

Tantric Lay Practice and the Formation Urban Buddhist Communities:

The case of *Yanhuoshanfang* (烟火山房)

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Abstract

The past few decades are considered a Buddhist boom in the Chinese sphere. We witness various forms of Buddhist expression in religious practice and social life. One of the most striking trends in urban Chinese Buddhism is the adoption of elements of Tibetan Buddhism by ethnically Han Chinese (Denton Jones). In this paper, I will shortly present the shifts in Tibetan Buddhism in China over the 20th century, and the current state in which Buddhism is reviewed by scholars as strong social force (Ji Zhe, 2013). Through introducing my impressions from a case study from Shanghai (2017-1019) I aim to show the manifestation of Tibetan Buddhism within a structured urban community. Yanhuoshanfang (烟火山房) is a Buddhist organization/group which practices Tibetan Buddhism of the Nyingma lineage. The social and economic characteristics of the group serve as means for a spiritual connection to a land and a religious tradition which even though are technically not foreign, are restricted or limited by the PRC (Denton Jones, 2010).

Through showing the trajectory of this group alongside the history of Tibetan Buddhism in China I will stress for a core element with great influence on the formation of Buddhist communities namely: Tantrism. As discussed by Bianchi in *The Tantric Rebirth Movement in Modern China* Tantrism is back in the Chinese religious sphere. I wish to discuss here in the aspects of tantric practice within Lay society and argue that the formation of the group as a community is strongly connected to its Tantric practice, as a component which demands both; Transmission and Spiritual, financial and practical support.

Lay practitioners in Tibetan Buddhism are often viewed from the perspective of their support in Guru's, Tulkus and Monastic communities in the West (Tibetan regions and Tibet proper). Their money and connections can be used to support tulkus, lamas and monastic communities, which for the believers is considered an accumulation of merit (功德 gongde). In this sense being able to support the monastic community using personal wealth serves as both patronage to the monastic community and to one's own spiritual development (Symer Yu, 2012). I here turn to look deeper at the Lay Buddhists from the perspective of the conditions and the support which their practice entails- in their eastern urban environment. I will show how in order to maintain their practice they create a unique micro-social and economic structure with the potentiality to both spiritual and socio-economic ramifications.