

DRAFT PAPER

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Retaking the Monastic Vows: Chinese lay Buddhists' Struggle for the Authenticity of Monkhood in the 1980s*

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Abstract

This contribution will examine the role played by lay Buddhists in the Vinaya revival in the post-Mao China. During the Cultural Revolution, a great number of Buddhist monks were forced to return to laity and be married. In the beginning of the 1980s, some of them were recalled back to the re-opened monasteries for assuming religious services, even though, strictly speaking, they were still in a state of "vow break" (*pojie* 破戒). Contrary to the indifference of the official Buddhist Association and the Government departments of religious affairs, some lay Buddhists in Shanghai felt it as intolerable and manifested their protest in different ways against the "false monks". Under such a pressure, a number of monks (including a famous local Buddhist leader) had to "retake the vows" (*fujie* 複戒), thereby confessing symbolically their religious lapse. Based on interviews with witnesses of the event and on about 200 private letters of Buddhists on this issue exchanged during 1986-1988, this research will attempt to explore this cover-up in the contemporary history of Chinese Buddhism, by analyzing the positions and strategies of both the official Buddhist Association and lay Buddhists in their game around the authenticity of monkhood and the legitimacy of monastic authority.

本項研究旨在揭示後毛時代居士對維護戒律傳統發揮的作用。文革期間，大量僧人被迫還俗，娶妻生子。文革之後，其中一部分僧人被召會重新開放的寺院，但是，他們事實上已經處於“破戒”狀態。和當時的官方與佛協的曖昧態度不同，虔誠的在家佛徒對此難以容忍。在此背景下，上海的一些居士以各種方式向當局抗議“假和尚”的存在，最終迫使上海三大寺院的一些僧人（包括一些著名僧人）重新受戒。根據我收集到的 1986-1988 間一些佛教徒的近 200 件私人信件以及對一位重要當事人的訪談，本研究將嘗試重建這一在官方敘事中毫無痕跡的歷史，揭示這一僧俗之間圍繞僧人身份的本真性和僧團權威的正當性展開的博弈。

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One of the greatest difficulties in writing the history of contemporary Chinese Buddhism consists in the unreliability of the available materials. On the one hand, religions have always been a highly politically sensitive subject since 1949, and public statements about religions have been severely regulated. Since more than six decades, official discourse has not only completely dominated the publications of the Buddhist Association of China (BAC, Zhongguo fojiao xiehui 中國佛教協會) and its branches, but also infiltrated Buddhists' individual narratives. Because of political habitus and self-censorship, a lot of the historical memory involved in political and social tensions and conflicts has been deliberately hidden¹. On the other hand, the history writing in the Buddhist circle itself also has the tradition of “not speaking the unmentionables about those who are respectable, who are close to us or who are the virtuous” (wei zunzhi hui 為尊者諱, wei qinzhi hui 為親者諱, wei xianzhehui 為賢者諱), as in the official Confucian history writing. Therefore the recorders keep very cautious on existed controversies any potentially contentious issue. Admittedly, the primary goal of historical writing in religious perspectives is not to fully account and analyze facts, but to shape authority, orthodoxy, and continuity. Therefore, the revisionist means such as modification cover up and deification are commonly used, in an understandable way.²

Under such circumstances, the first self-advice that a historian should carefully keep in mind is to avoid the traps created by official history and commemorative history³. As I pointed out in a previous study⁴, this requires a technique of balance: on the one hand, one should keep a kind of “sympathetic understanding” on history and its representations; on the other hand, s/he must shoulder the responsibility of constructing historical subject and try to present the multiple stories that are obscured by or discordant from the dominant narrative. For this very reason, given the various internal and external tensions the Buddhism faces in modern and contemporary China, I think the Buddhist history writing from the sociological point of view should give priority to those conflicting key events⁵. History is not only made of conflicts, but the transformation triggered by the confrontation of various forces and discourses, however, is the main driving force of history.

As an effort in this direction, this study attempts to reconstitute a conflictual key event of the 1980s based on unofficial materials. Around 1949 when the Communist Party of China (CPC) gained power in China and in the 1950s, the new political environment highly hostile to religions have already caused many monastics to renounce their temples. The Cultural Revolution,

¹ For example, what impressed me the most is that the way of speaking of some Buddhist leaders are completely different before and after 1949. In addition, Buddhists often evaded the experience of the Cultural Revolution during my field investigation.

² Hagiographical biographies are a typical form of this kind of historical writing. See Campo, Daniela. *La construction de la sainteté dans la Chine moderne: la vie du maître bouddhiste Xuyun*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2013.

³ For a criticism on commemorative history, see Pierre Bourdieu, “Sur les rapports entre la sociologie et l'histoire en Allemagne et en France,” entretien avec Lutz Raphaël, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 106-107, 1995, p. 108-122.

⁴ Ji Zhe 汲喆. 2013. “重寫佛教史: 從傳記、群像到場域,” *人文宗教研究* III: 263-277.

⁵ See Ji Zhe. “Buddhist Institutional Innovations,” in *Modern Chinese Religion II: 1850-2015*, eds. by Vincent Goossaert, Jan Kiely and John Lagerwey. Leiden: Brill, 2016, p. 731-766.

begun in 1966, meant that the elimination of religions is materialized from the ideological ideal as a concrete policy implementation. As far as Chinese Buddhism is concerned, almost all monks and nuns are forced to return to laity. Of course, some people still stuck to the basic precepts of celibacy and vegetarianism, maintained subjectively the Buddhist identity and even secretly conducted religious activities. However, open collective practice was no longer allowed to exist since. Others married and had children, living completely the life of lay people. Soon after the end of the Cultural Revolution, the relative relaxation of religious policies and the need to develop a tourism economy enabled the progressive restoration of the institutional Buddhism from the early 1980s. At this time, some monastics, especially those who served as ministries before the Cultural Revolution, and were highly recognized were recalled to the reopened monasteries, to take charge of the day-to-day management and reception. Some of them publicly performed as monastics, although they still maintain their own family and in fact were in a state of “vow break” (*pojie* 破戒). According to the information that I get, the sangha's strict observance of the precepts was far beyond the priority issues of the government or official Buddhist associations. However, devout lay Buddhists (*jushi* 居士) could hardly tolerate this situation. In Shanghai, some lay Buddhists complained to authorities about the monastic management by “fake monks” (*jia heshang* 假和尚 or *weiseng* 偽僧), eventually forcing certain Buddhist monks in the three major monasteries in Shanghai – Longhua Temple 龍華寺, Jing'an Temple 靜安寺 and Yufo Temple 玉佛寺 - to “retake the vows” (*fujie* 複戒) in a low-key manner.

This event of monks obliged to retake the vows under the pressure of lay Buddhists may be unique in the history of Chinese Buddhism. Since the event was a blow to the monks involved, including the Buddhist leaders who then occupied an important position in Shanghai, and to the authority of the government, it has so far not been seen in any written records. In 2010, I visited the lay Buddhist Li⁶, the organizer of this protest movement in Shanghai. Thanks to Mr Li's trust, he opened the archive covered with dust for more than 20 years and allowed me to copy all the relevant information he kept. Among these materials, apart from his complaint letter, the particularly precious part is that of more than 200 letters and notes sent to him by Buddhists throughout the country from 1986 to 1988. The clear majority of these letters are responses to Li's claim of purifying the sangha. Through the studies of these materials, this paper tends to figure out the game of the lay Buddhists, the local monastic community and the political powers around the authenticity of monkhood and the legitimacy of Shangha authority, to clear the main clues of the event, and to explore the internal ecology of the Chinese Buddhism freshly restored in the 1980s.

1. Context: Buddhism in Shanghai under the Communist regime

Shanghai is located between Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces where the Han Buddhism was the most prosperous. In the first half of the twentieth century, Shanghai, as the center of China's modern industry and commerce as well as its

⁶ Given the sensitivity of this event, this article has hidden the real name of the person in question.

window to the outside world, had also become a paradise for various attempts of modernization of Buddhism in China. The large number of leaders of sangha and lay Buddhists have gathered here to make this metropolitan a hub of Buddhism throughout the whole Jiannan region. Until the Japanese invasion, Shanghai was the main sphere of influence of the Chinese Buddhist Association (Zhongguo fojiao hui 中國佛教會) led by Yuanying 圓瑛 (1878-1953) and the Pure Land Buddhist leader Yinguang 印光 (1862-1940)⁷. Longhua Temple, Jing'an Temple and Yufo Temple, the three major monasteries, held large fields and properties, and enjoyed a wide influence. In the meantime, under the auspices of the economic, cultural and political elites, the mobilization mode “lay Buddhist Grove” (*jushi lin* 居士林) has been initiated in Shanghai to deploy Buddhist activities including mainly charity and publishing⁸. The Anti-Japanese War inflicted these Buddhist movements. It was only after 1945, that Buddhism in Shanghai had gradually resumed its activities. However, only a few years later, Buddhism in Shanghai was rapidly destroyed under CPC occupation. At first, many monastics were forced or voluntary returned to laity, and relatively small-scaled monasteries were closed. In 1954, the official Buddhist Association of Shanghai (BAS) was established, and began to monopolize the administration of Shanghai Buddhism. In 1955, during the “Struggle to cleanse out hidden counter-revolutionary elements” (*suqing ancangde fangeming fenzi yundong* 肅清暗藏的反革命分子運動, 1955-1956), the extremely influential Shanghai Buddhist Youth Society (Shanghai fojiao qingnian hui 上海佛教青年會) and the Tantric Diamond Bodhimāṇḍa (Jingang daochang 金剛道場) were forced to dissolve and their leaders were also arrested and imprisoned respectively for 10 to 20 years. After 1956, the groups of lay Buddhists were forced to gradually merge into the single Shanghai Lay Buddhist Grove. Since then, the BAS is mainly controlled by some monks returned to laity. These ex-monks were mostly of average status before, but they were willing to cooperate with the Chinese communists, some of them even became CPC members. After the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, all temples and Buddhist groups, including the official BAS, also stopped their activities.

Since 1979, the three major monasteries in Shanghai had been gradually reopened up and the Shanghai Lay Buddhists Grove and the Buddhist Associations of Shanghai also began to resume their activities. The Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) called back some monks well-known before the Cultural

⁷ For the impact of Master Yinguang in Shanghai and its surroundings, see Zhang Xuesong 張雪松 2011. *Fayu lingyan: Zhongguo fojiao xiandaihua lishi jinchengzhong de Yinguang fashi yanjiu* 法雨靈岩——中國佛教現代化歷史進程中的印光法師研究. Taipei: Fagu wenhua ; Jan Kiely, “The Charismatic Monk and the Chanting Masses: Master Yinguang and his Pure Land Revival Movement,” in *Making Saints in Modern China*, eds. David Ownby, Vincent Goossaert, and Ji Zhe. Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 30-77.

⁸ About the lay Buddhists activities in Shanghai at that time, see Jessup, James Brooks, “The Householder Elite: Buddhist Activism in Shanghai (1920-1956)”, PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2010; 張佳 Zhang Jia, “Shanghai shenshang jushi de zongjiao shenghuo yu fojiao xiandaihua zhuanxing: yi Wang Yiting (1867-1938) weili ” 上海紳商居士的宗教生活與佛教現代化轉型——以王一亭(1867-1938)為例, PhD. Diss., The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2014.

Revolution to take charge of the daily religious services. At that time, religions were still subjected to discriminatory repression, and not all those who were recalled were genuinely willing to return to monastic affairs. In fact, their returning to monastic life, just like their returning to laity years ago, is basically mandatory arrangement by political authorities. Among them, most monks who already had family members still maintained their existing family relationships. They didn't really go back to a monastic life, and even didn't live in a monastery. Instead, they regarded the religious work as a piece of secular job. After completing the Buddhist activity, they went back to secular dress and returned home. For example, an informant very familiar with the Buddhist community in Shanghai told me such a story: Someone went to Yufo Temple for the abbot Master ZC. But he was not in the temple, and temple administration told him go directly to ZC's home to find him. This person went to ZC's home, and met him with his wife, eating and drinking. During the interview, Li also told me that after ZC's return to laity, he became accountant. He was reluctantly to go back to the monastery. He used to say, "It was not my will to be a monk!" Later, when the abbot received more and more money, he stayed.

In the early 1980s, the monks' political and economic status cannot be compared with today. The abbots of the three major temples, though nominally the chair and vice-chairs of the BAS which had just resumed its activities, they did not really take in charge the management of the association that was still under the control of the monks returned to laity before the Cultural Revolution. As agents of the government, the positions of director of the administration committee of the three temples are all occupied by these lay people. They were not opposed to the fact that the monks in the monastery had their own family and home.

However, there were some lay Buddhists who were very dissatisfied with the management of monasteries by monks under "vow break". Among them is Li that I interviewed. Li was born in 1938, interested in religions as a child, and later became a Buddhist when he was young. He worked in a textile mill in Shanghai and had been publicly criticized during the Cultural Revolution and his home - including all his books and diaries - confiscated. In a public criticism of him, he was hit at the back of his head because of his refusal to "bow to Chairman Mao", and he was heavily traumatized by this event. Less than 50 years old, he retired due to illness, and in the early 1980s he became member of council of the BAS. His wife, who is of his age, retired as a primary school teacher. She was also an early adopter of Buddhism. In the early 1950s, she was an executive member of the juvenile division of the Shanghai Buddhist Youth Society. In short, Li is an educated lay Buddhist who is pious in his faith and supported by his family.

From 1982 to 1983, Li and Mr. Fang from the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences held an inquiry about the family situation of certain monks. This Mr. Fang himself is also a monk returned to laity. Though he himself no longer retook vows, he was against the management of temples by monks under vow break. At that time Li had pointed out on different occasions in the BAS that the monasteries in Shanghai are run by "fake monks", and "the impact is not good". However, his effort had not come to fruition.

Some events that happened between 1985 and 1986 had prompted the escalation of Li's protests. Two of them were directly related to the subject of this paper. May 1985, was hold in Yufo Temple an all-three-levels vow taking

ceremony, presided by the abbot ZC. In fact, when ZC recruited lay disciples, he was already challenged by some Buddhists to be unqualified. Now as he preached precepts to monks, many considered it as an even more serious damage to the dignity of Buddhist Vinaya. At the same time, Jing'an Temple abbot GQ had been rumored to have sexual affairs with a number of women, and then came a new one about a sexual harassment of a woman.

In 1985, Li first reported the situation in Shanghai, through the way of a letter, to the chair of the BAC, Zhao Puchu 趙朴初 (1907-2000)⁹.

2. Complaints against “Fake Monks”

The complaint letters I have collected are composed of several pieces. The most important letter has two different versions: one dated in October 1985, that I presume to be the draft of the earliest one sent to Zhao Puchu; the other version dated in May 1986, is made based on the previous letter with some modifications, and it is the text to be submitted later to the CPC's Shanghai Municipal Committee and its Central Committee in Beijing. The content of the two versions doesn't show considerable difference. They are both titled “Rectification of Shanghai Buddhism Are Imperative: the Situation of the Three Major Temples in Shanghai through Their 95% of Fake Monks”.

Let us look at the letter of complaint dated May 1986. With a total of more than 3,000 Chinese characters, Li first stated his political stance based on the inherent pattern of complaint letters under the CPC regime. He praised the PRC's religious policy and quoted Zhao Puchu's speech on promotion of Buddhism's “excellent traditions” and the proposal made by the United Front Work Department of the CPC Central Committee requiring that “Monks should be like monks, temples like temples” (seng yao xiang seng, miao yao xiang miao 僧要像僧, 廟要像廟), in order to justify his complaints politically. Afterward, Li pointed out directly:

Currently there are three temples opened in Shanghai, they are Yufo Temple, Jing'an Temple and Longhua Temple. There are around 170 so-called “monks” (excluding Buddhist Academy's students¹⁰). However, not more than eight to nine of them are real bhikkhus who practice vegetarianism and follow the precepts. The remaining 95% are all “monks” returned to laity, with family, having children and grandchildren, drinking alcohol and eating meat. Both “abbots” of Yufo Temple and Jing'an Temple, as well as the other deacons including the one who is in charge of the daily management are in this situation. At the Longhua Temple, the monks, excluding the abbot and a few others, are also in this situation.

Next, Li cited what he called the four evil deeds of “fake monks”. First, they were specialized in ritual service (for money) and preached superstition. Second, they made all kind of new items to gather money. Li pointed out particularly that the abbot ZC of the Yufo Temple not only made money from his own anniversary

⁹ For more about Zhao Puchu and his role in Chinese Buddhism in the 20th century, see Ji Zhe. “Comrade Zhao Puchu: Bodhisattva under the Red Flag,” in *Making Saints in Modern China*, eds. David Ownby, Vincent Goossaert, and Ji Zhe. Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 312-348.

¹⁰ Opened in 1983, the Buddhist Academy of Shanghai situates in the Yufo Temple.

celebration, but also took money for “refuge taking” (admission of lay disciples), and invented a ritual called “Precepts of Ten Thousand Buddhas” that doesn’t exist in Buddhism at all, merely for gathering money, again. ZC even brought his wife into the temple to banquet for his son’s successful admission to college. Third, the “fake monks” made the gang and reject their challengers. All three temples are controlled by the so-called “North Jiangsu Gang” (*subei bang* 蘇北幫), made of people from the same area. ZC often brought his disciples home to drink alcohol and eat meat, and recruit young novices from his relatives at the countryside to prepare for the fake monks’ succession. Fourth, they consolidated their relationship with the higher ranked Buddhist figures or celebrities in order to eliminate the control over their misconduct.

Then Li argued that the fundamental reason why these “fake monks” were fake was because they violated the precepts. In this regard, lay Buddhists are their supervisors that they were the most afraid of:

According to the above four points, they no longer have any Buddhist belief, and have long worshiped merely the money. Because among the Buddhist precepts, the first is “to take precepts as the Master” (*yi jie wei shi* 以戒為師). The precepts in Buddhism are as important as the laws for a State. Therefore, it’s said in sutras: “Living as a Buddhist, one should first take the precepts as root”. Because the precepts are as a ladder to cultivate all good things, so those who hold the precepts have the merit of guarding against errors and evil, defending the solemn territory of his country, and giving profit and joy to all sentient beings. On the contrary, the fake monks of the three major temples accumulate shit over the head of Buddha. Look at them: first they don’t take the precepts (other than the God of Fortune); second, they don’t study the doctrine (so they can fool the masse of Buddhists); third, they do not do altruistic work (they can’t be more selfish); fourth, they are found of doing repentance ceremonies, to enrich themselves; fifth, they do not believe in karmic retribution, and conduct shamelessly. Buddhists in China and abroad summarized this situation in this way: “lay Buddhists fear retribution, retribution fear monks, and monks fear lay Buddhists”. Why do monks fear lay Buddhists? Because lay Buddhists know best what they are doing, they fear them because they are afraid that they unmask their tricks.

Finally, Li pointed out: Although the phenomena of “fake monks” were caused by the Cultural Revolution and had their historical reasons, as the Cultural Revolution has ended for ten years, it is time to tidy up the Buddhism. The first step in such reorganization was to clear the “fake monks”, and then “cultivate a group of young monks who are at the same time morally, religiously and culturally complete”.

He did not get a reply to his letter sent to Zhao Puchu. Subsequently, on January 19, 1986, Li sent the complaint materials by registered mail to the then CPC Shanghai Secretary Rui Xingwen 芮杏文 (1927-2005). On February 13, Rui’s secretary called Li and asked about the situation, saying that he would contact again but did not follow. In March, Li sent through acquaintances a letter of the same content to Wang Hongkui 王宏逵, deputy director of the Shanghai RAB - In fact, Li had repeatedly expressed his request to the Shanghai RAB. On May 30, Li wrote another letter to Wang to put forward specific measures to manage the situation of “fake monks”:

First seek the opinion of the fake monks: Are they willing to be true monks or lay Buddhists? If they want to be true monks, then they must make clear the relationship with the family and retake the precepts. This is permitted by the Buddhist institutions, and believers will understand and approve it even more. If they will not or cannot clarify the relationship with the family, but they are willing to work in the temple, they cannot wear monk clothes, but they can continue to work in temples wearing another uniform, as lay Buddhists. Including ZC, GQ and other main leaders of the Buddhist association, if they cannot retake vows to be monks, they can still work for Buddhism in the same way as lay Buddhists, and this will not affect their positions as chairs, etc., but they should not be ridiculously in the position of “abbot”.

In the letter, Li also suggested: young monks should be recruited from voluntary, truly faithful young people, having accomplished at least the secondary education; monasteries should resume regular lectures, so that religious activities and the superstition activities are distinguished; no “offering” (*gongyang* 供養) should be imposed from people taking refuge or taking precepts; all offerings should belong collectively to the temple, instead of particular individual, and the financial situation of the temple should be regularly published in the temple; the temple should restore the system of “opening to public”, which means to accept Buddhists (especially monks) from outside the temple to come to live in the temple, and to practice together with the in-house monks. This last point, in fact, is the Chinese large public monasteries’ (*shifang conglin* 十方叢林) traditional institution. However, at that time, the three major temples in Shanghai usually only allowed monks of their acquaintance to live in the temple.

In the meantime, Li believed that the CPC Shanghai Municipal Committee was not enough capable to solve the problem because it would still transfer the issue to the Municipal RAB, and the RAB and the Buddhist association under its control were standing on the side of the “fake monks”. Therefore, he sent also a complaint directly to the CPC General Secretary Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 (1915-1989). However, the initial result seemed to be very bad. On May 31, 1986, a deputy general secretary of the BAS rushed to his house in the middle of the night and said to him: “The letter you have written to the CPC’s Central Committee and the Municipal Commission is now in the hands of our Buddhist association”. Then very quickly on June 4, the BAS Council held a meeting. During the panel discussion, Li reiterated his request in his letters, and claimed that the Buddhist spirit of “taking precepts as the Master” should be respected, and it should be objected that “fake monks” having family and consuming meat and alcohol make money using the pretext of Buddhism. The next day, his speech was criticized by the general secretary of the BAS, who denied the existence “fake monks”, stating that Li’s speech was “dividing, not serious, wrong...” and forbid Li to speak in quoting the reason of “lay persons cannot discuss the faults of monks”¹¹. After the meeting, Li repeatedly received a warning from the BAS: “Do not mention this matter in the future, otherwise it will be detrimental to you!”

¹¹ In orthodox Buddhism in China, in order to maintain the superiority of Sangha relative to lay Buddhists, the latter are required to be respectful to Sangha and to support monasteries, but it is forbidden to criticize the monastics or to dip a finger into their symbolic privileges.

But Li did not give in. In July 1986, he continued to send letters to Rui and Hu about his misadventures. July 25, Mr. Xia, from the Shanghai RAB, come to see him at home and stated: "From a devout Buddhist like you, your point of view is absolutely correct, but it takes a time to solve this problem". But he told Li at the end: "I hope you care about the overall situation, do not write more letters to the up!"

Seeing no signs of any adjustment or rectification, on September 25, 1986, Li again wrote a dossier exposing the "bad deeds of the fake monks" in the three major temples in Shanghai and oriented the criticism to the Shanghai RAB. This letter did not have an addressee, but given the tone, it should still be written to Rui Xingwen, or both to Rui and Hu Yaobang. The letter cited some specific cases including: (1) GQ, Jing'an Temple abbot, vice-chair of the BAS, and vice-president of the Buddhist Academy of Shanghai, is not only a "fake monk with a wife", but also is suspected to have sexual assault on a female follower. (2) Someone posted posters in the Longhua Temple, exposing the ambiguous relationship of a monk in the temple with a woman. (3) In Longhua Temple, a cadre of the RAB stationed in the temple took advantage of his position to transfer his son to the temple to take charge of the reception of foreign guests. These father and son manipulated fake monks to "manage" the temple with them. (4) Monks from Yufo Temple and the Buddhist Academy went out to participate in activities, changed to lay clothes and even ate meat; the Buddhist Academy supervisor himself was a fake monk. (5) The Yufo Temple and the Longhua Temple all built high standard hotels in the temple, and employed cadres from the RAB to the position of general manager. (6) Chair of BAS and abbot of the Yufo Temple, ZC organized travel on public funds for more than 30 people (including several cadres of RAB), spending 20,000 yuan on one single trip¹².

3. Other Buddhists' Attitudes

In addition to complaints to the three different authorities - Buddhist association, the government (RAB) and the CPC, Li also sent at the same time the text entitled "The rectification of the Shanghai Buddhism is necessary and urgent" to monastics and lay Buddhists whom he trusted for support. In general, lay Buddhists reacted more actively than monastics. Among the latter, those with greater reputation and authority reacted relatively in a more cautious manner.

During 1985-1986, Guoyi 果一 (Donglin Temple 東林寺), Fayin 法因 (Lingyanshan Branch of the Buddhist Academy of China 中國佛學院靈岩山分院), Baoyun 寶雲, Zhanjiu 湛久, Da'en 大恩, Jingqi 淨祺, Delin 德林 (Gaomin Temple 高旻寺) all replied to support Li. In the replies from lay Buddhists, they also mentioned that they have transferred the materials to some monks, such as Dingchi 定持 (Buddhist Association of Shantou) and Baohan 寶函, and got their approval. Among them, Fayin also clearly stated his definition of fake monks:

¹² In 1986, the annual average disposable income of urban residents in the PRC was only about 900 yuan while that in rural areas was even much lower.

What is a fake monk? He has no real internal virtue, but external superficial performances, seeking reputation and benefits. That is what is called a fake monk. If he does not hold the precepts, does not practice meditation, but attaches himself with powerful and notable, relies on the property of the temple to feed his wife, children and family, takes up with powerful people, oppresses the monastics, he is a demon monk that confuses Buddhist religion, and will fall into Avīci hell after his death.

Some other monks admit the problems, but they said that the problems are complicated, they must be considered in long term, or they placed their hopes on the BAC and Zhao Puchu. For example, YZ, a venerable in Fujian, was even more cautious. In his reply, he expressed his admiration for Li's "willingness to defend the dharma", but pointed out: "This move may not be beneficial to people and, I am sincerely afraid, it will harm yourself", and returned Li's complaint materials. There is also another equally powerful and prestigious monk MZ, read the material but did not declare his position at the time, and returned the materials to the intermediate. The act of returning the complaint materials has a complex meaning. It may be a tactic of action formed under the CPC's long-standing class struggle regime. On the one hand, this can indicate the distance: I understand, but do not want to get further involved. On the other hand, it is a way to reassure the counterpart: Please keep this important material, and I will not use it to do things against you such as denunciation. Of course, such caution does not mean their objection to Li's request. In fact, MZ later recommended to mobilize Buddhist associations throughout the country to emphasize the precepts of sangha.

There are also a few among lay Buddhists who are pessimistic. They held that there were also fake monks in history, and at present, lay Buddhists could not manage these things. But most lay Buddhists' response is much more enthusiastic. Here we are content with a brief presentation of a few cases involved deeper in the incident.

In Shanghai, like Li, Mr. Wang is also a devout Buddhist for decades, already very active before the Cultural Revolution. He was also a major advocate of Li's protest. In October 1986, in line with Li's actions, he wrote a text entitled "For the real name of 'bhikkhu'" and sent it to the Shanghai RAB, in such fierce words:

In today's Buddhism, people living in temples having wife and family members publicly or in secret are considered as monks. Not only did the government departments recognize them as monks, as sangha member, it is also imposed to all Buddhists to recognize them as monks and sangha member. Isn't it like making a deer out be a horse? This name can never be so incorrect! On this issue, we must make it clear that we will never admit it! At the same time, we must also show our leaders that it is illegitimate (regarding to Buddhist dharma) to form a Buddhist association based mainly on such so-called "monks". Asked to participate in such a Buddhist organization, we always feel it an extraordinary shame and humiliation.

[...]

What is a "bhikkhu"? Bhikkhu, commonly known as monks, sangha members, dharma masters. [...] Only a monastic disciple taking full precepts, can be named bhikkhu. A monk, that is, to leave the family, owning no wife, no family house. Taking full precepts, that is, not only those ten for samanera, those for bodhisattva, but also in particular, the 250 bhikkhus precepts. If one does not

take the bhikkhus precepts, he cannot be named bhikkhu. They take the ritual but does not hold these precepts, they cannot be called Bhikkhu either. In the 250 precepts for bhikkhu, the first is on sexual relations. Not only shouldn't they have a wife, but even having close relationship with women is not allowed. If this precept is broken, it is like a person decapitated that cannot be resurrected.

[...]

To this end, we sincerely demand that the leading departments of the government's religious affairs hold a clear attitude on this issue. That is, anyone who publicly or secretly holds a wife shall not be called a bhikkhu; that is, he shall not be regarded as a sangha member, nor as a monk or a dharma master, nor shall he hold any monk's position in the sangha and shall not be a member of the monastic community. A group consisting mainly of those who openly or secretly have their wives may not be recognized as a sangha.

In his letter, Wang also refuted some particular rationales for tolerating the monks having a wife: (1) the legacy of the Cultural Revolution - in other words, during the Cultural Revolution, some historical facts were not normal, but only be slowly changed; (2) the number of monks with family is too big, the exclusion of them would make it impossible to maintain Buddhism work; (3) Japanese monks have family, in China they could also do this; (4) Buddhism is in a process of transformation, so in the new era, under the new circumstances, the requirement of monkhood without family is not immutable; (5) the lay Buddhists refusing to recognize the bhikkhus with wife are harmful to unity. At the same time, Wang stressed that they did not intend to exclude these monks with family, but did not agree that these people appeared as monks and dharma masters:

We also hope that this issue will be resolved quickly but in a decent and step-by-step manner through consultations, without prejudice to the legitimate interests of any single person. (They can either divorce, go back to the temple to take full precepts, re-become a monk; or correct his name to lay Buddhist and continue to serve Buddhism, or quit Buddhist activities. They are free to choose.)

Lay Buddhist Mr. Chen is also a staunch supporter of Li. He is a believer since before 1949. In his letters to Li, he often introduced what he saw and thought in the various temples in Shanghai. In a letter dated October 6, 1986, he expressed his indignation on the fact that ZC presided at the Yufu Temple the all-three-levels vow taking ceremony in 1985:

ZC did not feel ashamed, he even preached precepts to monastic Buddhists! This sin cannot be forgiven. Unless the Buddha himself come back, and pardon him! (When all the believers kneel to accept precepts, the gods are angered, thunderstorm roar, and the world is stormy. According to young novices, it is not possible to hear what the master was saying.)

He also suggested that Li persuade Longhua Temple abbot MY, who had no wife, to join the camp opposing the "fake monks".

Lay Buddhist Mr. Hong, living in Shanghai, but was then in Beijing, was also actively engaged in lobbying activities. Hong was born in 1906, his life was very bumpy. He joined the CPC early in his life and was a responsible of secret service.

In 1931, the chief of the CPC secret service, Gu Shunzhang 顧順章 (1903-1935), was captured. Zhou Enlai 周恩來 (1898-1976) worried that his family members would reveal the CPC intelligence and sent Hong to kill Gu Shunzhang's whole family, resulting in a big incident in Shanghai at that time. In the winter of 1934, Hong was captured and left the CPC. Since then he ever tried to return to the CPC but was not accepted. During 1958-1974, he was held in prison for 16 years. Buddhism was originally a tool to conceal his identity of CPC agent, but later Hong became a true believer. In July 1986, he went to see a famous Buddhist leader - the chair of the Buddhist Association of Beijing, master ZG - with the materials of Li. ZG said he has received Li's complaint and said: "It is too presumptuous to bring a wife into the temple." However, ZG expressed his frustration, saying that he had consulted Zhao Puchu's opinion and Zhao regarded the issue as a problem of the RAB. Heard this statement, Hong then visited the State RAB. In a letter, Hong described his waiting at the State RAB:

[When I was] received by a certain Mr. Wang, the latter just look at the title and said: "How can the monks be true or fake? The society changes and the Buddhism should also develop with it. We cannot interfere in the affairs of the religious community. If you consider they break the law, you may sue the court, and we do not care either." I could not butt in even though I had a lot to say, then I angrily went away.

Since then, and before returning to Shanghai in September 1986, he went another three times to meet ZG for this issue. I will return to this point later.

Some lay Buddhists out of Shanghai also expressed their support. Here I give only two examples. Mr. YR lived in Zhanshan Temple 湛山寺 in Qingdao. He used to be a monk but returned to laity in 1952, but he has always been a devout Buddhist. In the second half of 1986, he wrote at least 15 letters to Li. And at the same time, he wrote to Zhao Puchu, expressing his support for Li. In 1986, Zhanshan Temple was almost repaired and was expected to be open to the public by the end of the year. However, YR pointed out that the original person in charge of Zhanshan Temple was also a "fake monk". The situation did not improve until July when Master Mingzhe 明哲, from Guangji Temple 廣濟寺 in Beijing, came to preside the Buddhist Association of Shandong Province and took the position of abbot. After the arrival of Mingzhe, the "fake monk" was forced to stay in the secondary position, and he no longer dared to wear a monk cloth and call himself a dharma master, but only as a lay Buddhist.

Lay Buddhist Liu is a 33-year-old high school teacher. He was not very familiar with Li, but also criticized what he heard and saw in Sichuan:

[Monks at] Luohan Temple 羅漢寺 in Chongqing do a complete service only on the first and the fifteenth day of the lunar month, and people can hear the finger-guessing game for alcohol drinking from inside the temple. Wenshuyuan 文殊院 in Chengdu is a little better. However, there are more influential lay persons than monks. They bring their families and they all live in the temple. The temple on top of the famous Jinshan 金山 of Emei 峨眉 is almost not a temple, only one young monk is there. We would like to worship Buddha, and asked for a long time to see him get up lazily to open the door, and he locked the door as soon as we went out.

Liu considered that the lay Buddhists should take on the task of reforming the Buddhism: “Dharma depends on lay Buddhists” is the feature of today’s Buddhism.

4. Retake the Vows

In order to continue to put pressure on RAB and the BAC, Li also contacted a lay Buddhist in Beijing whose mother worked for Xinhua News Agency 新華社, one of the CPC’s main propaganda organs. Li hoped she could get involved, but the retired reporter suggested looking for a local reporter in Shanghai to write an “internal reference” (*neican* 內參) and send it directly to the CPC Central Committee. The so-called “internal reference” is compiled regularly by official news agencies and includes reports of news that are not allowed to be published or for the public to know about. It is an internal document only read by leading cadres. In the PRC, large official media - especially paper media - usually produce their own internal reference. Based on the sensitivity of the issues and the level of the leadership in the CPC, these internal references have corresponding reading rights. The goal is to have a relatively reliable channel for the leadership to understand the facts beyond the propaganda tools that the CPC know clearly that it is full of disinformation. This system still exists today. There is no sign that the retired reporter’s suggestion had been implemented. However, Li used his social relations in Shanghai to successfully convince the Shanghai People’s Political Consultative Conference News (Shanghai Zhengxie bao 上海政協報) to include in its internal reference a report on “fake monks”.

After more than a year of hard work, the appeals of the lay Buddhists represented by Li suddenly received an official response in the end of 1986. On the morning of November 7, the BAS held a “Chair’s Office Meeting”. GQ resigned from all the three positions as vice-chair of the BAS, abbot of Jing’an Temple, and vice-president of the Buddhist Academy of Shanghai. GQ apologized to the woman who had sexually molested and submitted a written self-examination to Shanghai RAB. At the meeting, someone also proposed to keep GQ’s position as vice-chair of the BAS, but the proposal did not obtain the consent of the majority. Li himself did not attend the meeting. However, the lay Buddhists Wang, Chen and Zhu, who played an important role in the Buddhist circle in Shanghai, wrote to Li respectively on November 7, 12 and 22 to report to him some details of the meeting.

GQ is punished mainly because of its “misconducts” (*xingwei shijian* 行為失檢), which cannot be tolerated, regardless of his monastic status. This punishment itself was still far from solving the widespread issue of “fake monks” that lay Buddhists are concerned about. Lay Buddhists were fully aware of this point. In the letter to Li reporting the dismissal of GQ, Chen denounced the chaos in Shanghai’s monasteries and the failure of BAS. Wang further pointed out in his letter:

At present, we should first solve the problem of fake monks. After the solution of this issue, we should ask the monks of the three major temples - Yufo, Longhua and Jing’an - to hold a half-month precept reading ceremony. If no one

understands the *Dharmagupta-vinaya* (Sifenlü 四分律), they should find experts to explain to them. If they do not know how to chant [precepts], they should send people to study in other temples. And they should be requested to examine their conducts of the half month against the precepts, to know whether they have violated them. If one's conduct is impure, he should be expelled. If the precepts are not completely observed, he ought not to be accepted in the ceremony. If any infraction, he should continue to repent according to dharma.

Three days later, on November 10, 1986, Wang wrote a "Letter to the Standing Members of Administrative Committee of the Buddhist Association of Shanghai" and send it to Li for advice. This letter reiterates ideas of his text that we quoted above, that he sent a month ago to Shanghai RAB "For the real name of 'bhikkhu'", and required to solve the two major issues of "monks holding precepts" (*sengren chijie* 僧人持戒) and "temple rectification" (*simiao zhengdun* 寺廟整頓):

"Monks must hold precepts". This issue has already been put forward for a long while. However, the Buddhist association did not pay any attention to it. Some people think that it is irrelevant for the monks to hold precepts or not; the "new monks" of the 1980s do not need to follow the precepts that the Sakyamuni Buddha 2500 years ago created; whether monks should hold precepts or not is not in the competence of the Buddhist association; for some people, the fact that the monks do not hold the precepts is even a sign of progress, and so on. We have always disagreed with these arguments. We believe: "monk" is a different name of bhikkhu. Bhikkhus must receive and hold the bhikkhus precepts. There are 250 precepts for bhikkhus, and the first one is to give up sex. Infraction of this precept, is like cutting the head to a person, he can no longer be revived.

[...]

Now the drama, in which lay people are playing the roles of bhikkhus or monks, should not be staged any longer. We reclaim that the Buddhist association take effective measures to stop such strange occurrences. If the Buddha association cannot solve this problem, we can also rise to solve it ourselves. That is, not admitting them to be bhikkhus, monks, or dharma masters if they publicly have a wife; not admitting them to take any monastic position in a temple; not recognizing them to be members of sangha; not considering the groups made up of married people as a sangha.

In the section entitled "temple rectification", Wang criticized the commercialization of the three major temples in Shanghai: charges for entrance tickets, commercial shops, restaurants, hotels and high level fees for Buddhist services. According to Wang, they are losing the essential characteristics of a Buddhist temple and are no longer a place of religious practice (*xiudao* 修道):

The three major temples are all named *conglin*, but they don't even have any code for collective monastic life. In Yufo Temple there is a meditation hall, but who meditates? In Longhua Temple there is a chanting hall, although they organized a seven-day practice for chanting Buddha's name, but it's also purely decorative. Who really practice diligently in the hall to pursue the deliverance from life and death, or the rebirth in the pure-land? Jing'an Temple's tantra

mandala is not yet restored. But even if it is restored, it would be up to nothing more than a small museum. Research on religious doctrine, it is just verbally slogan, who really does research? Precepts are abandoned, lineage traditions are forgotten, (money is the master; monastic rules completely disappeared). The monasteries are turned into (private) businesses. We feel grieved!

On December 18, Wang wrote a letter to Li telling him his plan to go with five or six lay Buddhists to talk directly with the general secretary of the BAS about how to solve the issue of “fake monks”. Wang stated that it should be required, on the one hand, that the monks and lay Buddhists be strictly distinguished from each other in the Buddhist association, “fake monks” may not be called bhikkhus or dharma master; and on the other hand, that the sangha should be rebuilt in the monasteries. The “fake monks” among the sangha should either retake vows or should not be considered as a member of the sangha, nor take any position occupied by monks.

Just on the same day as Wang wrote this letter, things turned out to be on a crucial turning point. The next day, December 19, 1986, the lay Buddhist Zhu mentioned above, a prestigious calligrapher that has a very deep relationship with the famous painter and disciple of Hongyi 弘一 (1880-1942), Feng Zikai 豐子愷 (1898- 1975), wrote with a brush on a small piece of xuan paper, to report this big news to Li:

Master ZC retook vows last night from master Fuchen 拂塵 (86 years old)¹³ at the Yufo Temple.

ZC was born in Jiangsu, became a monk as a teenager, moved to Shanghai in 1942, and was close to Yingci 應慈 (1873-1965), Yuanying and other Jiannan Buddhist leaders at that time. After 1979, he was abbot of Yufo Temple, chair of the BAS, as the highest ranked Buddhist monk in public activities. Now he had been forced to retake vows, this can be considered as a great victory for lay Buddhists. Of course, in order to keep his face, the ceremony was held secretly in the middle of the night.

However, the grievances of lay Buddhists have not been calmed down. On the one hand, they were not satisfied with the way ZC retook vows. Such as the lay Buddhist YR from Shandong who wrote to Li, he considered that ZC retook vows only in the aim to keep his position and power. He pointed out that the vow retaking ritual “must follow the Buddhist liturgy with three masters, seven witness masters and ten other masters, otherwise it is not conform to the Buddhist rules. Their self-made mid-night ceremony has nothing to do with the Buddhist rules”. On the other hand, those the lay Buddhists called “fake monks” are far more numerous than only ZC. In order to completely solve the “fake monks” issue, 22 Shanghai lay Buddhists jointly signed a petition letter in 1987¹⁴ to Shanghai RAB and BAS. They stated in the letter:

¹³ We do not know much about Fuchen. We only know that he is a disciple of Yifeng 怡峰 at Zizhulin Temple 紫竹林寺 in Shaanxi, and he is the master of Changming 常明 (1918-2009), who became abbot of Xi'an Xingjiao Temple 興教寺 in 1984.

¹⁴ The exact date of the letter is now unclear to read.

The first and most important fact is that sangha exists only in name. It can be said that the so-called sangha is a body without soul! Therefore, Buddhism has become a kind of work of art, no longer a treasure of Buddha; sutras became cultural classics, no longer a treasure of dharma. Since there is none of the three treasures of Buddhism, how to talk about Buddhism?! [...]

Why saying that sangha exists in vain name? That is because there is a large number of fake monks slipped in it. Such a sangha, can neither make the *uposatha* for himself, nor the *karma*. How can it be considered as a sangha?

[...]

But even the official documents from the Buddhist association openly call the fake monks “dharma masters”. What does this mean? Monks that take the bhikkhu precepts can be generally referred to as dharma masters, but those vow-breaking bhikkus are lay people, does it mean that lay Buddhists can also be called darma masters? There is an obvious difference between monks and laymen, why are they confused to this extent? How can you boast doing a good job in Buddhism?

Now we strongly claim: Step one, to implement concretely the party's religious policy: “monks like monks, temples like temples, monasteries managed by monks”. Step two, to require vow breaking monks to voluntarily retake vows, because precepts are the lifeblood of Buddhism. Buddha was the teacher while he was living, after his *nirvana*, precepts are the Master. Retaking vows of precepts is a major question to avoid damages to the next generation of young monks and to continue the life of *prajñā*. All Buddhists of genuine faith are feeling heavily concerned.

We do not know how Shanghai RAB and the BAS replied. However, such a rare collective protest demonstrated the mobilization strength of lay Buddhists. Obviously, ZC was forced to retake vows; this greatly encouraged the lay Buddhists' confidence. From the material that I have collected, we can see that this protest continued over the next year or so. For example, in a letter from Wang to Li dated December 31, 1987, Wang reported on his request to the general secretary of the BAS to resolve the issue of “fake monks”. At that time, although the general secretary agreed with Wang's view, he suggested that the settlement should be handled by the sangha internally and lay Buddhists should not intervene. In his letter, Wang refuted this position and planned to step up public pressure to urge the BAS to convene the leaders of the three temples, the representatives of the “fake monks” and lay representatives to dialogue on a three-sided meeting so that the lay Buddhists can make their demands directly to the “fake monks”. In a letter dated January 2, 1988, Wang asked Li to hand over a report to the general secretary of the BAS for publication in the “Buddhist Association Work Briefing”. The report in appearance applauded the work of the Association, but at the core was the emphasis on the sangha's adherence to “monk clothing, vegetarianism and celibacy” and the requirement that the BAS should strictly distinguish monks from lay people.

Under such an atmosphere, the BAS leaders must understand that for some monks vow retaking was no longer avoidable. When the general secretary insisted that lay Buddhists should not intervene, he in fact only wanted that the vow retaking would not appear to be caused by the pressure of lay Buddhists. In any case, in fact, 1988 was a year of massive retaking of vows for monks in Shanghai. On October 11, a letter from Wang to Li left a historical record for this:

I heard that a group of monks from Yufo, Longhua and Jing'an Temples have retaken vows. [Longhua Temple] master MY had a resolute attitude. He said publicly: if people do not retake vows according to the rules, he will not stay as the head monk at Longhua Temple; If monks who have temporary hukou (户口) fail to retake vows, they should return to their original place; from then on all monks of the temple should hold a half month precepts reading ceremony. At Jing'an Temple, probably only DH; and at Yufo Temple, only MR and TC [re]took vows. The campaign has been a further victory. It's enough to be reassured. However, there are still a group of monks who should retake vows. This must not stop.

Started in 1985, the Shanghai lay Buddhists' campaign to require the vow breaking monks to retake vows, can at this stage be said to be a total victory. However, the supervision of monks by these senior and devout lay Buddhists has not been loosening up. For example, in 1989, Li, Wang and another lay Buddhist Shen again wrote to the Shanghai RAB to complaint Longhua Temple abbot MY's conducts against precepts, including the frequentation of female lay Buddhists around him, the organization of a "marriage of the dead" in the temple, extravagance and waste, and so on. Nevertheless, after 1988, the issue of "fake monks" is no longer the focus of controversies in Shanghai Buddhist circle.

5. Win Some, Lose Some

Based on the complaint materials provided by Li and his correspondence with other Buddhists, I have attempted to reconstitute the context of the vow retaking of monks in the three major temples in Shanghai in the late 1980s. This is certainly not the first time nor the last in history that lay Buddhists criticize sangha. In fact, the tension between the two groups of Buddhists roots in the unequal religious status. According to the orthodox concept of Buddhist otherworldly deliverance, being a monk is the only way to become Buddha. Desire is the source of suffering, and lay people who live in the world of desire cannot be compared with monks both in status and in achievements. Moreover, in order to ensure the superiority of monks over lay people, the sangha often resorts to a series of discourses and *rituals* - such as "it is improper for the white clothed people (lay Buddhists) to teach dharma" and "lay people should not read sangha precepts". However, the religious privileges of monks are not without cost. This is the "monasticism", or "out of family" (*chujia* 出家), which implies a completely abandon of the earthly desires symbolized by "family", and devote all their mind and body to the pure monastic life prescribed by the precepts. For this reason, the precepts are monks' fundamental guarantee of their status. Without this guarantee, the legitimacy of the sangha's authority would have lost its religious basis and the power contract between monks and lay Buddhists would have vanished. Especially for those cultural elite lay Buddhists who do not see sangha only as ritual service operator, the precepts constitute the fundamental condition for them to voluntarily give up their own social privileges, and to be subject to the monastic authority¹⁵.

¹⁵ For further studies on the relationship between monastics and the lay Buddhists in modern and contemporary Chinese societies, see Ji Zhe, *Religion, modernité et temporalité: une sociologie du bouddhisme chan contemporain*, Paris: CNRS Editions, 2016, Part IV; Zhang Jia and

Thus, the elite lay Buddhists have been criticizing the phenomenon of the derailment of sangha since the late Empire. However, the vow retaking of monks in Shanghai in the 1980s still had its special meaning: the event took place in a historically unprecedented institutional context: the system of religious control under the communist regime, mainly based on the RAB and the BAC. We have seen that the lay Buddhists have never protested face-to-face with the “fake monks” they condemned (though such schemes have been proposed by some lay Buddhists): all the wrestling is done indirectly through the RAB and the Buddhist associations. In this sense, the lay Buddhists’ struggle for the authenticity of monkhood, was both religious and political.

Without understanding this, we cannot properly understand how the victory of the lay Buddhists came out and what has been the consequence. We have observed that in order to deal with “fake monks”, some lay Buddhists advised Li to take legal procedures. Others thought that the only effective way was to mobilize a large number of Buddhists not to recognize the “fake monks” as monks. Apart from expressing their indignation, almost all the monks think of resorting to the BAC and the RAB. Li himself followed both the approaches “top-down” and “bottom-up”, that is, the collective action of mobilizing lay Buddhists on the one hand, and on the other hand, the demand for arbitration to secular power. However, the agents of the secular power - that is, the RAB and the BAC - initially did not have the will to solve the problem.

The inaction of the authorities is not surprising. First of all, monks having a family was a common phenomenon at that time. As mentioned above, the large-scale of Buddhist monks returning to laity in China started in the 1950s. After the Cultural Revolution, the sangha completely disappeared¹⁶. In the 1980s, it was extremely common for monks returned to laity to wear monk’s cloths back without retaking vows. In this situation, both the RAB and BAC were reluctant to move heavily to deal with this sensitive issue involving many people. Certainly, maybe not all places were as Shanghai, as stated the lay Buddhists, to have a “fake monks” ratio as high as 95%. But the situation was indeed quite serious. In this connection, Mingshan 茗山 (1914-2001), a Buddhist leader in Jiangnan region left some clues for us in his diary. For example, as he noted, on March 11, 1981, Mingkai 明開 from Suzhou “criticized the phenomena of some semi-monk-semi-lay and nor-monk-nor-lay people in the temples” at the meeting of the Jiangsu provincial United Front Work Department¹⁷. On April 22, 1984, a young monk who was very confused after returning from a mission trip to Guangdong said: “Monks are not united, many have family, and very few are keeping precepts cleanly in solidarity”. Mingshan replied to him: “As for the few monks

Ji Zhe, “Lay Buddhism in Contemporary China: Social Engagements and Political Regulations”, *The China Review*, forthcoming.

¹⁶ To this period of history, so far there is no comprehensive and reliable research, only a few case studies and individual testimonies. For example, Master Jinghai 靜海 in Jiangsu was forced to give up in 1950 a small temple he had just bought and his life as monk to engage in accountancy and teaching as a layman. See Ji Zhe & Lao Yueshan, “Un dragon demeurant au territoire bouddhique: vénérable Jinghai et son Monastère Dalin”, forthcoming. Shuyun 書雲, *Wanli wu yun* 萬里無雲, Taipei, Shangwu yinshuguan, 2006, p. 50-59, also records the story of a Buddhist monk in Shaanxi under political pressure during the Cultural Revolution to marry a widow with four children.

¹⁷ Mingshan 茗山, *Mingshan riji* 茗山日記, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002, p. 149.

having family, you should look at the circumstances; most are due to the social background left over by history. Of course, there are always those who fell out by themselves because their own insufficient understanding of the dharma or lack in the practice”.¹⁸

Second, people are not quite certain about the trend of the evolution of Buddhism, especially if the vinaya system is to be reformed. At the time of the establishment of the official Buddhist association in the early 1950s, some Buddhist monastics suggested that Han Buddhist monks could also marry, eat meat, and wear secular costumes, just like some monks in Japan and Tibet, and considered it as a meaningful reform adapted to a modern society. This opinion provoked a fierce controversy among Buddhist leaders. Finally, the conservative monks represented by the Xuyun 虛雲 (1864?-1959), gained support from the government, so as to make monastic dresses, vegetarianism and celibacy requirements of Chinese official Buddhism¹⁹. However, after the Cultural Revolution, during the chaos of the disorderly sangha of the 1980s, the original resolution was again subject to review and re-clarification. I have not seen any written materials about this yet. However, a senior Buddhist scholar once told me that in the early 1980s, certain Buddhist leaders tended to support the option of being married for Han monks. Some social forces out of the Buddhist circle also share this view. For example, Mingshan recorded in his diary, at the end of 1979, at a People’s Political Consultative Conference meeting in Jiangsu Province, some attendants proposed to follow the Japanese Buddhism and allow monks to marry²⁰.

Third, the RAB, and particularly the BAC, are less concerned with the religious legitimacy of Buddhist discourse and practice than their political legitimacy. In the early 1980s, religions as a whole were still considered as a backward phenomenon that inevitably will decline with social development, and was stigmatized. Religions can only be justified under the condition of “being adapted to socialism”. This is clearly stated in Zhao Puchu's speech published in December 1983, entitled “The Thirty Years of the Buddhist Association of China”. In this very important text, which until now remains the official policy of Chinese Buddhism in the post-Mao era, Zhao proposed that the future development of Chinese Buddhism should follow the principle of “Buddhism for the human realm” (*renjian fojiao* 人間佛教). Concretely, it is to promote the “three excellent traditions (*sange youliang chuantong* 三個優良傳統)” defined by Zhao. The first is the tradition to “combine Chan with agricultural work” (*nongchan bingzhong* 農禪並重). In other words, Buddhists should “actively participate in productive labor and other practices in service to the cause of building socialism”. The second is the tradition of “academic study” (*xueshu yanjiu* 學術研究). Chinese Buddhists should proceed with it to enable their “active participation in the building of a socialist spiritual civilization”. The last excellent tradition is “friendly international exchange” (*guoji youhao jiaoliu* 國際友好交流). It should be developed to “enable our active participation in the enterprise of promoting

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 369-370.

¹⁹ For this controversy and especially of the role of Xuyun in it, see Campo, *La construction de la sainteté dans la Chine moderne*, p. 302-314.

²⁰ Mingshan, , *Mingshan riji*, p. 62.

our friendship with peoples around the world, advancing the cultural exchange between China and other nations, and defending world peace”²¹. Obviously these justifications of the legitimacy of Buddhism are all based on its political usability, and have nothing to do with the spiritual requirements of the religion itself. As far as the local authorities and Buddhist associations were concerned, as long as the temples can operate normally, meet the ritual demands of the general public, be in line with the needs of local reception of foreign guests and development of tourism, they had no will to get involved with the religious meaning of monkhood.

In this context, whether the monks returned to laity and come back to temples should retake precepts, basically rely on their own consciousness. For example, according to the Mingshan’s diary, from December 13 to 14, 1983, after the third meeting of the BAC’s forth council in Beijing, certain venerables, including Mingshan, were invited to the Buddhist Academy of China (Zhongguo foxueyuan 中國佛學院) to instruct precepts to the student-monks, and “the elders like Miaoshan 妙善, Juehai 覺海, Jinghui 淨慧, Kuanren 寬忍 and Tongguo 通果, as they abandoned precepts in the past, took the opportunity to retake precepts”.²² However, the vow retaking of those Shanghai monks mentioned in this research is by no means voluntary. The complaints of the lay Buddhists initially were not supported by the RAB or the BAC. So, how did the things take a turn? I think the posture of Zhao Puchu, then chair the BAC, is of crucial importance.

This lay Buddhist who dominated Chinese Buddhism for as long as half a century had close relations with the CPC. For the CPC, he, at least on the surface, represented the Chinese Buddhists; for the Buddhists, he was the CPC. He was both the executor of the CPC’s religious policy and a participant in the formulation of this policy. This made him the highest political authority among Buddhists. Among the letters I’ve collected, some placed hopes on him. For example, in a letter to Li dated October 1986, a monk said that he had reported to Zhao both Li’s letter and the lay Buddhist Hong’s material. He thought Zhao attached great importance to it and would transfer these documents to the State RAB for resolution. Another Buddhist based his experience considered that “Zhao is resolute in his attempts to defend the right dharma”, since Zhao once decided to punish the Buddhist leader PY²³ in Fujian, and even rejected the plea of the local government. However, some Buddhists made it clear in their letters that they did not trust Zhao. Li himself pointed out to me that Zhao’s attitude was not consistent: he wrote to Zhao, but Zhao did not respond. He later wrote to Hu Yaobang, General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee, and Hu instructed that this issue should be solved. This constituted a considerable pressure on Zhao who, although passively, had to deal with the issue of “fake monks” quickly. Zhao was quite irritated by this and had asked one of his friends in Shanghai, lay Buddhist Zheng, who Li is.

The afore-mentioned letters from lay Buddhist Hong also described Zhao’s attitude from one aspect. For the affair of “fake monks”, Hong went four times to

²¹ Zhao Puchu 趙朴初, “Zhongguo fojiao xiehui sanshinian” 中國佛教協會三十年, *Zhao Puchu wenji* 趙朴初文集, Beijing: Huawen chubanshe, 2007, tome I, p. 550-568. See p. 562.

²² Mingshan, *Mingshan riji*, p. 336.

²³ The letter did not mention what kind of mistake the monk had made.

see in Beijing Zhao's important collaborator, master ZG, vice-chair of the BAC. In July 1986, when he first came to see him, the latter said that according to Zhao Puchu the issue was too big and "it was not easy to report it upward". On September 17, Hong found ZG for the fourth time and continued to ask him:

So, [Zhao] neither treated nor reported it, this is not understandable. The old master replied: "It has been turned over, and we need the decision of the State Council, but it's not known yet!" I asked when has it been turned over, but he did not answer. We can see that the pressure is stressful, and as it is among their relevant responsibilities, he had to report it. I also said that Zhao called for Zheng, although I did not meet Zheng, I knew it concerned the issue of Li, and he did not deny it. [...] Finally, I asked: on the action of Li, what did Zhao said? He replied that Zhao said: "It is correct to put it forward, but we should do it slowly". - Slowly, what does it mean? Who can say that is not correct?

In short, after Li complained nearly a year, because of Hu Yaobang's instruction, solving the "fake monks" problem has been transformed from a lay Buddhists' request to a political mission. Zhao had to handle it with the RAB as soon as possible. Since more than a single case is concerned, the solution required the formulation of an official policy of the BAC. It was at the fourth meeting of Hong and ZG where the latter disclosed that the Fifth National Congress of the BAC, expected to be held at the end of 1986 (in reality it took place from February 23 to March 1, 1987), would require the representatives to meet the requirements of "clean abstinence on precepts practice" (*jie xing qingjing* 戒行清淨). Afterward at this congress, Zhao mentioned in his speech "to take precepts as the Master, and abide by the rules and precepts" (*yi jie wei shi, xinshou jiegui* 以戒為師, 信守戒規)²⁴. This is something that had never happened before. From then on, "taking precepts as the Master" became a key word in the speeches made by the BAC leaders in all its major congress. On December 12, 1987, Zhao especially emphasized the issue of precepts in the speech at the Symposium on the management of key temples in the Han regions (at the time not public)²⁵:

As far as the temple itself is concerned, we have many temples that are well-managed, clean and harmonious. However, there are also some temples, there are all kinds of problems, such as unsound organization, poor management, lack of solidarity in sangha, cronyism, laxation in the application of rules and precepts, instability of the permanent monks and nuns, over-admission of disciples, abuse of vow taking, and even the phenomenon of buying and selling the certificates of ordination and conversion. Some qualified monks are misconducting in their style of living and their influence is very bad. Now some

²⁴ Zhao Puchu 趙朴初, "Tuanjie qilai, fayang fojiao youliang chuantong, wei zhuangyan guotu lile youqing zuo gongxian" 團結起來, 發揚佛教優良傳統, 為莊嚴國土利樂有情作貢獻, *Zhao Puchu wenji* 趙朴初文集, Beijing, Huawen chubanshe, 2007, tome II, p. 811-827. See p. 819.

²⁵ Zhao Puchu 趙朴初, "Yao qieshi zuohao simiao guanli gongzuo" 要切實做好寺廟管理工作, *Zhao Puchu wenji* 趙朴初文集, Beijing, Huawen chubanshe, 2007, tome II, p. 865-869. See p. 866. Here the « qualified monks » should refer above all to GQ in Shanghai. According to Mingshan's records, at this congress, the 10th Panchen Lama (1938-1989), the honorary chair of the BAC, also mentioned the "scandal of a big temple in Shanghai". See *Mingshan riji*, p. 542.

key monasteries are still far from being able to meet the requirements of “temples like temples and monks like monks”.

Of note is that six years later, Zhao Puchu, on October 15, 1993, in his report to the sixth National Congress of the BAC, specifically mentioned²⁶:

For some monks and nuns whose faith is diluted and who live against precepts, if after studying they are willing to correct and continue to be monastics, they should repent and even re-take the precepts; if they really do not seem to change, their ordination certificate, monastic clothes and objects should be taken back and they ought to quit the temple and return to laity. For those few monks and nuns who seriously violated precepts, rules, and morality, and are not willing to correct despite repeated admonitions, they must get their ordination certificate, monastic clothes and objects withdrawn and themselves excluded from sangha according to the monastic rules and regulations.

This should be the first time that the BAC has publicly and explicitly stated its position on the question of vows breaking and retaking.

Therefore, the requirements of lay Buddhists on monkhood were finally defined as the institutional requirements of official Buddhism. However, the protests of Li and his fellow Buddhists were not fully recognized. On June 20, 1989, Zhao Puchu held a discussion with some lay Buddhists in Shanghai and Li was also present. The basic tone of Zhao's speech was critical²⁷. Its main ideas are: (1) we need unity, we should not only have religious sentiments and lack wisdom; (2) we should not be in a hurry in solving problems; (3) we should not be idealist, as sangha is always mixed with good and bad; (4) we should not just stare at others' mistakes and should pay more attention to our own introspection. After Li reiterated the issue of precepts, Zhao said²⁸:

As for the precepts, the lay Buddhist Li has just read many of the verses from the sutras, and now each issue of the *Sound of Dharma* (Fayin 法音) contains articles on holding precepts²⁹. You may have noticed this. This was my request, in order to often remind it to everyone.

But afterwards, Zhao emphasized “unity” rather than precepts. Although he made requirements both on monastics and lay Buddhists, the warning tone to the latter was obvious³⁰:

There are two conditions for unity. One is that temples are like temples and monks are like monks. If this can be realized, the cohesion and solidarity of the believers will be strengthened. The other is that, lay Buddhists defending

²⁶ Zhao Puchu 趙朴初, “Zhongguo fojiao xiehue sishi nian” 中國佛教協會四十年, *Zhao Puchu wenji* 趙朴初文集, Beijing, Huawen chubanshe, 2007, tome II, p. 1223-1240. See p. 1238.

²⁷ Zhao Puchu 趙朴初, “Yao ba jushi tuanti de zishen jianshe jiaqiang qilai” 要把居士團體的自身建設加強起來, « *Zhao Puchu wenji* 趙朴初文集, Beijing: Huawen chubanshe, 2007, tome II, p. 930-935.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 932.

²⁹ *Fayin* 法音 is created in 1981 as the official journal of the BAC. According to my survey, the series of articles on precepts in *Fayin* started in the fifth issue of the year published in May 1988.

³⁰ Zhao Puchu, “Yao ba jushi tuanti de zishen jianshe jiaqiang qilai”, p. 932.

dharma should know how to be skillful and appropriate, not only paying attention both to means and methods, but also choosing the right time, the right opportunity, and measuring the priority of actions. One should not act blindly without thinking; otherwise they will be in a harsh situation. In conclusion, we do all things that are conducive to unity and do not do anything not conducive to unity.

As a result, the religious issue (precepts) has been transformed into a political issue (unity). The complaints and supervision of lay Buddhists are religiously correct, but politically incautious because of the danger of undermining unity.

6. Conclusion

The historical records conserved in private materials here analyzed threw a new light on the lay Buddhists' role in the institutional reconstruction of Buddhism in the post-Mao era. In fact, the CPC's destruction of sangha after 1949 was not only formal (expulsion of monastics, destruction of sutras and Buddha statues, prohibition of collective practice, etc.), but also through vow breaking, substantially broke down the legitimacy of sangha, both on symbolic and organizational levels. After marriage, the monastics, in the ceremonial activities can not represent the "body of the precepts" (*jieti* 戒體), nor can they be fully integrated into the collective life of temple. Lay Buddhists are particularly sensitive to this issue. It is precisely with their efforts that the otherworldly monasticism centered at the precepts has been reconfirmed in the 1980s. In this regard, the lay Buddhists in Shanghai are an important initial engine for the vinaya revival in contemporary China. However, thirty years have passed, as far as I know, this story has never been raised. Before concluding this research, to explore the main reasons for this silence would be helpful for us to further understand the implications of this event.

It is not only under the Communist regime that monastics may break vows and retake vows. Master Yinsun 印順 (1906-2005) once criticized the monks in mainland China before 1949 and in Taiwan later to enter and leave sangha at will³¹. However, the vow retaking of these monks, like those monks who retook vows at the Buddhist Academy of China in 1983, was voluntary and did not cause significant controversy. But the vow retaking of Shanghai monks is forced under pressure. The failed part is precisely the part that wrote the official history, so from the very beginning, they deliberately covered up the event. After the retaking the vows, these monks have long held resources and power in the official Buddhist system. After their death, their disciples are, of course, reluctant to make this event public, so as not to undermine the legitimacy of their own status.

The face of the monk leaders is in fact an important cause of this historical silence. However, the event we revealed in this article is by no means a simple struggle between monks and lay Buddhists or an anticlerical movement, but has a specific political implication. As we have seen, the lay Buddhists represented by

³¹ Yinshun 印順, "Huansu yu chujia" 還俗與出家, *Huayu ji* 華雨集, Taipei, Zhenwu chubanshe, 1993, volume 4, p. 151-158.

Li have mobilized a rare and effective collective action. At least dozens of prestigious Buddhists nationwide participated. In addition to the continuous, growing waves of written complaints, the protesters, in individual or collective forms, have dialogued many times directly with the agents of the RAB and the BAC, by demanding that these authorities assume the management responsibility corresponding to their power. This mobilization is not only religious but also civil. Due to the absence of a real public sphere, such citizen actions were only achieved within a very limited institutional space and cannot resort to the public opinion. However, at least to some extent, the official BAC and its Shanghai branch are temporarily transformed into a field of protestation and contestation. In the debates and negotiations, what is at stake is never the divisions between sangha and lay Buddhists, but the divergence between the political view and religious view on the monkhood.

For this reason, if Shanghai lay Buddhists succeeded, this is above all a victory of the religious over the political. Certainly, this victory has in no way changed the obedience of religions to politics. However, spontaneous mobilization outside official programs is itself the greatest challenge to the CPC regime, conceived by the latter as a threat to the absolute stability that it aspires to. In the words of Zhao Puchu, this is a bad impact on “unity”. Zhao himself may not be a supporter of “fake monks”, but he is a defender of the CPC regime. Accordingly, he cannot fail to affirm the requirements of lay Buddhists at the religious level but at the political level to reject such requirements. Eventually, the BAC under his leadership officialized the demand of lay Buddhists for purifying sangha, but this demand for him came from an accidental runaway from the control that could not be appreciated.

Finally, it should be pointed out that in this story, the triumphs of lay Buddhists are paradoxical: they defeated the “fake monks”, but this victory was achieved precisely through the authoritarian regime (embodied in the instruction of the CPC General Secretary) that produced the “fake monks”. This paradox reflects the general dilemma of China’s citizen actions in the post-Mao era: there is no way but to co-operate with this regime to solve the problems created by it; and the solution to each problem reaffirms this regime that is responsible for the problems.