Critical Issues Confronting China: Consuming Belief: Han Chinese Practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism in the PRC

John Osburg, University of Rochester

October 24, 2018

When the Chinese government’s attempt to resurrect Lei Feng as a paragon of virtues from the 1960s and 70s was met with only cynicism and derision from the public, what else could fill the spiritual void in contemporary China, where crass commercialism and crude self-interest prevail? John Osburg, Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Rochester, delved into the Chinese quest for a meaningful life, and addressed the sources of the appeal of Tibetan Buddhism and the extent to which its Chinese followers apply its principles and concepts to their daily lives.

To underscore the attraction of Tibetan Buddhism, Osburg gave some examples of individual Chinese who had turned to Buddhism for spiritual salvation against a broad backdrop of moral crisis. One such example was Mr. Zhang, whose personal story was indicative of this larger picture. Zhang rose up in a debt collection business and was eventually in charge of a group of thugs to enforce repayments of high-interest loans through illicit means. After images of sanguinary violence began to haunt him at night, he renounced violence and became a Buddhist.

When news of acts of moral turpitude are frequently reported, such as spurious products with detrimental health effects being sold to unwitting consumers, and when self-worth is measured or perceived primarily in pecuniary terms, many Chinese conclude that “[all] there is left is greed,” and that China has an urgent need to revive and embrace its traditional culture and values in order to mitigate this moral crisis. In this climate of a massive search for meaning and principles for self-guidance, Qi-gong, traditional Chinese medicine and life-cultivation techniques (养生) as well as derivatives of Daoism, Christianity, and Buddhism have taken root and become widespread.

Because, in recent years, scandals surrounding Chinese monks and the commercialization of Chinese Buddhist temples have marred the perception of Chinese Buddhism, middle and upper-class Chinese have begun to turn to Tibetan Buddhism for its perceived impeccable probity and moral authority. Many first encountered Tibetan Buddhism as tourists in Tibet or learned about it from their friends or on the Internet. Thinking of their own seemingly trivial
and anxiety-filled lives in comparison with Buddhists’ (imagined) worry-free lives, they yearn to be spiritually rich even if materially poor. They have changed their stereotypical mental image of a backward and uncivilized Tibet to images worthy of admiration and emulation.

After many Tibetan Buddhist temples in China were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), many were rebuilt beginning in the 1980s. Larung Buddhist Academy (喇荣五明佛学院), the most influential monastery in spreading Tibetan Buddhism to Han Chinese, was founded in 1980 in Sichuan Province’s Seda County (四川色达). It has been thriving with monks numbering in the thousands, including a minority of Han Chinese. Larung has produced the most influential Tibetan monks among Han Chinese and has developed a widely-used Buddhist study curriculum for Chinese speakers. Informal classes using this curriculum led by Chinese lay practitioners can be found in most major Chinese cities.

Some wealthy Chinese not only donate money to monasteries but also lend their apartments in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, to “living Buddhas” (i.e. Tibetan monks who are recognized as reincarnations of important lamas) or established monks to meet and teach their disciples. Many well-to-do Chinese fly from Shanghai, Guangzhou, or other cities to Chengdu to meet or have dinner with their Tibetan gurus or to attend rituals performed by their teachers. These groups of Buddhist disciples also serve as communities for building social networks, not limited to religious studies but also for sharing information on everyday matters, from stock market investments to courses of medical treatment for various family illnesses.

The Tibetan lamas who guide these groups in Chengdu often feel torn between their obligation to serve their own community back home and to enlighten more Han Chinese. The more followers they have, the more financial resources they accumulate from substantial donations from rich Chinese. For many well-to-do Chinese, these lamas provide emotional support for the multifarious challenges of daily life, such as raising children, maintaining marriages, or managing businesses. Sometimes Tibetan monks feel ill-equipped to offer advice on these worldly matters.

There are also tensions within these Buddhist groups. The wealthy patrons of Tibetan lamas are susceptible to accusations that they use their financial power in order to gain more access to the gurus than ordinary followers, or that they use Buddhism to expand their own fortunes. They have been accused of “doing business with Sakyamuni (释迦摩尼佛):” trying to harness the power of their Tibetan gurus for their own personal financial and spiritual benefit rather than seeking the liberation of all sentient beings.

How are these Han Chinese Buddhists perceived by other Chinese? Many of these Buddhist practitioners believe that being a Buddhist has helped, rather than hurt, their businesses because
it makes them appear more trustworthy. Noting that about 70 percent of the practitioners in the study sessions are women, Osburg explained that Buddhist teachings are more acceptable for Chinese women because they are aligned with the traditional Chinese expectations of women: virtuous, self-sacrificing, and dedicated to their families. In contrast, religious practice for men is less socially acceptable since it can be perceived as an excuse for shunning family or career responsibilities and for making men less adaptable to the morally compromised society.

Regardless of their level of dedication to Buddhist practices, middle and upper-class Chinese are actively seeking spiritual guidance and a more meaningful life. For some, Tibetan Buddhism even serves as a gateway to engage with Chinese traditional culture, which was thoroughly denounced in the Cultural Revolution almost to the point of eradication, but has now been rekindled.