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### "Trading Western Suits for Monastic Robes" : Remaking Tibetan Buddhism in the Chinese Religious Revival

Jue Liang  
*Denison University*

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# “Trading Western Suits for Monastic Robes”

## Remaking Tibetan Buddhism in the Chinese Religious Revival

Jue Liang

Denison University—Granville

As arguably the largest Buddhist learning center in the world, Larung Gar (Tib. Bla rung sgar, Chn. 喇荣佛学院) regularly houses thousands of monastics and attracts tens of thousands more whenever public teaching gatherings take place. Of the four annual public teaching gatherings at Larung Gar, the Vajrasattva Teaching Assembly (Chn. 金刚萨埵法会) specifically caters to Han Chinese Buddhists.<sup>1</sup> People come from all over China, and from all walks of life, from government employees to businesspersons, from university professors to homemakers. The more well-to-do ones usually arrive in strapping SUVs, carrying provisions for themselves and for a donation. The less resourceful endure their long ride in a packed van or bus, and generate their share of good merit by donating time or labor at the teaching assembly. However they arrive, this monumental crowd

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1. The Vajrasattva Assembly takes place from the eighth to the fifteenth day of the fourth month of the Tibetan calendar, or the Saga Dawa (Tib. Sa ga zla ba), usually considered a holy time as celebrations of the Buddha's enlightenment and nirvāṇa take place during this month. The other three are the Vidyadhāra Assembly (Chn. 持明法会; it takes place from the first to the eighth day of the first month of the Tibetan calendar), the Samantabhadra Assembly (Chn. 普贤云供法会; from the first to the eighth day of the sixth month of the Tibetan calendar), and the Great Bliss Assembly (Tib. Bde chen zhing grub, Chn. 极乐法会; from the eighteenth to the twenty-sixth of the ninth month of the Tibetan calendar). Of the four, the Vidyadhāra and Samantabhadra Assemblies are generally not open to the public, while the Great Bliss Assembly has mostly Tibetan attendees.

would be beyond the wildest imagination for those who first reached Larung almost 40 years ago, when it was a humble encampment with only dozens of Tibetan followers.

Founded by Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok (Tib. Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs, Chn. 晋美彭措堪布, 1933–2004),<sup>2</sup> or Khenpo Jigphun, in the early 1980s, Larung Gar began as a small residence for him and his few disciples. But its influence and size quickly grew. First came the Tibetan disciples, attracted by the acclaimed Treasure revealer and Buddhist teacher; then the Han Chinese and even foreign disciples arrived, many of whom had heard Khenpo Jigphun's name from his well-attended and well-publicized pilgrimage to Mount Wutai (Tib. Ri bo rtse lnga, Chn. 五台山) in 1987.<sup>3</sup> By the 1990s, Larung Gar had attracted thousands of non-Tibetan pilgrims and disciples (most of them Han Chinese), a feat never accomplished by any other Tibetan Buddhist institution. At its peak around 2010, it was considered the largest Buddhist monastic institution in the world, regularly housing over 50,000 monastics, a significant portion of which came from Han Chinese regions in China, or *neidi* (Chn. 内地).

While Larung Gar's rise to eminence took place in tandem with the larger religious revival in China since the early 1980s,<sup>4</sup> its unprecedented success remains a case of singular significance. Considering the degree of discontinuity in and the erasure of religious activities that China found itself in after the Cultural Revolution, the national and global popularity achieved

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2. For a brief biography of Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok, see Antonio Terrone, "Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok," *Treasury of Lives*, October 2013, accessed June 13, 2020, <http://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Khenpo-Jigme-Puntsok/10457>

3. This pilgrimage to Mount Wutai is discussed in Terrone, "Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok." Also see David Germano, "Re-membering the Dismembered Body of Tibet: Contemporary Tibetan Visionary Movements in the People's Republic of China," in *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet: Religious Revival and Cultural Identity*, ed. Melvyn C. Goldstein and Matthew Kapstein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 85–87.

4. This revival is credited to the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and the beginning of the economic reform in 1979 in general, and to the restoration of religious freedom in Article 36 of the constitution in 1982, after the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, in particular. In addition to Article 36, the issuance of an internal communication, Document No. 19, entitled "The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period," also marks a new attitude of religious tolerance. For a complete English translation of Article 36 and Document No. 19, see Donald E. MacInnis, *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 8–26, 34–35.

by Larung Gar in a short time period of three decades is remarkable and rivaled by few other religious institutions in China. Moreover, as a Tibetan Buddhist institution, Larung Gar is the first of its kind to have a pervasive and persisting influence on Han Chinese Buddhists. While the Yuan and Qing dynasties (founded by Mongol and Manchu rulers, respectively) recognized Tibetan Buddhism as the state religion and venerate Tibetan Buddhist masters, Han intellectuals and literati have historically viewed this form of Buddhism as suspect, if not outright degenerate.<sup>5</sup> It was only in the Republic period (1912–49) that we see regular exchanges between Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist lineages, but this exchange trickled away with the founding of the People's Republic of China.<sup>6</sup>

What makes the success story of Larung Gar different? What explains its massive appeal? And what can this story tell us about Buddhism and the religion question in China? This chapter sets out to answer these questions. Building on current scholarship on the history of Larung Gar and the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in the Han Chinese population,<sup>7</sup> I am especially inter-

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5. Weirong Shen, "Magic Power, Sorcery and Evil Spirit: The Image of Tibetan Monks in Chinese Literature during the Yuan Dynasty," in *The Relationship between Religion and State (chos srid zung 'brel) in Traditional Tibet*, ed. Christoph Cüppers (Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2004), 189–227.

6. For a discussion on Sino-Tibetan Buddhist interaction in the early twentieth century, see Gray Tuttle, *Tibetan Buddhists in the Making of Modern China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); also see Nicole Willock, *Lineages of the Literary: Tibetan Buddhist Polymaths of Socialist China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

7. While there are a number of studies on Larung Gar, its history, and its significance in the Tibetan Buddhist world, only a few of them choose to focus on the Han Chinese Tibetan Buddhist community at Larung. For a discussion on how economic forces and the institutionalization of religious charisma intersect and create a "Sino-Tibetan Buddhist alliance," contributing to the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in China, see Dan Smyer Yü, *The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in China: Charisma, Money, Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 2014). David Germano's "Re-membering the Dismembered Body of Tibet" also pays attention to the fact that Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok attracted disciples not only from Tibetan areas but also from other areas of China and foreign disciples as well. Khenpo's revelatory activities also expand beyond the limit of the Tibetan geographical landscape. The most recent volume dedicated to the invention of a "new" Tibetan Buddhist tradition in Chinese society today is Joshua Esler's *Tibetan Buddhism among Han Chinese: Mediation and Superscription of the Tibetan Tradition in Contemporary Chinese Society* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020). The primary concern for *Tibetan Buddhism among Han Chinese* is the interactive, dynamic relationship between the worldview of Han Chinese Tibetan Buddhist practitioners and Tibetan Buddhist cultural values. While Esler centers his investigation around the lived experience of Han Chinese Tibetan Buddhists, and examines how their cultural world is

ested in how Tibetan Buddhism is communicated and presented to Han Chinese disciples, and how these disciples narrate their own experience of conversion, of finding religion in a secular age. For the Tibetan Buddhist leaders of our age, the survival of Buddhism requires a reinvention of what Buddhism is, which calls for a careful reading of the zeitgeist as well as an inheritance from its past. Using a hitherto unstudied collection of 125 first-person accounts of Han Chinese disciples who have arrived at Larung to study and practice,<sup>8</sup> I examine the reason for their conversion as presented in the collection and query the purpose behind compiling their life stories. I argue that, by advocating for an inclusive and intellectual vision, Larung Gar establishes itself as a modern institution, and Tibetan Buddhism as a universal religion. Tibetan Buddhism (and Buddhism in general) is depicted as scientific (not superstitious), transcending ethnic and national boundaries (not confined to one place or one time), and rooted in the long history of Chinese civilization (as opposed to being understood as a foreign belief).

In the following sections, I first introduce demographic information about these Han Chinese intellectual disciples, discuss the shared elements in their stories of converting to Buddhism, and then move on to analyze what their interpretation of Tibetan Buddhism is, and what attracted them to it. Studying the collection as a whole, I propose that this discourse of Buddhism as a scientific, transnational, and at the same time historically rooted religion is not an unprecedented practice. Based on the Buddhist concept of *upāya*, or expedient means, the Buddhist teaching always needs to be delivered in a manner that is appropriate to the circumstances it finds itself in. In the case of Larung Gar, its success lies precisely in its skillful adaption to the changing social and political reality of its time.

## COLLECTING THE LIFE STORIES OF INTELLECTUAL BUDDHISTS

In the collection titled *Zhihai langhua* 智海浪花 (*Flowing Tides in the Ocean of Wisdom*, hereafter *Flowing Tides*)<sup>9</sup> its compiler (and one of the abbots in

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shaped by but also superscribes onto the Tibetan Buddhist cultural world, I choose to read its primary sources as carefully crafted discourses that do not reflect (at least not only) the lived experiences of Han Chinese practitioners, but a version of Tibetan Buddhism that is considered particularly fit to be presented to a Han Chinese, intellectual audience.

8. In the following discussion, unless otherwise noted, I use the terms "Han Chinese disciples," "Han Chinese Tibetan Buddhists," and "intellectual Buddhists" interchangeably.

9. Suodaji Kanbu 索达吉堪布, *Zhi hai lang hua: Jiang shu 125 wei zhi shi fen zi de xue*

charge of the Han Chinese Tibetan Buddhist population at Larung Gar after Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok's passing), Khenpo Sodargye (Tib. Mkhan po Bsod dar rgyas, Chn. 索达吉堪布, b. 1962), presents relatable stories of modern, highly educated Buddhist practitioners to the Han Chinese audience.<sup>10</sup> In his personal experience, ordinary people have long worshipped the crowning achievements of scientists, while at the same time they dismiss or even denigrate many Buddhist practitioners, who are equally accomplished in their pursuit of the true nature of all things:

If we say that the use of science is to guide human beings out of their misconception about what themselves, society, life, and the universe really are, then the Buddhadharma is undeniably the highest, most superior form of science. What other forms of scientific knowledge can, like Buddhism, immediately cut to the illusory nature of things, disguised by

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*fo li cheng* 智海浪花: 讲述125位知识分子的学佛历程 [Flowing tides in the ocean of wisdom: Stories of 125 intellectuals about learning the dharma] (Hong Kong: Xin yi tang, 2001). This collection has been reprinted by multiple Buddhist monasteries across China and other publishers, attesting to the popular demand for it. Thirty-one stories from the collection are also republished in a 2014 publication, with some alterations including name changes. Suodaji Kanbu, *Xing hao you fan nao: 31 wei li xiang zhe de xin ling zhi lv* 幸好有烦恼: 31位理想者的心灵之旅 [Fortunate to be troubled: The spiritual journey of 31 idealists] (Beijing: Zhong guo you yi chu ban gong si, 2014).

10. *Flowing Tides* is not the first book that attempts to capture and make sense of the phenomenon of a "Buddhism fever" among Han Chinese intellectuals. Two other collections contain relevant biographical materials of these Han Chinese Tibetan Buddhists: see Chen Xiaodong 陈晓东, *Ning ma de hong hui: Jin ri la rong shan zhong de yi kuai mi cheng jing tu* 宁玛的红辉: 今日喇荣山中的一块密乘净土 [Blazing brilliance of the Nyingma school: A Pure Land of tantric Buddhism in the Larung Valley today] (Lanzhou: Gan su min zu chu ban she, 1999), and Wu, Yutian 吴玉天, *Fang xue yu da shi: Xi zang mi zong kao cha fang tan ji shi* 访雪域大师: 西藏密宗考察访谈纪实 [Visiting Buddhist masters in the land of snow: Documentation and interviews on tantric Buddhism in Tibet] (Lanzhou: Gan su min zu chu ban she, 2005). Chen's *Blazing Brilliance of the Nyingma School* was written in 1997, around the same time as *Flowing Tides*, and provides 30 vignettes of individuals and events taking place at Larung at the time, from eminent masters like Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok to ordinary practitioners, both Tibetan and non-Tibetan. Wu's *Visiting Buddhist Masters in the Land of Snow*, on the other hand, is an autobiographical account of the author's visit to Tibetan Buddhist sites and his interactions with Tibetan lamas. Compared to these two, *Flowing Tides* represents the biggest collection of narrative accounts about Han Chinese Tibetan Buddhists at Larung, and the most authoritative one, as it is compiled by Khenpo Sodargye, the lama for all Han Chinese disciples.

their manifold manifestations? What other scientists can, like the Buddha, gain insight into the true nature of the universe through only direct perception (Skt. *pratyakṣa*, Chn. 现量), without relying on any physical tools for experiment or mental inferences based on discriminating thoughts?

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If we preach with the Buddha's words to the letter, the incomparably sacred Dharma might not attract much secular interest. However, if demonstrated by [the conversion of] the intellectuals, who are widely respected, [the Dharma] will no doubt resonate with many.<sup>11</sup>

For this reason, Khenpo Sodargye decided to share the stories of these "intellectual Buddhists" (Chn. 知识分子佛教徒), most of whom have worked or studied abroad or have a college degree, or both, with a wider audience, so as to "remove the misunderstanding about Buddhists in common folks due to ignorance."<sup>12</sup> At the beginning of each account, he provides background information about the protagonist, introducing them to the readers; in the end, he concludes with an analysis of their views of Buddhism as well as some occasional personal reflection. The core narrative consists of stories of how these intellectuals transformed from being casually interested in Buddhism to finally taking refuge and becoming professional practitioners; some even became full-time monastics and stayed on at Larung or other monasteries. In other words, they have traded their Western suits for Buddhist monastic robes.

These accounts provide us with a glimpse behind the mass interest in Buddhism, especially Tibetan Buddhism, from the 1980s onward, and the perspective from these new Buddhists, as related by themselves. While the veracity of many of these accounts can hardly be determined (Khenpo Sodargye admitted to having changed some of the names and biographical details; many of the practitioners who lived at Larung in the 1990s have already left; I am only able to identify one case where the protagonist is related to a public figure<sup>13</sup>), they remain important to our understanding as

11. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 1–2.

12. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 4.

13. This is the story of Zhang Lei 张雷, who is the brother of Zhang Chaoyang 张朝阳 or Charles Zhang, the founder and CEO of Sohu Inc. (Chn. 搜狐), a Chinese internet company.



a discourse Larung leaders adopted and presented to the public. This discourse has certainly worked: the collection became a bestseller and is still cited by many Han Chinese Buddhists I interviewed at Larung from 2017 to 2020, almost two decades after its publication. Thirty-one stories from it were selected and reproduced as a smaller collection in 2014.<sup>14</sup> Khenpo Sodargye carries on with an impressive number of popular Buddhism books in Chinese and has become arguably the best-selling author in this category and one of the most celebrated Buddhist teachers in China today.<sup>15</sup>

The 125 accounts contain life stories of intellectual Buddhists of both genders and include both monastics and laypeople. They are from all over China (a few from abroad), from the northeastern province of Heilongjiang to the southern part of Guizhou, from as far west as Xinjiang and as far east as Shanghai. Table 1 gives some insight into the gender and monastic status of these disciples.

As advertised in the preface, most of these disciples are well educated (table 2). Over half of them hold a bachelor's degree, and almost one-quarter of them have earned postgraduate degrees, forming an unusually highly educated group. (For comparison, 326 in every 100,000 people in China were enrolled in higher education institutions in 1990, and 723 in 100,000 in 2000—roughly 0.3% and 0.7%, respectively.<sup>16</sup>) They are predominantly Han Chinese in ethnicity. Of the 125 included, only two are Chinese Mongols, two are Koreans in China, and one is Manchu. They also have some international exposure in their background: one comes from Belgium and a number of these practitioners have lived or are living or studying abroad

14. Suodaji kanbu, *Fortunate to Be Troubled*, also see note 7 above.

15. The author page of Khenpo Sodargye (Suodaji Kanbu) on douban.com (Chn. 豆瓣网, the Chinese equivalent of Goodread) records 62 books. Before 2000, most of his books are translations of Tibetan Buddhist literature, including commentaries, instructions to laypeople, and hagiographies of Buddhist masters or the life story of the Buddha. Since the publication of the *Flowing Tides* in 2001, Khenpo Sodargye has continued his translation and scholastic writing, but he has also expanded the genre as well as the scope of his writing. This latter category includes popular introductory books to Buddhism such as *Xinling de nuoya fangzhou* 心灵的诺亚方舟 [Noah's ark of the mind], *Ku caishi rensheng* 苦才是人生 [Living through suffering], and *Zuo caishi dedao* 做才是得到 [Achieving through doing], as well as his own commentary on Confucian classics such as the *Classic of Filial Piety* 孝经 and *Disciplines for Pupils and Children* 弟子规.

16. "Education Statistical Yearbook of China," *EPS China Data*, accessed August 2, 2020, <http://www.epschinadata.com/>

TABLE 1. Gender and Monastic Status in *Flowing Tides*

Gender	Lay/Monastic	Number
Male	Lay	29
Male	Monastic	45
Female	Lay	29
Female	Monastic	22

Note: There are slightly more male protagonists in *Flowing Tides* than there are females. This is not necessarily a representation of the gender ratio of Han Chinese disciples at Larung. Larung is known for its attention to female monastic education and has attracted more female than male pilgrims in general. The higher number of male Buddhists interviewed for this volume could be attributed to the male monastic identity of Khenpo Sodargye, who is bound by the *vinaya*, or monastic disciplines, and will need to exercise extra caution when interacting with women, monastic or not. For a discussion on female monastic education at Larung, see Jue Liang and Andrew S. Taylor, “Tilling the Fields of Merit: The Institutionalization of Feminine Enlightenment in Tibet’s First Khenmo Program,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 27 (2020): 231–62.

TABLE 2. Education Level in *Flowing Tides*

Highest Academic Degree	
High School	1
Associate Degree (Chn. 大专)	29
Bachelor’s Degree	64
Master’s Degree	15
Doctorate	15
n/a	1

(including the United States, the United Kingdom, Singapore, and South Korea). In short, these intellectual Buddhists are well above average in education level, and are well traveled and relatively affluent.<sup>17</sup> They wield more social and economic capital and inhabit the middle to upper echelons of Chinese society.

17. Although the income level is not a topic of much interest in the collection, in relating their personal encounter with Buddhism, many discuss their previous professions as highly paid. However, financial stability or prosperity does not ultimately satisfy their need for a spiritual life. In one case, a laywoman named Minglan 明兰 could easily afford transpacific flights from her home in Canada to Larung just to attend an exam on the seven treatises in her advanced Dharma class. On another occasion, Khenpo Sodargye mentioned a donation of one million RMB by Yuanbo 圆波 to build an assembly hall for Han Chinese monastics, commending his generosity. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 278–79, 644–51.

## THE PATH LEADING TO BUDDHISM

In this section, I will sketch out some common narrative threads shared by the experience of many protagonists in *Flowing Tides*. These include their reason behind converting to Buddhism, a shared image of Buddhism as they perceive it, and their collective impression of religious life and activities in the two decades between 1980 and 2000.

For many protagonists in *Flowing Tides* as well as millions of people who reached adulthood shortly after the Cultural Revolution, the national discussion on the meaning of life (Chn. 人生意义大讨论) in the early 1980s marks one of the most memorable ideological shifts in their formative age. Peng Lie 彭列, a former farming expert from northeastern China, cites this discussion as the force that prompted him to reflect on the meaning of life and to ultimately find the answer in Buddhism, as he recalls his high school years:

At that time, the *gaokao*<sup>18</sup> should be the most important life event that determines my fate. But the nationwide discussion on the meaning of life had a greater impact on me. It was a discussion that swept the nation from 1979–1980. Initiated by an open letter to the editorial office of *China Youth* 中国青年 by Pan Xiao 潘晓,<sup>19</sup> entitled “Why Does the Path of Life Grow Narrower and Narrower,”<sup>20</sup> many propaganda units organized public debates on the different views of life. What is the meaning of life? There were so many widely different opinions on this matter. I read almost all of the articles on this issue. Although I had to complete a lot of practice tests in order to prepare for the *gaokao*, I’d rather lose some sleep and get to an answer to the meaning of life, so that

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18. *Gaokao* 高考, or the National College Entrance Examination, is a nationwide, annual standardized test that is a prerequisite for entering any public higher education institutions in China. For the longest time, the *gaokao* has been the singular determinant of high school graduates’ fates—if and where they will go to college, what they will major in, and whether there will be tuition aid or scholarships.

19. Pan Xiao is a pseudonym combining parts of the names of the two authors who have contributed to this open letter, Pan Wei 潘炜 and Huang Xiaojun 黄晓菊. Both were invited by *China Youth* to write about their own views on life. *China Youth* is a magazine founded and supervised by the Communist Youth League of China (Chn. 共青团中).

20. Pan Xiao, “Why Does the Path of Life Grow Narrower and Narrower?,” 人生的路啊, 怎么越走越窄, *China Youth* 5 (May 1980).

I could improve my understanding of life and society. The discussion on life's meaning spread wider and wider by the day, people wrote in with piles and piles of letters to the editorial office; finally, *China Youth* had to suspend the discussion. As you can see, different views on life and the world are questions people have passionately inquired after for the past centuries; however, no satisfactory answer was found. It is after I started learning about the Dharma that I realized the key to life's meaning has been perfectly laid out in Buddhist scriptures and treatises.<sup>21</sup>

Others in *Flowing Tides* share Peng's sentiment. Ling Ming 林明, a biostatistics PhD from the University of Michigan, regards her intellectual achievements as meaningless compared to her understanding of the truth of life or the purpose of humankind. Having studied biology as an undergraduate at Peking University, one of the most elite universities in China, she continued her postgraduate research in the United States. However, her dissatisfaction with the explanatory power of modern science only increased as she progressed in her studies. She was in particular tormented by the fraught ethics of animal testing and finally decided to come to Larung in search of an antidote to the materialistic world and to her growing sense of alienation.<sup>22</sup> Another monk, Yuanlian 圆莲, also remarked that, ever since college, he had long wondered about the ultimate purpose of human life. This sense of emptiness could not be fulfilled by the loving care of his parents or by his prestigious status as a college student. He began to search for an answer by reading extensively, from *qigong* 气功 manuals to Daoist and Buddhist scriptures. It was finally through encountering the *Diamond Sutra* (Chn. 金刚经) that he found what he was looking for.<sup>23</sup>

It is not uncommon for people to survey different religious or spiritual practices before finally settling on one. In *Flowing Tides*, many of the intellectual Buddhists were also familiar with popular *qigong* practices at the time<sup>24</sup> or with organized religions like Christianity. Of the 125 subjects, 28

21. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 331–32.

22. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 41–46.

23. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 433.

24. In his book *Qigong Fever*, David Palmer offers a history of the rise and fall of *qigong* from 1949 to 1999. At the founding of the People's Republic of China, *qigong* started as an officially backed medical practice to counter Western medicine. After a forced hiatus (along with virtually all other cultural practices) during the Cultural Revolution, it came back in a revitalized form that centers around demonstrations of paranormal feats and claimed to be

of them explicitly relate their experience practicing *qigong*. A former *qigong* practitioner, Zhixian 智贤, mentions that *qigong* practices provide a bridge between modern methods and traditional techniques of the body and open up previously concealed potential within oneself.<sup>25</sup> While for some, *qigong* is an entry point to which a lifelong spiritual journey begins, other former *qigong* practitioners (and Khenpo Sodargye) see it in a less positive light, arguing that “compared to the Dharma, most *qigong* practices are not the most superior (Chn. 究竟).”<sup>26</sup> As for those who were exposed to Christianity, some considered its tenets uninspiring and criticized it for its idolatry, while acknowledging that philanthropic efforts by church organizations are worth emulating.<sup>27</sup>

For these disciples, Buddhism emerged as the most attractive religious or spiritual path for them. What exactly about Buddhism makes it stand out? In the next section, I will analyze three prominent features of the version of Buddhism as propagated in the *Flowing Tides*. Buddhism is scientific rather than superstitious, is transcultural rather than locally confined, and has coexisted with other elements of traditional Chinese culture for a long time.

### BUDDHISM, A SCIENTIFIC, TRANSCULTURAL, AND TRADITIONAL RELIGION

In the accounts of their conversion to Buddhism, these Han Chinese intellectuals discuss different reasons that make Buddhism their choice for religious practice. For them, Buddhism provides a convincing case that answers life’s most important question, and is particularly well suited to the needs of their time. Three themes emerge in their characterization of Buddhism (and in Khenpo Sodargye’s commentary as well). Buddhism is compatible with or even transcends modern science; its reach goes beyond the Chinese cultural milieu, captivating Eastern and Western minds alike; at the same

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able to withstand rigorous scientific investigation. By the 1990s, *qigong* has become a national movement, giving rise to many renowned masters and networks of practitioners, wealth, and power. David A. Palmer, *Qigong Fever: Body, Science and Utopia in China* (London: Hurst, 2007).

25. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 271.

26. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 268.

27. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 429.

time, the long history of Buddhism in China also attests to its legitimacy and status as a homegrown tradition.

The first defining characteristic of Buddhism for these intellectuals is that it is scientific, that is, Buddhism as a method of inquiry is compatible with, if not more advanced than, science. An apology for Buddhism against criticism from those who sided with science runs through *Flowing Tides* as a common theme. In "Analyzing Buddhism with Scientific Methods," a lay Buddhist, Wu Jin 吴金, laid out the following claim:

When I began to analyze Buddhist teachings with a scientific worldview and methodology, I discovered that standing in front of me is such a massive treasure house. If I were to make a judgment with my limited knowledge of modern science, I will say that "science," as represented by the modern disciplines of engineering, science, and liberal arts, will culminate in the Buddhadharmā. I really do hope that the descent of Maitreya will be the ultimate result of scientific developments.<sup>28</sup>

To prove his point, Wu quotes a famous statement from the *Heart Sutra*: form is no different from emptiness; emptiness is no different from form; form is emptiness; emptiness is form (色不异空, 空不异色, 色即是空, 空即是色).<sup>29</sup> Here, the "form" represents everything in the universe except for the mind, while "emptiness" stands not for nonexistence, but for the true nature of things. Expressed in the language of physics, "emptiness" is analogous to energy, while "form" is the manifestation of said energy. In this way, the form/emptiness teaching expresses the law of conservation of energy.<sup>30</sup> He further debunked the claim that "science proves that Buddhism is superstition" by arguing that science is not a static body of knowledge, but a method for an objective, fair exploration. The fact that we cannot explain supernatural phenomena using the knowledge we have does not make these phenomena superstitious.<sup>31</sup> Buddhism even meets the reproducibility

28. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 324–325.

29. The *Heart Sutra* is considered the pinnacle of the Perfection of Wisdom (Skt. *prajñāpāramitā*) teachings in Mahāyāna Buddhism, and is the most well-known and widely recited Buddhist scripture in East Asian Buddhism. For a complete translation, see Donald S. Lopez, *The Heart Sutra Explained: Indian and Tibetan Commentaries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 19–20.

30. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 325.

31. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 327.

requirement for scientific research—the experiences of Buddhist practitioners past and present are the perfect example.<sup>32</sup>

In “My Scientific View of Buddhism,” another monk, Huixian 慧贤, clarifies the teaching on interdependence and emptiness using the example of visual processing. In order to form a visual image of leaves, two elements are needed—the perception of light and its reflection of leaves in the eyes, and the processing of such a perception in the brain. This process is not a direct reproduction of leaves in the brain, but a reconstruction of the image of leaves through the medium of light. The processing of sensory information and the subsequent conviction of things as really existing are based on the sense faculties and mediated experience; for Huixian, this aligns well with the Buddhist theory of perception, which breaks down the cognitive process into a tripartite system of attribute, sensory basis, and consciousness (Skt. *guṇa-āyatana-vijñāna*, Chn. 尘-根-识).<sup>33</sup> In the eyes of these intellectual Buddhists, Buddhism, a tradition founded over two millennia ago, not only corresponds with discoveries in modern science, its profound wisdom could also very well transcend the limitations of scientific inquiry and lead us into further advancement of knowledge.

A second aspect that makes Buddhism an attractive option for these intellectuals is that it not only is compatible with the scientific method of inquiry but also attracts practitioners far and wide. In keeping with the zeitgeist of opening up and reform, many protagonists in *Flowing Tides* have been in contact with, studied, or even lived in Western countries. For them, the interest in Buddhism and other “Eastern” spiritual traditions among their Euro-American friends and colleagues attests to the transcultural, timeless appeal of Buddhism.

The first story in *Flowing Tides*, titled “The Dharma That Traverses the World,” features Aizesheng 艾泽生 (Edgerton?),<sup>34</sup> a Belgian Buddhist who had received a doctorate degree in traditional Chinese medicine in China and was an extraordinarily diligent practitioner. In his conversation with Khenpo Sodargye, Aizesheng sums up his reason for coming to China and practicing Buddhism:

32. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 329.

33. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 28–29.

34. Since the accounts in *Flowing Tides* are provided only in Chinese without English originals, it is unlikely that Aizesheng’s full name can be discovered, or that he can be identified.



With the arrival of the Digital Age, distances between different regions are shortened, and exchanges between Eastern and Western cultures are more widespread. More and more Westerners came to know Buddhism and became Buddhists. They are in particular impressed with the spirit of compassion and equality in Buddhist teachings. In a modern society, not only is material production highly developed, people also demand a more advanced form of civilization. In the past decade, various types of organizations are founded abroad with a dedicated purpose of protecting the environment and animal rights; many people actively took part in them. The number of people who became vegetarians and refrained from killing animals is also growing. In response to this trend, some airlines started to offer vegetarian options on international flights. Families built birdhouses to feed the birds in their backyard, so that they will not kill other insects. Philanthropic institutions took care of homeless animals. Even the Queen of Netherlands was criticized by animal protection agencies for her hunting activities. We can see that the moral principles of kindness in this world have no conflict with Buddhist teaching. With an increasing number of people who aspire to integrity and pursue the truth of life, the prophecy of Master Padmasambhava is gradually coming to realization. I do not doubt that in the near future, the Dharma will captivate the attention of fortunate ones all over the world, and eventually lead countless sentient beings to their own Pure Land.<sup>35</sup>

Another monk from Taiwan, Lianguang 蓮光, also refers to the widespread interest in yoga, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism in the West. He laments the loss of the true Buddhist transmission in the land where it had blossomed for a long time:

Nowadays in monasteries in India and Nepal, many Westerners are studying the Dharma. I have even witnessed an American Buddhist passing his Geshe exam in Sera Monastery in Southern India.<sup>36</sup> The more civilized a country becomes, the more prosperous the Dharma is:

35. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 20.

36. For a discussion of the community of Western monks and their study of Tibetan Buddhist scholasticism, including perspectives from the first Westerner to receive a Geshe Lharampa degree (the highest scholastic degree in the Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism), Georges Dreyfus, see Georges Dreyfus and Ven. Jampa Kaldan, "A Remarkable Feat by Extraordinary Men: The Western Geshe in Two Acts," *Mandala* (April–May 2007), 27–29.



such is the global trend of our time. Looking back to China now, even though it was a major Buddhist country, [its cultural traditions like] calligraphy and the art of tea—not to mention Zen—are all carried off by the Japanese and given names in Japanese such as *shodō* and *sadō*, so that many foreigners think these traditions originated from Japan.<sup>37</sup>

Yuanshang 圆上, a statistics PhD turned Buddhist nun, encountered Buddhism from a different direction. She first encountered a book on past life recollections during hypnotic therapy, composed by a Yale-graduated psychiatrist, Dr. Brian Weiss.<sup>38</sup> Titled *Many Lives, Many Masters*, this book changed Yuanshang's previous conviction that reincarnation is all made up superstition, and changed her attitude toward Buddhism.<sup>39</sup> Compared to Aizesheng and Lianguang, who view Buddhism as a superior spiritual path that can win over Western minds in itself, Yuanshang took a more circuitous path that led her first to Western psychiatry and then to Buddhism.

In addition to attracting many Western practitioners, Buddhism is also perceived not as a foreign religion, but as an essential part of traditional Chinese culture. Few of the Han Chinese intellectual Buddhists distinguish between the Tibetan and Chinese forms of Buddhism. When Tibetan Buddhism is singled out for discussion, it is usually with an emphasis on its scholastic tradition,<sup>40</sup> its lineage of renowned masters and vast literature,<sup>41</sup> and its supposedly unbroken and unadulterated transmission, especially the tantric teachings and practices.<sup>42</sup> Many of these Han Chinese Bud-

37. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 294–95.

38. Brian Weiss, *Many Lives, Many Masters* (London: Piatkus, 1994).

39. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 36.

40. For example, Huang Xi 黄曦, a Han Chinese Buddhist, is particularly drawn to the debate tradition in Tibetan Buddhism, and considers debating the best way to approach the ultimate truth. In the preface to his life story, Khenpo Sodargye comments that Tibetan Buddhism preserves “the most superior tradition of philosophical debate,” which is quintessential in determining the true meaning of Buddhist teaching. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 36, 652.

41. Many protagonists in *Flowing Tides* mention reading hagiographies of Tibetan Buddhist masters like Milarepa, Tsongkhapa, and Mipham Rinpoche. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 136, 211.

42. A monk named Lianguang summarizes the reasons behind the popularity of Tibetan Buddhism as follows: (1) Tibetan Buddhism uses logics and debate to establish the true teaching; (2) it contains a detailed, gradual system of practice that cuts through illusions and ignorance; (3) there are many practices distinct to Tibetan Buddhism that are not shared by

dhists have studied with both Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist masters or made pilgrimages to Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and sacred sites alike, or both.<sup>43</sup> It is not uncommon for them to adopt an eclectic body of Buddhist knowledge that includes Chan or Zen teachings, Pure Land chantings, and Tibetan Buddhist yogic practices. In other words, the Buddhism in *Flowing Tides* is one that transcends the ethnic boundaries of Han and Tibetan, and one that boasts a long history of almost 2,000 years in China. For example, Cao Liangbo's 曹良波 entry into Buddhism was classical Chinese art and literature:

The paintings and poems of my favorite Tang poet, Wang Wei, is infused with Zen aesthetics. His Zen paintings in particular, by using light-toned shades in ink paintings, reveal a mind that is peaceful, expansive, and pure. This produced an intensive curiosity about Buddhism in me. Moving forward in the history of Chinese art, one would come to the remarkable realization that many famous writers, poets, artists—from Bai Jūyi, Liu Zongyuan, Du Mu, Ouyang Xiu, Su Dongpo, Huang Tingjian, Lu You, Dong Qichang, Zhu Da, to Liang Qichao, Xū Beihong, Master Hongyi, and Feng Zikai—are all deeply familiar with Buddhist teachings. In other words, we can no longer speak about their artistic style if we remove Buddhist influence and elements in their works.

When assuming a higher vantage point, I discovered that, to my surprise, since it arrived in China in the Eastern Han Dynasty, Buddhism has integrated itself into the deepest level of the Chinese national character and the undercurrents of Chinese civilization. It has become an indivisible part of our spiritual, cultural, and material life. Buddhist culture manifests itself everywhere, whether it is within the realm of arts—architecture, painting, poetry, fiction, plays, calligraphy, or fashion—or any aspect of social life.<sup>44</sup>

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other Buddhist traditions, and are particularly effective at dispelling obstacles on the path to liberation. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 293–294.

43. Many in *Flowing Tides* mention their meetings with Master Qingding 清定, former abbot of Zhaojue Monastery 昭觉寺 in Chengdu and a Buddhist master who is well versed in both the Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Some even took refuge with Master Qingding or were ordained by him. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 18, 164, 210, 222, 324, 747, 760, 812, 902.

44. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 144–45.

Some even talk about Buddhist teaching and traditional Chinese culture as if they are indistinguishable. Wu Ming 吴铭, a lay Buddhist with a PhD degree, bemoans the lack of an education in “traditional culture” (Chn. 传统文化), especially about how learned people of the past viewed the world and human life. For Wu, the deeper he dives down into Buddhist wisdom, the more he realizes the hubris and superficiality of so-called modern civilization. Criticizing ancient culture without understanding its depth is like seeing only a few leaves, but not the towering tree.<sup>45</sup>

The propagation of Buddhism can further be coupled with other Chinese religious and philosophical systems. As discussed in the previous section, many protagonists explored other spiritual options before coming to Buddhism, and it is not uncommon for them to see these options as compatible with, or even reinforcing, each other. When Ling Ming discusses her mission to promote the spread of Buddhism, it entails combining the power of love and compassion evident in both Tibetan Buddhism and Confucian teachings on humanity (Chn. 仁) and human relations.<sup>46</sup>

Altogether, these three characteristics of Buddhism—scientific, transnational, and traditional—form a timely answer to the spiritual crisis and the nationwide discussion going on in China. Like qigong and New Confucianism, Buddhism traces its history back to classical Chinese culture, which was regaining its popularity at the time. It is also not a form of superstition that belongs to an Old China that will need to be eradicated with the founding of a New China. As for the “Tibetan” part of Tibetan Buddhism taught and practiced at Larung, which used to be seen with suspicion, if not contempt, by Han Chinese intellectuals, it can be addressed by emphasizing the historical interactions between Sino-Tibetan Buddhist traditions, and by obscuring the boundaries between Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism.<sup>47</sup>

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45. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 720.

46. Suodaji Kanbu, *Flowing Tides*, 46.

47. Khenpo Sodargye has also authored another apologetic treatise in response to 19 questions raised by Master Jiqun 济群, a prolific Chinese scholar-monk in the Weyang Chan transmission. This work explicitly engages with questions or stereotypes Han Chinese practitioners traditionally associated with Tibetan Buddhism. These include the lack of vegetarianism and sexual celibacy in some Tibetan Buddhist monastics, the question of proper transmission in tantric practice, the possibility of enlightenment within this life, and the relationship between esoteric and exoteric Buddhism. Suodaji Kanbu, *Zang mi wen da lu* 藏密问答录 [Questions and answers on Tibetan esoteric Buddhism] (Seda: Se da la rung wu ming fo xue yuan, 2002).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Despite its humble beginning as a small encampment—a “Gar” (Tib. *sgar*) in its literal sense—Larung has hosted many generations of Han Chinese and Tibetan Buddhists since it began offering these teaching assemblies in the 1990s. The size of the group grew significantly over time, from a few hundreds to over 100,000, until a recent limitation on enrollment size and number of participants at teaching gatherings.<sup>48</sup> Some of the participants today witnessed their parents or grandparents doing just the same thing; some of them were deprived of that. The sacred sites may have shifted place, digital counters worn on the fingers may have replaced the 108-bead rosaries, but the tradition itself is again found, and even revitalized, in its new emanation.

The case of Larung Gar and other institutions points to the fact that Buddhism and other religions do not remain undercurrents in a supposedly secular or atheist Chinese society. Rather, religion remains integral to people’s lives and worldviews. Even as Buddhist institutions like Larung Gar face immense challenges in continuing and expanding their influence, their skillful adaption to the social, cultural, and political landscape in China proves time and again the felt need for a religious life. By employing the Buddhist concept of expedient means and rebranding Buddhism, especially Tibetan Buddhism, as a scientific, transnational, and at the same time quintessentially Chinese religion, the leaders at Larung Gar deliver a vision of Buddhism that has succeeded in responding to the needs of its time.

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48. One of the abbots at Larung Gar told us in a 2018 interview that the official enrollment number at Larung Gar is capped at 5,000 monastics, including 3,500 nuns and 1,500 monks. Limitations on gathering size have also been in place since 2018, resulting in a reduction of the crowd size as well as publicity. For a discussion of the gender situation at Larung, see Jue Liang and Andrew S. Taylor, “Tilling the Fields of Merit: The Institutionalization of Feminine Enlightenment in Tibet’s First Khenmo Program,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 27 (2020): 231–62; also see Padma tsho (Baimacuo) and Sarah Jacoby, “Gender Equality in and on Tibetan Buddhist Nuns’ Terms,” *Religions* 11, no. 543 (October 2020): 1–19.

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