by urban infrastructure in rapidly developing Chinese cities), where Buddhist cultures and institutions are less historically entrenched. These emerging Buddhist spaces are especially significant in illustrating how lay practitioners creatively navigate religious engagement within China's evolving and often restrictive regulatory environment. Shmushko shows that lay Buddhism in China is not merely passively adapting to or resisting state regulation, but actively innovating and negotiating its place within the state-society nexus, with lay agency visibly expanding as a response to technological innovations, sociological and economic factors, and a changing political environment (50).

As an increasing body of scholarship has shown, contemporary Buddhism is marked by increased lay agency, democratization, and tensions between lay and monastic communities in terms of destabilized hierarchy, particularly in transnational contexts and in the wake of digital transformations. In some settings, monastic spiritual authority appears to be rapidly diminishing, and monastics' spiritual labor increasingly marginalized, especially in post-merit contexts where the accumulation of merit is no longer the primary axis of Buddhist practice, as seen in some Western cases (Wilson 2019). While the lay Buddhist movement in China does indeed challenge the traditional hierarchical structure of monastics and temples, Shmushko concludes that, despite operating independently from temple institutions, lay groups and individuals continue to seek monastic guidance, wisdom, and spiritual empowerment in various forms (265). Thus, lay Buddhists do not entirely displace monastic authority. Asceticism, scriptural knowledge, and the spiritual charisma attributed to monastics are not vanishing from the lay sphere; rather, modes of engagement with these sources of authority are shifting, a transformation both dynamic and contextually embedded (265).

The book employs a classic anthropological theoretical framework—*liminality* and the *liminoid*—as a conceptual nexus, weaving these ideas into a common thread that advances our understanding of multiplicity, instability, in-betweenness, transformation, and uncertainty. These themes address a complex and multi-layered reality that any single theoretical framework in sociology, anthropology, or ethnography might find challenging to fully capture. The book's key theoretical contribution lies in its dual-path approach—seeing *liminal* and *liminoid* as existing on a continuum, rather than as sharply divided categories.

The first path, "resilience in liminality" (56), highlights how ambiguous boundaries and transitional states serve as avenues for lay Buddhists to creatively and adaptively respond to complex challenges such as state regulation, public critique, orthopraxical dilemmas, and limited access to traditional practice modalities. This

path is reflected in aspects of lay Buddhism that involve forms of anti-structure or social subversion, the use of cyberspace to negotiate spiritual and social visibility in real time, and the increasingly expanded agency of lay practitioners subtly destabilizing the hierarchy of traditional religious authority. Notably, Shmushko cautions that: “The existence of grassroots modalities of practices, or digital forms of belonging and identity, is precarious in nature” (271).

The second path concerns liminal situations that obstruct or challenge lay practice, particularly ambiguities in state policy regarding cyber-regulation and the commodification of Buddhism. We witness the flourishing of online Buddhist activities on social media platforms such as WeChat and Little Red Book. While official policies restrict the commercialization of Buddhism, practitioners respond through alternative merit economies, such as in the case of the Living Hall in Shanghai and the teahouse in Shenzhen. Insightfully, Shmushko concludes that the commodification of Buddhism in China functions as a form of enchantment, an adaptive strategy to negotiate and achieve religious freedom. “Enchantment” here refers not to a return to pre-modern magic or superstition, nor to a religious transcendence, but rather to a sense of energy, agency, and meaning generated through the commodified forms of religion, particularly as a way to resist or navigate state control. Shmushko explicitly states that she joins Jane Bennett and others in challenging Weberian disenchantment theory as it presupposes an historical linearity. She does not use “re-enchantment” because she doesn’t see enchantment as something lost and returned. Instead, it persists and transforms—especially in the commodified forms of Buddhism in China. Enchantment thus also serves as an alternative response to state propaganda promoting Buddhism as culture and aiming to reduce its religious and spiritual dimensions. This discussion opens up an important avenue for future inquiry into the contemporary Buddhist economy in China, especially as it unfolds at the intersection of commodification, state control, and lay religious creativity.

By framing urbanization, digitalization, and governance as intersecting forces, the book advances discussions on Buddhism’s adaptability, positioning liminality as both a transformative and precarious force in shaping modern Buddhist engagement. Shmushko argues that modernity has created an overarching sense of liminality for a lay Buddhism confronted by state power and marked by a range of adaptations and creative assimilations due to the state’s harsh crackdown on religion.

Additionally, the book offers an in-depth investigation into Buddhist economies and material cultures that have been flourishing across various Chinese contexts in recent years. While the dynamics of ritual economy, materialization, and commodification are certainly not unique to Chinese Buddhist history, their contemporary manifestations there are especially prominent and varied. No serious study of contemporary Chinese Buddhism can proceed without examining the economic dimensions that underpin, shape, and circulate through Buddhist practices. Shmushko significantly advances the study of the Buddhist economy by bringing in comparative ethnographic insights from both mainland China and Taiwan. Among her most compelling examples is the role of tea—its consumption, exchange, and ritual deployment—as both a spiritual medium and a commodity. As Shmushko illustrates, the Chinese state ambiguously restricts the autonomy of religious institutions while simultaneously allowing commercial Buddhist enterprises to function under tightly controlled conditions. In Taiwan, by contrast, the commodification of Buddhism is shaped by a markedly different configuration: a confluence of Humanistic Buddhism, political freedoms, economic liberalization, religious marketization, and the democratic public sphere. Shmushko raises a critical and timely question for scholars of Buddhist studies and challenges us to consider other possibilities when looking at commodification in contemporary Buddhism. Instead of assuming that commodification equals corruption, a more nuanced Buddhist moral economy approach could ask: What Buddhist frameworks do lay practitioners use to justify or critique economic transactions? And how does the state’s endorsement of Buddhist commercial enterprises impact Buddhist teachings on wealth and renunciation?

Finally, this study contributes to the field of digital Buddhism. Ethnographic data on Asian religious traditions, especially up-to-date studies on digital Chinese Buddhist communities, remain seriously lacking (Han 2022). This study offers abundant examples of online and offline interaction in almost every lay group discussed. For example, readers might feel surprised “to learn to what extent cyberspace has become an important factor in the practice modalities” (265). Little Red Book, a Chinese version of Instagram, serves as an ideal public online space for exploring various digital Buddhist practices through social media. In addition to WeChat and Weibo, which have been extensively explored as rich and meaningful digital field sites by many scholars of Chinese Buddhism, Little Red Book emerges as a significant and essential digital platform that provides valuable insights into what it means to be a Chinese lay Buddhist.

Shmushko states that she is not attempting to figure out how Buddhism *fails* to exist in different areas of Chinese society, but how it *prevails* (273). Rather than confining the study of Buddhism to monastic institutions, she can thus insist that “to characterize lay practice in modern Buddhism, one would need to step outside of temples and monasteries, and search beyond them” (263). So she has done, to our benefit. Nevertheless, she might have presented her research with greater methodological transparency, particularly through more explicit reflexivity and clarification of positionality, such as how her status, gender, language proficiency, and institutional affiliations may have shaped her entry into the field and influenced interactions with the individuals and communities studied. Additionally, readers would have gained from a discussion of how the ethnography was co-produced with participants, especially across varied sites (urban vs rural, online vs offline).

Multi-sited ethnographic work carries the risk of fragmentation and uneven analytical depth, and this is occasionally evident here, despite the book’s impressive range—from urban temples (e.g., Hongfa Temple) to grassroots actors in Wutong, cyberspace engagements, and tea farms in Taiwan. Some chapters (notably chapter three on COVID-19 and chapter six on digital Buddhism) overlap both thematically and temporally, particularly in relation to the transition to online practice and the implications of state regulation. Rather than organizing the material primarily by community or geographic location, a more synthesized structure, grouped thematically (e.g., resilience, commodification and materialization, digital turn, or state policy on religion) or by practice (e.g., digital rituals, Tibetan Buddhist practices, tea culture), might have resulted in stronger analytical cohesion.

Despite these few issues, the book offers high-quality, first-hand data on some of the most current and dynamic aspects of contemporary lay Buddhism in China. It reflects Shmushko’s intellectual curiosity, analytical acuity, and deep commitment to exploring the world of Chinese Buddhism, and more importantly, stands as an in-depth, eye-opening, and paradigm-shifting contribution to the field of contemporary Buddhist studies. The book can serve as course reading for students in Buddhist studies and the anthropology of Buddhism, a guide not only for Buddhists but Buddhist sympathizers interested in the diverse lay practices of contemporary Chinese Buddhism, and a compelling case study for interdisciplinary inquiries into religion, politics, technological development, and material culture in contemporary China.

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