

Politics of Tranquility: Religious Mobilities and Material Engagements of

Tibetan Buddhist Nuns in Post-Mao China

by

Yasmin Cho

Department of Cultural Anthropology  
Duke University

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Ralph Litzinger, Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Anne Allison

\_\_\_\_\_  
Louise Meintjes

\_\_\_\_\_  
Hwansoo Kim

\_\_\_\_\_  
Karma Lekshe Tsomo

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in the Department of  
Cultural Anthropology in the Graduate School  
of Duke University

2015

ABSTRACT

Politics of Tranquility: Religious Mobilities and Material Engagements of  
Tibetan Buddhist Nuns in Post-Mao China

by

Yasmin Cho

Department of Cultural Anthropology  
Duke University

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Ralph Litzinger, Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Anne Allison

\_\_\_\_\_  
Louise Meintjes

\_\_\_\_\_  
Hwansoo Kim

\_\_\_\_\_  
Karma Lekshe Tsomo

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of  
Cultural Anthropology in the Graduate School of  
Duke University

2015

Copyright by  
Yasmin Cho  
2015

## Abstract

This dissertation ethnographically examines the lives of Tibetan Buddhist nuns in Yachen, a mega-sized Tibetan Buddhist encampment in eastern Tibet that emerged in the 1980s and is now a leading center of Tibetan Buddhist revivalism in post-Mao China. Over 10,000 nuns make up the vast majority of the permanent residents in this community (approximately 2,000 monks live there as well), but few scholarly discussions have taken place regarding the lives and practices of the nuns in Yachen or in Tibetan Buddhist revivals in China in general. This dissertation, therefore, calls attention first to the lack of proper research on these nuns by providing ethnographic accounts of their everyday lives in “China’s Tibet.” By placing the nuns and their lives at the center of discussion, I was able to realize the significance of examining the material, sensory, and mobile events and occasions through which alternative political logics and possibilities appear in the practice of Buddhism and in Sino-Tibetan politics. This alternative politics—which I call the *politics of tranquility*—presents itself through the mobilities and material engagements of the nuns in Yachen, and offers a stark contrast to the existing dichotomous understanding of Sino-Tibet relationships. Therefore, second, I argue that mobilities, as well as material and sensory engagements, are essential to the practice of Buddhism and the lives of the nuns in Yachen, without whom the current Buddhist revivalism, in Yachen at least, would not be possible.

Following my Introduction (Chapter 1), I begin my chapters by presenting the distinctive mobilities of the nuns. Most of the nuns whom I have known in Yachen are

escapees, running away from their homes to become nuns in this remote region; their mobilities, against all odds—both physical and social—are what initially make Yachen possible (Chapter 2). Upon arrival, in the face of the harsh spatial regulations imposed by the Chinese state, they engage in building residential huts for themselves; these building activities are primarily responsible for Yachen’s accelerated expansion and thus for its potential political tension (Chapter 3). In Chapters 2 and 3, I also argue that the nuns’ mobilities and building practices, which have rarely been taken seriously within the Buddhist revival in China, in fact constitute the fundamental process of making Yachen, i.e., of making the sacred. In addition, by living with the nuns, I was able to observe their intimacies and secrets through the lens of their transgression and confession. I consider the act of transgression as one of the most political ways to give an account of the self as Buddhist practitioner, as nun, and as woman (Chapter 4). I argue that the nuns actively, provocatively, and riskily (re)shape Yachen’s norms and morality through their acts of transgression and confession. Finally, by drawing on food consumption and eating habits among the nuns in Yachen, I tackle the highly intertwined issues of ethnicity, money, religion, and ethics in Buddhist revivalism as well as in Sino-Tibetan relations (Chapter 5).

To the nuns of Yachen

## Contents

Abstract .....	iv
List of Figures .....	xi
Acknowledgements .....	xii
A Note on Terminology .....	xv
1. Introduction .....	1
1.1 The Field .....	1
1.1.1 A Small Nun on My Lap .....	3
1.1.2 Mobility, Materiality, and Methodology .....	7
1.1.2.1 The Roads .....	7
1.1.2.2 Materiality, Rawness, and the Sacred .....	10
1.1.3 The Anthropology of Religion .....	12
1.2 Locating Yachen within Tibetan Buddhist Revivalism in Post-Mao China .....	15
1.2.1 Geopolitics and Forms of Knowledge about Tibet .....	15
1.2.1.1 Mapping the Production of Knowledge about Tibet .....	15
1.2.1.2 Yachen— <i>At the Margins and As the Margin</i> .....	20
1.2.2 Yachen in the Buddhist Transformation .....	24
1.2.2.1 Architecture .....	25
2.2.1.1.1 A Brief Note on Individualism in Yachen .....	28
1.2.2.2 Relationships .....	32
1.3 Brief Summary of Chapters .....	34

2. Becoming a Buddhist Nun in Post-Mao China.....	36
2.1 Introduction.....	36
2.1.1 Deshi .....	38
2.2 A Risky Trip Home to the TAR.....	47
2.2.1 An Arduous Journey to Home .....	51
2.2.1.1 The Permit.....	54
2.2.1.2 Crossing Borders.....	58
2.2.1.3 Living the Flesh of Time.....	64
2.3 Half-nun Puthi.....	67
2.3.1 Contextualizing Lay Female Renunciation in Tibet .....	72
2.3.2 Blurring the Boundaries between Names and Robes.....	76
2.3.3 Crossed Destinies—Puthi and Lochik .....	79
2.3.4 Spatio-Temporal Subjects .....	82
2.4 Conclusion .....	86
3. A Problem of Architectural Thinking.....	88
3.1 Introduction.....	88
3.1.1 The Architectural Framework.....	92
3.2 Materiality of Hut-Building .....	96
3.2.1 Hut-Building .....	96
3.2.2 Thinging in Tibetan Matters .....	104
3.3 Padmasambhava, Maleness, and Nuns .....	107
3.3.1 Buddhist Revival in Kham Tibet .....	107
3.3.2 Visionary Buddhism and Nuns .....	113



3.3.3 Yachen’s Monks, Nuns, and Female Lamas .....	117
3.4 Unruly Space—Rethinking Tibetan Grasslands .....	124
3.5 Improvisation and Encampment .....	130
3.5.1 Politics of Naming—Is Yachen a Monastery?.....	131
3.5.2 Tent-Building.....	134
3.6 Conclusion .....	140
4. Transgression, Another Name for Sacredness .....	142
4.1 Introduction.....	142
4.1.1 Transgressions between the Sacred and Normal.....	146
4.2 Buddhist Love and Shame .....	149
4.2.1 Passive Ethnography .....	152
4.2.2 The Politics of Confession .....	154
4.2.3 The Karmic Self.....	160
4.3 The Politics of Decoration .....	164
4.3.1 Decorators .....	164
4.3.2 Why Care about Decorations? .....	169
4.3.2.1 Chinese nuns in Yachen.....	170
4.3.2.1.1 Jamyang.....	174
4.3.2.1.2 Yeshi.....	177
4.3.2.2 So, Why Decorations?.....	180
4.3.3 Buddhist Photography or Political Photography.....	183
4.4 The Exam .....	187

4.4.1 The Servants.....	188
4.4.2 The Exam.....	191
4.4.3 The Logistics .....	194
4.4.4. Staged Bodies .....	197
4.5 Conclusion .....	199
5. A Sensory Ethics: Taste, Ethnicity, and Transformation in Tibetan Buddhism.....	200
5.1 Introduction.....	200
5.2 The Production of Buddhist Ethics .....	203
5.2.1 A Brief Sketch of Food in Yachen.....	203
5.2.1.1 Cabbage.....	207
5.2.1.2 Tofu.....	214
5.3 Buddhist Vegetarianism in China .....	220
5.3.1 Pure Dishes, Commitment, Good Practitioners .....	221
5.3.2 Banning Meat Consumption .....	228
5.4 Conclusion.....	237
6. Conclusion .....	253
Works Cited.....	242
Biography.....	255

## List of Figures

Figure 1: A map from the Washington Post (March 15, 2008) .....	17
Figure 2: An aerial view, nuns' quarters in Yachen .....	26
Figure 3: Nuns' quarters in Yachen .....	27
Figure 4: Meditation cells placed on the mountainside .....	30
Figure 5: Deshi, right before shaving her head in Yachen .....	47
Figure 6: Puthi's daily chore.....	69
Figure 7: Nuns are building a hut .....	101
Figure 8: Nuns are building a hut with fine lumber, which has been harder to secure...	102
Figure 9: Nuns on the statue construction site .....	108
Figure 10: The Padmasambhava Statue, with its gaze in the direction of the monks' quarters.....	123
Figure 11: The cement ring road and the growing tent city outside of the "legal zone" on the right side.....	136
Figure 12: The tent city.....	137
Figure 13: Inside of a nun's hut .....	169
Figure 14: A nun's room.....	185
Figure 15: The Exam scene: A nun answering the questions .....	194
Figure 16: The vegetable market in the nuns' side .....	206

## **Acknowledgements**

My first debt is to the nuns in Yachen. I received the warmest and heartiest caring from them during my field research in Tibet between 2010 and 2014. Without their extraordinary generosity, compassion, and help, my project could not even have been initiated. In addition, while going through the intensive and painful dissertation writing process, I was able to live vicariously by thinking about their happiness and kindness.

Without the insightful advice and encouragement of my dissertation committee members, my project might have remained an unorganized bundle of notes and ideas. My advisor and mentor, Ralph Litzinger, through his political and intellectual acuity, has been the source for me to rely on when dealing with politically sensitive issues. His support has never ceased, even when he was fighting for his life. Anne Allison patiently read many of my earlier drafts and gave me much needed editorial, theoretical, and structural feedback. Louise Meintjes posed provocative questions and gave me inspiring feedback each and every time I turned in my drafts. Hwansoo Kim made me realize my project's alternative value from a religious studies perspective, and made me follow a strict writing schedule, without which I could not have finished my dissertation in a timely manner. Last but not least, since our first meeting in Yachen in 2010, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, with her expertise on Buddhist women, has not only honed my research questions and improved the clarity of my arguments, but also given me moral support in studying Buddhist nuns in Tibet.

It must be quickly noted, David Need shared unsparingly his vast and in-depth knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism over the years of my study at Duke. I learned from him more than I can say. I would also like to thank my colleagues and friends both at Duke and elsewhere. I express my deep indebtedness toward my writing group with Tamar Shirinian, Cagri Yoltar, Layla Brown, and Jennifer Bowles, and wonderful workshop leaders, Rebecca Stein, Louise Meintjes, and Katya Wesolowski. Their inspiring comments and feedback, including editorial suggestions, improved my earlier drafts greatly and I was able to deepen and improve my arguments in each and every session. I want to pay special tribute to Christopher Ahn for his integral linguistic feedback and insightful questions that greatly improved the perspicuity of my drafts.

I feel grateful to my Tibetan gang, the “Duke Yaks” at Duke and beyond, for their endless and unconditional support: Drolma Gadou, Tsering Drolma, Namgyal Tsepa, Thupten Norbu, Dondrop Dorje, Tsering Dorje, Tsering Samdrop, Sangyi Drolma, Palden Gyal, Gesar Lamu, Rinchen Drolma, Rinzin Dorje, Iris Kim, Awang, and Geshi Sangpo. I also wish to express gratitude to Gen Tseten la, Dolka la, Gen Tinley la, and Gen Chok la for teaching me Tibetan intensively and patiently at the University of Virginia, without them I would not have been able to pick up my second fieldwork language so quickly. I also thank my Korean friends and colleagues at Duke and elsewhere, Juhyung Shim, Eunyong Kim, Hae-Young Kim, Youngji Lee, Hangyoung Lee, Inseo Son, Haebjol Choi, Enjung Cho, Senghee Lee, Jungsoo Kim, Hyunsun Ju, Hyejin Kim, Namhee Lee, Hyemi Lee, Hyejung Shin, Jongbok Yi, and Jooyoun Jung, for

their trust and support, and for being there for me when I craved expressing things in my native tongue once in a while. I also wish to thank my Chinese friends and colleagues, Jian Zhang, Bo Chen, Huayu Wang, Tianying He, Yun Jian, Yong Wang, Ming Zhang, and Yinong Zhang.

I wish to express my deep gratitude to Hee-eun Chung as well. She introduced the world of Anthropology to me in the summer of 2008 in Beijing when I was extremely frustrated by my academic environment, and without her I wouldn't have thought of pursuing a graduate degree in the U.S. In addition, I would like to thank scholars I have met at conferences and outside of academic institutions for their thoughtful advice and knowledge: Tashi Tering la, Nicolas Sihl é Nicola Schneider, Richard Balme, Dan Smyer Yü, and Jane Caple. In works like this that deal with sensitive political realities, even though there are so many people to whom I owe a great debt, I cannot properly acknowledge them. I wish to thank those unnamed friends in Tibet, China, and India for their inspiring knowledge, courage, and expertise in their field.

## A Note on Terminology

In this dissertation, I try to write Tibetan terms phonetically, in a manner as close as possible to the original sounds, so as to make the terms readable and accessible for English speakers. With the exception of a few renowned Tibetan lamas, I have used aliases for the names of most the figures appearing in my dissertation in order to conceal their identities. At times, I also use pseudonyms for place names to avoid the possibility of unnecessary attention being directed to the actual Tibetan locations.

As for the names of my main field sites, I use mostly Chinese pinyin along with Tibetan sounds in brackets: for example, Ganzi (*Kardze* in Tibetan). However, I avoid using the Chinese term *Yaqingsi* for Yachen because the Chinese term “*si*” specifically evokes the meaning of “monastery,” which I do not entirely agree with (See Chapter Three).

The term “Tibet” is very ambiguous. In contemporary Chinese usage, “Tibet (Xizang)” generally means the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), or Central Tibet, which was created when China occupied Tibet in the 1950s. But in other contexts, “Tibet” can include the greater ethnic Tibetan regions outside of Central Tibet. In this dissertation, I try to be clear in indicating different parts of Tibet by using specific terms such as Central Tibet, the TAR, greater Tibet, Kham and Amdo, and so on. The term “China’s Tibet” generates a different nuance because it signifies the possessive relationship that exists between China and Tibet. I use “China’s Tibet” a few times throughout my chapters when it seems appropriate to do so; and in those cases, my

intention of using “China’s Tibet” is not meant to signal a political stance but rather to indicate the space of *contemporary* greater Tibet that is under Chinese rule. I hope my usage of terms for “Tibet” and “China’s Tibet” will be clear when they are viewed within their contexts in my chapters.



# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 *The Field*

Every day at around seven o'clock in the morning, a small town called Ganzi (*Kardze* in Tibetan), located in China's northwestern Sichuan province and possessing an ethnic Tibetan majority, bustles with people and vehicles heading to a place called Yachen (*Yaqing* in Chinese). Yachen is a mega-sized Tibetan Buddhist encampment that emerged in a nomadic area of eastern Tibet in the 1980s. Mostly Tibetan nuns and some monks and laity are the major travelers to Yachen on these busy mornings. In most small and large Tibetan towns in western China, due to their remoteness, population scarcity, and lack of infrastructure, public transportation services are highly limited. Private vehicles such as vans, minivans, and SUVs make up a large portion of the transportation business. Although Ganzi has its own public long-distance bus station, which provides transportation connecting Ganzi to other Tibetan towns, the station never seems to be excessively busy or crowded. Instead, the front yard of an old and low-priced hotel called Hotel Liangjia (*Liangjia Fandian* in Chinese), two blocks away from the public station, functions as a gathering spot for most of the passengers, drivers, and various vehicles in town. The Hotel Liangjia provides cheap lodging for those Tibetan nuns and monks who travel back and forth between Yachen and other places. Yachen is the final destination for most of the people crowded together in the narrow street in front of the hotel, but an increasing number of passengers also look for connecting transportation to other inner Tibetan towns as well. Thus, in Ganzi, an outsider looking for travel transportation is

likely to be directed to the Hotel Liangjia rather than to the long-distance public bus station.

The Hotel Liangjia, due to its centrality within the town and its outsized number of guests who are Tibetan nuns and monks, is also the main spot for Chinese armed-police stations. In the vicinity of the hotel, three temporary police stations have been set up with heavily armed police, adding more complexity to this already bustling area. This has been an oddly familiar scene in Tibet since 2008<sup>1</sup>; wherever Tibetan nuns and monks gather, the Chinese armed forces are highly visible as well. The contrasting colors of the maroon Tibetan robes and the deep-blue uniforms of the Chinese police compete side by side in contemporary Tibetan towns in China. Through the visual impact of this simple mixture of colors on the streets, we can easily sense that religion and politics in contemporary China (and, generally, perhaps in other places as well) can in no way be simply divided and treated as separate categories.

My purpose for visiting the hotel, or precisely, the front yard of the Hotel Liangjia, is to buy a bus ticket for Yachen for the following morning. Two battered minibuses rotationally serve to transport passengers and things between Yachen and Ganzi once a day, every day. This is a privately run shuttle bus that has the cheapest tickets for passengers traveling to Yachen. The driver himself sells the tickets a day prior to departure. The actual passenger capacity of the vehicle is said to be thirty-five, but the

---

<sup>1</sup> On March 14, 2008, Tibetans in Lhasa demonstrated against Chinese rule. It was a peaceful protest at first and later became violent at times; it quickly spread to other ethnic Tibetan regions outside of central Tibet. The Chinese government sent a heavily armed force to quell the protests and central Tibet was immediately sealed off. See Barnett (2009).

bus usually ends up carrying more than sixty people along with their bulky luggage. Even if I buy a bus ticket with the written seat number “3,” due to overcrowding inside the bus, I often end up sharing my seat with others or, at times, I will have someone sitting on my knees—usually a small nun—throughout the entire journey.

### **1.1.1 A Small Nun on My Lap**

Because, as I have described, the driver usually oversells the number of tickets, regardless of the actual number of seats, the inside of the bus is extremely crowded; virtually any tiny spot that is big enough to squeeze into is used as a seat. Frequently, a nun next me, pushed by other passengers or piles of luggage, ended up sitting on my lap; luckily, her small body size usually allowed me to make it through the entire five-hour journey to Yachen in that position. Since it is indeed an awkward situation, and I am usually in no mood to make small talk with anybody during these unpleasant trips, the nun on my lap and I both remain silent, except for exchanging smiles a few times when our eyes meet.

For all these years, she had been invisible to me: I had been ignoring the nun on my lap during the numerous bus trips to Yachen, while she kept forcing her presence on me through her body as well as through her mobility. In the moments when I was confused by my field because seemingly nothing “noticeable” was happening, her presence constantly served as a material cue for my research and directed my attention toward what to look for and what not to ignore.

Now I am bringing her back, putting her at the center of my research. “A small nun on my lap” allows me to see ever more clearly the confusions and questions that I

had over the years of my field work: why was I constantly drawn back to sensory, material, and mobile occasions and events that are not particularly related to the practice of religion per se? Why were my field notes filled with observations about the physical labor, mobilities, and daily chores done by nuns rather than with descriptions of spirituality, piety, or sacredness? In other words, why did I find myself at construction sites, in kitchens, and in moving vehicles more often than at the sites of rituals and religious performances, even though I was physically living in a Buddhist monastic community and studying the lives of practitioners there? When I took the lives of nuns seriously, the focus of my research turned upside down. Their stories of running away from home needed to be counted; their building practice had to be placed at the center of their religious practice because this is precisely what makes their lives physically possible in a monastic community like Yachen; and their intimacies, secrets, and transgressions had to be examined because they show how their distinctive practice, religiosity, and daily sacredness are formed. At first I simply couldn't connect pursuing a focus on the lives of nuns with these tremendous changes that I had to embrace because I was blinded by the established norms and the existing approaches to studying religious practices. Put simply, suppose that I were to focus on Tibetan monks and male lamas.<sup>2</sup> If so, would I feel the necessity, or even recognize, that any of the factors listed above—mobility, building, and intimacy—should be included in the monks' religious practices? Hardly.

---

<sup>2</sup> "Lama" simply means spiritual teacher in Tibetan. I will use lama interchangeably with teacher and master throughout these chapters.

The nun on my lap, as a thing in and of itself, has taught me an important lesson about which I must be mindful: no matter how abstract things might be, there is always a material basis behind them, upholding them, and making them visible and recognizable. And this material basis also *creates* the abstract. In my research, what most Tibetan nuns are doing in the Buddhist revivals in China is exactly this kind of invisible and yet real physical work that supports “fancier” discourses of sacredness, spirituality, and what might be generally called the “practice of Buddhism.” And by doing so, they redefine the practice of Buddhism altogether. The sacred will become materialized at some point through texts, geography, signs, and so on; however, more importantly, materials condition and shape the very concept of sacredness as well. When it comes to the practice of Buddhism in Tibet, there has been very little discussion of the sacred or the religious practices that reflect the material conditions of the nuns, whose daily lives are fundamentally different from those of the monks.

The nun on my lap was heading to Yachen on that day, a place where a majority of the practitioners are female. And yet, surprisingly, no substantial discussions exist regarding the nuns’ religious practices. Because, within the established understanding of “practicing” Buddhism, subjects like the mobility and materiality of the nuns have never been at the center of discussion, and have never been treated as subjects worthy of examination. Therefore, the lives and practices of presumably over 10,000 “permanent” female residents are subsumed as part of the same discussions about the approximately

2,000 “temporary” male residents.<sup>3</sup> Tibetan Buddhist scholarship has been ignoring the lives and contributions of more than half of Tibetan Buddhism’s practitioners—just as I have been ignoring the nun on my lap—because the presence of the nuns is treated as a non-issue and a non-event within mainstream Buddhist practice. Nuns are always “the additional.” However, as I will discuss throughout this dissertation, I believe that what these nuns are doing—through what are seemingly the most mundane, invisible, and quiet activities—is in fact groundbreaking, feminist, and political in relation to the practice of Buddhism and Sino-Chinese relationships.

My goal in this dissertation is to bring the nuns back to the center, treating their lives and practices as central issues and events in the making of Tibetan Buddhism. Thus, my study is, first and foremost, based on my ethnographic experience with the nuns currently living in Yachen; their lives as nuns in this community share similarities with other Tibetan monastic communities, but are also fairly different from these other communities in many respects. The “differences” I pay attention to in this dissertation are crucial for understanding the nuns in Yachen, contemporary Tibetan Buddhism, and Sino-Tibetan relationships. As I will show throughout the chapters, some of the nuns’ actions are beyond the purview of the Buddhist *vinaya* rules, may even be “unnoticed” by

---

<sup>3</sup> It is not an easy task to accurately count the number of practitioners in Yachen. Two sources indicated that the population of Yachen was around 7,000—approximately 5,500 nuns and 1,500 monks in 2007 (Padma’tsho 2014) and unpublished secret governmental documents (2007). In 2010, the number of practitioners was unofficially reported as around 10,000—approximately 8,000 nuns and 2,000 monks. However during the years between 2010 and 2014 when I visited Yachen, the quarters shortage became a pressing issue in the nuns’ area and the nuns started setting up tents to deal with this issue. See Chapter Three. Based on conversations and guesswork, I presume the number of nuns is around 10,000.

high-ranking lamas in their own community,<sup>4</sup> and have rarely been discussed as a political possibility—what I call a “politics of tranquility”—in Sino-Tibetan politics. If I succeed in my larger ambitions, my project will contribute to: drawing attention to an alternative notion of “the political” in general and in the Sino-Chinese context in particular; redrawing or shifting the boundary of religion and Buddhist practices; and, most importantly, shaking up the everlasting gender biases in Tibetan Buddhism and Buddhist traditions in general.

## **1.1.2 Mobility, Materiality, and Methodology**

### **1.1.2.1 The Roads**

Each morning, in the front yard of the Hotel Liangjia, the engine of the old shuttle bus, packed with people and things way beyond its original capacity, arduously and loudly starts up. The road ahead is not easy. The heavily overburdened bus travels on the notoriously rough Gan-Bai road,<sup>5</sup> a virtually unpaved mountainous road, for about five or six hours. The luggage tied up on the roof of the bus sometimes falls down the cliffs or into the deep valley when the bus runs on a rugged stretch of road.<sup>6</sup> The bus also passes through the snowy mountain area that is called the sky road. A section of the sky road is

---

<sup>4</sup> My use of “unnoticed” here originates from the inconsistencies I often found when I asked about the nuns’ lives in my conversations with high-ranking lamas in Yachen. The lamas’ words and opinions were more inclined to general monastic rules and principles about the nuns rather than the real lives of the nuns in Yachen.

<sup>5</sup> This is the Ganzi-Baiyu (*Palyu* in Tibetan) road that stretches over 600 km throughout the eastern nomadic Tibetan plateau. The condition of Gan-Bai road has been greatly improved since 2010 when I first visited Yachen. It took me almost seven hours from Ganzi to Yachen in 2010, but it took me only four hours in 2014.

<sup>6</sup> I lost my brand new seventy-liter backpack, with all my personal belongings, in this way in my second year of field research during a field trip to Yachen.

located at an altitude of over 5,000 meters above sea level, surrounded by mountains that are permanently covered in snow. Novice passengers suffer the most in this section from high altitude sickness, nausea, and exhaustion. The sky road, however, has also been an inspiring subject for many photographers and tourists because of its awe-striking appearance. Their photos circulate widely outside of the Yachen and Tibetan communities, constantly inciting orientalism about Tibet both within Tibet itself and outside of it.

I began this introduction with a section titled “The Field,” which described a busy morning in preparation for a road trip to Yachen from Ganzi. Strictly speaking, Ganzi town and the buses themselves are not my field site. Over the years of my short- and long-term field research between 2010 and 2014, I took numerous trips to Yachen by traveling along the Gan-Bai road, as well as on other similar roads while accompanying nuns to visit their families in their hometowns on the Tibetan plateau. During those years of field research, therefore, although I basically resided in the heart of the Yachen community, I also spent a significant amount of time seated inside shabby moving vehicles along with nuns, monks, ordinary Tibetans, and Chinese pilgrims traveling on these bumpy roads in the greater Tibetan area. The experience of these types of arduous road trips on the plateau, which last for an extensive period of time, is probably similar to the experience of other ethnographers whose work focuses on rural and remote areas, and could easily be dismissed and treated as a non-issue or a non-event that does not need to be analyzed. In particular, when it comes to the discussion of religion and the search for spirituality and sacredness, how can one expect the exhausting travails that people



experience on the roads to be taken seriously? However, it took many years for me to begin to realize that in fact the road trips, which are characterized as noneventful and as a time of “ethnographic boredom,” and the roads themselves have keep signaling to me about the core aspect of religious revivalism that I have been working on: mobility. Simply saying, without the mobilities of the nuns, the existence and evolution of Yachen would be impossible.

The ethnographic methodology, so-called participant observation that I use, has evolved through my own bodily engagements and sensory experiences as I traveled in Tibet. This started at the Hotel Liangjia in Ganzi town when buying a bus ticket, juggling seats, and uploading luggage, as well as in the shabby shuttle buses and other forms of transportation that I used numerous times on the plateau. The experience of sitting inside a ragged vehicle, along with the feeling of one’s body being pressed tightly against another person or having someone sit on one’s knees, managing six or seven pieces of luggage and trying not to lose any of them, and traveling in a no-toilet zone for long hours, forced me to think, in a hyper-sensitized way, about what it really means to be part of Buddhist revivalism in China’s Tibet, and in particular to practice Tibetan Buddhism in Yachen. To me, therefore, methodology has never been simply a means to understand the lives of the people I am working on; rather, it *molded* my research, *formed* the questions I should ask; *directed* me toward what to look for and what was important. In other words, my own bodily experience on the roads has served to do more than just inform my initial impressions about the field ahead; it has actually shaped the way in

which I understand the nuns, religious revivalism, and Buddhist practices in Yachen and beyond.

### **1.1.2.2 Materiality, Rawness, and the Sacred**

The sacredness of the Buddhist teachings is, in fact, *felt* and *experienced* through material engagements, and through bodily and sensory experiences. As they sit in buses and visit local restaurants, temples, and monasteries in Tibetan towns, the pilgrims to Yachen first sense the dirt on the bumpy roads, the high altitude sickness and nausea of the journey, the smell of the butter lamp in the shrine, and the loud and undecipherable recorded lectures of Tibetan lamas on the streets. It is in such experiences that I found the rawness of the sacred. The most mundane and profane experiences are congealed together in the pursuit of the sacred. Even in a crowded shuttle bus to Yachen, the smell of *tsampa*<sup>7</sup> emanating from the piles of sacks next to my face, the feeling of another person's body mass, the loud and low-quality sound of Tibetan folk songs coming from someone's phone are shared by all the passengers in the vehicle. These passengers on a journey of pilgrimage, coming from different regions and different social statuses, share, whether joyfully or painfully, these indispensable bodily experiences, without which the sacred is never reached.

The spirituality that these Buddhist practitioners are seeking is obtained and recognized, not exclusively but mostly, through their physical presence in religious

---

<sup>7</sup> *Tsampa* is a Tibetan barley flour. This is the major staple cultivated in Tibet, and it has been the most representative food of Tibet. Tibetans eat it with tea (with butter sometimes) for breakfast or for snacks between meals.

rituals and gatherings and in the form of meetings and interactions with their teachers—the Tibetan masters’ physical “touch” on the forehead or the hands as a sign of blessing is considered a direct transmission of sacred teachings and sacredness itself. The leftovers of the lamas, including their drinking water, are considered the most edible sacred objects. After the lamas’ meals, disciples line up to get a piece of the sacred food left by their teachers, and the food is consumed with great awe and respect. In fact, Tibetan Buddhist revivalism, seen as a large social movement, began and continues through the sensory and material engagements of individuals in their material embodiment—moving, eating, building, and dwelling. My dissertation precisely calls attention to the material processes of Tibetan Buddhist revivalism in contemporary China that are central to the nuns’ practices, rather than to the lamas’ sacred teachings based on textual interpretations and analyses.

My insistence on giving meaning to such sensory and material experiences en route to Yachen is more than just a way of understanding the religious phenomena that I was observing. The experience of traveling on the plateau in fact foreshadowed the physicality of the space and the lives of the people that I was about to encounter in Yachen—geography, natural environment, weather, types of residences and dwellings. Within this context, traveling also heralded a sense of rawness in practicing Buddhism, as well as in being in the world. Practicing Buddhism—in rough terms: reciting, chanting, and merit-making—cannot be separated from the materials and material conditions through which it operates and is made possible. The discourse that has emerged about the sacred geography surrounding Yachen, the claim that Yachen was prophesized by an

ancient Tibetan master who lived centuries ago, is in fact grounded in the hidden fact that thousands of Tibetan girls moved to and physically made the community of Yachen by building huts and practicing Buddhism together. I consider the various hardships that I observed, including those I tried to share with the nuns, both on the roads and at construction sites, to be fundamental to the process of making the sacredness of Yachen and making the very religious revivalism that has occurred in China's Tibet.

### **1.1.3 The Anthropology of Religion**

If asked, I will simply answer that my field site is Yachen and I am studying the religious practices of Tibetan Buddhist nuns in the Buddhist revivalism occurring in China since the 1980s. Simply and broadly put, my research is an anthropological study of religion, which itself has deep roots in the evolution of the discipline per se. Those father figures of anthropology and their subsequent followers devoted themselves to understanding the meanings of religious practices, beliefs, and rituals in “primitive culture” (Douglas 2002; Durkheim 1995; Evans-Pritchard 1967; Frazer 1994; Malinowski 1954; Rappaport 1984; Turner 1967; Tylor 1958). Whether religion is understood as playing a role in social cohesion through prohibition and taboo (Durkheim 1995), or as magic and mystery in relation to science and rationality (Malinowski 1954; Tambiah 1990), or as a symbolic structure (Douglas 2002; Evans-Pritchard 1967; Geertz 1973; Turner 1967), religion, as a system of belief and as a collective state of mind that possesses that belief, was considered to be a representation that confers a social order, authority, gender roles, and a way of amassing capital. Later on, by drawing on in-depth ethnographic research, anthropologists began to put religion into more specific

sociopolitical contexts, with a focus on showing how religion and belief are intertwined with colonialism (Comaroff and Comaroff 1986; Shenhav 2006; Taussig 1980, 1987), nationalism (Kolås 1996; Shenhav 2006; Weller 2001), identity and gender politics (Boddy 1989; Gray and Thumma 2005; Grimshaw 1994; Gutschow 2004; Hirschkind 2006; Kinnvall 2002; Mahmood 2005; Makley 2007; Perica 2002), and more.

Likewise, in their study of religious belief and practice, anthropologists have begun to shift their focus from looking for a symbolic structure to examining embodied experience. They no longer treat religious belief as a set of teachings and creeds or a state of mind, but see it as a “constituting activity in the world” (Asad 1993: 47). In this transformation, the notions of the body, senses, and materiality have appeared as new key concepts that open up an alternative terrain for understanding religious belief and practices (Arweck and Keenan 2006; Jones 2010; Keane 2008; Morgan 2010). Materiality and bodily sensation provide a completely different register in which to examine religion, religious belief, and practice because we are now able to trace the dynamics and activities that are involved in shaping religious beliefs and how these “constituting activities” are reorganizing and reordering space, time, and relationships between things and people in the practice of religion.

Let’s think for a moment, for example, about the phenomenon of Tibetan Buddhist revivalism in contemporary China, a major theme of my dissertation. The Tibetan Buddhist revival in China, first and foremost, came to be recognized because of the physical emergence, in forms such as camps and communities, of gatherings of Buddhist practitioners in the western part of the country. This was followed in the 1980s

and 1990s by increasing numbers of practitioners from everywhere, who traveled to these communities to practice Buddhism with Tibetan lamas. Tibetan girls decided to join these communities and to become nuns by running away from their natal homes and, in the process, spending days and nights on the roads, at times even risking their lives (Chapter 2). Upon arrival in these communities, against all odds, they started erecting small huts or tents by themselves, using lumber, plywood, and fabric (Chapter 3). Chinese practitioners who live in urban centers began making travel arrangements and leaving the comfortable cities in order to make pilgrimages to remote and isolated places. They also started rearranging their dietary habits and following strict non-meat restrictions, and as a result, Tibetan Buddhism is being transformed from the inside (Chapter 5). In this process, new relationships, alterities, and transgressions also take place, which are normally unimaginable or invisible within teaching-based understandings of religious practice (Chapter 4).

In my understanding, the anthropological approach to religions has come to see religion not as a solid social category to be studied, but as an ever-changing activity that breaks down norms and orders, and at the same time, unites and crosses divisions, boundaries, and relationships. My dissertation contributes precisely to this understanding of religion. Roughly speaking, the religious practices of the Tibetan nuns in Yachen in fact are not limited to the nuns' recognition and acceptance of a predesignated set of beliefs and creeds, but instead are active engagements with those beliefs and creeds through the making new homes, dwelling there, and envisioning new possibilities within very limited and unfavorable circumstances; but in doing so, they deconstruct norms and

systems of order by uniting and crossing boundaries and relationships (See Tweed 2006).

In this regard, the nuns' religious practices are themselves deeply political.

## ***1.2 Locating Yachen within Tibetan Buddhist Revivalism in Post-Mao China***

In order to situate Yachen in contemporary Chinese society, we need to understand two axes of Sino-Tibetan relations—geopolitics and religion—which have been intersecting vectors in these relations. In this section, I will first elaborate on the geopolitical context in which Yachen is currently situated; and second, I will examine Yachen's position within the evolution of Tibetan Buddhism in the context of the center and margin, or to borrow from Samuel's expression (1993), between "clerical" and "shamanic" traditions. Although it seems that I am making a division between politics and religion in discussing Tibetan matters, I do so only as a convenient way to lay out the sections of this chapter. As we will see, in each subsection my discussions about religion and politics are intertwined and mixed. There is no way I can discuss them separately. Yachen is not only a crucial site for understanding the ongoing changes in Sino-Tibetan politics since the 1980s, but is also itself a groundbreaking phenomenon in the development of Tibetan Buddhist and in the gender politics of Buddhism in Tibet and Buddhism in general.

### **1.2.1 Geopolitics and Forms of Knowledge about Tibet**

#### **1.2.1.1 Mapping the Production of Knowledge about Tibet**

What I refer to as central Tibet is officially called the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR, *Xizang* in Chinese) according to contemporary Chinese juridical divisions. As

shown in the map below, the regions in which ethnic Tibetans dominate—what I sometimes refer to as greater Tibet—take up roughly one quarter of the entire territory of the People’s Republic of China. Since the 1950s, after the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP)<sup>8</sup> forced annexation of Tibet, the official Tibetan province has slowly been reduced to the size of the current TAR. The rest of the ethnic Tibetan regions have been made parts of other provinces such as Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan (Hao 2000) and are managed under the division of Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures. The forced geographic divisions produced by redrawing central Tibet and the rest of the ethnic Tibetan areas may give some governing efficiency and legibility to the ruling party, because the Chinese government can easily seal off the TAR as a single juridical category and embark on state-of-exception policies anytime, while not disturbing other neighboring Chinese regions. In addition, no ruling party with a rational mind would be satisfied with allowing a larger portion of its national territory to be designated for “unruly” ethnic minority populations. In 2008, after the March uprising by Tibetans against Chinese rule in Lhasa, central Tibet was immediately sealed off. Since then, foreign visitors have found few ways to access central Tibet.

---

<sup>8</sup> The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was founded in 1921, after which the Party went through a series of revolutionary periods and finally established the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Since the Party not only existed prior to the state but actually built the state itself, the authority and credit given to the Party in China are unrivaled. Government officials are basically the members of the Party. Those who are in higher-level positions in government often play a dual role, with responsibilities in both the government sector and in the Party. For example, the current President of the PRC, Xi Jinping, is also the General Secretary of the CCP. Therefore, at least in this dissertation, I use the Chinese government and the Chinese Community Party interchangeably as the major governing body of China in relation to Tibet and Tibetan policies. For additional explanations about the party-state system in China, see Dirlik (1989), Edin (2003), Laliberté and Lanteigne (2008).





Figure 1: A map from the Washington Post (March 15, 2008).<sup>9</sup>

Central Tibet has always been a restricted location for foreign scholars conducting field research, and the 2008 incident made the rules for access even stricter. Field workers who are not Chinese nationals cannot get permits to stay, and foreign tourists are limited when entering central Tibet. After the incident, foreigner-focused guest houses in

---

<sup>9</sup> I have added the locations of Ge'ermu, Chengdu, and Yachen to the map. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/graphic/2008/03/14/GR2008031404504.html?referrer=emailink>, Accessed April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

Chinese cities closed their Tibet-trekking packages with no further notice.<sup>10</sup> Even if a researcher, who is not a Chinese national, is able to obtain a permit to enter Lhasa, s/he is subject to regular interference by the host institution in China that granted the permit. In particular, visiting rural areas outside of Lhasa is even more severely limited; and virtually no active, independent field work has been possible in central Tibet since then (Barnett 2012; Yeh 2013). While foreign researchers have not been able to freely reach Lhasa or any part of central Tibet, Han Chinese researchers have relative freedom of mobility in central Tibet. The long-term sealing off of the entire TAR has, therefore, impacted not only the lives of ordinary Tibetans with their highly restricted mobilities, but also the production of ethnographic knowledge about the place; ethnographic data and interpretation have been monopolized by Chinese scholars and institutions who are subject to state surveillance. At the same time, central Tibet has rapidly grown as an emerging adventure destination, attracting visibly increasing numbers of young Chinese backpackers, bikers, and photographers throughout the year. In the winter of 2013, in my observation, the streets of Lhasa were full of Chinese tourists<sup>11</sup> because the policy of sealing off central Tibet has been applied exclusively to ethnic Tibetans and to anyone who is not a Chinese national. Han-Chinese are exempt from this policy.

---

<sup>10</sup> Gradually starting around 2012, and as of 2015, foreign tourists are able to enter Lhasa only by booking a travel package from official travel agencies that will provide the tourists with permits; and in this case, the tourists are asked to follow a strict itinerary scheduled by the agencies.

<sup>11</sup> This is in extreme contrast to my personal observations in 2005. Due to its popularity with tourists who saw it through a Shangri-La type of orientalist imagination, Lhasa, or at least the center of the city, was occupied by western tourists and backpackers. The streets were filled with western-style restaurants and cafes busy doing business with foreign customers, and many local Tibetans around this area were quite fluent in speaking English. On the other hand, I met very few Han Chinese tourists in the city in 2005.

It may be true for other social scientific research on contemporary societies as well, but especially for ethnographic research, the geopolitics of the region where a researcher conducts field work is absolutely crucial. Restrictions in accessing the field, the fundamental basis of producing ethnography, foreclose an initial encounter with the people and the place. This has been an issue for non-Chinese Tibetologists since the beginning. Before the reform policy in 1979, China was a forbidden world for most westerners, let alone those traveling in Tibet. Thus, most work related to Tibet in this dark era was done through the diasporic networks based in the Tibetan exile community in Dharamsala in northern India. Tibet was understood through the narratives and memories of refugees who had escaped from Tibet after 1959. In the beginning, therefore, scholars focused more on producing historical and Buddhist-oriented accounts, rather than on ethnographic explorations of Tibet (Conboy and Morrison 2002; Dreyfus 2003; Goldstein 1991, 1997, 2007, 2009; Grunfeld 1996; Huber 1999; D. Norbu 2001; Powers 2004; Shakabpa 1967; Samuel 1993; Shakya 1999).<sup>12</sup> Ethnographic studies of Tibetan society were conducted in regions of the Himalayas such as the border towns in Nepal and northern India (Childs 2004; Grimshaw 1994; Gutschow 2004; Havnevik 1989; Levine 1988). After the opening of China, including the partial opening of Tibet as well, ethnographic work in diasporic communities has continued to be produced, but the focus has shifted to the liminality of refugee communities and the lives of Tibetans

---

<sup>12</sup> A large volume of biographical accounts on ordinary Tibetans and renowned lamas including the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama's began producing since then, and adding rich texture to the lives of Tibetans in Tibet, in exile, and other places as well. See two volumes of the biographies of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama were published (1962, 1990), Khésun (2008), Tapontsang and Blakeslee (1999), and Thondup and Thurston (2015).

outside of Tibet, rather than on the mere reproduction of mirroring accounts about Tibet that depend on narratives produced by the refugees (Diehl 2002; McGranahan 2010; Zablocki 2005).

Book-length, ethnography-based work about Lhasa and central Tibet started being produced when foreigners were allowed limited stays in Lhasa. Ronald Schwartz's (1994) seminal work, *Circle of Protest: Political Ritual in the Tibetan Uprising, 1987-92*, was based on his firsthand experience of the political uprising of 1989 in Lhasa.<sup>13</sup> Robert Barnett (2006) wrote a poetic essay collection, *Lhasa: Streets with Memories*, based on his several short-term stays in Lhasa as a student and as a scholar. The most recent example of such work, *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development*, was published by Emily Yeh (2013) and includes some documentation about what happened after the 2008 uprising. However, long-term ethnographic work done by foreign researchers on the city of Lhasa and greater central Tibet has virtually stopped since the 2008 incident.<sup>14</sup>

### **1.2.1.2 Yachen—At the Margins and As the Margin**

Restrictions on entering central Tibet have not only impacted the mobility of scholars in the field, but, more importantly, they signal the intensification of the colonizing project aimed at central Tibet by the Chinese government. The historically

---

<sup>13</sup> Scholarly works related to Tibetan resistance were produced around this time. See Barnett and Akiner (1994) and Barnett and Spiegel (1996).

<sup>14</sup> Emily Yeh in her book (2013) partially documents the situations after the 2008 uprising, but most of her work is based on her long-term field research conducted in the early 2000s.

renowned three Gelupa Buddhist monasteries<sup>15</sup> near Lhasa have been under stricter governmental surveillance, with increased limitations on their estates, memberships, and educational curricula. The monasteries were forced to restrict the number of monks; and their child monks were dismissed and sent to secular schools, although most ended up wandering on the streets.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Tibetans who wish to become monks and nuns in Lhasa must obtain a permit to join a monastery or a nunnery, and obtaining the permit takes years. Travel to central Tibet for ethnic Tibetans who do not have central Tibet residence has become much harder (Chapter 2). Additionally, all government officials are banned from practicing Buddhism, and surveillance cameras have been placed in monasteries and on every street corner. Tibetan monks and nuns are not allowed to enter governmental buildings or secular educational institutions such as Tibet University (Barnett 2012), and those Tibetans who do not have residency in Lhasa have been expelled from the city.

Lhasa used to be the center of Buddhist education, attracting Buddhist practitioners from all over the plateau with its well-established systems and great scholars and lamas. Now, the situation has been reversed; I met and heard about many nuns from Lhasa who are now outside of central Tibet. They told me that they had to leave Lhasa in

---

<sup>15</sup> These three monasteries are Ganden, Drepung, and Sera.

<sup>16</sup> This information was gathered in 2013, based on interviews and conversations with former monks in the exile community in India. Monasteries are major educational institutions in traditional Tibetan society. Parents used to send their sons, as boys, to the monasteries for high-level Buddhist education. Due to Beijing's hardline, secular policies, however, those young monks were expelled from the monasteries and many of them became street boys who spent their time stealing, drinking, and smoking until they were sent to India.

order to practice real and active Buddhism. It has been observed many times that Tibetans in Lhasa, due to the increasing influx of Chinese commercial forces and tourists, are becoming a minority in their own capital. This coincides well with the recent revival of Buddhism at the margins, where Yachen is currently located. Generally speaking, the Tibetan Buddhist fever in contemporary China was initiated simultaneously with the government's liberalizing policies regarding religious affairs, which occurred when the government started focusing on economic development rather than political struggles. The changed governmental policies on religion have had an undeniable impact on the current religious revivalism in China, without which the mammoth size of the Buddhist communities that we see now wouldn't even be imaginable.

However, I also see a different geopolitical vector triggering Tibetan Buddhist revivalism in contemporary China. Through being divided from the other Tibetan regions and having state-of-exception policies imposed on it for an extensive period of time, central Tibet has been losing its authority as the center of Buddhist education under Chinese rule. Monks and nuns in central Tibet are obliged to attend patriotic education sessions and are forced to deny the current Dalai Lama as their spiritual leader (Barnett 2009, 2012). Monastic curricula are monitored by government officials and the power of the abbots has shrunk. Because of this, ethnic Tibetans, both monastic and laity, have been forced to think about other possibilities at the margins in regard to practicing Buddhism; for example, in those remote places in the eastern nomadic area where ethnic Tibetans and Tibetan cultures still have a dominant position and where relatively less severe ethnic policies have been in operation. In other words, the more severe and

encompassing controls by the government in central Tibet have resulted in non-central parts of Tibet being seen as alternative possible spaces for revitalizing the Buddhist education and practice that are withering in central Tibet. Therefore, Tibetan Buddhist revivalism in post-Mao China is, I argue, not purely a consequence of the (relatively) liberal policies of the Chinese government since the 1980s; rather it is, ironically, in part because of the tightened and lasting political pressure placed on central Tibet by the government. Therefore, the contrasting modes of Chinese governmental policies, Sino-Tibetan geopolitics, and the suffering of ordinary Tibetans have become constituting factors of the current Tibetan Buddhist revivalism in China. As shown in the map above, Yachen is located both geographically and culturally at the margins of Tibetan society. When the center is severely oppressed, the margins appear as an opportunity. Yachen precisely emerged both *at* the margins of Tibet and *as* the margin of Tibet.

Concordantly, in relation to the recent revitalization of Tibetan Buddhism in this area, scholars have started focusing on regions outside of central Tibet; several ethnographic works have been produced since the 2000s regarding the greater northeastern part of Tibet called Amdo Tibet (Blezer and Huber 2002; Caple 2011, 2013; Makley 2007; Zhang 2009, 2012), and the eastern part of Tibet called Kham (Epstein 2002; S. Jacoby and Terrone 2009; Smyer Yü 2012; Terrone 2010; Tsering Thar 2002; Turek 2013). Some works attempt to show the broader Tibetan society within the post-Mao transformation, by focusing on topics such as the changing identity politics (Jinba 2014; Kolås 2008; Kolås and Thowsen 2005), modernity (Barnett and Schwartz 2008; Kolås 2008), the emergence of non-monastic Buddhist communities (Jacoby and Terrone

2009), the environment and Buddhism (Smyer Y ü 2014), and international perspectives on Tibetan Buddhism and society (Esposito 2008a, 2008b). These works contribute greatly to the production of knowledge about greater Tibet in China since the 1980s. Because of better ethnographic accessibility, we are now able to see how Tibetans at the margins constantly interact and negotiate with non-Tibetans within the context of the rapid social transformations in post-Mao China. I would now like to turn to the other axis, Buddhism, for a fuller understanding Yachen, or to put it more broadly, of the Yachen phenomenon in contemporary China.

### **1.2.2 Yachen in the Buddhist Transformation**

As discussed, if Yachen's political and geographical marginality makes the current Yachen possible in the first place, its Buddhist marginality—Yachen belongs to a non-central sect of Tibetan Buddhism—is also responsible for the current “success” of Yachen. What I mean by “success” is simply its current existence as a mega-sized Tibetan Buddhist community and its ongoing expansion under Chinese rule. If this section were being written as part of Buddhist studies, I would likely elaborate on the details of sectarian differences. However, rather than taking a theological perspective, I would like to examine Yachen's Buddhist marginality from its ethnographical and phenomenological aspects. I will discuss the Buddhist marginality of Yachen by drawing on two distinctive categories that I believe to be crucial in understanding Yachen: architecture and relationships. These two divisions are deeply intertwined; one makes the other possible and vice versa.



### **1.2.2.1 Architecture**

Yachen is a Buddhist shantytown. When we talk about Tibetan Buddhist revivalism in contemporary China, especially as it is happening in the Kham Tibetan area, we must not picture a nice, huge Buddhist monastic building structure, where all practitioners stay together and share communal monastic rhythms. This is how the Tibetan Buddhist revival in the Kham started: individual practitioners followed their own masters and gathered in a remote nomadic region and started residing and practicing there with the masters by setting up a temporary communal living structure (See Germano 1998). In Yachen, the residential structures are provided by the practitioners themselves. Therefore, the quality, size, and shape of each dwelling varies; but in general, the structures are in very poor condition. Due to the increasing numbers of followers, the individual living quarters in Yachen have now become a huge cluster of encampments, as if a Buddhist island sat in the middle of an endless ocean of grassland.



**Figure 2: An aerial view of the nuns' quarters in Yachen. Photo by Yasmin Cho (2010).**



**Figure 3: Nuns' quarters in Yachen. Photo by Yasmin Cho (2013).**

This type of Buddhist gathering is in fact not at all new in Tibet. Renowned Tantric masters, yogis, and yoginis in Tibet have settled in remote places, meditating for life, with small or large groups of followers gathered around them, forming Buddhist encampments. What makes Yachen look so unique then, is its unprecedented numbers of followers, especially its huge majority of female practitioners. However, what is most interesting and even provocative about this type of Buddhist residence in the context of the Tibetan Buddhist revival in China is the fact that it is “politically appropriate.” In

order to explain what I mean by “politically appropriate,” I need to go over another important concept that has emerged in Yachen: individualism.

#### **2.2.1.1.1 A Brief Note on Individualism in Yachen**

Over my years of spending time together with the nuns, traveling around the plateau, and pondering their lives and activities in Yachen, a notion of individualism has slowly come to me, which is something I had never thought of. Yachen is a gigantic Buddhist community that encompasses the lives of over 10,000 practitioners and puts them together under a single unified category. But looking closely, this large collective entity works not quite collectively: the nuns act individually; each runs away from home based on her own individual decision, travels mostly alone, builds a hut to secure her own space, has an individual cell for solitary meditation, decorates her own room using her highly individualized style and taste, has an individual relationship with the head lama, and so on. Individualism is indeed a running principle for all the activities in Yachen. However, the meaning of individualism in Yachen is different from what western society has postulated—securing one’s own property and privacy. The nuns in Yachen are collaborative and highly attuned to giving help to one other and sharing intimacies; and in no sense, as far as I know, is any attempt made to secure exclusive boundaries over one’s own private space or property in the same way that this occurs in western society. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Nonetheless, individualism is embedded in every facet of the daily lives of the nuns in Yachen—meals are prepared separately, daily practices are individually scheduled except for classes and official rituals, travel is adjusted according to individual situations, and so forth.

One of the noticeable architectural structures of Yachen that is quite unique indeed when compared to other Buddhist communities in neighboring areas is the individual meditation cells that almost all nuns individually own. A meditation cell is a small, box-type of structure that is normally big enough for one sitting body. The nuns build these meditation cells on the roofs of their quarters or on the mountainside where they can face the sun and feel its warmth during long meditation retreats in the winters. These cells are sometimes disassembled and reassembled whenever needed. Having individual meditation cells is directly related to Yachen's training focus, which is meditation rather than studying and interpreting scriptures.



**Figure 4. Meditation cells placed on the mountainside. Photo by Yasmin Cho (2012).**

Individualism and individualized practices, such as meditation in the cells, are, I argue, a major force that puts Yachen in the position of being one of the most stable Buddhist communities in existence under the heavy surveillance eyes of the Chinese government. Embedded individualism is what makes the nuns' practices extremely quiet and even invisible. Think about the size of Yachen itself in contemporary Chinese context: that size is more than "a threat" to the Chinese state; and historically speaking, the PRC government has rarely allowed a Tibetan Buddhist community to expand to this

level.<sup>17</sup> The individualized practices that Yachen has adopted originate from the specific Buddhist sect and teachings called, in a broad sense, the Nyingma tradition. This tradition, which contains shamanic components and was marginalized for a long time, now plays a central role in revitalizing Tibetan Buddhism. The individualized building practices in Yachen cannot be easily read by the government surveillance net as the kind of threat or disturbance that would justify allowing the government to destroy and nullify the whole community. Because there is few official, steady curricula offered, the education in Yachen is not subject to monitoring by the government. The spaces of the meditation cells and individual huts, and the meditation practice itself, have no register in any political terms. Individualism *apoliticizes* and *tranquilizes* what the nuns are doing in Yachen; and precisely because of this, the type of residence the nuns have in Yachen is “politically appropriate.” And yet, ironically, individualism is what gives Yachen the most provocative political existence of any Tibetan Buddhist monastic community in China.

---

<sup>17</sup> Around the same time in the early 1980s, another monastic community in Kham, known as Larung Gar or Serthar Institute, which is similar to Yachen in terms of its evolutionary process, emerged and expanded to the size of Yachen. In 2001, however, a large portion of Larung Gar was destroyed by the Chinese government without any clear reason and many monks and nuns there were forced to return home. For more information regarding the destruction of the institute, see the report released by the Tibetan exile community in India, “Destruction of Serthar Institute: A Special Report” (2001). Larung Gar has recovered since then and through a population explosion it is once again larger than Yachen. Larung Gar and Yachen share many commonalities but are also very different in terms of their emphasis on practices and their population components. For example, Larung Gar includes more monks and non-Tibetan practitioners than Yachen. To compare these two communities is beyond the scope of this dissertation, and I leave that for a future task. For more discussion on Larung Gar, see Germano (1998) and Smyer Yü (2012).

### 1.2.2.2 Relationships

Highly related to the discussion of individualism above, Yachen emphasizes the individualized relationships between masters and disciples. This is due to the distinctive practice Yachen has adopted, called Dzogchen, in which teachings must be transmitted directly by the students' own masters. So-called mind transmission from the master to the disciple is presumably the fastest way to gain enlightenment. Theoretically speaking, unlike the gradual approach in larger Mahayana Buddhist tradition, Dzogchen practitioners can reach enlightenment within this lifetime.<sup>18</sup> What I want to focus on in this section however, is not really Dzogchen practice per se, but rather the specific relationships that Dzogchen authorizes and encourages in Yachen.

In Dzogchen theory, the masters' qualifications are the most crucial factor, and because of this, admiration and absolute faith toward them is also extremely emphasized. The success or failure of Dzogchen practice is nothing but this absolute faith in their masters. The nuns call their current head lama, Asong, a root lama, which means that they rely on him and his teachings for their entire life. The nuns visit the head lama regularly for individual time with him, however brief, even a few minutes. This is what makes Dzogchen practice fundamentally possible, because, as I have stated, the teachings are delivered directly and verbally to practitioners by their masters. Therefore, there are no "textbooks" for the study and interpretation of Dzogchen practice. There are some

---

<sup>18</sup> Tibetan Buddhism technically belongs to the Mahayana tradition, which emphasizes a gradual path toward enlightenment. But Dzogchen (or Dzogpa chenbo, *rdzogs pa chen po*) practice introduces instant enlightenment under the strict guidance of qualified masters.



guide scriptures, but Dzogchen cannot be accomplished without actual practice guided by the masters. This is the job of the masters, who are able to penetrate the minds of disciples and give them the right teachings and advice each time. Upon receiving teachings from the head lama, the nuns practice according to what they receive. These teachings shouldn't be shared with one another, and it is especially strictly forbidden for them to tell laity about the teachings. Therefore, the nuns seemingly practice the same things, but in fact, they do not. They follow highly individualized curricula designed by their masters.

This type of teaching and these relationships are themselves actively shaping the very type of residence in Yachen, and vice versa. This marginalized Buddhist tradition has, coincidentally, emerged since the 1980s possessing many unexpected political merits because it can avoid the unnecessary surveillance that results from a large monastic system and a centralized curricula, both of which are the main characteristics of monasteries in central Tibet and therefore, severely restricted. In addition, the one-on-one relationships between masters and disciples draw large numbers of Han Chinese practitioners to this remote land. For most Chinese practitioners, direct teaching and care by their Tibetan masters are crucial to the practice of Tibetan Buddhism. If they had to take classes and learn how to interpret passages by reading esoteric Buddhist scriptures, which require a significant amount of time and extended concentration to begin to understand, few in urban centers would be involved in this style of Buddhist learning, and the Tibetan Buddhist fever among Chinese might not have happened, or at least might not have happened in the same fashion. The verbal teachings, advice, and personal

interactions with Tibetan lamas—now facilitated even more through cutting-edge electronic gadgets—is what had caused Tibetan Buddhism to expand way beyond the boundaries of the Tibetan plateau.

### ***1.3 Brief Summary of Chapters***

In the second chapter, in order to provide a sense of what the nuns' mobilities actually mean and how they exercise these mobilities in Buddhist revivalism, I will begin by introducing in great detail, through her own narration, a nun's experience of running away from home. This escape story will be followed by the story of a nun traveling in a highly politicized space and time and her own temporal understanding of the political incidents (for example, the 2008 Lhasa Uprising and Self-immolation protests since 2009) and her own exercise of mobility in the situation. Lastly, by drawing on the story of what I call a "half nun," I will elaborate on a kind of mobility that is paradoxically exercised through "waiting." This chapter describes the thick texture of the nuns' exercise of their mobilities in the making of Buddhist revivalism.

In Chapter Three, I will discuss how the nuns make a living and create their own spaces in Yachen by building huts and tents in the harsh contexts of governmental surveillance, material shortages, and gender hierarchy. I will describe the hut-building practice of the nuns in great detail in order to emphasize the flow of materials, humans, ideas, and feelings that are involved in the process of construction. I also specifically demonstrate the gender biases of Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhist scholarship concerning the matter of Buddhist revivalism in general and Yachen in particular. I do

this through a critical reading of the notion of Visionary Buddhism that has become the sacred, theological source of the current revival movement in China.

While Chapter Three focuses on the nuns' space-making project from an exterior perspective, in Chapter Four, I will examine their internal space, the most intimate and hidden parts of the nuns' lives, through the concepts of transgression and confession. My discussions of nuns' secret "love affairs," decoration practices, and a new yearly exam will address the nuns' distinctive practices, religiosity, and notion of the sacred; none of which have been discussed in mainstream Buddhist scholarship.

In the fifth chapter, I will discuss the highly intertwined relationships among money, ethnicity, taste, and Buddhist transformation by drawing on the sensory experiences and events—namely, the tensions between Chinese and Tibetan nuns over foods—that are implicated in the constant making of Buddhist ethics. I will specifically address the foods and eating habits of the nuns and the Chinese Buddhist laity in urban centers to show how sensory (in this chapter, more precisely, gustatory) components play an important role in shaping a new Buddhist ethics and Buddhist identity, and how this slowly but potently changes Tibetan Buddhism from the inside.

## 2. Becoming a Buddhist Nun in Post-Mao China

### 2.1 Introduction

Most Tibetan nuns I have met in Yachen were escapees; they physically escaped from their natal homes to be nuns, and by doing so, they were also able to escape from their expected future roles as wives and mothers. “Leaving home,” not by marriage but through participation in labor markets, is considered one of the most popular ways for young rural women in post-Mao China to reclaim a new identity. A substantive amount of scholarly work has shown that many peasant girls transform themselves into urban subjects by leaving home and staying in cities (Chang 2008; Chu 2010; Pai 2012; Pun 2005; Zhang 2001; Zheng 2009). As China was becoming a “global factory,” a specific type of laborer who could perform unskilled labor-intensive work was required for the burgeoning industries in the coastal regions of the country. This has recast Chinese rural girls as appropriate working bodies in the new era. Many works have discussed the poor conditions and low wages in the working environments where these girls have been placed through the mechanism of Chinese “cheap labor” in the global market. Studies have shown that these girls themselves also pursue material betterment through a new urban life in a new place. *Dagongmei* (“working girl”) has emerged as a new social identity, revealing different layers of social issues in China such as labor exploitation, gender discrimination, unbalanced economic development among regions, and so on. At the same time, *dagonemei* also shows, through the mobility of such large numbers of

girls, how new desires, values, consumption, and relationships have emerged at and through the margins of the state (Sun 2014).

However, the mobilities of the Tibetan girls with whom I have worked do not fit this larger, dominant migratory trend in China. In contrast, their mobilities have forced us to recognize a dramatic movement in the opposite direction: there has been an on-going process of imagining an alternative future that is not driven by capitalistic desire but by religious and spiritual values. Discussions of factory girls in urban areas recast a new mode of working female bodies—“docile” bodies, to borrow Foucault’s term (1977)—which fit well with the nature of labor in the new industries. In contrast, the spiritual mobilities of Tibetan nuns reveal a different regime of bodies—bodies in religious practices; bodies in the processes of hut-building, crossing-borders, and escaping homes. In this chapter, I will explore in depth this inverse mobility of Tibetan women: from natal homes to more remote nomadic regions in pursuit of spirituality. Through this, I will examine the type of alternative social identity and values that has emerged and been imagined in post-socialist Chinese society and push further to ask what it means to “become” a Buddhist nun in post-Mao China. I emphasize the process of their becoming subjects and making their subjectivity through their mobilities, in spatial as well as temporal senses. I will present the stories of several Tibetan women—including a young girl, a nun, and a half-nun—in order to show how Tibetan rural women have recast themselves and their roles in Tibetan society; and in particular, how they have done so in the context of rapidly changing Sino-Tibetan relationships and the encroachment of Chinese capitalism into Tibet.

### 2.1.1 Deshi

“Nima Drolma!<sup>19</sup>” Someone called to me from behind when I made a groaning sound as I pulled out a heavy metal storage box from the bottom shelf in a community-owned shop one day in Yachen. My tiny hut, already packed with things like books and foods, was getting messier. I realized I did not even have a small spot for anyone to sit if they came to see me. In fact, I had more and more visitors as I was making more friends in the community. At one point, I realized that people could not step into my hut but could only talk to me from outside while they perched on the narrow threshold. Because of this urgent need to make a tolerable working space and a reception area, I decided to purchase a Tibetan storage box to organize my personal things. Everyone seemed to keep one or two of these in their quarters. I did not realize how bulky and heavy the metal container was until I actually pulled it out from the shelf in the shop. Otherwise, I would have asked someone to accompany me. It was the only type of container available through the community’s commercial network. All necessities and items sold in Yachen are tightly regulated and controlled by Yachen’s head office. I was calculating my physical capacity and the distance from the shop to my hut; the question was whether I could walk twenty minutes carrying that heavy thing on my back.

Thus, when I heard someone call my name, I instantly felt pleased. With great relief, I turned back and looked for the caller; however, it took me a while to recognize

---

<sup>19</sup> I had several Tibetan names while I was staying in Yachen. A group of nuns whom I initially contacted gave me the name Nima Drolma (Nima means the sun and Drolma is often attached to women’s name, meaning Tara, a female bodhisattva) and I used it for a while. Later, my male Tibetan lama gave me another name and I used it for some occasions. With Chinese nuns and laity, I also used my Chinese name.

who she was, even though she looked directly at me with a big grin. It was Deshi. In my memory, Deshi was a pretty, rural Tibetan girl, aged nineteen, who had long, rich dark hair when I had first met her a few months ago in Yachen. Her hair was so long so that it reached her waist. Like many other young Tibetan laywomen, she had a worn-out jacket and a pair of blue jeans wrapped with a Tibetan wool skirt. She looked a bit nervous, unsettled, yet determined. I had heard that she had just escaped from her natal home a few days before to become a nun and had not spoken to her parents since. Now Deshi had a different look. She was indistinguishable from her fellow nuns, at least from her appearance, as she was wearing maroon Tibetan Buddhist robes and her head was shaved. She had really become a Buddhist nun! I noticed the bashful smile on her face when she took off her hat and revealed her shaved head to me for the first time. She was on her way to go back to the gathering hall to continue her afternoon practice. But she was willing to help me with moving the box. On the way back to my place, we caught up briefly with each other. It turned out that she lived not far from me.

When I first heard that she had run away from home to be a nun, I was eager to document her story. I accompanied her as much as I could, since I, as one of the few lay residents and probably the single foreigner in this community, had no other regular schedule to follow. Deshi was a newcomer and had no previous contacts or acquaintances in Yachen. In this sense, in fact, Deshi was more an outsider than I was. She was blindly introduced, by a mini-van driver who sympathized with her, through his personal networks, to a guide nun in Yachen. The guide nun took her to her own quarters and offered her hot tea and food. Deshi had barely fed herself during the four days of her

flight from home. She arranged to stay there with the guide nun for a while until she found herself a place. When other nuns went to the gathering hall for morning prayer, Deshi was left alone. So was I. She helped with chores around the quarters in the morning, mostly sweeping the floor and drawing water from a well. It was, in fact, on her way back from this chore as she carried two buckets of water on her shoulders that I encountered her for the first time in Yachen. She spoke fair Mandarin Chinese, an indication of her educational background. I invited her over to my hut and tried to talk to her, but she seemed hard-pressed to focus on my questions, or on anything.

The next morning, after circumambulating the *Mani* stones a couple of times together—actually I could only do it one time and waited for her to finish, since any physical activities, including walking, in the highlands altitude made me extremely exhausted—I finally found time to sit down and talk with her again in the afternoon. She seemed a bit more stable and began to talk to me about her four-day moonlight flight and her life. Starting from her primary-school years, she chronologically articulated her life story, including how she decided to become a nun and why she came up with such a dramatic measure—running away—to do so. Her eyes were watery when she finished her story. I did not interrupt her except to pass paper tissues to her a few times while she was talking. Much later in my field research, I confirmed that Deshi was one of many who escaped from their natal homes in order to be nuns in Yachen.

I left Yachen to visit villages nearby a few times around that period and in the middle of these travels, somehow Deshi and I lost touch. Since nuns, unlike monks, are not allowed to carry any communication devices in Yachen, there was no way of calling



her or leaving a message to keep up the relationship. The only way of continuing it was to visit each other. It frequently happened to me that I lost my contacts because I simply could not remember or find where they lived. Yachen, especially the area of the nuns' quarters, was an amazingly complicated giant maze. I had to locate my nun friends' huts one by one by remembering certain material signs near their quarters, such as the location of wells near the huts, a bit of slanted ground, weird-looking retreat cells nearby, a slight uphill path next to a large stone, and so on. But Deshi's place was impossible to locate in this primitive way because her place was somewhere in the hinterland of the nuns' quarters, and I had to make a few dramatic turns from the main road. In addition, fierce dogs were always around, attacking new visitors who innocently invaded their territories. Even the Tibetan nuns are extremely careful when visiting an unfamiliar part of Yachen because of sudden dog attacks. Although I lost many contacts in this way, I also reunited with my lost friends in unexpected ways, as I did with Deshi.

Initially I thought that I had completely lost her until she hailed me that day. Deshi was spending all day outside receiving and practicing the novice training with other newcomers from dawn to late at night. That's why I could not see her even once although we lived quite close by. Due to her tight schedule, I could hardly find a time to talk to her. But one rare night, a night when she was advised to take a day off from practice because of her frequent nosebleeds, we were able to find a time to sit down and talk. As usual, our conversations started from casual talk, daily events and practices, and slowly moved on to her family situation; but then shortly after, we redirected our conversation to the story of her runaway night. Deshi articulated her flight days once

again, with full details and in a much calmer way, which helped me understand the deep texture of Deshi's life story.

I was born in a small rural village in Central Tibet.<sup>20</sup> It belongs to the Changmai prefecture in Central Tibet. My family was a typical Tibetan peasant household—making a living mainly by growing barley and raising domestic animals—and we all are devoted Buddhists as are most other ethnic Tibetans. As the youngest child in my family, I was able to go to a primary school and really enjoyed studying. In my final year in the primary school, however, my mother suddenly got sick and could not move at all. I had to drop classes and stay home to take care of my mother. My other siblings were either married and had their own households in nearby villages, or were busy laboring in the fields and grasslands all day. I was the only one left who could help mother at home. After my mother got a bit better around half a year later, I managed to come back to school. It was a final exam period. Despite the serious study gap, I worked really hard and caught up with the class quickly and made it through all my final exams.

My teacher saw potential in me and especially advised me not to drop out of school but to continue to move on to the secondary schools. (Many Tibetan children in rural areas start school, but discontinue their education after primary school due to various reasons—finance, availability of educational institutions, family obligations, and so on. Girls have a much higher drop-out rate.) I never intended to give up my education and, in fact, I was full of hope about moving on to the secondary schools in town. But my plan did not go as I wished. Not long after I started my middle school, my mother's knees got worse again all of the sudden. I, the only person available at home who could take care of my mother and do house chores, was pulled back again. One morning my friend in the village was calling me from outside to go to school together as usual. We walked to school together every morning. I shed tears inside while hearing my father yelling to my friend that I would not go to school anymore. I was fifteen years old. After that, I stayed at home helping out with house chores. My mother recovered a bit and was able to move by herself a few years later. However, I thought it was already too late to join school.

---

<sup>20</sup> I later tried to locate her township on my map, but the town is so small that I could not locate it on my large-size Chinese/Tibetan maps.

Time passed quickly. I became eighteen years old. My father had already started searching for a husband for me. In my village, parents arrange their sons' and daughters' weddings. Quite often young people are getting married to someone whom they have never met before. The process was quickly settled, and the wedding date was set. My future husband was nineteen years old, living in a nearby village. He was known as sincere, filial, and good-looking. People told me that my father found a good one and I would be happy with him. However, I had another concern on my side. A while ago, I secretly took a vow to give my life to the Buddha while I was circumambulating the stupa. It was informal, private, and spontaneous, but it was not a negligible problem for me. I took the vow very sincerely. I confronted a dilemma of either going against my father and family obligations by refusing marriage, or going against the Buddha by breaking my vow.

I made up my mind to keep the vow. And I knew that I had to act quickly. The wedding date was rapidly approaching. I needed help since no one in my village had left to become a nun before. I told my runaway plan to my elder brothers and sisters first, who were married and had their own families in other villages. They tried to persuade me to give up my plan at first, but after long conversations they eventually gave me support because I was so determined. They became my supporters and we planned out the escape plot together and picked the date. This was the plan we came up with at that time; in order to avoid my father's suspicion, I told my father that I was going to visit a relative who lived on a deep mountainside and wanted to see her before the wedding, so that my father would expect a few days of my absence from home. During this time, I had to make it to the other side of the county, which was extremely far to reach on foot.

I left home early that day and hid at my sister's until it was dark. The destination was Yachen. I had heard of Yachen before, that it is a great place to practice Buddhism and there are many great teachers and many other fellow nuns. But it is located in the far eastern corner of the plateau, where I, and most my family and relatives as well, had never been to. In fact I had never been outside of my village and nearby township. I knew there were other nunneries in much closer places such as Lhasa, the holy Tibetan capital, not far from my hometown. However, monasteries and nunneries in Lhasa were no longer independent institutions due to the strict governmental controlling policies, and I figured I could not practice Buddhism well in such an environment. I chose Yachen.

My brother was so worried about me and insisted on escorting me for a while. It was January, the coldest month of the year and a jet-black night.

Packing a bit of *tsampa* (barley flour) and bread in my bag, we left. At first we could not even turn on the flashlights on the way for fear of getting caught by some villagers. The town was completely out of range of modern infrastructures—no paved roads, public transportation, reliable electricity, and so on. Soon we were walking in deep and dark mountains. My brother went ahead to get rid of bushes and twigs, making space for me. I kept asking him to go back, but he would not listen. My brother probably could not bear to leave his younger sister alone on a dangerous mountain in the middle of the night. But he had to turn back sooner or later. Otherwise, he could not manage to get back to the village by morning.

Parting with my brother a little later, I was left alone with nothing else I could do but keep walking. I never stopped walking during the night. I felt extremely tired, and my body was almost frozen. I found a house-like structure in front of me. It was an empty abandoned house. “Do you know how scary it was to confront an abandoned house in the mountains during a dark night?” (Deshi asked me and paused for a bit as if she felt the horror of that night again).

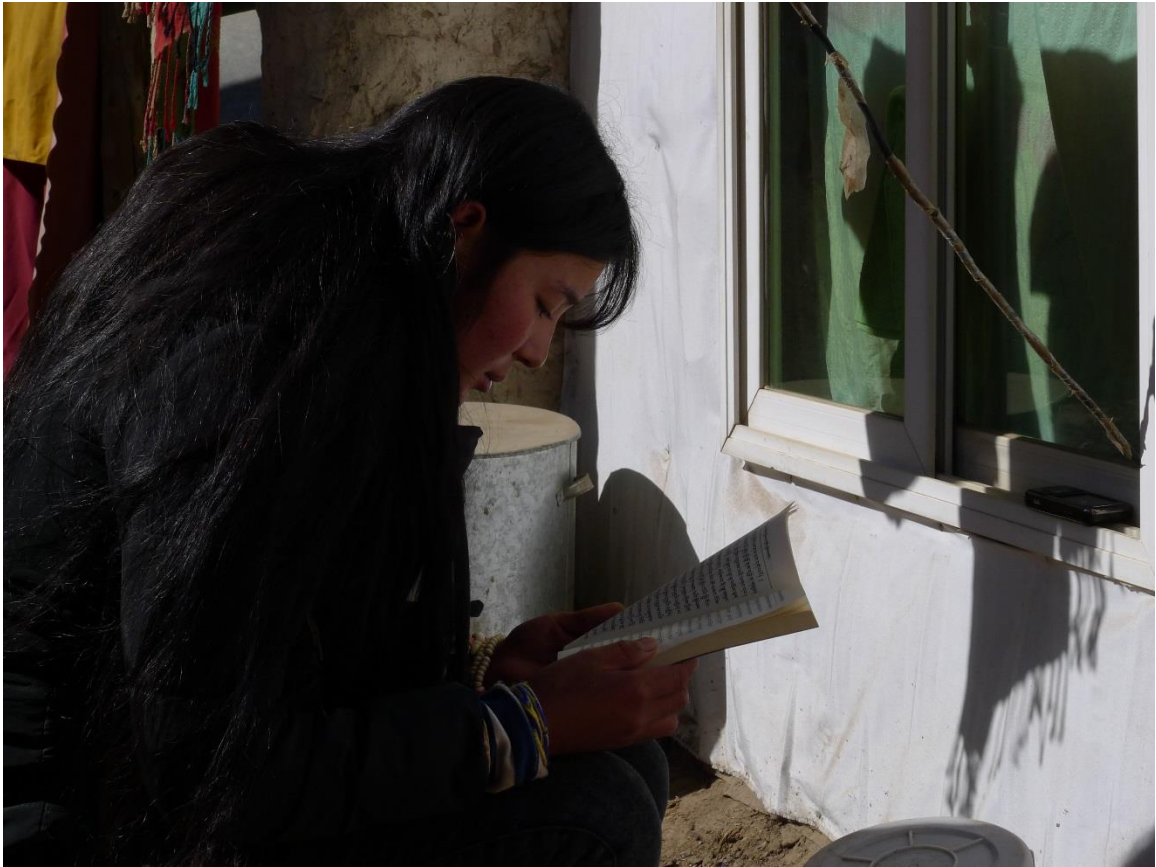
I prayed silently and repeatedly called the lama’s names, while I passed the deserted house as quickly as possible. Continuing to walk for a couple more hours, I saw a village. It was dawn already. I was not sure where I was and what time it was. I just moved my feet forward in the direction my brother had told me the night before. I was starving, and my legs were no longer able to walk farther. I decided to knock on someone’s gate. After fierce dog barking, an aged woman opened the door. Like a beggar, I asked her for food. The woman let me in her kitchen and offered me a cup of hot tea and bread. I lied to her that I was going to my relative’s house, but got lost on the way. The woman was kind and generous to me, but she did not seem to believe me. I noticed this. Even though I walked all night—it felt like a million kilometers—maybe it was not that far away from my home. This aged woman might know my father or one of my relatives. I got scared that she would call someone to ask about me or inform others about my sudden appearance. I left the house right away. I walked through the village and passed a stream and fields and a couple more villages by the late afternoon. I could not remember where I was exactly, but I met a group of minivans and drivers gathered to recruit passengers. Most minivans were heading to Chamdo, a traffic hub in the eastern Tibetan area. I went on one of the minivans and arrived in Chamdo the next morning, the biggest city I had ever been in.

I stayed in the same cheap inn where other passengers had chosen to stay, and started asking around about how to get to Yachen. The city was strange to me. It seemed that many people knew Yachen, but no direct transportation went to Yachen from Chamdo. Based on information I got from the streets, I hopped on another minivan to go to Baiyu, believing it to be a closer township to Yachen. I bought a cheap phone and a SIM card on the way to call my brother and sister, who were extremely worried about me by then. My brother told me that my father had started becoming suspicious about me, because it had been a few days since I had left for the relative's house. Nothing I could do about it. For now, the important thing was to keep moving and reach Yachen as quickly as possible. While I got on a minivan directly heading to Yachen from Baiyu, I was almost out of money and had no one to contact in Yachen to pick me up. The minivan driver immediately noticed me, an exhausted-looking young girl heading to Yachen by herself—another escapee from her hometown—and found out that I had no other contacts. He sympathized with me and introduced me to a guide nun he knew who might give me help.

I arrived in Yachen after a harsh journey of four days from my hometown. I called my brother and sister and discussed how to break the news to my father. My brother suggested that we should hold it for a few more days because my father was now extremely angry at me. Within a few days, my father's current wrath would shift to anxiety, and that would be the right time to break the news to him. My brother was right. A few days later, my father started worrying about me and he feared something bad had happened to me; the mountain roads to the relative's were snowy and slippery, so I might have fallen down on the way and died there. By the time when my parents had gathered people to search for me or my body, I called my father and told him that I had arrived in Yachen to be a nun and that I felt so sorry for lying to him and letting him down. My father told me, "Deshi, you foolish one, why didn't you talk to me first? I would have let you go. How could you travel to such a remote place by yourself? You could have died on the road, you foolish girl. Now you are in Yachen to be a nun. I am proud of you, be a good nun."

I cried. My father cried. We both cried as I held my phone on the bridge. My father himself visited me in Yachen a few months later and brought a big bag of *tsampa*, yak butter, and other foods for me. Next summer my father and other relatives will visit me again to find quarters for me because I have no place of my own yet and have lived temporarily here and there with other nuns.

Deshi took out a few photos and showed them to me. The girl in the photos was Deshi herself, a pre-nun figure with long, rich, dark hair. I smiled. I remembered that the photos had been taken by me when I first met Deshi in Yachen a few months ago. Back then, she was definitely not in the mood to have a photo taken of herself with all the concerns about her father and uncertainty about her life in general. But I insisted and persuaded her that this would be the last pre-nun image of herself, and she should keep one as part of her history. I developed the photos when I was in town later and asked other nuns to deliver them to Deshi. It was a while ago and I did not expect the photos to actually get delivered to her. As we looked at the photos and chuckled about them, I did not ask whether she missed those pre-nun days or her long hair. I did not need to. It seemed so obvious to me that she was happy to join Yachen and felt appreciated. Like so many other Tibetan girls in Yachen, she made herself break away from a world that she was supposed to believe was the one and only world she could act within. Deshi broke from this world by becoming a nun. By putting herself in a much harsher, worse, and more isolated place and by learning and practicing ancient teachings that seem to have almost no visible outcomes or rewards in this lifetime, she in fact enables herself to be a very visible subject. In doing so, she creates an alternative path and possibility for other young Tibetan girls to follow.



**Figure 5: Deshi, right before shaving her head in Yachen. Photo by Yasmin Cho (2013).**

## ***2.2 A Risky Trip Home to the TAR***

It was an awfully cold morning. Jubei and I were seated in one of the few shabby minivans parked at the entry to Yachen. Jubei, in her early twenties, is a Tibetan Buddhist nun who was initially ordained at Yachen about five years ago. She does not normally travel outside the community, but on this occasion she had decided to visit her natal home due to her much worsened stomach illness. She chose early February, right after a 100-day retreat session would end, as an optimal time to travel. This was also close to the festival season of *Losar*, the Tibetan New Year. Once she arrived home, she could see her

family and relatives and have a restful time while getting proper treatment, something that she had refused to do for years. However, this trip worried Jubei more than ever.

Since the “Lhasa uprising” on March 14 in 2008 and the spread of self-immolation protests<sup>21</sup> on the Tibetan plateau that followed after, the mobility of ethnic Tibetans has been severely restricted by the Chinese government (Barnett 2009, 2012). Tibetans are not allowed to move around their land at will without a governmental permit, and the process of obtaining the permit is laborious and painful. Furthermore, such spatial restrictions are more seriously applied to those who are in Buddhist robes. Chaotic rumors and horrible stories circulate regarding how brutally the Chinese police treated Tibetan monks and nuns when they catch them on the ethnic borders. One rumor went like this: A nun was caught at a border checkpoint and was immediately put into jail. During her jail time, she was forced to deny the current Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibet; to attend patriotic education classes; and to watch pornographic videos all day long. Such horrifying stories rapidly spread through the nuns’ living quarters in Yachen.

These frightening narratives, regardless of their factuality, have a certain plausibility because it was monastic members who initiated the Tibetan national uprising in 2008 and the endless self-immolations that followed. Because of this, the Chinese authorities have been extra vigilant with Tibetan monastic populations. They belong to a

---

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of the self-immolation protests in Tibet, see McGranahan and Litzinger, “Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet” *Fieldsights - Hot Spots*, Cultural Anthropology Online, April 09, 2012, <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/93-self-immolation-as-protest-in-tibet>.



special category of “religious professionals” who have become the object of stricter restrictions by the government (Barnett 2012). Thus, someone like Jubei, an ethnic Tibetan as well as a Buddhist nun, is one of the most highly targeted subjects being monitored and controlled by the government.<sup>22</sup> Then, why and how do Jubei and other nuns decide to travel during a time of such extreme uncertainty, inconvenience, and even danger? Why do they put themselves in a situation that is antagonistic and perilous to them? Given my hasty and presumed imagination of Jubei’s life—as an extremely precarious one because of her ethnic and religious identity in China’s Tibet—her rather pert answer gave me pause. “I think the situation is slowly getting better since the self-immolations haven’t been reported for a while, and *now is the time that I can move. There is a way. Are you still coming with me?*”

Traveling is certainly not a frequent event for the nuns in Yachen, and yet it is a very crucial element in their lives. Tibetan girls and nuns travel—mostly by running away—from their hometowns to Yachen, and they travel also from Yachen back to their hometowns and to other places as well. As seen in Deshi’s story, mobility is not only part of the nuns’ daily lives, but also what makes their lives visible, viable, and meaningful. As Tim Cresswell (2006: 1) argues, “...[M]obility is central to what it is to be human. It is a fundamental geographical facet of existence.” However, their seemingly banal mobile activity is easily cast as a political action; in what circumstances and in what

---

<sup>22</sup> Even before the 2008 uprising, monks and nuns in Tibet played an active role in the Tibetan resistance movement. See Barnett and Spiegel (1996) and Havnevik (1994).

hidden logic and politics, is “going to a monastery to be a nun” or “visiting home for a recuperation or for the New Year’s festival” seen as a potential threat to the integration of society? In this section, I will draw on ethnographic observations from the journey I took with Jubei in February 2013 on her way home to Central Tibet and follow-up journeys that I took by myself in the Tibetan ethnic borderlands. Using on-the-way and border-crossing ethnography, I discuss everyday engagements regarding border-crossing practices among Tibetan nuns on the plateau and show how they have coped with the governmental spatial restrictions that have been newly imposed on the Sino-Tibetan ethnic borderlands since 2008.

In particular, I focus on the ways in which the restraints on mobility can be interwoven with temporality and how a sense of the (im)possibility of moving across the borders has been crafted in relation to the intricate understandings of temporality that the nuns have learned and internalized from the recent political turmoil. I demonstrate that Tibetan nuns read political repressions in their own way by utilizing a sense of *temporality* and actively engaging in it *spatially*. Faith and devotion toward their spiritual masters make the girls move in the first place, risking their lives at times, and in the process, they also travel back home to fulfill physical and secular needs—care for bodies, the desire for reunion with family, and so on. I will show how the recent spatial restrictions on ethnic Tibetans by the Chinese government are repetitive, arbitrary, and “rhythmitized,” and how the nuns deal with these antagonistic circumstances and transform them in their own ways. As a result, I argue that within this political turmoil Tibetan nuns are creating a new spaces of temporal possibilities, normalcy, and mobility.

### **2.2.1 An Arduous Journey to Home**

It has been five years since Jubei took her vows and shaved her head in Yachen. For her first three years there, Jubei was not allowed to leave. Yachen expects novice nuns to fully focus on monastic training, practices, and rules; and to subdue emotional feelings such as the loneliness, homesickness, and hardships they often experience during the initial stage of their nunships. After this stage, nuns in Yachen are able to travel outside when the need arises; mostly for short visits to hospitals or relatively long-term visits to hometowns. They sometimes need to see a doctor in one of the local towns, and for a long-term illness they are advised to go home and get treated. Also, some travel to their hometowns for the New Year's festival after completing a year of arduous practice in Yachen. Some return home for the winter season due to Yachen's brutal weather. If a nun has reached an advanced level, guide nuns and teachers often advise her to leave for a three-year retreat on a quiet mountainside or in a cave near her hometown, with the expectation that she will be taken care of by her family during her intensive meditation period. Even for people like the nuns, who have the most secluded and detached lives, mobility is indispensable.

Considering the monastic rules and daily lives of the nuns, the trip that Jubei and I took in February 2013 was fairly routine; she simply wanted to return home to treat her illness and to reunite with her family. She had postponed her treatment for years due to both her practices in Yachen and the recent political tensions on the plateau. What made this common trip extremely uncommon was the newly and arbitrarily imposed spatial restrictions between the Central (TAR) and Eastern Tibetan areas—mostly in the Sichuan

and Qinghai provinces of China. It has been noted that, since the 1950s, China has maintained fundamental policies denying any internal expression or debate that disrupts so-called “social stability” among ethnically non-Han-Chinese groups (Potter 2003).

These controlling policies have been implemented and are very actively applied to Tibetan society, but they have always been somewhat vague about when, what, and how much. The policy enforcements and the punishments implemented in the name of maintaining “social stability” are overly arbitrary and ambiguous. The control is real, but it often hovers over the Tibetan cities, towns, and villages like an atmosphere, a rumor, or some kind of sign that affects and penetrates into the everyday lives of Tibetans. Emily Yeh, who has worked on Chinese developmental policies and spatial controls aimed at Tibetans in Lhasa, rightfully puts it as: “The category of the ‘political’ is always ambiguous, producing an expansionary effect. A nebulous field of uncertainty surrounds a whole host of actions and words: Are they ‘political’ and thus forbidden, or not? No one knows for sure” (2013:46). Control is real, but also exists as an intangible panoptic mechanism.

Beginning in March 2008, however, these ambiguous policies were slightly transformed, not in terms of the nature of the controlling policies themselves but in terms of their tangibility and material presence. The controlling policy line and the basic attitudes of the Chinese authority towards ethnic Tibetans were as arbitrary and reckless as before, but they gained more concrete material forms. New police checkpoints sprawled throughout the city, military patrols became routine, and forced patriotic education drives were imposed (Barnett, 2009). When I stayed in Ganzi before heading to

Yachen in the years of my field work between 2010 and 2014, I often saw armed police cars patrolling the main streets in the town; and when tensions were especially high, the police cars passed by every two minutes all day long. During March and July each year, in entire Tibetan regions including those autonomous prefectures in Sichuan and Qinghai provinces, the Internet and cell phone text messages are completely cut off for the whole month due to the state's extra surveillance of every move of Tibetans in the most sensitive months of year.<sup>23</sup> During March in Lhasa, on Yutuo road between Jokhang temple and westward toward the Potala palace, a main tourist attraction with bustling street vendors and restaurants, whether there is a protest or not, the heavily armed trucks and army squads patrol all day long, displaying the violent presence of the Chinese state in the ordinary life of Tibetans.

These corporeal controls are paralleled by more direct control at the level of the daily lives of ordinary Tibetans. During the period of greatest control around 2008, monks and nuns were forced to attend patriotic education sessions and to deny the Dalai Lama as their spiritual leader; pilgrims and religious worship were highly monitored and controlled; and Tibetan school teachers and junior government officials throughout the plateau were forced to write ten or more pages of patriotic statements and submit them

---

<sup>23</sup> March is a "sensitive" month because in the Tibetan history of resistance to Chinese rule, important political protests have occurred in March such as the uprisings on March 10, 1959 and March 14, 2008. July is also "sensitive" because the birthday of the current Dalai Lama is in it. In July, many Tibetans including those living in exile celebrate the Dalai Lama's birthday and wish his health and long life through various cyber media and space exchanging messages, photos and videos, but the Chinese government restricts all celebratory cyber activities by blocking the Internet connection in Tibetan populated regions altogether.

regularly.<sup>24</sup> Sometime later, however, when these arbitrary, preposterous regulations were losing their momentum and the military patrols were becoming less prevalent, people started figuring out how to get around these randomly imposed rules. The checkpoints became empty and foreign tourists appeared on the plateau once again.

However, this did not last long. The first self-immolation by a Tibetan monk was reported in Aba County in Sichuan in 2009, and this form of protest quickly spread all over the plateau, including in Lhasa. The Chinese authorities promptly reactivated their police checkpoints and set up more of them, sealing off Central Tibet. This time, Tibetans' internal mobility was severely frozen through a series of controlling actions that included: (1) sorting out Tibetans without Lhasa *Hukou* (the household registration system) and deporting them out of Central Tibet, and (2) restricting regular visits to Lhasa by non-Lhasa *Hukou* holders. Han-Chinese were exempt from all of these rules. Self-immolation protests continued throughout 2010 and beyond, and since then, ordinary Tibetans who reside outside Central Tibet have experienced enormous difficulty visiting Lhasa or other parts of the TAR. Their mundane visits to Central Tibet for activities such as seeing family and relatives, doing business, and making pilgrimages have been extremely restricted.

#### **2.2.1.1 The Permit**

Spatial control over members of its society is not new in China. Through the *Hukou* system, the mobility of Chinese citizens—where people are permitted to live and

---

<sup>24</sup> This information is based on multiple private conversations with Tibetans from Amdo regions.

work—has been highly regulated and restricted (Cheng and Selden 1994; Mallee 2000; Mackenzie 2002; Zhang 2001). *Hukou* has become an effective means for controlling the influx of rural populations into cities and managing citizens' mobility through birthplace. However, recent migration studies have pointed out that the extreme labor exploitation of Chinese peasant workers as a source of cheap labor in cities occurs and continues to occur because of the workers' lack of legal residence documents, namely, the city *Hukou* (Chang 2008; Pai 2012; Pun 2005; Yan 2008; Zhang 2001). The Chinese *Hukou* system, therefore, has been a coercive institution that binds its citizens' mobility, but at the same time, it also serves to supply a much-needed cheap labor source for the country's miraculous economic development. Since its implementation, therefore, the *Hukou* system has politicized the mobilities of people in China; individual intentions to move or not to move have been understood and interrogated within a political context.

In recent years the *Hukou* has been politicized more than ever in China's ethnic minority regions. Since 2008, although the strictness of ethnic border control between the TAR and the rest of the Tibetan regions has been repeatedly tightened and loosened, Tibetans living in the Amdo or Kham regions, including neighboring provinces such as Sichuan and Qinghai, cannot freely visit the TAR, especially the capital city, Lhasa. For Tibetans, Lhasa holds a singular position as one of the holiest places in Tibetan land. But in another light, it has also been the center of the dissent movement of Tibetans toward Chinese rule and the city bears the history of the rigorous Tibetan resistance. Lhasa has thus been a contested space: it is both a genuine holder of Tibetan cultural and religious sincerity and, simultaneously, a geopolitical marker of Tibetan nationality against

China.<sup>25</sup> Given previous historical contexts and more recent protests such as the Lhasa uprising in 2008, Tibetans traveling to Lhasa, whether for worship, visiting relatives, sight-seeing, or doing business, have been treated by the Chinese authorities as harboring the potential for rebellious political action, i.e., the potential for disturbing the Chinese order of things.

The regulations controlling entry into the TAR are always changing, and are subject to various sociopolitical factors in specific times and spaces.<sup>26</sup> If a non-Lhasa-*Hukou* Tibetan tries to visit Lhasa for some personal reason, she or he must obtain two government-authorized documents in advance. One is a police statement from the person's original town, attesting to his or her legal residential status and showing no record of violating Chinese laws and rules. The second is also a police statement from Lhasa. This one is much more complicated: once the person successfully secures the first document, she or he must contact a Lhasa *Hukou* holder who is able and willing to guarantee the traveler's political conformity, and willing to state that the person has no intention of agitating against social security and stability in Lhasa and has no plans for participating in any type of religious activity, including worshiping at Buddhist temples or stupas, or associating with lamas. If the person obtains all the needed documents, he or she is eligible to apply for a "temporary residence permit (*zanzhuzheng* in Chinese)" in Lhasa. Until the person has obtained the temporary residence permit, however, his or her

---

<sup>25</sup> For discussions about Tibetan resistance surrounding Lhasa, see Schwartz 1994; and for poetic, lyrical description about the city's past and present, see Barnett 2006.

<sup>26</sup> The following information is based on the conversations and observations I had during the winter of 2013.



personal ID card will be taken and held by the Lhasa police. Even though Tibetan travelers carry all these documents on their person as they pass through the provincial borders, over and over again, each time they reach one of the police checkpoints that have been set up at both the entry and the exit of every village, county, and town in Central Tibet, they are asked to stop, leave their vehicles, and fill out forms.

Jubei's hometown is in Central Tibet. She was more than aware of the current situation. She even understood that because she was a Tibetan Buddhist nun, she would instantly be recognized as a political target—a potentially dangerous one—under the gaze of the Chinese authorities. In actuality, Jubei was born and raised in Central Tibet and therefore holds a Central Tibetan *Hukou*. Her personal identification card indicates this clearly. However, according to her, she was still not safe near or passing through the borders because of her appearance as a Buddhist nun. Tibetans wearing maroon robes are the first to be controlled, governed, and dominated.

On top of this, Jubei had another concern. Even though she possesses a Central Tibetan ID card, her photo on her ID card is problematic because it shows her as a nun. She had become a nun at sixteen, before she registered for her ID. The photo of her in her ID picture, with her shaved head and maroon robes, immediately signals her ethnicity and place of origin, as well as her religious belonging, which makes her a potentially troublesome subject in the current Chinese political climate. In this ironical situation, her legal identification as a *Hukou* holder of the TAR is ineffective and meaningless. All she was trying to do was to return to the place where her official documents say she belongs; however, she could not show her photo ID to the police at the checkpoint when she

traveled to her hometown. Given this difficult situation, why, then, did Jubei decided to travel? What made her firmly believe that, “Now is the time that I can move. There is a way?”

### **2.2.1.2 Crossing Borders**

When monks and nuns travel to the TAR, it is convenient if they have IDs with pictures of their lay appearance.<sup>27</sup> However, as discussed above, Jubei’s ID card shows her shaved head because she was already a nun when her card was made. Other nuns have the same problem. When they travel by car, if the border checks are too risky, they stop at some point before the last checkpoint and walk into town. Sometimes they may even have to walk all night over the mountain and meet the driver, who passes through the checkpoint alone, on the other side the next morning. They walk in cold and dark forests, relying on small flashlights that they carry in their hands. When I heard such stories from the nuns in Yachen, my emotional reflections often surged while processing these stories: I thought about how scared they must feel, and that the heavy breathing sounds they hear from each other at such moments are probably a comfort. What are they thinking during their overnight walks to meet their drivers on the other side? Do they blame the arbitrary governmental policies that make the journey to visit home a most unbearable hardship? Or, do they blame themselves for being born into a lower realm of *samsara*? However, my empathy was turning out to be rather sentimental or even naïve

---

<sup>27</sup> All Chinese citizens above sixteen years old must obtain a national identification card (*gongminzheng* or *jumin shenfenzheng* in Chinese) that includes a photo as well as the cardholder’s gender, date of birth, place of origin (*hukou* address), identification number, and ethnic nationality. If the cardholder is an ethnic minority, the ID is written in both Chinese and in her or his ethnic language.

in that the nuns' mountain walks could in fact be understood as literally making a new route, and as pioneering a new path for exercising their subjectivity through their specific reading of time and space.

When Jubei and I had first discussed the trip to her hometown, she assumed then that the situation was bad and that we might not be able to move at all. We discussed a few possible options at that time; these included walking overnight, hiding in the cargo bed of a large truck, and waiting for a "safer" time. To avoid extreme hardship, however, the nuns normally choose to wait for a better time; picking the right time is always entirely based on the nuns' own temporal sensitivity and their ability to read the rhythms of complicated political situations. According to Jubei's rhythmicized internal clock, she finally chose the right time to leave for her hometown. In February 2013 just before the hundred-day retreat ended and the New Year's festival was about to begin, we left.

It was still dark at around six in the morning in Yachen and the cold chilly winds pierced us on the day of our departure. The walk from her hut to the place where we could find a vehicle took us twenty minutes or so. Jubei walked ahead, chasing the fiercely barking dogs away. She had quite a load because her friends from the same village had asked her to carry some things for their families. We had to wait about an hour before we found a van at the entrance of Yachen, and another hour passed before the van actually started on its journey. The van had room for ten passengers and the driver would not proceed unless all seats were taken; but since this was during the retreat, few people were traveling. Jubei and I held each other's hands tightly together to keep warm while we waited for all the empty seats in the car to fill with passengers, and by the time

the car finally started moving our feet were completely numbed by the freezing temperatures.

After about five hours of a bumpy road trip, we arrived in the town of Ganzi. Compared to the weather conditions at over 13,000 feet above sea level in Yachen, the weather of Ganzi, about 10,000 feet above sea level, was like a mild spring to us. As soon as we unloaded our luggage, which was covered in dirt from the trip, we checked into a cheap inn near the area where people usually look for cars and passengers for further travel. Some shops and stores on the main street in Ganzi were already closed due to the Chinese and Tibetan New Year's festivals.<sup>28</sup> However, the seasonal street markets were bright and lively. People had set up temporary stands on the streets with various festival foods such as candies, cookies, nuts, meats, and fruits. The goods displayed on the racks were so colorful and motley that they created a festive spirit. Jubei and I temporarily forgot the risky trip we were on and enjoyed the joyful mood on the streets.

Normally when Jubei returns home, she is able to find a minivan in Ganzi directly heading to her hometown of Lhamo in the TAR. According to her, the trip normally takes one-and-a-half days. However, due to the border restrictions, Jubei, a nun, and I, a foreigner who also has difficulty traveling individually inside the TAR, could not simply take a regular route to travel there. When Jubei told me before we departed from Yachen that "there is a way," she had a concrete plan. She had already collected information

---

<sup>28</sup> The Tibetan New Year and the Chinese New Year are normally about one month or so apart, but in 2013 they were nearly synchronous at just one day apart.

about which border checkpoint was the least strict in terms of checking the IDs of passengers in vehicles. This was an extended detour from the normal route; we had to go all the way up to a small border town located in a northern Sichuan province in the upper region of the Driчу (*Jinsha* in Chinese) River, and cross a small bridge to enter the TAR. Through her relatives in her hometown, Jubei had found a contact in this border village who could assist us in arranging lodging and transportation for further trips. This seemed to be the only way for us to cross the border. Our journey was arranged and managed solely through our reliance on Jubei's rhythmic understanding of the circumstances and her prearrangements for this detour route.

I had never heard of this small town to which we were heading and it seemed that few people traveled to it. According to Jubei, in this border village, we might be able to pass the TAR border without our IDs being checked. The problem, however, was that we could not find any transportation by which to reach this town. Due to Tibet's remoteness and its underdeveloped infrastructure, private minivans make up the main portion of public transportation on the Tibetan plateau. The fees for travel between places are consensually set up among drivers and passengers, and there is always an option for reserving the whole vehicle (*Baoche* in Chinese) by paying the sum for a full load of passengers. We inevitably had to reserve a whole van for ourselves a few times over the course of this journey.

Jubei and I could not find a minivan heading to this small border town and had to make another detour to get there. There was transportation heading to Laixiang and from there we might be able to find another minivan heading to the border town. This kind of

unexpected situation forced us to wander longer on the road, which made Jubei grow more concerned about her timeframe and her visibility as a nun; once on the road, it is better to reach one's destination as soon as possible. After about ten hours of travel along rugged roads, we arrived in Laixiang around five p.m. the next day. Despite the sublime scenery of endless pastures and grasslands along the way, we were exhausted by the consistently rough road trips of the past few days. Although we did not fear that our IDs would be checked in Laixiang, we both agreed that we did not want to stay there even a single day. Because of the festival, Laixiang was like a ghost town. Almost all the shops were closed and, unlike Ganzi, few people were on the streets; only the fierce stray dogs barked at us.

We began negotiating the price of transportation with the few drivers left, all of whom hoped to make a large fortune before the festival by catching last minute passengers like us. The principle of supply and demand worked perfectly. We had much difficulty in finding a driver who was willing to go to the border town. It turned out that the road between Laixiang and the border town was extremely icy and dangerous, and most drivers were reluctant to drive unless they got very satisfactory compensation. In the end, we had to accept whatever price the sole willing driver asked us to pay. It was only a three- or four-hour drive, and we paid RMB 800 (US\$128)—normally this trip would cost RMB 80. However, when we arrived in the border town that night after traveling in darkness over extremely risky and icy mountainous roads, we simply appreciated being alive.

Late at night, our van crossed over the bridge on the Drichu River, which forms a natural border between Sichuan and the TAR. We did not even notice that we had passed the border checkpoint because it was a jet-blue dark night and no one stopped us. Luckily we passed the first gateway to Lhamo without problems and officially stepped into the land of the TAR. Thanks to Jubei's friend, who is a monk in this border town, we were able to take a break from our long journey at his small monastery. Unlike Yachen, the monks in this monastery own individual houses, each of which is at least a two-story construction with multiple rooms, a kitchen, and a spacious yard. We spent two nights in the guest room of this monk until he helped us to arrange transportation to Lhamo. The principle of supply and demand worked again there. We paid ten times as much as the normal price to have a minivan drive us to Jubei's hometown.

On the morning of the third day, we were able to leave the border town and head to Lhamo. Just as people had said, there were no police checkpoints. The route we took the next day went through grasslands in which there were no communities large enough to be considered villages. It seemed that everything was going smoothly. As we approached Lhamo township, we were preparing for and praying that we would pass the checkpoint without a problem. This would be the last gateway that we had to be careful about before arriving in Lhamo. For some reason, which to this day is still not clear to me—I consider it our pure luck—we passed the checkpoint without incident. We had safely arrived at Jubei's home.

### **2.2.1.3 Living the Flesh of Time**

Like many other lay Tibetans, Jubei had learned a lesson from the recent series of political disturbances and the range of regulations and restrictions that followed. Tibetans were especially aware of the evolution of such arbitrary policies and regulations as time passed. Jubei had monitored and carefully listened to other nuns' border-crossing stories in Yachen. She had asked those nuns who had just traveled back from their hometowns about how the situation had evolved and how tight the security checks had become. Finally, after collecting stories about the borders and listening to advice from other nuns, she decided to move but to take a detour instead of trying the seemingly less tightly controlled security check on the border. According to Jubei, the situation had passed a critical moment, and things would slowly get "better" as long as no other self-immolations occurred near her hometown. Therefore, this was the right time to leave, otherwise she might miss her chance to go home.

What she had confirmed for herself was the moment that constituted the "right time" in the field of temporality between a previous event and the present, as well as between a previous event and a possible future incident. She confirmed the right time based on the information she had collected that allowed her to retroactively consider the previous incident in relation to the present and future. Her conclusion was highly speculative and instinctive, it seemed not to depend upon any measurable rationality. However, we can see that Jubei's conclusion was intuitively rooted in and a part of the in-between time that connects the past and present. She lives time itself.



Because of the arbitrariness of the regulations and restrictions, there is an enormous range of uncertainty regarding the rules and punishments that may be applied to mobility. Whether or not Tibetans are able to safely pass through the TAR borders and whether they can claim the rights of mobility in their own land require keen observation about the relationship between time and the changing modalities of rules and regulations; this skill has become an indispensable element in the life of every ethnic minority person on the Tibetan plateau. Jubei and other nuns have internalized this vacillating reality through a sense of rhythm; the intensity and persistence of an incident, as well as the geographic vicinity of an incident, are interpreted through the lens of the relational tempo between a previous event and current as well as future events.

The repeated protests and the state's controls on the Tibetan plateau in recent years seem to appear in a cyclical pattern. However, this pattern is not recognizable unless people actively and intuitively observe and engage with it. By reading a situation through rhythm, rather than through linear time, the nuns in Yachen assess the general political climate of the plateau as well as the situations of the places where they are headed, and intuitively grasp whether it is "safe" enough to move or not. By doing so, they not only understand the nature of any singular incident itself, but also learn the relational forces between these singular events, and eventually actualize these forces in their mobilities.

The rhythmic temporality of the nuns in Yachen is not one of steady, homogenous, and rational repetition. While this rhythmic temporality does seem to be cyclic and patterned upon a larger picture, it does not repeat itself with the same duration,

interval, and intensity between events. It is instead an uneven, irrational, embodied, and intuitive temporality based on subjective understandings about the event that connect it to the past, present, and future simultaneously. Lefebvre says, “Rhythm appears as regulated time, governed by rational laws, but in contact with what is least rational in human being [sic]: the lived, the carnal, the body” (2004: 9). At the very moment Jubei decided to move, she intuitively calculated her mobile possibilities by drawing upon previous incidents that she had collected and assessing them retroactively; in doing so, she was able to sense that the current time belonged to a duration between two events, to position herself within these events, and to anticipate future situations as well. What Jubei focused on was not singular incidents within a linear time frame, but the intervals, the silences, and the viscous relations between events that pull and push them together in a rhythmic temporality. She does not live in time and through time, but she lives time itself; the “flesh of time” (Wiskus 2013: 110).

As discussed above, when it comes to how this rhythmic perception is created, Jessica Wiskus’s study on rhythm, based on Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, gives us an important clue: “It is the relationship of a second articulation to the first that creates a rhythm” (Wiskus 2013:9). The Tibetan nuns acquire their rhythmic perception when a second or third incident occurs and, during this process, they observe how the event evolves and shifts through the forging of different relationships among events. The relation between two incidents is never homogenous and symmetrical in terms of its temporal intervals or the intensity of the incidents themselves, which is just how rhythm presents itself. Jubei internalized such rhythms in her own mobility. She instinctively

knew that it was the right time to move; if she waited longer, she might not have been able to leave at all. This rhythmic perception requires an ability to consider both the past and the future simultaneously. And this ability is precisely a way to turn Jubei, a Tibetan Buddhist nun, into a subject, who exercises mobility in what is a highly disagreeable time and space. Her rhythmic perception has been actualized in her mobility and it has provided a deep texture to her way of being and living as a Tibetan nun in post-Mao Chinese society.

### ***2.3 Half-nun Puthi***

I was surprised to see Puthi's shaven head the first time she took off her scarf. Puthi was neither a nun nor a widow. She was a twenty-seven-year-old single woman living with her aged mother and five-year-old nephew in an agricultural village in eastern Tibet. I got to know her when I was visiting Puthi's home, through her older sister, Lochik, a Buddhist nun whom I met on my first field trip to Yachen in summer 2010. Since 2010, I have often visited Puthi's home on my way to Yachen and stayed there for a few days to a week. As time went on, Puthi and Puthi's mother treated me like their daughter and sister, and I was able to get to know them more personally and to extend my relationship to their kin who live in the same village. I was invited over to this house and that house in turn, having tea, eating meals, and taking photos together—a typical ethnographic way of knowing each other and getting involved with each other. I often had a chance to observe Puthi's daily life over the years of my frequent visits, and became quite familiar with her housework and her distinctive lifestyle, although I failed to talk to her in a one-on-one situation because her Kham-Ganzi Tibetan dialect and my

Lhasa-focused, classroom Tibetan were simply incommensurable. However, Puthi's mother and Lochik speak fair Mandarin Chinese and understand a little of the Lhasa dialect as well, which made our communication possible.

Every time, Puthi's mother warmly greeted me at the front gate of her house, a humble traditional two-story Tibetan house made of mud and wood. In this structure, people keep their animals on the first floor and the family stays on the second floor. The structure of living space was simple; one living/bed room where all family members sleep, an adjacent kitchen, and one house shrine—the cleanest, brightest, and the most decorated room in the house filled with numerous photos of renowned lamas, butter lamps, scriptures, and offering objects. Thankfully, I was often offered the family shrine for my use while I was visiting. What I did the most in Tibetans' houses was drink tea—milk tea, salt tea, and also hot water. If I did not restrict myself, I ended up drinking more than ten cups of tea a day with them. In the Lochik's living/bed room, we talked or watched TV if there was electricity on that day, and sipped hot tea all day until it quickly turned dark. This was about the time when Puthi would come back from her fieldwork.

Puthi came back from herding animals or doing other work in the fields at around sunset every day. Without resting, she immediately started milking for the next morning's butter-making because it had to be done before the animals were put out to rest in the evening. Puthi's mother makes butter with this fresh milk every morning and makes fresh milk tea for breakfast. Puthi's dark skin and coarse hands told me of her continual labor inside and outside the house. After finishing milking, Puthi then went out to get water for cooking for dinner. It was too challenging task for her aged mother to walk up and down

the steep stairs carrying heavy water buckets on her shoulders. Puthi finally sat on her Tibetan style chair/bed<sup>29</sup> and sipped tea poured by her mother. Puthi's long day was almost over.



**Figure 6: Puthi's daily chore. Photo by Yasmin Cho (2012).**

I thought that Puthi was a typical rural Tibetan woman helping to keep the household until I saw her shaved head. As time went by and I learned more about her, I

---

<sup>29</sup> In traditional Tibetan furnishings, the long, wide chairs also serve as beds.

came to understand that she not only kept her hair short, but also refused marriage. She maintained celibacy as a lifetime commitment. Why then did not she join a monastery like her sister Lochik and become a Buddhist nun? Later I came to know that there was another woman like Puthi in this village who also shaved head and refused marriage. And in other villages, there are a few, if not many, women like Puthi—sometimes they wear robe-like clothes just like the nuns in monasteries. Studies of Tibetan lay renunciants are very rare. Such women are socially unique but unrecognized as social subjects. In this section, I try to make sense of the life of Puthi, whom I call a half-nun and who lives in a liminal space and time between nunhood and laity, between Buddhist practices and endless labors. I focus on the stories of two sisters: Lochik (a nun) and Puthi (a lay woman) from a village in eastern Tibet. In analyzing the relationship between these two sisters in their daily interactions, I am able to see the hidden tensions regarding who got to *leave* and *become* a nun and who had to *remain* at home. I found that there are certain spatial as well as temporal tensions: who occupies a certain space first (the monastery, for example), and who is left behind in a certain space (the home) and waits. These tensions lead to alternative possibilities for thinking, from more material and flexible perspectives, about the formation of a feminist subject.

Unlike Lochik, situating Puthi's life in Tibetan Buddhist contexts or in the general ethnic-Tibetan way of life is especially challenging. Despite a pervasive and lengthy history of such lives in Tibetan society, as a lay female renunciant, Puthi's life has remained veiled and is almost never been taken seriously in either Buddhist academia or in feminist religious discussions. At first, I was thinking about Puthi's life through the

lens of the full-ordination debates that emerged in the 1980s, triggered by the Western women who practiced Tibetan Buddhism in monasteries outside of Tibet—especially in Tibetan exile society in India as well as in Southeast Asian Buddhist societies. These debates were in part influenced by the waves of feminist movements and discourses in the West regarding women’s empowerment and gender equality (Tsomo 1996). In reading through these debates, I was extremely tempted to use the case of female full-ordination debates in the Tibetan Buddhist realm to look into the rift between Western-produced feminist thoughts and their impact on the real lives of women in non-Western society. However, the more I tried to place Puthi into such contexts, the more I realized she did not quite fit. Puthi is not a nun, first of all, and the geopolitics and socio-historical contexts where Puthi currently lives are simply not concomitant with the exile communities in India where “advanced” Western feminist works often intervene. I went back to the daily lives of Puthi in her home and her relationships with other family members, especially with her sister, Lochik, currently a nun. And I closely reread my notes on Puthi’s “escape night” and her frustrations that followed about her fate to stay at home. In doing so, I was able to see Puthi’s life from a different perspective, first and foremost by putting her in her own contexts and within her own issues and the intricate nets of her own relationships.

In the next section, therefore, I demonstrate what I have found through an intimate reading of Puthi’s life and her relationship with her sister Lochik, who succeeded in getting away from home and becoming a nun just the night before Puthi made her own attempt. In doing so, I am able to see a different narration and experience,

shaped through a spatial/mobile and temporal sense, regarding so-called “feminist subject formation.” However, this does not mean that I have something to “add” to the dominant theories of the subject. Rather, I suggest that when we use conventional key words in feminism such as “agency,” “empowerment,” and “subject” we should attend to historically specific and flowing contexts and consider the lives of the women themselves within these contexts. By looking closely into the lives of Tibetan nuns and lay women in general, and Lochik’s and Puthi’s in particular, I am able to gain the insight that their subject positions are subjected to a series of ongoing spatial and temporal changes and transgressions. In a place like Tibet, the fixed category of “subject being” might be a misnomer that does not capture these women’s vastly dynamic lives in their entirety. I suggest instead “subject becoming” in order to understand the spatially as well as temporally mobile practices that these women undertake.

### **2.3.1 Contextualizing Lay Female Renunciation in Tibet**

For the past few decades, the phenomena of lay female renunciations within Theravāda Buddhist societies in South and South East Asia, mostly Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand, have been well documented (Bloss 1987; Bartholomeusz 1994; Collins and McDaniel 2010; Falk 2006; Jordt 1988, 2007; Mroziak 2009; Muecke 2004). *Dsms* (Sri Lanka), *mae chi* (Thailand), and *thela shin* (or *thila shin*, “holder of precepts” Burma) are specific terms for indicating lay female renunciants in these societies. These women are highly visible as participants of a “movement” (Bloss 1987) and have their own histories, starting from the early twentieth-century colonial era. They have already been semi-institutionalized in the mainstream Theravāda tradition, and are recognized as a



distinctive social identity. In particular, many see the increasing number of lay female renunciants as connected to the fact that the full-ordination of the *bhiksuni* Order has been interrupted, or only existed in a very limited fashion in these societies. Accordingly, the current *bhiksuni* Order is preserved and is accessible to women in the Mahayana Buddhist traditions only, in places such as China, Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam, and in the Chinese diasporic societies of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines (Tsomo 1996; Mroziak 2009). Some women from Theravāda countries, especially those who can afford to travel to places such as China and Korea where they can access full-ordination, have started receiving the *bhiksuni* Order within other traditions (Tsomo 1996). In these cases, due to the different lineages and traditions of Theravāda and Mahayana, there are ongoing debates around the legitimacy of such ordinations.

Unlike in Theravāda Buddhist contexts, however, in Tibetan Buddhism the notion of lay female renunciation is rarely recognized or discussed except for mere references to its existence in some texts, despite its common presence (Grimshaw 1994; Gutschow 2004; Makley 2005; Schuler 1987).<sup>30</sup> Anna Grimshaw's (1994) pioneering ethnographic research on Tibetan Buddhist nuns at the foot of the Himalayas, in a place called Julichang in Northern India, briefly sketches a group of women who live side by side with nuns but are not really nuns. A decade later, in a more full-fledged anthropological research on a Tibetan Zangskar nunnery in Ladakh in Northern India, Kim Gutschow

---

<sup>30</sup> What I mean by Tibetan lay female renunciants are those women who have never married and have no plans for marriage, and who shave their heads as a sign of their lifetime commitments to celibacy. Widows with shaven heads are not included in my discussions.

(2004) fleetingly remarks on “household nuns” in the region, who maintain celibacy at home. From the structural anthropology tradition in early days, Sidney Ruth Schuler (1987) studied Tibetan marriage practices in Chumik in the Nepalese Himalayas. Schuler’s argument, mainly made through the structuralist point of view, is that the Tibetan non-marriage practice for certain female populations originated from the fraternal polyandry system that led to certain economic benefits and environmental adaptation (1987; see also Goldstein 1971). Although these studies focus on Tibetan villages and Tibetan ways of living, they are geographically limited, only taking account of ethnic Tibetans outside of Tibet. Hardly any research has been conducted on Tibetan renunciants in Tibet. Recently, Charlene Makley (2005, 2007) studied gender and sexualities after the post-Mao social changes in three nunneries in Labrang, in Qinghai province in China. However, Makley also does not focus on female lay celibacy practice in her research; although in a footnote, she mentions the existence of such laywomen renunciants in the villages (2005).

The reasons for the lack of research on a particular group of people can vary: the group may not have a socio-politically visible influence on local societies: or, they may be difficult to study due to geographical challenges, population dispersions, accessibility, and so forth. The scarcity of research on female lay renunciants is probably related to both. In my own field research on Buddhist nuns in Tibet, I encountered women such as Puthi “by accident,” while visiting a nun’s hometown. Even after meeting Puthi in a village, I only made brief notes about her in my field notes and quickly moved on to other issues. However, in my extensive field work on the Tibetan plateau, I encountered more

and more people like Puthi—albeit varying in terms of their practices and their names for themselves—in Tibetan towns and villages. I started asking about them and trying to gather information through documents, and conversations with scholars and experts as well. What I learned from my initial research in the field sites can be summed up in two points: First, although it sounds a bit paradoxical, the total number is quite small, and yet the phenomenon is quite common and widely practiced throughout the Tibetan plateau; many villages have at least one or two such lay women renunciants.<sup>31</sup> Second, however, they are not socially recognized or properly named as they are in similar cases in other Asian societies.

As Schuler indicated (1987), in Tibetan society, female celibacy and non-marriage have been practiced and recognized for a long time, mainly because of the polyandry system. Unlike in western societies, Tibet has systematically and culturally allowed women to lead quite decent lives outside of the patriarchal marriage system. This doesn't mean that these women are free from all household labor and other bondages based on gender inequality or that they fully enjoy their lives as free agents. Although both marriage and being a nun are quite visible and plausible paths for most Tibetan women, what I want to emphasize is that Tibetan societies traditionally produce a “niche slot” for those women who do not follow either of the two dominant paths. However, as I mentioned above, Schuler's structural account is not enough to explain the current

---

<sup>31</sup> This interesting state of affairs requires further examination in the future: I have almost never heard of male lay renunciants, who just like Puthi would be kept at home to work. Men are encouraged to become ordained, to join monasteries, and to train under official monastic curricula.

celibacy of Tibetan laywomen; for example, the simple explanation that these women (have to) choose a non-marriage life path because of the lack of male counterparts is insufficient. Based on my field research, the current Tibetan female lay renunciants—whether they practice Buddhism at home and whether or not they are completely devoted—envision their future as corresponding to the paths of nuns in monastic communities. When the *time* comes, they will *leave* home and *become* nuns; this is their plan, at least.

### **2.3.2 Blurring the Boundaries between Names and Robes**

Despite its seeming lack of impact on current Tibetan society, the lay female renunciation practice in Tibet is significant in relation to the recent so-called religious migratory trend of Tibetan girls in western China. And broadly, the practice gives us even more insight into the fluctuating nature of subject formations in a non-western context. Unlike other Buddhist societies in Asia, Tibet has a very ambiguous idea of how to use the term “nun,” *ani* or *jomo*, and it directly reflects the particularity of Tibetan female lay renunciation as well as nun practice. Let me explain further about the blurring of the terminology concerning nunship.

In Tibetan, *ani* and *jomo* normally refer to nuns; but in reality, these names are also widely used beyond their original meaning. In Grimshaw’s work (1994), “*jomo*” was used to refer to lay renunciants, who lived close by the nunnery.<sup>32</sup> Also, Grimshaw

---

<sup>32</sup> According to Gutschow (2004) and Grimshaw’s (1994) research, those Tibetan monasteries and nunneries in the Himalayas are located among the local villages and the monks and nuns share their monastic lives and rituals with local villagers. Precisely because of this geographical proximity, nuns in this region rely on the support of family and relatives in exchange for their labor working in the fields.

herself was called or identified as *jomo*, which was juxtaposed with her position as an outsider living in a nunnery. Over the course of my field research, I have collected many cases in which *ani* does not refer to real *ani*. For example, in a village near Yushu town, located in southeast Qinghai province, China, people call lay female renunciants in their village *ani*. In colloquial Tibetan, *ani* also refers to aunts or older female relatives. In ethnographic research in a Tibetan carpet factory in Lhasa, the female weavers called the women in the showroom *ani* (Zhang 2013). According to Zhang, the women workers in the factory showroom had never considered themselves as nuns. However, during her interviews, she found that they were committed to celibacy.<sup>33</sup> In Tibetan society, the terms designating a specific religious status for women have been ambiguously adapted for naming women in other realms. These terms, *ani* and *jomo*, straddle the boundary between *Sangha*<sup>34</sup> and non-*Sangha* communities.

In other Buddhist societies, especially those that preserve full-ordination traditions such as South Korea and China, being a nun means entering into a strict ascetic world, not only privately, but also publicly. In being called a nun and wearing robes, the person declares a specific identity of her own in public that follows additional ethical rules and constraints. Therefore, the name and the robe are not only important in a

---

Therefore, nuns maintain close ties, mediated through physical labor, to their natal homes even after they leave home. This is in contrast to the nuns in Yachen who also maintain close ties to their natal homes but do so not through their physical labor but through their “spiritual labor”—prayers, chanting, and so on.

<sup>33</sup> Zhang also talked about the legacy from the Cultural Revolution that many “real” nuns were forced to work in factories when they were detached from their nunneries during the Revolution period. (See Zhang 2013)

<sup>34</sup> In Sanskrit, *Sangha* is normally used when referring to a Buddhist monastic community.

symbolic sense but are also crucial at the material level for demarcating the separation between *Sangha* and non-*Sangha* communities. In other Buddhist societies where no full-ordination tradition has been preserved, such as Sri Lanka and Thailand, the term nun is not used to refer to lay renunciants. These societies have specific terms for these women, *mae chi* and *thela shin* (*thila shin*) as mentioned above. These women also adopt special robes for themselves, which separates them from *Sangha* communities.

Compared to other Buddhist societies in Asia, it is quite uncanny that in the Tibetan lay renunciation practice the name and the robe blur the line between the *Sangha* and non-*Sangha* communities. I will explain the reason for this in the next section through an analysis of ethnographic narrations, but here I would like to briefly mention two factors: performativity and spatiality. In a nutshell, in Tibetan society, being a nun is *performative* and *spatial*; nuns are made to care less about ordination, with an accompanying ordination name or a specific robe given, while men are encouraged to be ordained and to formally join monasteries<sup>35</sup> In other words, the religious status of women is determined within the realms of the behavioral and the material. Simply put, because of the lack of formal full-ordination tradition of nuns as well as the lack of a massive lay renunciation movement, performativity became central: *what* she does and *where* she does it remain crucial for separating laity and non-laity in Tibetan society.

---

<sup>35</sup> Along with the absence of male renunciants in Tibet, the gender tensions surrounding ordination issues between men and women in Tibet would also be an interesting topic for further examination.

### 2.3.3 Crossed Destinies—Puthi and Lochik

I have two brothers and three sisters, all of whom left home and lead their own lives in other towns and cities. My first older brother settled in Lhasa in the TAR, with his own family, and I am taking care of his son, my five-year-old nephew. My brother and sister-in-law cannot afford to take care of more than one child because they are both working all day at a local restaurant in the city. My second older brother, a Buddhist monk, is about to finish his *Khenpo* degree in a monastery near Dege and will become a teacher there soon. My elder sister runs a small restaurant by herself in town. And my second elder sister, Lochik, left home to become a Buddhist nun nine years ago. My younger sister, also the youngest child of our family, is going to be the first college graduate in my family. I, on the other hand, have never left home and have never gone to school. Each time my siblings left home, one by one, to pursue their own livelihoods or religious careers, I was left with more and more work inside and outside the house; from herding cows, farming land, carrying water, and preparing fuels, to cleaning up the house. It was not that I have never tried to leave home. Since around the mid-1990s, when I was only a teenager, many girls in the village started to leave home to become Buddhist nuns.

This was two decades after the Mao era in which any kind of religious belief was suppressed and subjugated to the massive political discourses and movements that Mao propagated. Most Tibetan monasteries and nunneries were shut down, and monks and nuns were forced to abandon their religious vows. Since the 1980s with its general mood of liberalizing policies toward religious affairs in China, some monastic communities have been restored, and some members have rejoined monasteries and nunneries. However, Tibetan girls born after the 1990s in mostly Kham did not choose to go to these nearby restored nunneries and monasteries to be nuns; instead they went further away to a new place—a place where there are no stable monastic structures, modern facilities, or registered residents. Nonetheless, this place was considered to be full of mystical power, aspirations, and spiritually powerful teachers as well as a sacred history. Single-mindedly

the girls flocked to this place and started to stay there simply by building small quarters and huts for themselves. There are basically no initial thresholds<sup>36</sup> for joining this religious community; physically there are no walls or gates to demarcate insiders from outsiders; the space produces a sense of boundlessness, irregularity, and unrestrictedness. It gives village girls like Puthi, who have no resources or support, a sense of accessibility and possibility. They pack, leave, and stay. In addition, the entire complex of encampments and the relaxed structure of the architecture—the tent-like quarters, self-built wooden shelters and retreat cells, etc.—have created a context in which the controlling attitudes of the authorities towards ethno-religious populations have become relatively “loosened.”

Becoming nuns in this village, or most likely in any other village on this upper land, requires a certain degree of boldness or rebelliousness of mind. In a general sense, on the Tibetan plateau, joining a monastic community is considered a welcomed and respected practice. Nevertheless, in reality, unlike boys, girls often face strong rejection from family when they try to join monasteries. They have to overcome such initial refusals by using various “tactics” such as incessant persuading, begging, and waiting. However, the most popular and effective measure among these is moonlight flight. Sometimes a girl will undertake the journey alone. Other times, two or three girls gather;

---

<sup>36</sup> What I mean by “no initial thresholds” is not that Yachen has no rules or formal procedures for accepting or ordaining newcomers; instead, I mean to emphasize the openness of Yachen as a Buddhist community, with its nomadic geographic conditions and specific residential arrangements, in embracing girls who come to this community to become nuns regardless of their circumstances—age, initial parental permission, economic preparedness, social status, and so on. The nuns in Yachen always find a way for these newcomers to stay there and to be nuns.



one of them is usually a nun, who acts as the leader, and they carefully plan their escape.

Puthi was in one of these groups.

The date was set for my nighttime getaway. When the date came closer, I became worried and nervous, yet tried hard to look normal by doing my daily routine as usual. I had dreamed of becoming a nun and practicing Buddhism with other nuns since I was a little girl. For this escape, I had saved up money, carefully checked the local bus schedule, and even bought a hat and a muffler in case I might need to disguise myself from acquaintances. I didn't tell anybody about my plan, not even Lochik, the sister I feel closest to, for fear of the word getting out. However, something unexpected happened on the night before my escape. My elder sister Lochik, who is the one closest in age to me, ran away during the night. The next morning, my eldest sister and other male relatives from the village went out to look for Lochik in the township bus station. Everyone knew that Lochik fled together with another nun from the village who was visiting home at that time. Lochik escaped in the end and has been a nun in Yachen since then. I was shocked and devastated. I simply couldn't carry out my plan after Lochik's sudden escape because if I left home, it meant that my aged mother would remain at home alone and there was no one else left to take care of the housework. I had no choice.

It is said that to be able to join a monastery and to be a nun is not considered something that can be accomplished through human efforts or innocent desires. It can only happen when personal desire meets the right "karmic timing and force" in the intricately interconnected cause and effect network of Buddhist cosmology. Wearing red robes is not simply decided by one's own willingness or eagerness. It is an awfully complex, interdependent process between humans and cosmos, humans and things, and time and space. Thus, to be able to be a nun is certainly a gladness and beatitude. In this sense, obviously Puthi didn't have such good fortune, while her sister Lochik did. However, the mysterious "karmic timing and force" is also preconditioned socially and culturally as much as spiritually. Normally, girls are putting out a lot more effort than

boys when they join a monastery; they have to prove themselves as trustworthy, enduring, and perseverant persons so that they can sincerely maintain their monastic vows. In most cases, however, they are highly unlikely to be approved by their elders or parents as suitable candidates for religious practices because of culturally prescribed negative notions regarding the nature of females—they are considered emotionally unstable, so it is easier to bend their will with worldly temptations.

Although Puthi did not have the “luck” to be a nun, she believed that she could still choose her own lifestyle for the rest of her life. She has decided to adopt parts of a nun’s way of living—celibacy and a shaved head. Her decision was not made suddenly; rather it was a premeditated and almost natural outcome in a sense. Since childhood, Puthi has maintained short hair—she was distinctive in that sense—and never imagined herself as a married woman. For her, marriage and having a family meant shouldering double burdens with all the housework, childbirth and rearing, farming, and herding. Marriage, for many women in these countryside villages, is configured as a life of physical and emotional exhaustion. Being a nun and practicing Buddhism in monasteries, and thus remaining detached from worldly matters and awful labor practices, seems to be considered bliss for many women.

### **2.3.4 Spatio-Temporal Subjects**

As mentioned above, Puthi’s seemingly dramatic decision, however, was not all that dramatic. There were already a few girls in her village and neighboring villages who had shaved their heads and decided to remain celibate, for mostly the same reasons.

Although the number of women who have led such a lifestyle is small, it is also quite

commonly seen. Many people I have talked to—Buddhist experts, scholars, monks, drivers, local farmers, and street youth—acknowledge this distinctive lifestyle of women in their villages and hometowns, even though they name them differently or have never named them before. I have not found a unanimously used word in Tibet for this group of women, as seen in other Asian societies that use words such as *mae chi* and *thela shin* (*thila shin*). The “non-naming” practice in a sense shows the insignificance or banality of female lay celibacy. However, more importantly, it also reflects the unstable position of nunship in Tibetan society.

Unlike its normal connotations, I see the instability here as being associated with rather “positive” repercussions in that it creates a space in which the women can maneuver. In Lochik’s case, we can see that being a nun in Yachen does not necessarily require passing through complicated bureaucratic thresholds that other established Tibetan monasteries and nunneries require. These women pack a bag, leave home, and join monastic communities. They are not asked for parental permits or monastic contacts in advance, even if they are teens.<sup>37</sup> I do not mean to devalue or simplify their internal anguish or hesitation in deciding to be nuns, but it is much simpler in Tibet than in other cultures.<sup>38</sup> My emphasis lies on their “doing,” not their “being.” Makley also says that

---

<sup>37</sup> This sounds highly unusual according to the *vinaya* rule that sets parental permission as a prerequisite for ordination. For those nuns who have full familial support, such a rule might be applicable. However, although they are not a majority, a significant number of the nuns who arrive in Yachen are escapees from their natal homes; they barely inform their parents about their “leaving,” let alone obtain parental permission in advance. In Yachen, there is always a rather murky and operative space for both the escapees and the head office regarding these nuns “becoming” members of this community, and this is often not a rule-driven process.

<sup>38</sup> Many non-Tibetan nuns with whom I have talked have been through traumatic experiences before joining monasteries, such as divorces, deaths, etc. And normally they do not expect family support, either

being a nun in Tibet is more about performing (2005; see also Butler 1990, 1993), rather than gaining a title. I agree with Makley's insightful observation, but I want to place more emphasis on the spatial dimension of such performativity. Tibetan nuns perform nunhood through spatial practices: by managing to *leave home*—escape in many cases—and to *find and occupy* a new space for themselves. It is interesting to see that those places where these young women flock to be nuns are open grasslands: the endless grasslands, just like the ocean, appear infinite and obliterate all spatially constrained human rationales.

Outside Tibet, the increase in the number of Western women becoming nuns in Tibetan Buddhism, along with the influence of Western feminism, has raised the issue of Tibetan nuns' full ordination in Tibetan Buddhism, especially in the Tibetan exile community in India.<sup>39</sup> Inside Tibet, however, the circumstances are not the same. As we saw in Lochik's case, whether the person obtains a full *bhiksuni* Order or not is not an "issue" in the daily lives of nuns and lay people in contemporary Tibetan society. No one asks or cares about a nun's stage of nunship or her ordination situation.<sup>40</sup> Leaving home and staying in a monastic community is simply enough for one to be called and respected as a nun. As Henri Lefebvre rightly puts it (1991), space is a production of social

---

financially or mentally. They separate themselves from their family lives and rely completely on monastic charity and patronage (See Chapter Four). On the other hand, in the Tibetan nun's case, once a daughter is recognized as a nun, she usually gains family bliss and support for her entire life, maintaining close ties with her natal home after joining a monastery.

<sup>39</sup> The debates around full ordination of nuns in the Tibetan exile community have been ongoing for over twenty years, and culminated in 2007 when the current Dalai Lama convened monastic and academic *vinaya* experts to discuss the Tibetan *bhiksuni* lineage at the Buddhist Conference in Hamburg, Germany (See Mrozik's article 2009).

<sup>40</sup> Strictly speaking, Tibetan nuns only have access to novice-ordination (See Tsomo 1996).

practices and vice versa. Tibetan nuns become nuns through producing a social space for themselves as well as through their spatial performances.

In a different way, Puthi is part of shaping Tibetan nunhood. Those sisters who fail to escape, like Puthi, perform a partial or “half-way nunhood”; not spatially, but *temporally*. It is interesting to see Puthi’s narrative through the lens of her readiness or willingness to be a nun; she simply has not been able to accomplish that goal *yet*. One night, when Lochik visited home, the two sisters got together and laughingly re-narrated the escape night, and how a single night changed their fates so dramatically. Lochik said that if Puthi had run away earlier than herself, she would now be doing the exact same work that Puthi does at home. *When the time comes*, Puthi will follow Lochik’s path, and everyone also acknowledges that the time will come when her aged mother dies. Puthi’s celibacy and shaved head, her halfway nunhood, show that her life lies in the middle of her “waiting.” Her body is seemingly spatially trapped in a household and in endless labor day by day, but her life is much more meaningful in the sense of her “temporal living.” “Waiting” in general might connote passive agency. But in Puthi’s “waiting,” I see instead hyper-agential forces; she voluntarily took up a nun’s way of living, not only to cope with her current situation but also as a way of escaping it altogether in the future.

I also noticed that in some cases, women like Puthi end up remaining at home for the rest of their lives, never joining monasteries. This might support the case of those structuralists who argue that the reason these women remained unmarried is because of the socioeconomic structure; that society needs unmarried permanent labor sources at home. But my focus is much more about the women themselves, their own narratives,

their religious pursuits, and their ways of understanding their surroundings and relationships. By contextualizing Tibetan lay renunciants through their own narratives and daily lives, we can see how they are actively living life as a temporal possibility that confronts unfortunate karmic as well as social circumstances.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

In the above, I demonstrated how Lochik performs her nunhood in a spatial sense, while Puthi performs her half-nunhood in a temporal sense. Lochik became a nun through spatial-leaving and spatial-making, and Puthi become a lay renunciant through temporal living and waiting. In Tibet, laywomen can be called *ani* or *jomo* and don robes, or robe-like clothes, relatively freely. This is because nunhood is completed through physical movements like “leaving” and “doing,” not by obtaining a title. Such a permeable and flexible notion of nunhood in Tibetan society allows Puthi, the sister left behind at home and “waiting” to be a nun sometime in the foreseeable future, to be unveiled and properly revalued, not as another fixed subject but in her changing and ongoing formation of “subject becoming.” Deshi gives herself as a new identity by leaving home, transforming herself into a nun through her harsh trip to an unknown place. By going against her father’s will and familial pressure, in order to keep the vows she secretly took herself to the Buddha, she escaped home. Jubei traveled through the highly antagonistic time and space for Tibetan nuns by relying on her instinctive understanding of the politics and spatial controls of the Chinese state.

What I have tried to show in this chapter is the alternative meaning of “leaving home” among Tibetan women, a stark contrast to the factory girls in cities in China.

Tibetan nuns' stories allow us room for understanding contemporary Tibetan women's mobilities and desires, as well as their challenges. They powerfully show us different regimes of temporality, identity formation, values, ethics, and politics through their mobilities, and their material engagements with the roads, policies, checkpoints, police, and labor. In these alternative ways, they create and maintain their nunships, making communities, forming their own temporality and ethics that are barely imagined in Chinese urban societies. The risky and solitary road trips these girls constantly undertake allow me to pose a fundamental question: What do we pursue in life? What is a good life? Although they might fail to accomplish what they intended to do, as in the case of Jubei, they keep moving and creating for themselves a crack within the tightly controlled webs of surveillance, restrictions, and gender hierarchy. Becoming a Buddhist nun in post-Mao China partially means materializing alternative values and ethics.

### **3. A Problem of Architectural Thinking**

#### ***3.1 Introduction***

Every day around 1:30 p.m., when a deep and long bugle call echoes through the air, thousands of nuns move to the gathering hall for daily chanting. In Yachen, nuns are expected to participate in the afternoon chanting and prayer session. One day, two Tibetan nuns, Tenzin and Lhamo, told me during lunch that they wouldn't make the afternoon prayer session because they were going to help build living quarters for a nun. Although the nuns normally do not skip daily routines such as prayers and classes, affairs related to building and repairing quarters or other structures are always a reasonable exception. That day, in the afternoon, when many nuns were leaving for daily chanting, Tenzin and Lhamo took the opposite route to the little construction site where other nuns were already at work. As usual, I tagged along.

This time the project was a little bigger; an elderly nun had decided to demolish her tumbledown shack and rebuild from scratch. More than ten nuns from the same town, whose ages ranged from pre-teens to mid-fifties, had gathered to help. No one directed anyone or anything, yet they all seemed to know very well what had to be accomplished and in what order, and how to make things happen. Some were shoveling mud just like experienced male construction workers; some were carrying bricks and gravel they had picked up at the river's edge and other places, and piling these up ready for use; some were hammering the walls; and some, of course, were making milk tea and filling the air with their laughter.



This is, more or less, a common scenario for building living quarters in Yachen. Much of my “hanging out” time with the nuns occurred on such mini-construction sites. Of all the activities in which I participated, it was their building activities that amazed me, as well as puzzled me, the most. My amazement was based on a rather phenomenological observation: the speed and efficiency of their building practices. The quarters for the elderly nun that Tenzin and Lhamo worked on were completed within two days; often it took even less time than that. My puzzlement was deeper, causing me to question my work and to feel suspicious of myself as a fieldworker. Every time I went out to building sites with nuns, whether I was carrying building materials together with them, running errands, or at times standing there watching what they were doing, I could not stop myself from posing the question over and over again, “What am I doing here?”

The question haunted me for quite a while. I had observed and documented the nuns’ building practices for over six months and even built a hut for myself, but the activity hadn’t seemed very crucial to me as a researcher of the nuns’ spiritual practices. It hadn’t occurred to me that building might be “something good to think with.” My fieldwork felt overwhelmingly charged with repeated physical activities such as fetching water, cooking, and building shacks with the nuns. This seemed removed from the kind of work that is “religious” and that would lead to intellectual and analytical discoveries for me, the observer. I felt that I should be tracking discourses that mirrored the lives of the nuns. While I knew that ethnographic field research tends to be “going out” and “being with people,” whenever I participated in physical activities, I felt anxious that my fieldwork had gone too “material.”

My uneasiness about the nature of my fieldwork was exacerbated by the prevalent discourses in Yachen about emphasizing immaterial values. As a rigorous Buddhist community, the attention on immateriality is pervasive; for example, the lamas' teachings focus on controlling the state of the mind; and subjects like death and dying, spirits, magic, the existence of hell, and one's previous/next life are common topics during daily conversations. Even materials such as statues, scriptures, rosaries, and lamas' photos stand out primarily because of their claimed-to-be-potent immaterial qualities: the sacredness, mysteriousness, or symbolic power behind their physical membranes.

However, as I came to know more about the nuns, the stories of their families, their pre-nun days, and their private secrets, and as I became more involved in the repeated physical activities of everyday life in Yachen with them, I was able to get to the root of my anxiety. I had been trying to find a governing discourse or an overriding principle inherent in this place that would represent everything neatly, once and for all. I envisioned Yachen and the lives of the nuns within the pre-designed discursive maps that had already gained a certain authoritative status; for instance, sacred geography, charisma studies, and reclaimed Tibetan nationality. The daily lives of the nuns that I observed and was involved with in Yachen, however, do not fit within these well-established categories. Their lives are simply "too messy," "too physical," or "too trivial" to be part of a grandiose, slick narrative that, in fact, represents everyone but the nuns. Within this fixed linguistic framework, Gutschow's (2004) warning seems true: the stories of the nuns in many cases are, at best, "added" to the larger, male-focused accounts of Buddhism.

The dominant scholarship concerning the contemporary Tibetan Buddhist movement in China greatly appreciates the immaterial and the linguistic: topics such as the words of high-ranking male lamas and saints, their biographies, their mysterious achievements, and their extraordinarily compassionate minds and capacities have been summed up as belonging to the category of so-called Visionary Buddhism (Doctor 2005; Germano 1998; Gyatso 1993; Smyer Y ü 2012; Terrone 2002, 2009, 2010; Tulku Thondup Rinpoche 1986). Although some research emphasizes how the Han Chinese participate in a more material way through merit-making donations and cyber networks (Smyer Y ü 2008, 2012), this research still does not directly deal with the actual material processes of sacredness; namely, the very space-making project that is, I argue, being done by the nuns. The fact that I so badly wanted to find a so-called “abstract understanding” during my fieldwork is rooted in the fixed, pre-conceived, and male-centered understandings and writings that have dominated the field of Tibetan Buddhist studies for several decades, especially in the revival movement in eastern Tibet. Thus, I decided to go back to my field sites, where the everydayness of the nuns—building, cooking, and dwelling—took place.

For a number of reasons, I explore the everydayness of the nuns in Yachen by focusing on their hut-building practices. First, building is a very frequent, banal activity among the nuns in Yachen. Second, it brings people, objects, nature, affects, politics, and religion together. Third, construction and reconstruction physically give a new form to Yachen. Non-religious activities like “hut-building” in Yachen have been largely ignored and even unrecognized in academic discussions, despite their startling vitality in making

up the nuns' everyday lives. "Building" has rarely been treated as a contributing factor to the current form of Yachen, while narratives of the "single founder" have been widely circulated. History clearly states, in numerous ways, that (almost all) monasteries or monastic communities in Tibet are "founded" by a single great male figure. In the case of Yachen, that figure is the late Achuk lama,<sup>41</sup> a legendary founder who demonstrated miraculous power and extraordinary wisdom and compassion<sup>42</sup> in helping many sentient beings. His stories are being told and retold and circulated across the Tibetan plateau and return back with even more added authority given to Achuk lama as "*the* founder of Yachen."

### **3.1.1 The Architectural Framework**

The problem with the production of hagiographic narratives about Achuk lama is that the narration puts him in the position of "architect," as one who projects a pre-envisioned and pre-conceived design already in mind about Yachen's unfinished architecture. Yachen is composed of an ever increasing number of practitioners—now presumably over 12,000. It is a leading center of the resurgence of Tibetan Buddhism in the People's Republic of China (PRC). If we follow the "omnipotent architect's point of view," Achuk lama *pre*-envisioned the current form of Yachen three decades ago when it began: the sacred geography is *pre*-conceived; the practitioners are *pre*-imagined; and

---

<sup>41</sup> His official name is Grub dbang lung rtogs rgyal mtshan (in Wylie), but people call him Achuk lama, or Lama Rinpoche (the Precious lama).

<sup>42</sup> Since his *parinirvana* (passing) in 2011, Yachen published a series of biographical materials to commemorate Achuk lama's achievements. See Terrone (2009) for a concise biography of Achuk lama and his accomplishments.

most strikingly, the nuns greatly outnumbering the monks is *pre-figured* in his mind.<sup>43</sup> Architectural thinking makes us *map* people and things onto a flat terrain, leading us to produce “knowledge of an order.” It gives us an aerial view or an outline of the entirety, presenting a nicely anchored geographic and conceptual knowledge. Achuk lama’s visionary achievement gathers the various histories, practices, and daily mobilities in Yachen and merges them into a singular, neat, and absolute “fact.”

One sunny day in the summer of 2010, I climbed up the hill and stood next to a stream. At the top I have a nice panoramic view of Yachen. I can see a small gate—in the shape of an arch, a few miles away to the west from where I stand—that marks the symbolic entrance to Yachen. From the arch, the unpaved road, passing through grasslands, goes down for a mile and reaches the “real” entrance of Yachen, where most vehicles stop to drop off luggage and people and also to wait for new loads. On the west side far off from the road, I see that a flock of vultures is circling over the field, signaling that a body has just been chopped into pieces and sky-buried at the funeral site on the grasslands. On the opposite side in the vicinity of the main road, people are busy living their lives—arranging transportation and places to go, or meeting people and picking up luggage. This bustling spot is where the monks’ quarters begin. From there, my gaze

---

<sup>43</sup> Surveying the population of a community like Yachen is an extremely challenging task because of its flowing and ever growing numbers. See Padma‘tsho (2014), in her essay, there were 5,070 nuns and 1,500 monks in Yachen around 2007. However, the population has risen since then, and as I will show in the rest of the chapter, without particular enclosures, people freely come and go in Yachen. According to the escalating numbers of nuns’ shacks and huts and the number of participants in major rituals, I can make a reasonable estimation about the ratio between the nuns and monks. My sense, in the summer of 2014, is that the proportion of nuns to monks is 9:1, and the total population is said to be over 12,000.

passes through the monks' areas, main stupas, prayer wheels, many lamas' houses and lecturing halls, shops, and finally stops at Achuk lama's residence and the main square next to it in the valley right down from the hilltop. From Achuk lama's residence, I turn around to the east side, where I can see the scene that leaves most outsiders awestruck, the messiest part of Yachen—the nuns' quarters. The nuns' quarters are a densely packed shantytown, naturally divided from the rest of Yachen by a stream. The stream flows quickly there, giving a round shape to the area of the nuns' quarters. On the other side of the stream are grasslands, with no end in sight.

The real problem of the architectural framework, however, is that it always projects a completed, fixed, final form and prevents us from acknowledging the on-going processes of form-making. It gives us a nice map; but there is no *tour*. Most of the nuns' daily activities, their experiences, their trivial but real-life concerns—eating, sleeping, and feeling—are never marked on the map, but they appear and are performed on the course of a tour. This is precisely what I focus on in this chapter and more broadly in my dissertation as well. Yachen has never been a closed, completed form; rather it is a “form-giving” (Klee 1973) community. In the corners of someone's yard, in the side streets or ditches of this highland shanty town, nuns always build and repair their shacks and huts together; and by doing so they physically give a new form to the place and make a new space.

Traditionally, when materials are the subject of discussion, they are treated as a tool or a carrier of something immaterial such as culture, spirits, or values that connect people and eventually generate and maintain human societies. For example, Mauss's

seminal work (1990[1950]) describes “*hau*” as gifts carried through tribes and clans, connecting individuals, and crafting indebted relationships. More recent scholarship on material culture has tended to focus on animating objects, the role of objects as well as non-human agentic forces, thus expanding the horizon of anthropological subjects in a dramatic way (Barad 2007; Haraway 1991; Hull 2012; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Kohn 2013; Latour 2005; Miller 2005; Tsing 2012). While not entirely disagreeing with the recent discussion of materialism, which offers certain diversities and dynamics in the field of study by treating non-human objects as part of the new relationships and politics it theorizes, my take-away from the studies of material culture does not lie in objectifying objects. In other words, I avoid demarcating object and subject. I emphasize the quality of flow that objects have, the processes of making, and this is what I mean by “materials” and “things” in my chapters. Hut-building, in this sense, is itself material; it gives us a sense not of what it *is*, but what it *does*. Below I describe in detail the nuns’ building practices and my “deeply material” fieldwork that takes up a significant part of our tour. After all, unlike monks, lamas, or historians, what matters to the nuns is not “What Yachen *is*” but “What Yachen *does* (for them).”

In the following sections, I will elaborate ethnographic details regarding various types of building practices—ranging from their own hut-building to statue-construction and tent-making—of the nuns in Yachen. By materializing the very fundamental material processes in the everyday life of the nuns, I will show how the nuns’ personal experiences and family backgrounds are woven into the processes of *making* and *improvising* in Yachen and how these create possibilities for a new politics that has rarely

been addressed in current Tibetan Buddhist scholarship. I argue that the architectural framework—represented through the Visionary Buddhism tradition and the Padmasambhava statue in the following discussion—contains a gender-blind perspective that has overridden the role of the nuns in the Buddhist revival movement in Kham.

### ***3.2 Materiality of Hut-Building***

#### **3.2.1 Hut-Building**

During most of my preliminary fieldwork period and a fair portion of my primary field research as well, I stayed with nuns in their humble quarters. They generously offered one side of the room in their quarters for my bedding and accepted my messy belongings and my alien presence for months. This is how I started intruding into their private lives. Ideally, nuns should live alone for solitude practice, but given the shortage of quarters, or more precisely the land shortage in recent years in Yachen, many of them stay together. No more than two typically share quarters; in this case, they are usually live with sisters or relatives who have joined Yachen later.

A twenty-two-year-old nun, Jubei, was my first hut-mate. She is from a small village near Duo town in Central Tibet and joined Yachen five years ago. Jubei and her cousin, who was already a nun in Yachen, bought a small piece of land from a Han Chinese nun who owned a spacious yard and they built their current quarters together. The shape of a hut is usually in the simplest form possible for an indoor space: four walls and a flat roof. It is made of lumber and plywood and sometimes coarse bricks are also used. This depends on the availability of resources and finances at the time of construction. The size of the hut varies, but is normally more or less between two and



four square meters. The first step in hut-building is to obtain construction materials, most importantly, lumber. Jubei barely managed to purchase clear planks from Tibetan merchants, who sometimes carry them in a truck and sell them to the nuns. Buying clear planks has become harder because the Work Team (*Gongzuo zu* in Chinese), a political governing unit, has started banning lumber importation to Yachen. The number of planks Jubei acquired was just enough for building the hut, but not enough for a kitchen, which she planned to build separately. To my eyes, the hut Jubei built appeared quite solid because she used thick planks to form an entire sidewall, instead of using thin broad plywood to cover the sidewall.

The most important part of building a hut, which I learned later in my own hut-building, is to make the ground flat and even, and to erect a firm beam at the center of the floor. The endurance of the structure depends on these two factors: flat ground and a firm beam. As a first step, Jubei and other nuns use bricks and earth to make a flat base for the hut. There are no fancy tools to use; things must be done with shovels, saws, hammers, and mostly bare hands. After hammering and sawing all day long, Jubei's tiny but sturdy hut was taking shape. After erecting the four walls of the hut, the nuns covered the roof with a few layers of large vinyl cloth to prevent water damage. In order to attach the vinyl cover to the roof, flat stones are placed on top of it. However, the stones are never safe. They move and fall down. They dance with the wind, heavy rain, and the wild dogs that run across them. To solve this problem, the nuns spread mud on the roof and let grass grow from it. Having their own vitality and energy, the grass and mud hold tightly onto the roof.

In contrast to the relative sturdiness of her hut, Jubei's kitchen was rickety from the beginning. She didn't have enough planks to make the wall as she did with her hut. The roof was never completely covered, and the bottom was not made even. When hailstorms hammered it or wild dogs chased each other on the roof, I worried that Jubei's kitchen would cave in. Unexpectedly, it endured quite well, despite its fragile form. The kitchen always held our attention in many ways and made us cautious when we were using it. But it survived for quite a while—until the last straw arrived: the earthquake. Luckily, the earthquake wasn't severe and caused no serious injuries. However it hit some of the nuns' more fragile quarters, and they eventually crumpled. Jubei's weak kitchen was one of these. She temporarily relocated her utensils into the hut, also being mindful to collect still usable planks from the ruins. However, she never re-built the kitchen. Much later it struck me that perhaps she hadn't felt the desire to rebuild it; her mind was slowly receding away from the hut, the place, and nunship altogether. It was a surprise when she broke her vows and left Yachen a year later. Her demolished kitchen and assembled planks remained there for a few months, until another nun's father came and checked out the spot and the price for building new quarters for his daughter. By the time my field research was halfway through, the issue of the quarters shortage in Yachen was becoming serious. Nuns began sharing rooms with their newly arrived cousins and sisters, or turned their kitchens and yards into new huts. Jubei's tiny earthquake-ruined kitchen became a good potential site and opened itself up to a new life with new people.

As Jubei, Tenzin, Lhamo, and many other nuns have done, Tibetan girls who come to Yachen to be nuns are supposed to solve their lodging and other basic needs on

their own. In addition to their religious practice, building (or repairing) a hut—literally erecting a material structure for one’s residential needs—is the main task that nuns face from the beginning, and throughout their whole stay in Yachen. First of all, they must find a piece of land for building, a task that is becoming more and more difficult given the new arrangements and policies imposed by the Work Team. The Work Team, a direct branch of the United Front Work Department (*Tongyi zhanxian gongzuobu* in Chinese) of the Chinese Communist Party,<sup>44</sup> is the main controlling agency apart from the police in Yachen. The Work Team is a separate governmental body from the head office of Yachen; in fact, in an administrative sense, the monastic head office is under the governance of the Work Team, which is a branch office directly dispatched from Beijing. A Han Chinese is normally appointed as the chief of the Work Team, but the twenty or more members of the Team in Yachen are mixed: Chinese, Tibetan, and Chinese-Tibetan. Their main task in Yachen is to control the growing population and the ongoing housing augmentation. The most effective way to do this is to limit or cut off the material resources needed for building quarters and to restrict the size of the permitted residential area. Because the nuns are the fastest growing population in Yachen, the Work Team focuses on patrolling the nuns’ quarters to search for illegal hut-building.

Even if the nuns are able to secure land, obtaining the proper quantity of fair-quality lumber planks is another issue. This does not mean that lumber is no longer available in Yachen; in fact, a great deal of fine lumber was brought in for larger or

---

<sup>44</sup> More information about the United Front Work, see Van Slyke (1967).

“official” constructions such as the late Achuk Rinpoche’s memorial hall, his stupas, and houses for other high-ranking masters and *khenpos*.<sup>45</sup> But this lumber is not available for the nuns who live across the stream. Sometimes Tibetan merchants hide lumber in their minivans and drive at odd times to the nuns’ quarters and sell to them, usually around four a.m. when the Work Team is not patrolling. Nuns then line up to buy a plank before dawn, despite the exorbitant prices. Although the number of planks the nuns can buy at a time is highly restricted, this slight quantity is still crucial for adding small, attached spaces onto existing huts for newcomers. When it is difficult to find a piece of land or enough materials for erecting an independent hut, the nuns use any available spaces (e.g., kitchens, roofs, or tiny yards) and any available materials and create a space for new members.

---

<sup>45</sup> A *khenpo* is an intellectually trained monk in the Nyingmapa tradition. Unlike reincarnated lamas, who obtain their sacred positions by birth, *khenpos* earn their position through long-term and harsh intellectual training in monasteries. Their status is equivalent to the *Geshi* degree in the Gelugpa tradition, similar to a Ph.D. in the western tradition.



**Figure 7: Nuns are building a hut. Photo by Yasmin Cho (2013).**



**Figure 8: Nuns are building a hut with fine lumber, which has been harder to secure. Photo by Yasmin Cho (2010).**

But revealing the specific hardships nuns face in their building experience and their general living situation in Yachen is not the main point I am trying to make in this section. My focus on the buildings and the building practices of the nuns lies in the very processes of *making*, which gives an actual form and shape to a place that never ceases to transform itself in relation to people, things, events, and feelings. Jubei had to deal with many issues before her actual building began. First, she needed to look for a possible site

while talking to her parents and relatives about their financial support.<sup>46</sup> Obtaining lumber is certainly a pressing issue as well, but it is still less serious than getting caught by the Work Team during the building process. I once witnessed a newly built hut being bulldozed by the Work Team because the nun had no “permit” for the structure. Once the actual building had started, many skillful procedures and steps were involved. As I described above, a firm beam in the center of the structure and the tight grip of the grass on the roof are essential for establishing and maintaining the frame of the building. In addition, political incidents such as problems with the Work Team may be reasonably anticipated; and, sometimes, natural disasters like the earthquake become part of hut-building processes. However, even if the process is not thwarted by shortages, natural disasters, and interference from the Work Team, it still requires the right feeling or will; without which nothing will happen, just as Jubei’s kitchen was never rebuilt.

These are the nitty-gritty processes of hut-building that most nuns are involved in everyday in Yachen. In this process, things flow and connect numerous elements together. I will take lumber as an example. Lumber travels through construction sites like Achuk lamas’ stupa and house-building by *khenpos*, and sometimes manages to sneak into the nuns’ quarters through the efforts of bold and business-minded Tibetan merchants. The lumber might be intercepted by the Work Team on the way; or if not, it might also get wet, damaged, or ruined during multiple shipping processes. At the end,

---

<sup>46</sup> Since nuns, unlike monks, usually have no outside donors or regular charities to live on, their families are often the only sources for their sustenance in Yachen. Although their daily chanting and prayers allow them to receive some chanting-money, for a project like building a hut that demands a fair amount of money, they cannot manage without family support.

after a tedious wait in the chilly dawn, the lumber may find a nun who is going to use it as the main buttress for her new hut or as the solution for a leaky roof problem, and so on. To borrow Arjun Appadurai's (1986) expression, we might consider the "social life of lumber," which flows and weaves into the lives of the nuns, the merchants, and the Work Team through new trajectories and new encounters, connecting each one of them in one way or another: a process of *Thinging*.

### **3.2.2 Thinging in Tibetan Matters**

In a discussion of the nature of things, Martin Heidegger said, "...the thingly character of the thing does not consist in its being a represented object, nor can it be defined in any way in terms of the objectness, the over-againstness, of the object" (2013[1971]: 165). An object in the Heideggerian sense is a dead, closed, and fixed being that is waiting to be represented or re-animated by the subject. Therefore, objects and things are simply incommensurable; a thing is the "over-againstness of the object." What I mean by materials is precisely this *thingly* being, which has flows and currents, makes changes and shifts, permeates into and exudes from the forms and parts of languages, institutions, humans, and non-humans. Therefore, my use of terms like materials, materializing, and materiality throughout my arguments is focused on the processes that lead us to see into what Tim Ingold (2010) has called "the textility of making." In this regard, the hut-building of the nuns in Yachen is a material process, or a *thinging* process of space-making.

A material perspective is crucial for understanding Yachen in that it gives us a way of avoiding the object-subject dichotomy, and in particular it offers a thinking tool



for going beyond the dominant discourse on so-called Tibetan issues in the PRC. As Jane Caple (2013) points out in her ethnographic research about the revival of Tibetan monasticism in the Amdo Tibetan region, issues concerning Tibet in China, especially but not limited to those about religious matters, have been highly skewed toward focusing on relationships with the Chinese state. Therefore, matters about Tibet are summed up and set within three categories: subjugation, resistance, or something in the middle. The Chinese party-state undeniably plays a strong role in the domestic realm, especially in maintaining social stability; and issues regarding ethnic minorities have been prioritized in terms of keeping society “harmonious.” The presence of the state, through police stations, the Work Team, checkpoints, and street surveillance cameras, is evident everywhere and at all times on the Tibetan plateau. My point is not to ignore the potent impact of the Chinese state in Tibet, but to be cautious about treating the state as a single, fixed institution-object that works uniformly. We need to see the *thingly* character of the state and its various flows and movements into the life of Tibetans.

Not only the Chinese state but Tibetans themselves should not be treated as an object to be uniformly represented. We often automatically consider Tibetans in relation to Buddhism, as though Buddhism was born in Tibet or from the beginning naturally grew out of Tibetans’ minds. But scholars describe how foreign Buddhism seemed to Tibetans when it was first introduced into Tibet by Indian pundits around the eighth century (Davidson 2005; Powers 2007[1995]). We also often think of Tibetans as a singular nation with a united language, culture, and strong feeling of belonging, who have always fought to protect their Tibetanness throughout centuries of history. However, even

until the early twentieth century, the eastern Tibetan regions were separate political entities centered around the Kingdom of Dege (Samuel 1993; Tsomu 2013) and the central government only extended effectively into regions that bordered Lhasa. Even though, in a general sense, each part of Tibet broadly shared certain cultural norms and codes, the majority of Tibetan regions were ruled by their own kings or through chiefdoms, independent from the Lhasa government until the Chinese took over.<sup>47</sup> Once we treat Tibet and Tibetans as an object or *objectify* them, we lose the ability to see how internal dynamics and flows constantly give new form and new possibilities to the region and the people.

This is a problem of architectural thinking, turning everything into a neatly arranged, pre-designed finality. It is important not to see Yachen with an architect's mind that sweeps away or wipes out the essential details of *making*: the flows of things, fickle events, feelings, and willpower that actually matter to the nuns in their daily lives. Within the architectural frame, thousands of nuns, who are the major portion of the population in Yachen, become thousands of interchangeable *mere* bodies. Their presences, as a frozen cluster, serve either for decorating the hagiographic narratives of the great lamas, or as a source for attracting outsiders who are amazed by the size of the body of followers. Architectural thinking hinders us from seeing the “textility of making” on the ground, and instead gives us a nice operational system that works only at the aerial level.

---

<sup>47</sup> More recent examples of this include anthropologist Tenzin Jinba (2014), who captures the dynamics and differences of the Tibetan-specified Suopo people in relation to “other Tibetans” and Chinese in post-Mao China; and Jocelyn Ford's documentary, *Nowhere to Call Home: A Tibetan in Beijing* (2014), which shows heterogeneity among Tibetans in terms of their language, customs, and so forth.

Architectural thinking might be tempting, especially when anthropologists are so well trained to grasp something beneath the surface or beyond/behind the materials. For the past three decades or so, scholarship regarding the resurgence of Tibetan Buddhism in the PRC has focused on the production of the well-designed architectural façade. And this architecture, despite its convincing insights and influence, has systematically blocked us from recognizing almost 90 percent of the actual practitioners, i.e., the nuns, turning them instead into a splendid backdrop. In this framework, we are incapable of understanding the everydayness of the nuns in Yachen. From the outset, we are made to see Yachen through a highly gender-blind perspective and manner. If we think only in terms of architectural layouts—such as the impetus of charismatic (male) lamas, revived monasticism, and the rule of China, all of which are important but severely limited—we are prevented from opening ourselves up to thinking in other terms. The striking degree of the nuns’ participation, their mobility, and their lives are consistently undervalued by the current scholarship. The architectural perspective of the recent Buddhist movement began from legendary stories about the lamas’ vision. This is reinforced in the male-oriented Buddhist idiom of Visionary Buddhism, which I am about to elaborate.

### ***3.3 Padmasambhava, Maleness, and Nuns***

#### **3.3.1 Buddhist Revival in Kham Tibet**

In the summer of 2010, I climbed up the hilltop next to the stream in order to take photos of Yachen in its entirety. While I was taking photos on the edge of the hill, I found a group of nuns, roughly forty to fifty of them, working on a construction site on the inside of the hill. On the slightly elevated land, they were carrying stones, cement, sand,

and other supplies on their backs. I didn't know what they were building, and I also wondered why only nuns but no monks were there. I took a photo of the scene and climbed down. A year later, the structure on the hilltop had slowly taken its shape; it was a statue—and a huge one at that. The nuns were still up there laboring. Since making a statue is a skill-demanding task, a few experts, including sculptors and carpenters, were making the main part of the statue, and the nuns were assisting them by doing menial chores alongside them.



**Figure 9: Nuns on the statue construction site. Photo by Yasmin Cho (2010).**

In 2012, when my long-term fieldwork began, the giant statue was completed. It was the Indian saint and tantric master, Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche, or The Precious One), who is believed to have planted Buddhism in Tibetan soil by taming the local demons in the eighth century.<sup>48</sup> The statue is over thirty meters tall and gold-plated. Due to its hypervisibility, including its colossal size and elevated location, as well as its gleaming surface, the giant Padmasambhava has become a highly noticeable identifier of the place, especially for those who step onto this land of Buddhism for the first time. Since its completion in 2012, the hilltop has become a place where people circumambulate, take photos, or simply spend time. The statue is not only a representative physical marker of Yachen, but also, more importantly, it signals the conscious message that Yachen and Achuk lama have a distinctive authority through being directly connected to the great Padmasambhava and his teachings and lineage. Padmasambhava is important in understanding the Tibetan Buddhist revival in Kham, not only because he was a legendary master in the history of Tibetan Buddhism, but also because he is the source of Visionary Buddhism, from which the current revival movement seeks its legitimacy.

Visionary Buddhism is key to understanding the Kham Tibetan Buddhist revival. Let me detour briefly. The Tibetan Buddhist revival has largely been characterized in mainstream Buddhist studies as the resurrection of monasticism along with the

---

<sup>48</sup> Padmasambhava's demon-taming stories appear in introductory materials about Tibetan Buddhism. See Powers (2007 [1995]). For other taming accounts of demons and wrathful deities in Tibetan Buddhism, see Dalton (2011).

restoration of monastic architecture from the ruins of a despairing Maoist past. Indeed, in Amdo Tibet,<sup>49</sup> many monasteries and nunneries were reconstructed, monastic educational systems were recovered, old members returned and some new members gathered once again (Caple 2013; Zhang 2009). However, in Kham Tibet,<sup>50</sup> where my research lies, the situation is quite different. Unlike Amdo Tibet, where well-managed Gelugpa monasteries have prevailed, Kham Tibet has been heavily influenced by Nyingmapa Tibetan Buddhism, which operates through non-monastic elements such as hermits, yogis, and tantric meditation-focused practices. Borrowing from Samuel's (1993) useful distinction, Amdo Tibet is a more "clerical" Buddhism, while Kham Tibet tends toward a more "shamanic" bent.

Different historical trajectories cause different forms of resurrection.<sup>51</sup> What I want to point out here is that the leading factors of the Tibetan Buddhism movement in Kham Tibet are not about bringing back bricks, mortar, monks, and lamas to "previous ruins,"<sup>52</sup> or about reconstructing ruined monastic architectures and educational systems. The Kham Tibetan Buddhist revival has taken place in a fairly radical way: by creating *new* spaces and attracting *new* people into "unknown places." The unknown-ness of the

---

<sup>49</sup> Amdo Tibet is the northeastern part of the Tibetan region, mostly Qinghai, Gansu, and a part of Sichuan provinces according to Chinese administrative divisions.

<sup>50</sup> Kham Tibet is mainly the eastern Tibetan region, mostly Sichuan province.

<sup>51</sup> For a good grasp of Tibetan (Buddhist) history regarding different regional and sectorial paths, see Samuel (1993).

<sup>52</sup> Jane Caple's ethnographic work (2011, 2013) shows how Tibetan monasticism and monastic architecture have been restored in contemporary Amdo Tibet. She argues that it is unfair to see the revival of Tibetan Buddhism in the Amdo Tibetan region entirely within the umbrella of the changing political climate or state policies in the 1980s, but rather it is more about the struggles of individuals who secretly preserved traditions, teachings, and education throughout the Maoist era.

movement to the people in Kham made the movement's geography and temporality more mysterious and pure, enabling the movement to develop its own narratives of itself as being something envisioned and sacredly predicted from an untraceable beginning. The contemporary leading centers of the Kham revival movement, Serthar and Yachen and other newly emerged small hermitages,<sup>53</sup> started as remote uncharted places, inner nomadic grasslands, deep valleys, and mountainsides, which seldom linked to regular transportation or infrastructure reached. In Kham, the flows and movements among places, people, materials, and ideas have unfolded in much more unexpected and dramatic ways, linking to each other along unfamiliar routes and paths.

Since the Kham Tibetan religious revival has lacked monastic authorities, its means of gaining religious authority and legitimacy have taken rather unconventional or mystical routes, through the notion of sacred geography and the Treasure movement that dominate Visionary Buddhism. Visionary Buddhism as a *genre* distinctly provides a direct link to the realm of the pure, ancient teachings and words of legendary saints and masters. Through a designated lineage of reincarnation and visions, the sacred teaching passes straight down to selected disciples, and through their translation, it reappears in the world once again. Within this tradition, the distinguished masters and the texts they have visualized and the objects they have unearthed have become the main sources of teaching materials in the revived Buddhism in Kham Tibet. The objects they have found are called *Terma* (Treasure) and the discoverers are called *Terton*. According to Treasure

---

<sup>53</sup> For substantial research on non-monastic hermits in Kham, see Turek (2013).

narratives, Padmasambhava buried *Termas* in the earth and prophesized that the *Termas* would be revealed at *the right time by the right figure* for the purpose of reigniting Dharma teaching.<sup>54</sup>

Since his prophecies, many *Termas* have been discovered by *Tertons* throughout the Buddhist history of Tibet. These treasures include sacred objects and texts or words. The texts are revealed in the *Terton's* dreams and mind through encrypted codes. Then the *Terton*, usually recognized within Padmasambhava's lineage of reincarnation, and also seen as one who possesses extraordinary wisdom and capacity, translates the coded texts and produces a number of sacred archives. As the founder of Yachen, Achuk lama is also a renowned *Terton* in the region. According to his biography, he discovered numerous sacred objects and texts in the unknown earth, mountains, and rocks. Visionary Buddhism claims that its legitimacy lies in its emphasis on direct transmission: the teachings and words are directly passed down from the sacred ancient kingdom of Tibet. A text unearthed from the ground contains, therefore, the purest teachings and words without any interruptions by human or demonic forces. This "borrowed authority" (Gyatso 1993) from the ancient saint is realized in the current revival of Visionary Buddhism in Kham Tibet.

---

<sup>54</sup> For more information about the Treasure movement, see Tulku Thondun Rinpoche (1986), Janet Gyatso (1993, 1998), David Germano (1998), and Antonio Terrone (2010), among many others.



### **3.3.2 Visionary Buddhism and Nuns**

Visionary Buddhism is a brilliant yet complicated invention. It is brilliant in that it has the potential to create omnipotent authority and charisma in a single day. It powerfully whirls through all obstacles, unfortunate events, and harmful thoughts/forces, and flattens them into a neat, singular, legendary narrative. It works through and beyond time and space limitations; the dark era and profane places are redeemed once and for all by and within the singular sacred lineage of Padmasambhava. In this sense, the general operational system of Visionary Buddhism is extremely hierarchical and exclusive; however, at the same time it also bears vastly horizontal messages: it is a genuine attempt to make the teachings reach out to all, especially to those who have lacked such opportunities, and to those who are without monastic affiliations. In a uniquely Tibetan manner, it has absorbed all layers of social lives in Tibet and beyond. This is in part why Germano (1998), among others, cogently argues that the Treasure movement signaled a distinctive Tibetan way of responding to the Chinese modernism and capitalism that was encroaching into Tibet in the 1980s. Tibetans have reclaimed the land as a sacred and pre-historical space where moral superiority, self-confidence, and Tibetan civilization are reinvigorated as antithetical to the Chinese form of modernity. In addition, more recently, Terrone (2010) argues that it also reflects Tibetans' own struggles with re-identification with Tibetanness in the wake of the massive destruction of Tibetan culture, religion, and language throughout the dark era of Maoist China.

Despite the powerful insights and influence of these arguments, I see a trickiness in Visionary Buddhism. My uneasiness stems from close ethnographic observations of

the daily life of the nuns, which I am about to elaborate in detail, and perhaps at a deeper level, it comes down to a sense of misgiving—the taken-for-grantedness of male lama-focused succession and legend-making. However, there are a small number of female lama lineages in Tibet, and also female *Tertons*.<sup>55</sup> I myself met a few female reincarnations during my fieldwork in Yachen and elsewhere, as well as highly educated female teachers, called *khenmo*, who like their male counterparts receive respect and give teachings. But the fact that there *are* female masters and female *tulkus* (reincarnated lama) does not undermine altogether the gender bias that is prevalent in the Tibetan reincarnation system. This was one of the most common counter-narratives I heard when in conversations with lamas and Buddhist experts I teased out gender as an issue in Tibetan Buddhism. “Look! There *are* many female *tulkus* and female enlightened beings in Tibet.” And then the conversations were quickly wrapped up, my unawareness or ignorance of such female lamas’ existence having been pointed out to me.

Gender tension in Buddhism, especially in living practices such as the Visionary movement in contemporary Kham Tibet, is hard to define. Buddhism and gender discrimination made for uncomfortable encounters from the outset; stories about the Buddha’s obdurate refusal to allow women to join the *Sangha* community are classic. Rita Gross (1993), a feminist scholar of Buddhism, tries to balance gender issues in Buddhist doctrines and texts by analyzing the early Buddhist canons.<sup>56</sup> However, talking

---

<sup>55</sup> Regarding female treasure revealers, see (Jacoby 2007).

<sup>56</sup> For scholarly accounts of Buddhist women and gender issues, see Gyatso and Havnevik (2005), Gross (1993, 2009), Havnevik (1989), Schaeffer (2004), and Tsomo (Tsomo 1988, 1999, 2004, 2006, 2014); for ethnographic research, see Grimshaw (1994), Gutschow (2004), and Makley (2007).

about gender tension in a contemporary, living Buddhist community presents other kinds of challenges beyond dealing with ancient texts. Reincarnation is largely assumed to be in male bodies; if it happens within female bodies, then it's acceptable but exceptional. As Makley rightly puts it in her analysis on *Tulku* worship in Amdo, "...maleness was largely an unconscious given" (2007: 37). Padmasambhava's maleness is unconsciously given, while female lamas' femaleness is seen as consciously exceptional. Visionary Buddhism in this regard is a gendered ontological practice of knowledge production; it absorbs all and everything once and for all like a vortex of air, sucking up all the dynamics, tensions, and latent uneasiness—especially regarding gender tensions, into a singular morality, authority, and history.

In this powerful vortex, issues of gender have no niche. McGranahan (2010), in her research on Tibetan women in a refugee community in India, argues that narrating one's life—to be able to possess one's life story—involves a social process and cultural organizing. In Yachen, to be able to recognize gender as an issue involves risking oneself being cast as unfaithful and as having impure intentions in challenging male-saint authority. Why were only nuns there on the hilltop, building the giant male statue? Why do nuns cook food and make tea for thousands of monks at every major ritual and ceremony, thereby sacrificing their own time for spiritual practice? Why are nuns not allowed to approach the sacred sites such as, for example, the location where Achuk lama found the treasures? Why are nuns not permitted to own cellphones while monks are freely using all kinds of cutting-edge technology? Why are female lamas, known to possess the same holiness and spirituality as male lamas, living in such poor conditions

compared to their counterparts? Most nuns in Yachen do not think of these types of issues as problems.

However, many nuns have a surprisingly sharp awareness regarding women's lives in the villages, the shackles of marriage, child birth/rearing/labor, and domestic violence. Over the course of my fieldwork, I was advised many times by the young nuns not to get married. According to them, men would freeze my mobility and freedom. And they often lectured to me using a Feminism 101 about women's misery in the domestic realm. They stated their own good fortune in removing themselves from the worst *samsaric* suffering for women: marriage. It was odd to see them having such a keen awareness and strong opinions about women's rights in the domestic realm, while they appeared blind to the visible gender discrimination in the male-dominated world of Yachen where they currently reside. Whenever I asked the nuns about gender issues in Yachen, they told me, "This is the way it is. It has always been like this." They think of the issue as if it were a "natural law," something unquestionable or not worth questioning.

What makes them hold such dramatically divergent perspectives on gender issues? I find a clue within McGranahan's insights into the narrative of dispossession among Tibetan women in the exile community (2010). In her research, the way that Tibetan women narrated their own stories always indexed larger Tibetan national history, comprising socially recognizable and memorable resistance stories. She finds that Tibetan women in exile narrate their stories as a part of the national epic, locating themselves in a niche within the solemn resistance of Tibetan nationalism. These women

do not narrate their stories as a purely personal matter; individual stories are dispossessed by the owner. The nuns in Yachen recognize gender issues only when the issues can resonate with the sacred history of Buddhist teachings. Refusing marriage shows a commitment to celibacy, a core Buddhist ethic in Yachen and other Buddhist communities in general. Critiques of the marriage system and ill treatment within the family toward women in Tibetan society are well coordinated with renunciation practices in wider Buddhist discourse, thus leading to the acquisition by the nuns of a certain moral superiority. To the nuns, to be able to escape from home to become a nun is a blessing. On the contrary, various gender discrimination practices in Yachen are not recognizable to them because they are happening or *not*-happening under the umbrella of Padmasambhava and Achuk lama's blessings; given their presences, nothing "bad" can possibly come into play. It is certainly a blessed umbrella, but also a blind one.

### **3.3.3 Yachen's Monks, Nuns and Female Lamas**

Yachen is certainly not restricted to nuns; in its spirit, it opens itself to all sentient beings; laity, non-laity, Tibetans, non-Tibetans, and nonhumans. Although the major body of practitioners is nuns, many monks (approximately 2,000, but the numbers fluctuate) also practice in Yachen. They also build huts and shacks for themselves—that are in much better condition because of the resources available to them—and follow the regular practices and rituals that Yachen offers. However, the fundamental difference in their residence status from that of the nuns in Yachen is that they stay in Yachen temporarily from a few months to a few years; for them Yachen is a good retreat center, a supplement to their wholesome monastic education back home. Most monks staying in

Yachen were ordained in their home monasteries and have had years of traditional monastic education. As Yachen gained its reputation as a tantric meditation center, thus providing something that was lacking in their regular monastic curriculum, many monks began to travel to Yachen in order to fulfill their specific needs. Their trips to Yachen are well prepared and planned out carefully, both financially and mentally; this involves seeking general advice from their senior monks and lamas or those who have been in Yachen, making decisions about the length of their stay and their planned return, as well as obtaining contact information about who will take care of them during their stay, especially during the initial settling-in process. The huts in the monks' residential area are in much better shape compared to the nuns' huts, and many huts remain empty due to the temporariness of their stays and frequent trips back to home monasteries. The attitudes toward Yachen held by the monks and by the nuns are simply not comparable.

I heard the name Yachen from my sister one time, and I was told that it has good lamas and many nuns gathered there, practicing together.

...

I overheard Yachen in the conversations among people in my village. It seemed to be located somewhere in Kham. I didn't know much about the place, actually, I had never been outside of the township I grew up, but people said the lamas are good in Yachen.

More or less, these are the typical answers I received from the nuns when I asked about the reasons that they chose Yachen. Most nuns<sup>57</sup> had heard about the name Yachen by accident and had learned about the place on almost random occasions in their villages

---

<sup>57</sup> Some nuns join Yachen with their family's blessing, just as monks do. Also, some nuns have relatives and sisters already staying in Yachen. In these cases, they will have relatively solid information about Yachen.

and elsewhere. Many times they didn't even know exactly where Yachen was located. One nun told me that when she decided to run away to be a nun, Yachen came to her mind because she had heard good things about the place before, however she didn't know where it was located. One thing she could confirm at that time was that she was supposed to travel from her village toward the northeast, so she started walking in that direction. Many nuns begin their moonlight flights with little money and little knowledge about the place, and even if they arrive safely at the end, often times by then they are almost broke, and they have no single acquaintance in Yachen. They will be given familial recognition after they shave their heads and wear the robes.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, the monks who travel to Yachen for short- or long-term retreats gather information about the location, available curriculum, valuable rituals, living environment, and qualified lamas; and sometimes they make comparisons with other retreat centers and academies. Often they investigate Yachen by visiting it themselves. To them, what matters is what Yachen *is*, who the lamas *are*, and the established reputation and authenticity of the teachings, all of which are well summed up in the Visionary Buddhist tradition.

None of these “thoughtful pre-considerations” are typically available to most

---

<sup>58</sup> This does not mean that they have a full ordination. In Tibetan Buddhism, the full ordination lineage for nuns has been broken, and currently no Tibetan women can be fully ordained in the Tibetan Buddhist lineage. However, nuns can be half-ordained, and in my view, this doesn't seriously impact their practice or identity as a nun, as I elaborated in the previous chapter. Once they obtain nunhood, normally they are able to obtain family support both financially and morally. The relationship and the balance of power with their families are in fact totally overthrown once the nuns take their vows. Even though they escaped from home by going against their parents' will, once they become nuns, it is important to maintain their nunship throughout life and practice sincerely to the end. Breaking one's vows is considered a highly disgraceful and immoral action against oneself and one's parents. Therefore, the family will support their escaped daughter well enough to make sure that she does not break her sacred vow because of trivial daily issues like financial hardship.

nuns. For most nuns, Yachen is an unknown place, overheard in someone's random conversation, a place far away from their villages and townships. Nevertheless, this is also a place where they carry the faint hope that for the rest of their lives they can be something other than a wife and mother who stays at home. Yachen is a destination where their bold running away finds its endpoint. Arrival there signals the start of another long journey to an even more unknown world because there is no turning back for them. The nuns are at the outset alienated from, deprived of, a condition that so many monks can take for granted: the condition that allows them to make well-informed, knowledgeable decisions about the place they are going. How many Tibetan girls are in a situation where they are able to choose Yachen on the grounds that some ancient master has prophesied that Yachen is a sacred land, or that Achuk Rinpoche is the Treasure revealer? How many girls are aware of the deep legacy of the Treasure movement and its political impact, which Visionary Buddhism and Buddhist scholars emphasize so much and so well? In the end, what really matters for the nuns is what Yachen *does* for them, what the teachers *do* for them, and what alternative *life* Yachen *offers* to them. Visionary Buddhism by its nature contains a grand-scale discourse that obscures the details and subtleties materialized through the mobilities and improvisations of the nuns in their everydayness.

The female lamas (*tulkus*) whom I met in Yachen live in the same area in which the nuns' huts are lined up side by side. The female lamas stay in huts that are in slightly better condition and have relatively spacious yards, with a couple of nuns who help do chores. However, compared to the material conditions of the male lamas who live across



the stream, their better conditions are nothing at all. Most male lamas and *khenpos* stay in well-constructed houses and sometimes have their own separate lecture hall. They travel widely in their white Toyota SUVs, often go abroad, and spend most winter days in warmer Chinese urban centers. One day, I asked my male teacher about female lamas, and he said, “Oh, they are just like me, a reincarnated lama, we are all the same.”

This is the unanimous answer other lamas and nuns gave me as well. Female lamas and male lamas are all the same, recognized as having the same level of spiritual leadership. However, female lamas will be proclaimed to have the same status as the male counterpart only in public speech, and in some stanzas of ancient texts. It is only true in principle, not in actuality; only in the *mapped* world but not on the *tour*. Most female lamas in Yachen do not share the conditions that male lamas are afforded that lead to their public visibility and to their charismatic behavior in front of potential disciples. Even when laity and nuns in conversation refer to a female lama’s spiritual capacities, they tend to focus on a shamanic/mystical power that she possesses, such as being able to see the future or her ability to travel to the realms of hell and return, and so on. Her supernatural power is valued as complementing Achuk lama’s and other male lamas’ more formal teachings.

I found that many issues regarding gender hierarchy in Yachen operate at the transcendental level, which I call the “architectural” level. The Visionary Buddhism tradition helps us to *map out* where Yachen and the lamas are situated in the massively complicated Tibetan Buddhist lineages and history of tantric teachings. It gives us knowledge of an order of places and times, and a destined authorship. Visionary

Buddhism puts the Padmasambhava lineage at the core, enthroned as a singular source of power and authenticity. As a result, by default, under his blessings, nothing inauspicious—unharmonious or any individualized voices articulating gender issues, for example—can appear. From an architectural point of view, Yachen is pre-designed as a place free of conflicts and issues. Padmasambhava's and Achuk lama's maleness, in this process, is unconsciously given, in both a systematic and nuanced way, and organizes the gendered life in Yachen and beyond.

Padmasambhava's sparkling golden body, erected on the highest hill in Yachen, looks down into the valley with his wholesome compassion. However, his giant immovable body and fixed gaze look directly at the Achuk lama's bedroom and the monks' quarters behind it, eschewing the nuns and their presence on the other side, as if he has forgotten who has actually molded his body by laboriously carrying mortar and bricks to the hilltop for the past several years. It seems that his blessings are oddly poured onto the body of guests (monks), but not onto the actual owners and makers (nuns). Ironically, his body and aerial gaze on the hilltop, as a sacred phallus soaring up to the heights, are unable to find their way back to the majority of his disciples, who have longed for his teachings.



**Figure 10: The Padmasambhava Statue, with its gaze in the direction of the monks' quarters. Photo by Yasmin Cho (2012).**

### ***3.4 Unruly Space—Rethinking Tibetan Grasslands***

“If you sit for hours on the grasslands and look at the yaks in any nomadic region in Tibet, you might be astonished by how the world can move so slowly,” a Tibetan friend of mine, a novelist, living in a large city in China, told me one day. What he was describing is the heavenly idleness and serenity of the grasslands, which we urban dwellers feel lacking in our bustling daily lives in cities. I couldn’t have agreed more with him when I listened to him, sitting in a nice coffee shop in the crowded city. But I can’t agree with him any longer, having “sat” and “lived” on the grasslands with nuns for quite a while. Grasslands in Tibet, or in Yachen at least, are not all serene and idle.

Over 4,000 meters above sea level, weedy grasses uncontrollably spread across the gradual slopes and flatlands with no end in sight. There are no trees and bushes. Black yaks feed freely, maintaining a good distance from each other and from the herders’ tents. This is the scenery where Yachen sits, exactly as my Tibetan friend described. However, it is not at all quiet and calm, if we think further about the contested nature of Tibetan grasslands within the context of the ethnic border politics in China. Yachen juristically belongs to a county called Baiyu (*Palyu* in Tibetan) in the northeastern section of Sichuan province. The township of Baiyu County, 120 km west of Yachen, borders central Tibet. This is a simple fact about Yachen’s geographical location. But now, I am going to explain why this is so crucial to understanding the success of Yachen and the Buddhist revival movement in Kham.

As I discussed in the Introduction, Central Tibet, the Tibetan Autonomous Region (the TAR, *Xizang* in Chinese), was artificially drawn as an ethnic Tibetan region more

than half a century ago by the Chinese government for its own political purposes. The Beijing government has used all kinds of exceptional policies to control the TAR; these control policies have been imposed at a provincial level and vertically planted from the top. When one travels to any part of the TAR, whether it's a small old farm village or a middle-size township, one will not fail to find almost identically shaped, newly-built police stations, the same shiny SUV police-patrolling vehicles, and street cameras. Nothing has grown out of the local needs or conditions; how alien to see modern glass police stations side by side with dilapidated old buildings and farmhouses in small towns. The police stations are all *planted* there by an authoritative organization. However, the situations of the Tibetan regions outside of the TAR differ from the TAR; the policy is still vertical but not quite provincial. Although these Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures in other provinces are controlled using the same logic of exception, the degree and scale of control is different from what the TAR has experienced. The TAR is exceptional among the exceptional.

This TAR exceptionalism, however, allows a crack to appear in other Tibetan dominant regions in the PRC. Yachen is in the vicinity of the TAR, but technically belongs to another province. Even though Yachen has achieved hypervisibility as a Tibetan Buddhist center—and because of this, the on-going surveillance from the state is undeniably present—the nomadic grassland makes Yachen less easily targeted by direct state-control policies when compared to the monastic communities in the TAR. In other words, Yachen, precisely because of its peripheral location outside of the heated center, has been able to avoid quite the same level and degree of implementation of control

policies emanating from the Chinese government. Yachen, by the time of my fieldwork, had not yet been subject to compulsory patriotic education. Also this is why Yachen has drawn so many girls from central Tibet who are nuns-to-be, who are desperately seeking living teachings from active teachers. It seems that religious authenticity in Tibet is now shifting from the center to the margins. During my fieldwork, I often saw the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama's photos hanging on the walls and ceilings in public places such as the shops in Yachen, which is impossible to imagine in the TAR.

This does not mean that Yachen's location guarantees the sanctity of its presence under Chinese rule. Regardless of their locations and associations, Tibetan communities, especially religious ones like this, always risk being exposed to a crackdown at any time and without any clear reason. Around 2001, Yachen experienced a sudden demolition and shutdown by the government.<sup>59</sup> In Tibet, the state of exception is in fact the state of normalcy (Agamben 2005; Yeh 2013). Yachen's response to these fluctuating political situations is to focus more, or only, on practices and to emphasize strict morality rather than getting involved in political protests. The late Achuk lama and other high-ranking lamas are all fully ordained monks and maintain strict celibacy, even though sometimes their advanced tantric practices require having female consorts. As Germano observes (1998), moral strictness is widely emphasized in the Buddhist communities in the Kham

---

<sup>59</sup> Serthar Institute, another leading center of the revival movement in Kham, was half-demolished by the government without specific reasons given. Many nuns and monks were forced to return home. They came back a year later and rebuilt their huts and started life again at Serthar. See *Destruction of Serthar Institute: A Special Report* (2001).

Tibetan region.<sup>60</sup>

In addition, Yachen's remote location has certainly played a role in its success. Yachen began as a handful of poorly built shacks on the grasslands, inhabited by disciples who were willing to sacrifice the comforts of life in order to receive the teachings of their teacher. Achuk lama started his hermitage at the fringe of the nomadic land of Kham, successfully eschewing political attention from the beginning. He didn't seek permission to build a monastery, although he developed monastic-like rules and practices later on. Since his initial sojourn in this location in the grasslands, the small cluster of shacks, centered around his residence, has increased dramatically, altogether transforming the surrounding landscape. The "grasslands with no end" seemed at first to offer Yachen the fundamental condition of unlimited expansion and growth. Yachen did in fact expand in an unstoppable way over the last three decades, until it eventually gained government attention and was enclosed by an arbitrary cement road circling its outer edges.

Yachen has never been fenced, or had any sort of physical enclosure, or anything signaling the division between laity and non-laity in the sense of a traditional monastery. Yachen from the start had a "spirit of the grasslands," an openness toward all beings and things. As long as people are willing to practice, and follow the basic rules of the

---

<sup>60</sup> I see that such an emphasis on moral superiority corresponded with the massive influx of Han Chinese devotees. See also discussions on the complicated rules of meat consumption due to the increasing Han Chinese influence in the section on food politics in the fifth chapter.

community, there is no need for a mandatory special permit to enter into this space.<sup>61</sup> People, regardless of their status as laity/non-laity, monks/nuns, or Tibetans/non-Tibetans, have the liberty of their own mobility. This is why someone like me, a foreign fieldworker, comes and goes freely without particular obligations or necessary forms of consent.<sup>62</sup> However, Yachen, with its spirit of the grasslands, confounds the government's hardline policies. An interesting phrase appears in a report, published in Chinese for internal circulation only, by the government-funded Tibet research center based in Beijing.<sup>63</sup> The report was written by a group of researchers who were sent by the central government to inspect Yachen in 2007. The report is the result of their investigation, and contains a huge number of documents consisting of up to several thousand pages. I was allowed to read a small portion of the report and through reading it, I can assume that the Beijing government has been vigilant about the growth of Yachen and has tried to keep track of the situation. The section that I was allowed to read was the evaluation portion of the final conclusion in the report. In it, I found this: "All in all *Yaqing Si* (Yachen Monastery) is relatively stable, and there seems to be no visible

---

<sup>61</sup> In principle, if one asks formally at the head office of Yachen about a residential permit, one will probably receive the answer that one needs some kind of permission, especially if one is planning on a long-term stay here. During my stay in Yachen, I heard a few times about long-term permissions issued by the head office for long-term residential seekers. But such permission wasn't required. In addition, one normally doesn't request permission for a short-term stay when one wants to pay homage to one's lamas. How long a "short-term" stay is is subjectively understood.

<sup>62</sup> Even though it is largely true that Yachen does not have a strict threshold for entering and staying, I have to admit that my Chinese-looking appearance eventually made my long-term stay in this place possible. I have seen and heard that western foreigners are often kicked out of the community by the Work Team. Even though a western monk, whom I know, was ordained in Yachen as a monk, it is difficult for him to stay longer than a week each time he visits Yachen.

<sup>63</sup> The report is a "secret" internal archive for government use only. In order to protect my informant, I cannot reveal my source for obtaining this report.



political instigation, nevertheless we shouldn't be caught off our guard.”

One of the aims assigned to this research team was to find out whether there were any latent anti-government movements in Yachen. And the team obviously failed to find any visible evidence of such. Yachen, to them, is a place oddly distant from the bustling towns and cities where most political incidents happen, but is also a place that could be a potential problem because it is classified as a “Tibetan monastery,” a top category among targets for controlling Tibetan matters of any kind. But at the same time, this place is strangely populated by female members who purely and quietly practice Buddhism. Not a single political agitation has occurred in Yachen since its beginning in the 1980s. The report tells us of the government's confusion regarding a “Tibetan monastery” like Yachen; the remarks from the report seem to scream, “What should we control here?”

In the Chinese government, in its current policies for Tibetan issues, there is no code for defining Yachen or the Yachen phenomenon in general, other than calling it a Tibetan monastery. It does look like and function as a monastery; however, it also works beyond the monastic way; for example, in its uncontrollable expansion. There has rarely been a Tibetan community that is isolated to such an extreme, but is still so potentially troublesome to the Chinese authorities. The grasslands and the nuns obscure the legibility of the place and produce a sense of unruliness and uncontrollability. The grasslands of Yachen do not so naively symbolize serenity and idleness, but instead they open the stage for new politics and possibilities. I will detail how the nuns embrace the grassland politics materially, adding more confusion for the authorities. By looking at the nuns' practice of setting up tents, we will see how rigid and problematic it would be to define

Yachen as a monastery.

### ***3.5 Improvisation and Encampment***

That there are no official, formal nuns' quarters in Yachen vividly demonstrates the notion of impermanence, the core teaching of the Buddha. On the first day I arrived in Yachen in summer 2010, I luckily managed to slip into the nuns' quarters—the messiest space in Yachen but also the most enticing part that draws both awe and sympathy—located across the stream from the residences of the lamas and monks. I was allowed to unpack my luggage in an abandoned meditation structure that had only enough space for one sitting body. The space was so tiny inside that I had to sleep curled up all night. I found out later that it wasn't all that horrible, at least in a spiritual sense, because being slightly curled up and lying on one side is an ideal Buddhist sleeping posture. The pose of Buddha entering into Nirvana is somewhat like this, and this is what Buddhists want to have when their time comes. The nuns want to be prepared anytime in case of a sudden passing during sleep, because, they all know, life is impermanent.

This is why the nuns' beds are always so small and short; the beds are almost the same size as a coffin and much shorter than the actual height of the nuns. Whenever I visited the nuns' quarters, I was surprised by how things can be small but still have full usefulness; along with the tiny bed, there are the small yet full shrine set with fake flowers, the lamas' photos, and offering bowls; space-saving book shelves for piles of scripts; the mini-kitchen, and so on. But what struck me the most was how the nuns

promote such a tiny and temporal space as a space with a full sense of “homeness.”<sup>64</sup> I have asked myself, “How much space on earth do we need to have a basic life—for sleeping, eating, and sipping tea once in a while?” As if in answer, the nuns’ demands are beyond modest. When the hut shortages became a pressing issue for the nuns, I thought how nonsensical this sounded if we think about, or simply look around at, the immense size of the lands surrounding the region and the nuns’ meager demands for space. This nonsensical situation is, in fact, at the center of the nuns’ space-making practice and their daily improvisations within this practice.

### **3.5.1 Politics of Naming—Is Yachen a Monastery?**

At first, I had no doubt about calling Yachen a monastery; what better term is there for a Buddhist nuns’ (and monks’) collective living space other than a monastery?<sup>65</sup> From outside, especially in Han Chinese circles and in government papers, Yachen is generally categorized as a Yachen “monastery” (*Yaqing Si* or *Yaqing Simiao* in Chinese). Labeling Yachen as a monastery or as something else might not change what Yachen currently *is*; its genealogical histories, gleaming biographies of the lamas, and the sacredness of the geography. Labeling does not affect any of these, but instead what it does is fix the label itself as unchangeable fact. To broadly apply Ingold’s (2013) thoughts on buildings, let’s think for a moment about how a building gets framed and understood in our daily life. If we say, “There is a house,” or “There is a hospital,” we

---

<sup>64</sup> As for life inside the quarters, see next chapter.

<sup>65</sup> I do not use separate terms for monasteries and nunneries here at the moment. In a larger sense, I consider both to be institutionalized monastic communities. Yachen is normally considered a monastery, rather than a nunnery, because of its mixed population.

picture a closed material structure serving particular aims or functions and we are less concerned about its prior and on-going processes of construction, the very physical actions and materials put into shaping and maintaining it, and the various relations that emerge from these processes and actions. People, especially in modern societies, tend to think of a building as a closed rather than an open process due to the strict separation between the activities of builders (physical laborers) and residents. To spin Ingold's insights about buildings: a building, once designated with a name or having certain closed architectural form—a church, a hospital, a store, and so on—will also call upon its residents to assume appropriate roles and for their activities to conform to their framed boundaries.

Here, I find a problem in calling Yachen the “Yachen monastery.” Monasteries in Tibet, or any other places, either as a form of institution or as a form of architecture, have their own unique socio-historically attached meanings and forms with exclusive residents and their proper activities in them. As I described earlier, Yachen did not officially start as a monastery; or to put it another way, Yachen did not pursue any “forms” in that regard. From a religious perspective, Yachen is a result of the deep influence of the Nyingma tantric tradition, which is less focused on institutionalized formations. However, it also has a political bent.

Yachen's Tibetan name is Yachen *Gar*, which can be directly translated as Yachen “encampment.”<sup>66</sup> Encampment is suitable in many ways for describing the

---

<sup>66</sup> The Tibetan word for monastery is *Gompa*; *Gar* and *Gompa* are sometimes intermixed in some places in

current form of Yachen. However, when its reputation as a spiritual center reached Chinese urban centers and Han Chinese disciples started visiting Yachen, the Han Chinese immediately began calling it a monastery (*Yaqingsi*). Germano also points out (1998) that the founder of the Serthar Institute, Khenpo Jigme phuntsok, tried to avoid having his institute categorized as “monastery” in order to avoid the foreseeable political troubles it would encounter with the local government once it was defined as a monastery.

Nonetheless, as I pointed out earlier, Yachen is officially defined as a monastery in government papers, and it is managed and controlled within the category of Tibetan monasteries proper because “monastery” is the only legible code that works for the government with respect to Yachen. Starting from an Ingoldian inspiration, a monastery, as a closed building, a completed architecture, has its prefigured forms and roles. In this regard, Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in post-Mao China bear their own socio-political meanings and expectations. However, Yachen in many respects has grown beyond its designated role as a monastery. Thus, Terrone (2010) calls an institution like Yachen a “quasi-monastic encampments.” Terrone’s understanding is much closer to Yachen’s original intention as an encampment than is the governmental understanding of it as a

---

Tibet (thanks to Nicolas Sihle for pointing this out to me at the International Association of Buddhist Studies conference in 2014) because *Gar* and *Gompa* share certain similar functions; both designate the house of lamas and Buddhist teachings and rituals. However, *Gompa* as a monastery has a more institutionalized educational curriculum, various codes of conduct, and a strict division between monks and nuns; monasteries only house monks, and nunneries house nuns. *Gar*, on the other hand, is a slightly more relaxed structure in terms of its curriculum, rules, and gender division, and is more focused on meditations and retreats that monasteries do not usually offer in their regular training program.

monastery. This emphasizes the on-going processes of the *making* of Yachen. The category of the monastery, on paper, doesn't show us how flexible this space can be. In particular, if we look at the nuns' tent-making practice, we will see how dynamic their spatial actions are as they confront various harsh situations. This is something beyond the framework of a monastery.

### **3.5.2 Tent-Building**

When the quarter shortages surged, I became extremely nervous, since I was an alien member trying to blend into the community. By taking one person's space, I was uncomfortable that my stay might add another spatial burden for them. When I finally decided to build my own hut in the neighbor's yard, I felt that I would be taking up a nun's potential spot. I promised myself that I would "donate" my hut to another nun when I left, which I did. This idea gave me some moral composure. Due to the shortage of lumber, I couldn't find proper planks. A nun disassembled the meditation box in which I slept during my first visit to Yachen in 2010 and gave me some usable lumber from it. My hut eventually was built with a few cheap and coarse plywood planks and re-used planks from an old structure. It took us a day and a half. It was a little shaky but at least not leaky; and I was satisfied with it.

Soon after I managed to procure my own space in this densely packed community, I heard that in the outer cement road some nuns had begun setting up nomadic tents. In order to prevent the escalating nun populations from moving into the open grasslands of Yachen, the Work Team had as a last resort paved a cement road around the nuns' quarters as a way of signaling an authoritative limit. From then on, the

road was the border marker that divided the legal and illegal spaces for building huts. Only inside the ring-road are nuns allowed to build a new hut—and they are still supposed to get permission first—but the space inside the ring was already so thickly populated that there was no space for building any more structures. If nuns built quarters outside of the ring, the Work Team would quickly demolish them.

What did the nuns do? They improvised on the concept of a dwelling structure by setting up nomadic tents in the “illegal zone” outside the ring. In the usual case, if a nun built a solid structure like a hut in this zone, it would be bulldozed sooner or later by the Work Team. However, the tents that the nuns set up presented some ambiguity as to whether they should be considered “dwelling structures.” The Work Team could not determine how to respond to such improvisation. They wouldn’t demolish the tents as they did with the huts. The tents spread in the fastest way, pushing the edge of the legal space outside of the arbitrary cement ring, toward the endless grasslands. By building tents one by one, the nuns physically redraw Yachen’s limit every day, saving new space for themselves and newcomers. By summer 2014, the gathering of such tents already formed a little village, absorbing newcomers on a daily basis.

The tents are basically made of thick but pliable fabric, not solid wood or stone. The pliability of the materiality of the tent signals transience, temporality, and impermanence, creating an ambiguous space in the Work Team’s controlling policy. This wouldn’t be happening in the first place if Yachen were a monastery in the traditional sense. The tents are not, in a strict sense, fixed dwelling structures that need to be put under the Work Team’s discipline. What is there to control if the object is already

movable and temporary? What is there to bulldoze if it is already less than a shack or a hut? The Work Team has not found its answer yet. It has only been a couple of years since the tents entered into Yachen as a new possibility for nuns' quarters; however, they are now firmly settled in, just like the regular huts inside the "legal" ring zone. The flexibility of the tents ironically makes the tent-village a solid structural fact in Yachen.



**Figure 11: The cement ring road and the growing tent city outside of the "legal zone" on the right side. Photo by Yasmin Cho (2014).**





**Figure 12: The tent city. Photo by Yasmin Cho (2014).**

In addition, Tibetan nomadic tents are quite spacious; many times larger than regular huts, and their structure is also quite sturdy. They have doors, windows, and space for a stove in the center. The dogs never run on the roofs. Some nuns are in fact from nomadic regions, and in this case, their natal houses have precisely the same structure, albeit bigger and nicer. The case I am making is that the nuns quietly *improvise* the tents, a well-accepted dwelling structure in the Tibetan plateau, as a way of coping with the harsh and fickle realities of life in Yachen. By doing so, they open up unknown space and possibilities for themselves and for girls who will join the community in the future; they not only create a space but also a sense of continuity.

Nuns can build a hut-like structure anytime and anywhere within a day or two. They can also dissemble it quickly for other uses. Or, the Work Team may smash it for them; at times, earthquakes or running dogs do the job; sometimes, an alien like me builds one and then leaves it to them; sometimes a nun runs away and empties her space. To the nuns, “building a hut” or “living in/with a hut” reflects the gist of the Buddha’s teaching: the impermanence of life; the fickle and precarious trajectory of life that we all, more or less, ultimately confront and deal with in our daily lives. If we say that how we deal with tragic situations sometimes defines who we are, then how the nuns deal with lumber shortages, the annoying Work Team, the earthquakes, the dogs, and alien intrusions shows who they are, or at least it gives a glimpse of who they are. They are *improvisers*. They *improvise* new possibilities with whatever is available to them at the current moment—the tiny patch of land in someone’s yard, a kitchen, old lumber from a dead structure, the grasslands, and so on—making things flow and move forward. Ethnomusicologist Paul Berliner (1994) says that we are commonly misled to think of improvisation as a performance without previous preparation; however, through his thorough research on jazz musicians and their performances, he finds “the remarkableness of the training and rigorous musical thinking that underlie improvisation” (1994:15). “There is...a lifetime of preparation and knowledge behind every idea that an improviser performs” (1994: 17).

The ways in which the nuns respond to various uncertainties in daily life in Yachen are improvisations, but they are not done out of a pure spontaneity without previous thought or history. When they, mostly in their teens, decided to run away from

homes to be nuns, they had to face directly, probably for the first time in their life, gender prejudice. Those parents who strongly objected to their daughters' decisions to be nuns told me the reason for their disapproval. "My biggest concern was that she might quit the nunship after a couple of years of trying. It is really, really bad to break the vows. Once you take the vows, you must keep them until death. Otherwise, it's better not to take the vows in the first place." On the other hand, sons are sent to the monastery when they are still children with the full trust of their parents. Fundamentally, the boys do not have a chance to question their qualification to be monks, while the girls are made to constantly doubt and re-doubt their motivation, eligibility, and capacity to carry on nunship, even at much older ages. Therefore, sons are sent to be monks with full family support, financially and otherwise, and oftentimes the family is involved in the process of choosing monasteries and lamas, in stark contrast to the situations of nuns, who rely only on vague information, which they pick up from somewhere by chance, about the places to which they are heading.

When the son is still a boy or a teen, he usually stays with older monks who guide him and teach him in the monastery. However, once he grows up and becomes fully ordained, the family usually builds a large house for him in the monastery. This is a full-sized house, often a traditional Tibetan two-story structure with a spacious yard, separate kitchen, bedroom, and living room. Having such a nice house and systematic support in the home monastery, the life of monks in Yachen is a great supplement or addendum to the end of their formal training. They do not need to *improvise* to the same degree and with the same intensity as the nuns. Less need arises for the monks in dealing with the

lumber shortage, the harsh Work Team, or the dogs and aliens. They can go back to their home monasteries whenever situations trouble them, and return again at any time. This is why there are many empty huts in the area of the monks' quarters; however harsh the quarters shortages turn out to be for the nuns, the monks do not suffer the same.

However, for most of the nuns, life in Yachen, even for a single day, is absolutely necessary and the main portion of their entire nunhood. Their improvisations do not come out of nowhere, they are not spontaneous pop-ups—they come out of a very conscious effort and thorough preparation, as a desperate way of forcing themselves to reach out to unknown possibilities and opportunities. The improvisations they make are the result of such struggles with the socially constructed bias against women about the unreliable nature of femaleness. Precisely as Berliner (1994:17) says, there is a “lifetime of preparation and knowledge” behind the nuns' actions in the outer zone of the grasslands in Yachen. Their improvisations are the outcome of, to use Tsomo's (2000) expression, “swimming against the stream.”

### ***3.6 Conclusion***

Whether people call Yachen a monastery or not doesn't matter. Yachen certainly functions like a monastery in many ways. What matters is that such labeling and naming has systematically blocked us from seeing the dynamics and spatial actions happening everyday on the ground; the flows of materials, bodies, and thoughts are not legible in the framework of *mere* monastery. Perhaps this is why so many previous scholarly works on the revival of Tibetan Buddhism in the Kham Tibetan region have left out the presence and activities of the nuns in this movement. Without much consideration of the nuns'

spatial actions, Yachen, as it has been read so far, is a physical realization of an ancient saint's prophecy through the body of a single male figure and his omnipotent charisma. This forces us to "fetishize" the place in a certain way: things just happened magically through the power of vision and mind; through the architect's mind.

But Yachen is not all about the lamas or the great master Padmasambhava. It may have begun with their blessings and compassion, but it has never been a completed form as they envisioned. What I have shown in this chapter is the ongoing making of the place; in other words, I am "materializing" Yachen. And what I have found is that the nuns' spatial actions are at the center of this. Their labors, building skills, mobilities, witty improvisations, and boldness in the face of lumber shortages, the Work Team, dogs, and earthquakes have hardly been represented in Tibetan Buddhist scholarship about the recent revival movement. Instead of remapping the current Buddhist revival movement in Kham from a nuns' point of view, I directly made a tour into their huts, tents, and natal homes to show the very processes of making. In the next chapter I will continue this tour into the intimate spaces of their lives inside their huts, their kitchens, and their journals.

## **4. Transgression, Another Name for Sacredness**

### ***4.1 Introduction***

In the previous chapter I presented the spatial politics in Yachen that exist between the Tibetan nuns and the Chinese state. I discussed the Tibetan nuns' hut- and tent-building practices under the state's strict residential policies as a new form of Buddhist space-making and ethnic subjectivity in the post-Mao era. While the main discussion of the previous chapter centered on the external expansion and making of sacred space by the Tibetan nuns, my focus in this chapter is the internally oriented, hidden spaces of intimacy, where the nuns' innermost feelings—afflictions, shame, love, and audacity or transgression—take place. My exploration of this topic includes various private sites such as rooms, kitchens, meditation cells, and the gathering halls; and I even include a sheet of paper from a journal as a site where the most provocative confessions are made.

Before embarking on further discussions regarding intimacy and the intimate spaces of the nuns, I would like to say something about my own innermost concerns and dilemmas as an ethnographer who was able to observe and share the most private feelings and anxieties of others, and who is also trying to write about those feelings and anxieties. The thought of writing about the nuns' covert feelings and the events that caused those feelings gives me a great deal of anxiety and moral discomfort, especially when the intimacies the nuns shared with me are culturally and morally situated outside their operative social norms. For example, when the nuns' secret "love" stories—their

(platonic) relationships with monks from their hometowns—were *revealed* to me, the immediate assumption that the nuns and I shared was that these stories would not be mentioned or publicized again. I did not know how to begin to understand these unexpected incidents or these accidental “findings,” not to mention the quandary I faced regarding whether I should continue pursuing these stories as part of my research agenda. The only thing that seemed to be appropriate at that time was to make notes for myself, but to remain silent about the issue. To my surprise, however, despite the clandestine nature of the topic and my own discreet attitude toward the subject, such secrets continued to be “leaked,” “disclosed,” and “materialized” to me over the course of my fieldwork in Yachen. In other words, these secret affairs, led by some unknown force, kept unfolding in front of me, the outsider. This chapter, thus, can be considered as my best effort to trace down this “unknown force,” rather than an attempt to present a solid argument about the secrets themselves.

The moral conundrum I felt was not about witnessing self-revelatory immorality per se within a highly moral space. From a simply human perspective, it is not hard to understand this kind of moral transgression committed by the nuns, given that they are young and at the beginning of their nunship training. Rather, it lay in my own sense of closeness and friendship with the nuns with whom I was staying for an extended period of time. It is with a sense of shame that I write about, or make use of, someone else’s shame. Although my intention or my “job” as a researcher is to make sense of seemingly nonsensical events and situations within a given sociocultural context, I could not entirely avoid the shameful burden of utilizing others’ secrets in my research when I finally

decided to write about the “secrets” of the nuns. This has led me to postpone writing this chapter for a very long time; and at the current moment, I admit that I am not totally free of feeling hesitation and confusion. My main concern is not about my being labeled as a revealer of secrets or as a tattletale, but is rather about whether my descriptions of the nuns’ intimate relationships will end up marking them, unfairly and unnecessarily, as “immoral” and “impious” subjects, and thereby contribute to and even reinforce the already widely accepted negative connotations, as shown in a previous chapter, about the untrustworthy nature of females in Tibetan society and beyond.

As discussed in the previous chapters, a pervasive discourse has certainly existed in Tibetan society about the vulnerability assigned to femaleness in the practice of Buddhism. This type of gender bias is part of what drives young Tibetan girls to run away from their homes in the first place, and makes it harder for them to prove themselves as trustworthy, capable, and sincere religious subjects. Given the widely accepted, precarious nature of femaleness in Tibetan society, my discussion about the nuns’ “love affairs” can easily serve as “evidence” to justify the negative sociocultural labeling of women. If it sounds as if I am being overly cautious, this is precisely because of my personal relationships with the people I am studying, as well as a general negative social attitude toward women in Tibetan society. Because of my dilemma, or more precisely, my moral fear of ultimately caring more about the writing itself than the



subject I am writing about, in this chapter, my voice can be neither objective nor analytical; rather, my voice will be biased, sympathetic, and affective.<sup>67</sup>

If I must insist on giving a justification for why I am continuing with this chapter despite the reasons I have offered against doing so—namely, the moral uneasiness of dealing with controversial materials of this kind—there is a thin, yet sturdy, thread of belief in me that these intimate experiences in these intimate spaces produce the uncanny social relations and religiosity of the nuns through which the affective and transgressive aspects of their religious lives can operate; and these are not easily visible, understandable, or imaginable from within an official and external perspective. Religion, or more precisely the practice of Buddhism, never stops at accepting precepts and performing daily rituals. To the nuns, religion is more of a process of constantly (re)creating selves and (re)negotiating between sacredness and transgression in their daily lives. What I am arguing in this chapter, as well as throughout the entire dissertation, is that this is an ongoing process of becoming and making—of the self, of spaces, and of the sacred by, for example, building and repairing their huts, decorating their rooms, and sometimes by keeping secrets and sharing journals. And I would like to call this process the politics of tranquility, in order to include all the non-violent, non-traditional, and subtle ways of making a life in Yachen and in the Tibetan Buddhist revival in post-Mao

---

<sup>67</sup> Just to be fair to the nuns, I make a cheap comparison here: before casting any doubts on the nuns, one should keep in mind that the monks, who enjoy much more freedom than the nuns and are also equipped with advanced electronic gadgets, have many more chances to be involved in “shameful affairs.” Undesirable relationships between monks and female lay followers are sometimes discussed among the Tibetans, who deplore the decreased sense of morality in contemporary Tibetan society.

Chinese society. This type of politics, in a quiet and invisible way, impacts and transforms the structures and the relationships that we have thought of as “normal.” I have discovered that the form of transgression committed by the nuns, which I am about to present in this chapter, is one of the genuine ways of making the politics of tranquility.

#### **4.1.1 Transgressions between the Sacred and the Normal**

Sacredness, in the practice of Buddhism or in any other religious tradition, is in general characterized as highly authoritarian and transcendent, produced and owned by the power of the extraordinary—gods, spirits, or magic. Sacredness is tied to something abstract and intangible— holy principles, myths, and faith; but in the case of the practice of Tibetan Buddhism, it is also being produced in a material way, namely through bodily actions as exhibited in fairly quantifiable activities such as the number of recitations of scriptures, or the amount of time spent seated in meditation. For example, the meditation sites of some renowned masters are considered sacred spaces and automatically produce a sense of sacredness, with frequent reference to the numbers of years the masters have remained seated in meditation in these particular spots or caves. For instance, a cave where the great Padmasambhava<sup>68</sup> meditated, located a two-hour drive from Yachen, is now a holy pilgrimage site for many devoted practitioners who visit Yachen. According to the circulated story, Padmasambhava meditated in this cave for several decades. An exceedingly high number of repetitions of physical performances such as prostrations,

---

<sup>68</sup> An Indian tantric master who played a crucial role around the eighth century in spreading Buddhism in Tibet. Yachen recently established a huge golden statue of him to honor his accomplishments and compassion. See Chapter Three.

pilgrimages, circumambulating, and reciting are distinctively emphasized as a sacred practice of merit-making in the practice of Tibetan Buddhism. I have already discussed in the previous chapter how the sacred has been created and maintained through the physical labor and material engagements of the Tibetan nuns in Yachen, rather than solely through the words and prophecies of ancient Tibetan masters. I have argued that the so-called “sacred geography” of Yachen has, in fact, been made possible because of the invisible daily struggles of the thousands of the Tibetan nuns, along with their physical engagements with building, securing lands, and making spaces.

In line with this argument, what I am trying to show in this chapter is that there is another important, even more invisible and hidden process that is operating in the making of the sacred in Yachen. Sacredness, based on my observations of the lives of the nuns in Yachen, not only has a material basis, but also has behavioral and sensorial components. It is produced and reproduced on the basis of very mundane actions and sensory experiences, and it is revisited and reclaimed through the constant transgression of normality. The “unknown force” that constantly makes the nuns’ immoral actions visible in front of me, and that I am trying hard to track down here, can be considered as a way for the nuns to reclaim their practice within the liminal space of transgression. What they are doing in Yachen is indeed an alternative practice of the sacred, and they want to reconfirm the sacred through the act of confession, the act of making their “sinful” actions visible, audible, and material. Sacredness, therefore, I argue, is at times produced and reaffirmed provocatively through an act of transgression and confession: first by facing shame, the sinful part of the self, and being truthful about the self; and then by

turning around the unwholesome mind and fixing the problem. This eventually leads to achieving complete power over the self and to reclaiming sacredness in the practice of Buddhism once again. What I found in observing the “shameful affairs” of the nuns and their ways of dealing with these affairs was in fact nothing but a process of reinforcing their faith in Buddhism and their masters, a process of becoming more reliable and devoted practitioners. And this process of “becoming” and “reclaiming” is part of the religiosity of the Tibetan nuns that has been largely ignored.

My aim for this chapter is rather modest; it is to show the existence of highly dynamic spaces and practices of intimacy among the nuns in Yachen and the new relationships and religiosity that emerge from them, which are not mediated through physical labor or the recognized logics and codes of conduct in Buddhism, but which operate through anti-norms, secrets, and affects. In the sections to follow, I will discuss first the most controversial and provocative events—the nuns’ love affairs—that were revealed to me a few times during my stay in Yachen. My emphasis will be on how and why these extremely private experiences were revealed and for what purpose, rather than their factual accuracy. Then I will move on to less controversial issues regarding the nuns’ decoration practices. I will describe the rooms of the nuns, and show how decoration becomes the expression of a particular Tibetan order of things and at the same time disturbs certain aspects of the Chinese order of things in the lives of the nuns in Yachen. I will detail the nuns’ decorative techniques, such as the types of materials they employ, the arrangements of objects and photos, and the use of fabrics to show what it means for the nuns to have such individualized spaces. Lastly, I will discuss the large,

public space of the gathering hall where all the important rituals take place. My focus, however, is not on how the gathering hall officially functions in the operation of Buddhism in Yachen, but on its rather uncanny and even secular role in leading the nuns to engage in tasks and activities beyond their religious practices. In particular, I will focus on the exam, a newly employed educational opportunity for the nuns in Yachen, through which the nuns are individually “staged” and spotlighted in a larger public space. I argue that this is another form of transgression, albeit relatively unproblematic in its nature compared to the previous two examples. Whether the head office of Yachen intended it or not, the new educational opportunity is a quite serious form of transgression in the monastic education of women. I will show how more and more nuns have become involved in the exam and, by adding new exam subjects on their own terms, are active and creative participants in this program.

#### ***4.2 Buddhist Love and Shame***

I am so sad. My heart was broken.  
I just broke up with my boyfriend.  
...  
Let's forget everything.  
Practicing Buddhism is the most important thing.  
I have a great, great teacher.  
Why shouldn't I be happy?  
I am happy.  
(Written by a nun in the communal journal.)

Don't be so hard on yourself, it is the work of karma.  
We have our great Asong lama.  
He is always with us.  
(A response to the above from another nun)

A cheap, medium-sized journal covered in black vinyl was filled, in a juxtaposing and rather incommensurable way, with the heart-broken experiences of the nuns from their recent “relationships” and their religious devotion toward the head lama, Asong. This secret journal is communally shared and circulated within an exclusive circle of Tibetan nuns in Yachen. It is written in both simple Chinese and Tibetan, with occasional doodles and paintings. The nuns in this circle write about their experiences of “secret” relationships that they have or had with monks from their hometowns; and on the very same pages, following such secrets, they also express their deep religious devotion, resolution, and absolute faith toward their head lama. Other nuns in this circle read these entries, and respond to them with words of comfort, sympathy, and encouragement.

This secret journal came to me one day by accident; one evening, I found Samchul, my hut-mate at that time, occupied in reading something at the foot of her bed. In such a tiny space, two adults staying together are bound to become involved in each other’s business. In addition, my role as an ethnographer often led me to be more invasive and meddling in other people’s lives. I showed an instant curiosity about the material Samchul was reading, because it did not seem like one of the scriptures or other printed publications that I had often seen in Yachen. It looked like a notebook. Samchul hesitated for a moment before answering, and then handed the notebook over to me. She perhaps thought it was too late to hide it from me. I started reading it at once. At first, I did not know that it was a journal. If she had said so, I would never have asked to see it, no matter how eager I was to read it. Page by page, and paragraph by paragraph, I was shocked as I read. I stopped a few times at words like “*nanpengyou*” (boyfriend in

Chinese). Samchul, sitting next to me, was quite nonchalant, but I was still in shock as I digested the material I was reading. She made no particular comments at that time, other than simply to ask me not to tell anybody, especially the guidance nuns, about the journal. If the guidance nuns were to find out about it, Samchul would be severely punished.<sup>69</sup> The “boyfriend talk” came up a few times after, when Samchul and I were alone in our hut and I was cautiously able to ask a few, limited follow-up questions. But on the night that she allowed me to read her journal, I did not ask a thing. I simply did not know what to ask or how to react.

I happened to know almost all the members of this secret and exclusive society because the nuns normally associate with members from the same village group. Therefore, once one becomes acquainted with a nun, it is easy to link up with other nuns from the same village, who usually live close by. This is a quite practical and convenient arrangement; a pioneer nun comes to Yachen and gets settled and then if another nun from the same village later joins the community, the nun who is already here usually helps the newcomer settle in by doing such things as finding a hut or a piece of land for her. This is the reason why nuns from the same village or the same area end up living clustered in a vicinity close to each other, although this arrangement has since been somewhat shaken up because of the quarters’ shortage problem. As I was reading the

---

<sup>69</sup> This so-called “punishment” is more or less performed verbally, rather than physically or institutionally. Sometimes, as a result of the punishment, the nun’s mobility is restricted and she is not allowed to go outside of the community; for example, to visit her hometown or go to local markets, and so on. Such punishments are mainly intended to change and correct the inappropriate behaviors of nuns; the punishment is never intended to expel them from the community, or to prohibit them from practicing.

pages filled with feelings and relationship stories, I was able to trace down most of the approximately five or six authors of this communal journal, even though they did not attach their names to the pieces.

The existence of such a journal in a community like Yachen is itself sensational given the nature of the place—a Buddhist monastic community that emphasizes strict celibacy and, more importantly, religious and social “norms” against relationships with monks that are constantly produced and reinforced through this community. The journal is antithetical to the norms that Yachen and the nuns themselves produce and value, and violating such norms further subjects the nuns to severe moral condemnation. Strictly and simply put, in a Buddhist monastic community there is no justification for allowing someone to atone for this kind of action. However, it turned out that this seemingly self-evident rule was not that simple at all. It would be simpler if the nuns never revealed their secrets, or if they gave up their nunships and left—it happens sometimes—or if they were expelled from the community. What makes things complicated is their self-awareness of the problems and the way in which they treat these issues; why on earth do they create written evidence of their shameful experiences, risking their nunhoods all together? Why do they deliberately form a space for confession about their sinful actions? Why do they need to reveal this sinful aspect of their selves at all?

#### **4.2.1 Passive Ethnography**

Before I make any poor attempts to answer these questions, I need to mention a methodological conundrum that is involved in conducting an ethnographic study about this type of issue. It is obvious by now that, even after I found out about the journal, I



hardly intended to do research on the “love affairs” of the nuns in Yachen. I could not indiscriminately ask about issues that must be hidden and kept secret, and that are highly disgraceful if revealed to an outsider. I simply could not investigate these issues further since I was asked to keep them secret from the guidance nuns. A multitude of questions bothered me but there was no easy way I could pursue answers unless such answers somehow revealed themselves to me. I could not ask further about “the affairs”—even simple questions about the nature of the relationships that the nuns have with the monks, who the monks are, how they met in the first place, how long they have been meeting one another, and so on, were extremely inconvenient to ask. Asking these questions would not have been an issue if this were not a monastic community and if my informants were not nuns. Looking back now, even before the journal incident, not to mention after it occurred, I myself had several times come across quite “suspicious moments” regarding nuns’ unusual behaviors, but these had remained matters of speculation at best. Even if I had had a sense of something going on, I could not have pursued my suspicions in order to confirm them. The only thing that seemed appropriate in those situations was to wait for the situation itself to unfold, and to simply try to be in the right place at the right moment. I was a passive ethnographer in this matter.

The journal in fact turned things around for me a little bit, even though I was still not able to speak about things I witnessed or to ask details about them. At least, the journal gave me a material sign of something about which I had been suspicious. However, as an ethnographer, my role remained the same. The information I eventually collected comes from a passive ethnography; I did not go after the truth or the facts about

these inside stories. I believed back then that not pursuing the facts was the right thing to do. I had decided to remain as passive as possible about these matters until another “love incident” involving a nun was revealed to me in a similar way in the summer of 2014. This time, I was a listener, not a reader. Perhaps this time I was coincidentally in the right place and at the right moment as the story unfolded. This incident was completely unexpected and was delivered to me one afternoon out of the blue, via a narrative given by a nun. Through concepts such as confession and revelation that I was not previously aware of, but which were nonetheless quite suitable for passive ethnography, I was able to retrospectively link this incident to my previous encounter with the journal.

#### **4.2.2 The Politics of Confession**

The journal produced highly mixed feelings in me—I was shocked and flattered at the same time. Besides my shock, I felt flattered because I interpreted the fact that Samchul allowed me to read the journal to mean that I was considered a person trustworthy enough to share such important secrets being kept by the nuns. As I was keeping their secrets and pondering how to understand this whole situation, an unexpected event occurred to me in 2014. I finally comprehended other significant aspects of the secrets and the journal, which I had otherwise ignored. This event also completely changed my thinking about the nature of the earlier incident of the secret disclosure of the journal. I came to the conclusion that the secrets had reached me not because I was reliable and sincere, but because the secrets were somehow bound to be revealed in some way. It almost seemed to me that the nuns themselves had found a way

to confess their immoralities and the transgressions they had committed, in order to seek out something else, perhaps a sense of relief, or a sense of truth about their selves.

In the summer of 2014, half a year after I had finished my long-term fieldwork and begun writing my research, I visited Yachen once again to do follow-up research. This time I was able to expand my relationships more widely to include nuns from the towns of central Tibet, thanks to my much improved ability in speaking the central Tibetan dialect. I met Dekyi, an eighteen-year-old nun from a small town in central Tibet, and later through her I came to know a few more nuns from the same village. I frequently hung out with them that summer in Yachen. Dekyi had arrived in Yachen and had become a nun three years earlier when she was fifteen years old. She is small, about five feet tall and skinny, and has reddish highland cheeks like many other Tibetan girls. For the past three years in Yachen, Dekyi has never visited her hometown. It is likely that she will not travel home in the foreseeable future either, because of the tightened spatial controls on the borderlands of central Tibet. She fears that she might not be able to come back to Yachen once she passes the border. The second time that I was sitting with Dekyi in a hut where I was staying at the time, totally out of blue and out of context, Dekyi began talking to me about a recent embarrassing incident.

I tried to ignore the uncomfortable feeling that someone behind me was staring at me all morning. It had been weeks since I felt that a monk sitting across from me was sending easy smiles my way during the head lama's lecture. The monk is nineteen years old. He gave me the warmest smile whenever our eyes met. It made me feel baffled and anxious. One day, the monk passed closely by me during the commotion after the lecture was dismissed. I didn't know how to respond when I found a slip of paper in my hand that he had just secretly handed to me. My heart began pounding and my face blushed, and I looked around to see if anyone was looking at

me. I cautiously opened the note. It said in Chinese, “*wo ai ni* (I love you).”

The daily morning lecture that Dekyi attended was part of a yearlong program that Yachen has newly embarked upon for the purpose of studying the biography of the late Achuk lama and his teachings. The program starts from about March and lasts through November, except for a few weeks for official rituals and ceremonies during the summer. Asong, the current head lama, lectures in the square outside the monks’ main gathering hall every morning for about three hours, starting from eight o’clock. All the nuns and monks of Yachen are expected to attend the lecture, making this long-term lecture series a very rare occasion in which the monks and nuns share the same space, although they are seated in separate zones. Dekyi was assigned to sit at the end of the nuns’ line, adjacent to the monks’ seats and about a meter apart from them. Once the seats are assigned, each nun and monk brings their hand-made wooden seat and leaves it in their designated spot as a marker for their personal seat during the yearlong lecture series. They are expected to attend the lectures regardless of weather conditions; sometimes they are seated in rain, snow, and hailstorms because the lecture never stops unless there are already-scheduled official rituals, or the head lama is absent. Although the yearlong lecture series was ambitiously created as a means for praising the accomplishments of the late Achuk lama, the founder of Yachen, and for passing on his renowned teachings, it has also produced an unintended effect. The combination of the long period of time and the fixed seats sometimes provides the monks and nuns with a space for interacting, just as in Dekyi’s case. Regardless of the significance of the

lectures and the holiness of such an education, things can happen between the monks and nuns when they are exposed to each other for a longer period of time.

Dekyi's feelings were stirred when she read the note, and she could not or did not want to tell anyone about it. From then on, the monk became bolder and passed her notes everyday, asking her to meet him privately and giving her his phone number. Dekyi acknowledged that what the monk was doing was morally wrong, but she also could not overcome her feelings of curiosity toward him. She decided to act upon her curiosity and called him one day. Since the Tibetan nuns in Yachen are not allowed to have cell phones, the only way that this relationship could actually be initiated was through a phone call by Dekyi made from one of the publicly available phones in Yachen. Ironically, the policy forbidding cell phones for the nuns gives the nuns the fundamental power to initiate and also to end a relationship. Dekyi eventually began the relationship by calling the monk, and ended it by ceasing to call him. They met briefly a couple of times in a carefully picked spot in Yachen, where they could avoid the guidance nuns' watch.<sup>70</sup> Every time they met, the monk offered gifts, food, and money in order to ingratiate her. He seemed to be very capable of providing anything Dekyi might want. She refused all the gifts at first, but obviously she did not refuse to meet him altogether. He lent her a DVD player with a film about Milarepa, the legendary tantric yogi of Tibet, and Dekyi accepted it. Watching the movie about the ancient Tibetan saint gave her some

---

<sup>70</sup> Yachen's head office is in fact quite aware of these kinds of incidents occurring between young nuns and monks, and the potential risk for their practice of Buddhism. Therefore, a special team, consisting of several guidance nuns, regularly patrols every inch of Yachen to look for secret meetings.

sort of moral comfort; a sense of relief that having a relationship might not be a totally bad idea. The monk tried to convince Dekyi and make her feel easy by saying things such as no one would know about them and that he wanted to continue the relationship. All he wanted from her, according to him, was to see her once in a while. Dekyi eventually ended the relationship and returned to her normal life as a nun.

Dekyi's confession was indeed unexpected and shocking. However, what astonished me more was the fact that she shared the story of her intimate experience with me, someone who was almost a stranger. We had met only once in Yachen before she told me her story. Dekyi's confession reassured me that stories are revealed not solely because of the listener's credibility based on a long-term relationship, but for some other reason. Both the journal and Dekyi's experience end with reclaiming a sense of moral righteousness; with publicizing what is supposed to be "right." The journal always ended with devotional remarks about how valuable it is that they can practice Buddhism in Yachen, and how grateful the writer felt to practice with such a great master. In the same vein, Dekyi ultimately determined to end the relationship with the monk, and she emphasized the ending part several times to me. In this regard, that the nuns expose their shame to a stranger or an outsider can be understood as another way of claiming a higher morality—not the kind of morality that is given and must be followed as a social norm, but the kind of morality that must be earned and claimed through struggle, effort, and restraint. This is a highly risky, transgressive form of morality.

While I was sympathetically influenced by their "love affairs," what I am still struggling to understand is how they could act so boldly and in such a sensational

manner. Their boldness and the transgression are startling in terms not only of their initial violation of the rules per se, but of their self-revelatory actions afterwards. Why did Samchul and other nuns have a journal for writing specifically about their shame, and casually handle and circulate the journal in such a way that it ended up in an outsider's hands? Why did Dekyi, in only our second meeting, bring up this shameful experience and share it with a half-stranger when not even asked to do so? I have been puzzled about these nuns' confessional behaviors, all of which occurred in an unexpected space and time. Why do they see themselves through the lens of shame and why do they share and interpret their private stories in a semi-open way? What does this say about their pursuit of the hermeneutical self?

In *Confessions of the Flesh*, his unpublished fourth volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault discussed the early Christian invention of confession as a means of developing sexual ethics through the technique of self-disclosure.<sup>71</sup> What Foucault focuses on is not how Christian sexuality was created by people through the act of confession, but how, by verbalizing certain things about themselves to others through confession, people began thinking about themselves and began focusing on discovering the truth about themselves (1993). I do not intend to follow Foucault's genealogy of the subject or the evolution of the concept of subjectivity in Western civilization here; but in relation to the nuns I am studying, what interests me in his work on confession is the way in which the pursuit of the truth of oneself is integrated into structuring and being

---

<sup>71</sup> Two lectures at Dartmouth in 1980 (1993).

structured by social norms. This is also what Butler has to say about Foucauldian subjects: “If we conclude that Foucault’s failure to think the other is decisive, we have perhaps overlooked the fact that the very being of the self is dependent, not just on the existence of the other in its singularity (as Levinas would have it), but also on the social dimension of normativity that governs the scene of recognition” (2005: 23). An act of confession, enunciating a certain shameful truth about oneself to others, is a way—which may be a bit odd—to maneuver oneself into a position of recognizability within a given context and scheme of normativity. Rather than concealing themselves from the norms and blaming themselves, the nuns, by revealing one of the most sinful parts about themselves, create a liminal space for negotiation in which they can confirm themselves as recognizable members of the community who acknowledge right and wrong, and who have an ability and a will to turn things around when needed. By doing so, they reassure their social position as nuns, and have complete power over themselves in interpreting their own actions within the norms.

#### **4.2.3 The Karmic Self**

In the passage I cited from the journal, a nun is comforting her fellow nun by using karma theory. Karma in Buddhism is generally understood as a significant logic of cause and effect that applies widely across all human history, lives, and cosmologies. The working of karma is often mysterious, because it frequently links one’s past, present, and future lives. Therefore, people living their present life often miss the connection between the real cause from a past life and its much delayed result in this life. We do not simply remember and trace down the exact cause and effect between events; the only thing we



can do is to rely upon wild speculation and subjective interpretation. In the Buddhist worldview, all forms of human encounter are considered as part of people's intricate karmic networks; whether a meeting culminates in sharing friendship or resentment depends upon its own logical thread of karma from previous lives. My presence in Yachen, for instance, was often interpreted in terms of the work of karmic force. Samchul once mentioned to me the mystical nature of karma regarding my arrival in Yachen. She often marveled at how I ended up visiting Yachen, and how among the over 10,000 nuns there I ended up staying with her as a hut-mate. This is karma, according to Samchul.

Karma theory indeed suggests certain answers for those inexplicable events that happen to us, although sometimes such answers are not quite satisfactory, especially if one does not believe in this system. However, to the nuns in Yachen, karma is a powerful explanatory mechanism to be utilized. The nuns understand their affairs as the working of karma; some unknown deeds and actions they performed in their previous lives eventually led to such things happening to them. In this regard, karma could be seen as something that one conveniently applies to give oneself an excuse for whatever mistakes one makes. Indeed, if one thinks about everything only retrospectively, karma can be understood as a panacea that lifts away severe moral condemnation for every negative behavior that people exhibit. However, karma has a flip side; it is also very much a forward-looking theory because the actions that one performs in the current moment will affect and result in events that occur in the future, possibly in one's next lives. What karma offers to the nuns is that it gives them a term with which they can recognize themselves and can understand their anti-normative behavior within the realm of

normality. Karma forces the nuns to work toward the many lives ahead of them by actively and voluntarily correcting their wrong deeds. The self makes an inexcusable mistake and transgresses the norms, and the self also recognizes its fault and feels shame, and constantly makes an effort to fix the problem and to make oneself re-recognizable in the normative field of karma. Through the technique of verbalizing and writing about their shame, i.e., through the technique of confession, the nuns constantly claim such a “karmic self.”

In other words, the act of confession—in this case through the journal of Samchul and other nuns, and through Dekyi’s disclosure—is an act of making oneself recognizable within the norms. By transgressing and then turning away from that transgression, the nuns make for themselves a space for an alternative normativity that might also be operative within the formal normativity. If one actively reflects on one’s own actions and does something about it, no matter how abnormal the action might be, it will be incorporated into the existing norms and start its own trajectory within those norms. Let me explain this a bit further with an interesting conversation I had with an older nun one day

One day I had a random conversation with an older nun about the matter of love affairs. Neither of us explicitly mentioned the phrase “love affairs,” but we both knew what we were talking about. The older nun lived near Samchul and me at that time, and she also knew some of the nuns’ secrets that I had discovered. That afternoon, she told me that transgression is part of life, and Buddhism recognizes this. To my many follow-up questions, her only answer was, “This is a process, and we know it, and if you just fix

it and turn it around, then it will be okay. It's all part of life." I did not know who "we" referred to, or how exactly Buddhism recognizes transgression. What I understood from this Zen-riddle-like conversation on that afternoon was that there is a space for people who make a mistake to maneuver, to correct things in the right way, even within the strict monastic precepts and vows.

Unlike in other religious traditions that focus on transcendent figures such as gods, the rules in Buddhism are created by humans rather than by divine force, and they are constantly reapplied and renewed by the people who create them and participate in them, even if this process is rarely openly endorsed. I do not plan here to generalize about Buddhist attitudes towards rules and regulations. But from my own observations and experiences while living with the nuns in Yachen, I sense that "practicing" Buddhism is in fact quite different from "believing" Buddhism. The nuns in Yachen, through transgressive actions and follow-up acts of confessions, are literally "practicing" Buddhism on their own terms, and are creating an alternative possibility for remaining within the sacred.

I do not know what percentage of nuns in Yachen engage in such bold transgressions. My passive ethnography could not tell me this. But certainly some nuns, due perhaps to their youth, curiosity, or immature desire, move about within this strict net of morality, making an alternative space for themselves, a space for breathing alternative air, which eventually re-anchors them in the moral space where they currently belong. The so-called relationships with monks are mainly platonic and completely controlled by the nuns due to the phone policy that I mentioned earlier. Transgression in this context

does not totally deconstruct or disprove existing norms, but, quite the opposite, constitutes a constant norm-making process within the existing norms. Although there are still many murky areas that are must be clarified regarding the subject of this section, this is my fullest and most recent attempt to understand the “love affairs” of the nuns in Yachen. In the next section I will discuss a less provocative topic, which is nonetheless highly relevant to the point that I have made in this section: decoration. I will demonstrate in detail about how, in comparison to the Chinese nuns who rarely decorate, the Tibetan nuns through their transgressive decoration practices make their own norms within the received norms.

### ***4.3 The Politics of Decoration***

#### **4.3.1 Decorators**

Anyone who has lived in Yachen for more than a month or so will notice that buying the products one wants requires perseverance and luck. Since all necessities and foods consumed in Yachen arrive infrequently and through a process of laborious long-distance transportation from remote towns and cities, if one catches the right timing, one is able to buy what one is looking for; otherwise one has to wait quite a long time for the next shipments to come in. As soon as the daily prayer session ends at around four o'clock in the afternoon, if the weather is fine and there are no additional obligations, the nuns begin doing chores such as going to the riverside to do laundry, the shops to buy necessities, and the public phones to call their families; or they visit each other's huts to drink tea and eat snacks. Except for those days when the weather is bad or other arrangements are in place, between four o'clock to around sunset is the most bustling and

lively time of the day in Yachen. The main roads and the shops are filled with the nuns buying foods and goods, and running errands. These are the times when I was able to observe scenes such as a nun carrying a 25 kg LPG gas cylinder on her back and walking down the street, or a small nun skillfully tying a huge metal box onto her back.

On one of those bustling days, I accompanied a few nuns who were buying goods at the shops. Wangmo and two other nuns were heading to the community-owned shops to buy a piece of fabric for Wangmo's new curtain. Wangmo had a particular kind of fabric in mind for her new curtain material. The types of fabric sold by the shops in Yachen are limited; they are generally all the same kind, with a few color variations. However, occasionally when new shipments come through, the shops will display different kinds of fabric; when they do, the fabric sells quickly. If one is lucky and fast, one can buy a piece before the material is sold out. Wangmo had been trying to buy this special fabric—a semitransparent, mesh fabric embroidered with flowers—for some time, and she had several times checked out the shops where she could buy it. The main shops in Yachen are spread along the riverside, and some are inside the quarters' area. Most community-owned shops provide staple diet foods and necessities such as oil, flour, and *tsampa*, along with religious objects such as robes, incense, scriptures, and so on. A few small private shops sit side by side with the community shops and mainly provide non-necessary products and services such as DVDs, photo developing (these are recently opened), more options for fabrics, and so on. However, the same products can often be found in both types of shops and the nuns visit each shop one by one in search of the

products that they want to buy. This is why buying things is quite a time- and energy-consuming task in Yachen.

On that day Wangmo, the two other nuns, and I stopped by each shop looking for the fabric Wangmo wanted to buy, but we were unsuccessful. One option was left: going across the river and trying the shops in the monks' area. These shops are bigger and equipped with more items than the nuns' shops. However, Yachen has a strict curfew for nuns who go across the river to buy things from the shops in the monks' area. The nuns are only allowed to visit the shops in the monks' area every other day, and even on the days they are allowed, they cannot cross the bridge after around six o'clock.<sup>72</sup> Since the curfew did not apply to the laity like me, I was asked to go across the bridge alone and look in the shops in the monks' area for the fabric that Wangmo wanted. While I was looking for this specific fabric on the other side of the river, I wondered why she cared so much about a piece of fabric. Wasn't it just a cover for the window, after all? A curtain is certainly not as important as lumber, or as sacred as scriptures or photos of lamas.<sup>73</sup>

The Tibetan nuns in Yachen are decorators.<sup>74</sup> It was a pleasing experience to observe the nuns' rooms each time I visited their quarters, especially the rooms of those

---

<sup>72</sup> When six o'clock approaches, a group of guidance nuns, mostly middle-aged, stand at the edge of the bridge and control the flow of people. The nuns are not supposed to cross the bridge after this time, unless there is medical emergency since the main clinic is located in the monks' area.

<sup>73</sup> However, even though it appeared that Wangmo wanted the fabric badly, my close observation tells me that her attitude toward the fabric was not a mark of an excessive obsession toward things. She was actually not at all anxious about not obtaining the fabric. If the shops did not have it, she quickly moved on and for weeks she seemed not to care about the curtain at all. She was only checking around the shops when time allowed, and if she found the fabric, she would buy it and decorate her window. Perhaps this is partially due to the frequent lack of goods in Yachen in general, and the nuns are used to such difficulties.

<sup>74</sup> Most Tibetan nuns in my research are young, aged roughly between their pre-teens to their twenties or early thirties; these ages are representative of the majority of nuns currently living in Yachen. However, I

whom I had just met when I was invited over for the first time. Although one cannot have much control over the exterior of a hut in Yachen due to the limited construction materials and availability of the land, Tibetan nuns vastly enjoy and investigate adorning—provocatively at times—the inside spaces of their huts. Their bed(s), bookshelves, and mini-shrine are placed tightly against the walls in a highly space-saving way, and serve as the basic furnishing of the huts. Objects such as books, scriptures, bedding, implements used for making offerings, photos of lamas, and small personal belongings are neatly arranged on these attached structures. The nuns also carefully choose fabrics for wallpaper, curtains, and door covers. The types of fabric determine the level of lighting and the general mood of the indoor spaces. For example, if a red translucent fabric is deployed on the window as a curtain, it creates a pinkish and softer ambience in the room when the sun shines directly through. Some nuns prefer this, while others choose a darker and thicker fabric that prevents sunlight from penetrating directly through the window and thus produces a calmer mood. Therefore, the creative combination of the different colors and material textures of the fabrics, along with other decorative factors, often communicates the distinctive character and preferences of the owner of the hut.

As shown in the previous chapter, the Tibetan nuns physically expand their living horizons in Yachen by building more huts and tents, despite facing strict residential

---

also met an older group of nuns and they also care about decoration; not with dolls and stickers, but by using fabrics and spotless arrangements of objects. In general, I found that Tibetan nuns' rooms are tidier than Chinese nuns' rooms. I believe that older Tibetan nuns deserved to be studied separately. I leave them for my future research.

control by the Chinese government—in particular by the Work Team. In this vein, the endless grassland of Yachen often becomes a tranquil, green battlefield on which the Tibetan nuns and the Chinese state fight over who controls the power of spatial authority. In other words, the grassland of Yachen can be seen as a contested site containing quiet conflicts over ethnicity, religion, and the state. Due to the poor conditions for obtaining lumber and other construction materials and the limited amount of time for erecting a structure, combined with the nuns' modest demands for space, the exteriors of their living quarters often seem shabby, unenduring, and unsteady. However, in striking contrast, the spaces inside these cave-like huts are often neat, tidy, and even cozy. The Tibetan nuns go to a great deal of effort to make their poor living structures livable. What I mean by making a “livable” space is that the Tibetan nuns consider these shabby huts as their second permanent homes after their natal homes—spaces not only for temporal religious retreat but also for non-religious personal uses, for relaxing, enjoying, and life-sharing over a long period of time. This stands in ironic juxtaposition to the poor exteriors of their structures, which strongly signal a sense of ephemerality and transience. The kind of ambience that their rooms produce is thus a parallel to the space of home, a Buddhist home. The highly personalized, non-religious items such as family photos, seasonal flowers, teddy bears, (girlish) stickers, and colorful lights are oddly mixed in with Buddhist objects such as offering bowls, incense, scriptures, and photos of lamas.





**Figure 13: Inside a nun's hut. Photo by Yasmin Cho (2014).**

### **4.3.2 Why Care about Decorations?**

In order to understand why the Tibetan nuns give so much attention to indoor decorations in a place like Yachen by carefully choosing materials and matching the colors of their things despite the limited resources they have there, we need to first take a careful look at another group: the Chinese nuns, who rarely care about decorations as much as the Tibetan nuns do. This comparison by no means focuses on emphasizing how the Tibetan nuns are aesthetic in nature, or uniquely possess the skills that are necessary to decorate their indoor spaces. The purpose of this particular comparison rather lies in examining why a certain practice is so important to one group but not to the other group,

both of whom reside in the same place and follow the same religious doctrines and share a religious affiliation. This comparison in fact precisely allowed me to realize the in-depth meaning of the practice of decoration for the Tibetan nuns, otherwise it would be too easy to treat the practice as the sort of child-like, girlish actions that might happen in any other group of young women. I was forced to consider the practice of decoration in relation to the larger context of Yachen and beyond—that is, the precarious conditions of both the Tibetan and Chinese nuns’ dwellings and practice, the subtle politics with the Work Team, and the personal histories that are always deeply embedded and intertwined in the local sociopolitics. Therefore, my questions are: In what way is the practice of decoration, which is distinct from cleaning their rooms or being strict about the hygienic aspects of their lives, related to, or beneficial to, the practice of Buddhism; or more broadly, how does it add meaning to their lives in Yachen? Why do the Tibetan nuns embellish their private spaces so meticulously and tirelessly, while the Chinese nuns seem not to care about this at all and instead focus on the “actual” practice of Buddhism—in forms such as reciting and praying? Does this mean that the Tibetan nuns take religion less seriously than the Chinese nuns?

In order to make my point convincingly, I now turn in the following section to describing in detail the lives of two Chinese nuns. This will lead to tackling the hidden meaning of decorations for the Tibetan nuns.

#### **4.3.2.1 Chinese nuns in Yachen**

Yachen’s night is usually long; it starts as soon as the sky turns dark. Before electricity arrived in the nuns’ quarters in spring 2013, the nuns relied on dusky solar

bulbs when they cooked and read at night.<sup>75</sup> Due to the unreliable supply of electricity, even after the service went through, the nuns still need to use solar energy panels that are placed on the roof of each hut for absorbing sunshine during the day. If it is rainy or cloudy without sun all day, the solar bulb will not generate enough energy for turning on the lights for them at night. In this case, they go to bed as early as eight p.m., or they meditate in the dark. When I stayed with a Tibetan nun in her hut, we often went to bed at an oddly early hour simply because of the darkness. My hut-mate often stayed up a little longer in order to pray and meditate, but we usually went to bed no later than nine o'clock when there were no lights. My physical proximity because of staying with the Tibetan nuns allowed me to see the very subtle but unique attitude that they have toward “practicing” Buddhism. When it comes to practicing Buddhism on their own schedules—reciting, prostrating, or meditating inside their huts on their own time—Tibetan nuns do so in a diligent and sincere manner but not in an exhausting and painful way. According to the Buddha, to put it simply, being alive in this world is fundamentally suffering, and the nuns seem to refuse to add more agony to the already laborious life of this world by practicing Buddhism in a harsh way. For instance, when there are no lights, they simply go to bed earlier and continue practicing the next day when practice is doable. Based on my observations, there is no sense of the kind of last-minute, deadline rush in their

---

<sup>75</sup> As a note in passing, the areas for the monks and lamas’ residences were connected to electricity much earlier than the nuns’ area, and they have enjoyed a relatively stable electricity supply as compared to the nuns.

practices to which people in the cities are very accustomed and even addicted. In general, my conclusion is that the Tibetan nuns work hard but never work laboriously.

One evening when I was about to finish dinner with my hut-mate, I heard a vague mumbling sound from outside; it seemed that someone was reciting scriptures. Reciting scriptures is a common private practice in Yachen. Nuns recite them regularly on their own schedule—normally at dawn or at night—so in this regard, it was not at all odd to hear that sound at night. What was unusual about the sound on that night was that it was in Chinese. First of all, there are very few Chinese nuns; only about two to three hundred altogether live spread throughout the nuns' quarters. I rarely heard the sound of Chinese chanting in the nuns' quarters. They prefer solitary, silent meditation on their own, rather than chanting out loud like Tibetan nuns do. This is due partially to the slightly different emphasis in their practices. The curriculum they receive is different from what the Tibetans receive, not in terms of content but in terms of the manner and the approach. Due to the language difference, Chinese nuns do not participate in the head lama's morning lectures or afternoon prayers. Instead, they go and study with their own masters who live across the stream, are fluent in Mandarin Chinese, and who own their own lecture halls. These Tibetan lamas lecture to the Chinese audience in a culturally suitable way based on their own experience of staying extensively in Chinese regions. If there is a large official ritual or ceremony, the head office arranges a separate space, along with translated materials and other needed adjustments, for Chinese disciples. All in all, silent meditation seems to be more preferable to the Chinese nuns.

I went out to the yard and looked around at the neighbors, trying to find the source of the sound. It was Jamyang, a young Chinese nun in her mid-twenties, who had recently moved into my neighborhood. She had shaved her head about a year ago in Yachen, and since then she has practiced rigorously with her lama; every day she left her hut early in the morning and came back late night. When it was too late and too risky—due to dog attacks—to come all the way back by herself from her lama’s hall to the nuns’ quarters, she would stay the night in the hall. I rarely had a chance to see her. Her life in Yachen was like that of a busy businesswoman in a metropolitan center. Because of her hectic schedule, Jamyang could not even find the time to set up a solar panel on her roof. Without a solar bulb, every night her hut and yard were in complete darkness. She did not care about this. For her, the hut was not a cozy home or a place to feel any attachment. Relying on dim moonlight, she was standing outside and reciting the scriptures. She read them as fast as possible as if she had a daily goal to accomplish. Later she told me that she had a target number for daily reciting, and she just wanted to finish what she planned for each day. That was why she was standing out there in the darkness and reciting the scriptures at the fastest speed. Jamyang also fasted frequently as a way of maintaining a higher level of spirituality by abstaining from foods; over a period of time, this slowly ruined her health. Her hut, a short-term rental from another nun, was in poor shape. She simply had no time to take care of anything but her practices and her daily tasks as an assistant for her Tibetan lama in his hall. Her lama had made a website for Chinese disciples and Jamyang, who has a master’s degree, was in charge of part of this project.

Jamyang is a capable and hard-working Chinese woman, like those one can easily encounter in Chinese urban centers, but who are not likely to be found in a place like Yachen. Tibetan nuns in Yachen practice hard and actively every day, but as I have observed, I do not see in them a hectic urban life cycle. On the other hand, Jamyang's style of practicing Buddhism is in fact strangely familiar to me—it is like the life of many of us who live in cities working all day to the degree of alienating oneself from one's work and one's life. The point here is that the way to practice Buddhism and the attitude toward the practice itself are differently understood between Chinese and Tibetan nuns. What made Jamyang recite scriptures in the darkness so that she could finish her goal for the day? Why did she fast so often that her weakened health eventually led her to move from Yachen for a temporary recuperation in a city? Why such pressure and urgency in practicing Buddhism? Probably Jamyang is a young, novice nun who carries the working habits she had during her pre-nun days in the city. While listening to Chinese nuns' stories and observing their lives, I realized there are different layers of history, context, and hardship that must be unpacked, so that we can have some answers for these questions that I pose.

#### **4.3.2.1.1 Jamyang**

Jamyang is an only child in her family and grew up in a middle-class family in a Chinese urban center. She studied well and went to the best college in the province and pursued her master's degree in journalism after college graduation. She was well prepared for leading a relatively comfortable lifestyle as soon as finished her degree. But since college she had also been deeply interested in Buddhism. Whenever possible, she found a

way to visit temples and to study Buddhist teachings throughout her college years.

During summer vacations, she packed a bag and visited temples for long-term stays. Her rigorous pursuit and passion for Buddhism eventually led her to meet her current Tibetan lama, at a lecture in a temple of a southern city of China where she was staying a few years ago. The Tibetan lama from Yachen had just started traveling to Chinese cities and giving lectures. She was deeply moved by his lecture and spoke to him after the talk. After graduation, she followed him and came to Yachen. A year later, she shaved her head.

Jamyang's experience reflects a representative "encounter moment" between Chinese disciples and their Tibetan lamas. Unlike Tibetans, Chinese nuns not only remember but also articulate well the very conscious moment of deciding to become Buddhists and to become nuns. Since most Chinese nuns do not grow up as Buddhists or in Buddhist friendly environments, converting to Buddhism is a crucial moment in their life. In Jamyang's case, she was inclined to Buddhism almost instinctively when she was a college student—she called it her karma—but for her, the incident of meeting her lama in the city a few years ago was the critical juncture between being on the verge of having a journalist career and being a serious practitioner and pursuing her nunship later in Yachen. For Jamyang, the encounter with her teacher was a life-changing event. Since becoming a nun in Yachen, her entire energy and passion have focused on her lama, his teaching, and his extended work—traveling, making websites, publishing books, making visual materials, and so on. It seems that her knowledge and education from her pre-nun days are of great use for her teacher's evangelical work. To her, helping with the lama's

various tasks is equally as important as conducting her spiritual practices. Jamyang does not have time to hang out or have a meal with the Tibetan nuns in her neighborhood. She sets up a tight schedule for the day and makes herself extremely busy in following her goals. To her, Yachen is meaningful mainly because this is the place where her lama resides and where she can conduct spiritual practice by doing solitary meditation as well as by assisting her lama's work.

Jamyang re-contextualizes her lama and her own practice within the landscape of Yachen. She does not view Yachen as a totality in which to lead a full life—a life of practice that goes along with day-to-day dwelling—but instead uses parts and bits of Yachen to make her life temporally meaningful. Jamyang's quarters are not a home in any sense. She does not cook at her hut and in fact she barely stays in it and refuses opportunities to socialize with the neighbors. She did not build her own hut, but rather prefers to buy or borrow one from other nuns. She simply does not have time to deal with all these mundane tasks that would eventually anchor her life in Yachen. She constantly uproots herself from Yachen even while she stays there. Because she gave up another promising life in China and deliberately turned to this life in order to obtain the ultimate teaching and truth, Jamyang is too serious or too busy to treat Yachen as a place to live and to share a life together with fellow nuns. She has an obligation to herself to make her chosen life come as close as possible to the final goal that she is striving for. She has to be exhausting herself with the practices and tasks that make her second life, a consciously chosen one, *the* right one.



#### **4.3.2.1.2 Yeshi**

Yeshi lives a few blocks away from my hut. Among Chinese nuns, she is one of the few who joined Yachen in the 1990s. In her late fifties, she has lived in Yachen for about twenty years. She is also one of the few who still owns a spacious yard along with her hut, because there was plenty of land when she arrived in Yachen twenty years ago and at that time everyone was able to have quite a bit of space as a front yard. Other Tibetan nuns gave up their yards for newcomers later, but Yeshi kept hers. She grows vegetables in her yard and built a private toilet, albeit of the simplest form, for herself by using a corner of her yard. To me, her hut is more like a regular house, based on its appearance at least; compared to the living conditions of other nuns in Yachen, her residence in fact comes close to being a five-star hotel, but this doesn't mean that she decorates her hut in a luxurious fashion. I was sometimes invited over for lunch at her place and she cooked nutritious meals each time. In every facet, Yeshi's life in Yachen reflects her twenty years of experience "living and surviving in the Tibetan landscape." Other Chinese nuns admire her in that she has maintained her health and thus been able to stay in Yachen for so long. Among Chinese nuns, to be able to stay in such harsh conditions for more than twenty years is considered a blessing. She is not at all in perfect shape, but she has managed illness each time by herself through dietary treatment combined with self-prescribed medicine and good rest. Yeshi was not instinctively inclined to Buddhism in her youth as Jamyang was. She started off her career in a pharmaceutical company as an accountant in a city in the southern coastal region of China. She was married and had a daughter. She had a financially stable life and a loving

family. However, her happiness was shattered in a single day when her husband and her eight-year-old daughter died in a car accident. Yeshe attempted suicide a few times. All she wanted to do was to leave the world that had left her alone and miserable, and to get completely away from the place of her excruciating memories. She found the farthest location possible from her former life and her tragic situation: she came to Yachen and became a nun.

It might be seen as an absurd question if you ask a Tibetan about when s/he became a Buddhist. However, for most Chinese Buddhists, as addressed above, this is a critical question: a serious query about the moment of converting from a life of A to B, i.e., from being non-Buddhist to Buddhist.<sup>76</sup> Most Chinese nuns have “stories,” stories that demarcate their lives before and after becoming Buddhists and before and after becoming nuns. These stories are often tragic and traumatic. Many Chinese nuns gave up their familial ties in order to be nuns, and this is why quite a number of Chinese nuns, to my surprise, live in extreme poverty.<sup>77</sup> Yachen is an alternative place that they chose when their initial lives in Chinese regions were not viable or meaningful. Many of them had a full, energetic social life before joining Yachen and this gives them a certain burden

---

<sup>76</sup> When a Chinese practitioner becomes a Buddhist, especially within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, she or he will have a simple ritual to convert to Buddhism, led by her/his Tibetan master. This ritual officially marks her/him as a Buddhist and the student of the specific lama who just performed the conversion ritual. Some Chinese intentionally wait for a few years before they convert to a particular lama, until they have absolute faith in him. Thus, “When did you convert, and to whom?” is an important question that serves as an identity marker among the Chinese Buddhists who are affiliated with Yachen.

<sup>77</sup> I helped to set up a project, called *Shanyuan* (meaning, good karma), which was initiated with funds provided by a few Singaporean Buddhists. It aims to provide those Chinese nuns who have no source of financial support with a small amount of funding to make their basic livelihoods possible. (www.shanyuanhui.com)

of feeling that their second choice has got to be the right one. Therefore, they are very purposeful and determined, as if they need to prove to other people as well as to themselves that their lives in Yachen are more than just viable. This is a moral burden. The sole reliable source of such a moral claim is their lamas and their lamas' teachings, which they can fully receive only by joining Yachen and following the path. Yeshe is a skillful masseuse. Every evening she changes into clean robes and visits lamas to massage them. This elderly Chinese woman massages young male Tibetan lamas' feet for hours every day. To Yeshe, serving lamas is equally as important as practicing Buddhism. The Chinese nuns put their lamas at the center of their lives in Yachen, the lives that they have chosen over all other promising life expectations and opportunities.

To most Chinese nuns, Yachen is not a place where they make new relationships or a new social life, Yachen is straightforwardly a place to practice and to serve their masters during their time there. In addition, Yachen is a physically challenging place to live for Tibetans, not to mention for Chinese. In winter, when I would wake up in the morning in my hut, I often found my toothpaste completely frozen. The brutal winter drives many Tibetan nuns to leave for their hometowns for a few months. However, these younger and older Chinese nuns endure the winter, sustaining their lives in Yachen as much as they can. Encountering such extreme environmental challenges, Chinese nuns need to show their "ability to hang in," and their "endurance" for the sake of accomplishing their goals in this life, or to put it more precisely, their second chance in this life. Living in Tibetan regions and practicing with their teachers in Yachen is itself rewarding and proof that their renunciation was worthwhile and "right."

#### **4.3.2.2 So, Why Decorations?**

My detour into the rather lengthy descriptions of the life stories of two Chinese nuns living in Yachen is meant to provide leverage for understanding the meaning of the practice of decoration by the Tibetan nuns. The stories of Jamyang and Yeshi illuminate individual examples, but are fairly representative of the attitudes of Han Chinese nuns toward practicing Buddhism: with a feeling of urgency and some sense of desperation. By reflecting upon the contrast, however, this attitude of the Han group forces me to see the flip side of the room decorations of the Tibetan nuns. Like Wangmo, the Tibetan nuns are not in a hurry to buy the right materials for the decorations for their huts. This is in stark contrast to the hut construction practice that has to be done very quickly, sometimes within a day, with poor materials. Once the exterior of the hut takes shape—however shabby it might be—the interior is secured as a private, intimate, stable, and, most of all, state-free space. The Tibetan nuns find their own tempo, rhythm, and style when they are indoors. Strictly speaking, the Work Team can be anywhere, including inside the nuns' huts, and on rare occasions, they indeed enter and inspect the nuns' rooms. However, inside the huts is still considered a relatively autonomous zone for the nuns' religious and private lives.

From a strictly religious perspective, focusing on decorating one's room with flowers, colorful fabric, and personal pictures is not encouraged and probably, in most cases, prohibited. It is neither related to the practice of Buddhism nor in any sense linked to a notion of sacredness. It is a form of transgression: the transgression of making a living space into a home rather than a religious training site. I often found myself feeling

“at home” when I was sitting in Tibetan nuns’ huts. A little teddy bear at the side of the bed, brought from a natal home, radiates a sense of coziness. The pinkish mesh-type curtain fabric that Wangmo wanted to buy gives a tiny hut much warmth. Many outsiders might imagine that the nuns’ rooms are kept simple and grey for the sake of solitude practice (as in most Han Chinese nuns’ rooms). However, the Tibetan nuns’ rooms are colorful, cheerful, and charming. Religious objects are also arranged side by side on the center and top shelves in the room, and a little space next to the bed is filled with non-religious personal belongings: photos of a nun wearing sunglasses and posing with her fingers making the victory sign, little hanging dolls and cute stationary, and sometimes even pictures of celebrities are nestled into every corner of the room.

Not only does this particular arrangement of objects in the room create a homey environment, but the process of purchasing the materials also forms relationships and reinforces bonding. The construction of the huts themselves requires a highly efficient collaborative labor force, which constantly brings the nuns together as a group at building sites. On the other hand, the decorations of the huts are seen as more of an individual responsibility, and show a nun’s personal sensibility, preferences, and style in matching things together in a tiny space. Therefore, the nuns ask their closest friends to accompany them when they shop for the materials for their interior decorations and this creates “hanging-out groups” among the nuns. Such activities do not require a larger network of physical support, but instead demand more intimate bonding and relationships because of the frequent trips to the shops and the specific items they look for. The act of buying materials for decorations—sometimes including a small-sized table or mini-shelves—

reveals the relational maps of the nuns: who hangs out with whom, who has a close relationship with whom, who most likely shares secrets with whom, and so on.

Once the battle with the government over erecting the huts and tents on the grassland ends and the nuns obtain their own spaces, they eagerly and carefully create worlds of their own inside their huts by uniquely arranging their intimate possessions. Decorating their huts is in fact a quiet process of regaining and reclaiming their own private spaces, according to their individual tempos and rhythms, against the larger backdrop of the power of state and the ongoing repression. Given the building practices and the runaway stories of the Tibetan nuns that I discussed in the previous chapters, we now know that the practice of decoration is so much more than an individual preference or a kind of hobby that the nuns engage in when they have free time. The practice of decoration must be read as one of the most provocative actions for overcoming their precariousness and making viable and meaningful lives in Yachen.

To my question about the length of their stay in Yachen, the Tibetan nuns often gave me a pert and direct reply: “Until I die.” Most of them wish to stay in Yachen until their final day of this life. Their statement conveys their strong desire to meet death in their ramshackle huts in Yachen. Often, a Tibetan nun will maintain a long-standing relationship with her natal family after joining Yachen, due to the reciprocal exchange of constant financial support she receives from her family and the mutual merit-making activities by the nun and her family. But the nuns do not consider their parents’ home as a home they can return to and reside in for the rest of their lives. Tibetan nuns have run away from and abandoned the homes they originally belonged to, and have created new

homes for themselves in Yachen. In Yachen, picking the fabric for a curtain is a political act.

### **4.3.3 Buddhist Photography or Political Photography**

If we understand decoration as a subtle form of political action, arranging photos of lamas inside one's hut is a hard-core political transgression, probably the most visibly rebellious transgression in Yachen. As in Figure 1, in a Tibetan nun's room, one of the indispensable decorative items we can find is photos of the current Dalai Lama.

Possessing and hanging the photo of the Dalai Lama has been strictly forbidden in central Tibet, although this rule is ambiguously applied outside of central Tibet (Barnett 2012).

Along with the Dalai Lama, the nuns also enjoy hanging photos of other important lamas, such as the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa lama, who are currently in exile and whom it is therefore forbidden to worship.

To keep images of masters in their home shrines, shops, cars, and pockets is a distinctive Tibetan way of practicing visual worship. Even before the technique of photography was introduced, Tibetan Buddhism had developed a religious painting genre called *Thangka* to commemorate the extraordinary accomplishments of masters and yogis, and historical events in Tibetan Buddhism. Such an emphasis on visual engagements with their masters can be traced to the practitioners' immediate and personalized relationships with their masters in Tibetan Buddhism. As much as bodily performance is centered in the practice of Tibetan Buddhism through actions such as prostration, pilgrimage, and repeated circumambulation, this type of visual relationship between the lamas' photos and practitioners is also important as part of visual practice, or

for cultivating what David Morgan has called (1998) “visual piety.” In a place like Yachen, or anywhere on the Tibetan plateau, however, the action of simple hanging up a teacher’s photo is considered an act of serious dissent toward the Chinese state; it is a political action. A nun told me one day, a while ago, that the Work Team had patrolled the nuns’ quarters. A group of two or three men who include Han Chinese, Tibetans, and at times a person of Tibet-Han ethnicity, will randomly enter the nuns’ rooms and confiscate all the photos of the exiled lamas and destroy them in front of the nuns. After the Work Team left on this occasion, this nun quietly took out other copies of the same photos, and hung them on the wall again, because she knew that the Work Team wouldn’t come back to check her room again in the near future.





**Figure 14: A nun's room. Photo by Yasmin Cho (2010).<sup>78</sup>**

If we take a look at the nun's room in Figure 14, at first, the photos of celebrities along with the photos of lamas here made me smile. The photos of movie stars on the wall instantly appeared to me as an example of one of those "adorable" habits that girls share with one another. However, in fact what made me smile was the seemingly incommensurable visual mixture of the celebrities and the lamas, the mundane and the sacred. It took me years to begin to understand this practice, by the Tibetan Buddhist nuns in Yachen, of oddly juxtaposing photographs. Over my years of field research, I was

---

<sup>78</sup> The phone in this photo was not owned by the owner of the hut. This is a wireless phone that only guidance nuns are allowed to have and to use for the purpose of public affairs. This particular nun lives next to one of the guidance nuns and the phone happened to be in her room when I took this photo.

slowly able to put together seemingly unrelated events and stories that helped me to understand the photos on the walls in the nuns' rooms. Put simply, I found that the photos of celebrities are little different from the photos of the Dalai Lama, like the photo which caused the visibly political incident between the nuns and the Work Team that I discussed earlier. Like the decoration practice discussed in an earlier section, photographs of celebrities and personal memories are crucial for making the current living spaces of the nuns more livable, enduring, and private—that is, free from state power and surveillance. The existence of the photos in the rooms makes the spaces homey and personal. As I have been arguing in this chapter, making a home in Yachen, or making Yachen one's home, is itself a political project. It may seem radical to understand the photos of celebrities and the photos of the Dalai Lama in the same vein, but I argue that in a place like Yachen, where the community itself is *always already* politicized by the state, anything that the members of the community do to make their lives viable and meaningful can be read radically as a political project.

I interpret the practice of hanging up photos of celebrities not only in terms of its political potential, but also in terms of its sacredness. The transgressive actions of the Tibetan nuns—through their activities of building huts and reciting texts, chores and the holy rituals, love affairs and the rules, and the photos of celebrities and the photos of the Dalai Lama—are constantly breaking the rigid division between the mundane and the sacred. In other words, their transgressions constantly reveal the material and sensory basis of the making of the sacred and the sacred per se, and thus pose the fundamental question of what it means to “practice” Buddhism.

#### ***4.4 The Exam***

In the last section of this chapter about the various forms of transgressions the nuns commit, I would like to introduce what is probably one of the most provocative “transgressions” ever made in the history of nuns’ education in Tibetan Buddhism or in Buddhism in general. However, my emphasis on the term transgression in this section is different from the previous discussions regarding “love affairs” and decoration. The transgression the nuns make here is not in breaking rules and norms, but in creating an alternative space for themselves within a given context, especially in the realm of so-called monastic education. I use transgression here as an action that goes beyond boundaries. These boundaries are not necessarily set up between the normal and the abnormal, but rather are the boundaries beyond which things that have rarely been imagined or properly tried can exist. The nuns bring seemingly non-monastic, secular subjects, based on self-designed curricula, to the exam floor and make them sacred. Through such actions by the nuns in the exam, perhaps no individual morality or monastic rule is violated; but the traditional monastic education of nuns in Tibetan Buddhism and other Buddhist traditions in general is severely transgressed.

Yachen ambitiously embarked on a new education system for its practitioners in 2011 when the current head lama took office. One of the most sensational systems is an exam that all nuns are allowed and encouraged to participate in. In order to properly evaluate how this exam is revolutionary for the nuns in Tibetan Buddhism, we need to understand how completely embedded a highly gender-biased culture is in the practice of Tibetan Buddhism. However, I am describing this as part of an ethnography based on my

own (bodily) experiences, rather than elaborating historical facts and Buddhist rules.

#### **4.4.1 The Servants**

One day, the nuns were reciting scriptures in the gathering hall. This was a regular assemblage in which almost every nun participated. The gathering hall was full of people and the sounds of scriptures being read. Suddenly, the nuns in a few of the front rows stirred and murmured with excitement. The head lama was stopping by unexpectedly! The well-arranged rows were instantly disturbed by a crowd running to get close to their respected teacher. I was running, too, in the hopes of capturing the whole scene with my camera. The head lama was seated. The massive crowd ordered itself and became immediately silent. Everyone was holding their breath and trying not to miss a single word coming from their teacher's mouth. I was trying to get closer to the front to take a better picture. As I did so, I carelessly passed over a nun's book containing the written words of the previous head lama. Passing over scriptures is considered to be a behavior that highly dishonors their teachers, the Buddha, and the entire community. Nuns keep their scriptures on the top shelf in their rooms, and cover or wrap them with *Khathak* (Tibetan ceremonial scarf) or golden-colored fabric. What made the incident worse is that I was not even aware of what I did until the nun stopped me by grabbing my arm and looking at me quietly, for a few seconds, with a very sad face.

Those wordless few seconds of her sad face and eyes have haunted me since then. This small and literally quiet incident has many layers for me to interpret. If she had said something to me, had expressed anger or something else, it would have been simpler. The wordless few seconds came to me as hours of self-admonishment and self-blame: how

clumsy my body was, how my presence had been visibly and invisibly intrusive in their lives, and so on. With regard to the present chapter, among the many layers of self-blame in this incident, I want to point out that this incident has been inscribed in my mind and body as a lesson regarding how the nuns think about their head lama and the sacred objects related to him. I had heard and read many times about how people revere their teachers and certain objects in Tibetan Buddhism, but I had obviously not fully absorbed the meaning of this reverence until I confronted the sad face of the nun on that day in the gathering hall. The nuns in Yachen are very much in awe of their lamas as well as lama-related objects such as the lamas' published books, photos, and scriptures. It is believed that the lamas' spiritual powers always extend from their bodies, so that things that they have touched, smelled, worn, and even nibbled a little are all considered precious, sacred objects. It is almost like the idea of the "Midas touch": whatever their bodies touch, along with the written words that come from their mouths and minds, turn into blessed objects to be treasured and worshiped. As a leading Dzogchen practice center,<sup>79</sup> Yachen emphasizes that absolute faith towards the master cannot have any limits. Accordingly, Dzogchen cannot be accomplished without the extraordinary blessings and compassion of

---

<sup>79</sup> Dzogchen teaching (the Great Perfection) is one of the oldest practices of Tibetan Buddhism, and largely operates under the Nyingma tradition, in which Yachen has emerged as a Dzogchen practice center. "Direct Transmission" is considered a distinctive, vital basis in the practice of Dzogchen. Students reach the primordial state of self-perfected realization only through a direct transmission from their qualified masters who embody Dzogpachenbo. The master holds authoritative power over disciples in deciding when, where, and how s/he transmits the appropriate level and depth of teaching to his/her student. The intimate relationship between the transmitter and the transmitted, as well as absolute faith in one another, are prerequisite conditions for ensuring that the practice is possible and valid. See H.H. 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama (2000), Karmay (1988), Namkhai Norbu (1986), Pelzang (2004), and Sogyal Rinpoche (1990).

the master and his mind transmission. Therefore, a feeling of fear, arising out of extreme awe and respect towards their masters, is nothing less than a feeling of deeply embodied gratitude.

Such awed gratitude is often expressed through the nuns' humble bodies and through their modest bodily performances; for example, when they ran toward the head lama on that day in the gathering hall, or when they see him in his white SUV traveling on the road, or visit him at his residence to seek teachings, the nuns normally dare not even make eye contact with him. A Tibetan nun often said to me, "Han Chinese have the guts to visit and talk to the lama all the time, but we dare not." From my observations, this really seems so; the nuns feel honored but also much more afraid when facing their master than do the Chinese practitioners and monks.<sup>80</sup> The Tibetan nuns' bodies are much more attuned to avoiding being the center of attention on any occasion and they often easily remain part of the background. In addition, this bodily humbleness is directed not only at high-ranking lamas, but also at monks and (elderly) males in general.<sup>81</sup> In regular assemblages in Yachen, twice per month, monks and nuns separately perform a ritual to reconfirm their vows. The ritual is constituted by a few hours of chanting, with tea and mealtime following after. Groups of nuns take turns being in charge of cooking meals and making tea each month to feed over 10,000 mouths after the ritual. On the same day,

---

<sup>80</sup> I have observed many times that Han Chinese students call their masters or send/upload messages in cyberspace and speak to their masters directly and freely, all of which are hardly imaginable for most Tibetan nuns.

<sup>81</sup> This point is well documented in an insightful ethnographic work by Kim Gutschow (2004) on the lives of Tibetan Buddhist nuns in the Himalayas. Also, a decade earlier than Gutschow, Anny Grimshaw (1994) documented a nunnery in northern India, and called the nuns there "the servants of the Buddha."

monks also perform the same ritual at their own gathering hall, and usually another group of nuns are, in turn, dispatched to the monks' kitchen to make tea and a meal for them each month. I asked the nuns many times why the nuns serve the monks, all the answers I received were something along this line: "This is the way it has been." In all Buddhist monastic communities, the rule is simple: Nuns serve monks.

#### **4.4.2 The Exam**

Given this background, I will now take a close look at the scene of the exam.

Drolma's voice trembles violently. The microphone clearly carries the subtle shaking of her vocal cords to the several hundred nuns in the gathering hall who have come to listen to the exam and to support their friends who are taking it. The large screen next to Drolma captures her reddish cheeks becoming more blushed. Her voice is trembling even more than before. The head lama, Asong, is present in front of her along with other high-ranking lamas. We are all heartily praying for her to finish what she has prepared for the exam.

It was amazing to watch as one by one the nuns took an oral exam in front of their head lama and other high-ranking lamas in Yachen. The scene of the exam is quite intimidating in itself; the exam taker is led to the main table that is set up in the front of the main gathering hall and is surrounded by several pieces of technical equipment such as microphones, cameras, and a projector with a large screen. At first, I was impressed by all the fancy electronics that had been set up to document the entire process of the exam in such a place as Yachen; that is, in a remote, isolated nomadic region far from any modern facilities. Having a poor supply of electricity, most equipment is operated through oil-fueled electricity generators. The newly built nuns' gathering hall is the single largest piece of architecture in Yachen, large enough to hold over 10,000 people at

the same time. Various kinds of religious activities for nuns take place here on a daily basis. However, during this specific time of the year, the hall is solely dedicated to this significant annual event.

When I first heard about the exam, I could not possibly imagine that it would be like this; all the major lamas are present as examiners, asking questions or making comments to each exam taker. The process is similar to an oral thesis defense in a modern college setting in the West. With the head lama as a chair and twenty or more other high-ranking lamas as her committee, a nun sits in front of them and demonstrates her knowledge and understanding of certain topics. All the presentations and conversations are video-recorded and simultaneously broadcast over radio to the entire community and even to neighboring areas, so that non-exam takers can listen to the exam in their own quarters and in other places. Once a year, starting from late August, the entire community is enveloped in the exam mood. Talk about the exam occupies daily conversations and schedules; what happened during the exam decorates the nighttime talk in the huts. Stories are shared about how some nuns' performances were excellent, and how some nuns got extremely nervous and forgot everything or froze for a while but ended up completing the exam successfully, and were given the instant prayer and blessings of the head lama on the spot. This is certainly not the only type of exam in Yachen; there are many exams for nuns, such as daily quizzes in their various small-



group afternoon classes.<sup>82</sup> The biggest difference between the two, however, is that while the daily regular exams take place with or under the guidance nuns and with few high-ranking male lamas in attendance, this annual exam takes place in front of the head lama Asong, along with many other renowned *khenpos* in Yachen. The head lama does not simply stop in and make an encouraging remark and then leave, but supervises the entire exam himself, staying in the hall from eight a.m. to eight p.m. for about fifteen days in a row.

---

<sup>82</sup> Yachen recruits teachers from among nuns who have good knowledge of the Tibetan language. They are divided into several groups, and students choose a group that fits their own level. The basic alphabet class is the most crowded and popular among the nuns, guiding those who have never been to schools or have difficulty in reading and writing Tibetan script. Other groups, each holding approximately twenty to thirty students, gather in small groups in corners and around the pillars, and these small classes take quiz-like exams on a daily basis.



**Figure 15: The Exam Scene: A nun answering the questions. Photo by Yasmin Cho (2013).**

#### **4.4.3 The Logistics**

Roughly speaking, each exam slot takes about thirty minutes, plus additional Q & A. The exam begins like this: a nun walks toward the head lama and prostrates in front of him before stepping up onto the front of the stage. Before she is seated, her exam topic is presented both on the screen behind her and on the blackboard on her left-hand side.

After a short prayer to herself, she begins speaking. This is the moment when all eyes and ears are upon her, including the head lama's. Her seat directly faces the head lama's; they are probably ten meters from each other. Once she has finished about thirty minutes of

oral demonstration without a pause, the head lama begins speaking. He sometimes begins by asking simple questions such as “Where is your hometown?” or “When did you come to Yachen?” and so forth, which softens the rather tense mood in the hall. He then moves on to ask questions about specific parts in her answers, or he makes comments, and other lamas follow. At the end, prizes are conferred and some extraordinary performers receive award certificates as well.

The subjects of the exam are surprisingly varied; whatever the nuns have learned or practiced in Yachen can be a possible subject. The nuns utilize this liminal space created by the ambiguously defined exam-subject policy to develop strengths and skills that are far beyond what we would imagine for such a test. While many nuns choose to explain crucial Buddhist texts during their oral exams, others demonstrate their own artistic works such as *thangka* paintings and *torma* (*tsampa* sculptures) that they have made during their stay in Yachen. They bring their paintings and sculptures to the exam stage and explain and analyze their own work and answer whatever questions follow about it. Since there is no fixed category of exam subject, those nuns who are more interested in practical skills such as languages and computers demonstrate these skills in front of the lamas. A few nuns have their Chinese or even their English speaking ability examined, and a few nuns type Tibetan characters with a laptop and the audience watches upon the screen as the nun types. Although their skills are not highly advanced, and in fact are probably rather elementary, the various subjects they attempt beyond the recitation of Buddhist texts is beyond my imagination. And most importantly, these non-traditional exam subjects are self-designed and practiced by the nuns themselves. For a

few days, medical nuns occupy all of the exam slots.<sup>83</sup> Likewise, their exam places an extreme focus on individual interests and achievements rather than fixating on the rigid formality of their monastic education. This encourages self-development and confidence and creates new opportunities and possibilities among the nuns.

Each exam taker is pre-selected by her guidance nuns or *khenpos*. This is sometimes based on the nun's daily class performances and willingness; and all nuns who have finished their "five hundred thousand preliminaries"<sup>84</sup> practice, which is a prerequisite for seeking Dzogchen teaching in Yachen, are eligible. The exam has been employed for a few years and each year more and more nuns participate in it and have a chance to present themselves in front of the highest-ranking lamas of the community. Although Drolma trembled a great deal, just like many other exam takers, she maintained her calm and eventually finished her oral exam. As I watched the nuns taking the exam successfully one by one in the gathering hall, I genuinely wondered where this boldness suddenly came from, and what gives them the courage to perform in such a pressured public space.

---

<sup>83</sup> Yachen has a small clinic that mainly provides medicine for simple illnesses. A few Tibetan-monk doctors serve in this clinic each day, but it's impossible for them to deal with the needs of over 10,000 nuns. Therefore, the head lama selects some nuns who have the desire and who also know Chinese and places them in a training program for Tibetan and Chinese as well as Western medicine. Although their medical skills are still rather rudimentary compared to formal medical schools in cities, their medical education focuses on gynecology and deals with some of the illnesses frequently suffered by the nuns, such as stomachaches. Yachen dispatches the nuns to local hospitals for clinical training for several years and supports them with living stipends. Once a year, when the exam starts, the medical nuns are convened in front of the lamas to demonstrate what they have learned.

<sup>84</sup> This normally includes reciting each of the following one hundred thousand times each: 1) the refuge prayer, 2) the Bodhichitta prayer, 3) the hundred-syllable mantra, 4) offering of the mandala, and 5) the prayer of the Guru Yoga. Sometimes, this includes prostrations as well. (See *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* by Patrul Rinpoche, 1994 pp. 317-8).

#### **4.4.4 Staged Bodies**

Many nuns told me that participating in the exam was the most nerve-wracking experience of their life; they describe vividly and joyfully how their entire bodies shiver and shake with awe and fear during the exam, how fast their hearts throb, how their legs are weakened, and so on. Even in such a pressured venue, however, they boldly step onto the platform at the front and bring up their own subjects and interests and make impressive oral presentations. Their performances on the stage are audacious and professional. I can hardly believe that the two completely different forms of action arise in the same body: the timid body in daily life and the bold one during the exam. The exam is “eventful” and temporary, so too is the rare boldness of the nuns. However, the impact of the exam continues throughout the whole year; the nuns meditate on the words the head lama gives specifically to them during the exam, and they remember his sharp eyes and the warm smiles thrown directly at them. Their prizes and certificate papers are hung on the walls of their huts, and more and more nuns show the desire to participate in the exam each year with new subjects and interests. By voluntarily exploring new topics and possibilities and by daringly engaging with new opportunities, they expand the realm of traditional monastic education and, especially, the considerable educational limits that have traditionally been placed on them. On this rare occasion, the nuns are individually highlighted and presented and allowed to converse with their head lama in a public space, something that their senior nuns have never experienced and have never been able to imagine.

It is hard to know how much the head office thought through the impacts of the exam on the lives of the nuns. No matter what the initial intentions of the office were, the nuns actively take up the slots and move themselves forward to grasp these new opportunities. Who told them to show, or not to show typing skills, language skills, and artistic skills in front of the lamas? The nuns transgress the subject boundaries and the educational horizons of the traditional monastic curricula. It is hard to deny that Tibetan Buddhist nuns, or Buddhist nuns in general from other places, have lacked opportunities for access to high-ranking teachers and high-quality education when compared to male practitioners. The Tibetan nuns in Yachen are still cooking meals and making tea for the monks, doing physical labor for community construction, and are treated as less significant than monks wherever they are. The nuns' full ordination issue does not seem likely to be resolved in the very near future. It is hard for them to avoid the doubtful eyes that look upon their nature as female when practicing Buddhism and conducting rituals; and compared to monks, throughout their entire lives as nuns they receive less support and have fewer opportunities in each and every facet of their training. It is hard to remove their status as "the servants of the Buddha and monks."

However, against all these factual realities, the performance of the nuns at the exam in the gathering hall I observed is, simply put, revolutionary. The exam is revolutionary for the nuns in Yachen and perhaps in the history of nuns' education in Tibetan Buddhism. They talk directly to the head lama for more than thirty minutes when they normally do not even dare to make an eye contact with him. The exam as a stage offers a chance for the nuns to perform; but to my mind, in fact, the nuns are making the

stage for themselves and using it to expand and transgress their expected roles as female Buddhist practitioners.

#### ***4.5 Conclusion***

I have shown in this chapter, by drawing on various contexts and events, that transgression is not only crucial to understanding the sacred, but is also the very component that constitutes it. The physical labor that these nuns put into to make living structures for themselves is not only noteworthy and deserving of analysis, but the actions that lie in secretive, invisible, and forbidden realms also—and in a sense even more importantly so—constitute factors of sacredness and can even be equated with the sacred per se. By treating sacredness as an ongoing process rather than as a fixed, transcendent, conceptual notion, we can see how sacredness is deeply embedded in the daily, mundane, transgressive lives of the nuns and how sacredness is constantly evolving, reproduced through the redrawing of the boundaries of the norms and rules themselves. In Yachen at least, sacredness, perhaps, is another name for transgression and vice versa.

## **5. A Sensory Ethics: Taste, Ethnicity, and Transformation in Tibetan Buddhism**

### ***5.1 Introduction***

Since starting my field research about the nuns in Yachen, I have received questions like these many times: “What did you eat there?” “What do they eat?” “Do they have vegetables?” Whether these questions come from pure curiosity or a concern about my well-being, they reflect one of the fundamental material conditions of being a human being: we eat food. As I immersed myself in the daily lives of the nuns in Yachen, however, I slowly realized that food in Yachen is more than a material substance for maintaining our biological metabolism, as many classical studies on food have already informed us (Bourdieu 2005; Counihan and Van Esterik 2013; Douglas 1975; Goody 1982; Lupton 1996; Mintz 1985). Food is, borrowing from Lupton’s expression (1996: 16), “a liminal substance” that is tied up with both nature and culture, the inside and the outside. In the case of Yachen, food helps give your body enough strength to sustain itself in a highland environment, but at the same time, food also serves to bind you to a distinctive ethnic category. In this chapter, I focus on how food and food consumption play crucial roles in not only making a physical life possible in Yachen but in creating a subtle but fundamental demarcation between being Tibetan and being Chinese; and also how food and eating habits have become a sensory source of moral judgment in the practice of Buddhism that has transformed Tibetan Buddhism from the inside.

Yachen has two official vegetable markets, one each located in the nuns’ and monks’ residential areas. The head office of Yachen recognizes a particular seller group,



usually a kin-based group of Han Chinese from south China, and lets this group monopolize the vegetable market in Yachen on the condition that they do not randomly increase the prices of the vegetables. If the sellers do not satisfy this condition, the contract will be nullified, and the sellers will be replaced. By doing this, the head office controls the market price and secures a stable vegetable supply for the entire population of Yachen. The practitioners in Yachen do not spend time cultivating land for food; this is certainly not considered a “job” they should be doing as full-time practitioners, although some Chinese nuns who own relatively spacious front yards cultivate land and grow some vegetables during summer for their own consumption. But even in this case, cultivation remains mainly at a modest level. This means that the entire population of Yachen must rely solely on food transported from outside. Therefore, monopolizing the entire vegetable supply for Yachen is a highly lucrative business, and the Chinese merchants who are chosen to do business in Yachen bring their kin from their natal hometowns and work together for an extensive period of time by setting up tents next to the market building. They eventually leave Yachen when they earn enough money to make other investments. When I started my field research in 2010, the seller group was from a small town in Hubei province of China; but by 2014, that group had left and another group, also distant relatives of the previous group, had taken up and continued this profitable business.

By examining the mechanism of food consumption in Yachen, we not only see the deep involvement of Chinese merchants in the system of the food supply, we also notice a structural facet of the monastic economy: the inevitable economic dependence of

monastic communities on the laity, which from its inception has long been noted as a distinctive feature of Buddhist social relationships. In this case, however, given the ethnic politics of Sino-Tibetan relations, this long-standing symbiotic relationship between monastic communities and lay society in fact produces an ambivalent space of tension. The size of Yachen is always problematic to the Chinese government; it simply challenges the legibility of the state's governance of the community. Ironically, however, Yachen, a Tibetan monastic community, is fed by Chinese capital. Simply put, from a financial perspective at least, the growing size of Yachen is largely a result of its economic stability as well as its economic independence from the Chinese government,<sup>85</sup> which is made possible through the large amount of donations from outside, mostly from wealthy Chinese disciples. Thus, it could be said that the existence of Yachen is increasingly intertwined with various forms of Chinese involvement. Having this background in mind, my focus in this chapter, however, does not lie in analyzing the structural political economy of Yachen per se, but in tracing how such a structural transformation has evolved and how it changes the daily lives of the nuns in Yachen and

---

<sup>85</sup> A government official told me unofficially that Yachen does not receive any subsidies from the government. In fact, the government has no clue about the actual amount of money flowing in and out of Yachen. My very cursory calculation based on an estimate of the "stipend" that nuns receive can give us a sense of the flow of money. During my long-term stay in Yachen in 2012-2013, the nuns and monks equally received, as a return for their daily prayers, approximately 1,000 RMB (\$160) in cash every other month, although the amount varies greatly, depending on the amount of donations received each period. (Sometimes the money was doubled.) If we consider the headcount to be about 10,000, (in fact, it is more than this), then each month, Yachen distributes cash money of, at minimum, 500,000 RMB (\$800,000) to its practitioners. This speculative estimate is the minimum amount that the financial office in Yachen deals with per month, and does not include other expenditures for things such as building a new gathering hall, statues, roads, and so on. Therefore, the total amount of money handled by the head office is easily triple or quadruple this amount.

vice versa. I found an abundant source of this transformation in the food and eating habits that lie at the juncture between the very physical everydayness of daily life and larger structural and linguistic-driven transformations in the practice of Buddhism in Yachen.

As “a liminal substance” (Lupton 1996: 16), food is directly linked to the body, the senses, and desire; and precisely because of this, food also becomes a basis for producing regulatory discourses that tend to restrict such bodily actions. In a more complicated way, as I will elaborate, food and eating in Yachen are also tied to the practice of Buddhism and to a sense of ethnicity. What I am trying to show in this chapter is the nuanced, sensory, and gustatory mode of politics that is operating through food, eating habits, and body-care in relation to the production of Buddhist ethics among the nuns and beyond. In order to make better sense of food discourses, I will first briefly sketch the general environment of the food supply and consumption in Yachen, and then discuss in-depth how particular food items such as cabbage and tofu work as “liminal substances” and produce ethnic and moral discourses. In the last section, by drawing on the larger foodscape and food consumption practices of Chinese practitioners in cities, in relation to their more visible influence in Yachen, I will show the impact of such regulatory eating habits on the daily lives of Tibetan nuns in Yachen as well as on contemporary Tibetan Buddhism itself through the establishment of a policy that bans meat consumption.

## ***5.2 The Production of Buddhist Ethics***

### **5.2.1 A Brief Sketch of Food in Yachen**

As I noted earlier, all practitioners rely on the two vegetable markets in Yachen for buying daily vegetables. Staple products such as rice, flour, and *tsampa* are sometimes brought to practitioners by their families and supporters.<sup>86</sup> Due to the large volume of demand, vegetables are transported roughly once a week to Yachen by truck from large cities like Chengdu, rather than from the small markets in nearby towns. It usually takes days to reach Yachen from a city like Chengdu. Due to the difficulties of transporting to Yachen, the price of vegetables there is not cheap; and in my view, this is understandable, even though vegetables are more expensive and less fresh than those in the street markets in Chengdu. Since the price is fixed by contract, unless prices in the urban centers skyrocket significantly, what the seller often does to increase profits in Yachen is to furtively hide bad vegetables in with the good ones and sell them together in small bundles that cost five RMB (8 cents). The nuns often later find rotten, crumbled peppers and tomatoes hidden inside their bundles.

One thing I also noticed through my years of observing the vegetable markets is that the variety of products brought in to Yachen has increased. For example, a tropical fruit durian placed among other fruits caught my eye in the market on the monks' side one day. It is likely that the market on the monks' side deals not only with the monks but, more importantly, with the non-Tibetan lay practitioners from the cities who temporarily

---

<sup>86</sup> Financial resources for buying food comes both from the head office (see footnote 1) and from their families. Therefore, being a nun means, in another sense, requiring lifetime support from one's natal family. This is a serious reciprocal commitment for both sides; one side demands permanent financial support in return for her prayers, chanting, and sincere practicing for her remaining family members. This reciprocal relationship is possible and is maintained only because of a strong faith in life after death.

visit Yachen. The seller quickly assesses that these middle-class, urban-based practitioners will consume this high-priced tropical fruit in this highland. Even if they do not consume it themselves, since it is pricey and rare, they might buy the fruit for the purpose of offering it to their Tibetan teachers. Along with durian, other types of fresh fruits, dried fruits, and various supplementary foods in addition to the main staple foods and vegetables have been rapidly appearing in the markets, especially in the market in the monks' area. All in all, the vegetable markets in Yachen bring in more and more products that do not seem to be necessary for sustaining life, but seem intended for fulfilling gustatory desire. This is in stark contrast to the fact, as I will show in the later sections, that most Chinese nuns are very strict about their dietary regulations and abstain from foods that offer only gustatory pleasure but no nutritional value.



**Figure 16: The vegetable market on the nuns' side. Photo by Yasmin Cho (2011).**

Even though more and more fancy vegetables have shown up in Yachen's markets, the major items consumed by the nuns are still cabbage and potatoes, especially during the brutal winters. Even during times when vegetables are sparse due to the seasons and the timing of transportation, I have never seen a shortage of cabbage or potatoes in the markets in Yachen. These two items are the most likely (and possibly the only) available vegetables in the far corner of the plateau during the cold winter, and Tibetans, without other options, seem to know very well how to cook and eat these vegetables, usually with a lot of hot spices and artificial seasonings.

In the section that follows, by analyzing the eating habits of the nuns in Yachen as well as the discourses, mostly by the Chinese nuns, that have emerged from these particular habits, I show how food and food-related talk expand to become a basis for moral judgment about what is the “right” way to practice Buddhism among the nuns.

### **5.2.1.1 Cabbage<sup>87</sup>**

I will never forget the summer of 2010, the first night I slept in Yachen, and the first meal I had there: a cabbage saut é. In summer 2010, when I first visited Yachen, I felt that I was an amateur explorer rather than a field worker in any sense of the word. The main purpose of the trip was to “discover” an “unexplored” site—to take a cursory look at the place and the people. Although I had come across a few photos of Yachen online and through other media before the trip, I was still barely able to picture the environment of the place, not to mention the lives of the people there. I landed in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, which borders on several Tibetan autonomous areas. The journey to Yachen always starts in Chengdu, and from there one needs to spend three full days in various vehicles on the bumpy roads to get to Yachen.<sup>88</sup> When I got off the local shuttle bus running between Ganzi town and Yachen, and finally stepped, all covered by mud and dirt, onto the sacred land of Yachen for the first time that summer, the initial thought

---

<sup>87</sup> The cabbage discussed in this section is Chinese cabbage, which is often called napa cabbage in English. Yachen has other types of cabbage as well, such as green cabbage. According to the Chinese nuns, even though they both belong to the category of “cabbage,” the green cabbage has a medical function and purpose different from napa cabbage.

<sup>88</sup> As of 2014, the road has been much improved, so the trip to Yachen from Chengdu may no longer take three full days. However, if one relies only on public transportation, it still takes three days, due to the limited frequency of buses between connecting towns.

that came into my mind—“Why on earth do people choose to live in a place like this?”

At first, because of my exhaustion from the three-day road trip and probably also because of a feeling of nausea from high altitude sickness, I simply could not yet appreciate the wonder of the place. A hot shower and a nice bed were what I missed the most on the first day.

Through the help and requests of several unknown people, on the same day that I arrived I found a place to stay in the nuns’ area. It was a small empty meditation box in someone’s yard and had not been used for a long time. I was so glad to have a place to lie down, albeit one that was too small for me to stretch out my legs at night. On the night of my first stay, the Chinese nun, Lomik, who allowed me to stay in the meditation box in her yard, offered me a late meal: simple stir-fried cabbage and cold rice. Perhaps because I felt starved, or for some other reason, it was surprisingly savory. I ate it up in seconds. I did not realize at that moment that cabbage, along with potatoes, would become my regular diet for the rest of that summer in Yachen and over the next several years of my entire field research as well.

What is interesting about consuming cabbage in Yachen is that it not only serves to fulfill biological needs and is an indication of the sparse availability of food choices there, but also, more significantly, it marks material and sensory boundaries between ethnic hierarchies, social classes, and different moralities in the practice of Buddhism. Whenever Lomik cooked cabbage for me, she also talked *about* the food: for example, how good cabbage is for our bodies when we eat it during summer, but how harmful it is for us if we eat it during winter. As light side reading, she read books about dietary



treatments in Chinese medicine. And she liked to talk to other people about what she learned from these books. These books were her personal property and had nothing to do with the Buddhism she practiced in Yachen. However, to most Chinese nuns, having command of certain nutritional knowledge about food and eating techniques is equated with the “right” way of practicing Buddhism. I found out much later that many Chinese nuns own several “health books” like these and read them regularly and lend them to each other.

Although I myself did not read Lomik’s book that discussed cabbage, her full oral summary of it over a month was surely enough for me to give a brief introduction to the book here. When we ate, she always kept the book at her side. And she often opened it to a page and read passages to me out loud whenever she thought something was worthy of being cited. This book was about the clinical demonstrations of a royal physician in ancient China. The physician used prisoners serving life sentences to conduct various clinical tests of dietary treatments for certain diseases. Then he charted all kinds of foods according to their basic functions, proprieties of eating times, and cooking methods. This book gave Lomik very useful and scientific knowledge about the food itself and eating practices that she would not have known otherwise. She easily divided vegetables between categories of “cold” and “hot,” as the book taught her. She tried to maintain her diet by following this and her other books. Over the decade of her residence in Yachen, Lomik instinctively acquired enormous knowledge about how to maintain vital energy in this highland, especially during the bitter winters. Many Chinese nuns who come to Yachen and stay for a few years have health problems due to the harsh climate and

unsuitable high-altitude environmental conditions. Many Chinese nuns, especially those who are aged, eventually choose to move back to Chinese regions, mostly because of health issues. Among Chinese nuns, therefore, how to maintain good health and how not to lose vital rhythm and energy during their stays in Yachen are frequently discussed themes of daily conversation. Many casual conversations easily turn into mini-health workshops. There is no authoritative figure distributing knowledge; the information is equally shared and circulated horizontally.

In addition to all of her careful dietary management, Lomik also takes five to six different types of vitamin pills per day. I found out later that many Chinese nuns regularly consume at least one or two types of dietary supplement pills. Their supporters or friends (or families in rare cases) back in their hometowns send comfort packages to Yachen a few times a year.<sup>89</sup> These packages include various dietary health products, dried mushrooms and vegetables, nuts, soybean flour, and even herbal medicine at times. Chinese nuns put extraordinary effort into maintaining their bodily health, which also hopefully allows them to stay and practice longer in Yachen. Thus, among Chinese nuns in Yachen, dietary care-talk obsessively circulates as the dominant topic of daily conversations and concerns. And importantly, in this process, food talk and food-ways become a new ethnic marker for discerning between Chinese and Tibetans in Yachen. Whether or not Lomik's knowledge about diet is correct and effective, an interesting

---

<sup>89</sup> This type of package delivery system via the postal service is only possible for those who have a phone number, because the postal service cannot deliver packages door-to-door in Yachen. The postal service calls or sends text messages to recipients to inform them that their packages have arrived. Therefore, Tibetan nuns, who are forbidden to own cellphones, cannot use the postal service.

feature of her conversation was that she always concluded her daily dietary lecture with a comparison to the Tibetan nuns. For example, when she talked about cabbage, she said,

You see? Those Tibetan nuns eat cabbage all winter! They don't know how harmful it is! Cabbage makes your body cold!  
I don't eat artificial seasoning anymore and even try to quit soy sauce as well, because they are artificially made and no good for meditation. But Tibetan nuns eat a lot of spicy foods and artificial seasoning that stimulates their stomach! They're only concerned with *the transient happiness of their mouth and do not care about their bodies!*

To the Chinese nuns' eyes, consuming a diet that is mainly cabbage throughout the winter, along with other "bad" dietary habits of Tibetan nuns, is often seen as a lack of knowledge: ignorance and misunderstanding of the principles and foundations of the human body and of natural laws. However, Lomik's message not only points to the simple ignorance of others, but also, more importantly, it signals a sense of moral judgment that what Tibetan nuns are doing is wrong. Here, the mouth has become a contested site. As a physical organ, the mouth absorbs food that generates pleasure, which itself, to most Chinese nuns, is unethical. The taste buds in the mouth are considered to be the sense organ that represents the most corporeal of desires, which are neither permanent in nature nor in anyway religious. In Lomik's as well as in other Chinese nuns' minds, the spiciness and artificial seasoning of the food that most Tibetan nuns are eagerly consuming is nothing more than a delusion, a gustatory, and sensual happiness that is quickly obsolete and that eventually hinders the practice of Buddhism. This is because, according to Lomik and the books she reads, strong tasting foods upset the stomach and interfere with a tranquil mind when meditating. From a Buddhist

perspective, such foods are a sign of ignorance coming from the mind of craving and attachment.

But at the same time, interestingly, the mouth serves as a linguistic organ that produces discourses and regulations for controlling sensual desire. By the time my field work was halfway through, after numerous meals together with Chinese nuns, I felt myself obtaining quite a great deal of knowledge about food and Chinese-style eating habits. The Chinese nuns constantly, on an everyday basis, produce and reproduce discourses about food and health. Lomik's cabbage lesson, for example, creates a new moral discourse not only about foods and eating habits, but also about what is the right way to practice Buddhism in Yachen. Her mouth produces a boundary, a name, and a judgment (Colebrook 1998).

In the context of Yachen, foods and eating habits are directly connected, in a very sensual way, to a symbolic demarcation between being Chinese and being Tibetan. By learning and incorporating specific dietary practices in their daily lives, and also at the same time, by abstaining from gustatory desires altogether, Lomik and other Chinese nuns in Yachen not only detach themselves from what they see as unhealthy and unethical habits and environments, but they also actively create a new discourse and set up norms to pursue what they believe to be the right way of practicing Buddhism. Colebrook states that “[e]thical theories would be forms of practice and self-formation, they would produce ethical subjects in their acts of regulation” (1998: 45). The Chinese nuns in Yachen transform health talk into an ethical practice by abstaining from sensory desires—savory foods for instance—and by turning themselves into “ethical subjects in

their acts of regulation.” Foucault (1994) understands ethics, in contrast to the concept of morality, as linked to a notion of “care of the self,” as autonomous forms of technologies of living. To Lomik, taking good care of herself, which leads her to be able to sustain herself in Yachen, is an ethical action; she is in this sense “ethicalizing” her caring action through the regulatory consumption of foods. Food, to her, is not just an edible substance for maintaining her metabolism, but is a form of technology constituting the self as a form of self-regulation. Therefore, Lomik’s ethical claim, made through her body care, serves as a means for transforming herself into a better person, an ethical being. More crucially, however, this type of ethical formation, in a place like Yachen, is mixed with a discourse of ethnic division and social class, i.e., self/other and Chinese/Tibetan. To Lomik’s eyes, Tibetan nuns, who do not know or do not care about how to take care of their own bodies, are ethnically different, belonging to the group of the “inferior Other.”

Likewise, although most of them have never received any formal medical education, the Chinese nuns in Yachen have quite comprehensive knowledge about the basic workings of human bodies and health, and they reproduce this knowledge by sharing it with each other. Regulating one’s diet according to the “recommended standard or wisdom”—the proper amount of daily intake in protein and vitamins, for instance—is dominant in the light of the modernization discourse. By circulating health discourses and making them an ethical declaration, Chinese nuns produce their own version of biopolitics (Foucault 1977) and impose it on Tibetan nuns and their bodies. The “bodies” in this care-talk are an object to be taken care of through universalizing tactics and knowledge that make other singular (Tibetan) bodies unthinkable. The Chinese nuns

ignore altogether the possibility that Tibetans, who were born and grew up in this land, might have their own techniques of body care and their own understanding about healthy living. The idea of monopolizing certain knowledge and keeping it for oneself and one's body simultaneously demarcates other people and pushes away those who do not own the same knowledge or who are not interested in it in the same way.

#### **5.2.1.2 Tofu**

I always stop in Ganzi (*Kardze* in Tibetan) town and spend at least a day there en route to Yachen. This is primarily because the local shuttle bus between Ganzi and Yachen runs once a day and tickets are sold only on the day before departure. Therefore, once I buy a ticket for the next morning, I have a whole day to myself in Ganzi. This seemingly idle day in town is in fact quite a hustling day. I must run several errands. What I mean by errands is mostly buying different types of dietary products in the vegetable markets in Ganzi for the nuns. I have already packed quite a load of chocolate, candies, and gum in my bags as gifts for them; half of my luggage is always filled with various sweets that I have brought from the cities and even from overseas. However, certain items have to be prepared in Ganzi: one of them is tofu. Because I often come in and out of Yachen, I have become a person who can run errands, i.e., can buy tofu for the Chinese nuns. Tofu, as a major source of protein, is highly welcomed among the Chinese nuns, but the markets in Yachen do not sell it; partially because it is heavy and easily deformed, but mainly because tofu is not a product demanded by the majority of the Tibetan nuns. Therefore, Yachen's vegetable merchants do not see the monetary value in transporting tofu to this highland and selling it to a handful of customers.

Since I have noticed the high demand for tofu, whether there is a specific request or not, I buy tofu, because I myself see a value in tofu as a gift for the Chinese nuns. However, buying tofu and transporting it to Yachen is a laborious task, especially when one uses public transportation—the shuttle bus. Over my years of fieldwork, I invented a system to deal with this. First, in the market I buy a large bucket with a cover made of either plastic or steel. Then, I buy several chunks of white tofu from tofu stands in the market. There are usually three types of tofu available at the local market—dried tofu, dried roll-shape tofu, and white tofu. White tofu is the most welcomed of the three, because of its freshness, rarity, and presumably higher nutrition. I wrap each chunk of tofu carefully several times using plastic bags and put the pieces in the bucket that I have just purchased. Tofu is very watery and fragile, so I cover the lid and tightly seal it with plastic tape so that it will be safe for the five hours of bumpy travel the next morning. The weight of the tofu bucket is basically the same as the weight of a bucket filled with water. I simply cannot carry it by myself along with my other luggage. Thus, I bring the bucket to the shuttle bus stop and load it onto the bus for departure the following day. The bus driver allows passengers to preload their luggage the day before leaving, because there is usually too much luggage to handle in the morning.

After I finish loading the tofu onto the bus, I return to the vegetable market to buy “less delicate” products for the Tibetan nuns. Usually, the foods I buy for the Tibetan nuns, based on their preference, are the spicy, thick, saucy side dishes that are often sold at the street vendor stands—spicy glass noodles, Sichuan flavored pickled vegetables, and deep fried cookies. Whenever I look at these foods that are smothered with and

soaked in oils, artificial seasonings, and stimulating chilies, albeit I enjoy them a lot myself, I have a moral dilemma: should I bring these relatively “unhealthy” foods to the Tibetan nuns, while I am bringing nutritious foods to the Chinese nuns? However, these are meant as a gift brought from outside and I want to give the Tibetan nuns things that please them. I cannot give them “tasteless” tofu that they do not want and explain to them how healthy it is, as the Chinese nuns do. Meanwhile, I normally do not bring the same spicy street food to Chinese nuns, in fear of giving them the wrong impression by presenting the wrong foods to them. I carefully sort out my food packages for the two different groups and present them separately to each group. By the next morning when the bus starts, I often end up carrying six or seven bags of luggage filled with various foods. The ethnic demarcation in Yachen already starts, in a very material way, in my food luggage and especially in the tofu bucket, reflecting their different demands and divergent interpretations toward foods and bodies, as well as their different senses of taste.

As my fieldwork became longer and as I met more nuns in Yachen, I carried more food and other items. Each time when I buy food products for the nuns, whether it is in Ganzi or in a larger market in one of the Chinese urban centers, I carefully consider the nutritional value and the taste of the products and sort them out for different purposes. I divide my food gifts into two groups by using Lomik’s words to create the two categories: the group for people who pursue the “transient happiness of the mouth” and the group for people who care about their “bodies.” This difference in the matter of food consumption between Chinese and Tibetan nuns in Yachen lies with their mouths, with



their gustatory taste buds and the interpretation that follow after. Tofu itself, a bland white product, does not invoke the happiness of the mouth for the Tibetan nuns, who favor artificial seasonings and stimulating spices over so-called biological nutrition. Douglas says that food, as a code, carries messages about certain social relations: “[t]he message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries” (1975:249). By consuming tofu and dissociating themselves from all artificial seasonings, including the five seasoning vegetables,<sup>90</sup> Chinese nuns in Yachen establish a hierarchical as well as a moral boundary between the Tibetan nuns and themselves. As Bourdieu puts it, “taste” is “class culture turned into nature” (2005:74). The ability to control gustatory desire and to practice bodily abstinence is a Buddhist moral claim; in other words, borrowing Bourdieu’s expression, “taste” is “morality turned into nature.” Chinese nuns’ tofu consumption, therefore, does not only reflect their biological needs (protein for example) and the demand for health care, but it is also tied to their lifestyle, cultural values, and moral superiority as Buddhists. It is a distinctive form of self-identification for a Chinese nun living in a Tibetan-dominant space. It is a sense of class incorporated into the body and a set of moral claims that are connected to their notion of a larger and superior Chinese society. By carefully taking care of their bodies and hygiene through meticulous food choices and

---

<sup>90</sup> These are garlic, green onion, chive, wild chive, and scilla. This *vinaya* rule is widely practiced in the Chinese Buddhist tradition, but not in Tibetan Buddhism. However, Chinese nuns who practice in the Tibetan tradition continue by choice to strictly keep this rule.

treatment, the Chinese nuns continue enacting ethnic hierarchization and performing cultural distinction.

De Certeau discusses the notion of consumption as “an entirely different kind of production...[consumption] shows itself not in its own products but in an art of using those imposed on it” (1984: 31). By using de Certeau’s understanding of consumption practice, consumers can be “makers” and “producers,” which gives us an insight into analyzing from another perspective the use of tofu. Tofu in Yachen, due to its rarity and popularity, and the hardship involved in its transportation, *creates* a distinctive and exclusive network in the political economy of food consumption. Before elaborating on the network of tofu in Yachen, I will take a moment to think about the materiality of tofu per se. As we know, white tofu is a fragile, bulky, and delicate product that requires meticulous care from both sellers and consumers. In particular, unlike the nicely packed tofu in the markets in cities, white tofu in a traditional market such as the one in Ganzi is usually sold unwrapped and unrefrigerated, so it must sell out quickly within a few hours before the hot sun comes out, and then it must be stored as soon as possible in cold water or in a refrigerator. Not only does the importance of storing it quickly make it difficult to handle, but tofu’s crumbly texture also needs particular attention. Precisely because of its delicacy and deformability, I was forced to develop the specific delivery system that I mentioned earlier. What I am trying to get at through this detailed description about the materiality of tofu is that in order to deliver tofu to Yachen in a timely manner, a certain infrastructural network—which most Tibetans do not have—is required and this network

signals the very presence of the Chinese in Yachen. Therefore, the hardship of tofu transportation itself generates a meaning beyond its original nutritional value.

After the quick distribution of tofu upon my arrival in Yachen, as the tofu starts traveling, additional meaning and power become attached to it. It is circulated exclusively among Chinese nuns and at times also offered to lamas. Since tofu is something brought from outside as a highly rare product, not only with its own nutritional value but also with infrastructural power behind it, it often goes to the Tibetan lamas' kitchens as an offering as well as to other fellow Chinese nuns' dinner tables as a gift. Also, the tastelessness of tofu is suitable to the Chinese nuns' pious gustatory desires. And it must be cooked in a delicate manner, without spices and artificial seasoning. Tofu produces exclusive relationships, networks, and a sense of bonding among the Chinese nuns and this emotion extends towards their lamas. When tofu is offered to their Tibetan lamas, it creates ethnic pride and self-respect. Chinese nuns, by consuming tofu, *create* a sense of confidence and inclusion that makes their presence in Yachen valuable. In other words, they can bring "good" things to the Tibetans who would not know about such things otherwise; this gives the Chinese nuns a superior sense of inclusion both culturally and politico-economically. It is proudly said among Chinese nuns that the current main cook for the head lama Asong is a Chinese nun (Why not a Tibetan?). The food that the head lama is served every day is mostly Chinese cuisine. Chinese foods along with Chinese cooking style, nutritional balance, and the manner in which foods are served penetrate and intrude into the core of Tibetanness in a very gustatory way. Tofu and tofu eating signal the hidden notion that the Chinese own unique knowledge about what is "a good

product” for bodies, and that they also exclusively own the means to bring this knowledge with them into the places they live, no matter where those places are.

### ***5.3 Buddhist Vegetarianism in China***

As elaborated above, food and eating habits among the Chinese nuns in Yachen serve as a way of making and maintaining a moral and ethnic hierarchy in Yachen. The distinctive dietary regulations of the Chinese nuns are also supported in the cities by the large number of Chinese lay practitioners and their eating habits in cities. It is very common among Chinese Buddhist practitioners to actively incorporate the maintenance of certain dietary restrictions as an important part of their practice of Buddhism. I now turn to a discussion of the emergence of Buddhist vegetarianism among Chinese laity and show how a vegetarian diet becomes a regulatory technique that imposes new ethical roles and identities on a large number of Chinese Buddhist devotees and impacts the lives of Tibetan nuns in Yachen as well. I will first elaborate on the general foodscape of Chengdu, a Chinese metropolitan space and also a gateway city to the Tibetan plateau, in order to provide a context for what it means to adhere to a vegetarian diet in a city like Chengdu. And then I will move on to an in-depth ethnographic discussion of a group of Chinese Buddhists in Chengdu who are rigorously observing dietary regulations as a way of claiming a new and different self and a sense of moral identification that distinguishes them from the non-Buddhists in the city who practice similar dietary restrictions. Finally, I will discuss how these larger, changing patterns of food consumption among Chinese Buddhist practitioners in the city impact the dietary regulations of Tibetan nuns living in Yachen, and how this leads to the transformation of present-day Tibetan Buddhism.

### 5.3.1 Pure Dishes, Commitment, Good Practitioners

Pure vegetarian restaurants are not frequently found in contemporary Chinese cities, although they are slowly increasing. In more internationalized places like Beijing or Shanghai, one might encounter high-quality vegetarian (*sushi* in Chinese) restaurants more often on the streets; but in most inland metropolises such as Chengdu, a vegetarian diet is rarely a concept or an option for ordinary citizens. Chengdu, which is ranked as having the fourth largest population and is the westernmost economic hub in China, is well known for its abundance of foods and food-ways as well as for its citizens' leisurely lifestyles. The cuisines of Chengdu are mainly meat-based, flavored with a magical Sichuan spice called *mala*, which stimulates and numbs the tongue at first; however once addicted to it, one is tempted to fill all one's plates and bowls with *mala* flavor. Street food vendors and small restaurants that make "light snacks" such as *mala* potato, *mala* grilled tofu, sour-spicy noodles, rice noodles, and various grilled/fried/stirred *mala*-flavored meats spread to every corner of the city, and they are usually open very late to attract night wanderers. During my field research in Chengdu, I was often amazed to see countless *mala* hot pot restaurants on the streets, which are always crowded with *mala*-addicted customers regardless of whether it is a weekday or a weekend. Hot pot allegedly originated in Mongolia, but it has now become the most representative Sichuan cuisine; with a huge boiling *mala* pot centered on the table, people put meats and vegetables of their own choice into the boiling soup. Sichuanese especially love to put various animal body parts into the boiling red *mala* hot pot; a variety of organ meats as well as duck's

tongue and chicken feet are favored by many. There is a saying that “Chengdu people work only half a day, and eat and enjoy the rest of the day.”

I met Mrs. Jiang in Chengdu through the disciple-network of a Tibetan Buddhist lama from Yachen. Mrs. Jiang, middle-aged, of Chengdu origin, is one of the earliest Chinese students of a Tibetan lama from Yachen. Mrs. Jiang has been his student for over a decade and is now a local organizer for various Buddhist meetings such as fish-releasing rituals, reading scripts, and so on. She recently opened a two-story shop that sells high-priced health and dietary products, and she has also set up a private shrine on the second floor for worship and religious meetings. Since I was in “the network,” I was often invited to her shop and to other activities she organized. Whenever I visited her shop though, she called up other people in the vicinity, and led us to a vegetarian restaurant she adores. My first visit to the restaurant was one afternoon with five other Buddhists for a late lunch after a fish-releasing ritual at the nearby brook. The restaurant was quite fancy and even elegant, decorated in a Buddhist theme and filled with a tantalizing aroma of incense and meditation music. The hall was huge and uncrowded. The six of us were led to a room and quickly served with herbal tea. Mrs. Jiang asked me to choose a favorite dish on the menu, which was filled with photos of colorfully embellished vegetarian foods. I looked over the menu and was astonished at the diversity of foods, their decorative appearances, as well as the unusually high prices. Being so accustomed to an “unhealthy” spicy street diet and Chengdu’s “regular cuisine,” I felt like I was walking into a completely different world where food is not for the happiness

of the mouth or the fullness of the stomach, but more for well-being, self-caring, and, to borrow from Bourdieu's term (1984), the very ways of making "distinction."

Mrs. Jiang told me that the owner of this restaurant was also a devoted Buddhist. "It is great to eat "*qingjing*" (pure and clean) food in an "*anjing*" (uncrowded, quiet) place once in a while," said she. I could see her point as I looked around the lonely main hall and the neatly presented light foods on the table, which posed a starkly contrasting scene to the crowded hot pot restaurants on the streets. I imagined that regular, non-Buddhist Chengdu citizens would not want to spend money in a restaurant that serves only vegetables with little or no *mala* flavor. When the ordered dishes were served, Mrs. Jiang and others recited a short scripture of gratitude towards the masters, similar to saying grace. As we all started indulging in these "exotic" Chinese vegetarian dishes on the table, Mrs. Jiang kept commenting on each dish: the ingredients, nutrition, the cooking methods, and so on. And she emphasized that this was an artificial-seasoning-free restaurant, and that the lama also likes this place. Our conversation moved further on to the importance and the hardship of adhering to a vegetarian diet and being a good Buddhist in a non-Buddhist environment.

One thing I was always struck by whenever I "hung out" with Chinese practitioners, as I briefly elucidated in earlier sections, was their ability to produce, on the spot, immediate discourses and reasonable justification about their activities—eating, worshiping, and whatever other actions they were doing. Unless they are at the novice stage, Chinese Buddhist practitioners can articulate their thoughts about things such as the meanings of activities that are related to their own practice of Buddhism, and they are

able to reason at each and every step about what and why they are doing something. “Practicing” Buddhism, unlike “believing” in Buddhism, allows the followers to self-consciously make sense of the activities they are involved in. The knowledge upon which their articulation and reasoning are based is not coming from an analysis of ancient texts, but mostly from speeches and private conversations with their Tibetan teachers, as well as from their experiences of practicing Buddhism and reflecting upon their own individual contexts. Therefore, the discourses that are being produced in this venue are alive, practical, and contingent upon whatever the current situation is. Food-talk, as I have shown in the case of Lomik in the earlier section, is a good example of seeing how this discourse-making happens and how it circulates and is shared, and reproduces through itself more concrete meanings and values. Here is one example that I observed at the late lunch with Mrs. Jiang and the other Buddhists in Chengdu on that day.

Mrs. Chen, who is Mrs. Jiang’s college classmate, also of Chengdu origin, talked about her challenge at home regarding maintaining a vegetarian diet. Mrs. Chen has a non-Buddhist husband and a teenage son who both support her religious faith but never practice it themselves. Mrs. Jiang suggested to Mrs. Chen that she should cook two separate meals for the family and for herself, so that she can keep her own diet “clean and pure” in order to ensure the “right” environment for her practice. On that day, we talked on and on about the right food for practicing Buddhism and we shared experiences with each other regarding foods and eating habits in daily contexts. These practitioners in urban centers regularly visit Yachen and other places in Tibet where their teachers give teachings, and when they move from place to place, they not only physically bring



supplementary vegetarian dietary gifts for the nuns and the masters on the plateau. They also bring their discourses regarding health-care and the body.

Vegetarianism is, in a general sense, a very visible marker for a Chinese Buddhist. This is because maintaining a vegetarian diet is immediately associated with one of the Buddhist core doctrines, “No killing.” However, vegetarianism is not a totalizing principle to be followed in the Buddhist world; it has been widely contextualized in various social settings throughout the 2,500 years of Buddhist history. For instance, allegedly the Buddha Shakyamuni himself died of food poisoning from pork that he was served.<sup>91</sup> Back then, the *Sangha* population was always moving and relied solely on the food they collected from their lay supporters. Whatever food was poured into their bowls by the laity, they were supposed to receive it gratefully. Therefore, it hardly made any sense for Buddhist monks and nuns to choose or regulate their diet. *Sangha* vegetarianism happened much later when monasteries were established and their inhabitants stopped begging for alms.<sup>92</sup> The Chinese Buddhist tradition, along with East Asian Buddhism, has adopted strict vegetarianism and has also banned consumption of five vegetables (*wuxin* in Chinese) in order to maintain the purity of practitioners.<sup>93</sup>

---

<sup>91</sup> Many works describing the biography of the Buddha document the incident of the Buddha being poisoned before his death by the food he ate from alms. See Armstrong (2008), for example.

<sup>92</sup> For discussions of Buddhist vegetarianism in China, see Kieschnick (2005). Kieschnick argues that vegetarianism among lay people in fact had a great impact on the Buddhist vegetarian diet. The concept of vegetarianism existed before Buddhism was imported into China. According to Kieschnick, the vegetarian diet among Chinese laity connoted a sense of morality that contrasted with the prevailing habit of voracious meat-eating.

<sup>93</sup> Kieschnick (2005) also mentions the five vegetables that have been banned for Buddhist practitioners. According to Kieschnick, initially these vegetables were banned because of their smell; but later, the additional meaning that they hinder the flow of “passion” was attached to these five vegetables.

Tibetan Buddhism from its inception has had no strict tradition of banning meat-eating practices. The reason for this may be that in the harsh environment of the Tibetan plateau, one can hardly survive without meat intake or there simply is little food other than meat. Or, it could be an influence from early Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism is known to have been directly imported from India, where the *Sangha* population sustained their lives through gathering alms. In general, in a wide range of Tibetan regions, including the exile community in northern India, Tibetan Buddhist monks, nuns, and reincarnated lamas consume meat with no specific restriction other than a few temporal and ritual dietary restrictions. This doesn't mean that Tibetan Buddhists do not value the practice of vegetarianism. Instead, they value it highly and respect individuals who commit to doing it, but they do not force individuals to practice it.

Nonetheless, as part of their practice and their adherence to basic doctrines, the Chinese who practice Tibetan Buddhism and follow Tibetan lamas choose to strictly forbid meat consumption. This may be one of the distinctively different characteristics of the Chinese practitioners who follow Tibetan Buddhism: they have creatively and voluntarily selected and adopted vegetarianism from the Chinese Buddhist tradition; even when most Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns, including their masters, do not strictly practice vegetarianism. In the Chinese social context, vegetarianism itself symbolizes Buddhist faith and a commitment to a lifestyle of abstinence. Vegetarianism for them, therefore, is not only a defining religious identification, but also reflects an ability and willingness to take care of oneself, and to maintain both physical and mental purity. The “care-talk” in this situation is highly mixed and discourses of pure religious devotion and

discourses of neoliberal body-care techniques are almost inseparable. Avoiding the violation of the “no-killing” principle parallels and is well mingled with refusing to eat junk food, i.e., spicy, unhygienic street food in a noisy place. In other words, “where to eat,” “what to eat,” and “how to eat” indicate one’s religious devotion and the depth and seriousness of one’s commitment.

At the same time, walking into a high-priced vegetarian restaurant in a place like Chengdu is also a highly “performative” action that distinguishes one’s life from others through dietary practices. As Bourdieu puts it, eating habits and the sense of taste work to formulate a sense of distinction (1984). Foods and eating habits are a particular way of differentiating oneself, the making of religious self-being in Chinese Buddhist circles. Food plays a role in shaping new self-identifications and ethnic relations in Sino-Tibetan relationships. Vegetarianism, associated with religion, popularizes the discourses of self-caring, well-being, and body politics of the upper-middle class in Chinese urban centers. Since that initial visit to the vegetarian restaurant with Mrs. Jiang in my early years of field research, whenever possible, I have deliberately looked for other vegetarian restaurants, which are slowly but steadily thriving in urban Chengdu. These restaurants are not “popular” in the same sense as the numerous hot pot restaurants on the streets of Chengdu, but slowly maintain and expand their business with their regular customers. These restaurants do not necessarily present themselves as specifically Buddhist, but offer customers a general sense that they know how to take care of their bodies. Buddhism certainly attracts many serious practitioners in cities, but at the same time, Buddhism as a *theme* produces a sense of a non-religiously driven ethics of self-care in

post-Mao urban China. However, undeniably, the main customers in this steadily booming vegetarian market business are Buddhist practitioners whose affiliation to Buddhism, in many cases, is related to the recent revival of Tibetan Buddhism.

In the section that follows, by drawing on the recent policy banning meat consumption in Yachen and its impact on the daily lives of the Tibetan nuns, I will further discuss how the self-body-care discourses in urban centers are slowly transforming and reconstructing, in a very sensory way, Tibetan Buddhism from the inside.

### **5.3.2 Banning Meat Consumption**

A kind of “socializing” process in Yachen often occurs while visiting each other’s quarters and having a meal together. Sharing food produces positive effects such as benevolence, intimacy, and faith toward one other. After years of experience of only being served by the nuns, I finally learned to pack some cooking ingredients into my backpack during my long-term research trip to Yachen in 2012. I expected to share meals together with the nuns by cooking something myself. After serious consideration, I decided to pack instant curry flour and black-bean flour because they are easy to cook and I believe them to be pleasing to the Tibetan nuns’ appetites. During my stay in Yachen, I always carried either the curry flour or the black-bean flour in my side bag, just in case I needed to cook promptly. My flour-based instant cuisine was popular among the Tibetan nuns with whom I worked, and later I had to order more of each kind of flour through shipping services in the cities. However, I normally would not bring this instant

flour to Chinese nuns, because, as I mentioned, I was afraid they would dislike my bringing them “unhealthy” instant food.

The following happened when I cooked my black-bean sauce and rice in Sangmo’s quarters one day. Sangmo is fourteen years old and lives with her aunt, aged thirty, who joined Yachen over a decade ago. Sangmo always cooked for me, but I insisted on that day that I should cook something special in return, at least one time, for her and her aunt. I prepared potatoes and cabbage for my black bean sauce, peeled the potatoes, and chopped them into small cubes. While watching me, Sangmo suddenly suggested that we should put something else in the sauce, which would make it even tastier. She then proudly brought me something with which I was very familiar; a very low-quality stick-type sausage, which was popular once, but is no longer found in big cities in China (one can now find versions that are much improved in quality). Yachen had recently forbidden eating meat and meat products, and had banned all kinds of meat-based dietary supplements imported from outside. Although Yachen had never sold raw meat, its shops used to sell cheap, spicy jerky products for snacks, and many Tibetan nuns enjoyed consuming them. Now the head office had completely banned all of these. I asked Sangmo about this rule and she was very aware of it, because the head lama had preached directly about it many times. I became more curious and asked her again why then she ate the sausage, which was a meat product. She was surprised and said, “This is not meat, is it? That’s what I was told.”

Without thinking, I told her that the sausage was basically made of meat, indicating the main ingredient, chicken, written in Chinese on the wrap. I literally read

the word, “chicken” out loud to her like a mean older sister. Sadly, she and other nuns had bought a couple boxes of this sausage when they visited a neighboring village, Changtai, a few days before. No one had thought this was meat. I guess a nun bought this cheap, tasty product by accident one time, and since it does not look like a real piece of meat the other nuns started consuming it. Also it is possible that the local vendors lied to the nuns, who usually cannot read Chinese. I quickly regretted what I had revealed as soon as I saw the guiltiness covering this young nun’s face. It was simply too much to throw it all away, but she could not keep eating it either because now she knew that this was a product specifically banned by the lama. I found later that many Tibetan nuns keep either sausage or fish cake in their kitchen shelves for cooking, without acknowledging that these are meat- or fish-based products. They are cheap but savory indeed, compared to other plain dietary staples in Yachen such as *tsampa* or cabbage sauté I immediately stopped being a revealer of “the secret” on this matter, which is, after all, likely a more complicated issue than it may first appear.

As I mentioned earlier, banning meat eating as a monastic rule is new in Tibetan Buddhism. For a long time, meat consumption simply remained a matter of individual decision for both laity and non-laity. Meat is the center of the regular Tibetan diet. When greeting guests, joining in festivals, as well as in the daily life of Tibetan households, meat cuisines, including naturally dried yak flesh, are core dishes on the table.<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>94</sup> Dried beef is well known as a nutritious preserved food for Tibetans. It is made of a big chunk of yak meat that includes the flesh, fat and bone together, dried in the highland winter air for about three months or more. Tibetans eat it as a snack, at meals, and serve it to guests.

Monasteries also traditionally consume meat, and monks cook it regularly, although they do it with prayer. Vegetarianism is practiced in a limited way in Tibetan society; short-term vegetarianism and specific-date-based vegetarianism are widely accepted and highly respected. In other words, in Tibetan society, adhering to vegetarianism as a Buddhist diet is a matter of individual choice; it may be recommended, but is not a must-follow doctrine as in Chinese Buddhist circles. But it is certainly valued and recognized when one restricts meat consumption. Among Tibetans, a refusal to eat meat is based on religious determination and devotion, rather than on the notion of body care and self-regulation.

The current head lama in Yachen, Asong, who is in his early 40s, attained the head office in 2011, right after his master Achuk lama passed away. This young lama has an enormous burden on his shoulders, as he must maintain and promote the ultra-success that his late teacher was able to accomplish in this remote piece of land. In particular, of great significance is whether he is able to maintain and improve the astronomical amount of donations that were made by Chinese disciples under the previous Achuk lama. Asong lama has embarked on several innovative procedures in an attempt to “modernize” Yachen. Among his many innovations, I want to focus on his new policy of banning meat consumption, which leads to the reconstruction and redirection of Tibetan Buddhism’s own traditional and historical uniqueness. There is an increasingly pervasive voice that says it is time in Tibetan Buddhism to ban meat-eating all together, as in other Buddhist traditions. This voice seemingly comes from the inside, based on the rationale that unlike previous times, Tibetans do not lack food and nutrition, and it doesn’t make sense to

continue eating meat—which is directly related to a “killing practice”—in the name of survival. Interestingly, this voice mostly comes from those lamas who are becoming celebrities in the Chinese Buddhist world and who often travel to Chinese cities and abroad to preach their own teachings, and from those diasporic communities abroad where western influence has been strong.

Asong lama’s sudden ban of meat and meat-based products confuses nuns like Sangmo and her friends, who have never had such a regulatory idea for food or for eating habits. This is neither a doctrinal problem nor a nutritional concern. In a place like Dharamsala, a small northern Indian town where the current exile-government of Tibet is located and the current Dalai Lama resides, Tibetans consume meat and meat-based products. Given that India is a country where vegetarian restaurants and vegetarian dietary habits are rampant because of India’s own religious reasons, maintaining vegetarianism as one’s steady diet is never a challenge there. Nonetheless, most Tibetans, who are all Buddhists, are non-vegetarians, and they often utter the desire to once again have the dried beef that they used to eat in Tibet and which they cannot find on Indian soil. This strong expression of the desire to eat dried beef is an encrypted sense of longing and nostalgia toward their homeland. Regulating meat consumption has never directly been associated with self-care, religious restrictions (except for particular rituals), moralism, and so on. In Yachen, on the other hand, meat consumption has now become a category of ethics, rules, and self-care. Due to the new imposition of the ban on meat, which has come from outside of the traditional Tibetan context, Tibetan nuns have begun to feel guilt and shame about their daily diet. As in Sangmo’s case, although the secret



escaped through my reckless intervention, sooner or later those nuns who possess meat-based products like sausage and fish cake will abandon them all together.

I have no empirical evidence to explain why Asong lama suddenly banned meat consumption altogether in Yachen. I had no chance to talk to him about this issue. On the surface level, based on his speeches, the reason for banning meat consumption appears to be that the meat products sold in Yachen are unhealthy and go against the “no-killing” doctrine. However, my speculation is that, given a context in which more and more Chinese devotees have started becoming involved in Yachen through generous donations and other means, and many young lamas from Yachen travel to the Chinese cities and give lectures attracting more Chinese disciples, the head office of Yachen cannot avoid considering the growing presence of Chinese—both laity and non-laity in Yachen and in Yachen’s greater networks—who strictly practice vegetarianism and who might feel very uncomfortable when they see the nuns in Yachen enjoy jerky on the streets.

I have noticed that the head office and Asong lama personally take great care of Chinese practitioners in Yachen. For instance, I attended Asong lama’s seven a.m. morning lecture for Chinese disciples that had lasted every day for several months in the winter of 2013. This was during the brief free time he had between his dawn meditation and his regular long lecture at eight o’clock for Tibetans. He gave this time, presumably his break/breakfast time, to a handful of Chinese monks, nuns, and the lay practitioners

who travel from Chinese cities.<sup>95</sup> His lecture was in Tibetan and immediately translated line by line into Chinese. The head office also responds to the specific needs of the Chinese population in Yachen; for example, it distributed coal fuel exclusively to Chinese nuns and monks during the winter of 2013.

Given the fact that in recent years more and more pious Chinese capital flows into Yachen, particularly in infrastructural forms such as roads, electricity, and new buildings, the official ban on meat consumption does not suddenly seem as strange as before. For a mammoth Tibetan institution like Yachen, maintaining financial security is essential for keeping a certain autonomous status from the Chinese government. In order to do this, Yachen recently imposed apparently nonsensical—yet quite sensible in the given sociopolitical context—regulatory rules on their practitioners and made them feel disassociated from their own past and tradition. Pious Chinese capital and Yachen’s own struggles with keeping its autonomy against the Chinese state produce ambivalence among the Tibetan nuns regarding regulations on diet, especially the banning of meat consumption. Sangmo’s guilty and shameful face on that day, triggered by my reckless revelation, is nothing but a materialization of the kind of ambivalence that these nuns have recently experienced. The Chinese version of healthy, wellness-producing food ways and eating habits, as a new regulatory ethics for being a good practitioner, is

---

<sup>95</sup> The number of Chinese practitioners, consisting of both laity and non-laity, in Yachen is estimated to be 200-300 hundred. This is still a “handful” compare to the over 12,000 Tibetans in Yachen.

transforming the nature of Tibetan Buddhism in a very slow and sensory way, from inside, as well as re-inscribing who the “right” subject is in the practice of Buddhism.

#### ***5.4 Conclusion***

One of the most banal components of the material aspect of being a human being is probably eating food. “What to eat” or “what not to eat” however, is much more complex than this presumed banality; this is true in general but is even more complex in the context of ethnic politics in China. As discussed above, the complex relationship between Tibetan and Chinese nuns in Yachen frequently and repeatedly draws an ethnic line in the matters of the trifles of daily life and practices such as food consumption. Cabbage, the most pervasive and inexpensive all-year vegetable in the highlands, becomes a sign of the Tibetan nuns’ ignorance and lack of culture, and furthermore, for the Chinese nuns in Yachen it serves as a means for forming a new ethical sensibility. Tofu, in an even more obvious way, serves as a marker of who owns knowledge about protein intake and about taking care of bodies, and who owns the infrastructural power to bring tofu into Yachen. This highlights not only Chinese ways of living and surviving in a Tibetan space, but also heavily influences the core of Tibetan sensibilities. As I have argued throughout my chapters, I interpret this type of quiet transformation as a form of the politics of tranquility. Cabbage and tofu play a role in ethicalizing a “right” way of practicing Buddhism that equally indexes the increasing impact of the Chinese urban centers on Tibetan Buddhism.

Many Chinese Buddhist practitioners travel to the far west of their country to pay homage to their lamas and to absorb the “air of sacredness” from Tibetan land. These

remote travels and long-term stays—a round trip to Yachen alone takes up to a full week—require a certain amount of economic stability from the devotees, who must therefore be relatively free from their work unit or livelihood, and who are able to afford long-term absences from their work and from their family (Smyer Y ü 2012). I have shown that such a middle-class background in terms of both time and finance enables them to invest additionally in more than Buddhism itself; that is, they can invest in Buddhism-compatible methods for health-care activities such as walking into the fancy vegetarian restaurant of Chengdu and enjoying clean unpolluted food. On that day in Chengdu, a simple meal for the six of us cost almost 1,500 RMB (\$250), and was Mrs. Chen's treat to everyone. As with other religious activities in China since the reform era, such as Protestantism, Islam, and Chinese Buddhism, (Han) converts to Tibetan Buddhism are generally well positioned in society. As I have discussed through the ban on meat consumption in Yachen, these rich Chinese practitioners build even deeper patronage relationships with the Tibetan lamas and the lamas' communities, thereby contributing to the reshaping of Tibetan Buddhism in certain ways. Vegetarianism is a key to contemporary Buddhism's mode of being in urban China, and it is also crucial to high-ranking Tibetan lamas, whose interpretation of the ban on meat consumption reflects the influence of the growing presence of Chinese devotees; or more precisely, to the influence of their donation.

## 6. Conclusion

At dawn, when it was still dark outside, three nuns and I were busy preparing for a one-day mountain pilgrimage, packing hot water, cheap cookies, and a sitting mattress in anticipation of long hours of trekking back and forth across the chilly mountainsides. Once a year, the nuns (also the monks) in Yachen visit one of the sacred sites where the late Achuk lama allegedly unearthed the Treasures. With each of us carrying a flashlight, we headed out and quickly joined a crowd of other nuns who were already on the pilgrimage. It was around five a.m. The sun was still hidden. The frozen morning air on the highland was painful, which led us to forget the simple fact that it was summer. No one dared to open their mouths until the sun came out. After three-hours of hard trekking, the crowd of nuns turned to the left, using a large roundabout course to trek up the steep hillside, while the monks headed straight ahead toward the sacred site. This was because, I was told, women are not allowed to get any closer to this sacred site. While I was trekking up the hillside with the nuns, I was able to see far below where the male lamas and the monks, looking like tiny spots, were performing some kind of ritual.

The idea has come to my mind a few times since then that if I had been a male researcher walking with the monks on that morning, I would have nicely documented the ritual that they were performing on that day about the Treasures and the sacred sites while being completely unaware of the fact that a population of nuns five times larger was making its way around the site, at a much farther distance away, only because they were female. In recent years, many claims and discussions about Buddhist practices and revivalism in China and elsewhere tend to take it for granted that the subjects they are

focusing on—the rituals, scriptures, performances, chanting, and so on—are universally accessible and unanimously important to all members. My dissertation has evolved precisely as a rejection of this blind assumption; not only do I pose questions about such embedded ignorance per se, but I turn this lopsided attention to an unseen group: the nuns, who are the majority in Yachen and in the recent Buddhist revivals in China. I do not read the gender-biased situations of the nuns in Yachen as being a “lack” of something—as their lack of opportunities, of education, of precious rituals and teachings, and so on, although I pointed these out a number of times as “facts” in my dissertation. By avoiding the treatment of the nuns’ situations as a discourse of “lack,” I am able to see the nuns themselves without being constantly drawn to issues that are not necessarily reflective of them. The nuns’ practices, their own ways of approaching difficulties, making relationships, daily lives, and spaces in Yachen deserve to be analyzed and examined in their own right.

I have never felt sorry for myself for not being able to observe the ritual on that morning because of my female gender. On the contrary, thanks to my gender, I felt deeply fortunate not to be part of the ritual and not to miss out on the other side, filled with captivating stories and practices that have long been ignored. To the nuns, the harsh three-hour trek on that chilly morning is, in and of itself, part of being a nun in Yachen, even though it didn’t lead them to a seat at the ritual. On that day, the nuns meditated in small groups or alone at the top of the hill for a while and then climbed down. Upon returning to Yachen in the early afternoon, the nuns enjoyed quite a bit of leisurely time for the rest of the day; they cooked vegetable Momo (Tibetan dumpling), drank tea, and

went out to the riverside to do overdue laundry or to continue meditating. They were pleased about the free time that they were being given and happily engaged with mundane physical chores as well as private meditation throughout the day. (I do not know how much longer the monks and the lamas stayed at the site and performed the ritual that day.)

In this dissertation, I have tried to show the lives of Tibetan Buddhist nuns in Yachen and to understand the recent Buddhist revivalism by putting the nuns, who are undeniably the major participants but who, startlingly, are being ignored, at the center of discussion. As I am writing and studying more about the nuns, I realize, to my surprise, that my simple attempt to focus on the nuns in Buddhist revivalism in China becomes itself a major contribution to the existing scholarship, due merely to the striking absence of discussions of this kind. What I want to show through my research is, however, more than the daily lives and practices of the nuns. I want to show that mobility, materiality, and sensory experiences are essential to practicing Buddhism, and that these are the key factors in understanding the lives of the nuns in Yachen, without whom the Tibetan Buddhist revivalism in China, at least in Yachen, would be impossible.

Yachen's openness and marginality, both geographical and conceptual, which I described elsewhere in my chapters as "unruly space," offer opportunities and confusions for all of us—the nuns, the state, and the researcher. Yachen gives rural Tibetan girls, the most underrepresented group in Chinese society, unprecedented opportunities in terms of education, social status, and self-making; and at the same time, it also imposes new regulations and new roles for them to follow, such as in the case of the meat consumption

policy. One thing I must emphasize is that Yachen has come into being through the labor, mobility, and daily material engagements of the Tibetan nuns. They open up opportunities for themselves by running away from their natal homes, building huts, taking the exam, and decorating their rooms. The Chinese state has little means to read the latent political dynamics of the nuns' building practice and their lives in general within the politically constrained context that the state itself imposes upon them. If the state's primary goal for Yachen, a Tibetan Buddhist community, is to restrict Yachen's augmentation by imposing various controlling apparatuses, the goal mysteriously slips away because the permitted religious boundaries are *slowly and quietly* being pushed back and expanded by the nuns and their practices.

The Sino-Tibetan relationship—whether it is discussed in terms of matters between governments, issues of economic deprivation, religious freedom, resource extraction, or cultural suppression—has been largely addressed in fairly strict and transparent terms: put simply, in terms of repressive regime versus anti-regime, or controlling governmental power versus subaltern struggles, and other such pairings. This framework remains almost immovable as a strong logic for understanding the Sino-Tibetan relationship, since both parties constantly and consciously politicize each other; my dissertation, however, shows an alternative politics that is taking place *quietly and effectively, even if not purposively*, at the margins of Tibet—what I have called in my dissertation the *politics of tranquility*. My usage of “margins” here is meant in both a geographical sense, as an unmarked space of Yachen, and in reference to the Tibetan



Buddhist nuns, a largely invisible group of people who are only visible when they are treated as political dissenters and thus as targets of the state.

Without an alternative reading of politics, I have argued, it is hard to conceive of proper understandings of the lives of the nuns in Yachen and a broader sense of the Tibetan Buddhist revivals in Kham Tibet. The politics of tranquility comes directly out of the everydayness of the nuns in Yachen—their physical labor and mobilities, rather than from textual analyses; and this is possible because of the openness and marginality of Yachen. I am one of the main beneficiaries of this openness and marginality of Yachen. Despite my being a complete stranger and a total outsider, my presence has been accepted and warmly welcomed each and every time, without any institutional threshold or the state's interference. This is something that I took it for granted at first. But it is truly a rare chance and honor to live so closely with the nuns for an extensive period of time and to be able to observe and (partially) be a part of their lives. This dissertation is a result of my attempt to understand some of the material facets of the lives of the nuns in Yachen, and this is my fullest, subjective reading of their lives: They are not only Buddhist meditators, but also decorators, makers, and builders.

## Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. 2005. *State of Exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1986. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Arweck, Elisabeth, and William Keenan, eds. 2006. *Materializing Religion*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Barad, Karen Michelle. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Barnett, Robert. 2006. *Lhasa: Streets with Memories*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 2009. “The Tibet Protests of Spring 2008: Conflict between the Nation and the State.” *China Perspectives* 3: 6–23.
- . 2012. “Restrictions and Their Anomalies: The Third Forum and the Regulation of Religion in Tibet.” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 41 (4): 45–107.
- Barnett, Robert, and Shirin Akiner, eds. 1994. *Resistance and Reform in Tibet*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Barnett, Robert, and Ronald Schwartz, eds. 2008. *Tibetan Modernities: Notes from the Field on Cultural and Social Change*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Barnett, Robert, and Mickey Spiegel. 1996. *Cutting off the Serpent’s Head: Tightening Control in Tibet, 1994-1995*. London and New York: Human rights Watch and Tibet Information Network.
- Bartholomeusz, Tessa J. 1994. *Women under the Bō Tree: Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Berliner, Paul F. 1994. *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Blezer, Henk, and Toni Huber, eds. 2002. *Amdo Tibetans in Transition: Society and Culture in the Post-Mao Era*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

- Bloss, Lowell W. 1987. "The Female Renunciants of Sri Lanka: The Dasasilmattawa." *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 10: 7–32.
- Boddy, Janice. 1989. *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- . 2005. "Taste of Luxury, Taste of Necessity." In *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, 72–78. Oxford and New York: Berg.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- . 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge.
- . 2005. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham Univ Press.
- Caple, Jane. 2013. "Remembering Monastic Revival: Stories from Reb Kong and Western Ba Yan." In *Monastic and Lay Traditions in North-Eastern Tibet*, edited by Yangdon Dhondup, Ulrich Pagel, and Geoffrey Samuel, 23–48. Leiden, Boston: Brill.
- Caple, Jane Eluned. 2011. "Seeing beyond the State?: The Negotiation of Moral Boundaries in the Revival and Development of Tibetan Buddhist Monasticism in Contemporary China." United Kingdom: The University of Leeds.
- Chang, Leslie T. 2008. *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.
- Cheng, Tiejun, and Mark Selden. 1994. "The Origins and Social Consequences of China's Hukou System." *The China Quarterly*, no. 139: 644–68.
- Childs, Geoff. 2004. *Tibetan Diary: From Birth to Death and Beyond in a Himalayan Valley of Nepal*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Chu, Julie. 2010. *Cosmologies of Credit: Transnational Mobility and the Politics of Destination in China*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Colebrook, Clair. 1998. "Ethics, Positivity, and Gender: Foucault, Aristotle, and the Care of the Self: A Foucault Symposium." *Philosophy Today* 42 (1): 40–52.
- Collins, S, and J McDaniel. 2010. "Buddhist 'nuns' (mae Chi) and the Teaching of Pali in Contemporary Thailand." *Modern Asian Studies* 44 (06): 1373–1408.

- Comaroff, Jean, and John Comaroff. 1986. "Christianity and Colonialism in South Africa." *American Ethnologist* 13 (1): 1–22.
- Conboy, Kenneth, and James Morrison. 2002. *The CIA's Secret War in Tibet*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Counihan, Carole, and Penny Van Esterik, eds. 2013. *Food and Culture: A Reader*. Third. New York and London: Routledge.
- Cresswell, Tim. 2006. *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*. New York: Routledge.
- Dalton, Jacob P. 2011. *The Taming of the Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Davidson, Ronald M. 2005. *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- De Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- "Destruction of Serthar Institute: A Special Report." 2001. Dharamsala, India: Tibetan Centre For Human Rights and Democracy.
- Diehl, Keila. 2002. *Echoes from Dharamsala: Music in the Life of a Tibetan Refugee Community*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dirlik, Arif. 1989. *The Origins of Chinese Communism*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Doctor, Andreas. 2005. *Tibetan Treasure Literature: Revelation, Tradition, and Accomplishment in Visionary Buddhism*. Ithaca, New York and Boulder, Colorado: Snow Lion Publications.
- Douglas, Mary. 1975. "Deciphering a Meal." In *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*. London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- . 2002. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Dreyfus, Georges B.J. 2003. *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.

- Durkheim, Emile. 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated by Karen E. Fields. New York: The Free Press.
- Edin, Maria. 2003. "Remaking the Communist Party-State: The Cadre Responsibility System at the Local Level in China." *China: An International Journal* 1 (01): 1–15.
- Epstein, Lawrence. 2002. *Khams Pa Histories: Visions of People, Place and Authority*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Esposito, Monica, ed. 2008a. *Images of Tibet in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Vol. 1. Paris: École Française.
- . 2008b. *Images of Tibet in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Vol. 2. Paris: École Française.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1967. "The Problem of Symbols and Spear Symbolism." In *Nuer Religion*, 123–43, 231–47. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- Falk, ML. 2006. "A Silent Undercurrent: The Significance of Mae Chii's Socially Engaged Buddhist Practice in Thailand." In *Out of the Shadows: Socially Engaged Buddhist Women*, edited by KL Tsomo. Delhi, India: Sri Satguru Publications.
- Ford, Jocelyn. 2014. Documentary Film, *Nowhere to Call Home: A Tibetan in Beijing*.
- Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- . 1979. "Docile Bodies." In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Random House.
- . 1993. "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth." *Political Theory*, 198–227.
- . 1994. *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. New York: The New Press.
- Frazer, James George. 1994. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Culture*. New York: Basic Books.
- Germano, David. 1998. "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*, edited by

- Melvyn C. Goldstein and Matthew T. Kapstein, 53–94. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Goldstein, Melvyn C. 1971. “Stratification, Polyandry, and Family Structure in Central Tibet.” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 64–74.
- Goldstein, Melvyn C. 1991. *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913-1951: The Demise of the Lamaist State*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Goldstein, Melvyn C. 2007. *A History of Modern Tibet. Volume 2, The Calm before the Storm, 1951-1955*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Goldstein, Melvyn C, Jiao Ben, and Lhundrup Tanzen. 2009. *On the Cultural Revolution in Tibet: The Nyemo Incident of 1969*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Goldstein, Melvyn, William Siebenschuh, and Tashi Tsering. 1997. *The Struggle for Modern Tibet: The Autobiography of Tashi Tsering*. Armonk, New York; London, England: M.E. Sharpe.
- Goody, Jack. 1982. *Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Gray, Edward R., and Scott Thumma. 2005. “The Gospel Hour: Liminality, Identity, and Religion in a Gay Bar.” In *Gay Religion*, edited by Edward R. Gray and Scott Thumma, 285–302. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Grimshaw, Anna. 1994. *Servants of the Buddha: Winter in a Himalayan Convent*. Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press.
- Gross, Rita M. 1993. *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . 2009. *A Garland of Feminist Reflections: Forty Years of Religious Exploration*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press.
- Grunfeld, Tom. 1996. *The Making of Modern Tibet*. New York: M.E. Sharpe.
- Gutschow, Kim. 2004. *Being a Buddhist Nun: The Struggle for Enlightenment in the Himalayas*. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Gyatso, Janet. 1993. “The Logic of Legitimation in the Tibetan Treasure Tradition.” *History of Religions* 33 (2): 97–134.

- . 1998. *Apparitions of the Self: The Secret Autobiographies of a Tibetan Visionary*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Gyatso, Janet, and Hanna Havnevik, eds. 2005. *Women in Tibet*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hao, Yan. 2000. "Tibetan Population in China: Myths and Facts Re-Examined." *Asian Ethnicity* 1 (1): 11–36.
- Haraway, Donna Jeanne. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Havnevik, Hanna. 1989. *Tibetan Buddhist Nuns: History, Cultural Norms, and Social Reality*. Oslo: Norwegian University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. 2013. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, New Delhi and Auckland: HarperCollins.
- H.H. Dalai Lama. 2000. *Dzogchen: The Heart Essence of the Great Perfection*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications.
- Hirschkind, Charles. 2006. *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Huber, Toni. 1999. *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain: Popular Pilgrimage and Visionary Landscape in Southeast Tibet*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hull, Matthew S. 2012. *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California.
- Ingold, Tim. 2010. "The Textility of Making." *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 34: 91–102.
- . 2013. *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*. New York: Routledge.
- Jacoby, Sarah Hieatt. 2007. "Consorts and Revelation in Eastern Tibet: The Auto/biographical Writings of the Treasure Revealer Sera Khandro (1892--1940)." Virginia: University of Virginia.
- Jacoby, Sarah, and Antonio Terrone, eds. 2009. *Buddhism Beyond the Monastery: Tantric Practices and Their Performers in Tibet and the Himalayas*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

- Jinba, Tenzin. 2014. *In the Land of the Eastern Queendom: The Politics of Gender and Ethnicity on the Sino-Tibetan Border*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.
- Jones, Carla. 2010. "Materializing Piety: Gendered Anxieties about Faithful Consumption in Contemporary Urban Indonesia." *American Ethnologist* 37 (4): 617–37.
- Jordt, Ingrid. 1988. "Bhikkhuni, Thilashin, Mae-Chii: Women Who Renounce the World in Burma, Thailand and the Classical Pali Buddhist Texts." *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 4 (1): 31–39.
- . 2007. *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Karmay, Samten Gyaltzen. 1988. *The Great Perfection: A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching or Tibetan Buddhism*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Keane, Webb. 2008. "The Evidence of the Senses and the Materiality of Religion." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14: 110–27.
- Khásun, Tubten. 2008. *Memories of Life in Lhasa Under Chinese Rule*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kirksey, S. Eben, and Stefan Helmreich. 2010. "The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography." *Cultural Anthropology* 25 (4): 545–76.
- Kieschnick, John. 2005. "Buddhist Vegetarianism in China." In *Of Tripod and Palate: Food, Politics, and Religion in Traditional China*, 186–212. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kinnvall, Catarina. 2002. "Nationalism, Religion and the Search for Chosen Traumas: Comparing Sikh and Hindu Identity Constructions." *Ethnicities* 2 (1): 79–106.
- Klee, Paul. 1973. *Notebooks, Volume 2: The Nature of Nature*. Edited by Jürg Spiller. London: Lund Humphries.
- Kohn, Eduardo. 2013. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.
- Kolås, Åshild. 1996. "Tibetan Nationalism: The Politics of Religion." *Journal of Peace Research* 33 (1): 51–66.
- . 2008. *Tourism and Tibetan Culture in Transition: A Place Called Shangrila*. London and New York: Routledge.



- Kolås, Åshild, and Monika P. Thowsen. 2005. *On the Margins of Tibet: Cultural Survival on the Sino-Tibetan Frontier*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Laliberté Andr  and Marc Lanteigne, eds. 2008. *The Chinese Party-State in the 21st Century: Adaptation and the Reinvention of Legitimacy*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 2004. *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*. New York, London: Continuum.
- Levine, Nancy E. 1988. *The Dynamics of Polyandry: Kinship, Domesticity, and Population on the Tibetan Border*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lupton, Deborah. 1996. *Food, the Body and the Self*. London: Sage.
- Mackenzie, Peter W. 2002. "Strangers in the City: The Hukou and Urban Citizenship in China." *Journal of International Affairs-Columbia University* 56 (1): 305–22.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Makley, Charlene E. 2005. "The Body of a Nun: Nunhood and Gender in Contemporary Amdo." In *Women in Tibet*, edited by Janet Gyatso, and Hanna Havnevik, 259–84. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 2007. *The Violence of Liberation: Gender and Tibetan Buddhist Revival in Post-Mao China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1954. *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc.
- Mallee, Hein. 2000. "Migration, Hukou and Resistance in Reform China." In *Chinese Society. Change, Conflict and Resistance*, edited by Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, 140–61. London: Routledge.
- Mauss, Marcel. 1990. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Translated by W.D. Halls. New York, London: W.W. Norton.
- McGranahan, Carole. 2010. *Arrested Histories: Tibet, the CIA, and Memories of a Forgotten War*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- McGranahan, Carole and Litzinger, Ralph. "Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet." *Fieldsights - Hot Spots*, Cultural Anthropology Online, April 09, 2012, <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/93-self-immolation-as-protest-in-tibet>
- Miller, Daniel, ed. 2005. *Materiality*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Mintz, Sidney W. 1985. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Morgan, David. 1998. *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . , ed. 2010. *Religion and Material Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Mrozik, Susanne. 2009. "A Robed Revolution: The Contemporary Buddhist Nun's (Bhiksuni) Movement." *Religion Compass* 3 (3): 360–78.
- Muecke, Marjorie. 2004. "Female Sexuality in Thai Discourses about Maechee." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 6 (3): 221–38.
- Norbu, Dawa. 2001. *China's Tibet Policy*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press.
- Norbu, Namkhai. 1986. *The Crystal and the Way of Light: Sutra, Tantra and Dzogchen*. Edited by John Shane. New York and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Padma'tsho. 2014. "Courage as Eminence: Tibetan Nuns at Yarchen Monastery in Kham." In *Eminent Buddhist Women*, edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, 185–94. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.
- Pai, Hsiao-Hung. 2012. *Scattered Sand: The Story of China's Rural Migrants*. London and New York: Verso.
- Patrul Rinpoche. 1994. *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Pelzang, Khenpo Ngawang. 2004. *A Guide to the Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Boston: Shambhala Publications.
- Perica, Vjekoslav. 2002. *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Potter, Pitman B. 2003. "Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China." In *Religion in China Today*, edited by Daniel L. Overmyer, 11–31. The China Quarterly Special Issues New Series 3. Cambridge University Press.

- Powers, John. 2004. *History As Propaganda: Tibetan Exiles Versus the People's Republic of China*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2007. *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*. Ithaca, New York and Boulder, Colorado: Snow Lion Publications.
- Pun, Ngai. 2005. *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace*. Durham, Hong Kong: Duke University Press, Hong Kong University Press.
- Rappaport, Roy A. 1984. *Pigs for the Ancestors: Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Samuel, Jeffrey. 1993. *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Schaeffer, Kurtis R. 2004. *Himalayan Hermitess: The Life of a Tibetan Buddhist Nun*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schuler, Sidney Rute. 1987. *The Other Side of Polyandry: Property, Stratification, and Nonmarriage in the Nepal Himalayas*. Boulder and London: Westview Press.
- Schwartz, Ronald D. 1994. *Circle of Protest: Political Ritual in the Tibetan Uprising*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Shakabpa, Tsepon W. D. 1967. *Tibet, a Political History*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Shakya, Tsering. 1999. *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947*. New York: Columbia University press.
- Shenhav, Yehouda. 2006. *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Smyer Yü, Dan. 2008. "Living Buddhas, Netizens, and the Price of Religious Freedom." In *Privatizing China : Socialism from Afar*, edited by Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong, 197–213. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- . 2012. *The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in China: Charisma, Money, Enlightenment*. London and New York: Routledge.
- . 2014. *Mindscaping the Landscape of Tibet: Place, Memorability, Ecoaesthetics*. Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter.
- Sogyal Rinpoche. 1990. *Dzogchen and Padmasambhava*. California: Rigpa Fellowship.

- Sun, Wanning. 2014. *Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media, and Cultural Practices*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja. 1990. *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tapontsang, Adhe, and Joy Blakeslee. 1999. *The Voice That Remembers: One Woman's Historic Fight to Free Tibet*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications.
- Taussig, Michael. 1987. *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- . 1980. *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Terrone, Antonio. 2002. "Visions, Arcane Claims, and Hidden Treasures: Charisma and Authority in a Present-Day Gter Ston." In *Tibet, Self, and the Tibetan Diaspora: Voices of Difference*, edited by P. Christiaan Klieger, 213–28. PIATS 2000: Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the Ninth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Leiden 2000. Leiden, Boston, Kōln: Brill.
- The 14th Dalai Lama. 1962. *My Land and My People*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- . 1990. *Freedom in Exile: The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Thondup, Gyalo, and Anne F. Thurston. 2015. *The Noodle Maker of Kalimpong: The Dalai Lama's Brother and His Struggle for Tibet*. New York: Publicaffairs.
- Tsing, Anna. 2012. "Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species." *Environmental Humanities* 1: 141–54.
- Tsering Thar. 2002. "Shar Rdza Hermitage: A New Bonpo Center in Khams." In *Khams Pa Histories: Visions of People, Place and Authority*. PIATS 2000: Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the Ninth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Leiden 2000. Leiden, Boston, Kōln: Brill.
- Tsomo, Karma Lekshe. 1996. *Sisters in Solitude: Two Traditions of Buddhist Monastic Ethics for Women*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . , ed. 1999. *Buddhist Women across Cultures: Realizations*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . , ed. 2000. *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming against the Stream*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon.

- . , ed. 2006. *Out of the Shadows: Socially Engaged Buddhist Women*. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications.
- . , ed. 2014. *Eminent Buddhist Women*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . , ed. 1988. *Sakyadhītā: Daughters of the Buddha*. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications.
- . , ed. 2004. *Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges, and Achievements*. Albany, New York: State University of New York.
- Tsomu, Yudru. 2013. “Taming the Khampas: The Republican Construction of Eastern Tibet.” *Modern China* 39 (3): 319–44.
- Tulku Thondup Rinpoche. 1986. *Hidden Teachings of Tibet: An Explanation of the Terma Tradition of the Nyingma School of Buddhism*. Edited by Harold Talbott. London: Wisdom Publications.
- Turek, Magdalena Maria. 2013. “In This Body and Life”: The Religious and Social Significance of Hermits and Hermitages in Eastern Tibet Today and During Recent History.” Diss. Germany: Humboldt Universität zu Berlin.
- Turner, Victor. 1967. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Tweed, Thomas A. 2006. *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Tylor, Edward Burnett. 1958. *Primitive Culture*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Van Slyke, Lyman P. 1967. *Enemies and Friends: The United Front in Chinese Communist History*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Weller, Robert P. 2001. “Living at the Edge: Religion, Capitalism, and the End of the Nation-State in Taiwan.” In *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, 215–39. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Wiskus, Jessica. 2013. *The Rhythm of Thought: Art, Literature, and Music after Merleau-Ponty*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Yan, Hairong. 2008. *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Yeh, Emily T. 2013. *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Zablocki, Abraham Mark. 2005. "The Global Mandala: The Transnational Transformation of Tibetan Buddhism." Diss. Cornell University.
- Zhang, Li. 2001. *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks within China's Floating Population*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Zhang, Tracy Y. 2013. "Factory 'Nuns': The Ethnicization of Migrant Labor in the Making of Tibetan Carpets." *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 20 (6).
- Zhang, Yinong. 2009. "'Little Tibet' with 'Little Mecca': Religion, Ethnicity and Social Change on the Sino-Tibetan Borderland (China)." Diss. Cornell University.
- . 2012. "Between Nation and Religion." *Chinese Sociological Review* 45 (1): 55–69.
- Zheng, Tiantian. 2009. *Red Lights: The Lives of Sex Workers in Postsocialist China*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

## Biography

China came to me at first in a rather romantic way through reading ancient Chinese poems and novels while I was studying Chinese Language and Literature as an undergraduate major in South Korea. However, looking back, what I most enjoyed and learned the most from in my college years was my summer trips to China that I took every year. Once summer came, I went backpacking throughout China by myself, from the north to the south and the east to the west—basically wherever I could go within my limited budget and time. Having a curious, young mind, I was simply excited about the unknown cities and towns ahead of me. The cheap overnight trains, which were my main transportation while I was traveling, allowed me to break away from the initial fantasy I had constructed from my ancient poetic readings about China, and to see other facets of this large country that possesses a long and complicated history and ever-changing sociopolitical dynamics. I was able to talk to various people on the trains—students, soldiers, peasants, and business people—and the conversations I had led me to deepen my understanding of Chinese society beyond books, poems, and college courses.

My innocent affection toward China ripened in a more serious way when I started my master's program in Beijing. I studied Political Science with a firm belief that it would help me to better understand Chinese society. Even though I do appreciate that I had a chance to learn about China from the perspective of strict social science and to learn various structural understandings of the Chinese political system, I gradually came to feel a distance from what I had been initially excited about: my real conversations with people in their everyday lives. In retrospect, my anthropological geekiness had already

come into play in those initial years during my study in China and even before that in my summer trips in my college years. My final breaking point came when I decided to study Tibet; pursuing research on Tibet in a Chinese university, to me at least, meant a dead end. Perhaps due to the things that I had heard and seen about Tibet during my travels, or for some unknown reason—it is tempting to call it karma—I had been desiring to study Tibet, secretly and overtly, since my college years. I gathered the courage to apply for a graduate program in Anthropology in the U.S. around the time that I had already completed three years of PhD course work in Political Science in Beijing.

Thanks to my numerous initial trials and errors in Beijing before embarking on my field research in Tibet, which was supported by the Department of Cultural Anthropology at Duke, I was able to fully appreciate each and every second of that research while I was in Tibet. What I was doing in Tibet was exactly what I had longed to do for a decade. Also, my previous “errors” were not at all useless; in fact, my training in political science in a Chinese university for several years nurtured my political sensitivity and equipped me with the proper language skills and other capabilities that turned out to be extremely crucial for conducting field research in a highly politicized region like Tibet. As a non-US citizen, non-Chinese, and non-Tibetan, my position as a researcher on Tibet in a U.S. institution may be somewhat unusual, and I don’t know whether my positionality will strengthen or weaken my ongoing research on Tibet in the future. What I can be sure about at this point is that this dissertation is a kind of completion for me—not in the sense of its contents and arguments, but in the sense of its being the closure of a life-long pursuit of my twenties and thirties—and also the sign of a new start and another adventure.