

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Dharma and Difference in Dar es Salaam: the first Chinese Buddhist mission in Tanzania

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August 2025

This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the preface and specified in the text. It is not substantially the same as any work that has already been submitted, or is being concurrently submitted, for any degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.

Abstract

Tanhua Temple, founded in 2018, is the first Chinese Buddhist mission in Tanzania, and part of a broader expansion of Chinese Buddhist institutions across the continent. This thesis describes the development of this Buddhist mission based on data gathered over one year of participant observation as a Chinese-English-Swahili interpreter and driver living in the temple (2022-23). At Tanhua Temple people of different religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam), languages (Chinese, Swahili, English), ethnicities (Tanzanian & Chinese), socio-economic statuses and other positionalities created a highly pluralistic space. Applying a thick comparative approach to the problem of pluralism, this thesis extends discussions of comparison in anthropology to this mission space, with each chapter analysing a particular set of engagements that unfolded in social life. The thesis starts by describing the system at the core of Tanhua Temple, and then goes on to analyse the various groups that came into its orbit. Each chapter asks how people dealt with the problem of pluralism as they mapped out their differences, communicated across them, negotiated competing interests, and sometimes found new ways to live together.

Chapter 1 traces the historical development of lay and monastic networks that led to Tanhua Temple's founding and allowed it to develop independently after the collapse of its Beijing headquarters in 2018. By describing the Longquan and Tanhua System (*tixi*), I argue that the Buddhist System can serve as a new analytic category in the anthropology of Buddhism, and help us understand the driving forces behind Tanhua Temple. Chapter 2 describes the collaboration between the Abbot of Tanhua Temple and a charismatic local, arguing that the latter's engagements constituted a cosmopolitan response to the problem of pluralism. Chapter 3 describes the growth of local Buddhist studies groups and their eventual decline, from the thickening of material, embodied and supernatural engagements grounded in polyontological pluralism, to their eventual thinning as expectations of patron-client relations lead to fractures in the relationship. Chapter 4 analyses the way the 'merit model' frames exchange relations between Tanhua Temple and its volunteers, employees, and recipients of its charitable donations. I describe the tensions, conflicts and compromises that result from a monist value framework coming into contact with a value plural context. Chapter 5 describes Tanhua Temple's relationships with the Chinese diaspora, introducing the business people who acted as mediators between the temple and local actors throughout the process of land acquisition, the opening of an orphanage and a school. I also describe the

temple's redistributive function within the diaspora, as it received support from powerful institutions and redirected resources toward Chinese migrant labourers, traders, and children. Chapter 6 introduces the aspiring Tanzanian interpreters who volunteer at the temple to improve their Chinese and network with potential employers and partners, engaging with debates about language acquisition and power dynamics in Sino-Tanzanian spaces. Chapter 7 describes the Chinese backpackers who stay at Tanhua Temple, arguing that their pursuits of 'civic intimacy' (Ning & Palmer 2024) through travel and volunteering are attempts at reclaiming the present, and at rejecting the future-orientated values of the state, family and market. In conclusion, I synthesise three themes that emerge from this thesis, asking how engagements across religious, economic and linguistic differences shaped social life at Tanhua Temple and the other Chinese Buddhist institutions on the continent. I argue that mission spaces are structured by contested comparisons. This means they can be sites of friction, fracture and fusion, as social life is framed and reframed by the diverse people and institutions that come into their orbit.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful for the institutional, intellectual and emotional support I have received over the last four years, without which this thesis would not have been possible.

This degree was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Open-Oxford-Cambridge Doctoral Training Program, with an honorary Cambridge International scholarship and Benefactors' Scholarship from St John's College. I also received support from the Smuts Memorial Fund managed by the University of Cambridge in memory of Jan Christiaan Smuts, The Richards Fund, the Radcliffe Brown Trust Award (ASA/RAI), and an award from the Great Britain-China Educational Trust.

I am very much indebted to the people I met in the field, from Dar es Salaam to Beijing. Their patience and hospitality was an essential ingredient in the making of this thesis. I would especially like to thank the Abbot and residents of Tanhua Temple who so graciously hosted me for over a year, and forgave me for sleeping through morning chanting more times than I would like to admit.

The students and staff of the Social Anthropology Department at Cambridge have been a source of constant intellectual stimulation and encouragement. A special thanks to members of the Writing Up Seminar, which has been the highlight of my week for the last two years. Thank you to my supervisor, James Laidlaw, whose retirement plans have been somewhat delayed by this project, but has nonetheless provided insightful, timely and supportive feedback on everything that I have written at Cambridge. I have also been lucky to receive feedback from the following people who read and commented on parts of this thesis: Naomi Fastovsky, Christie van Tinteren, Mike Degani, Benjy Klyne, Daniel Krugman, Xuefei Shi, Siyu Tang, Camille Lardy, Ashley Chin & Jacques Brouillette. Finally, a special thanks to the members of the SAN0: Cambridge Anthropology of Religion Reading Group with whom I have passionately debated the merits of over 30 books since 2021. I am sure that our lively conversations at Cambridge pubs have stimulated as many brain cells as they have destroyed.

In 2024 and 2025 I learned an immense amount from speakers at the "Frontiers of Faith: Religion in the China-Africa Space" seminar series that I convened with Professor Jörg Haustein, funded by the Cambridge Centre for the Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences (CRASSH). Thank you also to the scholars who gave me opportunities to present parts of this thesis to their deeply knowledgeable audiences: David Wank & Yoshiko Ashiwa (Chinese

Buddhism in Globalization Conference, 2024); Ida Hadjivayanis (BARAZA Annual Swahili Conference, SOAS 2024 & 2025), Benny Shen (Cambridge Indigenous Studies Discussion Group, 2024); David Palmer (Asian Religious Connections Research Cluster, Hong Kong University, 2025); and Catherine Hardie (Exploring Contemporary Monastic Religiosities in the Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist Worlds Conference, Hong Kong University, 2025).

Thank you lastly to my family and friends for being constant sources of support and encouragement. Finalising this thesis in Vancouver in the summer of 2025 with my parents (Ros Wisenthal & Matt Stapleton), grandparents (Jonathan and Christine Wisenthal) and brother Archie, has been a special way to end this PhD. Finally thanks to my partner of the last eight years, Cao Yue, for being there throughout this journey. Just as the relationships in this thesis span everything from tension and conflict to cooperation and compromise, so has ours. Although we are now going in our separate directions, I dedicate this thesis to you and our friendship.

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Introduction

Dealing with Difference at Tanhua Temple

Tanhua Temple is the first Chinese Buddhist mission in Tanzania, and one among a wave of Chinese Buddhist institutions established in Africa over the last three decades. Sino-Africa relations have intensified markedly in the 21st century, with deepening economic and political ties paving the way for increasing flows of people and ideas. While scholarly and media reports have taken factories, construction sites and mines as the paradigmatic sites of China-Africa engagements, there are also an increasing number of churches, monasteries and mosques on the complex and multifaceted 'frontiers' between Africa and China. From Nigerian Churches in Guangzhou (Haugen, 2024) to Daoist temples in South Africa (Fastovsky, 2025), religious institutions are facilitating new types of intellectual and material exchange in this century-defining relationship.

This thesis is the first long-term ethnography of an institution within the emerging Chinese Buddhist missionary movement in Africa. While Taiwanese Buddhists established the first Chinese Buddhist monastery in South Africa in 1992 and have since built orphanages all over the continent, it was not until the opening of Bohua Temple in Botswana in 2015 that the first Buddhist system from the People's Republic of China (PRC) arrived on the continent. Tanhua Temple, founded in 2018, belongs to the same Longquan System as Bohua Temple and was the first mainland Chinese Buddhist institution in Eastern Africa. Since then, a number of other mainland Buddhist institutions have been established, including the Shaolin Cultural Centre in Zambia (Li, 2024) and Xizu Temple in Madagascar (Shi, 2024), while Taiwanese organisations like the Amitofo Care Center and Tzu Chi International (Travagnin, 2025) continue to carry out vast charitable projects across the continent[1].

When I first arrived at Tanhua Temple in April of 2022, the Chinese Buddhist volunteer showing me around told me in no uncertain terms: "everyone comes here for different reasons". She gestured to the local staff, explaining that they were non-Buddhists working at the temple for a wage, as opposed to the Chinese Buddhist residents who were volunteers. Her comment prompted further questions: who were the different individuals and groups at Tanhua Temple? What were their different reasons for being here? And finally, if

[1] Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese Buddhist organisations come from very different political contexts, with Buddhist groups from Taiwan globalising earlier after the political liberalisation in the late 1980s (see Broy; Reinke & Clart, 2017). In this thesis 'Chinese Buddhism' refers to both mainland and Taiwanese groups, unless otherwise specified.

everyone came to Tanhua Temple for different reasons, how did they deal with those differences? Her comment was the perfect introduction to social life at Tanhua Temple, and ended up being the point of departure for almost all of the arguments made in this thesis.

This thesis is an ethnographic portrait of people dealing with the problem of pluralism at Tanhua Temple. This fieldsite was a productive place to think about pluralism given the profound linguistic, religious, class, ethnic and national differences that permeated social life. The people I met during fieldwork included citizens of Tanzania and China, Buddhists, Christians and Muslims, speakers of Swahili and Chinese, men and women, children and the elderly, along with people from every socio-economic status from wealthy businesspeople to unemployed migrant workers. While we tend to think about mission spaces as dyadic cross-cultural encounters (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991; 1997; Keane 2007), the differences shaping social life at Tanhua Temple went far beyond Buddhist versus non-Buddhist, or Chinese versus Tanzanian. As such, the ethnography that follows is not only about Buddhist missionaries and potential Tanzanian converts, but is a slow comparison of the wide range of relationships that developed at Tanhua Temple, and the way different groups of people dealt with their many differences. Ultimately I argue that while Tanhua Temple is deeply connected to the wider Sino-Tanzanian context, the particular ways people deal with their differences cannot be reduced to all encompassing metanarratives of neocolonialism or South-South cooperation, but instead require thick comparisons that account for the specific value framings of different groups who passed through its grounds. The resultant picture is a diverse set of relations that reveal this mission space to both reinforce and transcend the power dynamics in the broader Sino-Tanzanian encounter.

In this introductory chapter I begin by introducing the China-Africa literature, arguing that this field has gradually thickened its analyses of these relationships by more fully exploring the frontal and lateral dimensions of comparison (Candea 2016), moving us beyond the reductive metanarratives with ethnographically informed accounts. I then describe my own fieldwork and the ways that I positioned myself to conduct a thick comparison in the terms set out in the previous section. I then introduce the conceptual framework for this thesis, which extends thinking about the comparative method in anthropology Candea (2018) to comparative practices in social life, theorising the way people's contrasting comparisons can create friction, fracture and fusion in social relations. Finally, I introduce the particular relations analysed in each chapter, describing the way different people dealt with the problem of pluralism, and how these different perspectives shaped the collaborative, conflictual and contentious dynamics of life at Tanhua Temple.

Thick and Thin Comparisons of Sino-African Relations

China-Africa scholarship is now well into its second decade, and as an explicitly comparative field (it's in the name), the challenges it faces overlap significantly with the challenges that have faced the comparative method in anthropology. China-Africa scholarship is interdisciplinary, featuring scholars from political science, economics, sociology, geography, area studies, and anthropology, with each discipline applying their own analytic tools at different scales. While the field began with a focus on international relations (Large, 2008), from the outset there were calls to diversify methods and include more fieldwork-based studies (Strauss & Saavedra, 2009; Park & Huynh, 2010; Monson & Rupp, 2013). Strauss (2013) described ethnography as "a 'sixth sphere' to complement the other epistemic worlds that engage with China-Africa". In response, a "new generation" (Lee, 2022) of anthropologists have contributed a number of thick ethnographic descriptions of Sino-African spaces (Sheridan, 2017; Driessen, 2019; Wu, 2023; Ke-Schutte, 2023). To understand how ethnography has opened up new analytic possibilities in the China-Africa field, Matei Candea's archetype of comparison, with its frontal and lateral dimensions, and three perennial problems of mapping, communication and purpose are particularly useful.

Candea's book, *Comparison in Anthropology: the impossible method* (2018), presents an archetype of anthropological comparison, and provides a common language for anthropologists to talk about our radically diverging methods and aims while using the comparative method. While Candea focuses on anthropology, the model is broad enough for it to encompass the comparative, interdisciplinary work done in the Africa-China field. He begins with Evans-Pritchard's tripartite division of the anthropological method: *translation* of emic information into the etic language of anthropology, *abstraction* of that information into conceptual structures and puzzles, and finally *comparison* with other cases in the literature (Evans-Pritchard, 1950; 1951). Candea adapts this tripartite model into a more general archetype of comparison with a distinction between frontal and lateral comparison. Frontal comparisons operate along the "us" and "them" divide, including the fieldworker's encounter with their interlocutors, learning of languages if required and moments of culture-shock. In other words, these are the processes of "making the familiar strange and the strange familiar". For other disciplines this may include writing survey questions and collecting data, or a historian's first reading of archival material, and reflections on how they relate to ideas in their disciplinary hinterlands. This kind of comparison has been one of anthropology's most productive tools, as ethnographic evidence from around the world has transformed our

understanding of everything from kinship and politics to religion and economics. Recent ontological turns and decolonial critiques have also made frontal comparison the key focus of their theoretical, ethical and political reflections, problematising it in new and thought-provoking ways. Lateral comparisons are those that compare across two or more cases, objects or relations. As with frontal comparison, this encompasses a wide range of comparative moves. These comparisons can work towards the ends of identity or alterity through contrasts and analogies, but they can also push towards the recognition of bounded objects or towards dissolving those objects into intensities, flows and -scapes.

After laying out this archetype and a wide range of heuristic devices too numerous to mention here, Candea also presents a normative model for what he considers good comparison. In the past anthropological models of comparison have tended to contrast themselves with what they say is an inferior model, but as Candea carefully observes, many of the problems with comparison have periodically resurfaced, albeit in different forms. In fact, even at the time Evans-Pritchard described the comparative method, every step in the process had already been thoroughly challenged, leading him to call it the "impossible method" (see Candea, 2018:p.29-30). Candea describes three sets of perennial problems for the comparative method; mapping, communication and purpose, which I take to refer to the metaphysical/ontological, epistemological and ethical challenges facing comparison. As elaborated below, these problems also confront the scholars in the China-Africa literature. While there is no way of solving them entirely, by thickening our frontal and lateral comparisons, these problems can be mitigated. Instead of arguing for one particular comparative model or heuristic move, Candea urges us to put the full spectrum of tools to use, in what he calls 'thick comparisons'. Thick comparisons feature "a consideration of similarities and differences, continuities and breaks, between three or more entities, at least one of which includes the perspective from which the comparison is taking place" (p.323).

In recent years the China-Africa literature has thickened the lateral and frontal dimensions of this comparative subfield, and in doing so has produced important insights into the nature of Sino-African engagements. To see how this has been achieved, let us first consider two particularly thin but persistently cutting political metanarratives that have been the foils for many China-Africa publications. The first of these metanarratives is the critical Western characterization of China as an imperial, or *neocolonial* actor on the continent, one that is expanding its political and economic interests in a way that mirrors the extractive colonial practices of foreign powers past and present. The second is the narrative promoted by the Chinese government that China-Africa engagements are paradigmatic cases of

South-South cooperation, undermining global inequalities through win-win geopolitics. In the language of comparison laid out above, these comparisons fail to cut the ethnographic mustard because they are highly generalised lateral comparisons with politically problematic frontal dimensions. They start by asserting the existence of monolithic entities called China, and Africa (or sometimes even the Global South), and only reach for one comparative device when comparing the two. The term "South-South" asserts similarities between China and Africa based on shared experiences of imperialism and colonialism, while the neocolonial framing asserts differences by emphasising economic and political inequalities and dependencies. These metanarratives are also thin because they neglect to make explicit any frontal dimensions, which would reveal clear political purposes. Developing in response to these polarising narratives, Africa-China scholarship took on a "myth-busting disciplinary persona" (Sheridan, 2019), and sought to provide a more empirically informed picture. Rather than thinking of these as just more "nuanced" accounts (see Healy, 2017), I argue that the China-Africa literature has produced new insights by exploring a far fuller spectrum of lateral and frontal comparisons, allowing it to complicate these two metanarratives.

Lateral comparisons are centrally concerned with addressing the problem of mapping, or trying to define the objects, concepts or relations being compared. While political metanarratives speak of "China and Africa", academic work has disaggregated these two catch-all terms into an increasing number of national and subnational units. Even the most macro-level political or economic analyses in the literature tend to adopt a country-by-country mode of analysis, disaggregating Africa into its 54 nation states. Analysing China's relationship with one African country at a time allows us to distinguish between very different historical relationships that include Eswatini, which still has no formal diplomatic ties with the PRC, and countries like Tanzania, that have developed deep engagements with China from the Mao era (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012; Monson, 2009; Thomas 2024). More fine-tuned analyses of African countries have been matched with increasingly disaggregated approaches to China, such as discussions of the administrative pairing of African countries with Chinese provincial governments for foreign aid projects (Shi & Hoebink, 2019). Others have called for the field to move beyond methodological nationalism, such as Schneider's (2023) argument that framing migrant mobilities within China-Africa relations obscures the heterogeneity of Chinese migrants in Dar es Salaam. Other studies have investigated particular institutions in Sino-African spaces such as Confucius Institutes (Stambach & Kwayu, 2017), state and private companies (Lee, 2018), media organisations (Wu & van Staden, 2018) and Chinese medical clinics (Hsu, 2022).

Some scholars have turned their attention to religious institutions, including studies of African Christians and Muslims in Guangzhou (Haugen, 2013; Jiang, 2022), along with the surprising case of Jehovah's Witnesses in Zambia learning Chinese to proselytise to Chinese migrants (Haruyama, 2025). Most pertinently for this thesis, we now have one detailed lateral comparison of the Chinese Buddhist groups on the continent (Shi & Li, 2023), and studies of the various Chinese temples in Madagascar (Shi, 2024).

This increasingly detailed picture has revealed the variously overlapping and conflicting interests of different groups, or what we might call the "internal frontiers" (Stoler 1989) of Global China. For example, Maria Repnikova describes the "pragmatic enticement" of Confucius Institutes in Ethiopia that offer different value propositions to students, teachers and administrators. Miriam Driessen's monograph on Chinese road construction in Ethiopia describes strong distinctions between Chinese managers, migrant labourers and local employees. Her study also shows the importance of considering subnational African institutions, like the local courts (*wereda*) that seemed to side with the local workers more often than not. Consideration of local actors has also been encouraged by scholars trying to reinsert "African agency" into China-Africa relations (Corkin, 2013; Mohan & Lampert, 2012), and others have shown the key role played by African governments and subnational actors (Tudoroiu, 2022). This descent into increasing lateral complexity has not obscured the larger categories of China or Africa, but in fact has helped us reflect on how they are imagined by different actors on the ground. For example Derek Sheridan's (2019) detailed descriptions of Chinese traders in Kariakoo, Dar es Salaam, shows how they reflect on the larger category of China. This involves their own lateral comparison between the USA embassy and their own, which they complain does not protect them as the USA one does for American citizens. Monson & Rupp (2013) argue that the field's "most successful scholarship… conceptualizes the ways that these diverse levels of human engagement both overlap and interact". Thickening our lateral comparison through the disaggregation of the objects we are comparing not only generates more detailed pictures of particular relationships, but also shows how those relationships interact with broader China-Africa comparisons.

At another end of lateral comparison scholars abandon the fiction of bounded objects, and instead describe intensities, or in more familiar language: "flows, '- scapes' and multi-sited or travelling phenomena" (Candea, 2018:p.233). While this encompasses many potential comparative approaches, from Marxist critiques to celebrations of globalisation and hybridity, let us consider one example of this move in CK Lee's influential monograph *The*

Specter of Global China (2017). Like her earlier study of the labour regimes of Sino-African projects in Zambia and Tanzania (2009), Lee's monograph is a comparative one, comparing Chinese state investment with global private investment across the two industries of copper and construction. Following the "varieties of capital" literature, her objects of comparison are commensurable because they are all imagined as forms of capital. The comparison is no longer between distinct bounded objects, but instead flows of capital with variously similar or different logics of accumulation, regimes of labor, and ethos of management. Lee resists the taken for granted "Chineseness" of these phenomena, arguing instead that "we are compelled to show China's peculiarity, or the lack thereof, through comparison" (2022:p.327). Her slow and careful comparison of these two industries and two types of capital generates many important insights, including the fact that Chinese state capital is more responsive to political pressure, more focused on use-value and production, and ultimately more likely to make concessions to Zambians than private profit-driven capital. She also demonstrates that the differences between Chinese state capital and private capital are far less obvious in the construction sector where labour is less unionised. While her approach begins with a lateral comparison that emphasises *flows* of capital, and formal continuities between Chinese and non-Chinese actors, this approach also requires the identification of objects, like the companies being compared, or particular political leaders, or periods of time. She also explains her use of the terms state and private capital as "analytical and hypothetical constructs used as methodological devices to guide and structure my comparison" (Lee, 2018:p.5). The strength of her work is not in one particular comparative move or another, but in its ability to keep all ends of lateral comparison in play. Lee has become a leading voice in the Global China literature, and her calls for developing thick comparative heuristics are seen in her insistence that all scholars consider questions of "agency (who), interest (why), method (how) and consequences (so what)" (Lee, 2022). We can also see these questions in terms of the problems facing comparison; mapping (who/what), purpose (why), and communication (how). Analyses of China-Africa topics within these rubrics have significantly thickened the lateral comparisons in the literature, broadening our view of both the objects and relations that make up these spaces.

More recently, anthropologists working in Sino-African spaces have thickened the field's frontal comparisons. While lateral comparisons mainly deal with problems of mapping, frontal comparisons deal more directly with problems of communication and purpose. Namely, how can we really know anything about the "other", and what are we aiming to do with our comparisons? While frontal comparisons can be simply described as

comparisons between "us" and "them", both the "us" and the "them" are inherently unstable categories, and it is the oscillation between their various meanings that gives them their rigour. In China-Africa studies the "them" is necessarily diverse, as demonstrated in the previous discussion of lateral comparisons, but the "us" in this dyad also has multiple meanings. Here the first-person plural pronoun can stand variously for the individual fieldworker, their 'culture' or 'society', or more specifically the discipline of anthropology. None of these categories are self-evident (Chua & Mathur, 2018), and will vary across each individual scholar. To see the very different ends of frontal comparison, consider the following examples of reflexivity, recursivity and critique from the China-Africa literature.

Reflexivity has been an essential part of anthropological research since well before the so-called 'crisis of representation' in the 1980s, and in any case it is now standard practice to introduce the positionality of the researcher in any contemporary study. While the China-Africa literature has tended towards more positivist fact-checking missions, the challenge of reflexivity reminds us that the researchers' own identity impacts everything from the information they gather to the analytic tools they reach for. Cheryl Schmitz (2018) demonstrates this by describing a lunch in Angola between a Chinese manager and an American journalist. During this intense and awkward meeting, geopolitical sensitivities led the manager to give performative answers to the journalist's "relentless" questions, always implicitly responding to the Western critique from China's perspective. These answers were often very different to the type of things said among Chinese colleagues, revealing the way "us" and "them" dynamics change the very shape of the answers received during fieldwork. Miriam Driessen, a white European researcher, describes her positionality as embodying the "critical second other (the West)", which was "neutral at best and threatening at worst" (2019:p.26). However, at times she was also called Chinese by her Ethiopian interlocutors, and at other times expected to attend Church because she looked European. Speaking both Amharic and Chinese, a close analogue to my own fieldwork positionality in Tanzania, Driessen was able to have in depth conversations with both Ethiopian and Chinese interlocutors, even though she was sometimes seen as a suspicious third party. In other cases researchers are perceived as unambiguously representing one side or the other. In *Affective Encounters*, Wu Di describes his positionality in the field as straightforwardly Chinese, which has the advantage of allowing him to gain deep access into the subtleties of Chinese social life in Zambia. While each scholar's positionality presents its own challenges and opportunities, by taking a reflexive approach, and diversifying the origins of the researchers in the field, this work is productively thickening our frontal comparisons.

Aside from reflexively acknowledging the role of the researcher's identity, frontal comparisons can also push towards the end of recursivity, a move made popular by the ontological turn (Holbraad & Pederson, 2017). This brings the problem of communication squarely into focus, a set of epistemological concerns about the possibility of ever truly knowing the other. Bunkenborg, Nielsen, & Pedersen's book, *Collaborative damage: An experimental ethnography of Chinese globalization* (2022) is the most in depth example of this kind of approach in the China-Africa literature. This collaborative project between three Danish anthropologists, each with language skills and fieldwork experiences in China, Mongolia and Mozambique respectively, was initially framed by a lateralist comparative methodology called the Dual Perspective Approach (DPA). By comparing Chinese engagements in Mongolia and Mozambique they sought to find general features of what they call an "incipient Chinese empire" (Bunkenborg, Nielsen & Pederson, 2022:p.235). However, their attempts to collaborate resulted in divergent interpretations, arguments, and even shouting matches, leading them to lose faith in the potential of the DPA. The recursive move was to think about their disagreements as symptomatic of a broader state of "collaborative damage", of mutual incomprehensibility and confusion, that characterised not just their own internal dynamics, but also Chinese-local relations. To describe these relations they coined the term "intimate distances", denoting the "paradoxical liaisons of mutual misrecognition" that form the "elementary building blocks of … social and material worlds" (2022:p33). Rhetorical emphasis on their disagreement demonstrates that the Chinese empire was never "out there", but was also produced through frontal comparison: "We too are the Chinese empire, but we only found out—we only discovered the secret of globalizing China—when we started arguing about it!". The failure of the DPA, a comparative heuristic to begin with, was in fact productive when combined with the frontal, recursive move just described. So despite the theoretical push toward frontal comparison and away from the naive positivism of the DPA (and CK Lee's comparative approach), it is more accurate to see the DPA as an essential lateral comparison that then paves the way for the recursive frontal move just described. Just as the most frontally inspired approaches of the ontological turn also have to rely on any number of micro lateral comparisons to construct the "us" and "them" of the researcher and their interlocutors, *Collaborative Damage* also generates comparative rigour through the careful oscillation between frontal and lateral comparisons.

Frontal comparison can also be imagined as the encounter between ethnographic material and the scholar's own intellectual hinterland. The multiplicity of this hinterland, which itself requires a lateral comparison, generates the rigour of these approaches. For

example, Wu Di's ethnography of Chinese-Zambian relations engages with Fei Xiaotong's sociology of China, bringing concepts like "differential mode of association" (*chaxugeju*) into conversation with the anthropological literature on affect and ethics. Here we see a frontal comparison being put to the end of clarifying our conceptual tools, which is achieved by putting parts of the anthropological hinterland together in new ways. Comparisons can have many other purposes, some of them pushing in incommensurate directions. One example of frontal comparison being put to explicitly critical, decolonial purposes is Jay Ke-Schutte's *Angloscene: Compromised Personhood in Afro-Sino Translations* (2023). This monograph describes the experiences of African university students in Beijing, who after imagining their studies in China through idioms of third-world solidarity, find themselves in part time jobs teaching English to their Chinese classmates who are applying for Oxbridge and Ivy Leagues institutions, leading them to ask: "Why do I have to come here, while the Chinese can go there?". Ke-Schutte develops the concept of the "angloscene", which is a "political economy of cosmopolitan aspiration", or "a white space-time with English subtitles that ideologically and discursively stratifies all non-heteronormative, non-white subjects in ultimately unequal ways, even within a non-western encounter" (p.10). Different as these analyses are, much as Wu Di's particular academic hinterland contributed to his analytic approach, Ke-Schutte's position as a white South African studying in an elite US institution also played a key role in his coinage of the "angloscene". His own disappointment with the lack of non-Western scholars in the curriculum of his American university, combined with his close reading of scholars like Franz Fanon, contributed to his particular style of analytic intervention. While neither of these exact theoretical approaches will be applied in this thesis, these examples reveal another important dimension for the thickening of frontal comparisons in the study of Sino-African contexts.

This brief tour through the China-Africa literature, from the thickening of thin political metanarratives through lateral comparison, to its more recent frontal innovations, has revealed an overall diversification of the comparative approaches in the field. If this section has involved laying out the different approaches within the China Africa literature, or a lateral comparison of the field, the following section turns to the frontal comparison that produced the arguments in this thesis: my fieldwork experiences.

Fieldwork

If comparisons all face the problems of mapping, communication and purpose, my fieldwork was designed in a way to mitigate against each of these, by conducting participant observation at Tanhua Temple as a volunteer interpreter and driver. On most days Tanhua Temple was home to no more than a few Chinese monastics, a handful of lay volunteers, two or three local staff and 18 children. This scale meant it was possible to get to know all of its residents in some depth, and allowed me to map the various relationships that structured temple life. Answering the problem of mapping is the first point of call in each chapter, as I describe particular individuals and groups whose engagements are being analysed, and identify the relevant objects and relations that they consider meaningful at Tanhua Temple. I did this by participating in temple life, which was in some ways highly repetitive, punctuated by daily collective rituals, but in other ways highly eventful and surprising. The temple was constantly visited by Tanzanian and Chinese people and institutions, and over my year there I was able to observe many engagements across differences that became the ethnographic material presented in this thesis.

An average day began with close to an hour of morning chanting at 5am (*zaoke*), followed by breakfast, after which I would drive the children to school. Throughout the morning volunteers and staff did various chores around the temple before lunch was served at 11:10am. After lunch, the temple's residents took their afternoon nap while I went to pick up the younger children from school, going again to get the older students at 4pm. There was an optional repentance and prostration session at 2pm, but I was also on call as one of the only people with a driver's licence, meaning I went on weekly trips to the market, and countless trips to suppliers of building materials, to the Immigration Office for visa issues, or to their new temple property on the outskirts of Dar es Salaam. At 5pm evening chanting began, followed by dinner and then evening study sessions in the Buddha hall, or personal time. Days would often end with conversations with my roommate in the dormitories before we fell asleep. For the first few months of fieldwork I closely observed this timetable, although as the year went on I became increasingly selective with my time.

The problem of communication was particularly pressing at Tanhua Temple because to engage with all of its residents I needed to be able to speak and understand Chinese and Swahili. Having several years experience studying in China, translating for Buddhist monastics (Stapleton & Tao, 2022), and doing participant observation within the same Buddhist system in Beijing (Stapleton, 2024), I was well prepared to integrate into the

Chinese side of social life at Tanhua Temple. However, Swahili was a new language for me at the time I commenced the PhD program, and while I was able to start lessons before arriving in the field, I was still a beginner by the time I arrived in Tanzania. Given my aim of capturing a thick comparative picture of social life at Tanhua Temple, I was very aware that I needed to improve my Swahili to a level comparable to my Chinese, within a very short period of time. I did this by doing at least an hour a day of flashcards that included words and sentences from my Swahili lessons at Cambridge and private lessons, along with the new words and phrases I picked up in the field. Having told the temple management that I would require time each day to study and practise Swahili, they were very tolerant and gave me significant leeway in attending prayers and chores. Attending the Swahili language events in the Buddha Hall on Sundays gave me a lot of listening practice, and I also read short stories written by the temple's local leader. I recorded many Swahili language events, and relistened to those from the early months after my Swahili had improved, which was also a chance to continue practising my listening skills. I soon became more confident using Swahili, and by the end of my fieldwork I was comfortable acting as a Chinese-Swahili interpreter in the temple.

The role of interpreter was a crucial element of my fieldwork, in that it allowed me to be on the front line of many engagements across differences at the temple, but it also brought the problem of purpose into sharp focus. To begin with it allowed me very close access to the Abbot and his leading volunteers, which in a large monastery in China would be next to impossible given the competition for their attention. Serving as the Abbot's Chinese-English interpreter during his Dharma talks forced me to take detailed notes, and actively consider the meaning of every single sentence. It also forced me to listen carefully to the questions asked to him by local visitors. While this sometimes involved some back and forth between the two parties, and my translation was by no means perfect, these countless hours of interpreting both sharpened my own linguistic skills, and helped me gain deeper insights into the relations unfolding at Tanhua Temple. While there were normally other Chinese volunteers who could assist with Chinese-English interpretation if I wasn't there, I often served as interpreter for private meetings between the Abbot and non-Chinese speaking individuals visiting the temple. While it is impossible for an interpreter to completely melt into the background, and my presence clearly had some influences on the conversations that unfolded, I made a conscious effort not to be too vocal about my own opinions. Towards the end of fieldwork I was more forthcoming, especially when asked directly during casual discussions, but for the most part I tried to remain as impartial as possible. This was of course very difficult, and as a

third-party (non-Tanzanian, non-Chinese) interpreter I was often caught squarely between conflicting parties. There were many occasions during which I felt sympathy for a particular side (normally the Tanzanian workers), and did my best to represent their interests (to the Chinese management). On one occasion just before I concluded my fieldwork I refused to translate when I was asked to tell all of the local workers their contracts were not being renewed[2]. On other occasions the manager admitted to paying a local more than she would have otherwise because I was watching. Suffice to say that the position of interpreter was often a compromised one, as I detail in Chapter 5, meaning that small, sometimes unintentional interventions were inevitable. However it was also an excellent way for me to observe people at Tanhua Temple dealing with their differences. My role as interpreter gave me a first hand experience negotiating some of the same kinds of differences as my interlocutors, and while not all of us dealt with them in the same way, at the very least we were all dealing with them together.

Having described my own attempts to reduce the linguistic differences between me and my Chinese and Tanzanian interlocutors, and my fraught but productive position as interpreter, I should also describe the way in which my interlocutors interpreted my own positionality. As noted above, reflexivity is an essential part of China-Africa scholarship, and at Tanhua Temple my positionality was best captured by the Swahili term "*mzungu*", or white person (see Haruyama, 2024 for a detailed etymology). In fact, several months in, it became clear that the Chinese temple manager thought my English name was *mzungu*, and another Chinese volunteer ended up transliterating *mzungu* into Chinese and started calling me *muronggu,* which then caught on among the children who found the Chinese way of saying *mzungu* amusing. The way my name bounced around the multilingual environment at Tanhua Temple is somewhat akin to my own movements through the temple, attempting as much as possible to engage with every person in either Swahili or Chinese. Ironically my behaviour actually shared a lot with one potential etymological root of the term *mzungu*, which is *kuzunguka,* meaning to "roam around", and also "*kizunguzungu*" which means to be dizzy, which might be an approximation of what Swahili speakers thought of the first white people to arrive there. While I was unambiguously the *mzungu*, or *muronggu*, which like Dreissen may have made me a critical Western observer, the longer I stayed the less this seemed to matter. My intense interest in Chinese and Swahili led both groups of interlocutors to see me as at the very least a foreigner who was deeply interested in their culture. At times this also

[2] Instead they were given a letter by the manager, who cried as she did, partly because she knew how much work they did. For the events leading up to this moment see Chapter 3.

spilled over into moments of recognition that I had somehow already "become Swahili" (*umeshakuwa mswahili*)[3], or that I might have been a Chinese Buddhist in a past life. However, ultimately I occupied a very privileged, and almost entirely distinct position at the temple. Not only was I funded externally, and able to contribute in small ways to fellow residents at the temple, I was also clearly a Western other. At times I sensed implicit racial hierarchies being made explicit, often after my fruitless attempts to complicate them. For example one of the older Tanzanian employees repeatedly said that I was a "civilised person" (*mstaarabu),* and there was a Chinese volunteer who asked me to teach her about superior Western models of education and parenting. While I acknowledge that power dynamics of the 'angloscene' (Ke-Schutte, 2023) were present, it was mostly brought about by my presence, and on the whole the West was conspicuously absent from the realities of social life at Tanhua Temple. Aside from me, the temple did not develop any deep engagements with a *'mzungu*', and those that did pass through its grounds were normally on their way to the beach. However, these frontal experiences of racial hierarchy, however uncomfortable they may be, certainly taught me a lot about the way perceived racial hierarchies played into my own fieldwork dynamics. A combination of white privilege, and also respect for my educational background and language skills, meant that I was generally able to occupy the position of third-party. While my role as an interpreter raised the problem of purpose for me and my interlocutors, it also made me particularly sensitive to the engagements across differences that were unfolding at Tanhua Temple.

Beyond daily life at the temple, I also visited all of the Chinese Buddhist organisations in Africa, conducted countless hours of online ethnography, and made one trip to China. In 2023 I accompanied two monks and two lay volunteers from Tanhua Temple to Malawi to visit the founder of the Amituofo Care Centre (ACC)[4], Venerable Hui Li. We inspected one orphanage & school in Blantyre and their boarding school in Lilongwe, along with an agricultural investment called the Puti Farm. Later that year I accompanied Venerable Yifa, a Taiwanese nun and several other scholars on a study tour to South Africa, Eswatini and Madagascar, where we visited more ACC campuses, along with another Puti Farm near Cape Town, Fo Guang Shan's Nan Hua monastery near Bloemfontein, and Xi Zu Monastery in Madagascar, the largest mainland Chinese monastery on the continent. In 2024 I returned to the field, and aside from visiting my own fieldsite, I also took the TAZARA railway to

[3] There was also a tongue in cheek element to this comment, given the self-deprecating double meaning of 'Swahili'.

[4] ACC is the largest Chinese Buddhist organisation in Africa, its leader Hui Li originally came to South Africa the early 1990s to establish Fo Guang Shan's Nanhua Monastery.

Zambia where I visited Shaolin Temple in Lusaka, and then took a bus to visit Bohua Temple in Botswana. These experiences allowed me to gain a lateral sense of the wider Chinese Buddhist missionary movement in Africa, which I return to in the Conclusion of this thesis. I also spent significant time observing and participating in Tanhua Temple's online spaces with their thousands of supporters in China, and visited Beijing where I met the core volunteers supporting Tanhua Temple from afar.

While there is no such thing as an all-encompassing ethnography, and there is so much ethnographic material that has been left out of this thesis, I hope you will be convinced that the fieldwork undergirding this research was sufficient to attempt a thick comparative account of social life at Tanhua Temple.

The Problem of Pluralism: an ethnography of comparison

This thesis is conceptually concerned with the problem of pluralism, or how we live together across our many and varied differences. Its central theoretical contribution is an application of discussions of comparison in anthropology to a range of conceptual and empirical literatures that each in their own way all deal with the problem of pluralism. A proposal for a similar analytic move was made in a recent special issue entitled 'How People Compare', which argues that taking comparison as an ethnographic object will allow us to "explore what it means to compare and be compared, what kinds of epistemic techniques this entails, and how these are mobilized for specific purposes" (Walker & Pelkmans, 2022:p.17). The authors rightly point out that comparative practices in social life take on greater affective, political and ethical significance than anthropological comparisons. However, while their aim was to engage with "a wave of writings on anthropological comparison", they miss an opportunity to think with Candea's discussion of frontal and lateral comparison and the perennial problems of mapping, communication and purpose. This would have led them to a detailed model for the 'epistemic techniques' and 'purposes' of comparison they seek to explore.

This thesis repurposes Candea's concepts for analyses of social life at Tanhua Temple, and extends the model in several ways. To begin with, it is clear that the problems facing anthropological comparison are also salient in our social lives, though not in precisely the same ways. Just as anthropologists think through the problem of mapping as they define their objects of study, our interlocutors are also deeply invested in the categories they encounter, use and adapt as they make the infinite complexity of life intelligible to the human mind. The

problem of communication is also central to social life, especially in linguistically plural spaces like Tanhua Temple, as people search for ways to understand the other and have their own positions recognised by people with whom they may not share a common religion, language, ethnicity, class etc. Finally, as people try to clarify their own intentions and those of others, adjusting their actions and reactions accordingly, they are also engaged with the problem of purpose. These concepts are particularly applicable in a place like Tanhua Temple where the problems of cross-cultural comparisons were not only relevant to the anthropologist, but also to the residents and guests who also dealt with the problems of mapping, communication and purpose in daily life. The structural similarities between the anthropological encounter and social life at Tanhua Temple make it a perfect place to answer the call for "more solid cross-situational or even cross-cultural comparisons of comparative practices" (Walker & Pelkmans 2022:p.32). However, by taking Candea's model into the field we must untether the frontal and lateral dimensions of comparison from the anthropologist, and instead acknowledge that one person's frontal comparison is another person's lateral comparison. For example, my description of an interreligious dialogue between Buddhists, Christians and Muslims is a form of lateral comparison, but it is also a frontal comparison for those involved. Just as the oscillation between frontal and lateral comparisons produce rigour in Candea's model, the oscillation between different centres of comparison produce a thick description of the way people deal with the problem of pluralism at Tanhua Temple.

This thesis is not interested in comparison for comparison's sake, which could be interpreted as a kind of butterfly collecting for an abstract philosophical model, but instead traces these comparative practices to analyse the relationships that developed at Tanhua Temple. By transposing Candea's concepts onto ethnographic contexts, we are no longer in the papery realm of anthropological comparisons, but instead are amidst the ebbs and flows of daily life with all of its ephemeral ambiguity and real-world consequences. Adam Seligman and Robert Weller's work on the problem of pluralism (2012; 2019) present us with a set of heuristics that delineate ways in which people deal with their differences in social life, and how they count things as the same. These include the practice of notation that seeks to clarify the boundaries of different identities through increasingly detailed categories, but also ritual and shared experience that have the potential to blur and sometimes transcend them (2023). They argue that there are different grounds for these comparisons that produce very different results in practice. For example, to claim shared identity on the grounds of common memory is relatively closed-off to those who don't share that memory, while

participation in mimetic action (ritual) is less so, and the work of the metaphor is the most dynamic of them all, opening up possibilities for new connections between things previously thought as unrelated. They argue that the ground for any particular comparison can draw on one or more of these modes of counting as the same, and that these change the way we think about everything from gifts to war memorials. While their argument is in fact a normative one about the value of metaphor, ritual and shared experience to transcend notation, their discussion moves us beyond purely discursive dynamics and towards a more ethnographically informed picture of the comparative boundary work that unites and divides us.

Inspired by this work, this thesis argues that we should add another temporal axis to Candea's model if we are to apply it to comparative practices in the world, and with that introduce two new problems: the problem of *contrasting comparative frames*, and the *consequences of comparison*. While Candea's model is interested in how comparisons are mobilised in anthropological texts, an ethnography of comparative practices has to consider how one person's comparative framing can exist alongside other people's, not only as an intellectual exercise, but in the give and take of daily life. Here we move from abstract comparison, to comparisons that are embedded within social, economic and political life, not only as intellectual propositions, but also as real world encounters and exchange relations. By thinking about the "social life of comparison" (Walker & Pelkmans; 2022), we can transpose Candea's comparative language onto moments of intellectual, religious, material or monetary exchange between different actors. In any ethnographic context with more than one subject (that is almost all of them, even most single-interlocutor ethnographies), we have cases in which the encounters and exchanges that unfold could be viewed from at least two perspectives, bringing the problem of *contrasting comparative frames* into focus. For example, Chapter 4's discussion of the exchanges between the temple, recipients of their charitable donations, and the workers they employed reveals that the nature of these exchange relations were understood very differently by each party. The same exchange relation could be framed as either a charitable gift or a market transaction, and working at the temple could be framed as either spiritually rewarding volunteering or wage labour. These are not static frames, but ones that respond to each other over time as people deal with the problems of mapping, communication and purpose in their engagements with others who did not always share their view of the world. Just as Appadurai (1986) notes the importance of the shifting framings of things as they move between people and places, the comparisons that structure social life also transform as they come into contact with the framing of others. This brings us

to the *consequences of comparison*, which refer to the way contrasting framings can produce tensions, conflicts and transformations in social life. In Chapter 4 I describe three consequences of these clashing frameworks; friction[5] (where there is tension but exchange relations continue), fractures (where conflict leads to the ceasing of exchange relations), and fusion (in which compromises are reached and exchange relations continue in new ways). In all of the chapters we see different permutations of contrasting frames, leading to a range of social outcomes from convivial cooperation to fracturing conflict. While I first disaggregate these relations, analysing each on its own terms, at the end of the thesis I synthesise three central differences that feature across the chapters. Theoretical frameworks are only useful to the extent that they give us new insights into our ethnographic materail, and the value of thick comparison should be measured by the quaity of arguments that it produces. It is to those arguments that I now turn.

Chapter Outlines

The structure of this thesis is based on my own mapping of the field, starting with the transnational Buddhist system at its centre, and continuing to describe the temple's engagements with different groups of Chinese and Tanzanians who came into its orbit. I was told on my first day that everyone comes to Tanhua Temple for different reasons, and that means they also deal with the problem of pluralism in different ways. Each chapter involves a lateral comparison between two or more groups (a frontal comparison from their perspective), and asks how they deal with the problems of mapping, communication, purpose in their engagements with others. By describing these contrasting comparative frames I also attempt to explain the consequences of these comparisons in social life. In many ways each chapter describes what Mary Louise Pratt calls 'contact zones', which are 'the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect' (1992: 7). Given the wide range of individuals and institutions who passed through Tanhua Temple, each chapter deals with a particular set of histories and empirical literatures, and does so with a different set of analytic concepts. While the first four chapters deal more explicitly with the problem of religious pluralism, the final three chapters move us into the realm of economic, political, linguistic and value-based differences.

[5] While building on the insights of Anna Tsing's (2005) use of the term, by flanking it with fracture and fusion I have a slightly narrower meaning in mind.

Chapter 1 traces the institutional development of Tanhua Temple, from its roots at the Beijing Longquan Monastery (2004-2018) to the emergence of the Tanhua System in the 2020s after the collapse of the broader Longquan System. This lateral comparison of Buddhist systems (*fojiao tixi*) reveals a particular mode of Buddhist organisation, one in which lay and monastic Buddhists collaborate under the leadership of a single monastic to create scalable structures for spreading the Dharma. I argue that the *Buddhist system* is not coextensive with other modes of Buddhist organisation like lineage, school or monastery, and as such should be adopted as a new analytic term in the anthropology of Buddhism, pointing to several organisations the term could apply to. This comparison also reveals some of the particular features of the Tanhua system, like its hybrid online-offline model, as they deal with the problem of communication between the system's Chinese devotees and its Tanzanian temple. I also argue that the bounded object of Tanhua System was entangled in a set of broader flows beyond its formal borders. These include lineage connections with Indonesian monastics, the transmissions of texts and teaching models from a Sino-Tibetan Buddhist organisation in Taiwan, collaboration with a Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhist temple in Dar es Salaam and connections with a Taiwanese Buddhist organisation in Africa. The slow process of tracing these historical and contemporary networks within and beyond the Longquan and Tanhua Buddhist systems is an instance of thick lateral comparison, seeing both similarities, differences, objects and flows. This allows me to describe the way differences are dealt with at different levels of the organisation, remaining open and inclusive at the bottom, while becoming increasingly competitive and hierarchical within its inner structures. I argue that it is this bifurcated approach to the problem of pluralism that explains its ability to overcome crises, and to become the first mainland Chinese Buddhist system to conduct missionary work in Africa.

Chapter 2 describes the collaboration between the Abbot and James[6], a charismatic Tanzanian man who became the temple's first local leader. I begin by introducing James, and the way he learned to negotiate the plural landscape of Dar es Salaam. I then describe the Sunday sessions that James ran with the Abbot for locals, during which hundreds of Tanzanians were introduced to Buddhism. Here we see James adopting a thick comparative approach that grafted Buddhism onto a Tanzanian context through notation of the similarities, differences, commensurabilities and incommensurabilities with the local context. I then describe the refuge ceremony that was held after a few months of Sunday sessions, in which

[6] All names of people in this thesis are anonymised, other than leaders of public institutions who are publicly identifiable, such as the Abbot who is the only Chinese Buddhist Abbot in Tanzania.

eight Tanzanian men became lay members of the temple. By contrasting the cosmopolitan conversations with this ritual moment of 'conversion', we see two very different responses to the problem of pluralism. While cosmopolitan conversations reinforced and dissolved differences through notation (Seligman & Weller 2023), the refuge ceremony symbolically transcended them through ritual action. The move from cosmopolitan conversations to 'conversion' captures an important historical moment in the development of Sino-Tanzanian Buddhism, and also helps us thicken our accounts of the shifting framings of missionary encounters.

Chapter 3 analyses the rise and fall of the local Buddhist studies groups that developed under James' leadership. This chapter also describes a shift in the framing of relations from the shared ground of polyontological pluralism to the more contested space of patron-client relations. I first describe the way Tanhua Temple thickened its engagements with its local congregation through outreach visits to their communities, opening up space for a wider range of encounters that went beyond the purely discursive to include material, embodied and supernatural dimensions. These include the use of Buddhist amulets, instances of spirit possession, and the Abbot's advice on matters of health, wealth and witchcraft. On both sides, these engagements were framed by polyontological pluralism, which acknowledges the commensurability of different traditions that people draw on in pluralistic spaces. In the Chinese and Eastern African regional literatures polyontological pluralism has been identified as an important way people engage across differences, and this was on full display at Tanhua Temple. While framings of these engagements varied among the Tanzanian and Chinese participants, all seemed to agree that Buddhism was a commensurable spiritual force, even if they differed about what that meant. Secondly, I describe the thinning of these relations, as the expectations of patron-client relations clashed with the Abbot's ascetic and antimarket ideals. Here we see the importance of shifting comparative framings of the relationship between the temple and its local congregation. The move from polyontological pluralism to patron-client relations produced friction, and finally fracturing of the relationship, explaining why Tanhua Temple's first attempt at localisation came to an end.

Chapter 4 analyses the exchange relations that Tanhua Temple developed with its volunteers, employees, and recipients of its charitable donations. The "merit model" that framed these exchanges for the temple leadership is a set of ethical discourses grounded in Buddhist doctrine, but also inflected by recent Chinese Buddhist histories and the life experiences of those involved. I describe the tensions, conflicts and compromises that result when a monist value framework comes into contact with people and groups that do not accept

its encompassment of value within the merit model. This chapter engages with anthropological debates about values and exchange, developing three heuristic concepts that describe the clashing of value frames and their effects on social relations, all with ethnographic examples from Tanhua Temple. 'Friction' creates tension but allows exchange to continue, 'fracturing' leads to irreconcilable differences and the ending of exchange relations, and 'fusion' results in a synthesis of the two value frameworks that allows exchange relations to continue in new ways. The contrast between merit and market framings of exchange is essential to understanding the sometimes fraught relationships Tanhua Temple developed with its workers, volunteers and recipients of charity.

Chapter 5 takes us further into the context of Dar es Salaam by describing Tanhua Temple's relationships with the Chinese diaspora. I introduce three key business people who acted as mediators between the temple and local actors throughout the process of land acquisition and the opening of an orphanage and school. I also describe the temple's redistributive function within the diaspora, as it received support from powerful institutions and redirected resources toward Chinese migrant labourers, traders, and children. In doing so I reflect on debates about extractive enclaves in the China-Africa literature, arguing that Tanhua Temple operates as a new type of redistributive institution in the Chinese diaspora in Tanzania.

Chapter 6 introduces the aspiring Tanzanian interpreters who volunteer at the temple to improve their Chinese and network with potential employers and partners, engaging with debates about language acquisition and power dynamics in Sino-Tanzanian spaces. By exploring their language learning journeys, from learning Chinese at the Confucius Institutes to perfecting it at Tanhua Temple, and finally being employed by Chinese companies, we see both the challenges and opportunities presented by Chinese language acquisition. Reflecting on arguments about Confucius Institutes and linguistic imperialism, I argue that language acquisition and the position of the interpreter provide opportunities for interventions in and critiques of Sino-Tanzanian spaces, within existing structural constraints.

Chapter 7 introduces the Chinese travellers who came to volunteer at Tanhua Temple for days, weeks or months at a time on their journeys through the region. This diverse cross section of university students, artists, essayists, vloggers, and backpackers made Tanhua Temple a place to "check in" (*daka,* a popular internet slang). All of them emphasised the personal nature of their travel choices, a style of travel that values autonomy, genuine interactions, and on an even more abstract level, valorises the experience of difference itself. Individualisation, a process well described in the China literature, has made many young

people sceptical of ‘one-size fits all’ approaches, including the traditional values of family, the increasingly ‘involuted’ contemporary workplace and systems of organized religion. This plurality of unsatisfactory ethical discourses has led my interlocutors to think about values as a deeply personal choice. By describing their lives in China, their travels, their engagements with the temple, and the online content they produced about it, I argue that these young people represent a cultural countercurrent in Chinese society. Prompted by their accounts, I reflect on their pursuit of ‘civic intimacy’, and how these individuals created what Ning & Palmer (2024) have called a ‘micro-civil sphere’ at Tanhua Temple.

In conclusion I ask how Tanhua Temple and the Chinese Buddhist missionary movement fit into the broader China-Africa relationship. By analysing the way religious, economic and linguistic differences were dealt with across the chapters of this thesis, I argue that mission spaces like Tanhua Temple are structured by contested comparisons. This means they can be sites of friction, fracture and fusion, as social life is framed and reframed by the diverse people and institutions that come into their orbit.

Chapter 1

The Tanhua System: tracing the lay and monastic networks of the first Chinese Buddhist mission in Tanzania

1.0 Introduction

The full name of the place I lived in Dar es Salaam was the Longquan Tanhua Temple. 'Longquan' refers to the broader Buddhist System (*fojiao tixi*) from which Tanhua Temple emerged. Founded in 2005, the Longquan System had grown rapidly until a scandal embroiled their leader in August of 2018, leading to the closure of its Beijing headquarters. When Tanhua Temple was established in March of 2018, it was still a node within the Longquan System, but after the crisis it was forced to develop independently. By 2021 the Abbot of Tanhua Temple, Venerable Xianhong, and his followers, were using the term 'Tanhua System' (*tanhua tixi*) to refer to their own online-offline hybrid networks of lay devotees, most of whom are in China, who have supported an increasing array of projects in Dar es Salaam. This chapter traces the lay and monastic Buddhist networks that have contributed to the emergence of the Longquan and Tanhua Systems, from the late Qing Dynasty to the present. In doing so we see the driving forces behind the first Chinese Buddhist mission in Tanzania.

After presenting this thick lateral comparison of two Buddhist systems over time, I then turn to a frontal comparison, asking what the term "Buddhist system" might contribute to the anthropology of Buddhism, and how it compares with our existing concepts. The term system (*tixi*) was used by my Chinese interlocutors to describe both the Longquan and Tanhua systems, and also other large Buddhist organisations like Fo Guang Shan, Larung Gar, or the Shaolin system. I define a Buddhist system as a form of religious organisation in which lay and monastic Buddhists collaborate under the leadership of a single monastic to create scalable structures for spreading the Dharma (*hongfa*). While these systems come in many shapes and sizes, they are also distinct enough to represent a new analytic category in the anthropology of Buddhism. By analysing the structures of the Tanhua system and its antecedent in the Longquan system, we see a model of lay education and management structures that have facilitated their growth in China and beyond. I argue that the "system" is not coextensive with more traditional terms used in Buddhist studies, like lineage, school/sect, and monastery, justifying its addition to our analytic toolkit. However, while these new bounded institutions are the driving force behind the growth of Tanhau Temple,

they are still connected in important ways to people, institutions, and ideas from outside of the system, constituting what I refer to as a Buddhist assemblage. The Buddhist assemblage encompasses a wider set of relationships that transcend loyalties to particular monastics, monasteries and schools of Buddhism. Seeing both the bounded object, and the broader flows that it exists within, I argue that the system is strengthened by its bounded, internally hierarchical structures, and its open, non-sectarian dealings with newcomers and outsiders. This openness in its dealings with non-system members, and increasingly hierarchical internal structure represent solutions to the problem of pluralism within the system, and allow it to sustain an increasing array of Buddhist studies groups, and a committed group of volunteers to lead them. Thinking through the various ways boundaries are drawn within and beyond the system allows us to see the system as both a seeker-friendly, expansionary religious system, and one that at its centre is defined by increasing orthodoxy and hierarchical relations typical of Chinese lay-monastic cooperation.

1.1 The Longquan System

The founder of the Longquan system, Venerable Xuecheng (born 1966, Dharma name), was born into a pious Buddhist family in Fujian Province, Xianyou county. After the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), this region was one of the first to experience a Buddhist revival. Fujian province recovered 85% of Buddhist temples by the mid 1980s, and by the end of the decade, "the 3,000 registered Buddhist temples in Fujian constituted 80 percent of all registered temples in the PRC, while its 10,000 monks and nuns accounted for 25 percent of the national population of Buddhist clerics" (Ashiwa & Wank, 2023:p92). Xuecheng was ordained in 1982 at Guanghua Monastery in Putian (Andreasen, 2020), a historical centre for Buddhism in the Xinghua[7] region, and one that benefited greatly from transnational connections with Southeast Asia. In the 19th and 20th centuries migrants from this region followed other groups from Fujian who had been trading and migrating to the region for centuries (Dean, 2011). Kenneth Dean (2022) has identified eight types of transnational networks including extended-lineage groups, networks of fisherman and smugglers, and many different religious and ritual networks. Those included networks of Xinghua Buddhist monks, who were linked through master-disciple lineage relations. Guanghua Monastery had sent monks to establish temples in Indonesia at the end of the 19th century, and during the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution monks from those institutions came to the aid of their

[7] Older name for the Putian area, which is also a dialect group.

ancestral temple (*zuting*), channelling resources from overseas Chinese communities. These transnational lineage connections created the conditions for Xuecheng's monastic career, and would also take on new significance at Tanhua Temple four decades later.

Xuecheng rose quickly through the ranks of Buddhist and state institutions. He studied at Buddhist seminaries in Fujian and Beijing in the 1980s, giving him important connections. With the support of the President of the Buddhist Association of China (BAC), Zhao Puchu (1907-2000), Xuecheng became Abbot of Guanghua Monastery in 1989, and was the youngest person to lead a major temple in China. Xuecheng was now at the head of a growing sangha that organised some of the largest and most elaborate ordination ceremonies of the period (Ashiwa & Wank, 2023), including a 1996 ceremony for 210 monastics that lasted for 108-days. By this time, he was Abbot of Guanghua Monastery and Famen Monastery in Shaanxi Province, and in 1993 he had become a Vice-Secretary of the Buddhist Association of China. He also became a member of Fujian's Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in 1998 and then a member of the National CPPCC in 2001. These institutional experiences gave Xuecheng a wide range of relationships that would help him as he founded his own system in the mid 2000s. Beyond the official connections he was amassing, he also made one very important cross-strait connection with Venerable Richang, a Taiwanese Buddhist monk who had founded his own Sino-Tibetan organisation in 1987 called Bliss and Wisdom (*Fuzhi*). In the 1990s Richang visited Guanghua Temple and brought with him a set of lectures on the *Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (Lamrim Chenmo in Tibetan, hereafter *Guanglun*) by the 14th century founder of the Gelug sect, Je Tsongkhapa. Recordings of his teachings were widely distributed and a systematic approach to organising lay Buddhist study groups was adopted at Guanghua Monastery (Zhang & Ji, 2018), a model that was later perfected at Longquan Monastery.

The Longquan System began in earnest when the eponymous Longquan Monastery in the hills west of Beijing was donated to Xuecheng in 2004. The lay Buddhist donor, Cai Qun, had been restoring it since 1995, and her only request was that Xuecheng become the Abbot in residence. It was here that Xuecheng developed one of, if not the, fastest growing Chinese Buddhist systems in the 21st century (CGTN America, 2016; Jacobs, 2016). Four of the eight disciples he brought with him from Fujian were graduates from Tsinghua and Beihang University. By setting up student organisations within Beijing's universities, they attracted new monastics including "nuclear physicists, IT programmers and, most notably, mathematical genius Liu Zhiyu (Master Xianyu)" (Zhang, Qian & Kong, 2024:p.5). Weekend

retreats were organised that targeted IT workers, who were spiritually drained from working in nearby Zhongguancun, China's silicon valley. There was even a rumour that Zhang Xiaolong came up with the idea for China's most popular app, WeChat, on one of those retreats. They created "modernized departments such as the Information Technology Group, Comic Association, Animation Department, Multilingual Translation Association, Longquan Voice website, Micro-movie Department, and a library, which made a perfect platform for these young elites to be close to the Dharma" (Zhang & Ji, 2018:p.26). The English translation team alone had over 400 members[8]. Throughout the 2010s, the system's talented monastics created a popular cartoon series about a monk called Xianer, and collaborated with robotics companies to produce a robot version that could answer questions about Buddhist topics. This expanding set of institutions was attracting more lay followers to the system, and Xuecheng was setting his sights on having 1000 monastics at Longquan Monastery[9].

One of these monastics was Venerable Xianhong (Dharma name), the future Abbot of Tanhua Temple. Xianhong (1973-) had first encountered the Longquan System in 2006 when he was surprised to find young people sitting in front of a whiteboard studying together, unlike the image he had of Buddhist temples as stuffy, superstitious places for the elderly. At that time he was reading self-help books like *The 7 Habits for Highly Effective People* (Covey, 1989), and found the Buddhist teachings at Longquan Monastery to be equally inspiring. He quickly became a volunteer, eventually moving onto the mountain and beginning the processes to become a monk: first becoming a *jingren* (lay devotee living in a temple abiding by precepts), then a novice monastic (*shami*), and finally taking the Threefold Ordination Ceremony in Hong Kong on the 29th of April 2009[10]. Xianhong had started working after graduating from middle school, and referred to himself as one of the 'farmer monks' who wore 'big cotton pants'[11], as opposed to the young monks from elite educational backgrounds for whom 'no computer problem was too difficult!'.

While he was never Xuecheng's most high profile disciple, Xianhong's straightforward way of speaking, humility and self-deprecation earned him the affection of many lay Buddhists and, over the next decade, he rose through the administrative ranks of the Longquan System. Shortly after ordination, he was sent to Inner Mongolia where he worked for a year or two in an affiliated monastery until, in 2012, he was sent to become the Abbot of

[8] Personal communications with Janie Chen Jiazi.
[9] According to a lay devotee present at the time.
[10] This practice of conducting ordination ceremonies in Hong Kong was perhaps an attempt to broaden Xuecheng's monastic network.
[11] An item of clothing that evokes an image of rural and elderly people in Northeast China and elsewhere.

a newly renovated temple in Fujian Province, near Xuecheng's hometown. Chongen Chan Monastery (*Chongenchansi*) was constructed in 2010, paid for by Cao Dewang, China's 'glass King', a wealthy Fujian businessman whose brother was the vice governor of Fujian from 1998-2003. There he developed summer camps for local children with the aim of bringing their parents to the temple. He also developed his own network of lay devotees beyond those sent from Longquan Monastery, which would later make a significant difference in the internal politics of the Tanhua System. In 2016, Xianhong returned to Longquan Monastery and took on a position as head of the Education Department (*jiaohuabu*), which focused on Buddhist education for lay people 'off the mountain' (*shanxia*). Xianhong, said to have memorised the entirety of *Guanglun*, began developing an extensive network of lay Buddhist studies groups. These experiences gave him a deep understanding of the Longquan System, which he would later apply at Tanhua Temple in Dar es Salaam.

During this time the Longquan System began its global expansion. In 2008, the same year the Beijing Olympics announced China's arrival on the world stage, Xuecheng gave a speech to the CCPPC arguing for China to increase its 'soft power' through Buddhism (Chinese Government, 2008). In 2011, he set up a translation department that worked in sixteen different languages (China Global, 2017). By 2015, Xuecheng had become the President of the Buddhist Association of China, putting him in a position to establish overseas branch temples. These included the Longquan Great Compassion Monastery in the Netherlands (2015), Buddhist centres in Germany and Italy, the Longquan Guan Yin Monastery in the USA (2016), and their two African missions: Longquan Bohua Monastery in Botswana (2016) and Longquan Tanhua Monastery in Tanzania (2018).

However, in August of 2018, a leaked report written by high level monks at Longquan Monastery alleged sexual and financial wrongdoings against Xuecheng. The report was followed by a government investigation that led Xuecheng to resign from all of his official positions, closing Longquan Monastery to the public, although Xuecheng is still living within one of his system's monasteries in Fujian Province. Lay and monastic devotees responded in different ways to the crisis. Some returned to secular life, others went to other Buddhist systems such as Donglin Chan Temple or Larung Gar, and others who maintained Xuecheng's innocence continued to support his disciples at Longquan affiliated monasteries. The reverberations of this scandal were felt around the world (Johnson, 2018), and no place more so than Tanhua Temple which had been founded only five months prior. Two of the monks who came with Xianhong returned to China, and another recently ordained monk was

sent to replace them. While each individual and institution within the system responded in different ways, in general those at Tanhua Temple thought the accusations against Xuecheng were false, but also accepted the fact that Xuecheng could no longer have a public facing role. When reprinting a series of Xuecheng's sayings in Swahili, English and Chinese, the Abbot told me to leave his name off the cover. According to discussions with insiders, there are now fewer than ten temples in China run by Longquan-affiliated monks, along with Jile Nunnery and its branch institutions (*xiayuan*). I was told there are no longer Sangha wide meetings held within the Longquan System, and in the case of Tanhua Temple, they had to become financially and administratively independent. While each institution has its own particular relationship to Xuecheng, Tanhua Temple in Tanzania now represents one of the most active successors to the Longquan System. As we describe the emergence of the Tanhua System over the last five years we see some of the key structures of the Longquan system re-emerging, although on a reduced scale and in an even more transnational, online-offline hybrid form. It is also far less connected to the institutions of Chinese state power.

1.2 The Tanhua System

The Tanhua Temple began as a branch temple within the broader Longquan system, but from 2020-2025, following the disintegration of the latter, it has developed into what its followers refer to as the Tanhua System. In this section I first describe the online structures of the Tanhua System, including its sprawling network of Buddhist studies groups and the Abbot's public Q&A sessions. I then describe the core ideas and practices presented by the Tanhua monastics, and how they responded to their follower's questions about Buddhist cultivation. I then describe the lay leadership structure called the Dharma Protection Team (DPT) that maintains and grows the system. Finally I describe the way this system, like the Longquan system before it, drew on a wide range of non-system connections within a broader Sino-African Buddhist assemblage.

Online Structures

In late 2019, just as the Covid-19 pandemic was about to begin, a young lay Buddhist with years of experience in the Longquan System suggested that Xianhong give Dharma talks to the resident volunteers (*changzhu yigong*) of Tanhua Temple. Without any grand plan in mind, Xianhong began by posting daily ten-minute lectures on WeChat. Soon lay Buddhists from China began to join the group, and once one was filled another one was started. These groups multiplied rapidly, partly due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which prevented Buddhists

from visiting monasteries in China, and also as ex-Longquan devotees joined these new study groups. By 2023 the online study groups (*banzu jiagou*) included around 6000 members across 26 large WeChat groups, with smaller groups embedded within. The core drivers of the system's growth that I explore below were its scalable structures and Xianhong's emphasis on outreach. Given its uniquely transnational structure, the Tanhua System has also taken a thoroughly online-offline hybrid form.

Once an individual is added into a Tanhua System small group on Wechat, as I was during fieldwork, they will begin receiving a 10 minute audio file each morning. The volunteer responsible for sending the file in my group did so with monastic-like discipline, delivering them at 5am on the dot. Others in the group respond throughout the day saying they have listened to the lecture, and the groups meet online weekly, or more frequently, to listen together to lectures and share their own reflections on the content. Some of these groups had already been studying together for years, and even in new groups social bonds form quickly. These spaces offer a chance for people to study together, and also support each other in their cultivation. These small groups function as the core building block for the system, creating both tight knit ethical communities, and also a shared sense of identity with the broader system that are also progressing through the same lecture series. From 2020 to 2024, Xianhong has recorded over 400 lectures, and the number of people listening to them has grown from a handful to nearly 10,000. He has only just got into the middle section of the text, so this has the potential to keep people studying for years. The other monk at Tanhua Temple, Venerable Xianfen, also taught similar courses on the Analects, and as I was leaving the field he had begun teaching the Abhidharmakosa-bhasya (*jushelun*). The volunteers running the group will post a spreadsheet with names and records of completion, which determine whether one is allowed to graduate from that group and listen to the next set of lectures. Once an individual has completed a set of lectures, they can then take a training course to become an organiser themselves, reproducing and expanding the system. One day I entered an online training session conducted by the Abbot for group leaders with over two hundred attendees. In this course they learn about how to manage group dynamics, including strategies to get people to contribute and stop one person from dominating discussions. Xianhong explained to me that "first you make sure of the quantity not the quality (*baoliang bubaozhi*) and then introduce levels to the system so that there are barriers to entry, and keep raising the standards". Lecturers were given trial groups, and ranked in a hierarchy based on their experience level, always leaving room for people to move up, while simultaneously expanding the number of new groups below.

The lectures are a systematic study of *Guanglun*, the Tibetan Buddhist texts mentioned earlier. Each ten minute lecture begins with a parsing of the original text line by line. Although not always directly quoting from it, he would explain it in understandable terms, introducing any Buddhist terminology when necessary. The second half of the lecture is Xianhong's exegesis (*kaishi*), which would take the form of everyday examples and stories from Ming dynasty morality books like *Liao Fan's Four Lessons*. These lectures introduced listeners to very specific Buddhist terminology, giving system members a common language through which to discuss their cultivation, and also did so in a way that was understandable for any Chinese speaker. Some listen to the lectures casually while they clean the house, but some more committed students would transcribe it verbatim, creating intricate mind maps of the lecture content.

Xianhong told his followers that they needed to bring new people into the system, and one way to do that was by holding public online Q&As through their Wechat account. These livestreams would go on for several hours, and were held every few weeks. Several thousand people would attend these sessions where the Abbot took questions from system members, and first time participants. My general impression was that middle aged women were overly represented, and in general the age of the students was middle aged and above, although there were also some younger people involved. Those who had questions would be prompted by the moderator to turn on their camera and microphone, and ask their questions directly to the Master, standing with hands pressed together in a sign of respect. More experienced practitioners would open with the respectful phrase, *dingli fashi* (meaning to prostrate in front of someone), and refer to themselves with the self-defensive term *moxue* (your humble student). However, not all were so well versed in Buddhist etiquette, and given its public nature (anyone could attend with the link), some were encountering the Tanhua System for the first time. On one occasion a middle aged man turned on his video while eating his dinner, saying "I have only been studying for a short time, but I am not really worried about suffering, it doesn't seem to bother me". The Master told him that if he didn't understand suffering he would never be free of it, but that he could still practise Buddhism by helping others. During the ensuing back and forth, the questioner turned around and shouted to the people standing behind him, "Hey, I am talking to a monk here please be quiet". At this point the moderator, an experienced and devoted member of the System, cut him off and began apologising to other attendees, begging them not to get angry, highlighting that this gentleman had only just begun studying and then reminding him that it was not polite to eat in front of the Master like that. This combination of seasoned volunteers and newcomers was

by design, as Xianhong told us, to grow the system they needed a steady flow of new participants.

Self-Cultivation Discourses

Discussions of Buddhist doctrine and practice within Xianhong's lectures and the countless hours of Q&A sessions he conducted were wide ranging, and it is impossible to exhaustively describe them here. However, there were some recurring themes, and by analysing a few of these core messages, and the way followers within the system engaged with those ideas, we get a sense of the Tanhua System's model of Buddhist cultivation. Those included a focus on the Doctrine of Karma (*yinguolun*), the repentance Dharma gate (*chanhui famen*), and the Pure Land Buddhist practice of recitation of the Buddha's name (*nianfo*).

The Doctrine of Karma, namely that all actions produce results, and those results can be karmic rewards or punishments, is at the heart of the Buddhist worldview (see Chapter 3). While the original text of *Guanglun* starts with instructions on how to find a good teacher, Xianhong has his lecture series open with a section called 'Deep Belief in Karma' (*shenxinyeguo*). He explained that this was because we are currently in the final dharma era (*mofa shidai*), meaning that there are poor overall conditions for cultivation, so people needed to start with the basics. By understanding karma, one can analyse one's current condition, and know what sort of actions caused them. For example, a state of poverty today might be understood as the result of theft in this life or a past one. Many of the questions from Xianhong's followers concerned the particular karmic results of certain actions, and ways to either "get rid of bad karma" (*xiaoeye*) or grow one's blessings (*jilei fubao*).

The Repentance Dharma Gate (*chanhui famen*) was presented as a particularly efficacious (*ling*) way of doing this. Each day at 2pm there was a session for repentance during which prostrations are performed for almost an hour, for which some practitioners will do the full Tibetan prostrations. Speaking to his followers at Tanhua Temple and online, Xianhong explained that repentance was not about denying yourself (*fouding ziji*), but instead was about changing yourself. Repentance includes two forces: the first is to regret the action you took (*pohuaixianxingli* 破坏现行力), and the second is to vow not to do it again (*zhezhizuieli* 遮止罪恶力). In a Confucian twist, Xianhong and Xianfen also recommended repenting for wrongs done to our parents as a good way of learning the practice. In one Buddhist class with volunteers in residence, Xianhong contrasted this to the confessionary practices of the Catholic Church, which he glossed as asking for forgiveness from God without changing your behaviour and thus defeating the purpose of true repentance. This

Dharma Gate is built around a simple but powerful theory of human action, namely that, as we encounter various conditions (*yuan*), we react in ways that are determined by our karma (*ye*), or past actions. For example, if you tend to get annoyed by a certain person, when they arrive you will get annoyed again if nothing has changed in your inner state. Buddhist cultivation is the only way to break this vicious circle and, within that, repentance is one particularly efficacious method. If you truly repent with the support of the Bodhisattvas, you will be able to change your behaviour next time you encounter the same conditions. This understanding of engrained, difficult to change bad habits (*xiqi*) was a constant feature of discourse among volunteers, and yet there was also an acknowledgement that with repentance and other forms of cultivation, they could improve.

One other central practice recommended by Xianhong was *nianfo*, the recitation of the Buddha's name. This is a Pure Land Buddhist practice, as opposed to Xianfen's focus on meditation which is considered mainly a Chan (zen) practice, the combination they described as Pure Land Chan synthesis (*chanjing jiehe*), a term that dates back to the Song Dynasty (Jones 2021). Xianhong spent a lot of time speaking about the importance of developing a daily practice (*dingke*). He advised students not to set themselves too much, but instead an amount they knew they could complete, and persist with that each day. Once this felt easy, then you could increase your daily number of recitations. Prayer beads, electronic prayer or phone apps were used as counters. Xianhong used the metaphor of digging a well to describe these practices. He encouraged students to stick with them for long enough to actually strike water, rather than just digging many shallow holes that never produce any results. Many of the questions he received in Q&As were about the nature of people's daily cultivation. Participants would often describe their daily practices, after which the Abbot would comment. Depending on the questioner, sometimes he would encourage them to do more, or sometimes tell them that they should maintain what they are doing. This is referred to as "skillful means" (*fangbian* in Chinese*, upaya* in Sanskrit) in the Mahayana Buddhist literature, namely the idea that different levels of practitioner need different types of guidance.

Also a common topic of conversation were Buddhist precepts, which are vows administered to people within the system by Xianhong in online rituals. After taking refuge in the three jewels (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha), the first ritual to become a Buddhist, there are many sets of vows that one can take, beginning with the Five Precepts (*wujie*), and then the Eight Precepts (*baguanzhaijie*). Not everyone takes precepts, but many observe the five precepts in their daily lives. Similarly, the eight precepts are normally taken for a shorter

period of time, often just 24 hours. The Eight Precepts include not eating after noon and avoiding any form of entertainment, among others. Often, questioners wanted reassurance about seemingly minor infringements, like accidentally eating after noon or overhearing some music. By admitting to a small mistake and worrying enough about it to ask the Master, they were putting the repentance dharma gate into practice. For example, one lady asked about a time she forgot to bring her *haiqing* (lay Buddhist robe for rituals) when visiting a rural temple, and was given a robe by the local monk. Later, she realised they were monastic robes which she shouldn't be wearing as a lay person. The Master responded that this wasn't a bad act at all, insisting she "just think of it as planting a seed, *jiegeyuan* [create affinities], [and] accept it as destiny". She was incredibly reluctant to accept the fact that she had made no error, and sheepishly thanked the Master with a look of intense guilt still on her face. Xianhong often took on a relaxed and forgiving tone with his followers who were very concerned with the karma their actions were producing. That was of course dependent on the questioner and what precepts they had taken. If someone had not taken precepts, then they couldn't break them. Therefore, while Xianhong would encourage people to continue their practice, especially their daily practice of listening to his lectures and *nianfo*, he also assuaged the worries of followers who were concerned with the karmic effects of taking and breaking precepts in order to encourage them to take vows.

Questions around parenting also came up frequently, related to practitioners' children's academic performance and experience in preparing for exams. Much has been written about parents grappling with the best way to express their love for their children within the intensely competitive Chinese education system (Kuan, 2019). Similarly, here we see how religion has added to this conversation. One woman asked how she could help her son if he didn't believe in Buddhism. Xianhong told her to give him a good study environment. The lady responded that he was in boarding school. Xianhong suggested giving him a call. She said he doesn't pick up the phone. Xianhong, sensing that their relationship was already tense, explained why reiterating big principles (*jiang daoli*) doesn't always help children, and that parents should be a 'mountain to rest on' (*kaoshan*) for their children, rather than give them more 'psychological pressure' (*xinli yali*). In this answer, and others, Xianhong argued that we overvalue exams, and that many people have good lives without succeeding in them. "Learning how to be a good person is more important than exam results". The moderator added that her son had been assisted by the Bodhisattvas in his exams. On other occasions, Xianhong would recommend Manjusri's mantra, which was supposed to increase wisdom. One man said that praying for his son, even without telling

him, had helped him get a mark beyond expectations. These concerns were also reflected in the prayers said after morning and evening chanting, which were dedicated to those who sponsored the ritual and sometimes they explicitly asked for good luck for their children's exams. While spiritual solutions were offered, these discussions also pointed to broader structural problems with education in China. One of Xianhong's key lay leaders, a 41 year old mother, explained the notion of 'involution' (*neijuan*) in the education system as being like watching a movie in a cinema when the front row all stands up, forcing those behind to do the same thing. If we all just sat down, we would see fine, but now that everyone else is finding extra tuition for their children, you are forced to follow suit. In these Q&A sessions, a critical countercurrent in contemporary Chinese society was on display, one that grappled with the increasing pressures on children in China's education system.

Another theme of discussion was managing relationships with non-Buddhist family and friends. For example, during a November Q&A one elderly lady asked a question about whether it was acceptable to give alms (*bushi*) without notifying her husband, because she knew he would not allow it. Her question finished by asking, "Is this like stealing?". The Master responded, "It does have a bit of that about it…" (*youdian nage yisi le*), following up by asking if she was able to make spending decisions normally without his permission to which she said yes. The moderator for the event then assured her that it was fine to continue supporting the temple. This question was not an outlier, but a recurring theme. Others asked about how to deal with family members who do not believe in Buddhism, asking how to convince their husbands or parents to bow to the Buddha or recite the Buddha's name. Clearly the intensity of the Buddhist practice promoted by Tanhua's monastics, and the highly involved nature of being a volunteer in this system caused conflicts with some family members outside of the system[12]. It is often remarked by the masters, and lay Buddhists I have met within the system that, once you start studying, your friendship circle will change, friends who smoke and drink will slip away from you, and instead you will spend time with Buddhist friends (*foyou*), going to the temple or engaging in charitable work. Xianhong always advocated for 'creating positive affinities' (*jie shanyuan*), pointing out that if studying Buddhism was increasing conflict in your family, then you were studying it in the wrong way. In particular, he advocated for the 'four methods of conversion' (*sishefa*), which are, giving, kind speech, actions to benefit others, and finally, cooperation. When family members were

[12] The monks are no exception. One monastic told me that to become a monk he left his wife and son, who is now in his final year of high school, and he does not keep in touch with them because he fears it would disturb them.

unwilling to listen to the Dharma, Xianhong advised them not to push it on them, because that would bring them into conflict with Buddhism and harm their relationship, although clearly this advice was not always heeded. If you do not have a good relationship, there is no way to influence someone, so first build rapport before trying to change them. Xianhong also stressed that these problems were just challenges for us in our self-cultivation, and once we reach a certain level of spiritual development, these problems don't seem like problems anymore. Not blaming others, but instead changing oneself was the core message.

Suffice to say that these Q&A sessions and the network of lay study groups created an ethical community of lay Buddhists that functioned as the base structure of the Tanhua System. These engagements can be described with our comparative terminology as a type of frontal encounter between the Abbot and his followers, but one that everyone else in attendance also listened to and could apply to their own lives. By responding differently to different people, while retaining some core themes and recommendations, he was building a rich tapestry of ethical discourse that offered answers for people at all stages along the Buddhist path. Each practice could be pitched to people at their level based on their level of daily cultivation and the vows they had taken. This reflects the Buddhist understanding of ethical self-cultivation as a path, with many different steps along the way. Given the ultimate goal was enlightenment, there was always room to improve, and one way to progress even further along the path was to take on more responsibility within the system by joining the Dharma Protection Team.

The Dharma Protection Team

The expansion of the Tanhua System was facilitated by an increasingly well organised group of lay volunteers who were part of the Dharma Protection Team (DPT). Initially Tanhua Temple had just one Head Lay Protector (*zong huchi*), the first of whom was the Longquan volunteer who suggested Xianhong begin recording lectures in 2019. In 2020 the role was handed over to another lay devotee who had not been part of the Longquan system, but had made significant material contributions to Tanhua Temple over its first few years, visiting on several occasions. Like the resident manager of the temple, her loyalties were to Xianhong directly, which meant that they were real "insiders" (*ziji ren*). However, in 2021 she was voted out of her position due to a perceived inability to work harmoniously with other members. This internal democratic process was one way competition among followers could play out, and one in which factional dynamics were inevitable. After the transition of power, the DPT was formally established and expanded to include positions for departments

managing finances, lay study groups, volunteers, physical materials, promotions, translation and construction works. The lay leaders of these departments would assemble teams for various projects, advertising opportunities through the system's Wechat groups, and I would often hear them having meetings with Xianhong about various aspects of their growing Buddhist System. This provided opportunities for those who wanted to take on more responsibility (*chengdan*), and functionally these individuals were the ones facilitating the growth of the system under the leadership of Xianhong. At an online event for Tanhua Temple's fifth year anniversary in 2023, a leading member of the DPT reported on the growth of these new teams, saying that they now had over 300 volunteers (*yigong*, as opposed to regular students).

During a visit to China in 2023 I was able to meet several members of the DPT at Longquan Monastery for the first day of public cultivation activities since its closure in 2018. After a morning of walking meditation, a group of around 20 filed into a wooden room to discuss Tanhua Temple and the DPT's work. This was a mixture of DPT members, students within the Tanhua System, and long term Longquan System volunteers. The newly elected Head Lay Protector, one of the few men in attendance, welcomed everyone by saying it was the first time for them to be meeting in person, joking that it felt like an offline meeting for a bunch of internet friends (*wangyou jianmianhui*). He went on to say that 'international-online Dharma Protection' (*guojiahua, wangluohua hufa*) was new to all of them, that they were 'crossing the river by feeling for the stones', and made a historical comparison between Xianhong and Xuanzang, the monk who famously retrieved sutras from India in the Tang Dynasty, emphasising the significance of the project in which they were involved. He spoke of his deep karmic bond to Xianhong who introduced him to Buddhism at a Summer Camp held at Chongen Monastery in 2015. In fact, he had attended primary school in some of the buildings within what is now the Chongen Monastery grounds. He concluded his speech by emphasising the need for a sense of 'mission' (*shiming*) and noting that they were all karmically blessed to be connected to this system. As the other people present introduced themselves, they all started by stating when and where they took refuge, and which Buddhist studies class they had attended. Many of those in attendance had taken refuge at Longquan Monastery many years ago, while others had more direct relationships to Xianhong. One woman explained that Xianhong had performed an online one-on-one refuge ceremony for her brother who was dying of cancer, holding back tears as she thanked Xianhong for helping him go to the Western Pure Land (*xifang jile shijie*). A man who had taken refuge at Longquan Monastery in 2008 and became deeply involved in the System after joining a study

group in 2015 exclaimed that this meeting reminded him what it felt like to be in a team of Buddhist devotees (*shifayou tuandui*). These introductions went on for a significant portion of the meeting, and as they are across the Longquan and Tanhua Systems, they served as a chance for individuals to demonstrate their own credentials. By speaking in a highly self-deprecating manner, saying that they had not retained much of the Buddhist studies content, but then also liberally using Buddhist terms in their introduction, they demonstrated their level of Buddhist cultivation. They also indexed their position within the Longquan System, their relations to particular monastics, and participation in various subgroups like the translation team, or the Ren'ai Compassion Congee groups (Stapleton, 2024).

While I was in Beijing I also visited one Buddhist Studies small group, and the tea shop of a long-term Longquan devotee who had also been involved in helping Tanhua Temple. During both of these meetings, the question of particular loyalties came up in revealing ways. In the morning I arrived at a vegetarian restaurant, where I met in a private room with ten people, all of whom were middle aged women. Only one of them was involved in the DTP, and others were studying Xianhong's lectures. We first introduced ourselves and had a chance to share anything we wanted to before the study session began. One member told us about visiting another Buddhist monastery in Hunan with connections to the famous Bailin Chan Monastery, describing the construction work going on there and the vibrancy of this other Buddhist system. She concluded by criticising sectarianism within Buddhist systems, saying that just belonging to one system and claiming it is better than the others is not a very Buddhist thing to do. The others agreed. Later that afternoon I was drinking tea with three highly educated, and deeply devoted Buddhists who had previously been involved in the English team within the translation department at Longquan Monastery. They had also volunteered at Tanhua Temple during its early years, and were now discussing helping out with the translation of Xianhong's lectures into English. After discussing some of the challenges at Tanhua Temple, one of these volunteers said that she did not agree with others who said Xianhong was 'outside of the system' (*tixiwai*). She argued that following the Master, in this case referring to Xuecheng, meant following his disciples, and that there was no contradiction (*maodun*) between following both. They also said that it was completely out of place for lay people to be comparing monastics in the first place. While this comment reveals a clear desire to smooth over tensions within this sprawling network of lay devotees, it is also evident that these tensions are far from resolved, and are perhaps an inevitable feature of a Buddhist system that establishes strong insider/outsider distinctions, while also remaining connected to broader networks of people and institutions.

The Tanhua System and Broader Buddhist Assemblages

While the networks of online devotees and the DPT were the driving force behind Tanhua Temple's development, Xianhong also developed relationships with a number of non-system actors. Those included a Theravada Buddhist monastery in Dar es Salaam, other Chinese & Taiwanese Buddhist systems in Africa, and also a range of more distant lineage connections that reveal the Tanhua System's place within a broader Buddhist assemblage.

Dar es Salaam is home to the oldest Buddhist temple in Africa, founded in the early 20th century by Sri Lankan workers who were brought to East Africa by the British. Their property in the centre of Dar es Salaam is today covered by a large Bodhi tree that was planted in 1920. This was a seedling from the tree under which the historical Buddha attained enlightenment, and now this tree has produced seedlings that have been gifted to Buddhist institutions on the continent, including Tanhua Temple. Although this temple did not have a resident monastic for most of the 20th century, since the 1980s there have been Theravada monks from Sri Lanka serving there. The 12th monk was Reverend Dr ILukpitiye Pannasekara, who remains the leader of the temple and its charitable activities today. After arriving in Tanzania in 1999 Pannasekara became fluent in Swahili, allowing him to represent Buddhism in various faith-based committees organised by the Tanzanian state, to which he also invited the monks at Tanhua Temple. He established Kind Hearts Africa which is the temple's charity organisation that supports almost 100 children in an orphanage in the suburbs of Dar es Salaam. When Tanhua Temple established its orphanage in 2020 they were provided with 12 young children from Kind Hearts Africa, along with two local staff members who were employed at Tanhua Temple. The monks and volunteers of Tanhua Temple attended several Dharma Events at the Sri Lankan Temple during my fieldwork, and Master Pannasekara also came to events at Tanhua Temple. On one occasion Xianhong also agreed to help him pay for part of a very expensive operation after a car crash, connecting him with some Buddhist business people for the rest. Master Pannasekera also introduced Xianhong to a young Tanzanian man who would become the leader of Tanhua Temple's local congregation (see Chapter 2).

Tanhua Temple also became connected with Mahayana Buddhist institutions on the continent, in more and less direct ways. The Taiwanese Buddhist system, Fo Guang Shan, had established the first Chinese Buddhist temple in Africa in 1992, the Nanhua Temple in South Africa, and the monk in charge had then established his own independent organisation, the Amitofo Care Center (ACC), that now has schools and orphanages in 6 sub-Saharan

African countries caring for thousands of children. The prayers used at the Sunday Swahili sessions (Chapter 2) had been translated from a Fo Guang Shan text, and even kept their founder's name at the top of the page. The Tanhua temple leadership in Dar es Salaam also visited Malawi to study their operations and discuss their challenges with the founder of ACC Venerable Hui Li. After that, one very experienced lay volunteer from ACC was sent to Tanhua Temple for a few days to share some tips. She was able to speak to the Tanhua Temple manager in the Min dialect that is shared between parts of Fujian and Taiwan, another small case of the kinds of transregional connections that exist within this Buddhist assemblage. The Sri Lankan temple had also been engaged with these groups, sending students and teachers to the Buddhist seminary at Nan Hua Temple (described in the Conclusion). Another more direct connection was with the other Longquan affiliated institution in Africa, Bohua Monastery in Botswana. For rituals that required more than 2 monastics, like the opening of their new temple property, monks from Botswana would fly to Tanzania to take part. There was also a visit from the Zambian Shaolin temple during my fieldwork. While these relationships have varying degrees of significance, they make it clear that Tanhua Temple is also connected to a broader Sino-African Buddhist assemblage.

Finally, lineage connections and reincarnation also serve to connect the Tanhua System with the deep Buddhist past, and a set of pluralistic, diffuse, and sometimes malleable relations in the present. When Xuecheng was ordained at Guanghua Monastery, he was tonsured by Elder Dinghai (*Dinghai Zhanglao*), a third generation Chinese migrant in Indonesia who had assisted in the temple's revival. This was because the Abbot of the monastery, Venerable Yuanzhuo (1909-1997), was not accepting disciples after one had tragically died[13]. Yuanzhuo himself was a student of both Hongyi (1880-1942) and Yinguang (1862-1940). These diverse connections, some relating as tonsure masters, or just having shared lived experience within a monastery, all presented potential resources for the monastics at Tanhua Temple. Xianhong's supporters often said he was a reincarnation of Hongyi, pointing to the fact that they shared a birthday, and that he was also connected through Xuecheng and Yuanzhuo. The connection to Dinghai became particularly salient after the crisis of 2018. Documentaries about our "master's master" (*shigong*) were sent to the temple, in what one monk at Tanhua Temple described as a process of unearthing (*wajue*) new parts of their lineage. In these documentaries Dinghai recounts visiting China as early as 1972, and then 3-5 times a year by 1981, transporting money and various goods for the

[13] According to a volunteer at Ji Le Nunnery.

reconstruction effort. This story of transnational daring was very inspirational to those watching in Tanzania, who immediately saw the connections with their experiences. It is no surprise that the translation team were also busy translating English academic work on Buddhism in Southeast Asia into Chinese to verify these lineage connections.

1.3 Buddhist Systems Compared to Traditions/Schools, Lineages & Monasteries

By describing the emergence of two related Buddhist systems, we now have a thick enough lateral comparison to turn our attention to a frontal comparison with existing terminology in the Anthropology of Buddhism. In particular I want to ask how the term "Buddhist system" relates to other modes of Buddhist organisation, whether or not it is coextensive with any existing terminology, and if not, how it could serve as a comparative heuristic to analyse contemporary Buddhist organisations. This type of mapping problem is not unfamiliar to anthropology, having structural analogs in debates about the definitions of religion, and in the delineations between types of Buddhism such as Great and Little traditions (Redfield, 1955; Spiro, 1970), village Buddhism (Southwold, 1982) and terms like Protestant Buddhism (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988). I argue that the term "system" is not coextensive with the most common modes of Buddhist organisation, namely school/sect, lineage and monastery, although it does not make these other terms irrelevant. These cross-cutting modes of organisation allow insider-outsider distinctions to be drawn very differently in different contexts, based on the perspective of the observer, and the purpose of their analysis. I conclude by arguing that religious differences described in this chapter descended and ascended into a set of distinctions between insiders and outsiders that could change based on whether the individual concerned was thinking about the system, or the broader Buddhist assemblage.

The Buddhist system is a form of religious organisation in which lay and monastic Buddhists collaborate under the leadership of a single monastic to create scalable structures for spreading the Dharma (*hongfa*). While systems do not represent a complete break with the past, they do go beyond the scale of traditional Buddhist organisations, driven by processes of globalisation and the rapid advancements in telecommunications technology in the 20th century. In China, connections between Buddhist monasteries had traditionally encompassed no more than a handful of temples connected to one ancestral monastery that would make contributions on special occasions, but this was an "informal and loose type of association rather than forming a hierarchy with layered one-directional orientations" (Wu, 2023:p.14). Like much of the Chinese religious world it was defined by a 'diffuse' structure (Yang,

1961), bringing to mind Sun Yatsen's famous comment that although China had millions of people, the society was like scattered sand. The type of "systems" we see in this chapter have their roots in the developments of the early 20th century, as Buddhists responded to a new secular nation state by establishing their own modern institutions. These included Buddhist Associations acting to represent Buddhists in their engagements with the state (Welch, 1968:p26), the growth of Buddhist charity organisations (Weller et al., 2017; Stapleton, 2024), and finally the proliferation of modern Buddhist seminaries (Ji, 2020; Gildow, 2020; Lai, 2014). After 1949, Buddhist monks who fled China for Taiwan founded Buddhist systems there such as Fo Guang Shan and Dharma Drum Mountain that have become the face of global Chinese Buddhism. While not all describe themselves as "systems", the term is easily understood in a Chinese context to refer to a relatively well established and structured organisation. While the structures of the "system" described in this chapter are the drivers of its development, that did not erase more traditional modes of association, but instead added a new institutional form to this broader assemblage of lineages, schools and monasteries.

Buddhism, as a world religion (Masuzawa, 2005), is often divided into Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, and within the Mahayana into the Eight Schools of Chinese Buddhism. While these categories remain significant in some contexts, both the Longquan and Tanhua systems took a much more ecumenical approach that made the delineations between traditions and schools less important. The Abbot at Tanhua Temple would often say that minute distinctions between particular paths should not concern the beginner, who should first establish a grounding in the broad tradition. This anti-sectarian spirit was evident in their use of Tibetan Buddhist texts, connections with Theravada Buddhist institutions, and in the Temple's Pure Land-Zen Synthesis (*chanjingjiehe*). Charles Jones (2019) argues that in China Pure Land Buddhism was never a school (*zongpai*) in the sense of being a bounded institution, but instead should be understood as a "tradition of practice" (*famen,* literally Dharma gate). The notion of Pure Land Buddhism as a school was taken from Japanese scholarship where a more sectarian type of Buddhism had emerged in which schools took on institutional forms. The more ecumenical approach had been formalised in the Longquan system under the slogan "promote the eight schools together" (*bazong binghong*), and in the final years before the crisis there was internal work being done to expand the system to include Theravada and Vajrayana traditions[14]. This would have been a very significant development, and even though it did not come to be, this shows clearly why

[14] Personal communications with a member of the English translation team.

a Buddhist system is not necessarily coextensive with a sect or school or tradition. In fact, there were times when even the category of Buddhism was transcended, like when an Indian woman who lived nearby and volunteered at the temple performed Hindu rituals on the Bodhi tree in Tanhua Temple's garden.

The Buddhist systems are also clearly not coextensive with lineages, although these connections can play important roles in their development, maintenance & revival. While lineages are by definition linear connections of masters and disciples over time, it is clear that monastic lineages are both more pluralistic and consequently more malleable than those curated historical lineages suggest. This can be particularly useful in times of crisis, as we saw at both Guanghua Monastery during the Cultural Revolution, and at Tanhua Temple after Xuecheng's scandal. The key difference between a lineage or school and a system is the temporal scale they operate on. For example, the Chan school of Chinese Buddhism is deeply invested in its lineage model (Ye, 2014), tracing their own masters back in time to the historical Buddha. These diachronic and genealogical connections confer legitimacy on the tradition, but do not tell us about the synchronic state of their institutions. Whereas a lineage is a term we use to describe a bounded set of connections between people over time, the system describes the lay and monastic networks that connect people under one leader in the present. Lineages invoke connections both real and imagined, and despite their name, represent a plural set of connections that give monastics some room to manoeuvre within the longue durée of Buddhist lineages and schools. So clearly lineages are not coextensive with Buddhist systems, but they remain deeply important to the people within them.

The monastery is perhaps the closest institutional form to the system, with systems often being named after the monastery of their founder. The system could be understood as a particular version of the hereditary monastery (*zisunmiao*) where the sangha are made up of only the disciples of a particular monastic, as opposed to public monasteries (*shifangconglin*) that are open to any Buddhist monastic who registers (*guadan*) there. However the Longquan and Tanhua systems transcended the physical boundaries of the monastery in more than one way. The system extends beyond the monastery when it expands to new monastic spaces, although this is arguably similar to more traditional networks of temples, however it exceeds monasteries in general with the development of lay Buddhist education, volunteering, and charity, all of which can occur outside of the temple or online. Also the system did not fully encompass social life at Tanhua Temple. Not all residents at the temple were part of the Tanhua System, and that included one of the longest serving residential volunteers who himself was studying within Larung Gar's online system, having previously been a member

of the Longquan system. In the following chapters we will also see many other groups who contributed to Tanhua Temple who were in no way connected to the structures of the system itself, like the local workforce, the Chinese diaspora, local university students and Chinese travellers. As such the monastery is also not coextensive with the Buddhist system.

1.4 Conclusion

The Buddhist System described in this chapter was one that had to deal with the problem of pluralism, as it sought to expand its influence to more people in more places. Thinking with the three perennial problems facing any comparative practice, we can think about how the Abbot dealt with the problem of mapping, communication and purpose, as he responded to an internal crisis in the broader Longquan system, and established a successor system in Tanzania. In terms of mapping the structures of the Buddhist System, the Abbot was applying a model he had learned at Longquan Monastery, with the base-level structures of Buddhist studies groups led by the Dharma Protection Team. The system was also mapped onto a broader Buddhist assemblage in which Tanhua Temple drew on transnational lineage connections, collaborated with Taiwanese Buddhist groups, taught Tibetan Buddhist texts, and worked with a Theravada Buddhist orphanage in Dar es Salaam. Within the system the problem of communication was tackled by an online-offline hybrid system that transmitted the Abbot's Dharma talks to their growing number of members, allowing his lectures to reach more people through a reproducible structure. The internet was an essential condition for the emergence of this transnational Buddhist system, and explains how a Chinese Buddhist temple can be sustained in Tanzania with almost all of their supporters living in China. Finally the problem of purpose, or ethics, was the central unifying discourse of the Tanhua System, but one that also presented followers with a range of options depending on their position along the path of cultivation. All of these ways of managing and growing the system simultaneously push in two directions, representing two contrasting frames for dealing with differences within and beyond the system. The first is an open, tolerant and seeker friendly approach to spreading Buddhism, and the second is one that puts increasing demands on its core volunteers who competed for the masters recognition. As the Abbot said, his growth strategy was to first ensure quantity, and then ensure quality by raising the standards as people moved up within the organisation. This bifurcated approach to internal tensions and external relationships helps explain the resilience of the Buddhist system, as its intensification of internal organisational competition drove an expansionist base structure with connections beyond the system itself.

Finally, this chapter raises one important methodological insight for anthropologists related to positionality. My own attempt to understand the Longquan/Tanhua Systems involved one year of fieldwork at Tanhua Temple, two trips to China, and previous research conducted within the Longquan System over the last six years. When I went to the field I had been introduced by a Longquan System acquaintance who I had met during previous fieldwork, but I did not know anything about the internal dynamics of this particular temple. By going from a complete outsider, to somewhat of an insider (studying within their groups, volunteering at the temple, participating in online spaces), I was able to personally experience the differences that shaped relations within the Tanhua System. For many Chinese and Tanzanians living at the temple, the entire online structures of the Tanhua System were either entirely unknown, or only experienced as scratchy voices emanating from phones in the background of daily life. My own understanding of the internal dynamics within the system required participation within its structures. It was only after I joined a study group, took part in online meetings with DTP members, and met the temple's key supporters in China that I became aware of the internal dynamics that have driven Tanhua Temple's growth. This also makes it clear that the positionality of the person encountering the temple will shape the kind of object they perceive. For a system-outsider they may just see a Chinese Buddhist temple, but for an insider they will see a complex set of distinctions between particular monastics, monasteries and systems. In the following two chapters we will see how Tanhua Temple also became a place for Tanzanians to learn about Buddhism, and in doing so a new set of contrasting frames emerge, and a new set of consequences.

Chapter 2

Tanhua Temple's Tanzanian Leader: from cosmopolitan conversations to 'conversion'

2.0 Introduction

In the final days of 2022 James, a Tanzanian man in his mid-30s, walked into Tanhua Temple in search of mantras[15]. James had lived at the temple as a resident volunteer for a year shortly after it had opened, and the Abbot was clearly pleased to see him again. As I translated their conversation over the next few hours in the Abbot's office, James agreed to run a weekly event on Sundays for Swahili speakers, helping the Abbot fulfil his ambition to develop a local congregation. Thus began a year-long cooperation between James and the Abbot, with me serving as their interpreter. James took charge of recruitment and the temple was to pay for catering and transportation to and from the temple for the guests. These weekly events began with a lunch of local cuisine, followed by a 1-2 hour session with James conducted in Swahili, followed by a Dharma talk from the Abbot which was translated into English (by me) and Swahili (by James). There were also question and answer sessions, various prayers, recitations of the Buddha's name (*nianfo*), candle lighting rituals and walking meditations scattered throughout the afternoon. During these sessions James introduced hundreds of Tanzanians to Buddhism, and in doing so, as we shall see in the following chapter, facilitated a thickening of frontal and lateral comparisons between Buddhism and the local context. After around three months these sessions culminated in a refuge ceremony for eight young men who chose to "enter" (*kuingia*) the religion, and later went on to found local Buddhist groups in the suburbs of Dar es Salaam.

In Chapter 3 I will go on to describe the rise and fall of these local Buddhist studies groups and the complicated set of engagements that unfolded beyond the temple, but here I am concerned with the conditions of their emergence in the discussions that James presided over in the Buddha Hall. Beginning with James has its analytic merit, because without him it is unlikely that any of these people would have been brought into the temple's orbit. Singling out James' approach to engaging with difference gives us an ethnographic picture of Chinese Buddhism being pulled into a Tanzanian, Swahili-language context. While it is tempting to think about the Chinese Buddhist system as the driving force behind proselytisation, in this

[15] A mantra (*zhou*) is a text that is said to confer particular benefits on the individual through recitation or wearing the written form as an amulet.

case the thickening of the relationship between James, the Abbot and the local congregation was in large part driven by James. As such I begin with a close analysis of James' personal background and his unique approach to the problem of religious pluralism, which is essential to understanding the unfolding story of the first Sino-Tanzanian Buddhist congregation.

Thus this chapter also speaks to scholarly debates about religious change and conversion, arguing that James adopted a cosmopolitan approach to the problem of pluralism that was invested in notation, or the mapping of similarities and differences, commensurabilities and incommensurabilities between Buddhism and the local context. Weller and Seligman (2012; 2023) describe notation as a strategy to deal with the inherent ambiguity of social life by stabilising our categories, working to define their boundaries through conceptual clarification. Discussions in the Buddha Hall did this by mapping out the ways in which Buddhism compared to the existing landscape of religious traditions, ideas, cosmologies, people, deities, spirits and values that concerned the audience. As different comparisons were made, James drew on a range of comparative heuristics that pushed in different directions, producing a thick comparison that was not reducible to rupture or continuity (see Chua 2012). Rather than a simple dyadic comparison, James was engaging with an audience who were already sensitive to the myriad of similarities and differences between Christianity, Islam, and other religious traditions in Tanzania. The frontal comparison was thus absorbed by lateral comparisons in an already pluralistic religious landscape. What emerges is not one type of comparison, but a plethora of notations that reinforce, reimagine, and sometimes dissolve the boundaries between the ideas, entities and relations being discussed. In Candea's language, some of these comparisons traded on similarity and difference, while others moved into the realm of intensities and flows, blurring the boundaries between Buddhism and the local context.

In the final section I describe one of the most important consequences of these comparative conversations, namely the refuge ceremony. Here we see the importance of shifting comparative framings, from the notationary strategies of the Buddha Hall, to the realm of ritual action as the refuge-takers were given Dharma names, and joined the ranks of Tanhua Temple's lay devotees. I describe the moment when the ceremony that had begun as a bilingual one transformed into a ritual in which the Tanzanians were imitating the Chinese responses to the Abbot's questions, marking a shift from the work of notation to the more capacious and ambiguous realm of mimesis, ritual, and shared experience (Seligman & Weller 2023). While the linguistic boundaries between Swahili, Chinese and English were maintained through translation during cosmopolitan conversations, the refuge takers' shift to

Chinese transcended that boundary, indexing their claim to a Buddhist identity, and membership at Tanhua Temple.

I conclude by making one final frontal comparison to anthropological theory, bringing the cosmopolitanism literature into conversation with the anthropology of ethics in order to clarify the central features of James' cosmopolitan ethical project and its limits. If the preservation of difference was a feature of cosmopolitan conversations, then the refuge ceremony marked their end, and the beginnings of a different approach to the problem of pluralism. Theorising this shift from cosmopolitan conversation to a type of 'conversion' reveals the shifting frames of engagement that led to the emergence of Tanhua Temple's first local congregation. By attending to these contrasting frames and their consequences I also demonstrate the value of a thick comparative approach to interreligious encounters and religious change.

2.1 A thick comparative approach to religious difference

In Chapter 1 I described the ways the Tanhua System dealt with the problem of pluralism among fellow Buddhists, but this chapter and the next we will see how interreligious differences were dealt with at Tanhua Temple as it became increasingly entangled with the religiously plural context of Dar es Salaam. In this section I introduce the new cosmopolitan literature that inspires my analysis of James' project, along with several other concepts that describe interreligious engagements, from hybridity and syncretism to conviviality and conversion. While some have argued for the value of one term over another, I argue that we risk losing their analytic value if we do not think about them comparatively. By describing these terms in the neutral language of comparison developed throughout this thesis, we are able to think through the threshold at which the cosmopolitan conversations transform into the ritual 'conversion' of the refuge ceremony, allowing us to better theorise these engagements across religious difference.

Cosmopolitanism is one answer to the problem of pluralism, one that argues for, or describes, an interest in engaging with the 'other'. However, its long and complicated history has given it significant intellectual baggage. The term, as it emerged in the West, is normally traced to the Ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes, who responded to the question 'where do you come from?' by labelling himself a kosmopolitês, or a citizen of the world. It was then picked up in the work of the Stoics, who inspired the first modern cosmopolitan argument one and a half millennia later, namely Emmanuel Kant's Perpetual Peace (1795), a book that presented his universalist humanist ethics as a theory for peace between nations (Pollock et.

al., 2002). The emergence of nationalism and the horrors of 20th-century totalitarianism and warfare dealt a blow to the cosmopolitan project, but it reemerged in the form of Human Rights discourses after WWII (Penman, 2020). In addition to this potted intellectual lineage, 'cosmopolitan' has also had a tumultuous political life, functioning as everything from an antisemitic slur against 'rootless cosmopolitans' in Soviet Russia, to a descriptor of 20th-century Parisian art scenes. This Eurocentric history, contemporaneous with histories of imperialism and colonialism, has also informed the popular imagination of a cosmopolitan as the sophisticated explorer, missionary or colonial officer, a cosmopolitan cocktail shot through with notions of empire and racial hierarchy. This has filtered into the caricature of 'neoliberal cosmopolitanism' as the cosmopolitanism of 'elite travellers' (Hannerz, 1990), freely choosing from a buffet of global cultures. While some have wondered if 'the term cosmopolitanism must altogether be rejected when it continues to carry the meanings of colonialism and the European Enlightenment' (Van de Veer, 1998), others have sought to 'decolonise cosmopolitanism' (Penman, 2020).

In response to the perceived acceleration of 'globalization' in the 1990s and 2000s, scholars began to use cosmopolitanism as an analytic tool in the humanities and social sciences, spurred by turns towards studies of global and transnational phenomena (Pheng & Robbins, 1998; Breckenridge, 2002; Werbner, 2008). These scholars were interested in studying 'actually existing cosmopolitanism' (Robbins, 1998), less as abstract enlightenment ideas for world peace, but as the various ways people of different backgrounds have been able to live together in an increasingly global and transnational world. This literature argued that the dominance of an elite Western form of cosmopolitanism, or an 'old cosmopolitanism' (Robbins, et. al., 2017), has blinded us to other cosmopolitanisms around the world, described by various additional adjectives such as 'vernacular' (Bhabha, 1996), 'rooted' (Appiah, 2006), 'subaltern' (Featherstone, 2012), 'cosmopolitanism from below' (Appadurai, 2013), and 'cosmopolitanism of the poor' (Santiago, 2017). This research argues that the 'willingness to engage with the other' that is characteristic of genuine cosmopolitanism (Hannerz, 1996:p.103) can be found in many places around the world, from Ancient Sanskrit contexts (Pollock, 2000) to contemporary Islamic ones (Maclean et. al, 2012). As a comparative tool, this "new cosmopolitanism" (Werbner, 2008) no longer referred to an argument for identification with the entirety of humankind as Kant suggested, but to cosmopolitan engagements across differences that may be grounded in other traditions.

Cosmopolitanism is just one among many concepts concerned with the problem of pluralism, and it is not without its critics. In this same period studies of globalisation have

theorised processes of creolisation and hybridity (Glissant, 1990; Bhabha, 1994), and recently terms like conviviality and superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007) have become fashionable in the social sciences. These terms emerged from different empirical literatures, but they share a "family resemblance" (Nowicka & Heil, 2016) as concepts that are concerned with the way we deal with our differences. While their uses vary between scholars, it is clarifying to think about this family of concepts in the language of comparison. Creolisation, conviviality, and cosmopolitanism all describe the multiplication and intensification of engagements across difference, or in other words, thickening of frontal comparisons (from the perspective of those involved). Just as approaches to comparison in anthropology have pushed in different directions, with different purposes in mind, so have our comparative analyses of multicultural, or superdiverse, spaces. Instead of repeating the theoretical "caesurism" that casts out the old for the new (Candea, 2018), I prefer to keep all analytic options open, but to do that we need to clarify their differences.

We can first distinguish these concepts by the way they tackle the problem of mapping, as each takes different types of objects or relations as their units of analysis. Concepts such as creolisation and hybridity are comparisons that are interested in relations, flows, and processes of change, whereas cosmopolitanism and conviviality tend to establish clearer boundaries between their objects of comparison. Creolisation was used to describe processes of "dislocation and invention" (Eriksen, 2019:p.49) that produced new languages and identities among formerly enslaved people, and various other groups who came to be known by this name. The concept of cultural hybridity broke down rigid racial categories, seeing identity as an increasingly fluid, global and changeable phenomenon. Creolisation has mainly been used to describe languages and cultures, but it shares structural similarities with syncretism, a term more commonly used to describe the mixing and combination of religions, epitomised by the Rastafari tradition in the Caribbean. Another concept that describes a more straightforward transformation is conversion, the meaning of which has been hotly debated in the literature on African Christianity (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991; Heffner, 1993). Conversion describes a process where one side transforms into the other (in terms of religious status), although in practice it is never that simple, and this process can be understood very differently by different religious traditions. Conviviality, a more recent term, is concerned with "the art of living across differences" (Eriksen, 2020) without erasing them, or in other words, it is about the minimum conditions of sociality in superdiverse spaces. Emerging out of concerns around immigration and the refugee crisis in Europe, conviviality, like cosmopolitanism, describes encounters across differences, but not ones that necessarily lead

to creolisation, or the blending together or people and practices. Conviviality has focused on the quiet, everyday ways people find to live together even when their differences seem insurmountable. These terms also operate on different scales, with creolisation tending to take place over decades, while conviviality refers to the negotiation of these processes in the present. These terms variously apply to individuals, cultures, societies and languages. While some have criticised cosmopolitanism for 'methodological individualism', as if that were always necessarily a sin, in this chapter I take this to be a distinguishing feature of the term, that implies a certain level of agency for an individual who has decided to engage across differences. By clarifying their differences, we are able to use these concepts to thicken our descriptions of cross-cultural encounters.

As with all comparative terms, the problem of purpose has come into focus with scholars defending the ethical and political implications of their chosen term. One common strategy has been to distance these terms from their normative philosophical origins, framing them instead as analytic and descriptive tools. We saw that in the distinction between old and new cosmopolitanism, the former being characterised as a Eurocentric moral argument, while the latter was open to various different sorts of cosmopolitanisms from around the world. The semantic widening of these concepts allows them to become comparative tools, but not without controversy. Proponents of conviviality have argued that the new cosmopolitan literature describes "phenomena that would otherwise not be associated with cosmopolitan lives" (Nowicka & Heil, 2016). However conviviality arguably makes an even more radical expansion to the original meaning of their own term, insisting that conviviality encompasses both "everyday tension, conflict and frustration … as well as situations of consensus, consideration and respect" (Nowicka & Heil, 2016). Following Gilroy (2004) these authors also argue that "cosmopolitanism derives from a world of hierarchy, it retains imperialist traces; it is entangled with the expansion of Europeans into new territories". However, as we will see in a discussion of Swahili social structure in the following chapter, hierarchy is not a European invention, and engagements across differences will always feature power imbalances. The critique that cosmopolitanism is uniquely Eurocentric is also somewhat perplexing given the connection of 'conviviality' to the concept of *convivencia* developed in multiethnic, religiously pluralistic Spanish cities (Rogozen-Soltar, 2017), not to mention its roots in the normative arguments of a Christian theologian from Austria (Illich, 1973). Notions like superdiversity have been floated as more neutral framings for the "diversification of diversity", but it too has been criticised for glossing over structural inequality, race and politics (Berg, 2022). While scholars do at times have incommensurable

ends, and a reflexive concern with purpose is essential, these arguments should not lead us to needlessly replace words, but instead to clarify their differences in order to broaden our analytical toolkit.

I propose a thick comparative approach to the problem of pluralism that builds on these concepts, retaining their distinctness to give us more precise ways to describe how people deal with their differences. Thickening and thinning of engagements across differences provides a neutral language to frame these concepts. If cosmopolitanism, creolisation and conviviality all describe various types of thickening cross-difference relations, then we can reach for different types of concepts to describe their thinning. While terms like cosmopolitanism and conviviality have an undeniably positive moral valence, thickening and thinning of relations across difference encompass a fuller set of potential outcomes. For example a war could be seen as a violent thickening of engagements that causes loss of innocent life, while a ceasefire is a thinning of relations that saves them. This allows us to sidestep the normative idea that relations are necessarily preferable to non-relations or detachment (Candea et. al., 2015). The push to think about a fuller spectrum of engagements across difference can be seen in Mair & Evans's "ethics across borders", which is "premised on both the existence of ethical difference and the possibility of transcending it" (2015; see also Mair 2014). This kind of thick comparative approach is also seen in a recent book about religious plurality in Africa that uses the terms co-existence, conviviality and conflict as framing heuristics, and brings out attention to the "relationality, entanglement, and multiplicity" of these encounters (Janson et. al., 2024). In the ethnographic descriptions that follow, we will see a similarly complex story of thickening engagements across difference, one that moves from cosmopolitan conversations that created a tapestry of similarities and differences, to a moment in the refuge ceremony that symbolically dissolved those differences as participants became official members of the Tanhua System. Before that however, I must first introduce Tanhua Temple's local leader.

2.2 Tanhua Temple's first Tanzanian Leader

The person responsible for all of Tanhua's success in localisation to date did not end up having these capabilities by accident. A mixture of his own personal spiritual, intellectual and political inclinations, along with the pluralistic religious landscape in Dar es Salaam, led him to becoming someone deeply interested in religion and the ways it could shape the lives of Tanzanian people. James was educated at a Catholic school in the centre of the city, where he was considered a highly promising student, and one with a future as a religious leader

(*padre*). He was also politically active, and was even arrested a few times for organising student protests, suspected by the authorities for participating in opposition politics at a time when multiparty democracy had only just been accepted by the CCM (*Chama cha Mapinduzi*) who had ruled since independence[16]. From a young age, James was also exposed to a vibrant public intellectual scene. In particular he would often walk around the inner city suburb Kariakoo after school, visiting the 'coffee spots' (*kijiwe cha kahawa*) where daily debates take place. According to James these places have been meeting spots for local scholars, religious leaders, and debate-inclined individuals going back to the late colonial era and to this day government agents use these places to keep their finger on the pulse of Tanzanian society. In his own work on Swahili intellectuals, Kresse (2007) was impressed by the "discursive pluralism at a local level" he witnessed in the *kijiwe* and *baraza* in Mombasa. The *baraza* is a feature of Swahili architecture; a stone bench built into the outside wall of a house where people would meet at specific times during the day. Similar types of spaces include "public sheds in either the village or along the roadside, often wooden, sometimes mud or concrete constructions (*kibanda, makuti*) with benches (*magogo*) and mats (*mkeka, gamvi, busati*) to sit on" (Kututwa, 2004, cited in Loimeier 2009, p.178). Such spaces have been central locations for people to deal with the problem of pluralism in its many guises.

One of James' favourite *kijiwe* was located across the road from one of the largest and busiest markets in the country. It consisted of three simple wooden frames covered with tarpaulin, each with a theme. The most well attended tent was full of *Simba* and *Yanga* fans[17] discussing football, there was another for political debate, and finally our destination, the tend where they discussed historical, cultural and religious topics[18]. As we took our seats James was warmly welcomed by young and old, who referred to him with various honorifics like Professor, or teacher, and small cups of steaming hot coffee were placed in front of us along with sweet pieces of *kashata*. Each tent had a chairman (*mwenyekiti*) who directed the debate, first asking attendees to contribute a question or topic, which were then selected by the chairman or put to the vote. Juxtaposed with the sound of traffic and crowds bustling past, the discourse at the table was orderly, as the chairman gave each person a chance to speak their mind. Discussions could become passionate, but formal rules were observed that allow people to have their say by raising their hand with an open fist or a closed one, indicating

[16] CCM has never relinquished power completely, seen in the arrest of opposition leaders before the 2025 elections. This led to protests around election day (October 29) in which lives were lost.
[17] The most popular football teams in Dar es Salaam.
[18] In Kresse's work on Swahili intellectuals in Mombasa he claims that "until recently, some barazas were notable for their specifically intellectual character and interest" (p.74), but in Dar es Salaam examples like this one still exist.

their wish to follow up on a past speaker's point or change the topic. Speeches were delivered with great virtuosity, displaying a mastery of the Swahili language (something coastal residents are very proud of), a deep familiarity with the religious and cultural debates that emerge on the Swahili coast, and a generous dose of rhetorical flourish. These events are attended by a mixture of 'famous speakers', newcomers, and passers-by, who would crowd around the table if the debate got good (or if a foreigner was suddenly answering questions, as I was forced to do that day). I was introduced to one of James' friends, an old man named Mzee Samata who had studied sociology for his undergraduate degree, and delivered highly humorous and cutting critiques through a charismatic toothless grin and a *kofia* (hats worn by Muslims). Other attendees included imams and pastors wearing symbols of their religious faith, along with people who just like a good debate. While I was in attendance, discussions ranged from the meaning of marriage, the historical accuracy of the Bible, to the genetic and social foundations of kinship. James' contributions were exceptionally strong, defined by a tendency to start with distinctions between concepts that were being discussed, pointing out how other speakers have conflated them, followed by his own argument or advice. When he spoke, people listened, and would often turn to him when the debate got complicated or people were speaking past each other.

The *kijiwe* is reminiscent of the coffee shops of the Harbermasian public sphere without the bourgeois trappings, and importantly for this chapter, gave me a visceral exposure to the way James learned to deal with differences in a Tanzanian context. One common logical operation was to distinguish between the religious and political aspects of a question, or between the Christian and Muslim perspectives, as speakers demonstrated their own cross-tradition literacy. While each speaker had their own faith, they were often encouraged to think about it from others' perspectives, or from the perspective of the state. If people could not agree religiously (*kidini*), they might agree on the question from a political perspective (*kisiasa*). The cosmopolitan knowledge of the other allowed these thinkers to create a convivial space where differences could be negotiated, but not always resolved. These places provided the perfect place for James to learn his craft, and remains somewhere he goes to test his ideas. "If you can get your idea past the old men at the *kijiwe* then it will be well and truly ready for the temple", James told me. We can see that his immersion in the social and political life of Dar es Salaam already gave him the rhetorical skills and intellectual flexibility to negotiate multi-faith spaces, preparing him for his role as the leader of Tanzania's first sizable Buddhist congregation.

Through his adult life James became a unique thinker and a dedicated spiritual practitioner. When I met him he had already spent six years in Russia where he studied bio-chemical engineering at university and became fluent in Russian, and was also in a comfortable financial position running a farm of around 100 acres inherited through his family. However, he told me that making money was not his aim. If he just 'followed the money,' he would not be able to achieve his true aims, which were more spiritually and politically inclined. Having grown up Catholic, James had begun studying Islam as a young man, but "in the end," James recounted, "the Christians wanted me to be a padre, the Muslims wanted me to be an imam, and now Buddhists want me to be a monk!" He had a different idea about his spiritual path, one that he described as "being himself" or "finding out who he is". He wants people to be liberated by "seeing through their own eyes", pointing out that religious traditions tend to see their own faith as the solution, but that this depends on the individual's condition. "A sick man needs medicine, and a hungry man needs food," he told me, so it is unlikely that there will be a one size fits all solution. His own spiritual journey is also an ongoing investigation into a dream that came to his mother before he was born. In that dream it was prophesied exactly when he would be born, and that before birth he was fishing somewhere - an image he is still trying to make sense of. He keeps his own personal vows, such as only taking public transport and eating once per day, saying that they help him achieve his goals. When he is faced with particularly difficult problems, he sometimes sets himself long weeks of collecting rubbish on the streets to think them over. If he really wanted to understand a difficult topic, ranging from computer coding to spiritual questions, spirits would visit him in the night, and the next day he would be able to teach the subject. He reads widely, and told me that he has found particular inspiration in the work of Lopsang Rampa, an occult author from the UK who claimed to be a Tibetan lama reincarnated and author of *The Third Eye* in the 1950s. He recommended that I read the work of Catholic theologian Charles Nyamiti, and even gave a sermon one Sunday on the topic of *The Kybalion*, a 1908 book that claimed to be summarising ancient principles. James cited Robert Ingersoll as an inspiration - an American Union Army general and preacher who, among other things, opposed the Chinese exclusion act of 1882. Suffice to say that James' encounter with Buddhism was not a rupture to an otherwise undifferentiated African world view that he inherited or held previously, but the next step in his own intellectual and personal development - one that has been marked by plurality/diversity rather than homogeneity. This eclectic cosmopolitanism is not uncommon in Tanzania, as demonstrated by Weiss' (2009)

study of barber shops in Arusha, but in James we see an even more intense pursuit of new ideas from new places.

Before he became the founder and leader of Tanhua Temple's Tanzanian congregation, James had already begun trying to distribute his moral and political messages. Aside from teaching in various Christian and Islamic contexts, he was a prolific writer, and even wrote speeches for Tanzania's late populist president John Magafuli. He frequently travelled to Dodoma, the capital, doing political errands or at one stage, reading Nyerere's *ujamaa* philosophy for months at the Revolutionary Party's Library. There is a particularly Nyererian brand of cosmopolitanism in James' engagements at the temple, which is why I at points refer to it as a Tanzanian brand of cosmopolitanism. Uncoincidentally, Andrew Nyerere, one of the first President's sons, had himself become a Buddhist in the 1980s at the oldest Buddhist temple in Africa, located in Dar es Salaam, and even studied Buddhism at a temple in Sri Lanka. His translations and introductory books on Buddhism were on display at the temple, a project that James would later continue at Tanhua Temple. He also read widely about Buddhism, and was even using Claude, Google's AI software, to trial ideas for his Sunday sermons. James also wrote hundreds of short parable-like stories, some of which he has turned into audio files complete with music, so that he could distribute them to his followers (and to anthropologists practicing their Swahili!). Each story has a moral or political lesson presented in the form of a metaphor. For example one story compares Tanzania's democracy to a zebra; pointing out that it doesn't matter if the arrow enters the black or white stripes, the zebra dies, a potent biological metaphor for a two party democratic system written during the heights of Magufuli's anti-democratic tendencies[19].

I was particularly struck by the allegorical nature of his writing, in which the two main characters, wise old Mzee Haji and young ignorant Chuma, encountered various problems which always stood for broader ethical, philosophical or political ideas. While discussing his writing, he explained that "we are looking for relative truth, so that is why I use a lot of metaphors". He likened his stories to pieces of *ugali*, the staple food made from corn flour that you eat with your hands. Some people have big hands, others small, and nobody can hold on to it if it is too hot, so his stories are written to appeal to a wide audience. The prevalence of metaphors, which continued into his sermons, illustrates Seligman and Weller's (2019) argument that metaphors are the most dynamic and future-facing tool in the

[19] This has taken on a tragic significance in Tanzania's October 2025 elections.

construction of social similarity (see next section). It is no surprise that they have become a key tool in James' comparative toolkit.

James came into contact with Tanhua Temple on the recommendation of a Sri Lankan Buddhist monk, Master Pannasekara. He had been learning about Buddhism by reading books at Panasekera's temple. In 2017, Master Pannasekara told him to visit the newly arrived monks at Tanhua Temple, and he ended up staying for a year. During that time there were four monks and a handful of Chinese volunteers at the temple. Language barriers were navigated through limited English language conversations, and google translate on their phones. In fact James told me that he deliberately did not learn Chinese, in the hope that it would prompt the monks to learn Swahili, an example of maintaining differences that will return to in the final section. That year at the temple James led a group of local young men, some educated and some not, who were thinking seriously about ordination. James was no stranger to spiritual discipline, and while he lived at the temple, he cleaned the toilets everyday, but according to the Abbot, the Chinese were not really aware of his educational status and ability. In 2018, after a fire broke out in the Buddha Hall, the Abbot asked these young men to leave the temple for a short time while they renovated the building, whilst James was asked to stay behind. James did not like this plan, and the rushed way it was communicated, feeling let down by the temple. According to James, the Abbot never called these young men back, which led James to leave the temple, and for several years he did not engage with it in any serious way. This departure was the first thinning in his engagements with the temple, and foreshadowed a later departure discussed in the following chapter. In late 2022 James returned, not to live at the temple, but to lead a Swahili language session on Sundays for Tanzanians, fulfilling the Abbot's wish to spread the Dharma to locals. On living outside the temple, he told me that sometimes relationships needed distance to maintain respect, a point that echoes the Abbot's observation that too much closeness can reduce reverence for him among his followers. This is an example of the thinning of relationships strengthening them (Candea et. al., 2015).

The relationship that I witnessed develop between the Abbot and James over 2023 was one defined by formal hierarchy, but also affinities, cooperation, and mutual respect. In many ways this resembled a patron-client relationship, an analytic that I will return to in the following chapter when I describe the eventual breaking down of this relationship. The Abbot trusted James as much as he trusted anyone at the temple, giving him complete free reign during his sessions without even inquiring as to what he was teaching each week (by contrast, he once asked me to stop a Chinese businessman from lecturing the locals in the Buddha

Hall, because whatever he was talking about, 'it was not Buddhism'). The Abbot would sometimes seek James' advice, and when it was offered he listened and took it seriously. James educated the Abbot about the functioning of religious institutions in Tanzania, telling him detailed stories about how localisation was achieved in Catholic contexts, and describing the way Churches generate revenue. He also gave advice on whom the temple should target, telling the Abbot we were not ready for middle and upper class people, but instead should focus on the poor, because they would have more time to attend, are more numerous, and have more to gain. The buses for James' Sunday events were also one of the temple's major expenditures, and their cooperation became one of the Abbot's top priorities, something he spoke of as Tanhua Temple's crowning achievement. The Abbot believed that "Buddhism became Sinified in China, so it needs to be Africanised in Tanzania", and in James he had found an ideal person for that job. James always showed the utmost respect for the Master, and while his advice on local matters was almost always implemented, he would always phrase things in a deferential manner, saying things like 'it is all up to you', 'whatever the Master decides'. That did not mean he refrained from offering frank and fearless advice, like when he reminded the Abbot not to antagonise locals during a labour conflict that I discuss in Chapter 4. However he remained clear-eyed about the limitations of individuals, recounting an exchange he had with a monk previously stationed at Tanhua Temple who asked him: "Who are your Masters?", to which James responded "you are my Master." The monk replied, "no, the best Masters are the Precepts[20]. We Masters, we will sometimes mess you up." This comment was made in the context of the 2018 scandal in the Longquan System, and while James always displayed reverence and respect for the monastics, he was also aware of human fallibility. As such he implored his fellow Tanzanians to be students, not followers, and to study Buddhism with a critical mind, not blind faith.

In 2023 I attended James' Sunday sessions as an audience member and as the Chinese-English translator for sessions with the Abbot. Just as the Abbot has emphasised bringing in new people to the Tanhua System, he asked James to invite a mixture of first-time guests and returnees. A group of young men who were inspired by what they heard at Tanhua Temple organised recruitment and pick up locations around the city. During these sessions there was free and open debate, with James running his sessions in a Socratic manner, constantly getting contributions from the audience. All manner of questions were asked and a wide range of topics were discussed. In the following section I will outline some of the key

[20] Precepts are vows against committing certain sinful acts.

themes of discussion that emerged during these sessions, and the way James' cosmopolitan approach sought to thicken Tanzanian's engagements with Buddhism, one comparison at a time.

2.3 Cosmopolitan Conversations in the Buddha Hall

Each Sunday of 2023 three buses would make their way through the suburbs of Dar es Salaam, picking people up on the way to take them to Tanhua Temple, some coming for the first time, and others who were regular attendees. Some who arrived early joined the Chinese events in the morning, others waited around for a lunch of chips, beans and fried plantain (*mzuzu*) prepared by James' volunteers. After lunch James and the regular attendees called people from the yard and went to find those who had wandered off to the beach. Slowly everyone entered into the Buddha Hall and took their seats on plastic chairs. Aside from the bookshelves on the back wall, the other three walls were lined with golden Buddha statues (*foxiang*), food offerings, candles and incense pots. After welcoming guests, James would almost always start with the following disclaimer: "For those of you here for the first time, I will start by dispelling some of your worries: you see the things in front of you, us Swahili we call them statues (*sanamu*), they have nothing to do with worshipping (*kuabudu)*". On different days he described the statues with various metaphors, saying they were like "friends we have in the street, you call their name and they can help you out", or "they are like superheroes, and can save you in times of trouble". It was important for him to emphasise that when we bow (*kuinama*) we are showing respect and humility, but are not worshipping statues. He compared them to the spirits believed by the Wazaramo, a tribe local to Dar es Salaam. Just as the Wazaramo call certain spirits to bring rain, or to assist issues of governance or the law, the statues in the Buddha Hall represent Buddhist figures who can help you in various situations. The food offerings below these statues were also explained by reference to the Tanzanian custom to allow the elders to eat first, as a sign of respect.

Here we see a comparative process that gets repeated throughout these Sunday events, as people attempted to understand Buddhism by comparing it to their own faith traditions and broader social contexts, turning from a frontal comparison to lateral ones. Any comparison necessitates the creation of similarity and difference, and in the following paragraphs we see how James and the Abbot present the case for Buddhism through the establishment of commensurability, but also distinctions between it and social practices in Tanzania. They did not have a monopoly on this comparative project, because many of the conversations that unfolded were prompted by questions from guests, new and old. Sometimes these questions

were preempted, like the problematic presence of statues and offerings in the Buddha Hall, which would often be dealt with in the first few minutes of each session. This initial comparison establishes both similarities between Buddhist statues and Zaramo spirits, superheroes, and friends, while also insisting they are different from the objects of idolatry criticised by Protestant Christianity and Islam. This serves to frame them in the local context. Comparisons like the one James made between Bodhisattvas and Zaramo spirits are metaphors, in that they pick out certain features of an object, and say that it shares this feature with another object while also maintaining space for difference. A metaphor suggests likeness but not identity (Seligman & Weller, 2019). While there were many complex comparisons being made, most of them served to establish both the commensurable, or even shared aspects of the Buddhist faith and Tanzanian religious practice (Islam, Christianity, and traditional religion), and also differences that suggested Buddhism had something new to offer. The similarities and differences produced by these comparisons made it possible to graft Buddhism onto a Swahili cultural/linguistic context and allowed people to make sense of how it could fit into their lives. Like any conversation, outcomes were not predetermined, and while it is not possible to know exactly how each individual responded to each comparison, it is clear that some were convinced and others were not. In these conversations we see a combination of frontal and lateral comparisons being made by James and his audience, the former including comparisons between Buddhism and "our religions" (Christianity and Islam), and the latter including comparisons between the different beliefs and practices within the local religious context.

These conversations were conducted in Chinese, English and Swahili, with translation across linguistic divides necessitating creative comparative work. Just as the metaphor can bring two distant things into relation, translation functions in a similar way, finding a term that we take as equivalent in another language, while acknowledging that they have their own connotations and contexts. As Chinese Buddhist terms were described in Swahili, James and I did our best to choose words that mapped on closely to each other, but the specific connotations of the Chinese and Swahili words being used were rarely identical. Also given the Abbot's tendency to speak for minutes at a time, translation was also a creative process in which James sometimes synthesised, restructured, and contextualised his comments. Therefore, it was not only the partial connections created through translation that enabled these conversations, but also the linguistic barriers that opened up spaces for comparative projects to develop on their own terms. This is also one condition that makes these cosmopolitan conversations, given they are always necessarily engaged across linguistic

differences, among the many others described below. The following summaries of these discussions are organised around themes that were brought up frequently during the conversations at these Sunday events, and reveal a notational strategy that turns on similarities and differences, relations and objects, commensurabilities and incommensurabilities. In the course of all this James was dealing with the problem of pluralism, and the problems of mapping, communication and purpose, by deepening Buddhism's entanglement with the local context through thick comparison.

God and the Afterlife

New guests would often ask about God: 'In both of our two religions, Islam and Christianity, we believe in *one* God. Do Buddhists believe in God?'. This question begins with a lateral comparison between Islam and Christianity, pointing out their agreement, which then motivates the frontal comparison with Buddhism. The answer to the God question took some time to settle. When the Abbot was first asked about this in a morning session by a local guest who had arrived early, it sparked debate among the Chinese. He began by explaining that "Buddhism says everything is impermanent, and passes through four stages: non-existence, existence, change and then non-existence again. That includes the universe we live in, the heavens and also the Gods. The difference between God and the Buddha is that in Buddhism we are supposed to become a Buddha ourselves, establishing our own Pure Land, or Heaven, but in Christianity you can never become God." He then suggested that the lowest Buddhist heaven, the Heaven of Desires (*Yujietian*) might look like it was created by God, but that God did not create the heavens and the earth. After some back and forth between a Chinese lady and the Abbot about the difference between Heavenly Kings (*Tianzhu*) and God, the Abbot clarified for the purpose of translation, the Abrahamic God was the Heavenly King of the Buddhist Heaven of Desires. This became the standard answer, avoiding the problem of denying the existence of God, while provincialising the God of Islam and Christianity to a single Buddhist heaven, the lowest one at that.

Once this position had been established, James provided further justifications throughout the year, creating commensurability between Tanzanians' existing cosmologies and the Buddhist one presented at Tanhua Temple, while also making an argument for the unique benefits of the Buddhist path. Responding to a question about whether Buddhists believe in life after death, James started by saying, 'in the two religions we are used to, there are two places to go after death. In Buddhism, they add another four, so the answer to your question is yes, but I will add a question, which is how do they differ?'. He explained that out

of the six realms, three are good, and three are bad. Our actions in this life determine where we go in the next. However in Buddhism, the heavens are seen as places of pleasure, and will ultimately not help us reach the final goal of becoming a Buddha. To explain this he provided the following metaphor: "imagine your aim is to unite Africa, but then after becoming the President of one country you get caught up in that nation's affairs. This is the same story as going to heaven, we are blinded by its pleasures and end up forgetting our original goals'. To justify the increase from two to six realms, he pointed out that even in Catholicism after death you go to a place to wait, after which you continue to heaven, suggesting that there are also more than two realms in Christian cosmologies too. Around a month later he gave a concise account of what these cosmologies share: 'Christianity, Buddhism and Islam explain their heavens in different ways, but they all share three things, there is life before birth, there is life, and life after death'. After establishing the similarities, he then argued for the particular benefits of the Buddhist Pureland, where you continue to be taught the Dharma and eventually become enlightened. In this short summary we can see James establishing commensurability through similarities, but then using differences to argue for the benefits of the Buddhist picture. In this way he provided a comparative framework for people faced with the seemingly stark differences between their preexisting cosmologies and a Buddhist one.

Comparing Moral Rules

Buddhism's promotion of vegetarianism, and its precept against killing was also a frequently debated subject, as it was during Chinese sessions discussed in the previous chapter. Vegetarianism is a hard sell in Dar es Salaam, as it is in China, so this teaching was presented in varying levels of strictness. Answering a question about the regulations in Buddhism, James made the point that while the precepts are phrased in the same grammatical format as the Ten commandments, or moral injunctions in Islam (thou shalt not, *usiue, usiibe* etc.), the Buddhists also explain *why* you should not engage in acts like killing. In doing so he was engaging with the problem of purpose, clarifying the intention of these rules as moral teachings rather than simple moral injunctions. The Abbot and James argued that the fact of reincarnation leads us to see animals as potential past or future humans, and worthy of our compassion. Killing produces negative karma, which can lead you to descend into the animal or hell realms, as illustrated by morality stories told by the Master. James and the Abbot explained that Tsongkhapa's *Guanglun* links particular experiences in the present to particular past thoughts, words and actions. For people with health issues, the Abbot (and James) always told them to abstain from killing and if possible, eating meat.

However, recognising the difficulty of strict vegetarianism, they would introduce the concept of 'threefold-pure meat' (*sanjingrou*). This is meat from an animal that you have neither seen nor heard being killed, and has not been killed for you. Tanzanians are no stranger to religious dietary restrictions, but neither Islam or Christianity promotes strict vegetarianism. Questions were raised by locals, like what to do if you encounter a dangerous animal? The Abbot responded that we do need to protect ourselves, but that killing will result in that animal coming back for revenge in some form, and that if we go to places with dangerous animals, like the Serengeti, we should not get out of the car. He told the story of the day we found a black mamba in the girls dorm, caught it, and released it a few kilometres down the beach, something that shocked the local staff. The no killing precept was also discussed in relation to local customs and the practice of animal sacrifices. James reminded the audience that if you are visiting family, do not let them kill a chicken for you upon arrival. The Abbot often criticised the sacrifice of animals to the gods in traditional religious practice, arguing that heavenly beings are disgusted by the smell of flesh and would want us to be compassionate to animals. At other times people asked questions about nutrition, to which James responded that peanuts, commonly sold by people walking around the streets, have more protein than chicken. Emphasis was placed on the reasons for not killing, rather than strict invocations of the rules, and in conversations with some of those who took refuge, they mentioned this as a feature of Buddhism, that it was not a religion of judgement, but one of education, a point the Abbot and James had also made. Once again this required a careful comparison between religious rules, arguing that beyond formal similarities, Buddhist rules also came with reasons.

Dealing with Differences

Sometimes the comparative project James and Abbot were leading in the Buddha Hall would deny potential differences by acquiescing to local standards, reclaiming elements of local faith, or even by denying Buddhism's commensurability with the very terms of comparison. This was evident in questions about marriage, which are hotly debated in Tanzania between Muslims who are allowed up to four wives and Christians who are committed to monogamy. On this topic the Abbot said that Buddhism follows local customs and does not have specific rules about marriage. By making Buddhism compatible with diverse understandings of marriage, James and the Abbot avoided a question that had plagued Christian missionaries in the 19th and 20th centuries, a conflict that contributed to the emergence of Independent African Churches in East Africa (Harries, 2005). On the topic of

circumcision, a topic that missionaries also took great issue with, the monks also deferred to local custom, agreeing to the request from local staff to have the boys at the Temple circumcised according to tradition[21]. This strategy of denying conflict between Buddhism and local positions was extended into some aspects of the comparison between Buddhism and Christianity too. One questioner pointed out that the Bible describes Solomon as the wisest man on earth, but that the Abbot said the Buddha was the possessor of perfect wisdom. To this the Abbot and James suggested that it was possible that Solomon is in fact a reincarnation of the Buddha. This is an example of difference being asserted by the audience member, and the Abbot and James proposing a radical theory that asserts an identity between the wisest figures in Christianity and Buddhism. Another more abstract denial of difference occurred in response to the question about whether Buddhism is a religion at all. James and the Abbot argued that Buddhism did not take a position on this because the labels would ultimately only point to relative truth, and this allowed people to engage with it as a religion, a philosophy, a life science, or whatever they fancied. This kind of answer allowed people to define Buddhism as they wished, keeping all doors of commensurability open, by denying any easy translation to one concept or category. In this comparative move Buddhism became an amorphous object that could be compatible with Tanzanian traditions, adopt a monarch from ancient Israel, and maintain an openness to the terms people use to describe it.

Sometimes stark differences were impossible to deny, and had to be dealt with through a convivial mixture of frank acknowledgement and humour. When the Abbot explained that the precept against sexual misconduct meant no sexual relations outside or before marriage, audible groans were heard around the room (the audience were mainly young men). James was adept at turning potentially tense moments into light hearted and humorous ones, and would often put these comments in a teasingly moralistic tone, using humorous slang for cheating or sex, looking around the room saying things like “I know what happens out there”. The differences in this case were not between Buddhist and Christian/Islamic teachings, but instead between these rules and the impression among Tanzanians that many don’t really follow them. Buddhism was after all being presented as a transformative tool for individuals, and in doing so needed to define failure, and its consequences. One day in the office James told me that one of his motivations for doing this was to help people extend the period of their life where they are youths (*vijana*), meaning in this case young adults without children. “After you have children, things change, for now we

[21] Although this had not happened, to my knowledge, by the time my fieldwork concluded.

have time to think things over and work on yourself", he pondered. So while he approached the matter with understanding humour, he was also interested in changing the behaviour of his congregation, giving them more time as young people without parenting responsibilities.

Metaphors and Philosophical Debate

So far these conversations have largely adopted a notational strategy, creating similarities and differences, commensurabilities and incommensurabilities, but as Seligman and Weller point out, the metaphor is another way to make connections between two things that initially may seem very different. While discussions of moral rules often took place during translated conversations with the Abbot, and were handled with a careful comparative approach and clear distinctions, the sessions using a book of quotes from the founder of the Longquan system[22] opened up space for wide ranging comparisons and debates. These sessions were run by James in Swahili, and established commensurability between Swahili and Buddhist wisdom by connecting their ideas through the work of the metaphor. Before handing out this book, James pointed out that in Swahili there are various types of idioms and expressions (*methali, nahau, misemo*) that capture wisdom passed down from the sages (*wahenga*). The quotes in this book are the Buddhist versions of the same thing. He would then have someone read out a quote, asking people to think of any Swahili equivalents. "We will read this and try to define and clarify it together… this is a classroom of cooperation". Often Swahili sayings would be found that have similar meanings. One of the first quotes discussed was: "Everything changes. Learn to understand and accept impermanence"[23]. After receiving some suggestions for Swahili equivalents from the audience, including "there is no beginning that has no end"[24] and "the one who is patient eats ripe fruit,"[25] he began to explain in his own words. "Everything changes, also known as the law of impermanence. This is a big punchline in Buddhism." In order to understand this punchline however, James needed to go back to the basic observation in Buddhism that suffering is caused by attachment (*kung'ang'ania*). He gave examples of people being attached to their youth, or to their bodies, pointing out that when those things change, as they always do, we suffer. If we accept change as inevitable, it can also help us achieve what we want. James explained that changes can come in the form of reforms (*mageuzi*), or revolutions (*mapinduzi*), the former involving

[22] This was a book of quotes or sayings of the Xuecheng, although they were published without an author due to the scandal that enveloped the Longquan system in 2018, see Chapter 1.

[23] *Yiqie dou shi huibianhuade. Xuexi jieshou wuchang*。Kila kitu kinabadilika. Jifunze kuelewa na kukubali mapito.

[24] *Hakuna chanzo kisicho na mwisho.*

[25] *Mvumilivu hula mbivu.*

minor tinkering and the latter more radical changes. He then gave an account of personal and social change, saying that thoughts (*wazo*) give rise to actions (*tendo*), which in turn form habits (*tabia*), which then become custom (*mila*), tradition (*desturi*) and culture (*tamaduni*). If the thought is wrong, he said, then the action will be too, so it is worth coming here to spend a few hours critically assessing our thoughts.

These sessions often resembled a philosophy classroom, and James was clearly a master of the Socratic method. On all topics he would ask attendees to give their opinion, or define and distinguish the meaning of certain terms (these ranged from money and culture to the verbs to see, to watch and to look). After collecting various responses, he would expertly weave the responses of the audience into a perspective that people found new and thought provoking. On one occasion he began with the famous Swahili methali: "the person who is not in sight, finds also that his portion is not present."[26] While this phrase is commonly used by parents to scold children who are late for dinner, James presented a new reading of this *methali* through the lens of Buddhist mindfulness. By describing presence as a state of mind rather than physical presence, he explains that we miss out on the things in front of us when we are mentally somewhere else. When we are at work we think of home, and vice versa, our minds are always somewhere else. Finding related Swahili expressions established the commensurability of Buddhist wisdom in a Swahili context, but in the discussions that followed James was able to give participants a sense of progress towards conceptual clarity. While explaining the difference between Mahayana Buddhism and Theavada Buddhism, James used the metaphors of a minibus (*daladala*) compared to a motorbike (*pikipiki*), the latter only able to take one person, while the former was a larger vehicle for the enlightenment of all sentient beings. Discussions covered a wide variety of topics from the distinction between gender and sex, to the positions of the planets in relation to earth, but James always found a way to bring us back to one of the Buddhist "punchlines". It is no surprise that he also cites George Carlin's stand-up comedy as an influence. By comparing Buddhist and Swahili wisdom, James was providing a nuanced answer to the problem of communication, arguing that while the insights from these two contexts are commensurable, we stand to gain something by thinking about them comparatively.

Everyday Religion

There were also many questions about the everyday practicalities of being a Buddhist: how does one enter this religion? When and how often do Buddhists pray? What do they

[26] *Asiye kuwepo na lake halipo.*

wear? And how do they greet each other on the street? These questions often directly referred to features of religious life in Tanzania that distinguish people of different religious denominations. The week is punctuated by different communities' days of prayer, Friday for the Muslims, Sunday for most Christians, and Saturday for the Seventh Day Adventists. Religious clothing distinguishes Muslims who wear *kanzu, kofia* and *baibui,* head coverings while Christians dress in their Sunday best for Church, dressing patterns that found their way into the Buddha Hall too. Greetings in Tanzania also feature religious content, like the pan-Muslim greeting "peace be upon you"[27], or the common response "I am well, we are thanking God"[28], or "God bless you"[29]. Sometimes direct equivalents could be found, like the greeting "*amituofo*", used by Buddhists in a comparable way to the Islamic greeting. On questions regarding the day of prayer, the Abbot and James explained that for religious people every day is a day for prayers (*ibada*). At the temple there is morning and evening chanting at 5am and 5pm, along with afternoon Repentance Bowing at 2:30pm. The Abbot and James explained that Sunday has been chosen as the day for 'public study', the morning for Chinese and afternoon for Swahili speakers, so that those who go to Church in the morning could still make it. By pointing out that every day is a day for prayer, as is true for many Churches and Mosques in Tanzania, he makes a claim about the equal piety of the Buddhists here in comparison with Tanzania's most committed denominations. Just as *Amituofo* was the functional equivalent of *Salam Alaikum*, Sunday afternoon became the Buddhist Friday prayers/Sunday church service. Sometimes these questions prompted the Abbot to consider changes or additions to the Chinese Buddhist norms, as he did on the topic of clothing. The Abbot would often remark on his appreciation for Islamic modesty, and spoke about designing a new sort of lay Buddhist outfit for Tanzanians, one that he promised they would like. There were also requests from audience members (and those that would go on to start their own groups) to run these events more often, because they felt one session per week was not enough to get a deep understanding of the faith.

These engagements reflect a broad variety of comparative moves, as the frontal comparison between Buddhism and the Tanzanian context unfolded into a thick lateral comparison that turned on similarities, differences, commensurabilities and incommensurabilities. However, in the following section we will see how these cosmopolitan conversations led to a refuge ceremony which adopted a very different approach to the

[27] Salam alaikum.

[28] Nipo salama, tumshukuru Mungu.

[29] Mungu akubariki.

problem of pluralism. Instead of thinking about these engagements as unfolding within static frames, it is essential to see the relationships transformation over time. This takes us from the ontological, epistemological, and ethical challenges of comparison (mapping, communication, purpose), to the transformation of the very ground of comparison, and its consequences.

2.4 The Refuge Ceremony: from cosmopolitan conversations to 'conversion'?

After a few months of discussions in the Buddha Hall, James spent one Sunday session explaining the meaning of the refuge ceremony that was to be held the following week, and answered people's questions about it. He began by explaining the refuge ceremony as the equivalent of conversion rituals in Christianity and Islam, one that means you are 'entering the religion'. The Abbot and James said that you could enter Buddhism without 'changing your religion' (*badili dini*), which James understood as an expression of skillful means, a Buddhist doctrine that allows for explanations to be pitched conventionally at the level of the listener. However he also noted that 'to enter' was more conceptually applicable to the metaphor of 'refuge' (*pakimbio*), which he defined as a place you go in times of need. He continued,

> *In Tanzania for example, if things are going badly, people will tell you go home (rudi nyumbani). This is the difference between the white person (mzungu) and us, there is no Tanzanian who doesn't have a home, even if you are sleeping outside in Dar, you can go home, you have chosen to do this.. If you see a Mzungu outside sleeping, you know they really have no home… every Tanzanian has a place to go home and sleep.. this is a very small thing for us.*

He then went on to distinguish between the home and the house, arguing "a house is just a building, the visible thing.. But a home (*nyumba*) is something we create in our minds (*fikra yetu*)". Noting that most of the people here are not native to Dar es Salaam he explained that those taking refuge they will have a new home at Tanhua Temple.

> *When it's a long way back, and a long way forward, when things aren't sitting well, Buddhism says, leave that there and come home, take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and the Sangha*.

He then went on to explain the content of the Three Jewels in which Buddhists take refuge:

> *Firstly, we take refuge in Shakyamuni Buddha because 2500 years ago he faced his problems and he defeated them, so he can give us strength to face our problems*

today… We take refuge in lots of things, be it alcohol or marijuana, but you wake up the next day and the problems are still there… We take refuge in the Buddha because he is one of us, a human being, and he can give us hope that we will make it.

On the second jewel, the Dharma, James noted that teachers often live on through their teachings, "for example Mwalimu Nyerere, is he dead? Well he isn't here, but his teachings are, just like Isaac Newton, or even Jesus or Muhamad." Lastly, he defined the Sangha as the community keeping the Buddha's teachings alive. He then distinguished between a *mfwasi* (follower), *muamini* (believer), and *mwanafunzi* (student), arguing that followers will do whatever their master says, a believer has blind faith, so we are not any of those, but rather we are students.

We don't do absolutely everything the Master (Abbot) says, you go as students, to study the system, we have to look at everything, we will ask our questions, so that we understand, and can then follow the system… Even when we have already entered, and you reach a certain point, you still don't lose your position as a student, we continue to study every day like we are today.

He continued:

We enter into this religion with our sanity, we are doing so because we have tried lots of paths before, so we are looking at a new system to see if it can help us. The difficulties will still be there, but you have new teachings, and they have the goal of helping you succeed where you failed before. The traffic will still be there.. things in the streets will still be there, but you will have a new way to deal with them. If you follow the system, it will show us the way.

On this point he stressed that you could still be a Muslim or a Christian and study Buddhism, but if you see it benefiting you, there is also the choice to leave the old religion behind.

These framings were a continuation of the notational dialogue in the Buddha Hall, with James and the Abbot offering a range of metaphors for them to understand its meaning. Taking refuge had been described by the Abbot as being an enrolled student at a school as opposed to simply auditing, teachers will take responsibility for you in a different way. The explicit metaphor of registering at a school connoted a form of membership extended to the refuge takers. There were also connotations of client-patron relations that will be more fully unpacked in Chapter 3. James said it was like being in a relationship for a long time and then getting married, the status change does have an importance. "It's like Baptism, it gives you new connections… so there are new doors to open. When I came here to take refuge, I made new connections. I was helped by this place". He then closed in a serious tone, making

reference to the sacraments in Christianity, saying that "there are some things that we can see and others we cannot, the latter is the sacrament, this is our blessing," concluding by repeating the time and date of the event and telling anyone who wanted to join to let him know.

In the days leading up to the ceremony, Venerable Xianhong sent me a set of powerpoint slides to translate into English. The slides included the text for the refuge ceremony, and existing English translations from two other Buddhist organisations. While preparing the powerpoint, I was concerned that refuge takers were to make vows to not engage with other religions that contradicted what was said about the ritual in earlier discussions, although neither James nor the Abbot thought there was any serious problem. This could be understood as a moment of friction, or tension, as I felt the ground of comparison shifting from a cosmopolitan conversion to something that looked more like 'conversion', complete with sectarian loyalties and recognition of the superiority of Buddhism. I then sent the translated document to James who created the Swahili version within 24 hours of the event. It was set to start at 2pm but, as that moment arrived, the Master, James and I were still sitting in the Buddha Hall going through the slides, as the Abbot taught us how to conduct the ritual. This included the section on welcoming the Master, which requires incense, flowers (although we did not have any on that day), and several rounds of formulaic questions and answers, which required some thought about how to arrange it given the presence of three languages. The Abbot decided to only have Chinese and Swahili, with the PPT being in English such that James could keep track of where we were, as I changed to the next slide at the appropriate moments. Before the ritual the eight young men who were participating were given Chinese Dharma names, which included a common surname and one character for each participant, drawn from a list of virtuous qualities and distributed on order of arrival. The giving of a name is a common feature of the refuge ceremony, and this method of distributing names is widespread in the Chinese Buddhist world, in which refuge takers also take on a Dharma name, indexing their own new Buddhist identities. It also formally included these individuals within a network of relations between other refuge takers under the same master, with whom they now share a last name. Only a few minutes into entering the Buddha Hall, the process of including these Tanzanians within the temple's official lay community had begun, with an initial moment of transcending differences that continued throughout the ceremony.

During the ritual itself, there was an unexpected change in the process of translation that made it entirely distinct from the cosmopolitan conversations of weeks gone by. Aside

from the eight locals, both Mama Wu and Ms Liu, a previous long-term volunteer and *jingren* (the step before ordaining) were also taking refuge again, as is common for Chinese Buddhists. The order of translation initially proceeded as planned: the Abbot asked a question in Chinese, and then James immediately translated into Swahili before it had been answered in Chinese, and the participants responded to Swahili in Swahili. However, around half-way through the ritual, Mama Wu and Ms Liu began responding to the Chinese directly, throwing off the pattern. This did not seem a deliberate choice, but one of habit as they were so used to answering the Chinese directly. To my surprise, the locals began repeating the Chinese answers to the questions to the best of their abilities[30]. That meant that the ritual had changed from being one where the material was translated, understood, and then repeated, to one in which the ritual text was no longer legible until after they had said it.

If the cosmopolitan conversations dealt with the problem of pluralism through notation, then ritual (mimesis) opened up new ways to deal with differences (Seligman & Weller 2023). In his historical discussion of mimicry, Ferguson argues that "mimesis may trouble cultural and racial boundaries in complex, subtle, and sometimes counterintuitive ways" (Ferguson, 2002:p.557). By thinking about this shift from conversation to mimicry in the language of comparison we can see how the latter moves towards a ritual expression of identity. This shift can be seen in the ways the problems of mapping, communication, and purpose are dealt with in each context. The cosmopolitan conversation mapped out differences and similarities while the refuge ceremony remapped these individuals' identities as lay devotees at Tanhua Temple. This move from acknowledgement of differences to the recognition of sameness is also on display as they face the problem of communication. Cosmopolitan conversations were grounded in and enabled by linguistic differences, while the refuge takers speaking Chinese transcended this linguistic difference momentarily. Finally the purpose of these events were distinct, in that one was interested in arriving at notational clarity through thick comparison, while the other was engaged in ritualistic action that served to confer membership on the Tanzanians at Tanhua Temple. Unlike the extensive debates about conversion in Christian contexts (see Chua 2012), the analysis of this ritual has not argued that this ritual was one of pure rupture or continuity, but instead marks a move into a different framing of the relationship, from cosmopolitan conversation to 'conversion'. The consequences of this shift will be unpacked in the following chapter as the relationship

[30] This also happened during morning and evening chanting.

between the temple and their emerging congregation continued to thicken, until their final thinning as new incompatible frames came into focus.

2.4 Conclusion: Tanzanian Cosmopolitanism & its Limits

To conclude we might ask what a thick comparative approach to these engagements helps us clarify about James' 'cosmopolitan' approach to the problem of pluralism. Having described the shift from the cosmopolitan conversations in the Buddha Hall to the refuge ceremony in March of 2023, I now turn to one final frontal comparison with the anthropology of ethics to explore some of the theoretical implications of this material. In doing so we arrive at a thick description of the shifting frames of religious comparison that defined the first few months of James' project. Here I draw on the late work of Michel Foucault (1985; 1986; 1997), specifically his suggestion that for any ethical project, we must consider what kind of cultivation is being done (ethical work), how is it impressed on the individual (mode of subjectivation), its goal (telos) and what kind of object it sees itself acting on (ethical substance) (see Heywood, 2023; Cook, 2023; Mair, 2023). Rather than seeing James' cosmopolitan ethic as a constant, we can instead think about it as a discursive step toward a much fuller set of engagements that began with the refuge ceremony, and continued in the engagements described in Chapter 3.

The core ethical work of James' cosmopolitan project was conversation across linguistic, cultural and religious differences in the Buddha Hall. James adopted a notational approach to the problem of difference, softening the frontal impact of Buddhism by absorbing it within thick lateral comparisons of the local context. I argued that this approach to the problem of pluralism has antecedents in the coffee spots of Dar es Salaam and a Nyererean cosmopolitan ethic. These kinds of conversation across differences preserved the boundaries between traditions, while sometimes also complicating or denying them. However, not all engagements across differences are cosmopolitan, and not all conversations are either. Kwame Anthony Appiah distinguishes "talk aimed at conversion" such as a lecture or a sermon from a cosmopolitan conversation which is not about agreement but instead "getting to know each other in ways that mean we can share the world precisely without agreement" (Appiah, 2017:p.272). The conversations leading up to the refuge ceremony were by this definition cosmopolitan, however they also foregrounded a very different sort of engagement across differences for those who wanted to take the next step. The refuge ceremony was also a form of conversation, but as a ritual set of questions and answers performed in Chinese, it did not unfold through discursive notation but had crossed into the mimetic work of ritual.

The cosmopolitan conversation was also dealing with a different ethical substance to the refuge ceremony, with the former working largely on the intellect, and the latter representing a change in the religious status of the individual. It is instructive that the exact meaning of the ritual text of the refuge ceremony and its potential contradiction of claims made in previous discussions were not seen as problematic by anyone involved (aside from the anthropologist). This is because the ritual text no longer intended to create notational clarity for the intellect, but instead reinscribed these individuals with a Buddhist identity. Qiu Yu's (2024) research at Tanhua Temple conducted before the emergence of James' congregation emphasised the monks' strategy of *jieyuan*, or "sowing the seeds of affinity". She argues that beyond "rational and intellectual conversation", it also involved "a process of embodied illumination that induces gradual, inductive, sympathetic changes in others". However, during the Sunday sessions led by James, he was engaged with exactly that sort of "rational and intellectual conversation", and these conversations paved the way for the thickening of engagements that culminated in the refuge ceremony. Thus we might say that James first engaged with his audience intellectually, but as we see in the refuge ceremony and further engagements with the local congregation, this was not a static project, but one that shifted over time as James deepened these individuals' engagements with Buddhism. Sensitivity to these shifts reveal the processual nature of interreligious encounters, and remind us that monolithic explanations rarely capture the diverse ways people deal with the problem of pluralism.

The "mode of subjectivation" (see Heywood, 2015) for James' cosmopolitan project, or the way it impressed itself on the individual was as 'a "resource" (that can be drawn from) and a set of acquired and developed "skills" (that can be employed)' (Kresse, 2012:p.45). Here we find one key difference between cosmopolitanism and related processes of conviviality or creolisation, namely that it is something an individual actively takes up because they think it will benefit their lives. This feature of cosmopolitanism allows us to explain the fact that not all people in the Buddha Hall were equally interested in engaging with Buddhism, with some people sleeping through the sessions, or playing on their phone. It is a deliberate analytic choice to single out the work of people like James, because without him the engagements described in this chapter and the next would not have happened. Rather than seeing methodological individualism of cosmopolitanism as a Eurocentric distortion, we should see it as one of its distinguishing features, clarifying the way it differs from other analytic tools as something that should ultimately apply to individuals who actively take these projects as their own. The cosmopolitan ethical outlook is one that is adopted by

individuals as a matter of choice, and while we can speak about a culture as having affordances for a cosmopolitan ethics, only certain individuals will be moved by them and take them as their own.

Finally, comparing the different teloi or purposes of the conversations in the Buddha Hall and the refuge ceremony reveal an important development in the relationship between Tanhua Temple, James and the nascent local congregation. A recent special issue has presented the notion of "religious suasion" as an alternative to the "limited scope of concepts like 'evangelism', 'proselytizing', and 'missionization'" (Cardoza & Victor, 2024). The editors argue that these terms have negative valences, and correctly point to a wide variety of religious outreach practices that aren't fundamentally concerned with converting the other. Analysis of James' approach reveals that suasive strategies are not mutually exclusive with other forms of engagements across religious difference. In fact these conversations were the precondition for the refuge ceremony, which while distinct in the ways I have described, were also intimately connected. More broadly, cosmopolitan conversations across differences may have various different aims in mind, from the anthropologist seeking to learn from the other (Kuper, 1994; Colson, 2008; Hann, 2008), to the religious leader trying to convince potential converts. It is incumbent on the analyst to describe the aims of cosmopolitan conversations and how they change over time, which can help us make sense of engagements like the ones described in this chapter.

By drawing out this contrast, this chapter has also highlighted one instance of contrasting comparisons, as the engagements between James, the Abbot, and the local congregation developed in new ways. Having spent several paragraphs clarifying James' cosmopolitan ethical project in the language of comparison, one final conceptual caveat needs to be added to the other side of that equation. The term conversion has just as much conceptual baggage as cosmopolitanism, and even more so given the importance placed on it by practitioners themselves. It should be acknowledged that there are theological differences between Buddhist notions of refuge and Christian or Islamic conversion. While conversion in Islam and Christianity represents a singular moment of identification with a new religion, in Buddhism the refuge ceremony is just the first step along a long path toward enlightenment that can involve taking monastic vows, ordination rituals, and a lifetime of spiritual practice. While these clashing framings of religious membership had not yet resulted in serious friction, in the following chapter we will see the ways in which new clashing comparisons led to the thickening, and then thinning of relations between Tanhua Temple and its local congregation. James' cosmopolitan conversations and the refuge ceremony had laid the

foundations for a much wider array of embodied, material and spiritual entanglements of the coming months, and it is to those engagements we now turn.

Chapter 3

The Rise and Fall of the Local Congregation: from polyontological pluralism to patron-client relations

3.0 Introduction

This chapter analyses the rise and fall of Tanhua Temple's local Buddhist groups and its local congregation. These engagements included embodied, material and spiritual exchanges that build on the discursive framings of the last chapter as the temple was brought into an even deeper entanglement with Tanzania's diverse religious traditions and practices. This was on display in the gifting and use of Buddhist amulets, cases of spirit possession during visits to local Buddhist groups, and discussions between the Abbot and members of the local congregation about health, wealth and witchcraft. These engagements across difference were more polysemic than the notation strategies of Chapter 2, but they all shared a comparative frame that saw Buddhism as commensurable with existing spiritual forces in Tanzania, pointing to a common form of polyontologism that has been described in both Chinese and East African regional literatures (McIntosh 2019; Palmer 2022). In these cases we see Buddhism being reframed in the local context, and while there was potential for friction, these contrasting frames were strikingly commensurable in material, embodied and spiritual realms of the encounter.

However, there were also framings of the relationship that created friction and eventual fracturing in the relationship as expectations of local groups became increasingly incompatible with the temple's approach. The Abbot was initially willing to enter into a patron-client relationship with James and his local leaders, but as they sought to expand their operations, clashing framings led James and his team to part ways with the temple. I begin by introducing the local congregation and contextualising the problem of religious pluralism in Tanzania (3.1), followed by an account of the thickening relations between the temple and its local groups (3.2), and finally their eventual thinning (3.3). I conclude by asking how a thick comparative approach helps us see the commensurabilities and incommensurabilities that grounded the emergence and decline of Tanhua Temple's first Tanzanian congregation.

3.1 Religious Difference in Tanzania: a thick comparative approach

The attendees at Tanhua Temple's Sunday sessions, and those who became involved with their local groups in Dar es Salaam represent a cross section of what is already a 'superdiverse urban space' (Dilger 2020). They were recruited by the leaders of the six local Buddhist studies groups who had taken refuge at Tanhua Temple. Results from a survey conducted during one Sunday session found that men accounted for 37 of the 62 attendees, and that the average age of attendees was just over 20: a gender and age profile that seemed to be fairly consistent each week. The majority (36) were born in Dar es Salaam, with the rest coming from other regions around Tanzania from Tanga to Kigoma, along with one attendee from Kenya. Unsurprising given the stronger presence of Islam on the coast, 44 identified as Muslims, and 13 as Christians. Some respondents clarified that they followed the state endorsed Islamic organisation BAKWATA (The National Muslim Council of Tanzania), and others specified their Catholic, Lutheran (KKT), or Pentecostal (Church of God) affiliations. 7 reported having changed their religion, with one young man specifying that he is a Muslim like his father, but had also been to Church because his mother is a Christian. This initial picture reveals the religious plurality of contemporary Tanzania, and the diversity of Tanhua Temple's local congregation. In terms of their socioeconomic positions, around a third said that they were unemployed, while other professions included student, film maker, barber, small businessperson, taylor, motorbike courier/taxi (*bodaboda*), *machinga* ('the term for the young Tanzanian men with low capital who informally sell retail on the street' Sheridan 2018b:p.148), market salesperson and artist. In their written comments many complained about having a 'hard life' (*maisha magumu*), which is important contextual information to understand their motivations for engaging with the temple. Finally, there were 29 different ethnic groups (*kabila*) represented, with the most numerous being the Zaramo who are indigenous to Dar es Salaam, but even that group was still a small minority of 7. This diversity presents a challenge for the analyst, as it would be impossible to present a thick description of all of these places, religious traditions, professions and ethnic groups and how they might shape their responses to Buddhism (see Kresse 2024). However, the regional literature provides us with some very helpful tools to think about engagements across differences in Tanzania (and along the Swahili coast). We will hear echoes of these responses to the problem of pluralism in the ethnography that follows.

Religious difference has been a constitutive feature of life on the Swahili coast for over a millenium. From the 9th century the coastal people, the Swahili, became defined by

their Islamic identity, with each Swahili town centred around coral mosques that are still scattered along the Eastern African littoral today (Fleisher 2019). Becker (2012) argues that it is likely "the spread of Islam helped dampen the expression of politicised forms of ethnicity" on the Swahili coast, and it is certainly true that Islam strengthened cosmopolitan connections with the Indian Ocean world (Sheriff, 2010). However, Swahili towns also displayed complex patterns of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, grounded in a distinction between the 'civilised' (*uungwana*) coastal towns and the 'barbaric' (*ushenzi*) inland people. The civilised were those coastal Muslims with patron-client connections to the Indian Ocean trade network, who were relatively privileged, and like James, were probably somewhat cosmopolitan in outlook. However, unlike purely racial discourses of difference, here the markers of Swahili civilisation were not immutable, and "no one was excluded from the outset" (Kresse 2007:p.39). Kresse argues that the "constitutive feature of the Swahili context is its dynamic capacity to absorb external cultural features and influences, through the gradual integration of a multiplicity of outsiders into society' (ibid, p.36-37). This was facilitated by "Islam, trade, marriage and the Swahili language" (Kress 2007:p.49-50), allowing people from diverse backgrounds to become Swahili in one way or another. This involved movement towards both inclusion and exclusion, as reflected in social institutions such as the dance societies of Mombasa that "served as vehicles for the integration of outsiders into urban society, while at the same time they pronounced existent rivalries between groups" (Kresse, 2012:p.39). This open but hierarchical structure "somewhat paradoxically, allowed access to a society characterised by its internal inequality" (Kresse, 2012:p.39). Here we see both the fluidity of the Swahili identity, and the persistence of hierarchical patron-client relations that we will see resurfacing in this chapter.

Patron-client relations were constitutive of the social structure, but they were far from static. Instead they reflected morally charged relations that could be the source of friction, fracture and fusion when these relations shifted over time. In his article on practices of slavery on the Swahili coast, Glassman (1991) describes the way local understandings of relations between slaves and masters broke down into finer gradations between the poles of 'barbarism' (*ushenzi*) and 'civilisation' (*uungwana*). As slaves gained increasing independence they could become contract labourers (*vibarua*), or craftsmen (*fundi*), and their children born in the coastal culture would become *wazalia*, who could go on to be Swahili gentlemen (*waungwana*). Compared to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the relationship between slaves (*watumwa*) and their masters allowed far more social mobility (McMahon, 2013). Glassman shows how local framings of 'client-slavery' were then challenged by new

Omani masters who introduced forms of 'chattel gang slavery' to Pangani sugar cane plantations in the late 19th century. This clash of moral economies (clashing comparisons of power relations between master and slave) explains why there was increasing resistance in the form of escapes and slave revolts. Here we see the value of thick description of local comparative practices over time, as they frame social relations and explain their many and varied consequences.

John Iliffe's historical magnum opus *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (1979) describes the even more complex state of religious practices and traditions in the 19th and 20th century across the territory of contemporary Tanzania. In the 19th century three major changes were underway, firstly new responses to witchcraft, including the sale of witches into the expanding Arab-run slave trade, secondly the shifting political fortunes of mediums and priests in charge of territorial shrines, and finally the expansion of spirit possession cults (p.81-83). Among the multitude of engagements across differences described, Iliffe gives examples of changing religious practices caused by interractions between different groups. For example the nature spirits in Ufipa that were "previously venerated at specific shrines, developed after Ngoni invasion into spirits capable of possessing female diviners" (p.82). Similarly, when a spirit possession cult (*kubandwa*) from the Bahaya was taken up in Unyamwezi it was reframed as a practice available to all people, not just mediums (p.30-31). He also describes a striking relativity in religious sacrifices on the Western plateau, where "men sacrificed to the four points of the compass", which referred to Ruhinda in the West, Ngalangai (a Tatoga or Masai diviner) in the East; Sungwa Nyanyika (a Nyamwezi diviner and warrior) in the South, and Mukasa to the North (p.79). This was a religious landscape that, like the linguistic and political landscape, was constantly changing, but not in one straightforward way. By the 20th century Iliffe argues that most Tanganyikans shared four religious practices; recognition of a single deity, consultation of diviners (intellectuals of pre-literate societies), witchcraft and the use of medicine (herbal and magical). In the 21st century arrival of Chinese Buddhism we see all of these on display. In the last chapter we saw monotheism discussed in Chapter 2, and we will see examples of the final three in the ethnography that follows.

Adding to this complexity was the arrival of Christian missionaries in the second half of the 19th century, which foreshadows many of the clashing comparisons I saw at Tanhua Temple. By 1885 there were five missionary groups in Tanganika, the French Holy Ghost Fathers, Anglicans of the Universities Mission to Central Africa (UCMA), the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the London Missionary Society and the White Fathers (Iliffe,

1979, p.84-87). These were met with mixed responses, and in the case of the LMS' engagements with the Nyamwezi, their King, Rindi "was so disappointed at its failure to supply firearms that he kept it in a state of constant insecurity" (Iliffe 1979:p.86). It was only after 28 years that they baptised their first convert. However, by the 1920s they had an estimated 22,000 to 29,000 followers (Liebst, 2021), as they focused on engaging with freed slaves and opening schools. As is the case in many missionary contexts around the world, "joining the mission community meant gaining a patron, which could be a valuable asset for socially marginal people", although their experiences in the mission schools did not always satisfy that desire for upward mobility (ibid). Across these encounters we also see striking examples of contrasting framings of exchange, like the gifts given to children by the missionaries to incentivise them to come to school that were understood by their parents as a wage, or even more problematically the purchasing of slaves (Liebst 2021). Another example is the local characterisation of freedmen at the mission stations being "slaves of the Christians" (Glassman 1991:p.304). The next century thickened these contrasting comparative framings as Christian texts were translated into local languages, and missionaries took a range of positions on local practices, from cultural adaptation to fervent critique and repression. By the 20th century Independent African Churches were emerging, and in the 21st century almost all African Churches are now led by local leaders. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to summarise the vast array of encounters that made up this missionary field, suffice to say that it involved an extensive project of cross-cultural comparison, one that shapes Tanzania's religious landscape to this day.

Contemporary ethnographic studies of the Swahili coast have also contributed important new conceptual tools to think about the problem of pluralism, interrogating discussions of creolisation, hybridity and syncretism that have pervaded social science thinking in recent decades. In her study in Malindi, a coastal town in Kenya, McIntosh (2009) says that the relations between the Swahili and the Giriama "from a distance… may appear to be an easy kind of cultural mixing or creolization", but that "ethnoreligious and ethnolinguistic fluidity poorly accounts for what happens" (p.8). McIntosh instead introduces the term polyontologism, defined as:

> *an emic stance ... of religious plurality that acknowledges the mystical potency (the ontological reality) of more than one set of religious or cosmological forces; marks these religious ontologies as distinct (by, for instance, marking their respective symbols and practices as embedded in different semiotic, historical, or ethnic contexts, or even marking their premises as contradictory); and considers all of the*

> *ontologies in question as eligible to be propitiated or interacted with by the same person or persons.* (2019:p.117)

So even when the Giriama learn to speak Swahili, and incorporate Islamic elements into their spiritual practices, they do not subsume the two into one, but instead flip between ontologies. McIntosh notes that "language may play an important role in marking these systems as bounded and associated with particular ethnoreligious forces" (p.117), which was seen clearly in Chapter 2's discussion of the shifting linguistic form of the refuge ceremony. She also describes the use of objectified symbols like the Quran, and their engagements with distinct spirits that are addressed in different languages with different offerings. We will see similar processes unfolding in relationship to the material, embodied and more-than-human encounters with Buddhism described in this chapter. This thick comparative approach acknowledges cultural borrowings and social entanglements while never losing sight of linguistic and religious differences that continue to shape social life.

The spectrum of responses to the problem of religious pluralism are evident in the scholarship about Zanzibar, which reveal both the presence of sectarian or antisyncretic forces, along with polyontological pluralism, especially in the realm of medicine and spirit possession. While the Indian Ocean studies literature has tended to cast Zanzibar as having a "tolerant and highly cosmopolitan social milieu" (Giblin, 2016:p.321), it has also been a place of severe tensions that have at times spilled over into religious and ethnic conflict (Glassman 2011). Neiber's (2024) discussion of Islamic medicine in Zanzibar captures this combination of dynamics in what is a paradigmatic example of thick comparison. She first points out that '"mixing' or 'syncretism' are highly problematic notions" (p.198) for many Muslims in Zanzibar. This is partly due to what Kresse describes as the 'double-periphery' of the Swahili coast, which is marginalised from both the Islamic world centred in the Middle East, and from what they perceive to be a Christian dominated political-economic sphere (Kreess 2009). Unlike the mainland (discussed below), the Zanzibar constitution does not include a commitment to secularity, and has an almost entirely Muslim population. Neiber describes one interlocutor who refuses to accept the plurality of the concept *dini* (Swahili for religion), insisting that Islam is the only true *dini*. However, in the field of health and healing we see practices that "are multiple, retain ambiguity, and enable practices of healing in Zanzibar among both Muslims and Christians" (Neiber 2024). This is reflected in the common expression 'medicine has no religion' (*dawa haina dini*). Christians living in Zanzibar deal with the problem of religious pluralism by reframing 'Islamic medicine' (*dawa ya kiislamu*) as traditional medicine (*dawa ya asili*) when they consult with Islamic healers.

As we will see in the cases of Buddhist amulets and rituals, a similar polyontological approach was also adopted by many who came into contact with Tanhua Temple.

Spirit possession is a realm of ritual action that that works across the boundaries of the pluralistic religious landscape, and one we will see on display in this chapter. Lindhardt (2017) argues that "many traditional beliefs or assumptions can be said to constitute something of a common cultural ground shared by Muslims and Christians alike", and as already noted by Iliffe, spirit possession was a practice that travelled and transformed across ethnic boundaries. Linda Giles' work on the Swahili coast describes a spirit cosmology featuring "Muslim (*kiislamu*) and pagan (*kafiri*), and coastal (*pwani*) and upcountry (*bara*)" (2017) influences, with spirits from as far as Madagascar and Ethiopia. The presence of spirits from diverse origins within these contexts "mirrors the cosmopolitan nature of Swahili society, reflecting the diverse structural components of Swahili communities and their pervasive translocal linkages with one another and with other societies" (Giles, 2018:p.190). Take for example the *Kibuki* spirits that originated in Western Madagascar and came to the Swahili coast via Comoros. While they were originally a set of spirits that reflected Malagasy social and political structures[31], in the Swahili context they became spirits who were considered foreigners who liked to drink brandy (Giles 2009). That meant that those possessed by these spirits would consume alcohol, making it a contentious issue within the internally diverse Islamic community. Increasing polarisation and internal fractures have been spurred on by revivalist movements that have spread across the region in recent decades (Becker 2006). Kresse notes that "young muslims were offered scholarships at universities in the middle east by a variety of Islamic missionary groups, foremost among them from Saudi Arabia but also from Egypt, Pakistan, Sudan, Kuwait and Iran, who desired influence in the Swahili region" (2007:p.94). The spirit possessions described in this chapter were certainly building on some of these local practices, along with Pentecostal-style exorcisms of the kind seen down the road from the temple at Mwamposa's[32] regular services. However, as we shall see, when 'tribal' (*ya kabila*) spirits responded to Buddhist chanting, new types of ritual responses needed to be choreographed. The were not simple dyadic relations between Buddhism and a homogenous other, but highly polysemic and ambiguous moments that were legible through the many different interpretive frames on offer in contemporary Tanzania.

[31] Personal communications with Anna Nieber.
[32] Mwamposa runs one of the most influential Pentecostal groups in Tanzania, Arise and Shine, live streams of which can be found on their Youtube channel.

Finally, the postcolonial Tanzanian state has played a significant role in managing religious pluralism, and promotes a discourse of interreligious dialogue and harmony that is well known across the country. To this day the Presidency and Vice Presidency is customarily shared between leaders from Zanzibar and the mainland, who tend to be Christians and Muslims respectively. During fieldwork I attended political meetings for Tanzania's religious leaders, on behalf of the monks who had lost interest in attending due to language barriers. This was facilitated by the state's Association of Ethics, Peace, Patriotism, Human Rights Compliance for Sectarian Denominations in Tanzania (JMAT, *jumuiya ya maridhiano na amani Tanzania*). At those meetings each speech starting with a call and response slogan, where the speaker said "Our Tanzania", followed by "peace first" from the audience, and "religions of all kind", followed by "peace and love"[33]. These political slogans do not mean Tanzania is always the "island of peace"[34] that people like to imagine (Nieber 2024), but it is indicative of the importance of interfaith relations in Tanzania where there are roughly equal numbers of Christians and Muslims. This state discourse of religious tolerance is not grounded in a secular logic, but instead actively incorporates Islam and Christianity in the state's projects. For example all schools teach religion, and religious leaders are often mobilised for political ends, as they were in the lead up to planned protests in September of 2024. While statistics can only capture so much complexity, a Pew survey (2010) found that "80% of Muslims associate the word "tolerant" with Christians, and 87% of Christians associate the world "tolerant" with Muslims", a sign that mutual respect does exist beyond government slogans. It is also worth noting that marriages between the two are relatively common but can be contentious. Here we see the state's attempt to fuse together a nation defined by its diversity in response to the potential friction and fractures that can emerge in religiously diverse spaces.

Suffice to say that this was a competitive religious landscape, one that already demonstrates different approaches to the problem of pluralism. The regional literature points to an underlying polyontological pluralism where differences are not dissolved but are reframed and put to different uses. However, following Palmer's (2022) discussion of religious pluralism in China, we should not mistake this for isomorphic pluralism in which the plurality of entities share the same form with different content. Within Christian and Muslim groups there are those who take a more ecumenical approach in which the boundaries of the tradition are more porous, and those who take a more sectarian approach that reinforce

[33] *Tanzania yetu, amani kwanza. Dini mbalimbali, upendo na amani.*

[34] *Kisiwa ya amani.*

them. However, in the realms of healing and spirit possession we are no longer dealing with bounded traditions. There is no need to convert to Islam to benefit from its medicine or magic. Here we see a different sort of object, one that can easily become entangled with traditions like Christianity, Islam, and as we will see in the following section, Chinese Buddhism.

3.2 Thickening Relations: Buddhist Amulets, Spirit Possession & Witchcraft

The Abbot and James decided to grow the local congregation by replicating the Buddhist studies groups of the Tanhua System described in Chapter 1, this time in the suburbs of Dar es Salaam. Several of the refuge takers became the leaders of these groups, which initially functioned as recruitment pools for the Sunday sessions. After they had been established, outreach visits were conducted during which the Tanhua monastics and lay followers were brought into an even deeper encounter with Tanzanian religious landscape. Writing about new directions in the study of Chrsitian missions in Africa, Strayer (1976) argued that "African reactions to mission Christianity cannot… be divided into two neat and opposite categories marked attraction and opposition". In the following cases we can also see a wide range of responses to Buddhism that range from confirmations of its spiritual efficacy to suspicion about its potential links to witchcraft. These responses build upon the discursive and material encounters described in the Buddha Hall in Chapter 2, as statues, candles, memorial tablets (*paiwei*), Buddhist amulets, robes and books created affordances for comparison of semiotic forms (Keane, 2007) before any discussion had begun. James' cosmopolitan discussions in the Buddha hall had begun to discursively graft Buddhism onto the Tanzanian context, and now this relationship was thickening through material, embodied and supernatural encounters that went beyond purely notational strategies. While Buddhist amulets, mantras and rituals have their own framing within Chinese Buddhism, as they were introduced to non-Buddhist Tanzanians, they were also imbued with new meanings. This is an example of the contrasting comparisons that I argue structure these encounters. Buddhism is presented as an open ended set of tools that are compatible with local problems of the spiritual and material variety, including everything from protection against witchcraft to spiritual healing and wealth creation. On the Tanzanian side, we also see the ontological pluralism of the Swahili coast, that starts with the assumption of commensurability between diverse traditions, cosmologies, spiritual beings, and the tools they offer for use in our lives. In these engagements material objects and spiritual forces were not under the strict control of people, and their efficacy relied on deep metaphors that allowed Buddhism to operate within

this Tanzanian religious context. The openness of these moments and their sometimes unpredictable results provide an ethnographic snapshot of the latest interreligious encounter on the Swahili coast.

Buddhist Amulets

The Abbot gave Buddhist amulets to all Tanzanians who came into the temple, framing them as a spiritual tool to protect against misfortune and witchcraft. The most commonly distributed were necklaces, some made from a five-coloured string that was said to give extra spiritual protection, that were threaded through a small vial containing the *Shurangama* mantra (*lengyan zhou*). There were also other styles of necklaces, simple Buddhist bracelets and large strings of 108 prayer counting beads. The Abbot never left the temple without putting a bunch in his bag, and he would also hand them out to bank tellers, security guards, customs officers, shopkeepers, and anyone else he came into contact with. As these objects began circulating around Dar es Salaam, they represented a new spiritual force, one that claimed to provide Buddhist protection for its wearer. Every Sunday attendees lined up after the events to receive their amulet, and often requested another for a kin. Those guests expressed interest in learning how to treat them properly, and what they could be used for.

The amulets were one element in a broader argument the Abbot and James developed about the efficacy of Buddhism in providing spiritual protection and blessings. Another related set of claims surrounded the practice of *nianfo*, reciting names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. This notably includes Avalokitesvara (*Guanyin Pusa*) who could save your life in a time of crisis. One entire dharma talk was used to explain the ten benefits of reciting '*amituofo*' (Amithaba Buddha), which included heavenly protection from Bodhisattvas, protection against evil spirits, good health, avoiding natural disasters, relaxed state of mind, good dreams, and finally reduced fear of death, because Amithaba Buddha will take you to the Pureland if you are reciting his name on your deathbed. During the Sunday sessions, Abbot described more or less miraculous happenings, including the time that *nianfo* saved him from being robbed on the beach outside the temple, or that reciting the Buddha's name helped him find lost objects in his office. He also added new stories of Buddhism's spiritual power from local followers, some of which I discuss below.

James was often directly asked about the commmesnurability of Buddhism with what was sometimes described as "African things" (*mambo ya kiafrika*), superstition (*ushirikina*), healing (*uganga*) or witchcraft (*uchawi*). His response was that all religions accept the

presence of these forces, giving examples from Islam and Christianity, and that Buddhism is no different. After translating the Master's explanation of how the amulets function to a local Buddhist studies group, James asked if he could say a few words about the origin of the *Shurangama* mantra. He explained that the Buddha had first used it to free Ananda, one of the Buddha's disciples, from a witch, a fact that the Abbot was impressed James knew. The power of these amulets to ward off evil is a commonly held view among Chinese Buddhists too, even if the kinds of evil are imagined in somewhat different terms. After establishing the commensurability of Buddhism with local practices, James made clear that Buddhism did not allow you to take revenge on witches, but instead allowed you to see when you were being affected, and to protect yourself. The Swahili term used to describe mantras was an Arabic term, *dua*, which refers to prayers that are also argued to contain spiritual potency.

The use of amulets, or other objects, for spiritual protection is not particularly new in Tanzania. Traditional healers (*waganga wajadi*) will often give people objects thought to offer spiritual protection, and "some Tanzanians use soil, water, oil, milk, cheese, coloured clothes, silver and gold chains and bracelets, and animal, bird, grain, and human organ offerings as talismans" (Kaale & Bazira, 2023). Christians and Muslims also have their own amulets, although not all support their use. Such objects belong to a common ground of religious semiotic forms, and while that encompasses a diverse set of potential objects, good and bad, these objects were easily reframed in a local context. The associations they made went beyond the initial presentations offered by the Master, such as one young man who pointed at his amulet as he left the temple, calling it "witchy". This ambiguity is reflected in different accounts of the amulets' effects, ranging from giving people headaches to warding off bad dreams. It was telling that during one episode of spirit possession discussed later, the possessed young lady refused to put on her amulet, a recognition that this object was having an effect on the spirit possessing her. Making these Buddhist amulets commensurable with local spiritual forces also opened up alternative interpretations about the kind of power Buddhism represented. While James attempted to distinguish Buddhism from forms of magic that could target people, associations with witchcraft were impossible to avoid. These discussions reflect similar ambiguities in Pentecostal churches, whose leaders claim to be in open warfare with Satanic forces, while their detractors accuse them of relying on that very same witchcraft to perform their miracles and exorcisms (Lindhardt 2017). Amulets were a polysemic semiotic form that was open for interpretation, and as individuals wore them and gave testimony to their efficacy, they became a symbol of Buddhism's emergence as a spiritual force in Dar es Salaam.

Spirit Possession

After establishing the local Buddhist groups, James, the Abbot, and Chinese volunteers conducted outreach visits to their home and community spaces. James would direct us to the local leader who was normally waiting at a nearby road with friends on motorbikes who would lead us through winding backstreets (*uchochoroni*) to our destination. They distributed amulets, Great Mercy water (*dabei shui*), and food supplies upon arrival, along with lollies for the neighbourhood's children. Generally the local leader would welcome the group, the Abbot would give a short speech translated by myself and James, followed by a question and answer session. Sometimes these meetings also included testimony from people who had visited the temple, an attempt to persuade others in attendance who were encountering Buddhism for the first time. These meetings also included Buddhist chanting, and walking meditation, just like the Sunday sessions at the temple. However, unlike the events held in the temple, these were regularly thrown into disorder by spirit possessions.

During the first of these visits, which was to an artistic collective whose leaders were recruited by James, the Abbot was leading the group in recitation of the Buddha's name while walking around the yard when one young lady collapsed. After a few minutes another young lady followed suit. They had pained expressions and were making an array of noises that seemed to suggest an internal struggle. Immediately one of the Chinese volunteers, a middle aged lady from rural Fujian who had some experience with spirit possessions in China, was supporting the young ladies, and another Chinese volunteer was sent to the car to fetch Great Mercy Water. Other locals were also helping out, showing the Chinese volunteers how to hold the head of the person experiencing possession, as the rest of us continued our slow single-file march around the yard, chanting as we went. As things calmed down, the local leader asked the Abbot if there was anything he could do to secure the property. After consulting with James and the local leader, the monks and the Chinese Buddhists conducted a ritual that involved walking around the edge of the property chanting the Great Compassion Mantra and sprinkling water, ritually creating a boundary (*jiejie*) that is said to function as protective spiritual shield[35]. As they were walking around the yard some water droplets hit a young man's leg, at which point he also collapsed and began muttering in a terrifying voice. During later visits to other local Buddhist groups people were possessed in similar ways, the Abbot was asked to perform these same rituals, and was even asked to chant for people

[35] This was also requested by Chinese business owners who paid for rituals at their factories, see Chapter 5.

whose kin said they were experiencing long-term effects of curses (which presented in similar ways to mental or physical disabilities). During these visits James, the Chinese Buddhists and the leaders of the local groups developed a cross-cultural ritual repertoire for dealing with spirit possession and witchcraft, a repertoire that was repeated around the city over the coming months.

These instances of spirit possession were debated among the Chinese, who each had slightly different comparative framings of the relations between people and spirits. On the drive back some of the Chinese volunteers, and the Abbot himself, admitted this was their first experience with a spirit possession (*futi*), while others said they had seen this kind of thing before. One volunteer who lived at the temple was particularly excited about these events, because they proved that the Dharma was effective in combating some of the occult forces at work in Tanzania, and could be used as a tool to spread Buddhism among locals. The Abbot viewed these matters as somewhat distracting from the teachings of the Buddha, but also was very willing to engage in ways that suited the local context. As such they were willing to adapt their comparative framing, using the spiritual tools at their disposal in new ways requested by James and the local leaders. During these events the Chinese were also educated in the ways to deal with spirit possession in Tanzania, not in a lecture format, but through hands-on teaching from Tanzanian participants. This took place during highly charged moments where possessed individuals sometimes became violent and needed to be restrained. The Chinese would also give extra Great Mercy Water to the local leader to use after they had left, once again shifting the comparative framing back to the Tanzanian context.

When I asked James about the spirits who were possessing people during these Buddhist outreach visits, he said they were 'tribal spirits' (*ya makabila*), and they were reacting to the Dharma. Given the diversity of spirit possession traditions among different groups, this also opens up a wide number of comparative frames. Giles (2009) argues that the tenacity of spirit possession "is that it is both multifunctional and polysemic," and these cases were certainly open to a wide range of interpretations, and we should not assume that each case was the same. Unlike spirit possession guilds along the Swahili coast, this was an almost entirely spontaneous and unstructured possession experience, one in which the events themselves and their outcomes were highly undetermined. It is possible that the arrival of the *Kibuki* spirits from abroad were also first encountered in similarly unstructured contexts, only later to be ritually and institutionally standardised. It is telling that many of those possessed were encountering the Tanhua monks for the first time, and later became regular attendees at

the Sunday sessions. The tension in these moments was in many ways an embodied expression of contrasting comparative frames, as Buddhism provoked responses from local spirits.

That no spirit possessions ever occurred within the temple itself is suggestive of one interpretation that turns on the question of mapping. In the dusty courtyards and tin roof shacks of the local Buddhist groups, Tanzanians and Chinese dealt with the problem of pluralism in ways that they never did in the temple. These events were triggered by the presence of Buddhist monks, mantras and amulets in places that were already seen as sites of spiritual contest with various supernatural forces. The temple was seen by the Chinese and Tanzanians as the centre of Buddhism's spiritual power, and as such local spirits were not able to enter in such force. However in these community spaces Buddhism was a newcomer, and the arrival of monks in robes chanting provoked a response among local spirits.

These shared experiences drove home the point that James had been making about Buddhism's commensurability with local spiritual forces, and involved new forms of engagement across religious differences. Unlike the notational distinctions made in the Buddha Hall, these embodied encounters were not propositional claims about the boundaries of traditions, but instead were impromptu ritual expressions of an underlying commensurability between Buddhism and the Tanzanian religious context. While the different interpretations of these encounters and their consequences are not easily characterised in positive or negative valences, or as convivial or conflictual, they did index a certain thickening of relations between Buddhism and the local context. These were not controlled comparative conversations, but moved into the more ambiguous but highly affectively charged space of ritual action on the Sino-Tanzanian religious frontier.

Health, Wealth & Witchcraft

Attendees on Sunday would sometimes ask for private consultations with the Abbot to discuss their problems, during which concerns about health, wealth and witchcraft featured prominently. The Abbot was very pleased to engage with these people, and would continue discussions even if they ran into the temple's schedule of evening prayers and dinner. During these meetings, translated by James and myself, the Abbot was made aware of some of the central concerns in the lives of Tanzanians, and was forced to think about the distinctive framings of problems in Tanzania and how Buddhism could help solve them. These often reflected the hard realities of a country where disease and poverty claim the lives of many, and provided insights into the challenges of living in Dar es Salaam. We met with a

motorbike driver who had been injured and was unable to afford proper treatment, and people running small businesses with little to no capital. The Abbot was also educated about other aspects of Tanzanian culture, when for example a man who injured his right hand complained that his roommate refused to eat with him if he used his left hand. In these interactions the Abbot was engaging with the problem of contrasting comparisons, as he considered what Buddhist framings could offer to those experiencing the challenges of the "hard life" (*maisha magumu*) in Dar es Salaam.

As these conversations continued, it became clear that the perceived causes of many problems were related to witchcraft, something the Abbot had very little direct experience with. For example, one woman spoke about her money disappearing, and others spoke of unbalanced accounts in their small businesses which could not be accounted for in any easy way. During these discussions the Abbot was often perplexed, not understanding how money could simply disappear. Sometimes he expressed doubts or incredulity about their explanations, as when he advised a lady who said her money was disappearing to pay close attention to where she was putting it, or to get a good wallet. Further explanations were offered by James, who told us about witchcraft including *chuma ulete* where accepting cursed money from someone can result in you losing your own. We also got an insight into the suspicions of witchcraft within families, where people accused kin of deliberately making their businesses fail out of jealousy. One case involved a young man who claimed his mother was not only making his business fail, but was also trying to kill him to increase her own powers. This was initially incomprehensible to the Master, who asked why a mother would do that and how they could still be living together, but James and the young man continued to explain. His mother was a witch, and wanted to pass down the 'magic bag' (*mkoba ya kichawi*), but his refusal to accept it had caused the conflict. James explained to the Abbot that witchcraft sometimes requires sacrifices of family members to increase the witch's powers. These interviews clearly taught the Abbot a lot about Tanzanian people's concerns, and although he sometimes exclaimed that he didn't believe in witchcraft at all, he was forced to engage with it, and in doing so was engaged with the problem of contrasting comparisons and their consequences.

His solution was to offer a mixture of secular and spiritual remedies, a strategy informed by the doctrine of skillful means that allows Buddhism to adapt to pluralistic settings across the world. On the topic of health, the Abbot said that illness and disease have three types of causes, physical ones such as your diet, exercise or hygiene, mental ones including conditions caused by stress or anger, and finally karmic ones, which are the

negative fruits of past deeds. When doctors are not able to treat a condition, a spiritual solution may be the only option. This included recitation of the Buddha's name and mantras, helping others in need, and use of the Great Mercy Water. He taught people how to bless their own water, by reciting the Great Compassion mantra in front of an open water bottle seven times. One lady who came in complaining about leg issues returned a few weeks later reporting that the pain had gone away through *nianfo* practices. Sometimes the Abbot gave people medicine where they were clearly in need, and in some cases other Chinese volunteers paid for hospital visits for people with severe injuries. Just as people with health issues were given a mixture of spiritual and practical solutions, so too were those facing financial problems. The Abbot often argued for self-improvement and hard work, along with repentance and Buddhist charity. When engaging with his Chinese followers, the Abbot also provided several answers to any question, like when he distinguished between the perspective of people who had not taken vows, and those who had. This internal pluralism of approaches also allowed him to pitch a variety of solutions to his local followers, in the hope that they would find one that suited them.

During some of these consultations the Abbot was asked to offer advice on problems concerning spirits and witchcraft. For example he told one man dealing with witchcraft attacks that reciting a mantra seven times to a knife, and then carving a circle around yourself could offer protection. Other cases concerned spiritual experiences such as interpretations of dreams or encounters with supernatural forces. One notable case was that of a young mother who told the Abbot about a ghost snake who had been aggressively following her around for some time. However, when she came to the Buddha Hall, she said that it was spitting money and curled up peacefully on her daughter's head. Although the Abbot presumably had different assumptions about the nature of this ghost snake, he did not hesitate in explaining: "The snake is a being from one of the hell realms, and when we perform the evening service we have a prayer to open up hell, and invite those beings to feed outside the temple, which is why we take a small amount of food out and put it on the altar outside, and then pray to multiply its size infinitely, to satiate those suffering souls. If you continue to recite the Buddha's name, and it hears more of the Dharma, it may receive a favourable rebirth and your merit will be unlimited". This explanation seemed to satisfy the woman, who became a regular attendee with her family. Potential clashing cosmological assumptions (problem of mapping) did not create any observable friction in their discussion, as a Tanzanian spiritual problem was reframed in the language of Buddhism, and remedied with Buddhist solutions. In these consultations the Abbot was also inadvertently reframed in the position of a healer,

much like those discussed by Nieber (2024) in Zanzibar, who was able to offer a range of spiritual tools to deal with the problems people who often still identified as Muslims or Christians. These consultations point to a polyontological common ground where Buddhism and the local context were highly commensurable.

However, on the question of wealth, we also see the beginnings of the clashing comparative framings of lay-monastic relations that would eventually bring these engagements to an end. These turn a difference between local expectations of patron-client relations, and the Buddhist understanding of lay devotees' material relationship to the temple. In his practical and spiritual advice, the Abbot never presented the temple as a direct source of financial patronage. The Abbot spoke about one local man who came to him when he was bankrupt and his wife had left him, recounting that after he recited *Guanyin* Bodhisattva's name his life turned around, and he even became a donor to the temple. Whether it was hard work, or divine assistance, wealth was not directly transferred to the followers, but came indirectly. I will elaborate on the logic of the 'merit model' in the following chapter, but suffice to say that extraction from the temple was seen as demeritorious, and the best way to receive more was, seemingly paradoxically, to give more away (especially to the temple). The Abbot once told the leader of a local orphanage that often received their donations that he should also bring some small donations to the temple, otherwise just taking could produce bad results. This particular framing of the lay-monastic financial relations was not entirely shared by James and his supporters. For example, James floated an idea to offer jobs to the local groups on the construction site for the new temple and school, and many of the local followers pitched ideas for Buddhist businesses, like the selling of amulets or other Buddhist paraphernalia. The Abbot did not agree to any of these proposals. Sometimes these sorts of blessings seemed to eventuate in other ways, such as when some locals found jobs with Chinese bosses who frequented the temple, however this was never directly facilitated by the Abbot. James on the other hand made more direct attempts to provide for his followers, like when he made them aware of a government loan scheme for youth groups that he had applied for in the past. He relayed information he had heard from the government while attending religious leaders meetings on behalf of Tanhau Temple, and gave them the details of how to apply. He said he would personally help them with their applications if they were interested, acting as an intermediary patron for their projects. He even arranged a deal with a production team to provide food and a camera for them to shoot their pilot, on the condition that some of their episodes would feature the Master. However, as we will see in the following section,

there was a limit to the Abbot's willingness to become involved in financially inflected patron-client relations.

In sum, these engagements reveal a thickening relationship between Buddhism and a pluralistic local religious context, which led to a wide variety of responses, from calling an amulet 'witchy' and being violently possessed by tribal spirits, to feeling healed and spiritually protected. However none of these alone can explain the eventual thinning of these relations as we move they went from being framed by polyontological pluralism to patron-client relations.

3.3 Thinning Relations: Fractures in a Sino-Tanzanian Congregation

As the Sunday sessions and visits to local groups continued, James and the Abbot began discussing ways to deepen Buddhism's presence in Dar es Salaam. There was an active effort to translate the daily Dharma talks studied by the Tanhua System's Chinese followers, first into English and then Swahili so that these groups could begin to organise their own study sessions. They also discussed purchasing or renting properties for 'Buddhist Churches' '*fojiao jiaotang*) where these local groups could host Buddhist events. There were visits made to several different sites with James and the leaders of the local groups, who also showed us various buildings and plots of land for sale or rent. While none of these locations were ever invested in by the temple, who ended up moving the local congregation to their new temple property (see Chapter 5), the exploration of this option indicated an initial willingness to extend a form of patron-client relations to the local leaders. During a discussion after a Sunday session, these young men told me that they were willing to drop everything to become full time missionaries for the temple, handing out flyers in their community. They also reported that their biggest challenge was the suspicion they faced from members of their community that they were benefiting financially from this arrangement. In one outreach session, an elderly man directly asked the local leaders how they could profit from the temple. It was hard for them to recruit when they were constantly suspected of privately profiting, even though the truth was they never received any money from the temple. In the following few examples we will see the tensions between these framings of the relationship between the local groups and the temple that led to friction and a final fracturing of the relationship. While the proximate cause for these events was a reduction in the support given to the local congregation for transport to the temple, below we see the tensions between the ethico-economic framings from both sides, an example of what I have been calling

contrasting comparisons. The consequence of this was the end of James and his local congregation's engagements with Tanhua Temple.

One Sunday after the buses had departed with the last of the local congregation, James was offered a lift home by one of the Chinese lay volunteers who used to live at the temple. For a reason unknown to me, James began to cry. He politely refused and went as he always did by public transport. James later explained that her offer had reminded him of another departure from the temple that had left him very disappointed. At that time he had been living at the temple for many months when he had asked to go home for a short time. However, his phone was broken, so he had asked to borrow a phone from the temple for the trip. After only two hours he received a call from the Abbot asking if he had taken the phone and when he would return it. Not having personally translated this discussion I cannot verify the Abbot's perspective, but for James this was an incredibly deflating moment that symbolised a lack of trust. He thought they might be asking about his family, but instead it was about a phone worth far less than the laptop he had left at the temple. On another occasion I witnessed, Joseph asked to borrow a laptop for his translation work, which was again denied by the temple. He told me this was a test to see if the temple had changed, but it had not. He felt at times that there were double standards in which a Chinese volunteer would be given things while Tanzanians were not. In the previous chapter I described James' first departure from the temple after the rest of the Tanzanian young men living in the temple were asked to leave in a rushed and unceremonious manner. These cases all indicate a failure on the half of the temple to meet his expectations of the relationship. James did not want to benefit financially, but he did want to feel as though he was supported and cared for by the Abbot and the Chinese lay volunteers in ways that they were not always able or willing to do.

James managed these tensions by choosing not to live in the temple, but instead only visiting for meetings or to work in the office, to teach on Sundays and for visits to the local groups. However, in the final few weeks of my fieldwork in 2023 the cooperation between the Abbot and James was fracturing once again. James had asked permission to form music and sports activities for the congregation at their new temple property, but the Chinese devotee in charge of construction denied James and the local congregation access, saying it would be a risk to have people there while they were working. The final straw was a reduction in the amount allocated for transport fees for the local congregation. Buses were first replaced with a cash handout of 3000 Tanzanian shillings on arrival, and then that was cut to 1000, which was less than most needed to get there. This did make transport more economically efficient than renting buses, but it also meant that people had to front the cost

first themselves. It also indicated a reduction in the temple's investment in its local congregation. Around this time James had to go to Dodoma for a few months, and took the opportunity to stop teaching on Sundays at the temple, given the significantly reduced turnout at his sessions. If the temple was no longer willing to uphold its side of the bargain by supporting the local congregation, this also meant that James was unable to provide for his congregation in the ways they expected. As such, the local Buddhist studies groups that James had established stopped bringing people to the temple, although they remained in contact with him. Here we see James responding to the reduced investment in his sessions, and their failure to uphold the kind of patron-client relations needed to expand further into Dar es Salaam.

However, in one sense this withdrawal from the temple was consistent with patron-client relations, which can also break down or be abandoned by either party. It also fits within a landscape in which some people move relatively frequently between religious organisations. In a survey conducted among Church goers, it was found that almost all had experience in more than one denomination, with most having attended several (Kaale & Bazira, 2023). While James did express his doubts about whether the temple was ready for a local congregation, he did not see this experience as wasted time, but as just one stop (*kituo*) along the way to his greater goal. Initially he described that goal as the creation of his own tribe (*kabila*), but when I met with him again in 2024, he referred to this as a community, one he calls "*waungwana*"[36], which he glossed as "those who respect the culture, law and tradition of the place he is in". He saw the temple as a good place to practice convincing people, a skill he believes will assist him in his future endeavours. As I spoke to him one year after leaving the temple, he was in the process of planning a TV program based on his writings, and also a platform where people could share their challenges and teach each other. Much like his work at the temple, his aim was to 'force people to think' (*kulazimisha watu kufikiri*).

He also stressed that he had not completely abandoned the Abbot or Buddhism, so this was a fracture rather than a clean break. After leaving for the final time, he was asked by a follower of the Abbot to translate materials into Swahili, and said that he wouldn't do it for them, but would do it for the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma & Sangha). They then rephrased the request, and he agreed. He also said that one day he plans to bring 100,000 people to the

[36] This is the same word that the Swahili used to describe civilisation, although today the term *mstaarabu* denotes a civilised person, a word that directly derives from the root word for Arabic customs, James told me that *uungwana* was a broader term that encompassed *ustaarabu*.

temple, when they are ready. In this way James was still engaging with Buddhism on his own terms, and while that could no longer support the thickening or relations described in this chapter, his engagements with Buddhism are far from over. By thinking about the thickening and thinning of relations in terms of the framings of those engagements by those involved, we get a picture of Buddhism being grafted onto the Swahili context, producing friction, fusion and finally fracturing in the relationship.

3.4 Conclusion

In Chapters 2 and 3 we have seen a detailed description of the rise and fall of the local congregation, one in which at least four framings of the relationship have been identified. These began with cosmopolitan conversations followed by a ritual moment of conversion, and continued to thicken against the backdrop of polyontological pluralism, and finally breaking down as they were reframed as a (failed) patron-client relationships. Building on recent work on religious pluralism in Africa (Janson et. al. 2024), I argue that we should take a thick comparative approach that keeps our analytic options open as we map the field, ask how communication is possible, and think about the different purposes of individuals engaged in interreligious encounters. Plural spaces like Tanzania should not be described by one modality of engagement across difference, but instead we should provide ethnographic descriptions of the particular things, ideas and relations that are being invoked and the consequences these framings have in social life. Across these four framings we see different objects being mapped onto the comparative field; cosmopolitan conversations mapped similarities and differences of religious traditions while the refuge ceremony mapped a transcending of those differences. The polyontological pluralist framing mapped Buddhism onto a spiritually plural context in which it was now a new but commensurable force, and the patron-client framing brought into focus the financial relationship between the temple and its local congregation. Here we also see different approaches to the problem of communication, ranging from discursive notation, to engagements that worked through embodied, objectified and spiritual encounters. The purpose of these framings also shifted from introducing Tanzanians to Buddhism, to formally including them as lay devotees, to repurposing Buddhist tools for local problems, and finally the attempt to solidify a patron-client relationship.

Approaching these interreligious engagements with a thick comparative approach allows us to understand the consequences of these clashing comparisons, and in doing so better theorise engagements across religious difference at Tanhua Temple. Ultimately it was

not the discursive, embodied, objectified or spiritual groundings of this encounter that created insurmountable friction, but the ethico-economic framings of relations between the temple and its local congregation. As the ground of comparison shifted from polyontological pluralism to a patron-client framing, friction and fracture was the result. In the following chapter I will show exactly why patron-client relations were anathema to the Abbot, and to do that I need to describe the monist 'merit model' that framed their understanding of the value of exchange relations.

Chapter 4

The Merit Model: between monist and pluralist framings of exchange relations

4.0 Introduction

This chapter explores the way value differences were dealt with at Tanhua Temple, as the temple engaged with a wide range of people and institutions in Dar es Salaam. The Abbot and his manager behaved according to a particular understanding of meritorious action that I call the merit model. However, in the pluralistic value landscape of Dar es Salaam not all shared their particular understanding of the good. This chapter draws on ethnographic descriptions of exchange relations that the temple developed with Chinese Buddhist volunteers, Tanzanian employees, local businesses and recipients of its charitable donations. Just as there were many different responses to Buddhist ideas and practices described in the last chapter, so too there are varied responses to Tanhua Temple's approach to exchange relations. While the Chinese Buddhist volunteers saw their relationship with the temple through the framing of the merit model, those who encountered Tanhua Temple as an employer, a customer, or a provider of charitable resources, did not necessarily share a Buddhist understanding of the terms of exchange. Theoretically this chapter is concerned with the way a monist value framework such as the merit model of the Buddhists at Tanhua Temple reacts to a pluralistic value context, and how the clashing of value frames shape social relations.

I begin the chapter by introducing the merit model as it was articulated and enacted at Tanhua Temple. I then introduce some key conceptual terms from the anthropology of value, describing the merit model as a monist value frame that encompassed other forms of value within the cardinal value of merit. This allows me to develop three metaaxiological heuristics that describe different results of encounters between the monist merit model and a pluralistic value setting. The rest of the chapter describes these processes of friction, fracture, and fusion, with ethnographic examples from Tanhua Temple. In doing so, this chapter constitutes a thick comparative analysis of the way Tanhua Temple's merit model was accepted, rejected, and transformed in Dar es Salaam.

4.1 The Merit Model at Tanhua Temple

The merit model promoted by the Buddhists at Tanhua Temple is a set of ethical discourses (Schober, 2022), or value framings, that describe a way of acting in this world that facilitates the accumulation of merit (*gongde, punya* in Sanskrit) and karmic rewards (*fubao*). The merit model is grounded in Buddhist doctrine, but at Tanhua Temple it is also influenced by debates within the Chinese Buddhist world, and the particular individuals in charge. While the merit model is considered a general truth about all human action based on the laws of karma (cause and effect), in this section I focus on the way it frames the exchange relationships between the temple and its residents, which I argue is a strongly monist value frame (Robbins, 2013).

Merit (*gongde*) was parsed by Ven. Xianhong in his Dharma talks to both Chinese and local audiences in the following way: *gong* refers to your hard work, helping others and supporting the three jewels (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha), that which increases your compassion (*cibeixin*), tolerance (*baorongxin*), and ability to control your afflictions (*tiaofufannao de xin*), in short it is your inner skills (*neixin de gongfu*), and *de* refers to your moral character (*pinde*). In other words, accumulating merit is about carrying out good deeds that improve your moral character. Karmic rewards (*fubao*) are the positive outcomes of this ethical work, which include improving one's condition in this life, and ensuring a favourable rebirth in the next. The way to increase your karmic rewards is through "giving" (*bushi*, *dana* in Sanskrit). Crucial to this discourse is the metaphor of a field of merit (*futian*), which suggests that helping certain people and institutions will produce more merit than others. In Buddhism, thoughts, words and actions are often described as planting seeds, and the fields of merit provide particularly fertile soil for those seeds, and as such produce more plentiful karmic rewards. The three fields of merit discussed by the Abbot were the field of grace (*entian*, referring to one's parents, teachers, and elders who have provided for you), the field of pity (*beitian*, referring to disadvantaged individuals and groups), and finally the field of reverence (*jingtian*, referring to the three jewels of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha). Ultimately the field of reverence, embodied by the monastics and the institution of the monastery, was the most important field of merit, because it was also carrying out charitable work that helped disadvantaged people (field of pity), and the Dharma was considered the most valuable gift one could give to one's parents, or in other words helping Buddhism was seen as the highest form of filial piety (field of grace). Demerit operates in the same way, so if one plants the seeds of evil actions in the field of reverence the karmic punishments will be

particularly potent. What exactly counted as good and evil acts came from the list of Ten Virtues and Ten Vices in *Guanglun*[37]. This was the doctrinal value framing presented at Tanhua Temple, with merit the cardinal value, and the monastery the key institution involved in its production.

Explicit references to merit and karma punctuated the day at Tanhua Temple, and were thought about and reflected on frequently by the Buddhist volunteers. At the end collective activity, be it morning and evening chanting, collective labour in the garden (*chupo*), or an evening Buddhist studies class, the merit produced was dedicated to all sentient beings in a prayer called the Transference of Merit (*huixiang*). While the text of this prayer indicates a transference of merit to others, Mama Wu, the manager of the temple, described it as depositing merit in your own spiritual bank account, a widespread metaphor from Buddhist contexts in China to Sri Lanka (Gombrich, 1971:p204). In everyday use merit also often ends up sounding like a sort of spiritual currency that one collects by doing good deeds, and is closely tied to karmic rewards. The Abbot also noted in an online Q&A session that sending merit to others after chanting would never be as effective as chanting yourself. Like money in a bank account merit could be transferred, but perhaps more akin to a spiritual investment, the very act of sending it to others increased one's own merit in the process. While theoretically unknowable and uncountable, volunteers were constantly weighing up their actions on the scales of imagined merit and demerit. The quantifiability of merit was driven home to me one day when Mama Wu encouraged me to take the Eight precepts at Tanhua Temple by pointing out that the time differences between Tanzania and China meant that we would technically be observing the precepts for an extra few hours, receiving more merit in return. Merit also encompasses economic value, demonstrated by one long term volunteer who described his motivations for going to morning chanting at 5am every day, which he did without fail, as entirely financial: “us guys from Henan are similar to you Jews[38], we won’t miss a chance to make some money”, he said in a joking tone. After following up about how serious he was, he doubled down, insisting that attending morning chanting was going to help him in his search for a job. Suffice to say that the volunteers all believed deeply in karma, merit, and the special status of the temple in producing karmic rewards.

[37] The vices include those related to the body (Killing, Stealing, Sexual Misconduct), speech (Lying, Divisive Speech, Offensive Speech, Senseless Speech) and the mind (Covetousness, Malice & Wrong View ie. denial of cause and effect), and the virtues are their opposites (Tsongkhapa, 2000:p.218-246).

[38] I had told him my mother is Jewish.

This monastery-centred merit model inspired the long-term volunteers and monastics to give their life, or years of it, to the temple while also striving to limit their monetary and material extractions from the field of reverence by adopting a frugal monastic lifestyle. Anyone who ate at the temple was told they had to finish their food, and after meals hot water was poured into bowls and drunk to ensure no food was wasted. The same kind of frugality was seen in the distribution of material goods like clothes, toilet paper, and soap, which had to be requested from the manager. While technically basic goods were provided for residential volunteers, some volunteers took it upon themselves to buy their own provisions, while also maintaining an ascetic lifestyle, rarely or never leaving the temple for personal leisure. The Abbot's own monastic robes, which had been patched countless times, were a reminder of this ascetic principle. The monks at Tanhua Temple, as is true across the Longquan System, do not receive monthly stipends, unlike most other monastics in China. They also symbolically renounce the notion of private property by keeping their closets open, and all donations received by monastics were sent directly to the Abbot. The Abbot proudly told us the story of a volunteer who after being given a small stipend, handed it to the local staff, telling them to donate it back to the Abbot, because she felt that extracting money from the temple would cause demerit. None of the Buddhist volunteers would accept payments from the temple while I was there, aside from in-kind payments of daily necessities, and sometimes the costs for missionary visas. When the Abbot did pay for visas, this gave volunteers an even stronger sense of indebtedness and obligation to pay back their dues. Freeloading (*baichibaihe*) at a temple was considered a dangerous thing to do, as it would destroy any karmic rewards you might have stored up. Even though the Abbot often told volunteers that "those who provided labour should not provide financial support" and vice versa[39], volunteers often continued to make financial donations if they could. The manager of the temple, who herself was in serious debt to family and friends back in China, continued to participate in five Wechat groups where red packets of money were sent daily by all members, collected by the temple. In theory and practice, the merit model at Tanhua Temple encouraged a highly ascetic, monastery-centred lifestyle that valorised volunteerism and contributions to the sacred centre, while making extraction from it highly problematic.

These strict, ascetic, and sacrificial ideals are also a product of particular political, economic and religious developments in China over the last four decades[40]. The

[39] "*Chulibuchuqian*"

[40] These debates are also connected to the 20th century Humanist Buddhist movements that criticised the practices of performing mortuary rituals for payment.

commercialisation of Buddhism has become a hotly contested issue in China during the reform and opening up period, as the flow of resources into Buddhist monasteries and institutions has generated moral concern, criticism, and reformist responses (Bruntz, 2021). Local governments that played an active role in the reconstruction and revival of important Buddhist sites have introduced ticketed entrances to provide them with another source of revenue (Yue et. al, 2019), provoking mixed responses among Buddhists. In some cases, Buddhist monasteries have embraced commercialisation, as is the case with Shaolin Monastery, whose Abbot, Shi Yongxin, controversially received an Volkswagen SUV from the local government in 2006 for his efforts, and has been accused of living a lavish lifestyle in contradiction to the monastic code (*vinaya*). In other cases monastic communities resisted local governments, sometimes in violent ways (Ashiwa & Wank, 2023). These debates are not just limited to entrance tickets, but also include practices such as selling expensive incense (*gaoxiang*). This practice plays on the common perception that merit operates like a commodity, in the sense that spending more on more expensive incense will produce more merit for the donor, a view strongly denied by philosophically inclined Buddhists. There have also been accusations of monasteries being directly bought out by commercial interests, who after installing their own people, collect the donations for themselves[41]. All of this has led to countermovements from leading monastics and pious lay people, such as the emergence of a Free Entrance Movement in 2012, the introduction of free incense at temples, and ascetic monastic communities who are highly concerned with problems of commercialisation. The Longquan System was very vocal on these issues, and to this day the monastics and lay volunteers at Tanhua Temple maintain a strong stance against commercialisation. These views were made clear during an evening study session when the Abbot complained that some monasteries in China, instead of being sites of spiritual purity, had been polluted by commercialisation. Xianhong himself had observed the struggles at Longquan Monastery and Chongenchan monastery over ticketing. At Longquan temple a compromise had been reached to allow card carrying Buddhists to enter for free after the local government had enclosed the site within a tourist park, and at Chongenchan Temple Xianhong himself had resisted pressure from local government to introduce entrance tickets. Read through the language of merit, these tickets introduce a barrier to entry for lay devotees, and divert resources away from the monastery to the state, which ultimately reduces the ability of the monastery to

[41] Personal communications with lay persons involved with leading monastics the Buddhist Association of China.

produce merit. These anti-commercialisation movements had a profound effect on the merit model at Tanhua Temple, making it particularly sensitive to market-like relations.

Finally, the merit model was inflected through the Abbot and the manager of the temple and their particular lay and monastic roles, along with their own personal life experiences. The lay manager of the temple, Mama Wu, grew up in a rural village near Fuqing City in Fujian, and prior to coming to Tanhua Temple she had spent almost two decades working in construction sites around the world in order to support her family. After an investment in Fujian failed to make returns, Mama Wu had ended up in almost 1 million RMB of debt to her family and friends. She was highly frugal, and would often justify her strict management of temple resources with the notion that giving too much to people would "expend their blessings/karmic rewards" (*xiaofubao*). Another lay supporter described Mama Wu's style of faith (*xinfeng*) as the "superstitious style that is all about collecting merit". Mama Wu herself admitted that before meeting Ven. Xianhong at Chongenchan Monastery, she had been a superstitious believer, only concerned with burning incense and prostrating before the Buddha (*shaoxiangbaifo*), but now had "true belief". As a lay manager, Mama Wu's role was to represent the monastery in contexts that would not be appropriate for the monks, including management of the workers and purchasing goods for the temple. The Abbot was entirely supportive of Mama Wu's tight-belted approach to the management of resources, but avoided personally involving himself. The manager and Abbot's own experience of poverty also shaped their view of who was in real need of charitable support, and they tended to see anyone with a stable job, including their employees, as not qualifying. As a young man the Abbot had served in the army for three years from 1992 to 1995, and after attempting to open a restaurant in Shenzhen, he moved to Beijing in 2000 where he experienced economic hardship working odd jobs, at times having money for only one steamed bun per day. These experiences also contribute to his approach to exchange relations, and who he thought was a worthy recipient of charity. While Mama Wu was fully supported as she attempted to minimise costs for the temple, the monastics were more publicly present in contexts where the framing was the production of merit through charitable donations. It is telling that whenever an employee was fired, a lay devotee rather than the Abbot would relay the news. This value structure, which Robbins (2013) would call stable monism, is akin to those described in Alaya Fader's (2009) work on ultra-orthodox Jews who outsource engagements with the secular world to women, leaving the more spiritually valuable work of studying the Torah to the men. It is also a typical example of value reversals as described by Dumont, in that on the lower market level, embodied by Mama Wu, accumulation was the

goal, whereas on the level of merit production embodied by the monastics, giving those resources away became the aim. Before moving onto the ethnographic encounters, we need to thicken our conceptual toolkit, drawing on work from the anthropology of values.

4.2 Value Frames: Monism meets Pluralism

This chapter seeks to thicken our comparisons of cross-cultural encounters by contributing to anthropological discussions of value structures, or what I will refer to as value frames, and debates about monism and pluralism. By value frames, I refer to the way ideas and language shape the way we evaluate the material world, and in this case the way they frame processes of exchange. This builds on the work of Bateson (1972) & Goffman (1975), who showed how the framing of action and language changed the way we interpret its meaning, just as a wagging tail framing an encounter as 'play' could be the difference between a friendly bite and an all out attack. Seligman & Weller (2019) refer to this as the 'ground', drawing on Charles Sanders Peirce's distinction between the 'ground' or 'scheme' and the 'sign', or what Basteson referred to as the 'frame' and the 'message'. We have already seen one value frame in the merit model, that grounded all action within the language of Buddhist ethics, and in the ethnography that follows we will see examples of several different value frames, from the law and the market, to kinship obligations and Christian ethics.

Value frames can take different forms. Louis Dumont's theorisation of value hierarchies gives us a language to describe the 'monist' merit model. Monism refers to an 'ideology', or value frame, in which there is a clear 'cardinal value', which Dumont argues is always a religious, transcendent value (1980). In Buddhism that is enlightenment, progression towards which is considered meritorious. In his analysis of Indian society, he argued that the structures of the caste system, and religion, formed the highest value (purity), which encompassed the lower levels of economic and political value (Dumont, 1980). However, as we will see in the remainder of this chapter, a monist value structure is not always stable, and is perhaps inherently unstable. Dumont says that between value levels there can be reversals, depending on the totality to which the social action is framed. For example, on the level of the household, a mother assumes a position of superiority, whereas in a political setting that might be reversed. While this has generated debate about whether he is describing a monist, or pluralist value structure (Robbins, 2015), scholars have argued that the "hierarchical

model, the ideological system, far from being monolithic is, on the contrary, both composite and contextual" (Houseman, 2015).

Joel Robbins has built on Dumont to create a set of comparative heuristics of concepts to describe the structure of value in a given context, ranging from monism (in which one value clearly encompasses all others), through monism with stable levels (in which there is a clear hierarchy but lower level values are fully expressed), to stable pluralism (with different levels without clear hierarchy), and unstable pluralism, (where values are seen as tragically irreconcilable) (Robbins, 2013). It is no surprise that examples of monism and monism with stable levels come from religious communities with clear doctrinal definitions of the good (Fader, 2009; Rogers, 2009). Robbins' example of unstable pluralism is drawn from his own fieldwork among the Urapmin in Papua New Guinea, whose previously stable pluralist balancing of willful and lawful action are now irreconcilable in the language of the Christianity to which they have converted to. This unstable pluralism is produced by the clashing of value frames that are specific to this fieldsite, but I would argue it is brought into focus by the fact that this is a place Robbins personally conducted fieldwork, producing a thick comparative analysis that is more likely to pick up on competing value frames. While monism can certainly describe particular traditions and devout believers in them (like the merit model), I argue that a thick description of most contemporary social contexts will reveal the presence of competing value frames. This is especially true of a superdiverse space like Tanhua Temple, where there are significant differences between individuals' value framings. What emerges is far from one stable structure, but a contested, changing, and sometimes volatile set of relations. By highlighting these social processes I move from a synchronic, abstract and structuralist description of value frames to one that captures the "dynamism of social life" (Robbins, 2015) in which people attempt to establish their own value framings and engage with the value framings of others.

To describe the way the merit model competed, clashed and changed through its encounters with other value frames, I introduce three meta axiological heuristic processes that I call friction, fracture and fusion. These heuristics describe the social processes behind the creation of affinities and incommensurabilities that Evans and Mair (2015) discuss in their work on 'ethics across borders'. Each describes a social process of evaluation, or value framing, which requires more than the unthinking application of an ideology, but a concerted effort to think through your own framework and the frameworks of others, and convince others to see the world like you do. Friction, fracture and fusion can be distinguished by their effects on social relations. Friction creates tension but allows exchange to continue, fracture

leads to irreconcilable differences and the ending of exchange relations, and fusion results in a synthesis of value frameworks that allows exchange relations to continue in new ways. In each section I present one or two salient examples of these processes, ranging from market visits and charity events for local orphanages to contract negotiations and labour disputes.

4.3 Framework Friction: Merit Encompassing Markets

While the temple management were never in any doubt about the primacy of the merit model, this view was not shared by everyone, and as such there was friction when other actors understood their exchanges with the temple in very different terms. This tension was succinctly captured by Mama Wu during an emotional discussion in the car one day: "I often feel pulled between the obligation to create wide affinities (*guangjieshanyuan*)[42] and not waste the donations of the temple's devotees". Creating wide affinities refers to creating good relations with non-Buddhists, like giving people things they want (see Chapter 1 on the four methods of conversion, which is the main justification for the temple's charitable activity). However, the imperative to make the temple's limited donations go as far as possible also meant that they drove a hard bargain when they could. In the following ethnographic examples of friction between the merit and market model, we see processes that Dumont would recognise as encompassment. On the higher level of the temple's charitable activities (realising merit) it gave generously to the disadvantaged, which justified the opposite kind of behaviour on the lower market level, as they attempted to minimise their costs. Dumont said value reversals like this one indicate a shift in levels, and a hierarchical structure, one that at its highest level reaches for the transcendent (1980), which in this case is the Buddhists soteriology of enlightenment. The temple ultimately engaged in both charitable gift giving, and standard market behaviour, although the latter was always framed as being in service of the former, as Buddhist merit was the value through which all other values were to be measured. What emerges is a dynamic process in which individuals attempt to establish the value frame for their actions, which when it comes to the morally sensitive line between a gift and a commodity (Gregory, 2015), can easily cause friction. In the following two examples of attempted encompassment, we see market transactions being reframed as gift exchange and vice versa, processes that cause significant social tensions along the way.

The first case involves a market, a place where unsurprisingly, exchange was expected to be conducted along market principles. Every week I drove Mama Wu to a vegetable

[42] See Yu (2024) for a discussion of this ethical imperative at Tanhua Temple.

market that specialised in Chinese produce, sometimes accompanied by other short-term volunteers who could help load the van with large sacks of fruits and vegetables. As we walked into the 50m long concrete hall, with light streaming in through the patterned walls, the Tanzanian sellers greeted us with various names like "boss" or "rafiki" (friend), beckoning us to have a look at their carefully stacked produce, calling out the names of vegetables in a mixture of Swahili, English and Chinese. If they saw a new customer, as I was perceived to be during my first few visits, most of the sellers would call out with great enthusiasm. This enthusiasm had already turned into murmurs and sly smiles when Mama Wu began her slow stroll down the market lane. She was known by name, and had a reputation as a hard bargainer. There had been a few attempts to allow other volunteers and local staff to manage the weekly market visit, but nobody could get better prices than Mama Wu. She kept a careful record of all prices at the market in her notebook, and could describe with impressive accuracy the fluctuations in the market from week to week. She took her time, inquiring about prices at several stalls before arriving at our regular vendor where we bought the majority of the required produce. More often than not these conversations would involve Mama Wu asking about the price, and after hearing the answer, laughing or feigning shock, and walking away shaking her head. Other Chinese people making purchases also frequented the market, and the sellers would often tell me with a grin that "the Chinese are stingy" (*wachina ni wabahiri*), and sometimes they had a few further choice words to describe Mama Wu. In many ways Mama Wu's behaviour in the market didn't differ too much from other savvy Chinese buyers, and conformed to what we might expect in a market model where the incentive is to drive costs down.

However Mama Wu was also very quick to remind the sellers that she was not here to make money, but was purchasing produce for a Buddhist charitable project, and specifically for Tanzanian children at the temple's orphanage. Often this involved giving sellers a Buddhist amulet, beginning with a gift in what she hopes will become a sort of gift exchange, while also revealing the religious motivation behind her bargaining. This is what Dumont describes as a "cardinal value", in this case a religious one, encompassing the lower level of market value. After hearing prices that she could not accept, she would often say "for *watoto*", unknowingly mixing an English word with the Swahili word for children while rocking an imaginary baby in her arms. Most sellers were unwilling to accept this argument, like when one seller responded that they also had *watoto* to feed at home, and that if they sold at her desired price their own children would go hungry too. The man who became the temple's regular vendor, and supplier of the vast majority of produce for the temple, had

become so due to his consistently low prices. As we approached, the tall man dressed in baggy brown suit pants and a clean collared long-sleeve shirt smiled warmly and stood up, letting Mama Wu take his seat while he began to fill the bags with produce, weighing them as he went under her watchful eye. Sometimes Mama Wu would ask why prices had gone up, and he would explain why there was less supply of that particular good, but would always emphasise that he didn't make any profit on these transactions. In this exchange Mama Wu has successfully shifted the framing from a market model, where the seller is expected to make a profit, to a charitable gift. Although her behaviour was realising the market value of minimising costs, she framed it within the higher level of religious merit, and the seller also frequently reminded us that the only reason he sold at these prices was for the children, and that we should not tell others about these prices. In the logic of the merit model, this meant that the seller was now producing merit, and would be spiritually rewarded. However, most other shopkeepers were unwilling to reframe their transaction in charitable or religious terms, causing friction between Mama Wu and the sellers, as they read her haggling as a particularly ruthless form of market behaviour.

In the second example we see this tension between commodity and gift in the opposite direction, as an exchange that was initially framed as a charitable gift was reframed in a way that made it seem more like a self-interested exchange. The centre of Tanhua Temple's merit production is its orphanage, its charitable activities supporting other children's centres and now the running of its own school. For years, regular weekend charity trips to orphanages in Dar es Salaam were organised by two Tanzanian university student volunteers, and attended by members of the Chinese community who donated generously. Each year since 2018, on the International Day of the African Child, Tanhua Temple has hosted an event for these orphanages, gathering members of the Chinese community to donate materials including wheat, rice, oil, clothes and shoes. With representatives from the United Front, the Overseas Chinese Service Centre, place-based Business Associations, along with paid local media and local politicians, this event can be seen as a flagmark celebration for the merit model, as the temple channelled resources towards the most needy, while also exposing more people to the compassionate ideology of Buddhism[43].

The Hiari Orphanage was one of the orphanages that came each year. It was opened in 1996 by a Muslim woman who now ran two centres in the suburbs of Dar es Salaam, one for young children and another for teenagers, the latter of which was missing beds and

[43] Among activities organised for the children were Buddhist chanting and meditation, which was understood as a merit making exercise.

mattresses. The founder told me that they relied entirely on donations and had never had the money to apply for a licence from the government. During a weekend visit to Hiari it was agreed that the Fuqing Business Association (*fuqing shanghui*) would purchase beds and mattresses for the Hiari Orphanage. It was also promised that cloth would be purchased for their children's school uniforms, which they made in-house. A few days later we went to Kariakoo, Tanzania's largest market, to purchase the cloth with Mama Wu, a local staff member, and the head of Hiari orphanage. On the way over, Mama Wu decided that we should purchase the cloth for the children at Tanhua Temple too, and have Hiari make them for us in return for our charitable work. Notice the subtle shift as what initially seemed a pure gift, without obligatory reciprocity, was now becoming a form of gift exchange. As negotiations unfolded in the car park after we arrived, it was also promised that the temple would purchase a part for their sewing machine, and then pay a tokenistic fee. Complicating matters, we also asked them to produce a small number of uniforms for another orphanage whose senior students were not able to go to school without them. The resulting deal was that the temple would pay Hiari's tailors a small price, much lower than market rate, to produce these clothes. After two weeks, and some delays due to electricity outages, we drove one hour to pick up the uniforms, only to find that the wrong numbers of shorts and skirts had been produced due to a mistake in the copying of the order. The tailors (who were employed by the orphanage) were understandably upset and demanded an extra payment to complete the order, saying that the temple's offer was exploitative. The temple was unwilling to pay more, and eventually collected the clothes in a slightly unfinished state, with neither party particularly happy. So what had started off with the seemingly free gift of food and clothes, had become framed as a form of gift exchange, and finally an exploitative market exchange. Ultimately the temple did receive its order, and there would continue to be a charitable relationship between the two, so this friction did not end the relationship as fracturing does. In this case it just left all involved with an uncomfortable feeling caused by friction between a charitable and market based framing of these exchanges.

4.4 Fracturing Frameworks: Market-Legal, Religious and Kinship Critiques

In the following two examples of fracturing frameworks, we move beyond the friction that arises within monism with relatively stable levels, and into the direct conflict between irreconcilable values as challenges were made to the legitimacy of the management's value framing by their own employees. Here I discuss different ways the workers attempted to turn

the tables, by comparing laterally to other value framings like the law and kinship, and frontally as they accused the temple of not acting in a religious way, or in other words failing in their core value of producing merit. The Abbot and his followers used the Chinese term *duili* (oppositional, literally opposed interests) as a negative descriptor for the relations the management had with the workers, which captures the perception that their interests were diametrically opposed and that conflict was inevitable. Unlike friction, fracture describes a process that ends the relationship, and in the following cases we see examples of workers and the temple management deciding to go their separate ways after these value conflicts became insurmountable. While the two examples differ in terms of the power relations between the parties, both depict social processes that established oppositional relationships and ultimately made continued exchange impossible.

As I arrived in Tanzania for the second time, I was told that the translator whom I met during my initial visit had suddenly left the temple without even taking his last pay cheque. He was not the first translator to quit, and would not be the last. Looking for a replacement, a volunteer called the Confucius Institute, asking if they had any recent graduates who could come for an interview. John was one of the four individuals recommended, having just graduated from a three year degree in Chinese. Born in the far North-West of the country, he had been raised by kin in Dar es Salaam after his father passed away, and had become a hard working, motivated young man with a humble demeanour. Although he topped his class at the Confucius Institute, like many other such graduates his Chinese was not quite ready for interviews with Chinese bosses. John arrived at the temple for an interview in mid-July of 2022, and only ever planned to stay 3-6 months to improve his Chinese before he took a Chinese exam in December. He knew a previous graduate who had stayed for almost a year after which he had no problems finding a job. After the interview it was agreed that he would do a week-long unpaid trial to see if he was suited for the job, and whether he could handle the long days, early mornings and hours of chanting. Another University student had already been on trial for one month, and after a few days contracts were drawn up for both of them that offered a base rate of 180,000 TZH with bonuses for improvements in the children's performance. The other volunteer was a deeply religious Christian who had not yet graduated, and was far happier volunteering without pay, although she too was grateful for the opportunity to earn some money to support her mother. However the offer did not impress John. Among Confucius institute students it was rumoured that the top graduates could receive over one million, and in one case four million shillings per month. During discussions the abbot was worried that giving them more than the women in the kitchen would create a

sense of inequality and resentment, however John felt that manual labour was not fitting for a university graduate, and the pay wasn't either: "180k is not a wage you give someone who has graduated from University". He was also dismayed with the lack of division of labour, as he felt he was treated in the same way as the kitchen and cleaning staff, being regularly asked to clean the male toilets regularly. Here we see the market expectation that there be a clear division of labour coming into conflict with the merit model which emphasises collective labour and everyday, menial tasks with the aim of reducing attachment to one's ego. After two months of hard work in the temple John began discussions about a pay rise and a new contract. The Chinese volunteer who was translating and negotiating the process argued that John was a great influence on the children, and given his educational status, was an important talent to keep around. After much convincing, the Master was willing to pay a base rate of 300,000 with bonuses, and then finally settled on a 400,000 offer. However by this time John was already having interviews with other Chinese bosses and offers were beginning to come through. While his potential new salary might have only been slightly better, at the temple work began before 5am every morning, continued without much respite until 9pm in the evening when the children went to bed, and stopped him seeing his girlfriend who he used to live with during university. John refused to sign the contract. In one final round of negotiations, the Master offered him a 45 hour work week, living off site, but after John accepted that deal, the Master withdrew it, deciding that all workers had to live on site. Ultimately John was in high demand outside the temple, and after around four months of intensive exposure to Chinese, he had gained a lot from the experience, finding a well paid job with a young Chinese entrepreneur who treated him well. Next time I saw John he was walking with his boss in an air conditioned mall wearing a suit, having realised his goal of becoming a young professional.

John had always understood his relationship with the temple from a market perspective, and the fracturing of the relationship came when employment at the temple no longer added up within a market framing. From the interview, to contract negotiations, and finally his resignation, he was dealing with Mr Rui, a long-term volunteer with years of professional workplace experience. Mr Rui understood John's value framing easily, but he also understood the logic of merit that informed the Abbot's decisions. During the negotiations Mr Rui made arguments to the Abbot about increasing John's wage, and also tried to convince John to sign a contract to stay for a longer period, arguing that after a year his Chinese would definitely be good enough to get another job. However Mr Rui eventually became disillusioned with his middle man position, feeling as though he was ruining his

relationships with both sides. While he tried to present a professional face to John, the withdrawal of an offer to work offsite and the general unwillingness to pay market rates struck him as unprofessional. Other volunteers with business experience had tried to help the Abbot by giving him management studies books, but the Abbot was consistent in his position that the temple was “not a place to make money”, and that if they wanted market rates they could go to work with a Chinese boss outside of the temple. During these negotiations John never signed a new contract, even though it would have doubled his pay. Mr Rui suggested he sign the contract and leave when he found a new job, but John did not want to be locked into giving one month's notice. On John’s side, he wanted to change the relationship to make it more professional, and regulated by legal and market values. In all of these engagements he clearly adopted the value framework of a non-Buddhist recent graduate who saw himself in the job market. While he later said that he learned a lot about life from Tanhua Temple, the working conditions and compensation at the temple was far below market rates, and led to John ending his employment relationship with the temple.

The second case involves the women employed as kitchen staff and cleaners, and in this we see relationships that became increasingly conflict ridden until none of their contracts were renewed by the management at the end of 2023. These employees also made legal/market critiques but due to the limited effect of those claims, they turned to other arguments against the temple management based on kinship and religious values. The two long-term employees in the kitchen were Teresa, an older woman who came with the children from Kind Hearts Africa[44] in 2020, along with her grandson who lived at the temple for extended periods, and Eve, a younger woman who had been recommended around a year later by a Chinese boss who frequented the temple. They did the vast majority of daily work at the temple, which included cooking three meals for the roughly 30 residents and guests, looking after the children, sweeping the grounds and doing the children’s laundry. Their direct manager, Mama Wu, made sure they were working hard and were constantly busy. Like John, Teresa and Anna also made a legal critique of the temple, pointing out the discrepancies between the contracts and reality, like pushing the temple management to stay up to date with social security payments, which at one stage were not paid for over six months. They complained about having their pay docked, and had to make constant arguments to limit the amount of work they were given. They also made threats, sometimes under their breath and sometimes more directly, to go to the courts and make a formal

[44] This is the orphanage run by a Sri Lankan monk introduced in a previous chapter where Tanhua Temple’s children had originally been living.

complaint, although that never eventuated. Legal actions were threatened on one heated occasion when Teresa shouted at a Chinese volunteer who had been seen caning the children in the classroom, threatening that she would go to the police if she saw it again. They argued that only Tanzanians should be able to physically discipline the children, which the Abbot agreed with. While they also complained about their pay, which was around 200,000 TZH, the management pointed to the salaries paid by other Chinese bosses, arguing that they were paying market rates and could replace them if need be[45].

Given legal and market critiques could not change their employment relationship, these women extended their critiques to values of kinship and the related values of love and peace that they said should define religious places. Obligations to care for kin came into direct conflict with the merit model, when for example the management docked Eve's pay after she took time off to assist her sick mother in hospital. In response the management insisted that charity and employment relations should be kept separate. It has been widely noted that employer-employee relations in Africa are often spoken about in kinship-like terms, where the employer is expected to also take care of the employees wellbeing in a holistic way, including their kinship obligations. The kinship critique was also frequently aimed at the temple's own treatment of the children at Tanhua Temple, shifting the framing of Mama Wu's actions to her eponymous role as a mother rather than manager. Mama Wu's ascetic management, and her idea that spoiling the children would use up their blessings, meant that the children were often wearing ripped or ill-fitting clothes. Her argument was that if she replaced them too quickly they would not treasure their clothes, and that previously when she had given them things they ended up lost or broken. This was particularly sensitive when it came to school uniforms. For the locals, having a child look the part at school was very important. The Principal at the school had warned the temple management to improve on this front, but it was a constant struggle to convince Mama Wu to distribute new clothes. The same could be said about the schedule, as the women argued that the children should not get up so early, or that they should have more time to play. The workers argued that in her miserly behaviour Mama Wu was not living up to her title as a mother of these children. If we take the expenditure of the Tanzanian workers as an indication, kinship relations were highly valued in their own lives. As mentioned, Eva spent most of her time away from work dealing with family health emergencies, and Teresa was constantly busy trying to organise and pay

[45] By the end of her employment Anna had effectively learned Chinese, and also how to cook Chinese food, and was able to find a better job relatively quickly, but up until that point there was never a lot of certainty about their employment.

for her daughter's wedding, and in general a significant portion of their pay went towards supporting distant kin. Although the relationship between Mama Wu and the workers could at rare moments feel light-hearted and convivial, when these critiques surfaced they took a serious tone, as the women accused the manager of having a "bad heart" (*moyo mbaya*). While they did not often make these critiques directly to Mama Wu (partly due to language barriers), they were relayed to the manager by others, including a Tanzanian translator who I discuss in chapter 5, and their dissatisfaction became fairly obvious through facial expressions and body language. Suffice to say that not seeing eye to eye on how to be a good mother certainly drove a wedge between the workers and Mama Wu[46].

There was one final element of the critique that fractured the value framing frontally, directly questioning the religious value that the temple relied on to justify their management of the workers. The women in the kitchen were particularly aggrieved when they saw the way local guests on Sunday were treated, being given a free lunch, gifted amulets, and a free bus back to their communities. Why would the temple treat these people so well, "when most of them aren't really coming here to pray anyway", and then put so much exploitative pressure on their own workers? Note how this critique turns on the morally fraught distinction between gift and commodity, questioning how the temple could engage in such ruthless market relations with their employees, while extending generous charity to other Tanzanians. The workers argued that religious people should extend compassion to all, including their employees, and their failure to do so led the workers to conclude that this was a place "without love" (*hakuna upendo*), and that there were "two families" living at the temple. This line of argument was also made by Grace, an 18 year old girl who had been brought in off the beach by a local fisherman who said that she had no place to stay. After confirming her identity, the Master offered her refuge in the temple on the condition that she become a volunteer. Initially this seemed a charitable act, but as a volunteer at the temple, Angel ended up working closely alongside the kitchen staff and slowly became disillusioned with the temple management. She claimed that there was "no love in this place", and one day when it got too much for her, she left without a word. Ultimately the workers' refusal to see the temple as a place of merit production contributed to the management's reading of the relationship as oppositional (*duili*), leading to the non-renewal of their contracts at the end of 2023.

[46] This critique is also potentially the most sensitive for Mama Wu, who had not been around for her own daughter's youth, which she still regrets.

4.5 Fusing Frameworks: From Worker to Paid Volunteer

The final ethnographic example presents us with a third potential outcome of clashing value frameworks in which a compromise is reached, creating a new exchange relationship. Thomas arrived at the temple in search of a job in late 2022, accompanied by Mr Zong, the boss of Group Six (see Chapter 4), with whom he had worked for several years. Thomas had recently left his job as principal of a primary school in Dodoma to pursue an undergraduate degree in education to further his career. He still had a wife and children in Dodoma to support, so he was looking for some part-time work and a place to stay in Dar es Salaam while completing his degree. During the interview his wages were discussed, with Mama Wu ensuring no more than 200,000 TZH was offered, and Zong suggesting that he could still work some days in his office if that pay was not enough, insisting that he was going to be great for the temple. At the temple he was responsible for the children's education, and became an informal moderator between local staff during disputes. However, during term time he would be occupied studying at University for extended periods of the day, and after the first month the Master was already thinking about letting him go. After around three months, the Master finally decided to fire Thomas after he had asked for his four days of holiday per month to be accounted for in his timesheets. Over the preceding months there had been several complaints about his absence, and in the end he was asked to sign in and out of the temple each day. However, the records had not been kept very well, and when it came time to calculate his pay, the Master decided to dock half of it based on an estimation of his absences. Thomas was worried that he would not have enough money for the bus fare to university, and responded by asking for his four days of paid leave to be added to the already docked pay. Realising that legally Thomas was in the right, the Abbot felt as though the relationship had become "oppositional", and that moment was the tipping point in the Abbot's eyes.

This would have been a case of fracture, if it weren't for Thomas's response. He gave me a carefully constructed statement to deliver to the Master, saying that he was sorry for his absence in recent weeks due to exams, asking whether he could at least work off the money he had borrowed from the temple, and finally that one day's notice was a bit sudden, asking if he could stay until he found a new place to live. The Master responded, through Mr Rui, that he didn't have to worry about the debts, and that he could stay as an unpaid volunteer. A few days later, after continuing to do his jobs as diligently as before, Thomas approached me with another message for the Master. The gist of the suggestion was that he wanted to become a

volunteer, but that he also needed to make sure his family had enough money to survive, and instead of receiving a salary, he wanted a stipend of 150,000 to be sent directly to his family. He also emphasised that he was happy to be in the temple, and was motivated to help the children and improve their behaviour. When I made this case in the Abbot's office, Mama Wu immediately scoffed at the suggestion, "does he think we are stupid? That is just the same as being employed". By proposing he become a volunteer, albeit with a stipend, Thomas was trying to reframe his relationship as a non-oppositional one. While Mama Wu's response saw this through the zero-sum logic of market relations, the Abbot was ultimately convinced that Thomas's intentions were genuine, and agreed to the new arrangement. What is striking here is that the material conditions of the relationship had not changed in any great way, but simply through reframing his relationship in the language of the merit model, he was able to reconcile their interests with his own and salvage his relationship with the temple.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to make a contribution to our theoretical understanding of value-plural contexts by identifying three types of social processes that respectively caused friction between frameworks, fractured them irreconcilably, or resulted in framework fusion. It has also revealed the inherent instability of monist value frames in pluralistic value-settings, which arguably includes almost any contemporary ethnographic context, but certainly includes the superdiverse space of Tanhua Temple. Building on work in the values literature, this chapter has been concerned with the way clashing value frames shape social relation. In contrast with notions of hierarchy in Dumont, or structuralist descriptions of social contexts, these values were not subconscious, but actively described, interpreted and responded to by the individuals involved. In the following chapter I consider another set of exchange relations that Tanhua Temple developed with the Chinese diaspora, ones in which the tensions, conflicts and compromises of this chapter are replaced by a much more symbiotic relationship, but one in which new differences emerge.

Chapter 5

The Chinese Diaspora: mediation, redistribution and a new Chinese institution in Tanzania

5.0 Introduction

For a field site complete with a fenced perimeter, Tanhua Temple was very connected with the city that surrounded it. Throughout the day different cars would pull into the temple's courtyard with Chinese associations coming to donate goods, Chinese medical professionals (state & private) providing healthcare services, the familiar 4-Wheel drives of a Chinese business person assisting the temple, or Tanzanian civil servants conducting inspections. On Saturdays the temple was bustling with children of the Chinese diaspora and their parents who came for a free Chinese class taught by Buddhist volunteers. The temple also kept its doors open to Chinese migrant workers and traders who had encountered difficulties in Tanzania, or just needed a place to stay. Unlike the 'extractive enclaves' described in the China-Africa literature (Bunkenborg, Nielsen & Pedersen, 2022), Tanhua Temple was a very porous place, and was designed to be so. As the Abbot solidified his presence in Dar es Salaam, he did so by thickening Tanhua Temple's entanglements with the Chinese diaspora, and local actors. This chapter is an attempt to make sense of these entanglements, asking whether Tanhua Temple reinforces, inflects, or reverses existing dynamics described in the Africa-China literature.

In the first half of the chapter I introduce three business people without whom Tanhua Temple's development would not have been possible. These individuals provided the land for Tanhua Temple, and played an indispensable role in the establishment of an orphanage, the purchasing of a new temple property, and the opening of Tanzania's first Chinese Buddhist school. They served as key mediators between the Abbot and local people and institutions in Dar es Salaam, utilising the skills and connections from decades of experience in Tanzania navigating the bureaucratic/legal system, applying for various licences, executing large projects and cultivating relationships with key local collaborators. On first glance, the way they assisted the temple resembles the 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2003) of extractive enclaves, as they helped Tanhua Temple acquire its first new property in Dar es Salaam. However, this property was not aiming to make profit for Chinese individuals, but instead was to become the first Chinese Buddhist school in Tanzania. The Abbot's desire to

build Buddhist institutions in Dar es Salaam overlapped with the diverse motivations of these businesspeople, who professed their own unique ideas about Buddhism, philosophy, and in one case their own syncretic school of thought. Opening a school also brought the Abbot into conversation with local regulators and collaborators who shaped the projects in important ways.

In the second section I describe the broader exchange relations between the temple and the Chinese diaspora, arguing that Tanhua Temple redistributed resources from economically and politically powerful institutions and individuals in the diaspora towards the less powerful. The Temple received direct and indirect support from institutions including business and place-based associations, medical professionals, and the Confucius institute, while also providing a social safety net for the the diaspora, offering free food and accommodation for more vulnerable traders and migrant workers along with free Chinese classes for children of the diaspora. Here the temple resembles a micro-welfare state, and in doing so presents itself as a new sort of institution in the Sino-Tanzanian space.

In conclusion I ask how this chapter thickens our comparative picture of Chinese diasporic institutions in Africa, drawing on conceptual heuristics from the burgeoning Global China literature. This literature has helped us disaggregate 'China', demonstrating for example that the "interests and capacities" of private Chinese actors on the continents "are markedly different from those of state capital, even though both types of capital have been racialized and categorized as "Chinese" in media reports and popular perception" (Lee, 2022:p.321). By asking questions of who, why, how and so what, I reflect on Tanhua Temple's position within the Sino-Tanzanian relationship, arguing that while it may be seen as a part of 'Global China', the state has played an insignificant role in its emergence, which was instead enabled by bottom up processes, and horizontal connections between civic institutions and private individuals.

5.1 Meditation of Buddhist Business Leaders

Master Xianhong was able to gain access to land in Dar es Salaam, and eventually buy his own property thanks to the assistance of key members of the Chinese diaspora. These business people served as mediators between the temple and the increasing array of Tanzanian people and institutions that came into its expanding orbit. Existing research on Chinese investments in Africa have characterised them as 'extractive enclaves' that attempt to minimize engagements with local communities to facilitate extraction of economic value,

something Bergeson (2008; 2013) has termed ‘surgical colonialism’. In their multi-sited comparative study, Bunkenborg, Nielsen & Pedersen observe ‘one striking pattern… from guarded Chinese-owned shoe shops in downtown Maputo… to Mongolian yurts inhabited by Chinese mining workers’, namely ‘the marked discontinuity between the outside and the inside, and between the external and the internal” (2022:p.21). Their analysis also foregrounds the ‘intimate distances’ between Chinese and local actors, as they live and work together, but “remain largely incomprehensible to each other” (ibid.p.25). The business people introduced below were themselves the leaders of projects akin to those described in *Collaborative Damage*, but instead of mutual incomprehension, they had built their careers by cultivating mutually intelligible, collaborative relationships with local actors. These skills were on full display as they helped the Temple access land and licences for their projects, mediating between the temple and complicated local contexts. This involved developing relations between the temple and local economic and political elites, but also members of the middle class like school teachers and low-level bureaucrats, and local children. Far from the ‘surgical colonialism’ of the extractive enclave, the role of mediator reflects the Chinese business people’s social embeddedness in one of the fastest growing cities in the world, and Tanhua Temple’s increasing entanglements with local actors. The descriptions that follow lend weight to the argument of Yan, Sautman & Lu (2018) that Chinese in Africa are in fact less self-segregated than many Western expatriates on the continent. It also becomes clear that these business people were deeply moved by the Abbot’s desire to build Buddhism in Tanzania (see Cao, 2025 for a similar argument about Chinese Christians in France), calling into question assumptions about Chinese investments in Africa being ‘value-free’, and their business people entirely pragmatic and profit driven.

Mr Zong: Tanhua Temple’s Beachside Property & Orphanage

The initial idea for Tanhua Temple was conceived by a Chinese businessman in Dar es Salaam, Mr Hong, who runs one of the largest Chinese companies in the country, Group Six International. During a visit to Longquan Monastery in Beijing several years before its closure, Mr Hong raised the possibility of establishing a temple in Dar es Salaam with Master Xuecheng, the head of the Longquan System, who then sent Xianhong and colleagues to Tanzania in 2017, who founded Tanhua Temple in 2018 (see Chapter 1). Land for the temple was provided by Group Six, next to one of their flagship projects, Palm Village, a large building complex with a mall, offices, apartments, restaurants, bars and a luxury hotel. They had originally planned to develop a Chinese-themed snack street on the plot of land that

stretched from the back of Palm Village to the beach a few hundred metres away, but that plan was put on hold for financial reasons, and the land was instead given to the monks. It is a curious paradox that this occurred during the term of office of Tanzania's most fierce opponent of foreign influence in the country, whose attacks on foreign companies created the specific opening for a temple to emerge on land that would have been a Chinese commercial development. While Mr Hong continued to give speeches at Tanhua Temple for large public events, it was one of his Vice Presidents, Mr Zong, who became the temple's most important mediator over their first six years.

Mr Zong arrived in Africa as a Huawei employee in 2006, initially working on projects in the Congo, Tanzania and Uganda. He was at that time a recent graduate, and spoke of the long work hours at Huawei that eventually convinced him to start his own company in Tanzania. By the time I arrived in Tanzania in 2022 he had been there for 15 years, and his company had joined Group Six. Mr Zong lived and worked in Palm Village. His company's office was based in one tower, and his spacious apartment in another, complete with a balcony overlooking the temple and the ocean where I drank tea with him and others on several occasions. Mr Zong's career progression is one familiar in China-Africa literature. Having arrived as an employee of a large company, he was able to set up his own private company, and has since established himself as a leader within the Chinese business community. He is the chairman of the Tanzanian Shaanxi Business Association, the Tanzanian (Chinese) Poetry Association, Vice-Chairman of the Chinese Medicine Health Alliance, and most importantly for our discussion here, the vice chairman of the Tanzanian Chinese Buddhist Association, and keen participant in temple affairs (Xinhua 2024). Doing business in Tanzania for almost two decades has given Mr Zong a wide range of connections in Dar es Salaam, and according to his staff, he is particularly known for hiring local employees and entrusting them with real responsibility. He was generous with the locals he came into contact with, including translators at Tanhua Temple, and was generally well liked and respected. One of those aspiring translators explained that big bosses, unlike the middle management, were good people and treated you well. Like others introduced below, Zong benefited from political and social connections in Tanzania. One day when I was talking to him about the local Pentecostal big man, Boniface Mwamposa, who attracted tens of thousands to his services down the road, Mr Zong told me that he knew him personally, having done the construction work on his mansion. Another sign of his affiliations with the local community, Mr Zong has also an adopted daughter who is the child of a Taiwanese and Tanzanian couple. Suffice to say that Mr Zong is deeply connected to Sino-Tanzanian

institutions and individuals in Dar es Salaam, connections and capabilities that he put to work for Tanhua Temple.

How and why did Mr Zong become so involved with Tanhua Temple? According to his own self-narrative presented in a public speech I witnessed, and in media interviews, his spiritual awakening began during the term of Tanzania's late President John Magufuli (2015-2021). At the time his 3 million USD business was almost bankrupt and family moved back to China along with many other Chinese people who were not optimistic about the political climate. At that time he began reading the Buddhist sutras. He recounted an eye opening conversation with a friend about life after death, and started exploring the works of influential Buddhist Masters including Jing Kong and Nan Huaijin. When the Longquan monks arrived in Tanzania he immediately offered his services. He told me that he had considered selling his company, feeling that there was more to life than just making money, and that he will eventually move out of business. He clearly spent a lot of time thinking and reading content outside of his business interests. One day as we were sitting on his balcony, with the echoes of the evening service emanating from the temple below, Mr Zong was showing me a set of powerpoint slides titled "The General Three-Brain Theoretical System" (*guangyi sannao lilun tixi*). This was his own synthesis of scientific and religious thought, which according to him held the key to saving human civilisation from another extinction event. He was convinced that this had happened before, and we were not the first highly advanced civilisation that had inhabited planet earth. The powerpoint integrated ideas from Chinese and Western medicine, the major world religions, and some highly esoteric texts. He had ranked various individuals and concepts, from Karma to Quantum Physics, on a spectrum from 1-8, arguing that we needed to progress up towards increasingly enlightened states, the final level only accessible once we insert chips into our brains, abandoning carbon based existence for immortal silicon bodies. He has been deeply inspired by books about the 'Ra Material' which are the transcripts of an individual in a trance who claimed to be a higher consciousness from outer space. He also showed me videos of aliens on Youtube (something not accessible in China), and spoke about lizards living under the earth. In the highly pluralistic context of Dar es Salaam, far from Chinese state censorship, his syncretic sensibilities were amplified. At one point he literally claimed that he was the 'messiah' (*jiushizhu*), and had been chosen to spread this knowledge in order to save the human race. During one discussion he said that these higher levels of consciousness had helped him in his work, like when he slept through a technical training session but had somehow digested the knowledge better than everyone else in attendance. According to his employees, he often

speaks about his theories, and is convinced that he needs to win over one billion people in his lifetime. He also spoke about providing healing sessions for people in his apartment. While his ideas and practices clearly exceed the limits of the Buddhist tradition, this did not diminish the importance or truth of the Buddhist doctrine for Mr Zong. He spoke with great admiration about the notion that one must give in order to receive, and he was a regular attendee at public sutra reading sessions on Sunday mornings, even if he sometimes fell asleep due to his exhausting work schedule.

The monastics were aware of Mr Zong's esoteric views, and were openly dismissive of them, meaning that Mr Zong had stopped trying to talk to them about the details. Although other laity sometimes discussed these matters with him, Mr Zong very rarely brought his own ideas into temple spaces, and in his relationship with the temple he presented as a loyal lay devotee. His company was responsible for the initial renovation of the Buddha hall, and the construction of new dormitories that took place during my fieldwork. He also took charge of many of the temple's public facing events, including the International Day for the African Child, the Buddha's Birthday, Tomb Sweeping Festival and other charitable visits to other orphanages. Mr Zong was responsible for managing invitations for these events that went out to the Chinese community, Tanzanian media and political leadership, and other charitable institutions. During the Mid-Autumn festival he drove the monastics to visit members of the Chinese community so that the monastics could give them a box of mooncakes, helping the temple maintain good relations with members of the Chinese diaspora. Sometimes when he couldn't personally attend to temple affairs, he would send members of his team. Events were often managed by his Chinese and local employees who produced run sheets, invitations, and furnished the courtyard with chairs, speakers and decorations. Mr Zong's Human Resources manager was also constantly working on behalf of the temple to solve issues with the orphanages licence, local workers contract negotiations, and social security payments. I would often find him waiting in the courtyard for Tanzanian civil servants coming to conduct inspections. Having participated in these processes, I can confirm that without their help, Tanhua Temple's orphanage would still likely be undocumented. Here we see Mr Zong and his team as key mediators for the temple, playing an essential role in its development at its beachside property in Dar es Salaam.

Mr Gao: Purchasing Puti Temple

Ownership of the Palm Village property was never transferred to the monastics, and it was always imagined as a temporary location before they purchased their own plot of land.

Historically, ownership of land in Chinese Buddhism has been an essential means for the preservation of the monastic community, as land donated to the Sangha could be used to produce food or rented out. Throughout the 20th century, from the threats to temple property during the reforms of the late Qing Dynasty to the iconoclasm of the Cultural Revolution, Buddhists became even more sensitive to the importance of owning land and property (Goossaert & Palmer, 2011). The Tanhua Monastics were also aware of the more recent precedent at the Longquan System's temple in the Netherlands, which they said ran into problems after the legal owner and the Longquan nuns got into a dispute, a problem that would not have arisen with monastic owned temple property. Although the CEO of Group Six had initially promised to purchase land for the monastics, by the time I arrived in the fifth year since its founding, the Abbot said that was looking increasingly unlikely. It was around this time that the Tanhua System described in Chapter 1 was providing new income for the temple, which made it possible to start thinking about purchasing land themselves.

Given Master Xianhong's lack of English or Swahili, he was unable to complete the procedures involved in the land purchase alone, and instead relied on another Chinese businessman, Mr Gao. In 2008, the latter was working as a journalist in Beijing, but had since made a small fortune running his own online gaming company. After selling the company to a Singaporean company he was planning to start a new project in Dar es Salaam, but a combination of business feasibility and his own mental health issues led him to recalibrate. In order to transition out of the business world that he had entered, Mr Gao moved into Tanhua Temple, a place where he would be left alone and not considered a business threat to his former colleagues. He showed me photos of his life before moving into the temple, in which he wore a three-piece pinstripe suit, standing next to local elites, a life of fine whiskeys and fast cars. At the temple he was learning to leave those material desires behind, and was convinced that this would help him in his future endeavours. Mr Gao, like the other business people introduced here, was also deeply interested in religion and philosophy. In our shared dorm he waxed lyrical about Nagarjuna, Socrates and Wittgenstein. He made thoughtful comparative points about Chinese and Western philosophy, arguing that Chinese history has produced Chinese thinkers more concerned with people and ethics than the metaphysical questions of humanity's relationship to nature. He also spoke about his personal need to progress from Nagarjuna's philosophy of emptiness to the practical insights of the Abhidharma, crediting the Abbot for guidance on these matters. Later on during fieldwork, I heard the Abbot speak about Mr Gao during a speech about the power of mantras, arguing that his use of the mantra of Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of wisdom, had clearly boosted his

intellect. There were a confluence of factors that led Mr Gao to Tanhua Temple, but undoubtedly his interest in Buddhism played a key role. Just like the others, his relationship with the Abbot was one defined by reverence, respect and service, and he was able to put his own business skills to full use by assisting the Abbot become a landowner in Dar es Salaam.

The land purchase ended up being far more complicated than initially anticipated. The plot of land they chose was in Chamazi, a suburb of Dar es Salaam around an hour's drive from Tanhua Temple, south-west of the city centre. It was previously home to a Christian private school that had closed during the Covid-19 pandemic, and when we arrived the classrooms were still full of scrap paper, books, and faded writing on blackboards. The legal processes, from drawing up a contract, to making a down-payment, to the official handover of legal title, took many months, and many trips to the property, and to the lawyer's office. There were also several complications during the payment process, which required some careful consultations with a lawyer. The lawyer who assisted the temple in the process, pro bono, was a Tibetan lady who had a successful legal practice in Dar es Salaam. Speaking fluent Chinese allowed her to provide services for many Chinese businesses who wanted to establish themselves in Tanzania. She was also deeply connected to the Tanzanian context after marrying a local man with some political connections. She is another example of a business person who has made a career out of forging relationships in Dar es Salaam across the Chinese-Tanzanian divide.

On a sunny morning in February of 2023 it was announced by Master Xianfen that today was a historic day for Mahayana Buddhism, the day that they would receive the key to the first temple property (*miaochan*) in Africa. This process had dragged out significantly, from Mr Gao speaking of finalising the deal in April of 2022 during my preliminary fieldwork, to February of 2023 when the handover was made official at the lawyers office. This process, facilitated by Mr Gao, had also brought the temple into a relationship with local landowners, who in this case was the husband of Tanzania's ambassador to South Africa, who was represented by his son in discussions prior to the handover. As the handover took place, the older man commented: "I don't want more or less, this is religion!", emphasising that he was happy to see the land given to people of faith, and implying he had not asked for a high price. In the process of this land purchase we see a Chinese businessman mediating the Abbot's increasing entanglements with local elites, the legal system, and as I describe below, a closed-down Christian private school in the suburbs of Dar es Salaam.

Mr He: Founding the Puti Temple International Primary School

After the purchase of the land was complete, attention turned to opening a school on its grounds. By this point Mr Gao had gone on to start a mining project in Zambia, and Master Xianhong was being assisted by another Chinese businessman named Mr He. Mr He had been in Tanzania for over two decades, having originally arrived with a State Owned Enterprise (SOE) from his hometown, Shaoxing in Zhejiang Province. As China deepened its economic reforms many SOE's were privatised, and Mr He, like many others in his position, went into business himself. His architecture and construction company in Dar es Salaam was responsible for building many of the largest structures in Kariakoo, the business centre of the city, and he claims to have worked mainly with wealthy locals rather than putting in tenders for Chinese government run projects. He joked that around Christmas time he would receive lots of requests for 'gifts' from local politicians and bureaucrats. He preferred to keep a low profile, often attempting to avoid appearing in photos at the temple. Here again we see a business person whose ability to make connections with Tanzanian individuals is a key feature of their success, and this was a skill he put to full use at the temple.

Mr He returned to Tanzania with his wife in 2023 after spending some time in China and the UK. While he was already winding down his business, he decided to dedicate most of his time to helping the temple open a school and construct a Buddhist seminary on their new property in Chamazi, which was now called Puti Temple. That first involved obtaining construction licences and renovating the existing school buildings, along with applying for a school licence, and recruiting both teachers and students. Mr He had years of experience doing business in Dar es Salaam, speaking fluent English and Swahili, and as such represented the Master in their engagements with the state and the new school administration. One of the lessons he had learned from his time in Dar es Salaam was the importance of establishing relations with locals who knew how to navigate the system, so when he was introduced to the previous headmistress of the school, Jenny, he immediately suggested the Abbot work with her. While applying for a licence for the school Jenny was asked to lend her support. In the ensuing negotiations, Jenny drove a hard bargain, asking for a significant one-off payment for her signature on a document that made her manager of the school, while agreeing with the temple that functional control would belong to the Abbot. The Abbot was always reluctant to pay extra money, seeing them as bribes, but after being convinced by Mr He that it would ultimately save them a lot of time and money, he agreed. While construction works were underway, carried out by Mr He's company, there were countless procedures involved, from approving architectural drawings, to obtaining construction permits. Mr He

sometimes paid bribes out of his own pocket to smooth over these engagements, often without telling the Abbot. Once as we were pulling away from the school in Mr He's 4 Wheel Drive, he had a quick conversation with Jenny about an upcoming inspection, telling her to "treat the government engineers nicely, talk to them sweetly, we can pay them, we just can't let them stop construction". Here we see the way that the diaspora, using the techniques on which the extractive enclave is founded, mediated between the temple and local regulators, helping the temple meet the expectations of their local interlocutors when the Master would have perhaps refused these unwritten rules of business.

This project was run on a tight schedule, as they aimed to open the school at the start of 2024. The Abbot, along with Mr He and Jenny decided to use the newly renovated buildings for a primary school, which had originally been envisaged by the Abbot as a Chinese language school using a Chinese government curriculum translated into Swahili. During a meeting in the Abbot's office with a representative from the education department, Mr He asked in English, "how can we be an international school? All of the other international schools are British or American, can we be a Chinese international school?". Although the educational representative said yes, after discussions with Jenny and Mr He, the Abbot was convinced that an English-medium school would be more successful in the local market. Jenny was tasked with sorting out the curriculum, hiring teachers, and recruiting students, which was a far easier process now that the school would be an English-medium one. Chinese language is still taught at the school, along with one period about Buddhism each week, but for all other classes local curricula are taught in English. In Tanzania the state school system is Swahili-medium until high school, so Puti Temple was positioning itself among the English-medium private schools. Here we see the ongoing influence of colonial language hierarchies and the influence of Christian missionary education (Bakari, 2012; Dilger 2013), but also the agency of local actors deciding that they would prefer an English medium school over a Chinese one. However, unlike most private schools, it would also have a number of children studying and living there for free, including the children from their orphanage at Tanhua Temple. When those students graduate they plan to open a high school, and as the Abbot said with a cheeky grin, perhaps even a university. There was also talk of opening a medical clinic in the future.

My own fieldwork concluded before the school opened, so I do not have any more detailed ethnographic material about ongoing developments, but it is clear from the processes leading up to that point that the cooperation between the Abbot, Mr He, Jenny and local government bodies were crucial in the registering and opening of the Puti Temple

International School. It is also clear that the final product was not a result of the Abbot's unilateral will, although that is how Buddhists tend to talk about it, but instead a product of a complex negotiation between the Abbot and local actors, mediated by Mr He. This reflects a growing number of works in the China-Africa literature that highlight the importance of local institutions, hierarchies and histories in shaping Chinese projects on the continent (Sheridan, 2022; Xu, 2022).

At the time of writing Mr He's company is still working on a 1 million USD multistory complex that will serve as a teaching building and a home for a Buddhist seminary on the same plot. While I do not have exact details of the financial relations between these business people and the temple, I do know that the costs for construction were paid for by the Abbot, although he was assured that he was being offered a very reasonable price. Clearly these business people were not only contributing their time and expertise for monetary return, but were motivated to support Master Xianhong in his promotion of Buddhism in Tanzania. Mr Gao was a regular attendee for Sunday sutra recital sessions, and when discussing his motivation, referred to Buddhist merit and Karma. I often heard him discussing Buddhist ideas with the resident monastic and lay Buddhists at Tanhua Temple. He once claimed that while meditating in the Buddha Hall he could hear the fish in the ocean, indicating he also shared certain confidence about his own level of spiritual attainment, although falling short of proclaiming himself the messiah. Like Mr Gao, Mr He's views were not always exactly inline with the Tanhua system orthodoxy. This was made clear on a trip Puti Temple as he debated the meaning of 'double cultivation; (*shuangxiu*) with a Tanhua system leader, which for her referred to the cultivation of the two wings of wisdom and karmic rewards (*zhihui, fubao*), but in his mind referred to esoteric sexual practices. Suffice to say the motivations of these businessmen were not obviously profit driven, even if they stood to gain reputationally as I develop in the next section, but also motivated by their support for Chinese Buddhism's expansion in Tanzania

In summary, from Tanhua Temple's establishment on a plot of borrowed land next to Palm Village in 2018, to the development of its own 11 acre temple property, we see the Abbot inflecting existing dynamics in the China-Africa space. The Chinese business presence in Tanzania provided the conditions for Tanhua Temple's emergence, and these three businessmen played crucial roles mediating between the temple, Chinese, and local people. While extractive enclaves tend to reduce any excess entanglements with local contexts, often operating in Special Economic Zones with different regulations to the rest of the country, Tanhua Temple was very much operating within the local context, and in fact deliberately

sought to expand its relational entanglements with Chinese and Tanzanian actors in Dar es Salaam. A close analysis of these individual's careers draws attention to the fact that Chinese in Africa "live among Africans, speak local languages, and adapt to local society" (Yan, Sautman & Lu 2018:p.54), and have succeeded by developing skills relevant in Tanzanian contexts. They made use of these skills when assisting the Abbot in his goals. In one sense the process leading up to the Abbot's acquisition of land was very similar to any Chinese business person acquiring property, even using the same law firm as many Chinese businesses. On the other hand, instead of functioning as an extractive institution, syphoning profits back to China, these temples represent a redistribution of Chinese capital toward services for local children.

We also see the Abbot deliberately moving away from a Chinese enclave in the heart of the city, to his new property in the suburbs. Tanhua Temple was founded next to Palm Village, a Chinese owned shopping mall, which while not as explicit as the 'China Towns' around the city, could be seen as a kind of Chinese enclave. While the Abbot developed deep cooperation with members of this diaspora, and maintained relationships with Chinese institutions described in the second half of this chapter, he ultimately used them to thicken his engagements with Tanzanian people. When I visited him in 2024 he was living at Puti Temple, where he eats local food, lives with one other Chinese volunteer teacher, over 20 local employees and hundreds of children, while the rest of the monks serve the Chinese diaspora at Tanhua Temple. It is also significant that the Temple's school ended up choosing English as the medium of instruction and a local curriculum. Just as Chinese corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects on the continent are shaped by local actors and international standards, Puti International School was deeply shaped by local language hierarchies, and colonial histories of missionary education that have continued in the postcolonial era. While the particular nature of the school and its impacts will require further research, it will undoubtedly involve thickening engagements between the temple, local students, parents, and regulators.

5.2 Redistribution among the Chinese Diaspora

Tanhua Temple is a new type of redistributive institution in the Chinese diaspora that receives direct and indirect support from powerful institutions, while also providing services for other members of the community, including migrant workers, families and children. In this section I describe three types of institutions that contributed to the temple; business

associations, medical teams and doctors, and finally the Confucius Institute. I then describe the temple's engagements with migrant workers and the Saturday Chinese classes that the temple offered for the children of families in the Chinese diaspora, demonstrating Tanhua Temple's role as a mini-welfare state within the Chinese diaspora. I argue that while charitable activities and associations existed within the diaspora, these have been organised by private and state institutions that have economic and political intentions (Ndofor et. al., 2024). While Tanhua Temple's projects could be read by the state and business interests as relatively harmless, or even beneficial for the reputation of 'China', that does not mean the Abbot himself was motivated by these outcomes. In fact he often stressed that he was not here to spread the Chinese language, or Chinese culture, but the Dharma. It is not surprising that charity emerged as an activity that could encompass these diverse goals. Since the birth of the modern nation state in China, charity has been used by Buddhists for 'political merit making' (Weller et. al., 2017) and in contemporary times it has continued to be an important way to expand Buddhism's influence beyond temple walls (Stapleton 2024).

Support from the Institutions of the Chinese Diaspora in Dar es Salaam

Tanhua Temple is engaged with a wide variety of Chinese state and civilian institutions. Civic associations (Li & Shi, 2020) such as Hometown Associations (*tongxianghui*) or Place-based Business Associations (*shanghui*) such as the Zhejiang Business Association and the Fuqing Business Association played the most direct role as donors to the temple. A typical visit from place-based and business associations began with a fleet of large 4-wheel drives pulling into the courtyard with a group of Chinese business people bearing cash and material donations, accompanied by a journalist or photographer. During a visit from the Guangdong Business Association for example, as their banner was unfurled, the attention of all involved seemed to be drawn to a diminutive man with slick oiled black hair, gold rimmed sunglasses, and a very loud polo shirt. He was the president of the association, and the other members seemed to gravitate towards him, as they exchanged jokes and cigarettes in the courtyard. As the children were called, still rubbing the sleep out of their eyes after their lunchtime nap, the visitors got out gifts and started to speak to them in Chinese while the photographer took photos. One was trying to get them to say 'I love China' (*wo ai zhongguo*) in Chinese to the camera. There was then a group photo with the bags of rice, flour and tubs of oil along with other items laid out in front of the Abbot, lay volunteers, the business association members and the children of Tanhua Temple. The Abbot handed out his nicest Buddhist beads, the type wrapped in a soft velvet bag, and within an hour after

arriving, the entourage filed back into their 4-wheel drives, leaving the temple to continue its normal activities. I witnessed very similar visits from the Fujian and Zhejiang Business Associations.

These associations would also come to the temple for charity events and accompany the temple on visits to other orphanages around the city. It is unsurprising that associations from Fujian, Guangdong and Zhejiang were key donors, given their high numbers in Dar es Salaam, long histories of outward migration, and the strength of Buddhist institutions in these parts of China. According to Mr Zong, whenever one of these place-based business associations was founded, they would come to the temple to make a donation. Tanhua's residents also conducted rituals in Chinese factories, the same spiritual protections offered to the local Buddhist groups in Chapter 2. The owners of these factories clearly believed that this ritual would have benefits for their factory, preventing any accidents and potentially increasing production. As Mr Zong put it, the motivations behind these donations were half to do with a belief in karma, the idea that this donation would give their association good luck, and also the more direct reputational benefits among the Chinese diaspora and with the Tanzanian state. On the latter, Mr Zong himself said it probably did help, recalling that he had mentioned their support for an orphanage to a political leader recently, who clearly appreciated his efforts. While much of the literature has debated the state's role in encouraging CSR among Chinese firms (Wu, 2024), by donating to Tanhua Temple they were engaging with an entirely non-state institution, and in a pattern of exchange that predates the international business discourse of CSR.

Tanhua Temple also received assistance from various Chinese-run medical institutions, including the Jiangsu medical team, two private hospitals and a doctor with his own private practice. Chinese medical teams have been sent to Africa since the 1960s in support of anticolonial struggles and third-world solidarity. Each province is paired with a country (Shi & Hoebink, 2019), and sends groups of doctors who provide assistance within existing hospitals, conduct trips to rural areas, and are involved in the construction or upgrading of medical infrastructure (Gong, 2023). The Jiangsu medical team, stationed in Zanzibar, came to give Tanhua Temple's residents a general check up. This only took one day of their time, but it was one of the few examples of a direct contribution from the Chinese state to Tanhua Temple. There were also other indirect engagements with the Chinese state at several large local hospitals where doctors who had studied in China were able to communicate with the temple residents in Chinese. At the Muhimbili hospital where the Abbot was treated for pneumonia there was both a Chinese state medical team, and a local

doctor who could speak Chinese. The majority of day-to-day medical issues at Tanhua Temple were dealt with by private Chinese medical professionals who provided free services to the temple. From the 1990s, private Chinese doctors and medical businesses had "started to take a foothold in African countries, constituting another driving force for China's medical presence in Africa' (Gong, 2022: 464; Hsu, 2022). Take for example Doctor Tang, who had originally come to Tanzania with the state medical team, and then set up his own private practice that he has been running for over a decade. In that time he treated several Presidents, telling me that Chinese medicine is well liked in Tanzania due to the history of medical teams who came to assist TAZARA railway construction. Doctor Tang would come frequently to attend to one of the children at the temple who had a spinal disorder that limited his ability to walk, helping him with exercises and acupuncture. Private Chinese hospitals were also engaged with the temple, providing various pro bono services. During emergencies we would drive sick or injured people to a nearby private hospital run by Henanese doctors who also treated temple residents for free. On other occasions we went to another Chinese-run private hospital, although they would charge, albeit at a slightly reduced rate. So while Tanhua Temple did not get all of its medical care through contributions from Chinese institutions, the Chinese state medical team and the private doctors and hospitals run by Chinese people made significant pro bono contributions to Tanhua Temple's residents.

Finally, Tanhua Temple could not avoid being engaged in some ways with the main Chinese state institutions in Dar es Salaam. As described in Chapter 1, Tanhua Temple had an uneasy relationship with the state due to its affiliation with Xuecheng and the state's general reluctance to engage with religious institutions. However, the Chinese Embassy and the Confucius Institutes played an indirect, but generally supportive role in relation to Tanhua Temple. The head of the Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification would also come to give speeches at major events, and the President of the Chinese Mutual Aid Centre (*Huazhuzhongxin*) also paid a visit to the temple on one occasion. This is a semi-official institution founded in 2017 that represents the embassy, so I was interested to see how he engaged with the temple. During his conversation with the Abbot in the courtyard he made small talk and smoked cigarettes, received Buddhist beads from the temple, and left without discussing any particulars. I asked the Abbot if they provide any support for the temple, and he responded that his greatest hope is that the Chinese government leaves them alone. However there were some further engagements, like when the embassy asked the children to perform Chinese songs and martial arts at major events, and a one off donation of some left over food after Chinese New Year, which was not publicised. Of the state

institutions, the Confucius Institute at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) had the most impact on the temple. I will introduce the local University students studying there who came to the temple in Chapter 5, but the CI also provided opportunities for students at the temple. One of those was the Chinese Bridge Language Competition, the regional round being won by a student of Tanhua Temple, allowing her to go to China for the international competition in 2024 with children from all over the world. While I do not claim that the state deliberately aided the Buddhist missionaries, the existence of these state institutions did not actively obstruct the temple's operations, and in fact created favourable conditions for its expansion.

So far we have seen how the temple attracted the support of Chinese business people, their companies and associations, along with state institutions, which raises questions about how Tanhua Temple fits into the broader Sino-Tanzanian space. Li and Shi's research in Zambia describes the institutions of the Chinese diaspora as a 'pyramid of power… from the embassy at the top, via the associations, to the bottom of individual Chinese and companies' (2020). Tanhua Temple was receiving support, indirect and direct, from all levels of that pyramid, however unlike the state or Chinese companies and associations, their ends were not primarily political. Prior to Tanhua Temple's arrival there had also been some ad hoc charitable activities organised by diaspora, sometimes through the embassy or other associations. As has been noted by other scholars, place-based business associations play a key role providing 'mutual assistance, dispensing public charities, preserving Chinese culture and fostering group identity' (Liu, 1998). Li and Shi (2020) argue that associations help Chinese migrants 'integrate with local society, functioning as cultural and philanthropic intermediaries by frequently organising cultural and charity activities with the purpose of spreading Chinese culture and bettering the image of Chinese'. Evidence from Kenya shows the embassy's role in encouraging corporate social responsibility among Chinese state and private firms (Liu, 2021; Wu, 2024), and actively supporting and publicising these activities. On the face of it, the kinds of activities they were involved in are not so different from the charitable activities of the temple, however the Temple was also interested in expanding Buddhism's influence in the country. As we will see in the following sections, that meant the temple did not accumulate capital for the sake of profit or political favour, but to enact their religiously inspired charitable projects.

Redistribution to Migrant Workers, Families and Children

The contributions from the above institutions were directly and indirectly redistributed through the temple's charitable activities to more vulnerable members of the

community. The most significant destination for these funds were Tanzanian children, their new school, and charitable donations to other orphanages around the city. However, here I will focus on the way the temple also provided important services for the members of the Chinese diaspora.

Not all Chinese migrants in Tanzania were as well off as Mr Zong, Mr Gao and Mr He. Of the estimated 1 million Chinese in Africa roughly one third are on one to three year contracts working in construction sites, mines or factories (Park, 2015), and in countries like Zambia that number has been as high as 95% (Postel, 2015). China-Africa scholars have highlighted the heterogeneity of the Chinese diaspora (Fei, 2020, Sheridan, 2019, Schneider, 2023) who are deeply divided between managerial classes, skilled and unskilled labourers, and between subcontracted labourers and 'people of our work unit' (Driessen, 2019). I was told repeatedly by members of the Chinese diaspora in Dar es Salaam about 'co-ethnic exploitation' (Liu & Olivos, 2020), with one man claiming that Chinese only exploited each other. Internal tensions could certainly be bitter, as was revealed when one Chinese businessman kidnapped the wife of a rival after he was insulted on social media. The Chinese construction industry is known in China for its hierarchical management and competitive subcontracting, and in Africa Chinese workers have even less recourse than in China to legal protections or are unable to access them. Of the many migrant workers who came to stay at the temple, several reported having their passports held by their bosses, not being paid on time, and interpersonal conflicts that led to their resignation. For some that meant they had no place to stay, and no money to get home. Others were small traders arriving in Tanzania for the first time looking for business opportunities, or those who had come into trouble in Dar es Salaam. The Abbot was always willing to provide refuge for these individuals, in the form of free accommodation and food in exchange for volunteering at the temple. The local workers were often very appreciative of their presence, as they would spend hours working in the garden, or assisting with repairs and construction of furniture, reducing the local workers' load. While these individuals' experiences differed greatly, consider the following trader and translator for whom Tanhua Temple represented a final social safety net for them in highly precarious situations.

Mr Zhang was a trader from Yongkang, Zhejiang Province. After graduating from high school in 1999, he opened a factory with 'no-capital' (*ling ziben*), and started to produce thermoses in China. He then spent his earnings on a Mercedes Benz and helping his girlfriend open several small businesses, which meant that by the time I met him in Tanzania he was back to square one. In order to make his next fortune, he had left his wife and two children in

China, but was considering bringing them to Tanzania if middle school exams do not go well. Mr Zhang had a health condition that led him to fall asleep for a few seconds every few minutes. I would often find him in the temple with his head slumped and his damaged phone on the ground. He said this came about after being detained during a conflict with the local government over a forced abortion performed on his wife in the name of the One-child policy, which was reported on by local media at the time. While he stayed at the temple he tried to convince the Chinese residents to invest with him, and tried to convince a few Confucius Institute students to partner with him. After getting his small business going, storing his products at the house of a young Indian man who he had met at the temple, he quickly ran into trouble with the authorities. We heard that he had been detained, due to visa issues and perhaps a conflict with a local partner. While I will describe some further situations that emerged with Zhang at the temple in Chapter 5, suffice to say that the migrant workers interests were not always in line with the state. As Derek Sheridan (2019) shows, the embassy in fact tries to distance itself from these petty traders, and many Chinese migrants in Tanzania did not think the embassy was protecting them, complaining that they have a 'weak passport' compared to countries like the United States. In the diaspora these individuals are often the most vulnerable to regulation by the host state, and also often have complicated relations with the Chinese political and economic elite, and when they had no other way out, Tanhua Temple became a place of refuge.

Another young man who was friends with Mr Zhang came to the temple after he had lost his job as a Chinese-English-Swahili interpreter. Alex was from Henan province, and had studied English at University in Beijing. He came to Africa in 2013, spending three years in Tanzania, and another three years in Nigeria and Ethiopia, after which he returned to Tanzania to work as an interpreter. One day as we were sitting in the courtyard with several local translators I introduce in the next chapter, Alex was complaining about the challenges of translating for a Chinese manager who spoke in very direct and rude ways to local workers. He also complained about being blamed for miscommunications by that same boss. He had worked at 12 companies over his six years in Tanzania, and in most cases he left due to feeling unfairly criticised and disrespected on the job. During his stay at the temple he was briefly hired by a local company only to return to the temple a few days later. Apparently the boss had asked him to bring a bottle of sauce, which he refused to do saying that he was a translator and not a servant. He also complained that wealthy members of the diaspora were unwilling to lend him money when he was in need. Alex had married a local woman who lived in another city, with whom he has two children. Unfortunately he had also developed a

gambling addiction that had cost him 5 million Tanzanian shillings as he spent days playing at casinos in Dar es Salaam, fueled by energy drinks. While he was regretful, Alex was also convinced that sometimes he just knew how the dice were going to fall. In the end a combination of gambling and being unemployed led to his moving into the temple, a period during which he told me his wife and children were sometimes struggling to get enough food. He acknowledged that he wouldn't be at the temple if he didn't have a problem. Without absolving their own responsibility for these predicaments, it is clear that Alex & Zhang were in precarious positions, and had more or less antagonistic relations with the leaders of the Chinese diaspora in Dar es Salaam. However, as I have demonstrated, Tanhua Temple was functioning as a social safety net for the Chinese diaspora, directing funds to assist people in a time of need, allowing them to live in the accommodation built by Chinese elites that they felt exploited by, and eat the food donated by the associations that represented them.

Finally, the temple also provided free Chinese language classes for children on the weekend. These were mainly attended by Chinese families with children attending English-language private schools in Dar es Salaam. One of the regular attendees was a couple with twins. The father was originally a university administrator in China, but finding that job boring he had applied for a position advertised through the education department to train Chinese teachers in Tanzania who would teach at 18 different middle schools around the country. While these individuals were not in as dire need as the migrant workers, the Saturday classes filled an important hole for many families in the diaspora who were worried about their children's worsening Chinese. Beyond the Chinese diaspora, these classes were also attended by some local children, and even one Japanese lady who was trying to learn Chinese while working in Dar es Salaam. The volunteer teacher was a Taiwanese lay Buddhist who was employed in a company in Dar es Salaam. These Saturday classes represent another way in which the temple sought to give back to the Chinese diaspora.

While I have focused on members of the Chinese diaspora, the temple also provided refuge for locals who sought it, beyond the children in their orphanage and school. There were several young men who slept on the beach outside the temple who would often use an empty structure at the back of the temple for shelter, and there were several cases of young people arriving at the temple without a place to stay. Once their identities could be verified, these individuals were allowed to stay at the temple provided they take part in its daily activities. In one case an 18 year old woman was brought to the temple by the young men on the beach, who said she had no place to stay. She ended up staying for many months, and

while the temple may not have changed her life forever, it did give her time to think about her next move.

5.3 Conclusion: thickening comparisons of the Chinese diaspora in Dar es Salaam

The 'Global China' literature has argued that we must delineate the diverse actors 'going out' from China, describing the interests of particular state and private actors along with their intended and unintended consequences (Lee, 2022). While the range of people and institutions studied within this literature has expanded impressively in recent years, religious groups have not featured prominently. In a recent special issue that represents some of the best work in the field, Ching Kwan Lee highlights three 'generic power mechanisms' that have repeatedly emerged in the literature on Global China, namely economic statecraft, patron-clientelism and symbolic domination. It is in this last category that religion is mentioned in parentheses, although examples of symbolic domination are limited to state led soft power initiatives including overseas media organisations, friendship envoys, and educational and healthcare related institutions such as the Confucius Institute and state medical teams. So is Tanhua Temple's role in the Chinese diaspora one of symbolic domination? Is it simply an instrument of Chinese soft power like these other institutions, ameliorating the extractive dynamics within the broader diaspora? In this conclusion I address this issue by asking C.K. Lee's four framing questions for the Global China literature: "questions about agency (who), interest (why), method (how) and consequences (so what)" (2022:p.316-317).

The question of *who* was involved in Tanhua Temple's projects is an instance of the mapping problem I described in the Introduction. While it is clear from Chapter 1 that the Tanhua System's online devotees and lay Buddhist structures are most directly responsible for Tanhua Temple's expansion, it is also true that their projects in Dar es Salaam would not have been possible without the mediation of Chinese business people. As I describe in the Conclusion, this is an important feature of the broader Chinese Buddhist expansion across the continent. Relationships between merchants and Buddhist monastics date back to its early history in South Asia, and were a central feature of its expansion along the Silk Road. It is no surprise then that China's growing political and economic presence in Africa has also created the conditions of possibility for Buddhist institutions. While the Chinese state did feature indirectly in these developments, its main contribution was tacit approval rather than direct support. There is a strong tendency to see Chinese actors as embedded within the Chinese

state, seen in Professor Chien-Peng Chung comments in a podcast about the state's relationship to Buddhism (Smith & Lim, 2025) where he claimed the embassies are funding these new Buddhist institutions in Africa. While in some cases this claim is more defensible (see Conclusion), and I do not deny the state and Buddhist groups have overlapping goals (see below), in the case of Tanhua Temple the state was clearly not the central actor.

Why did these individuals and institutions become entangled with Tanhua Temple? I have argued that charity is a particularly polysemic activity that allows for wide participation of individuals with various goals in mind (Weller et. al., 2017; Stapleton, 2024). Some were motivated by their Buddhist faith or their own spiritual frameworks, others were motivated by reputational benefits for them as individuals, for their business community, or even for the nation state, and some just needed a refuge during hard times. The particular conditions of Dar es Salaam also meant that the Abbot had to engage with a much wider spectrum of Chinese people with their own motivations for engaging with the temple. While in China the Longquan System could rely on Buddhist insiders from their own system, on the Sino-African frontiers the Tanhua System had to rely on people like Mr Zong, whose "General Three-Brain Theoretical System" demonstrates a syncretic sensibility that would have been a barrier to his entry into the inner circles of a large monastery in China. Just as 'African Frontiers' have been characterised as places of ethnogenesis (Kopytoff, 1989), the Sino-African frontiers are also places of cultural innovation and change.

How then, did the Abbot of Tanhua Temple, without any prior experience or knowledge of the local language and legal structures, open an orphanage and a school in Dar es Salaam? While I have mainly focused on the role of Chinese businessmen in meditating between the Abbot and local actors, we also saw the way these local regulators and collaborators expressed agency in these processes. As Puti International school was developing, the Temple engaged with Tanzanian land owners, regulators, and developed a deep collaboration with the previous Principal of the Christian school on that property. She was able to influence decisions about the language of instruction and directly oversaw the hiring of teachers. Here it is essential to "move away from great power reductionism or methodological nationalism" (Mayer et. al., 2024), but instead see the multiple Chinese and Tanzanian actors that contributed to Tanhua and Puti Temple's development. Rather than a simple extension of state power, I argue we should see Tanhua Temple as a new type of non-state institution in the Chinese diaspora, one that emerged through 'transnationalisms from below' rather than 'state-led transnationalism "from above" (Fran, 2024).

So what were the consequences of these entanglements? Beyond the redistributive and welfare-state-like functions described in this chapter, the most important impacts of these institutions will inevitably be on the children growing up within them. Due to these children's inability to give fully informed consent to my research, I prefer to delay answering this question until they are old enough to reflect on it with me. These children are growing up in a highly pluralistic Sino-Tanzanian space, and their reflections on the nature of these institutions will undoubtedly provide new insights into the increasing entanglements of Tanhua Temple in Dar es Salaam.

Chapter 6

Translators in Training: language acquisition, interpretation and intervention

6.0 Introduction

This chapter introduces the Tanzanian university students who volunteered at Tanhua Temple to practise their Chinese as they looked for work as interpreters in Sino-Tanzanian spaces. As China's economic engagements in Tanzania deepened over the last two decades, so has the demand for Swahili-Chinese interpreters. The young people I lived with at the temple were completing or had recently completed the new 3-year Chinese Language Bachelor Degree offered through the Confucius Institutes (CI) at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) and the University of Dodoma (UDOM). Beyond their formal studies, and experiences working in Sino-Tanzanian spaces, the temple played a vital role in their career development, providing them with an immersive language environment, experience living and working with Chinese people, and a chance to network with potential Chinese employers. As I got to know them at the temple, and in follow up visits and online discussions, I became increasingly aware of the challenges and opportunities afforded by Chinese language acquisition in Tanzania and work as interpreters in Chinese firms.

This chapter reflects on the role of language acquisition on the frontiers of Global China, and the role of interpreters in a bilateral relationship defined by asymmetry, inequality, and increasing levels of economic dependency (Kunreuther & Rao, 2023). I focus on what this tells us about processes of language acquisition for the individual interpreter, rather than seeing their experiences as reducible to broader geopolitical dynamics. I argue that despite these structural realities, language acquisition for these young Tanzanians was empowering individually on an economic level, and also gave them first hand experience in Sino-Tanzanian spaces through which they developed informed, critical perspectives, and sometimes allowed them to intervene in structurally limited, yet nonetheless important ways.

In doing so I make three points about the processes of Chinese language acquisition on the frontiers of Global China. Firstly, Chinese language acquisition is enabled by the rise of Global China and state funded Confucius Institutes, but it is not determined by top down processes alone. The reality is that to succeed as an interpreter, languages must be learned proactively, not simply taught to passive recipients. The students who came to Tanhua

Temple expressed a strong desire to learn Chinese, and were using the temple as a means to attain fluency that remained elusive for many of their classmates. Secondly, the processes of language acquisition do not necessarily transmit an ideologically charged epistemology, or constitute a 'colonisation of the mind' (Ngugi, 1986), but instead provide individuals with a new set of resources that deepen their ability to make empirically informed critiques of the Sino-Tanzanian relationship. Contrary to claims about Confucius Institutes as tools of soft power, Chinese language education did not lead these students to becoming more 'pro-China' (Cha, Ryoo & Kim, 2023). Finally, knowledge of Chinese did not reduce their use of Swahili, but instead was a new tool in their multilingual repertoire. I conclude that languages should not be seen as containing essential epistemic or political content that insidiously override other ways of seeing the world. Instead we might adopt the metaphor of the musical instrument (Ngugi, 2023). While each instrument has its own particular sound, techniques, and histories, they are theoretically masterable by anyone, and learning a new one does not mean that you throw away the instruments you already know how to play.

To do this, I begin with a sociolinguistic sketch of Dar es Salaam, arguing that it is a linguistically superdiverse place grounded in the Swahili language, which itself is defined by "polycentric" structures of significance, having existed within many different "orders of indexicality" (Blommaert, 2010) over the last few centuries. I also highlight the linguistic creativity that has been widely reported in the regional literature, adding several examples from my own fieldwork. I then describe the history of Chinese language learning in Tanzania, from the first Tanzanian Swahili-Chinese interpreter in the Nyerere-Mao era to the latest generation of Chinese interpreters graduating from the Confucius Institutes in the 2020s. In the next section I turn to the language learning journeys of the individuals I met at Tanhua Temple, from the classroom and the temple to the workplace, followed by a discussion of the particular affective and intellectual skills that they developed as interpreters. Finally I describe the variety of interpreters' interventions in Sino-Tanzanian engagements, reflecting both the agentive potentials of speaking Chinese, and the structural limits of the interpreter's positionality.

6.1 A Sociolinguistic Sketch of Dar es Salaam

In Chapter 2 I described the historical emergence of Swahili as a creole language along the Eastern African coast, but as globalisation intensified over the last few centuries the language has expanded significantly, and taken on several very distinct "orders of

indexicality" (Blommaert, 2010). In the 18th and 19th centuries the rapid growth in the caravan trade facilitated the expansion of Swahili from Zanzibar and the coast to inland populations. Then in the late 19th and early 20th century Christian missionaries participated in the standardisation of Swahili as they used it for proselytising, producing dictionaries and grammars in the Latin alphabet (Robinson, 2024). From the 1880s to 1961 Swahili was the language of German and British colonial administrations, although it would later become a double edged sword for the British as it was used by nationalist organisations (Marshall, 2016). Under Tanzania's first President, Julius Nyerere, Swahili was promoted across the country as a nation building tool, and as an essential feature of his *Ujamaa* philosophy, deemphasising tribal affiliations by promoting a national lingua franca (Beck, 2018). Similar processes were underway in China where Standard Mandarin (*Putonghua*) was being promoted to unify an equally diverse linguistic landscape. Nyerere's government invested heavily in primary education across the nation, bringing the illiteracy rate down from 77% in 1961 to less than 10% by the 1980s (Brock-Utne, 2000).

What was previously a littoral language attached to a fluid Swahili identity became the national language of the Tanzanian people, following the Herderian logic of 'one people, one nation'. Swahili had become a bounded, normative language backed by a new nation state, one that indexed Tanzania's independence from colonial rulers and their languages. In order to demonstrate Swahili's expressive equivalence to English, and its legitimacy as a modern language, Nyerere even used it to translate two of Shakespeare's plays (Devji, 2000). State standardisation and mass education in Swahili inevitably reduced the influence of regional languages, and in the symbolic order local languages "*kilugha*" or dialects "*lahaja*" were now placed firmly below Swahili. In this sense Swahili during the *Ujamaa* period can be seen as an Imperialist African language (Blommaert, 2010:p195), although the less controversial emic framing of this expansionary tendency is the language of Pan-Africanism. Today Swahili is one of the fastest growing African languages with around 200 million speakers in the region and is the only African language officially used by the African Union (Sippy, 2022). Notwithstanding the successful spread of Swahili, Tanzania still remains a place of remarkable linguistic superdiversity. While almost everyone speaks Swahili, only a small minority call it their mother tongue, with the vast majority growing up speaking one of Tanzania's 156 languages (Muzale et. al., 2008).

After Nyerere stepped down in 1985, Tanzania abandoned the socialist policies of *Ujamaa* and entered into a period of economic and political liberalisation. Structural reforms encouraged by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank were rolled out, and

the educational sector was no exception. Since the mid-1990s, private schools have proliferated, especially English language medium schools run by Christian groups, and Islamic schools that teach Arabic (Dilger, 2013). The language for secondary and tertiary education had always been English, and in the postcolonial period its prestige was maintained and arguably increased (Ochieng, 2015; Roemer, 2023). However the penetration of English was not nearly as deep as it had been in Kenya. There English was adopted as the language of elite politics and all levels of education, drawing criticism from decolonial scholars including the recently deceased Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986; 2023b). In Tanzania, Swahili is unambiguously the language of public intellectual and political life, but it exists alongside English spoken by people with secondary school education and above, and many local languages. Swahili has also become a global language, as it is taught in Universities around the world, including Cambridge. The strength of the Swahili language, in Tanzania and beyond, means that the arrival of Chinese described in the next section is not likely to displace the regional lingua franca, but it has nonetheless become a highly valuable new linguistic resource on the Swahili coast.

The linguistic superdiversity of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's largest city, means that it is a place where linguistic creativity is highly valued. In fact the colloquial name for the city is Bongo, coming from the word *ubongo* meaning brain, because to get around in this place you will certainly need one. At the coffee spots (*kijiwe*) around the city, and at local hangout spots, one is always hearing new expressions, or phrases, that do not not belong to the pure Swahili (*Kiswahili fasaha*) of the university, but the Swahili of the streets (*kiswahili cha mtaani*). Blommaert (2010) writes about what he refers to as the street language of the "bandits (*kihuni*)" (or thugs/ruffians), pointing out its "capacity to suggest the transnational while firmly remaining within the national, the regional, even the strictly local" (p.193). Just as barbershops of Arusha displayed an eclectic set of global symbols (Weiss, 2009), the language of the street was constantly borrowing and inventing new words. So while Swahili had benefited from state promotion in the postcolonial era, it has also continued to evolve outside of the strict oversight of the state (see Krugman, 2025).

The University students introduced in this chapter were deeply immersed in this linguistic landscape, and their own engagements with Chinese reflect a continuation of their multilingual repertoire. One of them, Jason, was a native Luo speaker, who had become fluent in Chinese at Tanhua Temple, and was working in Zambia with a Chinese miner when I visited him in 2024. Although he did not speak any local language, he told me that after a few days he had picked up enough Bemba to get past encounters with policemen who often

stopped them on the way to the mine. He laughed, explaining that all it required was a few well placed local words and then a confident "eeeeeh" before slowly driving off. This communicative dexterity was something he had developed in Tanzania as a Luo and Swahili speaker, and was something he also applied to learning Chinese. Fluency in English was also something that these young interpreters worked into their linguistic repertoire, like Isaac (see section 5.5), who used the word "international" as a positive adjective in all manner of situations. Blommaert's sociolinguistics suggests that languages can have indexical relations at "the transnational, the national, the regional, (and) the strictly local" scales (2010:p.194), and encourages us to see languages less as immobile objects, but as mobile resources. He argues that rap in Dar es Salaam is a medium through which Swahili speakers connected with different scales of symbolic order, and this was also true of many young people I met during fieldwork. One day Isaac asked me to take a video of him rapping while he was cleaning the toilets in a bright yellow Chinese-style martial arts outfit. The melodic hook "prisoner, prisoner, prisoner" was in English, and the rest was Swahili, with the occasional Chinese word thrown in, all while he was mopping the floor. His performance drew on global notions of the 'music video', symbols of Chinese culture, along with very local references to life at Tanhua Temple. This linguistic creativity foreshadows the way he put his Chinese to use in the temple and in the workplace, and the way languages become resources for these young people to use in a wide variety of ways.

Ultimately the linguistic landscape of Dar es Salaam was already a highly pluralistic one, and the arrival of the Chinese language that I describe in the following section can be seen as a further thickening of what is a "polycentric" (Blommaert, 2010) linguistic environment. Blommaert's approach to sociolinguistics, and his take on Swahili, is in many ways a call for thick comparative work, considering the multiple indexical orders that languages connect to at different scales. It is for that reason that I have started by sketching the linguistic landscape of Dar es Salaam before turning to the emergence of Chinese within it.

6.2 Arrival of the Chinese Language in Tanzania

The Chinese language has become one of the most significant additions to Tanzania's linguistic landscape over the first few decades of the 21st century. While there was contact between Swahili and Chinese speakers in the 15th century during Zhenghe's Ming Dynasty

expeditions[47], and material trade flowed between China and Eastern Africa, it was in the second half of the 20th century as bilateral ties deepened that Sino-Tanzanian linguistic contact began in earnest. The individuals introduced in this chapter are not the first Swahili-Chinese interpreters from Tanzania, but are the latest generation in a story of linguistic exchange that dates back to the early years of independence. After signing the Sino-Tanzanian Treaty of Friendship in 1965, Mao and Nyerere established several large Sino-Tanzanian joint ventures including Sinotaship, a joint shipping company with 6 ships that was established in 1967, the Tanzania-China Friendship Textile Mill constructed in 1968, various Agricultural projects like the Mbarali farm, and the largest project of the era, the Tanzania Zambia Railway (TAZARA) (Monson, 2011). From 1965 to 1975 China constructed over 100 factories in Tanzania, making it the largest recipient of Chinese aid on the continent (Lee, 2009). These projects led to extensive people to people contact, and also featured dialogues between leaders who required professionally trained interpreters. The first Tanzanian Chinese-Swahili interpreter, according to his own account, was Mzee Kazembe (1942-) who studied in China from 1970-1974, after which he served as Nyerere's interpreter. I also met several individuals who had learned Chinese in the decades that followed, most of whom were involved in diplomatic or state-led initiatives, and their numbers were sparse compared to the new generation of Tanzanian interpreters introduced in this chapter.

In 2000 the inaugural Forum of China Africa Cooperation was held, and over the first quarter of the century China has increased its engagements in the region to levels far surpassing the Mao era. In the 2000s Confucius Institutes (CI) were opened around the world as institutes for the promotion of the Chinese language and culture overseas (Zhang, 2022), and by 2013 two CI's were opened at the two top Universities in Tanzania (UDOM & UDSM). By 2020 they had opened around 20 teaching centres at universities and high schools around the country (Masanilo & Ammann, 2024)[48]. One of the administrators involved in training teachers for this project was a regular visitor at Tanhua Temple, where his own daughter attended Chinese classes on the weekend. After the relatively tense relations during the term of President Magufuli (2015-2021), President Samia Suluhu Hassan has taken a relatively more open and pragmatic approach to China, encouraging the

[47] Zhenghe's Ming Dynasty expeditions had also brought Chinese to the Swahili coast, although there is not any recorded linguistic exchange. My roommate and I did wonder if the Swahili word for noodles, *tambi,* came from the classical Chinese term *tangbing*, but the more commonly cited origin is from Indic languages via Arabic.

[48] Masanilo was also a student of the Confucius Institute, who has now conducted independent research into the institution.

expansion of Chinese language teaching at both secondary and tertiary levels (The Chanzo Reporter, 2024), stating that:

> *The Chinese will remain part of our economies, because let's not hide the truth, the dominant force in the African economy is China, and for you to engage well with them, you must understand their language. You must know their language. So that's my proposal, not out of preference, but that's the reality, that's the truth.*

In total some 20,000 Tanzanians are learning Chinese (State Council, 2022), and hundreds each year are given scholarships to study in China (Xinhua, 2019). These figures match the continent wide increase in the number of African students studying in China which have ballooned from just 2000 in 2003 to 81,562 in 2018 (Xu et. al., 2022). There are now many opportunities for Tanzanian students to study in China, either as fee paying students or on scholarships provided by the Chinese government.

Beyond formal language training offered through educational institutions, the presence of Chinese people in Dar es Salaam also thickened linguistic encounters between Swahili and Chinese speakers. During fieldwork I was surprised by many Tanzanian friends who greeted me in Chinese, showing off one or two sentences they had picked up meeting Chinese people in Dar es Salaam. Many more expressed a desire to gain proficiency in Chinese, or were learning it on their phones. Chinese is now also being taught by Tanzanians in private tutoring schools where anyone can come to study for a fee. I met with one graduate of the Confucius Institute who had later spent several years in China studying on a scholarship, who was now teaching Tanzanians in the city's northern suburbs. I also met with a translator from Zanzibar who had spent time in China in the 1980s, and had since taught many young people Chinese so they could work in his tourism business. Suffice to say that Chinese is becoming an increasingly valuable language to know in Tanzania, and opportunities to study this language are also multiplying. However, as we will see in the following section, the path to fluency and potential employment as an interpreter was a far longer and more arduous one, and one in which Tanhua Temple played a vital role.

6.3 Learning Chinese in the Classroom, Temple and Workplace

Over my year of fieldwork, I lived alongside over half a dozen aspiring interpreters at Tanhua Temple, and met many more of their friends who visited them at the temple. I also visited the Confucius Institute at UDSM on several occasions, and interviewed a wide range of Chinese-Swahili interpreters in preparation for a postdoctoral project on Chinese language

acquisition in Tanzania. In this section I will trace the journeys of the aspiring interpreters who lived at Tanhua Temple, describing the way they learned Chinese at the CI, on the job, and at Tanhua Temple, and the financial benefits this provided themselves and their families.

Tanzania is one of the poorest countries in the world, and while the family backgrounds of my interlocutors varied, none of them could be described as wealthy. As university students, they received a very small stipend that has been reduced since the neoliberalisation of the university in the 1990s (Provini 2015), and as such were constantly short of money. All of these students were the hopes of their families, and their university degree was seen as a ticket to a well paying profession that could support them. One second year student at the UDOM CI named Juma, who was spending his summer holidays at the temple, told me that when he went home he felt obliged to hand out 500 TZH coins to his younger siblings and cousins because they assumed he had already become wealthy and successful by being at university, and he didn't want them to know the truth. While living at the temple these university students rarely spent any money, and sometimes they would even need to request a small amount of money for their bus fare home at the end of their stay. The fact that the temple provided food and shelter in exchange for volunteering meant that this was a cost effective and productive way to spend a summer.

Their degrees at the Confucius Institute were primarily of interest to them as a path to employment and economic mobility. This is part of the 'pragmatic enticement' strategy described by Maria Repnikova at CIs in Ethiopia (2022), and reflects similar dynamics in other African countries where Chinese language skills are becoming increasingly valuable[49]. While initially sceptical about the value of a degree in the Chinese language, Juma and his parents were convinced that it was worth pursuing after learning that graduates could earn several million Tanzanian Shillings per month. Unlike the students in Ke-Schutte's (2023) study of African university students in Beijing, who lacked "role models of African excellence that stand as ideal and attainable futures facilitated through a commitment to Chinese education" (2023:p.55)", the interpreters introduced in this chapter were constantly speaking about success stories of past CI graduates. I heard about a senior classmate of Juma's who got a job paying 4 million TZS. While this classmate was not considered the 'coolest' student at university, he was now widely envied for being able to take his girlfriend on international holidays. They were also aware of older generations of legendary translators

[49] Rwanda (Stambach & Wamalwa 2018), Zambia (Sishuwa 2019), Tanzania (Stambach & Kwayu 2017; Stambach 2022), Madagascar (Zhang 2022), South Africa (Maddalena 2015), Kenya (Wheeler 2014), Ghana (Bodomo, Mboya & Nkrumah, 2024).

like Mr Kazembe, who was invited to speak at CI events. These success stories motivated their continued study of the language, and their time spent at Tanhua Temple.

However there were also plenty of CI students who either did not finish the degree, or would never develop the linguistic skills to become interpreters. Jason, who had stayed at the temple for one full year during his degree, said that out of his class of 100 students, 90 ended up graduating, but only around 20 were now working as interpreters 2 years later. His girlfriend at the time had not taken to learning Chinese, and was now working in a bank. A study of the CI at UDSM revealed that 34% had daily interactions with Chinese, but that 40% of students had little to no interactions (Masanilo & Ammann, 2024). Suffice to say that the degree alone was not sufficient to give them fluency, and for those who were not putting time into language learning outside of class, it would be an impossible task.

One way to make up the deficit of practice required to attain fluency was by finding a job with a Chinese employer during university, as many of these students did. On one sunny afternoon I sat in the temple's courtyard with current and recently graduated CI students discussing their first employment experiences as interpreters. Job opportunities were advertised through Wechat groups and by word of mouth, with one interpreter recalling the time he was added into a Chinese business association's group chat, allowing him to post an advertisement with his contact information before being kicked out. The next challenge was the interview. Given their limited experience of Chinese outside of the classroom, and the wide range of accents among Chinese in Dar es Salaam, this did not always go well. They laughed about interviewers waving them away after they couldn't string together more than a few words, or failed to understand the question. Those who did get jobs often relied on a healthy number of well-timed nods, informed guesswork, and some good luck. One third year student who also spent his summer at the temple recounted his past experience working for a Chinese boss who asked him to pick something up from the shop. After asking the boss to repeat the name of the item three times, he finally gave up, went to the shop, guessed what the boss might need, and was later relieved that he had guessed correctly. At other times they relied on the Swahili speaking workforce to give them important background information when they didn't fully understand the Chinese boss. However, perfecting one's Chinese on the job was not always so straightforward. One recent graduate said that after a few months of employment as an interpreter he was now mainly in charge of managing local workers and did not get much practice listening to or speaking Chinese.

Volunteering at Tanhua temple was another solution to the problem of attaining fluency in Chinese, providing these young people with an immersive Chinese language

experience. The best form of practice for an aspiring interpreter was to listen and speak as much as they could, and the temple provided a particularly good place to do that. During conversations they would often scribble down new words on a piece of paper or look them up on Pleco, the Chinese mobile dictionary app. Aside from communicating with the manager and Chinese volunteers about daily tasks, there was also plenty of time for casual discussions. Unlike the Chinese business people in Dar es Salaam who have a reputation for being uninterested in small talk (Sheridan, 2018a), many of the Buddhist volunteers were more than happy to converse with these young people. One Chinese volunteer was himself studying an English language textbook, memorising new vocabulary each day, and was a very capable language partner. He was also very knowledgeable about Chinese traditional culture, and would often make historical or textual references that would require further elaboration. He took great pleasure in challenging these language learners with new information and teaching them new words, as he did with me on countless occasions. He also had a cheeky sense of humour, and we all enjoyed his jokes that made use of various Chinese dialects and funny nicknames for people in the temple. Between these informal discussions, and their participation in daily chores, rituals, and classes, the students' Chinese improved rapidly.

All of the interpreters who spent significant time at the temple were able to find jobs, and while these jobs presented new challenges discussed in the following sections, they were better paid than most other jobs on offer. The economic benefits of employment as an interpreter cannot be understated. Take for example Jason, the CI graduate who spent one year in the temple during his degree. After graduating in 2022, he initially got a job at a Chinese solar powered battery factory on a 1 million TZH monthly salary, which increased to 1.2 after one month. After working there for 2 years, in 2024 Jason changed jobs and is now being paid 6540 RMB per month, or around 2.5 million TZH. He used his income from 2.5 years of work to pay back his family for the cattle they had sold to send him to school and construct a house in his parents village. Being one of the two children out of nine that went to university, he also felt significant pressure to provide for his family, and his interpreting jobs had allowed him to do that. John, introduced in Chapter 3, was earning 1 million less than one year after leaving the temple where he was paid 180k. When I met him in late 2024, he was working with two bosses at the same time. One who he had assisted with initial market research was paying him 1.5 million monthly, even though the boss himself was back in China and had very little for him to do. That meant he was also able to work for another Chinese boss, a middle aged woman who sold mattresses in Kariakoo. This echoes Renikova's claim that "Ethiopian translators… exercise agency in their engagements with

Chinese employers and Chinese companies" as they "improve their Chinese language and negotiation skills… to negotiate better terms, including job flexibility and more competitive salaries" (2022:p.460). I heard about more senior interpreters that had invested their income, like the graduate of UDSM who had opened 20 Airtel stores (providers of roadside financial services), and was now driving a BMW. Another had opened his own shop. Suffice to say that significant economic opportunities lay at the end of the Chinese learning journey.

The temple also provided interpreters with plenty of networking opportunities with Chinese business people. As described in the previous chapter, the temple was often visited by business associations, Buddhist bosses and people employed in Chinese companies, all of whom could provide potential employment opportunities. In one case an interpreter at the temple secured a meeting to pitch a business idea to Mr Zong, which would have been very difficult for someone who had not known him through the temple. The temple not only provided an immersive language environment, but also a place to mingle with potential employers and partners, and as I will describe in the following section, also helped them develop a range of interpretive skills that would serve them well in Sino-Tanzanian spaces and beyond.

6.4 The Skills of Interpretation

Interpreters, in contrast to translators who deal primarily with texts, are necessarily embedded within social contexts, translating the speech of people engaged in some form of cooperation or exchange. This means the job of the interpreter extends far beyond purely semantic, intellectual exercises. In this section I describe some of the social, psychological and affective capabilities that are cultivated by interpreters, inside and outside the temple. It is no coincidence that interpreters' job title is shared with a school of anthropology, because in many ways their training was similar to the anthropologist attempting to learn the language and culture of a group they do not belong to. The interpretivists argued that anthropologists were involved in a similar process of cultural interpretation as our interlocutors, reemphasising the frontal encounter as a process inherent to social life and anthropological analysis (Geertz, 1973). While these skills are ultimately put to different uses, as we will see in the final section, many of these capabilities are highly analogous to those cultivated by anthropologists in the field.

Greetings and self introductions are generally the first things taught in language courses, but as every language learner quickly realises, these formulaic textbook options only

get one so far. When these aspiring translators arrived at Tanhua Temple, their first interactions with the Chinese residents were often somewhat awkward, like Juma whose rather direct and nervous first words were, “Hello, I have come to live with you and study Chinese”. By the time they left they were much more vocal and comfortable living and working alongside the monks and volunteers at the temple. This process of socialisation is arguably just as important as the linguistic knowledge they gained at the temple. They learned the appropriate way to refer to people of different ages, and while some greetings (*amituofo*), and some titles (*fashi,* master or *shixiong,* fellow devotee) were specific to the temple, through these interactions they also picked up general principles of small talk. In the process of staying at the temple, some even opted to change their names, or came to understand them in new ways. One student arrived with the Chinese name *Liuxing,* meaning “shooting star”. A Chinese volunteer pointed out that a shooting star only shines momentarily before petering out, saying this wasn’t the most auspicious choice. They then decided to change his name to one with the opposite connotations *Bi Haishan* (that could be read as: to finish/complete the seas and the mountains). Another volunteer had the name *Li Jianguo,* a Mao era name that caused no shortage of chuckles from the Chinese at the temple due to its literal meaning as Mr Li “to establish the nation”. *Jianguo* had chosen that name because he thought it was befitting of a legendary Tanzanian translator, who was going to make great contributions to his country. He soon came to understand that Chinese people associated this name with their own first President, and an intensely patriotic period, hence the laughter. These seemingly quotidian moments of self introduction and small talk provided them with important insights into Chinese social life, history and culture. All of these soft skills were directly transferable to the job search and their future work as interpreters.

As interpreters in Chinese companies they were also forced to develop a calm and conciliatory disposition in the face of real anger from both sides of conflicts. All interpreters recounted having to soften the language of a Chinese boss, who may have just delivered a furious criticism of the worker’s laziness, which would be translated into a far less offensive encouragement to work harder. Another interpreter described certain situations in which one party had made some particularly spiteful and explicit remark, after which he would first repeat the sentence back to them, asking them if they were sure he should translate, warning them that it would probably offend the other party. Remaining equanimous in the face of genuine anger and frustration was an affective capability cultivated by interpreters. Jason described a situation where he was flown to Arusha to interpret for his boss in a conflict with a local wholesale customer, with discussions going all day and into the late hours of the night.

Tensions reached the point that neither was willing to speak to the other for long periods. Jason pointed out that interpreting is really a psychological job, one that requires deep attunement to both the discursive content of speech, but also the emotional state of the speaker, and how the translation might maintain or alter the emotional impact of the original phrase. Another described being an interpreter as being the person that brings Tanzanians and Chinese people together, or the connector (*munganisha*).

Interpreters also had to negotiate the racialisation of Sino-Tanzanian spaces, as they became increasingly aware of the racial ideologies of their Chinese employers. Take for example the following exchanges that took place during a follow up fieldwork visit to an interpreter who was now working for a mattress producer in Kariakoo, the central trading district of Dar es Salaam. When I walked into the long narrow shop, stacked with mattresses on each side up to the ceiling, I found John, the boss and another local employee sitting around a small cash register table chatting. As I joined the conversation, the boss, a middle aged Chinese lady, was asking John in a laughing tone why Tanzanian people discriminated against Chinese so much, and why they were "so nice to Mzungu[50] even though the Mzungu was the one that colonised you!". She went on to describe the employees of Chinese SOEs that had children with local women, only not to be able to bring them back to China because of their skin colour. Pointing at John, she said, "if I had skin like that, I would be unmarriable, for men it is ok to be a bit darker, but for women it is preferable to be as white as possible". John continued the conversation, joking back in Chinese, while also offering Swahili commentary to me and his fellow worker who did not speak Chinese. Before long the conversation had turned to the correct Swahili translation for chaos/mess (*luan*), which John explained was *fuso, ovyo* or *shagalabagala*. These conversations gave John a first hand experience of Chinese notions of race, and his ability to listen and remain unfazed was something that all interpreters had to develop. They were able to remain equanimous in the face of intercultural conflict and highly racialised contexts, and in turn developed highly informed critiques of the Sino-Tanzanian relationship as I demonstrate in the conclusion of this chapter.

Finally, interpreters also learned a lot about the internal workings of the industries they were involved in. Given the importance placed on intellectual transfer in China-Africa debates, it is significant that interpreters often end up with a very good understanding of the business from the managers' or bosses' perspective. Most of the interpreters I worked with

[50] Swahili for a white person, see Introduction.

expected that they would eventually start their own business, or partner with a Chinese business person. Linguistic proficiency was the first step on their way from working *for* to working *with* the Chinese. In sum, the social, emotional and practical skills cultivated by these interpreters at the temple and in their jobs put them in a position from which they could make various types of interventions, ranging from the "motivated mistranslation" (Cassen & Kirk, 2024) mentioned earlier, to the more direct and confrontational interventions described in the following section.

6.5 Interpreting & Intervening

While the professional ideal of a translator is someone who blends into the background, merely facilitating a seamless flow of information between parties, the reality is that the position of interpreter affords many opportunities to intervene in small and big ways. While different interpreters I met developed a wide variety of relationships with Chinese people, largely based on their own personal proclivities and values, in this section I describe moments in which the position of one interpreter became explicitly interventionist. Isaac's experiences reveal the potential for interpreters to use their linguistic skills in an interventionist way, and also his ability and willingness to end these relationships when they became unbearable.

Isaac was a recently graduated student from the UDOM CI who spent many months living in the temple while he was looking for work. As one of the few Tanzanian men in the temple, he saw his role as a representative and protector of the local staff and children. As the only Tanzanian who could represent their concerns to the temple management in Chinese, he was often caught in between two conflicting parties. On one occasion the local staff reported that the water was undrinkably salty, and after several days of tension with the manager, Isaac took this issue directly to the Abbot who immediately took us off to buy as many large containers of water as we could fit in the car. Another incident occurred when Isaac confronted a Chinese trader volunteering at the temple who he accused of hitting a child during a class[51]. The ensuing shouting match almost turned to blows before the other adults in the temple restrained them. During this altercation Isaac sternly reminded Mr Zhang, in Chinese, that he should remember that he was in Tanzania and that this was not ok (*bu keyi de*). The Abbot was very explicit that the Chinese were under no circumstances allowed to physically punish the children, however, it took the incident with Isaac for his actions to be

[51] I also had to intervene on one occasion during an evening service in the Buddha hall when the same volunteer twisted a young girl's ear to make her stand up straight.

met with reprimand from the Abbot, who after hearing about the situation ordered Mr Zhang to leave the temple.

Isaac's relationship with the Buddhists at Tanhua Temple were also inflected by his own deep faith in Christianity. Having grown up a Seventh Day Adventist he had since become a non-denominational Christian. During our conversations, he would often speak about the Bible, and when he did so his face lit up as he espoused passionate praises. Just as the members of the local congregation described in Chapter 2 responded to Buddhism in complex and multifaceted ways, Isaac's opinions of Buddhism were mixed. During one conversation he criticised the leaders of Christian groups in Tanzania for being cheaters that fakes miracles to make money, and praised the Buddhists for their religious discipline. He appreciated the reverence shown to monastics, asking me one day, "Do you see how they are singing for their food, do you see how they bow to the Masters when they leave the Buddha hall?" One day while in the dining hall he saw the Master close his eyes in silent reflection, and said, "this man knows God… I have never seen this kind of discipline before". When I asked him which God they knew, he said, that was their one mistake.

Isaac was also critical of the compulsory chanting sessions in the morning and the evening attended by all temple residents, citing the fact that in Tanzania freedom of religious belief is a constitutionally enshrined right, and one that is taken very seriously. To 'force someone to pray' (*kulazimisha kusali*) was very wrong indeed. He said that even though his own departure from his family's church has led to tensions with his father, his right to choose was always respected. These tensions also manifested in embodied, more-than-human spiritual conflicts. One morning when Isaac pulled me aside telling me in a hushed voice that there had been a big fight last night. I asked him with whom, and he said it was a fight with a spirit bigger than he had seen before, and he was sure it wasn't from Tanzania. He showed me a sore on his upper lip, saying that he had woken up in pain. In the morning he was looking around to see if anyone had similar signs of being in a fight the night before, and based on the Abbot's tired state and unwillingness to look at him, he concluded it was him. While he never made this accusation public, this spiritual battle is indicative of tensions experienced by interpreters, and his own willingness to fight back against perceived injustices, a trait that he took with him to the workplace.

Isaac also intervened when he saw what he perceived to be culturally insensitive and rude behaviour. The following incidents he encountered from the workplace were described to me at the temple, and while they might be exaggerated stories, they do suggest how Isaac saw his role as interpreter. One day he was visiting hardware shops to buy supplies with a

Chinese boss who was asking for prices, and then cursing rudely, exclaiming that it was too expensive before walking out. By the fourth shop, Isaac had seen enough. He physically pulled the Chinese boss over to the lady in the store who he had just left, telling him, "this is her business, you cannot just ask the price and be rude like that, say sorry to her right now, say *samahani*". The Chinese boss, startled, said *samahani*, after which Isaac corrected his pronunciation and told him to say it again. As they were driving off Isaac told the boss he wouldn't stop to ask any more prices. The boss then asked him to stop at a shop, but Isaac kept driving, asking him in Chinese if he had forgotten what he had just said. He told me a story of a Chinese boss who came to an Arab man's shop, asking the price four days in a row and touching all of the products, even pulling them apart. When he finally put the money on the table the shopkeeper pushed it all onto the ground and started shouting, "I don't want your business, I don't want to do business with Chinese!". Another day a different boss went to several shops looking for a charger for his phone but complained they were too expensive. Each time they left the shop Isaac would say sorry to the seller and then purchase the product with his own money, to make a point. Later that night the boss called him to ask if he could use the charger that Isaac had bought. In order to teach him a lesson, he told the boss he was out and wouldn't be back until late, reminding the boss it was not currently within working hours. However, after 2 minutes he came to his door and gave it to him, telling him we don't have time to waste going to shops asking for prices like this.

Another type of intervention, akin to the fracturing of exchange relations described in Chapter 3, is to remove oneself from a relationship altogether, and in Isaac's case that was becoming a frequent occurrence[52]. During his time at the temple he had a complicated relationship with the Chinese manager, featuring frequent arguments but also several emotionally moving heart-to-heart discussions. He both complained that she was "treating him like a stranger" when he was "treating her like a mother", but then also said that he loved her and that she reminded him of his mother. He was vocal in his criticisms, and even made them known to the Abbot when he was called into the office. While the Tanzanian state might be blind to what is going on here, he said, it had a strong hand. After he decided to leave the temple, he asked the manager what he should do to the temple if he became President one day. As he left he also taught me one final Swahili expression that translates to 'adults are not scared of cats' (*mtu mzima hatishiwi nyau*). This has particular significance given the role of cats in witchcraft, and his own experiences at the temple. This pattern of ending relationships

[52] In Haruyama (2025) we see a very similar example of a Zambian Jehovah's Witness, named Jonah, who speaks Chinese but refuses to work for them due to ethical concerns.

that he found unacceptable continued in the workplace. Since graduating from the Confucius Institute at UDOM Isaac had walked out of five different Chinese companies in 6 months, not because he was fired, but because he "cannot accept foolishness and mistreatment". However, Isaac is continuing to explore entrepreneurial opportunities, and is adamant that he will work *with* and not *for* the Chinese.

In Isaac's case we see both the potential and the limits of the interpreter's position. We also see clear demonstrations of Chinese language skills being used not just for the efficient extraction of resources from Tanzania for Chinese interests, but to stand up for Tanzanians and defend local ethical standards. Isaac's experiences in the temple, and in the workplace reveal the potential for interpreters to intervene in small and big ways, but also the structural limitations of such action, that have ultimately led to him removing himself from both the temple and several Chinese businesses. Isaac is now actively pursuing his own business plans, and at university was involved in student politics, so it is not unforeseeable that he will have an impact on this relationship in the future, having developed a particularly critical perspective. While these interventions were particularly dramatic, all interpreters had to develop their own subtle and explicit ways of intervening, and as I argue in the following, they all developed empirically informed, critical perspectives of the Sino-Tanzania relationship.

6.6 Conclusion: Critical Perspectives

"If you know all the languages of the world and you don't know your mother tongue or the language of your culture, that is enslavement. But if you know your mother tongue or the language of your culture and add all the other languages or the word to it, that is empowerment. For me, many languages are empowerment but rooted in the original mother tongue." Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Fung, 2021)

In this chapter I have argued that the interpreters who learned Chinese at the Confucius Institutes and Tanhua Temple gained both economically, and also developed a particular set of linguistic, affective and interpersonal skills that allowed them to think about and intervene in Sino-Tanzanian spaces. To conclude, I present two ethnographic moments that drive home the complex positionality of interpreters who are entangled within a deeply asymmetrical Sino-Tanzanian relationship, but far from being indoctrinated into one particular view or another, develop their own critical perspectives.

After we left the mattress shop, John and I continued our discussion over a *chipsi mayai* (a popular local omelette dish) on a bustling street. I was asking him about the concept of neocolonialism (*ukoloni mamboleo*), and he responded by recounting an experience he had working for a Chinese company building a factory in Tanga. The Director Commissioner of the area was asked by the Chinese boss what they could do to repay the community, and to John's dismay the Tanzanian politician asked for just 16 laptops. Given the scale of the investment, John said they could have asked for a road, or a school or hospital, but instead they only asked for laptops for their office! That day in Kariakoo there had also been widely published rumours that the opposition party was going to stage a large protest, and there were soldiers/police positioned on almost every street corner. I asked him what he made of it, and he responded that to protest was a civil right, just like your right to speak. As a highly educated, multilingual young interpreter, John's linguistic skills and experiences on the job had not left him with an uncritical view of China or Tanzania. In fact it gave him a particularly close look at these matters, sharpening his ability to make powerful critiques.

On another day I was visiting the Confucius Institute to watch the Chinese Bridge Language Competition, an event held in every CI around the world for students of Chinese that offers chances for winners to progress to the global round in China. There were official speeches from Confucius Institute leaders and leaders of the university, along with dozens of speeches from students. There was much talk of friendship, cooperation, development, and all speeches featured various forms of performative patriotism directed towards China and Tanzania. As I was leaving the event, I ran into a Tanzanian man who had been a student at the CI, and was now employed there as a Chinese teacher. He had previously represented the country in these competitions, where we had met in the past. He looked at me knowingly and said, "a lot of propaganda today!". While there was clearly a political element to this competition, the participants were not simply unthinking recipients of this message, but recognised the occasion for what it was, a highly orchestrated political affair. This was especially true of those with deeper experiences with Chinese institutions, and more developed Chinese language skills.

In these critiques we see both the informed reflective thought of young Tanzanians who have cultivated Chinese linguistic skills, and also the structural limitations of their positionality. Finally, one important caveat to the argument being made in this chapter is that the individuals discussed here do not make up a high percentage of the people involved in Sino-Tanzanian spaces, in which on-the-job language skills are more common than formal language training. Blommaert speaks about the globalisation of "truncated" linguistic

resources, and in factories and construction sites across Tanzania there are countless conversations happening that freely mix Swahili, Chinese and English. While this chapter has focused on the interpreters who came to Tanhua Temple, a subset of particularly dedicated and ambitious students, a thicker comparison of the emergence of Chinese in the Tanzanian linguistic landscape would consider a broader set of experiences. This would also highlight new linguistic inequalities that are emerging in Sino-African spaces.

Chapter 7

Desirable Differences: Backpackers, civic intimacy & changing values among Chinese youth

7.0 Introduction

Tanhua Temple is located in the largest city in Tanzania, Dar es Salaam, a popular stop for people travelling to East Africa and beyond. The temple sits on a beachfront property next to a large Chinese run complex called Palm Village with apartments, shops, supermarkets, restaurants, and a luxury hotel in a well-to-do coastal neighbourhood a short drive North from the city centre. While I was conducting fieldwork, Tanhua Temple became known to a new generation of globally mobile Chinese travellers who came to volunteer for days, weeks or months at a time on their journeys through the region. As Tanhua Temple hosted a diverse cross section of university students, artists, essayists, vloggers, and backpackers, it became a place to "check in" (*daka,* a popular online Chinese neologism). This chapter explores the unique perspectives of these young travellers and the way they dealt with differences at Tanhua Temple, based on ethnographic observations during their stays at the temple, analysis of the online content that they produced about their travels, and through semi structured interviews conducted after fieldwork. While there were 44,000 Chinese tourists who visited Tanzania in 2023, up from 34,000 in 2019 (Peng & Wu, 2024), this chapter focuses on the stories of a specific subset of Chinese tourists in Tanzania whom I will refer to as 'backpackers' (*beibaoke*). Distinct from short term tourists who come for safari tours and high end resorts, they wanted their travel to be something individual, spontaneous, and in many cases long term. When asked about the broader "travel scene" (*lvyouquan*), almost all backpackers emphasised the personal nature of their travel choices, a style of travel that values autonomy, genuine interactions, and on an even more abstract level, valorises the experience of difference itself. The chapter proceeds in three parts, analysing these individuals' (6.1) lives in China, (6.2) travel experiences and (6.3) engagements with the temple. In doing so we see the development of countercultural currents among Chinese young adults, the role of travel and volunteering as practices that facilitate the realisation of their values, and the way these backpackers contributed to a lively and pluralistic discourse space at Tanhua Temple, or what Rundong Ning and David Palmer (2024) refer to as a 'micro-civil sphere'.

It has long been noted that China has witnessed a hollowing out of collectivist socialist values in the post-Mao era, as rapid economic development improved material conditions for millions, and caused unprecedented social and political change. Both educational settings and the workplace have become increasingly competitive, putting pressure on individuals through new discourses of 'human quality' (*suzhi*), resulting in what Kleinman (2011) refers to as the 'enterprising and desiring self'. Traditional kinship structures have also been further transformed through rapid urbanisation after they were radically reimagined in the Maoist era, and the highly divergent life experiences between age groups mean that there is a significant generational gap in the way people see the world. This has led to a pluralistic ethical landscape that features everything from individualism, consumerism and nationalism, to the revival and invention of religious and spiritual traditions. David Palmer (2019) has pointed to at least three 'moral codes' in contemporary China, one grounded in history and tradition (including Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism), another that stems from the Maoist revolutionary period, and finally discourses of modernisation, dating back to the reforms of the early 20th century and continuing in the reform and opening up period. This chapter asks what we can learn about this changing moral topography by exploring the thought and action of the backpackers who came to Tanhua Temple.

I argue that when faced with this plurality of ethical discourses, none of which seem to fully explain the contradictions and challenges of contemporary life, these backpackers concluded that values were best treated as a matter of personal choice. That is, individualisation, a process well described in the China literature, has made many young people sceptical of 'one-size fits all' approaches, including the traditional values of family, the increasingly 'involuted' contemporary workplace and systems of organized religion. Their sceptical approach extended to the travel scene itself, as each traveller sought to develop their own idiosyncratic philosophy to describe their engagements with the 'other'. This meant they also resisted labels like 'lying flat' or becoming 'Buddhist-like youth' (also online Chinese neologisms), even when some might consider them good descriptions of these emerging subcultures. The individualisation of ethical discourses, seen in the psychological therapy boom (Zhang, 2020), is indicative of what some sociologists have called 'reflexive modernisation' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), and represents an important trend among Chinese youth. By analysing this small, but culturally influential group of travellers we not only see a new dimension of China-Africa engagements beyond the 'extractive enclaves' of

Chinese construction and mining projects, but also have a chance to reflect on young people's values and how they are contributing to China's public sphere.

7.1 Growing up in a Changing China

While tourism literature tends to focus on the national context of the host country at the expense of the countries of origin (Simoni, 2016), understandable given the methodological challenges involved, to ignore China's domestic economic, political and ideological context would make it impossible to understand the significance of the ethnography that follows. While I later move on to analyse the 'encounters' that are more typical of the tourism literature, we must begin with setting the scene in China in order to understand the most important causes and effects of their travels, along with an account of what that travel meant to them in the context of their lives. This section also attempts to move beyond the false dichotomy between so-called 'dark anthropology' (Ortner, 2016) with its focus on oppressive socio-economic structures, and anthropologies of the good that emphasise agency, freedom and self-development (Robbins, 2023). Instead I argue that the rapid socioeconomic changes in China have led to both new problems for Chinese young people, and also new potential solutions. Rapid economic growth has both led to increasingly commercialised, unequal and competitive society, but has also made possible alternative lifestyles and countercultures that I describe throughout the rest of the chapter.

The political and economic changes in recent Chinese history have led to a shifting moral landscape, as the country moved away from Maoist policies in the 1980s and 1990s, leading to unprecedented economic growth and societal change in the 'Reform and Opening Up' period (*gaige kaifang*). This process began with de-collectivisation of the late 1970s, institutional reforms that 'untied' (*songbang*) the individual, promoted private entrepreneurship, and increased the mobility of Chinese citizens that had been tied to 'work units' (*danwei*) and the 'household registration system' (*hukou zhidu*) (Yan, 2009b). The 1990s saw the retreat of the state from the provision of social services, structural reform and mass lay-offs within state owned enterprises, along with the formal inclusion of business interests into the party sphere in the early 2000s under Jiang Zemin's 'three represents' policy (*sangedaibiao*). These changes represented a departure from the Maoist revolutionary values of "liberation (解放), service to the people (为人民服务), sacrifice (牺牲), selflessness (无私), egalitarianism (平等)... and unity (团结)" (Palmer, 2019), creating a moral vacuum that was increasingly filled by individualistic, market based values. This was a 'consumer

revolution' (Davis, 2000), in which the "new process of making a new post-socialist consumer led by both the party-state and global capitalism" (Yan, 2009b: p. 36).

Existing work on rural-urban relations in China has pointed to the way changing socioeconomic structures have produced increasing individualistic ethical discourses among migrant workers from rural backgrounds. This is also essential context for some of this chapter's key interlocutors, who grew up in rural contexts and moved to cities for work. From the 1980s until the 2020s, China's urban population rose from 37% to 65%. In part due to the ongoing legacy of the household registration system (*hukou zhidu*), after moving to cities for work, rural citizens continued to have unequal access to state social services even as they were the labour force powering China's economic growth, a process that Ngai and Lu (2010) describe as 'semi-proletarianisation'. With unequal access to education and healthcare in cities, rural families were forced to live translocally, with children and the elderly 'left behind' in the villages. They also increasingly relied on remittances from their migrant worker kin in the cities. This created a "spatial chasm between production in urban areas and reproduction in the countryside" (Ngai & Lu, 2010). Social ramifications of this new arrangement included increased burdens on rural women who had to return to the village to raise families and manage agricultural production (Wu & Ye, 2016), pressures on the rural elderly who were increasingly tasked with raising their grandchildren (He & Ye, 2013), and harms to left behind children (*liushou ertong*) who were sometimes harmed by their caretakers, experienced mental health challenges (Qin & Albin, 2010), and also struggled to compete in China's increasingly competitive educational system (Murphy, 2014; Yue et. al., 2017). China's Gini Coefficient (a measure of income inequality) doubled from 0.3 in 1980 to 0.55 by the start of the new millennium (Xie & Zhou, 2014). These conditions also led to a well documented shift in the values of migrant workers. While the first generation of migrant workers, born in the 1960s and 1970s tended to tolerate difficult conditions and remained in one job for extended periods, the second generation born in the 1980s and 1990s have been less willing to accept these arrangements. They have been more likely to instigate collective action, stand up for individual rights, and change jobs. As Ngai & Lu put it, "characteristic of the second generation's ways of life is a greater disposition toward individualism, an increased proclivity for urban consumer culture" (ibid.p.495). In the following examples of young people from rural backgrounds who came to Tanhua temple, we see how the desire to lead autonomous, happy lives have led some to search for alternatives.

Take for example Wang Mengting, a young woman in her early 20s who came to volunteer at Tanhua Temple for a few weeks on her travels through Eastern Africa. She had

grown up in a small town in South West China, and left high school after her parents were unable to financially support her. Like many others, Wang went to Shenzhen for work in a sales position (see Sier, 2021). Eventually, she quit her job after a bad breakup, and decided to go travelling in Yunnan province. Along with a tumultuous investment into cryptocurrency, Wang began working as a live streamer selling goods on online platforms. The mobility of this online job allowed her to continue travelling, and she then began to produce longer videos documenting her experiences. One video about her travels in Egypt went viral, and since then she has been making a living producing travel related content, and conducting cross-border trade selling goods from her travels (a method for sustaining a travelling lifestyle that was adopted by many of the backpackers in this chapter). She now has over a million followers, which has allowed her to travel more or less full time. In the month it has taken me to write this chapter she has been bungee jumping in Dubai and skiing in Xinjiang. One day as we were walking through the market buying vegetables for the temple, I asked her about her tattoo of a marajuana leaf, a symbol commonly seen in China without necessarily referring to drug use. She told me that it stands for freedom and being unrestrained. It is perhaps no surprise that individuals who make their living through 'self-media' (*zimeiti*)[53] would hold these values. The class mobility that she has experienced, while not representative of the majority of rural youth, do reflect new aspirations, ambitions and career trajectories in the internet age. As we will see in the following sections, Africa is becoming a popular destination for online content producers from China, of which there are many different styles and niches. In the same way that working in Africa can provide class mobility for Chinese workers, who can go from labourer to manager, travelling in Africa also produces opportunities for individuals to develop new livelihoods in online commerce and content production. Just as being an 'internet influencer' has become a new potential career for youth around the world, in China the internet is also providing new opportunities for people to become 'internet celebrities' (*wanghong*), some of whom specialise in travel content. While not easy and requiring some amount of luck, this is an increasingly attractive industry for young people who value the freedom and autonomy of working for oneself.

Changing aesthetic tastes and the desire for distinction has also given rise to a plethora of subcultures, countercultures and increasingly niche artistic/lifestyle markets. While the consumerism of contemporary China tends to conjure up images of either mass produced or luxury goods and services, there are an increasing number of people who are

[53] This is a term for media produced by individuals and distributed through social media platforms.

explicitly anti consumerist, which ironically has produced new markets and opportunities for those embodying these values. Take for example the career of the photographer Mei Ling, who grew up in the countryside in Southern China with her grandparents. After studying hotel management at a university in Southern China, she moved to Shanghai for a job in the hotel industry. The work was tiring, and while she appreciated the opportunity to be in a big city, Mei Ling told her manager that she wouldn't work for more than one year. After saving up some money, she decided that instead of buying an iPhone like everyone else, she would invest in a camera. Thanks to her unique aesthetic tastes, her photography quickly built up a following, and was able to attract customers. At this point she also realised that she was not saving any money working in the hotel, so she decided to quit her job and became a volunteer (*yigong*) in a youth hostel where she worked in exchange for board (*dagong huansu*). This meant she had no stable income, but her newly found free time allowed more time to 'play' (*wan*), exploring nearby attractions and at the same time developing her photography practice. At the hostel she met lots of 'different young people' (*butong de nianqianren*), which gave her access to customers, and eventually allowed her to increase her prices and pursue art full time. While her practice eventually became economically successful, it was first made possible by rejecting the status symbol of an iPhone and moving from a paid job to a volunteering position, which gave her the tools and the time to develop the artistic practice that I describe later in the chapter. When meeting Mei Ling, with her dreadlocks and colourful clothing, it is hard to ignore the associations with the beat generation and the hippie movement in the West (Xie, 2021). While such comparisons are beyond the scope of this chapter, suffice to say that her attempts to carve out an alternative career for herself were motivated by a strong desire for something different. In this she joined a growing number of young people who are looking for meaning in life outside of China's increasingly competitive market inflected society.

While many migrant workers dream of an urban future (Sier, 2021), Mei Ling ended up leaving the hustle and bustle of the city for the peace and quiet of a small country town in Yunnan, where she now rents a courtyard with plenty of space for her artistic practice. When I interviewed her after fieldwork, she was hosting a group of adults who had come to study with her in the countryside for a short course. By 2024 she had hosted 61 students for these programs, which took place in her newly constructed courtyard space, full of curvy lines, irregular shapes and quirky objects which she captures in her film photography which she shares online. This is part of a broader trend of counter-urbanisation in which urbanites are

choosing to relocate away from high-pressure urban contexts to picturesque rural villages[54]. These 'return youth' are a "small but very symbolic movement of millennials who, against norms of "success," are hoping to pursue an "alternative" lifestyle that exists outside of the society perceived to be or experienced as involuting" (Qian & Bram, 2024). While counter-urbanisation has attracted significant attention in recent years, especially during Covid, it is worth noting that this builds on a long history of romanticisation of rurality among Chinese artists. For example, the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Forest (3rd century CE) have been mythologised as an inspirational group of artists and poets who rejected political careers to establish their own community where they lived freely and without social constraints, drinking, doing drugs and creating art. More recently, the first generation of Chinese contemporary artists formed their own art villages beginning in the 1990s, moving into peripheral neighbourhoods around Beijing (first Yuanmingyuan, and later Songzhuang) where rent was low and they could engage in increasingly radical artistic practices (Wang, 2010). These kinds of intentional communities, like the eco-village project studied by Liangliang Zhang (forthcoming), represent important countercurrents in Chinese society. Of course monasteries themselves have also represented a form of escape from the malaise of secular life, and while their proposed solutions differ substantially, the temple's position at a distance from secular life undoubtedly played a role making Tanhua Temple a popular destination among these young travellers. Here we see how the rapid urbanisation of the last few decades has also produced the conditions for its rejection.

The search for alternative lifestyles has not only been limited to migrant workers, but is also observable among more privileged urban youth who have grown up in increasingly competitive educational and business environments. The backpackers who came to Tanhua Temple included people escaping the pressures of a variety of industries; the police force, the service sector, legal offices, technology companies, and startups. While some saw their travel as a temporary escape, most were trying to find new livelihoods that could sustain a different sort of lifestyle. For example, Mr Zhang, a father in his early 30s said that if he had continued to work in China he would have completely burned out, or as he put it, the pressure would have killed him. After graduating from the top art university in China he had founded his own startup, but after a few successful years, he began to realise that his work life balance was entirely unsustainable. When I met him at Tanhua Temple he had quit his job, and had recently moved with his daughter to Tanhua Temple, where they spent their afternoons

[54] This should be distinguished from the government discourse of returning youths, which they are also promoting as a rural revitalisation policy.

paddling their inflatable canoe in the Indian Ocean, while planning their eventual move to New Zealand, Australia or Canada. Another short term volunteer traveller, Ziheng, had quit his job as a policeman to go travelling and had no intention of going back to the police force after he finished backpacking in the Middle East and East Africa. When he returned home, Ziheng opened a cafe called "On the Road", a reference to the novel by Jack Kerouak which is read widely within backpacking circles in China. Another young woman called Tianwei, after studying law, ended up opening a shop in a small town in South West China that has been a hotspot for artists and tourists, selling all sorts of cultural items, and other goods from her travels.

In recent years there has been a proliferation of internet neologisms that describe both the challenges of contemporary life, and also some potential responses. These include terms like 'involution' (*neijuan*) which describes the increasing competition within Chinese society that forces individuals to work harder without any chance of true progress, and various critical responses including 'lying down flat' (*tangping*) which means refusing to work, or becoming a 'Buddhist-like youth' (*foxiqingnian*) which entails the adoption of an equanimous attitude to the pressures of modern life. While most of my interlocutors were broadly sympathetic to these discourses, they did not think that they captured the real spectrum of alternatives. One backpacker, named Shirley, described these responses as 'a kind of 'escape (*taobi*) from jobs that people never really decided to do in the first place, that kind of work really takes it out of you (*xiaohao*)', but also said that this was only the first step in a 'process of cultivating one's heart/mind' (*peiyang xinli*). Tianwei, another backpacker, was also sceptical about the explanatory power of these terms, saying they leave her with 'no feeling', and that 'no matter if it is lying flat or involution, it is all a personal choice, at each particular moment as an individual's perception and values change, they make the choice that suits them the best'. She went on to express scepticism about labelling people, arguing that nothing is fixed and everything is in constant flux. Here we see young people not only rejecting mainstream values, but also complicating the caricatured responses to these conditions that have become so popular online and in Western media stories on Chinese youth. As we will see in their approaches to travel and attitudes towards religion, these backpackers were clearly critical of the status quo, but saw solutions to these conditions as highly personal endeavors to be pursued through living authentically according to their own values.

Much anthropological literature has explored the effects these economic and social transitions have had on the 'moral life of the person' (Kleinman et. al., 2011). Yan Yunxiang

has argued that the individualisation of Chinese society has taken shape in reference to a Maoist caricature of individualism as selfish egotism, resulting in individualisation without the associated emphasis on the values of "liberty, equality, freedom and self-reliance" (Yan, 2009b). He points to the deliberate use of poisonous ingredients in food production and scams set up to take advantage of good samaritans as examples of such a moral decline in rural settings, but then also shows how public backlash in these cases reveal the emergence of new universalist ethical discourses (Yan, 2009a). In urban China, individualism and self-development discourses have created an increasingly materialistic, consumerist, and competitive society, while also creating conditions for its critique. I want to conclude by suggesting one potential way of understanding the latest developments within the various countercultures in China, with reference to Xiang Biao's work on 'suspension'.

With reference to a set of ethnographies about migrant workers, Xiang Biao (2021) uses the term 'suspension' (*xuanfu*) to describe the 'state of being in which people move frequently, conduct intensive labour, and pause routine life'. Drawing on Jane Guyer's work, he describes suspension as the 'hollowing out of the present' as workers forgo connections with colleagues, kin and neighbours in the hope of achieving future gains. Discussing his methodological approach, he warns against both the 'misery porn' of dark anthropology (Ortner, 2016), and also an anthropology of the good that unnecessarily reminds us that people can 'care and love' too. Instead he calls for concepts that emerge in conversation with interlocutors, those that capture the contradictions of their lived experience, and can help people find ways to critically engage with their conditions. One feature of that special issue, and other work on self development discourses in China (Hizi, 2024), is its acknowledgement that experiences of these rapid changes in Chinese society have not been simply oppressive or emancipatory. Instead Xiang argues that China has experienced 'complexed development', referring to the non-linear, uneven, and sometimes contradictory ways in which economic and social transformations impact on people's lives. This is captured well by Willy Sier's article about rural university graduates in service sector jobs who experience both the class mobility of becoming white collar workers, but then a decline in material living standards in comparison to migrants working in construction. The same goes for Miriam Driessen's chapter about Chinese migrant workers in Africa who are stuck between the desire to make money and have a good life in China, and the reality of their present existence in highly isolated enclaves in Africa. While it is undoubtedly true that this sort of 'suspension' characterises tragic choices that are ubiquitous in today's China, and the associated feeling of helplessness (*wunai*), this rest of this chapter explores attempts of backpackers to break free

of this suspension, repopulating the present and the nearby that has been hollowed out by modern life. While the backpackers introduced in the following sections do not reflect the experiences of most young people, it is undoubtedly true that they represent a widespread shift in values in society, in which more people are seeking a different sort of future for themselves outside of the ultra-competitive conditions of the mainstream workforce.

7.2 'Floating', 'Roaming', and 'Strolling' through the 'Travel Scene'

When asking my interlocutors about their travel experiences, I was struck by their emphasis on the uniqueness of their approaches, and resistance to any generalised description of the 'travel scene'. Ironically, it was their insistence on difference that became one of the uniting features of their travel philosophies (see Heywood, 2018). The 'travel scene' (*lvyouquan*, literally travel circle) is a broad term that refers to a loosely defined group of people who are interested in, and often also personally engaging in travel. While my interlocutors were all aware of the broader 'travel scene', they also emphasised its internal heterogeneity, with each traveler's own understanding of their style of travel grounded in critical reflections that often problematised elements of the travel scene itself. This extended to the very personal choice of words they used to describe their travels, including words like 'floating' (*piao*), 'roaming' (*liulang*), and 'strolling' (*sanbu*). In his recent monograph, Jia Xie (2021) identifies four categories of Chinese backpacker, 'the amateur, the dreamer, the escaper and the alternative seeker'. These categories are distinguished along two axes, the length of their travel and their psychological closeness to Chinese society, i.e. whether or not they see their life back in China as the centre, or whether they are looking to escape and find alternative lifestyles through travel. Xie also acknowledges that the categories are not mutually exclusive, but instead are 'fluid' and 'continuously negotiated' by backpackers. This was true of the backpackers who came to Tanhua Temple who could fit one or more different categories. However, given the selection bias for those who had already successfully made their way to Tanzania, many of them fit best Xie's description of the 'alternative seeker', someone who questions traditional expectations to have a stable job and raise a family, viewing backpacking as a 'way of living on their own terms' (Xie, 2021). By analysing the ways in which the backpackers at Tanhua Temple described their own travel philosophy, we see a wide variety of critical reflections and deliberately idiosyncratic approaches to travel. Aside from sharing this common interest in independent, unique travel, I argue that these travellers were seeking what Palmer and Ding (2024) call "civil intimacy",

which are “idealized modes of sociality that are distinct from those of the classic social spheres of family, work, friendships, religion, and politics”. In the following cases, we see travel become a means by which individuals can realise genuine, intimate connections with others, encounters that are valued precisely due to their uniqueness. What emerges is a reflexive, critical, and self-consciously autonomous approach to travel, and one that explicitly valorises engagement across differences.

Tom, a man in his early thirties from Shanghai, had been travelling for several years by the time I met him at Tanhua Temple. In 2015 he had experienced some challenges with his supervisor while studying for a masters degree in psychology at a top university and decided to take a year off to be a tour guide in Sri Lanka. After graduating, he was employed in a peer-to-peer lending company that had just become legal in China. It was a well paid job, but after being transferred into the strategy department, he felt that it had little to do with what he studied, and also he was sceptical about the ethics of the business. Later he found out that one of his friends' family had lost a lot of money by taking out these high-interest loans. He decided at that point to quit his job and go travelling. He told me that the thought of going to work everyday, raising a family and buying a house scared him, and that the pressure of such a life was unbearable. When I asked him about his style of travel, he said that those like him who are travelling long term are ‘floating people’ (*piaoliuderen*), because often they feel no belonging (*guishugan*) to their original job, society or family and want to escape (*taobi*). ‘Floating people’ resemble Jia Xie’s escapers and alternative seekers, who are critical of mainstream society, and no longer see it as the centre of their lives, embracing what Turner (1973) calls the ‘centre out there’ (cited in Jia 2021). Tom also distinguished long-term travellers with the recent phenomenon of ‘resignation travel’ (*cizhi lvxing*), which refers to people who had quit their job or had been made jobless going out for short term trips in the post Covid-19 era. This correlates with Xie’s distinction between the escaper and the alternative seeker, the difference being, ‘resignation travel’ is always considered temporary, whereas long term travellers were trying to turn travel into an alternative way of life. True to his description, over the two years since we met, Tom has continued to travel within China and abroad. He said that 70-80% of those travelling long term are interested in ‘individual travel and experiences’ (*geren de lvyou he tiyan*). For example, while discussing his experience taking Chinese Buddhist tourists on trips around Sri Lanka, he promised that he could take me to the non-touristic spots. He was also highly critical of other types of travel, like those making online travel content, saying ‘most of them aren’t really interested in the destination, they see it as a business’. According to him, these content producers only cater to

Chinese domestic audiences, repeating the same tired message that Africa is 'poor, chaotic and dirty, in order to show that life in China is better'. He was also critical of some of the younger travellers he met, arguing that unlike his generation who grew up in the relatively liberal Hu-Wen era (2002-2012), some of those he met showed no critical reflection whatsoever. Here Tom is adding a moral dimension to categorisations of the travel scene, saying that 'although I don't really want to criticise them, I just can't stop myself', recalling overhearing younger travellers repeating party lines about the Covid-19 pandemic at a time when others were speaking out about the death of the whistleblower doctor Li Wenliang. In sum, Tom's account reveals both some of the unifying motivations that lead people to travel, but also a strong tendency to make critical distinctions between different elements within the 'travel scene'.

Roaming (*liulang*) was the phrase used by Ziheng, the former policeman who had opened his own travel themed cafe, to describe his approach to travel. Ziheng used the term to describe a type of travel without explicit aim (*mudi*) or long term plan. Much like Tom, he also had his own critical reflections on the 'travel scene'. He also spoke of those travellers who were producing online content, referencing a discussion he had with friends in a group chat about the phenomenon of 'distributing naan bread' videos (*fadabing*). In these videos, mainly taken in Pakistan and Afghanistan[55], travellers film themselves handing out food in an impoverished setting, which Ziheng described as a 'password for gaining views' (*liuliang mima*). He didn't like these videos because he felt they didn't reflect the true nature of daily life in these areas. He was also critical of commercialisation of tourist encounters like the Maasai villages in Tanzania where villagers wait to perform to tourists for money, arguing that *real* village life no longer existed like it used to. When some fellow travellers invited him to visit touristic villages in Ethiopia and Tanzania, he refused. Instead he favoured an approach that exposed him to 'real life' (*zhenshi de shenghuo*). When I interviewed him about his new cafe, he told me that he never locks the door, and allows people to use the space 24 hours a day. He said sometimes if he goes out travelling, he lets the customers make the coffee themselves. His approach to travel, and to running his cafe, reflect what Palmer and Ding (2024) call civic intimacy, 'that values an idealized social condition of free, pure and caring social relations, and dream of achieving this utopian condition not through political activism but through the immediate realization of authentic relations of emotional intimacy'.

[55] After the Taliban came to power many Chinese content producers went to Afghanistan.

Mei Ling, the artist introduced in the previous section, used the term 'strolling', or 'going for a walk' (*sanbu*) to describe her travels. All of the content she produced for social media was filed under the title "Mei Ling Strolling around the World". Elaborating on her travel philosophy, Mei Ling said that while travelling she has "no conception of the far away (*yuanfang*), because really it is only your immediate surroundings that actually exist (*zhiyoufujin*)". For that reason, she travels with no plan or daily schedule, instead cultivating slow, attentive, and sensitive engagements with her immediate environment, which she sums up with the word 'strolling'. If Xiang Biao (2021) described the "experience of suspension as the displacement of both the "near future" and the "nearby", this approach to travel was an attempt to exist in the sensations of the near and now. This aesthetic sensibility is on full display in her photography, writing, poetry and other online content. One of her photo essays, entitled 'The Similarity of the Far Away" (*yaoyuan de xiangsixing*), recounts her joy when she saw plastic sandals in Ethiopia that resembled those she used to wear as a child. The particular effect of seeing these familiar sandals being worn by Ethiopian men, and purchasing a pair there, meant that they produced a kind of intimacy that she describes as "the happiness of an encounter that emerged from *my* life, transcending time and space". She admits that she had also seen those sandals for sale on Taobao (the Chinese equivalent of Amazon), but as soon as she saw the big words 'vintage' and 'internet celebrity' in the advertisement, she couldn't bring herself to place an order (Bao, 2024). Here the very same sandals conjure very different responses, one that connects to her own personal experiences and the lived experiences of those far away, while the other that is a commercialised product, alienated from genuine experience through marketing slogans.

The photos she took on her year-long 'stroll' around Africa eventually became a solo exhibition in Berlin, entitled 'Beyond the Gaze'. The exhibition blurb describes her practice as attempting to:

> *offer a sense of warmth and intimacy across cultures and beyond the stereotypes, prompting contemplation of how Self and Other intertwine and how cross-cultural interactions shift under digitalization. In the end, we want to propose these questions: How can we break the walls of stereotypes and prejudices? How can we see behind these walls? How can we draw each other closer? How can we truly see each other?*

Unlike many photographers of Africa who depict the continent through its natural wonders and traditional cultural life, Mei Ling's work included photos of herself in the phones of locals, and photos of the locals holding the camera, or them taking pictures of each other. Here we see another example of travel functioning as a practice through which one realises

the value of genuine interpersonal connections, especially those that are explicitly interested in questions about the similarities and differences of the human experience.

Despite their emphasis on the distinctiveness of their approaches, many of these backpackers shared an interest in volunteering as a means to expose themselves to difference and created the kind of intimate, authentic experiences that make travel meaningful. Volunteering has been a central focus for studies of China's changing moral landscape, and has become increasingly popular among a post 1990s and post 2000s generation that grew up in a period of relative material prosperity. The emergence of NGOs and volunteering has been pointed to as evidence of both individualist and universalist ethical discourses (Yan 2009a; Palmer 2009). 'Loving heart' (*aixin*) discourses within these spaces have fused Confucian, socialist and universalist values (Wu & Zhan, 2024). Here I want to highlight the way in which volunteering provided opportunities for what Wu & Zhan (2024) have referred to as 'deep travel':

> *Part of the desire to travel is to connect with different people and to engage with different worlds. Travelling is a way to connect with strangers, transcend boundaries and break routines. Similarly, aixin also enables people to connect with strangers and offers them opportunities for in-depth engagement with their lives. This is the human connection. This allows volunteers to transcend geographical, economic and social boundaries.*

To illustrate this point, I will conclude with two examples of these kinds of engagements across differences that were sought out by the backpackers who came to Tanhua Temple.

Shirley is a young woman in her mid 20s who has just completed a master's degree in London. She was originally planning to volunteer in a drug addiction clinic in Zanzibar due to her interest in addiction and the effects drugs have on individuals. She also has a long term interest in psychology, therapy, and astrology which she has turned into a part time job doing private consultations online. During a break from volunteering at the temple, she went on a cycling trip around Zanzibar with another backpacker, during which they encountered some Maasai men, who later invited them to join a coming of age ritual in their home near Arusha. Deeply moved by the experience, she recalled a recurring dream she had throughout her childhood, in which she was watching a group of people in animal skins, on a vast African grassland. Whether it be her interest in the alterity of drug addiction, or her dreaming about tribal life, travel was a way to experience something new.

Next consider the case of Wang Mengting, a recently graduated university student who was on holidays before going back to university to start a new undergraduate degree in

Chinese medicine. After having a few conflicts with the temple manager, she decided to move into the dormitory for the Tanzanian female staff and children. One day as I was waiting for the children to get into the car to drive them to school, I saw that she was also wearing a school uniform and waiting to get into the car. In order to learn Swahili, she attended the local primary school for several weeks, to the surprise and excitement of our own students and the rest of the school. She also took on a Swahili name, Tausi, meaning peacock. Over a period of a few weeks she progressed from grade one to grade four, and was generally surprised by how easy these kids had it compared to Chinese primary school students. From these descriptions of the travel philosophies and practices pursued by these backpackers, we see both a highly individualistic understanding of travel, but one that is particularly interested in experiencing difference or alterity in an intimate and unmediated way.

7.3 Travelling to Tanhua Temple

After describing their lives in China and their approach to travel, we now arrive at Tanhua Temple, where this new generation of backpackers came into contact with the first mainland Chinese Buddhist mission in East Africa. Their presence at the temple had a significant effect on the space because they were not insiders of the Buddhist system described in Chapter 1, but were outsiders who brought new ideas and perspectives. Much as Gareth Fisher's (2014) ethnography of the courtyards at the Temple of Universal Rescue (*Guangji si*) in Beijing described a plurality of ethical discourses that existed in this vibrant discourse space beyond the monastic community, Tanhua Temple's openness to Chinese travellers also added unique perspectives to the cacophony of different voices already present. Just as the Tanhua Buddhist system is as an online-offline hybrid, backpackers' engagements with the temple also spilled over into online spaces. However, unlike the highly structured Buddhist studies groups of the Tanhua/Longquan system, the online 'travel scene' is a highly individualised space consisting of sole-authored essays, photos and videos posted on social media, which also served to spread the word about Tanhua Temple through the 'travel scene'. To see how these two worlds came together, I begin this section by describing the way backpackers came into contact with the Temple, describing how one popular essay made the case for stopping at Tanhua Temple on one's travels. I then compare two videos that were made by online content producers, which differ starkly in their approach. I then explore the backpackers' diverse approaches to religion that emerged through debates with Buddhist

volunteers about Buddhist soteriology and the role of travel in self-cultivation. Finally, I describe how the backpackers developed a form of non-confrontational critique when engaging across the stark generational differences between the younger travellers and older Buddhist volunteers.

Most of those who came to Tanhua Temple, even if they came alone, had heard about the Temple from fellow backpackers with whom they maintained contact online, or met sporadically along their travels. There were some exceptional cases, like Wang Mengting who approached Master Xianfen and me at the supermarket, wondering what a Chinese Buddhist monk was doing in Dar es Salaam. After hearing about the temple and orphanage, she promptly decided to collect her things from the hostel and move in. Although Wang decided she would not create content while volunteering at Tanhua Temple, aside from assisting the monastery in their own promotional material, I later discovered that several later backpackers who came to volunteer had learned about the temple through her. More often than not, information spread through Wechat groups for backpackers, the posts and comments of fellow backpackers, online content that has been published about the temple by previous volunteers, and in offline meeting places like youth hostels.

In a widely shared article written by a young woman who stayed at Tanhua Temple in 2023, the author, Lulu, begins by establishing her position as an outsider: “this article is about the experience of someone who knows nothing about Buddhism volunteering at Tanhua Temple. I do not know much Buddhist vocabulary, so to those practitioners within the system, if you feel I have been inappropriate or disrespectful please forgive me” (Haluo, 2023). Lulu had been travelling for several months in Africa when she heard about Tanhua Temple from three other travellers who had stayed there for a few weeks. She described the temple as a place where she could relax and not worry about food, accommodation and safety: “after a week there I still didn’t have any local money!”. The article goes on to describe daily life as a volunteer at the temple, the early mornings, Buddhist chanting, charitable trips to other orphanages and taking the children to school. While initially thinking this would be akin to “working in exchange for board” (*dagong huansu*) at a hostel, in the end she “realised that it was not the same concept at all”, expressing surprise that all of the volunteers here were giving their energy for years of their life in order to protect (*huchi*) the temple. She also wrote about her changing opinion about the restrictions of temple life, realising that they helped people “develop self control, reduce their desires, reach higher levels of cultivation and realisation”. While remaining positive about the temple and recommending others go for themselves, she then concludes by saying that:

Although everyone says that I have a natural affinity with the Buddha, I know that at this stage, the wild[56] *way of exploring life's truths may be more suitable for me. But maybe the seeds planted (at the temple) will sprout in the future, who knows!*

Just go with the flow (in English) and see where the flow of life takes me!

This long article, of over 5000 characters, was widely cited by other backpackers as inspiring them to visit Tanhua Temple, and was even shared by volunteers within the Tanhua Temple system. One member of the Dharma Protection team shared the article, adding the following caption:

Traveler Lulu has been a good girl since she was a child. She wanted to live for herself and bravely pursue the life she wanted, so she put on her backpack and embarked on a journey to find herself. The monastery was an inadvertent stop on the journey. Lulu's biggest gain from the monastery was that she began to learn Buddhism and use the principles of Buddhism to think about life. With Tanhua Temple as a stop on the journey, the blossoming homecoming of faith is finally welcomed into the journey of finding oneself.

Aside from Lulu's article, other travellers also produced content about the temple, including two Youtubers with starkly different audiences, both with over 100,000 subscribers. The first was taken by a travel vlogger called Xiangluo Tianwai. Born in the 1980s, he grew up in a remote part of Southern Yunnan province where he did not have access to education beyond middle school. Like many others we have met in this chapter, he ended up moving to Guangdong to work in various casual jobs including waiting at restaurants (*dagong*). However, while working he decided that he wanted to take the 'self-study' pathway to a degree in Chinese literature, which involves buying the textbooks for a university course, and then taking the exams without attending any formal classes. During our conversations post fieldwork, he made highly insightful points about the nature of Chinese society, linking them to ideas he had picked up from reading Max Weber, Herbert Marcuse, and the novels of Milan Kundera. After saving enough money, he embarked on a 403 day motorcycle trip through each of China's 31 provinces, producing video content along the way, and eventually published a book about his journey called "Motorbiking China". In 2019 he began to produce short videos, at a time he describes as the precipice of a boom in self media, and in short video platforms like Tiktok, which meant that he quickly gained significant viewership. Tianwai said that self-media became popular because it provides the perspective of the

[56] See Fang Liu (forthcoming) on 'wild intellectuals', who seem to share some of the proclivities of the backpacking community.

layman, and can get at the reality of daily life, unlike official news sources which many young people treat with scepticism. Since then he has been to over 50 countries, and as he puts it, 'almost found a way out of the pressures of mainstream society'. He produces short videos, does online streaming with his followers where he answers their questions (like Xianhong's Q&A), and also produces longer form documentary style videos.

He produced one of these videos during his day-long stay at Tanhua Temple, filming with a Gopro attached to his chest, allowing him to capture quotidian scenes without attracting too much attention. These included candid discussions in the courtyard between volunteers and the monks. One scene depicts one of the children crying about his lack of leather shoes, claiming he would be punished at school if the manager didn't replace the ones he lost. He then cuts to a conversation between a volunteer and the Abbot, explaining that the children are being hit with a stick at school for being late. His first person point of view makes the tension in these daily conversations palpable. He also conducted an extended interview with the Master in which he asks about the financial situation of the temple, how locals think about Buddhism, and the background of the children. The video also depicts the children speaking Chinese to the monks and volunteers, and Eve in the kitchen who uses the Chinese word for noodles to explain what was for dinner. His videos take a journalistic, documentary-like approach that gets to some of the core aspects of daily life at the temple, but he made it clear to me that he did not aim to 'teach' or 'civilise' (*jiaohua*) people through his videos, but simply present his own perspective on things he is personally interested in, without jumping to conclusions (*xiajielun*). During his travels around Africa he also made short films about the TAZARA railway, China's biggest foreign aid project of the Mao era, Shaolin temple in Lusaka, Zambia, and an interview with the daughter of a Tanzanian mother and a Chinese man who wouldn't take her back to China.

The second video was produced by a Youtuber called Ziheng who had been living in Dar es Salaam for a few years. After graduating and working as a field engineer for several years in Tianjin, he quit his job and began live streaming in 2017. After a few years in China, he decided to go to Africa where 'cultural difference' could become a highlight (*kandian*) that could attract more viewers. While many people come to Tanzania to create content, Ziheng is one of a handful who are living in Tanzania while working in self-media, and by all accounts seems to be setting himself up for a life in the China-Africa space. He first stayed in Zambia for six months in 2017, and then moved to Tanzania in 2021. In Dar es Salaam he had rented a house where he lived alongside several Tanzanian women, whom he had been introduced to by a Chinese-Tanzanian friend who has connections in the modelling industry.

At the time of writing he is now filming with Erika, a young Tanzanian woman who he is planning to marry. Much of his content now focuses on cultural differences they encounter during their relationship, including trips to visit respective families where they somewhat dramatically play up the contrasting cultural contexts on both sides. Both videos share a general interest in cultural difference, especially the phenomena of Tanzanians speaking Chinese, with Erika speaking in increasingly fluent Chinese in Ziheng's videos.

However, unlike Tianwai's first person GoPro perspective, most of Ziheng's videos are filmed in handheld selfie mode. The video he shot at Tanhua Temple was taken with Erika at the annual charity event for the International Day of the African Child described in Chapter 3. He does not spend much time interviewing people, but instead narrates the scene himself. On that day several orphanages from around Dar es Salaam came with their staff and children for a day of events and the distribution of charitable donations. In the video he was wearing a flowing white shirt unbuttoned to reveal his chest and white pants. The Master came out to greet them with a Buddhist bracelet and quickly receded back into his office. He emphasises the connection to China, and connects the care they are providing to these orphans to the upcoming 60th anniversary of Chinese-Tanzanian friendship. In the video he donated sports equipment and red shirts to all of the children, and left as the festivities were continuing, admitting that his acts can't count as true charity because he is filming it, but that giving to others does make one feel happy. These two videos, with similarly large numbers of views, tell two very different stories, and reveal the diversity of approaches to content creation. They also reveal differing levels of critical engagement within the broader 'travel scene'. While the first asked insightful questions and depicted some of the tensions of daily life at the temple, the second was content with falling back on official platitudes about Chinese generosity and assistance to Tanzania.

Beyond these videos and essays, backpackers who stayed at the temple for days or weeks at a time were also exposed to elements of the Buddhist system described in Chapter 2. Like Lulu, most of the backpackers had no prior experience living in a Buddhist temple, or studying Buddhism formally within a Buddhist system. However, some had Buddhists in their family, commonly a grandmother or parents who would take them to the temple to 'burn incense and bow to the Buddha' (*shaoxiang baifo*). The case of Shirley provides a window into the potential pluralism of 21st century Chinese spiritual life. Having grown up in a Muslim household (her family are of Hui ethnicity), she then became a Christian during her university years, and had since become a Buddhist, which also ran in the family through her Grandmother. She had left the Christian group after the death of the charismatic founder was

followed by his grandmother taking the reins, claiming to speak on behalf of God, which led Shirley to see the group as a 'cult' (*xiejiao*). Shirley had always been attracted to the Heart Sutra (*xinjing*), and had memorised it as a child. For her, morning and evening chanting were an opportunity to directly engage with Buddhist texts, and she also said that Master Xianhong helped answer her questions about Buddhism that had been troubling her for some time. One day after returning from fieldwork, I was surprised to meet her in London at an improvised music and poetry event on the bank of the Themes organised by a Chinese poet, at which she recited the Heart Sutra. She also spoke about meditation being an important part of her own cultivation. As mentioned before, Shirley is also deeply interested in astrology, and combines her Buddhist faith with her own personal research into everything from Baye's theorem to 'store consciousness' (*alayeshi,* alayavijnana in Sanskrit). Suffice to say that she came to the Buddhist faith from a pluralistic background of beliefs, and while she now 'completely believes in Buddhism', it is not her only framework for understanding the world, but instead fits into a curious and exploratory approach to religion. An interest in spirituality and wellbeing was not unique to Shirley. Another backpacker told me about a course she took in Yunnan province called "The Blooming of Life", which encouraged her to

> *deeply explore and understand myself, discover life energy, heal and relieve tension, anxiety, criticism, pain, numbness, weakness, etc… and become the creator and leader of one's own life.*

Mei Ling, the photographer introduced in the previous section, said that she was interested in Folk Religion, but pointed out that it was a lot broader than traditions like Buddhism. All of this reflects a growing openness to alternative spiritual traditions in contemporary China, and an increasingly individualistic approach to spiritual cultivation and the good life that are offered by things like new age spirituality (like astrology & tarot cards) and the psych-boom.

The backpackers were often called into the Buddha Hall for the daily 7pm Buddhist studies sessions, during which they were exposed to Buddhist teachings presented by the monks and lay volunteers. While some professed Buddhism, many others raised their doubts. One backpacker decided that after a week or so, he did not want to go to the Buddha hall, and refused anyone's attempts to talk to him about religious topics, saying that he did not want to expose himself to 'brainwashing'. One evening I walked into an evening class in the Buddha Hall where a highly devout middle aged volunteer from within the system was sitting with a group of travellers, asking them in an urgent tone, whether "anyone does not yet believe in the principle of karma?". He continued "karma is the most important principle in the world, if you understand it then you can understand everything". The three travellers looked somewhat

blankly at him as he explained how understanding karma had helped him calm his emotions, improve his relationships, and ultimately helped his son get into a top university. On the whole they listened attentively, and sometimes asked probing questions. One backpacker asked why, if karma was true, did some good people suffer and some bad people enjoy their lives? Another backpacker asked why there should be such a focus on changing oneself if you already feel happy? Why should I have to admit there is something wrong with me first? In response, the Buddhist volunteer asked, 'you don't beat yourself up sometimes?'. Slightly confused by the question, she asked him to clarify, 'you mean, do I hit myself sometimes?'. He had meant it metaphorically to make a point about the necessity of repentance (*chanhui*), but Mama Wu, the manager of the temple, interjected saying that she did genuinely hit herself sometimes after making mistakes. The surprised look on the backpackers faces told a story of radically different outlooks on life, one that saw life as suffering to be overcome through many lifetimes of cultivation, while the other questioned that central premise of Buddhist soteriology, and the repentance practices that struck them as unnecessary self-flagellation. There were others who also held sceptical views about organised religion, and were critical of the wealth accumulated by temples in China. One volunteer said that she had chosen not to donate because of a rumour she had heard from another backpacker that the temple was very well off. Another backpacker made her critique of religion in an interview post fieldwork, claiming that she did not have religious beliefs, but instead only believed in herself (*xinwoziji*). She went on to say that

> *I just want to know the truth about the universe. Religion is just a road to the truth, a shortcut that many people take. I just want to get to where I want to be by exploring myself. The most important thing is to remove limiting beliefs and get out of The Truman Show. And to a large extent, religion is like another Truman world.*

As we see here, many of these travellers were sceptical about the underpinning premises of Buddhist soteriology, and also tended to be sceptical of organised religion, preferring taking their own personal paths through life rather unlike the Buddhist volunteers who saw themselves as walking along the Bodhisattva path laid out by Tanhua Temple.

Outside of the Buddha hall, there were plenty of opportunities for discussions throughout the day, during idle time between tasks, or on drives around the city. One day I was driving a few travellers and long term volunteers to the temple's new school in the suburbs when a debate unfolded about the value of travel. Mr Bo, a long term Buddhist volunteer, said that he had previously been interested in travel, but after studying Buddhism, he realised that everywhere is the same. An elderly Buddhist volunteer Mr Shu concurred,

adding that he had been to Thailand and America, and really it was just three things; people, things and food, just like anywhere else. Meanwhile the travellers argued that by seeing new places and new things you come to a deeper understanding of yourself, and that travel was akin to a form of cultivation. The debate was brought to a somewhat abrupt end when another volunteer asked whether there were any good clubs for dancing in the city. Suffice to say that the backpackers were far more interested in the otherness of the city than the Buddhist volunteers, who saw it as yet another challenging condition to overcome in their cultivation. The travellers however saw the alterity of travel as fundamental to realising their own values, as described in the previous section.

Engagements between these young backpackers and the more elderly Buddhist volunteers revealed stark generational differences, in particular regarding the matter of the children at Tanhua Temple's orphanage. During their stays the backpackers spent much of their time playing with the children, assisting in their afterschool education, and even donated money for the purchase of school uniforms. Many of them reflected on the particularly "Chinese" style of parenting of Mama Wu and other older volunteers. After living together for a few weeks, Tom said that the attitudes and actions of these older volunteers were deeply familiar to him from his own family context, but seeing a foreigner within such a context made him realise how strange it was. It is telling that even with starkly different understandings about the treatment of the children, the backpackers were also able to remain almost entirely amicable with the Buddhist volunteers. Although many of them saw travel as a way to escape the confines of traditional family values, which they had rebelled against in their youth, they were also so familiar with the type of miserly, tough love parenting that it could seem innocuous to them. While they never made explicit, antagonistic critiques, they did embody their own approach through direct engagements with the children. In fact, during a chat with three backpackers outside of the temple, they said that if it wasn't for the children they would never have come in the first place, and that if they returned it would be to see them again. However their critiques were also balanced with a healthy serve of realism. Tianwai compared the education they were offering to these students with the education system in China, saying that the Buddhist content was like the Chinese Communist Party's political indoctrination, but that beyond that they were still teaching them valuable skills like reading and writing. Ziheng, the ex policeman summed it up by saying:

> *It's like if someone donated 500 RMB to charity, and you are standing there saying why didn't you donate 1000 RMB? Although there are things that make me uncomfortable here, I don't feel in a position to criticise it.*

Both Ziheng and Tianwai used the term *lunxin bulunji*, a Confucian idea that they said means we should take interest in people's actions over their intentions. This is arguably a consequence of valuing individuality and autonomy, which leads to accepting that people will have different values, and that one should remain somewhat circumspect about judging them too harshly.

In sum, backpackers who came to Tanhua Temple were made aware of this possibility by fellow travellers and online content that made the temple into a node in the 'travel sphere'. Comparing two Youtube videos, one taken by a long term traveller, and the other taken by an internet celebrity who had moved to Tanzania for the increased views associated with cultural difference, we see a spectrum of more and less critical engagements within this virtual sphere. In the backpackers' various approaches to religion, their debates about travel with the Buddhist volunteers, and their critiques of the temple, we see the reflexive, and individualistic attitude that I have been describing throughout this chapter. Finally, while they did not radically reject the Temple's project, their presence did raise questions for the Buddhist volunteers and monks, and exposed them to different ideas about religion, travel and engaging with difference more broadly.

7.4 Conclusion: Backpackers and Chinese Civil Society

This chapter has presented an ethnography of the backpackers who came to Tanhua Temple, describing the Chinese context they emerged from, their unique approach to travel, and their engagements with the temple. I have argued that these individuals are responding to the changing socioeconomic conditions and increasingly pluralistic moral landscape of contemporary China with an individualistic pursuit of civic intimacy through travel and related practices like volunteering and online content production. Of course the backpackers discussed here represent a small minority of Chinese young people, however the lives they lead attract widespread attention in China today, as many more engage vicariously online with these new lifestyles and the values of autonomy and individuality that they represent. To conclude, I want to ask how we might understand the role of these backpackers in the broader context of Chinese society by bringing this chapter into conversation with the decades old debates about Chinese civil society (Weller, 1999).

Along with rapid economic growth, post-Maoist China also witnessed an 'associational revolution' (Salamon, 1994) as the rise of businesses, organisations and not-for-profits led many scholars to write about the emergence of a Chinese civil society.

Most of this literature has focused on non-governmental organisations that look like civil society organisations from Western contexts, especially environmental protection groups (Li & Teets, 2024). However the framework of civil society has also come under theoretical scrutiny in the Chinese context, particularly the Tocquevillian assumption that civil society organisations will eventually lead to the erosion of authoritarianism (Ning & Palmer, 2024). Some argue that this proves Chinese civil society does not exist, or is not strong enough to challenge the state, while others have argued that we need to rethink our definitions of a civil society. Robert Weller's comparative study of the PRC and Taiwan, *Alternative Civilities* (1999), argues that looking for Western-style civil society institutions in China blinds us to the ways in which existing social structures, often informal and local, create the conditions for a formal and national civil society, as proven by the comparative case of Taiwan. This is partly a semantic debate about the meaning of civil society, a term that has a history almost as long as Western thought itself, stretching from Ancient Rome, right through to the most important political and social thinkers of the last two centuries. Unsurprisingly, this has ladened it with significant conceptual baggage (like cosmopolitanism in Chapter 2), leading Metzger (2001) to identify three definitional categories; sociological, political and classical. Sociological definitions tend to focus on qualitative features of what Habermas (1989) refers to as a public sphere, an intermediate associational realm of autonomous voluntary groups that function to 'protect or extend their interests or values' (White et. al., 1996:p.3). Political definitions, like the one critiqued in the Chinese case, have often tied civil society to the development of liberal democracies. Finally, classical definitions emphasised the normative connotations of civility, imbuing the term with a moral valence. While some authors have pointed to the backpacking scene as evidence of the emergence of a Chinese civil society (Lim, 2009), given the polysemic nature of this concept, it is worth interrogating exactly what that means. The question becomes twofold, firstly we should ask the empirical question of how backpackers and the 'travel scene' fit into the broader Chinese society, and secondly the theoretical question about what kind of language we should use to describe these phenomena.

To begin with, based on the ethnography presented here, neither political or sociological definitions of civil society seem to be met. While individual travellers may hold more or less critical views of China's political system, it is hard to mount the argument that they are eroding authoritarianism, at least in the short term, and as such do not meet the criteria for civil society on a political level. Furthermore, given the travel scene is made up of diffuse networks of individuals, coming together momentarily in youth hostels, online networks and through personal relationships, it lacks formal institutional representation, and

as such also fails to meet sociological definitions of civil society. To the contrary, many of the backpackers who came to Tanhua Temple embodied what Ning and Palmer (2024) call an "anti-political moral ideal":

> *groups that believe in idealized, free and pure social relations as an intrinsic value (see also Yan 2009a), and dream of achieving this utopian condition not through ideology, abstract principles, activism, plans or strategies, but through the immediate realization of authentic relations of emotional intimacy.*

While a politically active, national level associational civil society is impossible in China's political system, 'a "virtual" civil sphere can be said to exist, of moral and civil discourses" that 'circulate through all types of media, ranging from classical literature to pop culture, official propaganda, the Internet, social media, and so on' (Ning & Palmer, 2024). This virtual civil sphere, they argue, can be "actualized in certain social spaces, microcivil spheres within specific and interstitial locations". The backpackers discussed in this chapter engaged with the travel scene in a way that fits with this understanding of a virtual civil sphere, both through the production and consumption of online content and in their offline travel and volunteering practices. Tanhua Temple also became a sort of microcivil sphere, one that was not exclusively a loci of backpacker subculture like youth hostels or travel websites, but instead a space in which various groups, including the Buddhist volunteers, local workers, and children already constituted a polyphonous set of perspectives.

Lastly, it is worth considering one alternative reading of the ethnography in this chapter from the voluntourism literature. Mary Mostafanezhad's (2014) monograph about volunteering in Northern Thailand describes sentimentality as a key framing for voluntourism, as volunteers develop cosmopolitan empathy, a "humanitarian gaze" and "geographies of compassion" (2012) that have served to depoliticise global justice agendas. She concludes that "the sentimental response to structural inequality is insufficient", and that while "the affective and sentimental exchange is meaningful… it also inadvertently reframes structural inequality as a question of individual morality". In other words, volunteer tourism is "just one of many examples of how capitalism has cleverly accommodated social resistance" (Mostafanezhad, 2014). It must be said that this conclusion does not come easily, and is constantly caveated with acknowledgements that the book is not a wholesale rejection of the volunteering communities she engaged with. It seems to me that both of these insights are important, and at its root, the tension between travel and volunteering as individually meaningful but also incapable of bringing about structural change is really produced by shifting between two normative ethical theories. In the mid 20th century, philosophers

including Elizabeth Anscombe and Phillipa Foot, drawing on Aristotle, argued that ethics were about the development of individual virtues, criticising existing consequentialist theories like utilitarianism which says an act is ethical if and only if it maximises utility (normally pleasure or happiness) for the greatest number. This move is precisely that which is critiqued by Mostafanezhad, arguing that a virtue ethics framing obscures the consequences of structural injustices that are perpetuated by volunteer tourism. This structuralist, Marxist inflected critique of neoliberal inequalities shift us from a virtue ethics framing to a consequentialist one that is less concerned with the moral character of the people involved, but in the outcomes of their actions. For a virtue ethicist, travel and volunteering can be morally important because individuals can have transformative experiences through travel, which can be formative in developing their character, which in turn can shape important life choices regarding their occupation, social circles, and values. The consequentialist approach may not deny these marginal benefits, but would question whether the entire system is working in a way that would maximise the utility for the greatest number.

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to resolve this tension, I suggest that my own interlocutors were thoroughly wedded to the virtue ethics approach, and understanding why reveals an important fact about countercultural movements in China. The backpackers at Tanhua Temple have long been exposed to socialist inflected ethics of self-sacrifice, traditional social expectations to get married and raise a family, and market based discourses of human quality and efficiency. All of these discourses share a sense of future oriented consequentialism that reduces the meaning of particular individual action to their contribution to the family, nation or company. The focus on cultivating genuine, spontaneous relations in the present without any particular goal or outcome in mind can be read as a rejection of the future orientation of developmentalist, traditionalist or revolutionary ethics. I argue that given the pluralistic nature of ethical discourses in contemporary China, and the inability of one ethical code to fully convince these backpackers, they see individualism as the only rational response. This is not the selfish individualism of the early reform and opening up period, and is also not the individualism of self-development and human quality that are forced on young people in the school and workplace, but instead an ethics of self-discovery and autonomy. While these are often presented as highly idiosyncratic and unique, the initial intent to move beyond the constraints of politics, tradition and the markets of mainstream society is widely shared. By branding these trends as politically impotent, we risk missing an important countercultural current in Chinese society in which people are looking for alternative ways of living in the world together.

Conclusion

Religious, Economic and Linguistic Differences in the Chinese Buddhist Missionary Movement in Africa

8.0 Introduction: Contested Comparisons

This thesis has explored the ways people dealt with the problem of pluralism at Tanhua Temple, and has done so by taking a thick comparative approach that describes the different ways people map their social worlds, communicate across differences, and pursue the motivations that drive them. By analysing the contrasting comparative frames that people brought to Tanhua Temple, I have attempted to explain the sources of friction, fractures and fusions that shaped social life. So far these relationships have been analysed in relative isolation, with each chapter describing a wide range of social outcomes from cooperation and conviviality to competition and conflict. In this conclusion I turn to the broader patterns that emerge across this diverse set of relations. If the metanarratives of neocolonial exploitation and South-South-cooperation are ill-equipped to describe all aspects of social life at Tanhua Temple, how can we better characterise these relations?

I argue that we can see Tanhua Temple as a place characterised by its *contested comparisons*, or in other words, it is a place that is framed and reframed by different actors in different ways with different outcomes. There was no single Tanzanian or Chinese response to Tanhua Temple, but instead there were multiple comparative lenses through which Tanhua Temple was viewed. This thesis has mapped many approaches to engaging with differences at Tanhua Temple, from the core of the Buddhist System to its engagements with a wide range of Chinese and Tanzanian people and institutions. I described the temple as having a monist value structure, but one that encountered a plurality of comparative framings from others who mapped the field differently, communicated in different ways, and were working towards different purposes. However, as I will argue in this conclusion, the problem of pluralism comes in many guises, and Tanhua Temple was far better equipped to deal with pluralism in a Chinese context than a Tanzanian one. This conclusion will compare the way Tanhua Temple negotiated religious, economic and linguistic differences between their Tanzanian and Chinese interlocutors, pointing out the different distributions of friction, fracture and fusion across these relationships. While its engagements with Chinese people and institutions were grounded in well established comparative framings (like the Buddhist System, or the merit

model), engagements with Tanzanians presented new framings that often caused tensions, conflicts and sometimes compromises. While the strategies used to negotiate religious, economic and linguistic differences were diverse, in all cases we see important differences between the Chinese and Tanzanian experiences of Tanhua Temple.

In this conclusion I also make further lateral comparisons to other Sino-African Buddhist institutions[57], which allows me to think about the place of the broader Buddhist missionary movement in the context of Global China. While China's growing economic and political presence in Africa is an essential condition for the emergence of these institutions, these spaces also facilitated a much more diverse set of engagements across differences than we find in purely political and economic institutions. Rather than seeing Chinese Buddhist organisations as entirely fused with China's broader presence in Africa, we should see them as places where new frictions and fractures emerge. Just as Christian mission spaces in the colonial era were sites of complex negotiations between the metropole and the local context, the friction, fusion and fracturing of social relations at Tanhua Temple were neither reducible to macro-level forces (China-Africa), nor were they reducible to the micro-level interactions of individuals[58]. Instead they played out on a bridge between these two scales, as a Buddhist System engaged with various different framings of religious, economic, and linguistic differences brought into the picture by a wide range of Chinese and Tanzanian interlocutors. While this moves us towards some general consequences of these contrasting comparisons, this is not a static picture. If this thesis has shown anything it is that social relations in Sino-African Buddhist spaces involve contested comparisons, and in these plural spaces any one type of engagement across difference can always encounter the possibility of its own negation or transformation.

8.1 Dealing with Religious Difference

The first three chapters of this thesis described the way Tanhua System dealt with its internal and external relationships with other Buddhists, and then how this very same system was reshaped in its engagements with James and the local congregation. By comparing these two sets of engagements we see varying levels of friction, fracture and fusion across the different differences that were being negotiated. The relative ease with which Tanhua Temple

[57] This is based on my own fieldwork visits to these sites, and also draws on discussions with scholars who participated in the seminar series: "Frontiers of Faith: Religion in the China-Africa Space": Accessible at: https://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/research/networks/frontiers-of-faith/#1-programme-2024-2025

[58] I thank Mike Degani for this point about the scale of analysis.

and other organisations negotiated religious differences internally and among fellow Buddhists contrasts with their challenges they faced when introducing Buddhism to Africans. This explains why after three decades of Chinese Buddhist missionary movement in Africa, there has not been any sizable local Buddhist sangha emerge from these institutions.

Chapter 1 showed the Buddhist system to have remarkable persistence over time and space, surviving a collapse of the broader Longquan system and establishing a successor system in Tanzania. The management of differences within and beyond the system required a well thought out approach to the problem of pluralism and the associated problems of mapping, communication and purpose. The system itself was mapped out by the Abbot according to the model of the Longquan system, with its broad base of Buddhist studies groups under the leadership of the Dharma Protection Team. The system dealt with differences in different ways at different scales, taking an open and seeker-friendly approach during online Q&A sessions and in Buddhist studies groups, while creating an internally hierarchical and competitive management of differences within the DPT. Unlike the Tanzanian congregation, the problem of communication did not involve transcending linguistic differences, but it did require the development of a scalable online-offline hybrid system of study groups that could distribute the Abbot's talks to thousands of supporters in China. The Abbot had a very clear idea of his Chinese followers' different needs, speaking about the subtle differences between types of devotees (those who were interested in 'doing' *zuo*, 'cultivating' *xiu* or 'studying' *xue*). While the relationships within the system were on the whole very cooperative, they also sometimes produced friction and fracture, as seen in the internal power struggle over the DPT. However, the system was well placed to deal with these tensions through internal democratic processes. Another strategy to smooth over the potential fractures of loyalties to particular monastics was a rule against the comparison of the relative virtues of monastics. Within the system's teachings there was an emphasis on not engaging in divisive speech (*liangshe*) that turned people against each other, and internal sectarianism was frowned upon. Members of the system were explicit about these problems, and warned against these kinds of comparison in order to avoid some of their fracturing potentials. In sum, the Buddhist system was a comparative tool fine tuned to manage the differences between its thousands of members, and it was this structure that allowed Tanhua Temple to develop its operations in Dar es Salaam.

The other Chinese and Taiwanese Buddhist institutions on the continent are also supported by their own transnational networks, and in doing so have developed their own ways of dealing with the problem of pluralism. These institutional histories of these

organisations also feature fractures like the collapse of the Longquan System, along with the fusion of new networks in the broader Buddhist assemblage to support their activities. Take for example the first Chinese Buddhist monastery in Africa, Nan Hua Monastery that was founded in 1992 by the Taiwanese Buddhist system Fo Guang Shan during their global expansion. Their temple in Bronkhorstspruit, South Africa, is still a branch belonging to the broader Fo Guang Shan system based near Kaohsiung, Taiwan. However, Venerable Hui Li, the monk in charge of FGS's operations in Africa ended up leaving the organisation to start the Amitofo Care Centre (ACC) in the mid 2000s. This was in part due to disagreements about purpose, with Hui Li favouring continued construction of schools and orphanages, while the headquarters saw these as increasingly unbearable costs. Without the support of the FGS system, Hui Li now relies income from performing rituals for his own Buddhist networks, particularly Chinese speaking devotees in Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Taiwan. One of these rituals is the Water and Land Dharma Assembly (*shuilu fahui*), which tends to take place in large hotels, and requires 108 monastics and hundreds of lay devotees. The income generated from these rituals goes towards funding his ecosystem of schools and orphanages across the continent. In this way he was able to draw on his connections with the South East Asian Buddhist assemblage much like the Longquan System did in the 1980s, overcoming fractures within the system by fusing together new networks to support his new organisaton in Africa.

In comparison to the negotiation of differences among Chinese speaking Buddhists, the leaders of Tanhua Temple and other Sino-African institutions were far less aware of the subtleties of African contexts, and found it difficult to communicate across linguistic and religious differences. In order to frame Buddhism in a local context, Venerable Xianhong relied on his charismatic local leader James, bringing another person's comparative framing of these relations into the picture. James was steeped in knowledge of Tanzania's main religious traditions, and had become a persuasive orator at the coffee spots of Dar es Salaam. His cosmopolitan approach to engaging across religious differences led him to run one full year of Sunday sessions, which included the first refuge ceremony for locals who became his core volunteers. During the weekly Sunday sessions James mapped out the religious differences in the room through notation as he clarified the similarities, differences, commensurabilities and incommensurabilities between Buddhism and the local context. The problem of communication was dealt with through translation, which was a controlled crossing of linguistic boundaries, but also served to open up a Swahili language space for Buddhism to be reframed in, without the direct involvement of the Abbot. While James and

the Abbot had one overlapping purpose, namely to develop Tanhua Temple's local congregation, it was also true that James saw this as an opportunity for him to develop his rhetorical skills and build his own following for his future endeavours. As Anna Tsign notes in *Friction* (2005), 'There is no reason to assume that collaborators share common goals", pointing out that "in transnational collaborations, overlapping but discrepant forms of cosmopolitanism may inform contributors, allowing them to converse—but across difference" (p.16). Just as "African teachers were the key actors of missionary expansion" in the first half of the 20th century (Hölzl, 2016), without James' comparative work there would have been no local congregation. It is telling that since James stopped teaching at the temple they have seen a steep drop off in local attendees. While historical records tend to obscure the role of local mediators, this ethnographic account reveals their crucial role framing and reframing of religious difference in mission spaces.

The only other large-scale attempt to spread Buddhism among African adults was the Buddhist seminary that ran at Nan Hua Temple from 1994 to 2011 (Orsborne, 2025). Initially taking students from the Congo in West Africa, and then from Tanzania and Malawi, the program developed into a 3-year degree similar to those taught at Fo Guang Shan's university in Taiwan. After an initial focus on the Chinese language, the course covered Buddhist conduct, liturgy, philosophy and sutra studies, along with computer skills. As an academic program, it sought to negotiate the problem of pluralism through notation, but did so in Chinese. Matthew Orsborn, a Buddhist studies scholar from New Zealand who was also in attendance as a student in 2000 recounted the frictions caused by the intense monastic discipline required of students. This led to conflicts between students and staff, including mass walk outs. Of the 23 who started the course in the year 2000, 12 were left by the end of the first year, and by the third year they were down to four, with some being expelled for 'nocturnal adventures', one tragically dying from illness, and others who went to Taiwan. The aim of the program was to cultivate an African monastic community and build temples around Africa, but its closure in 2011 was a final fracture in the project that indicated the FGS headquarters had lost faith in its ability to succeed.

Sino-African Buddhist institutions have on the whole been circumspect about the possibility of converting adults, and as such have focused on children. Tanhua Temple's opening of a school in 2024 followed in the footsteps of the ACC, which now supports over 2000 children across seven large campuses in six countries. However after almost two decades of operation, these institutions have also not produced sizable African Buddhist communities. In the vast halls of the ACC campuses where students congregate for meals

three times a day, some students cross themselves after Buddhist prayers are recited and whisper their own prayers before eating. In Eswatini, their day begins with Buddhist chanting as it does at Tanhua Temple, after which they walk to the school buildings staffed by local teachers using the local curriculum, where they sing Christian hymns as they raise the national flag. This was similar to the situation at Tanhua Temple when the students were still attending a local public school which had compulsory religious education courses about Christianity and Islam for children of either faith. The children at Tanhua Temple seemed to choose their religion at school based on knowledge of their families religious affilitation (often clear from their names), or simply based on which class their friends were attending. While I have chosen to leave out much material concerning the children at Tanhua Temple due to concerns about consent, it can be noted that when asked in Swahili, most of the students would claim to be Christians or Muslims. During a meeting with senior students at the Malawi ACC where Hui Li was present, several of them professed the desire to eventually ordain as monastics, but having seemingly heard this before, Hui Li, ACC's founder, smirked and said, "let's see what you say in a few years!". At the ACC campuses the prayers have yet to be translated to local languages, and most are still chanted in Chinese. Suffice to say that there is still significant friction between what is perceived as a Chinese religion, and local religious identities, even when children grow up in these Buddhist institutions.

The development of a local congregation and Buddhist studies groups in Dar es Salaam reveals the different ways in which religious differences can be negotiated, and the way these shifting frames shape the friction, fusion and fractures between Tanhua Temple and its new local followers. At Tanhua Temple this involved bringing in a range of new comparative framings, beyond the discursive notations of James and the Abbot, but now including the local Buddhist groups around Dar es Salaam. I first described a shift in the comparative framing of this relationship in Chapter 2, when the cosmopolitan conversations led to a moment of ritual conversion, opening up a new ritualised mode of engagement across difference. In Chapter 3 I continued to describe the thickening of these relationships in their material, embodied, and spiritual forms through the distribution of Buddhist amulets, the development of intercultural responses to spirit possession, and consultations with the Abbot on questions of health, wealth and witchcraft. As a religion that has over 2000 years of encountering new cultural contexts, Buddhism was materially and conceptually well equipped to fit into the Tanzanian spiritual landscape, and Tanzanian religious traditions were also adept at integrating new spiritual forces. Here we see the relative ease with which

Chinese and Tanzanian people found ways to engage with each other's traditions, reflecting the shared but contested ground of polyontological pluralism. However, in Chapter 3 we saw cracks beginning to emerge, as expectations of patron-client relations on the Tanzanian side came into conflict with the temple's ascetic merit model described in Chapter 4. The friction and eventual fracturing of these relationships reflect a pattern that unfolded over a much longer time in the Christian missionary movement over a century earlier. While this has not yet led to an official independent African Buddhist institution, the groups that left Tanhua Temple could represent its beginning.

While conversions of the type described at Tanhua Temple were relatively rare, the polyontological mode of embodied, material and spiritual engagements were representative of a much more common mode of engaging across religious differences in Sino African Buddhist spaces. Unlike the formal inclusion of Tanzanians through the refugee ceremony, or the notation work of the Buddha hall, these engagements reveal Buddhism to be one commensurable force among many in an already diverse and competitive context. During a visit to the ACC campus in Eswatini I was told separately by senior students and Taiwanese staff about a spate of witchcraft attacks in 2019 that left a number of children with a severe limp. One of the senior students told us it was caused by an ex-staff member who used the blood of children to curse them after being fired. Of those who were affected, some were still dealing with this condition even at the time of our visit. Others had been cured with a combination of Buddhist remedies (the same used at Tanhua Temple), along with the assistance of a local pastor and traditional medicine practitioners, demonstrating a spiritual/medical pluralism that we saw among the local Buddhist groups in Chapter 3. On the second day of my visit, just as I was contemplating the meaning of these attacks, two students were struck with the exact same condition. This time the Taiwanese staff discovered the condition was also something these students had experienced at home, so they were sent to their relatives to rest for a few days. We later heard that they had made full recoveries, with the director explaining it was a problem with their ancestors, but that she didn't really understand, "it's complicated!". I concurred. Later that day three Taiwanese reporters arrived to film a TV program, and when one of their team vomited shortly after arriving, she said she was cursed too. These two examples suggest that the polyontological pluralism seen among Tanhua Temple's local groups is a feature of Sino-African spaces more broadly. There were many cases in which Chinese interlocutors in Dar es Salaam told me about engaging with local religious healers. One lay devotee who had been doing business for decades in Tanzania described inviting Christian and traditional healers to deal with witchcraft at her factory. Mr

Gao me about employing a traditional healer after a mining disaster in Zambia that led to the loss of several lives, saying that with his assistance they found the bodies that were unlocatable for weeks. Both him and his local partner mused over the possibility that his powers were really effective, and debated over whether to continue the monthly payments he had requested. Suffice to say that the polyontological grounding of engagement across difference, seen in cases of spirit possession, witchcraft, and spiritual remedies, are less likely to fracture under the pressure of pluralism, but instead thrive in the friction and fusion of diversity.

While friction, fusion and fracture were on display in all three of these chapters, we can also see how one mode of engagement across difference was dominant in each case. While the Tanhua System featured friction between hierarchy and inclusivity, and fractures did occur, these did not get in the way of continuing expansion of the system (exchange relations continuing). In the case of James' engagements with the temple we see a fusion of frames, as his own particular interests in engaging with Tanhua Temple were fused to the Abbot's desire to spread the Dharma to Tanzanians for the period of their cooperation. In the thickening and thinning of engagements with the local congregation we see friction leading to fracture, as the polyontological frame was replaced with the more contested framing of patron-client relations. The further cases mentioned indicate that these patterns are on display in many Sino-Tanzanian religious contexts. While China-Africa relations are normally spoken about in terms of macro-economic statistics and geopolitical power plays, this thesis reveals a very new set of engagements across religious differences that require their own analyses. As we will see in the following section, this is not only because they have distinct aims compared to other Sino-African institutions, but also because they are deeply entangled with them.

8.2 Dealing with Exchange Relations in Sino-African Buddhism

One of the central analytic puzzles in this thesis has been the complicated exchange relationships between Tanhua Temple and the various individuals and institutions it engaged with in Dar es Salaam. The analysis of these relations can help us see the way the Buddhist missionary movement fits into the broader Sino-African relationship. As we consider the perspectives of an even more diverse range of people and institutions we are also faced with a new set of comparative frames, and a new set of contrasting comparisons. Much like the above discussion of religious difference, Tanhua Temple experienced much more friction and

fracture in their relationships with local Tanzanian businesses, charities, and staff than they did with the Chinese diaspora in Dar es Salaam. Just as the Buddhist System was the temple's way of managing internal differences, the merit model was the broader value framing that structured the temple's exchange relations. The merit model is a comparative device in that it tracks the relative merits and demerits of action, and does so over time, which means that we can think about it the ways it mitigates the problems of comparison. The merit model identifies particularly fertile fields of merit to which resources should be directed (mapping), gives us a language to describe the types of exchange that produce merit and those that don't (communication), and establishes the production of merit as the cardinal value (purpose) behind these relations. Those who could align their actions with the merit model minimised friction, and were able to fuse their value frames with the temple's, but those who did not ended up embroiled in conflict that sometimes ended exchange relations.

The merit model rationalised Tanhua Tempe's exchange relations, and did so by making a strong distinction between merit production and market relations. On the higher level of merit production economic value was transformed into merit through charitable activities, but on the lower level of market transactions economic value was maximised in order to fund merit making activities. It is helpful to think about this value reversal in the language of comparison that I have developed in this thesis. In terms of the purpose of exchange, on the level of merit production (charity), giving away resources is the goal, but in on the lower level the aim was to maximise economic resources in order to later transform them into merit producing activities. So while the vegetables were haggled over in the market, the ultimate aim was not to sell them in a restaurant to produce economic profits, but to produce merit by giving this food to its residents with no direct expectation of return. These value shifts were signalled by communicative strategies, such as the gifting of an amulet to the seller of vegetables to reframe this market exchange in the language of gift exchange or a charitable donation. They also mapped out different actors involved in the exchange, like when Mama Wu and one salesman both rocked imaginary babies to tell eachother they needed to maximise their resources for the sake of their children.

These contested comparisons often produced friction, as they did when donations to a local orphanage that were initially framed as a free gift with no expectation of reciprocity came to be understood as a case of gift exchange and ultimately economic exploitation by the recipients. We also see tension in the critique of the temple by their local staff, which turned on the contrast between the temple's generosity in dealings with their local congregation and their seemingly harsh labour practices. Sometimes these frictions led to fracture, as they did

with the local staff when the temple chose to not renew all workers contracts at the end of my fieldwork, viewing the relationship as irrevocably oppositional (*duili*). In the case of Thomas we saw the possibility of fusing value frames, as he reframed his employment as volunteering without changing the material relationship. While the temple manager argued that the stipend was no different to his wage, the Abbot saw this reframing as changing the nature of the exchange from a market transaction to a merit producing one. Instead of demanding a wage, he was now volunteering his labour and being given a stipend. If exchange always involves a form of comparison, then we can think about the free gift as a limit at which point comparison (exchange) is no longer possible. Commodities are comparable, but the free gift (in this case religious volunteering) denies reciprocity, and as such is not something to be compared (see Laidlaw 2000). By shifting the grounds of comparison to the higher level of merit production, Thomas denied the problematic connection between his labour and a wage. Suffice to say that these contrasting comparisons were at the heart of the tensions, conflicts and compromises in social life at Tanhua Temple.

This analysis of the monist merit model can also help us theorise the exchange relations between Chinese business people, associations and institutions. In contrast to the friction and fracture that permeated exchange relations with Tanzanians, the merit model represented a value framing that already fused Buddhist ideas of value with the market economy in a Chinese context. From the temple's perspective, these institutions were supporting their merit making activities, and in doing so they were transforming economic value and business acumen into Buddhist merit. From the perspective of the business people, this did not mean they abandoned profit seeking, but were redirecting some of their profits and time into the merit economy. I also noted the perceived this-worldly benefits of merit production, including reputational benefits, winning favour with local actors, and improving the fortunes of their business operations. Much like the Buddhist system offered multiple answers to its followers' problems, the merit model was also malleable enough to be taken up by people who had very different understandings of the consequences of their engagements with Tanhua Temple. The relative ease with which these groups engaged with the temple is grounded in a long history of merchants supporting Buddhist monasteries in China. This dates back to its entrance along the silk road in the 1st century, when Buddhism represented a new framing of value for a Confucian society. While Confucianism mapped out a society in which merchants were ranked fairly lowly, Buddhism gave them a way to transfer their economic wealth into merit, prestige and spiritual attainment. However, much like lay-monastic relations in other renunciate traditions, this was never a complete

encompassment, but a partial fusion of the profit driven activities of the private sector and the temple's merit making activities. Instead of strong monism, this looks more like pluralism with stable levels that shift over time (Robbins, 2013), like when Mr Gao who volunteered at the temple for an extended time ultimately returned to the business world, opening a mine in Zambia. This was a pattern among Tanhua Temple's Chinese supporters in Dar es Salaam who moved in and out of the temple, and in doing so traversed the value reversal between merit and money over the course of their engagements with the temple.

The importance of these relationships at Tanhua Temple and in other Sino-African Buddhist institutions cannot be understated. The land for Tanhua Temple was provided by a Chinese business, and we saw the mediating role that three businessmen played in purchasing land for Puti Temple and opening a school in Chapter 5. This is even more evident in the case of the Shaolin System's cultural centre on the outskirts of Zambia's capital, Lusaka. Their bright red and yellow temple was constructed by the boss of Golden Peacock, a large Chinese firm present in many African countries. The temple is located (encompassed) within the walls of a large and mostly empty piece of land where there are plans for commercial developments. Displayed prominently at the entrance are advertisements for future luxury villas, factories for building materials, and a hospital. The plans to build a Shaolin centre on Zanzibar island in Tanzania are also linked to a 5-star Chinese hotel business who have offered them a piece of land next to their hotel.

However, not all Buddhist-business relationships are the same, and here we can see differing levels of friction, fusion and fracture across cases. At Shaolin temple in Zambia the company pays stipends for the monks, revealing the depth of integration or fusion between the values of the temple and their lay patron (*gongdezhu*). Tanhua Temple is the outlier on this front, coming from a particularly ascetic Longquan System that did not pay monastic stipends, and was always very clear that lay devotees would answer to the monastic community rather than the other way around. In fact, the boss of Golden Peacock had initially offered to provide land to Master Xianhong, however they had not been able to come to an agreement. Xianhong had made it clear that he required legal ownership to be transferred to the monks, complete control over the design of the temple, and all activities that happen on its grounds. Clearly the Shaolin monks have been much less demanding in their negotiations, displaying a greater willingness to fuse their Buddhist system to a wealthy patron. Xi Zu temple in Madagascar is also connected to Chinese business people on the island, and the same is true of ACC. While the specific nature of these relationships vary from case to case,

in general the Chinese and Taiwanese economic presence in Africa has created the conditions for these Buddhist institutions to emerge.

While these exchanges are framed by business people and Buddhists in the language of merit production, external observers have described this relationship in far more critical terms. Here we see the political dimensions of comparison, as the particular links between Chinese businesses with this emerging Buddhist field can provide evidence of neocolonial exploitation, and Buddhism's complicity with it. This is particularly important given the argument made by defenders of a more sanguine approach to China-Africa relations that there is no "military occupation by China in Africa, no chartered companies with exclusive or sovereign trading rights, no *religious proselytizing*— all things that typically accompanied colonialism over the past century or two" (Lee 2017 xi-xii, emphasis added). Two weeks after my oral defence, the Economist Magazine published Rachel Nuwer's extended investigation into ACC's Malawi branch that claims students had been recruited into the illegal wildlife trafficking industry run by Chinese criminals (Nuwer 2025). Her report, based on an undercover investigation, shows how Chinese criminal organisations allegedly infiltrated ACC through a local employee who gave students illegal goods to traffic around the country. ACC have yet to comment on these allegations, but this is not the first time an external observer has attempted to criticise its operations. Nicole Shafer's award winning documentary "Buddha in Africa" was shot at the same Blantyre ACC campus, and tells the story of one student who is torn between the pull of home and opportunities in Taiwan. The film also depicts a fight scene involving students and the martial arts instructor, and generally does not portray the institution in a positive light.

In the spirit of the thick comparative approach taken in this thesis, these are important perspectives to include in the picture, but it is worth thinking carefully about the comparisons they are making between Buddhism and the more sinister side of China-Africa engagements. In the first case ACC's relationship with Chinese criminal networks is exposed, although upon closer inspection it does not seem any of the Buddhists were privy to these engagements. The criminal networks were indeed making use of bilingual children raised in a Buddhist institution, but whether the leadership of ACC are actively complicit or passively negligent does matter for a nuanced understanding of this scandal. The critique of these missionary groups have also led to different sort of fracturing, this time with 'Western' observers, who are now viewed with much more suspicion at ACC making further research like that carried out by Yasmin Cho in Namibia very unlikely. In the case of Shafer's 2019 film, we also see a problem of mapping in the promotional materials where ACC is described

as a Chinese Buddhist organisation, not Taiwanese, framing it as a part of the PRC's growing global influence. This mapping involved questionable equivocation between Chinese and Taiwanese groups by a director who was at best unaware of the origins of the organisation, or at worst deliberately misleading audiences to promote their work. This is not to say these critiques are invalid, but a reminder that the actual connections between the religious and economic realms are multiple, and a thick comparative approach will give us a sense of perspective on these issues.

In sum, the Chinese business presence in Africa has created one of the necessary conditions for the emergence of this missionary movement. There is a great deal of synergy made possible by the value reversal built into the merit model, where the pursuit of profit can be momentarily encompassed within the production of merit and vice versa. While the missionary movement relies on the broader infrastructure of global China, it is certainly not reducible to it, and serves as an institution that can redistribute resources from the powerful to the weak. This tension between secular and religious teleologies was also present among the Christian missionaries, some of whom felt a deep "ambivalence regarding modern Western culture" and a "desire to escape from the rationalism, materialism, and urbanization" of their home societies. It is telling for example that the Abbot once remarked that he shared no common language with Chinese business people, and had very little to say to them. Suffice to say that Chinese business activity in Africa is a key condition for this missionary movement, but these relationships can also be a source of friction, fracture and fusion. Their ability to manage these contrasting comparisons, especially as they engage with local actors, will determine the future developments of this missionary movement.

8.3 Dealing with Linguistic & Cultural Difference

Alongside engagements across religious and economic differences, linguistic and cultural differences were sought out by the Chinese travellers and Tanzanian university who volunteered at Tanhua Temple. The Tanzanian students were learning Chinese at the Confucius Institutes wanted to improve their Chinese skills in order to find a job as translators, while the Chinese travellers were engaged across the same linguistic and cultural differences in the pursuit of civic intimacy and alternative lifestyles. In this section I will compare Tanhua Temple's engagements with these two groups, arguing that in doing so we can see the polysemic potential of mission spaces that can simultaneously function as a training ground for aspiring workers in a market economy, and also a haven of non-market

relations for countercultural travellers. I also describe the consequences of these engagements at Tanhua Temple, as the translators they trained entered the workforce, and the travellers produced online discussions that are shaping perceptions of China-Africa relations in China and beyond. By drawing on similar cases from the broader Sino-African Buddhist field, we can see engagements across linguistic differences as one of the most important impacts of this missionary movement.

While both of these groups displayed a cosmopolitan interest in engaging across differences, and did so as volunteers at Tanhua Temple, we can distinguish their approaches by thinking about how they deal with the problems of mapping, communication and purpose. Firstly, the Tanzanian mapping of Tanhua Temple was a mirror image of the Chinese, with the former seeing it as a foreign linguistic and cultural environment within a familiar one, while the latter saw it as a return to a familiar cultural context of China and their parents' generation in an otherwise unfamiliar cultural context. Secondly, in terms of their communication with the temple, some of the travellers engaged in debates with Buddhist residents, while others denied any attempt by them to speak about religious matters, calling it brainwashing. The translators had similarly diverse communicative strategies, from the highly interventionist to more passive approaches. While the Chinese travellers were communicating across a generational divide, the Tanzanians were communicating in a language that they had not yet entirely mastered which increased the potential for friction.

Finally, their divergent purposes reveal important structural inequalities that shape their engagements with Tanhua Temple. For the travellers, the purpose of their travel and volunteering at the temple was to the pursuit of civic intimacy and genuine experiences of difference. This meant rejecting the future facing values of the market, family and state, and pursuing alternative lifestyles that allowed them to experience genuine connections with people in the here and now. This attitude was described as a response to what Xiang Biao calls ‘suspension’ (Xiang 2021b), where people’s lives are put on hold for future gains as they take up work in factories away from family and friends. Many of the travellers I met had personally experienced the ‘involution’ of the Chinese workplace, and were seeking ways to reclaim the present at Tanhua Temple and beyond. In stark contrast, the Tanzanian university students' seemed to be in exactly such a state of suspension at Tanhua Temple, as they sacrificed the present and nearby for expected future gains. While the Chinese travellers were trying to escape white collar jobs, the Tanzanian university students desired them greatly. The fact that Tanhua Temple could simultaneously accommodate both groups is testament to its polysemic potential and the contested comparisons that structured social life there.

In terms of the consequences of these encounters, Tanhua Temple made more of a difference in the lives of Tanzanian university students than they did for Chinese travellers. As explained in Chapter 6, the translators faced an uphill battle gaining fluency in Chinese at the Confucius Institutes alone, and the temple provided one way to speed up that process. They developed a range of linguistic and interpersonal skills during their time at Tanhua Temple, along with connections with Chinese business people. While the spread of English through missionary schools can be viewed as part of what the Comaroff's called the "colonisation of consciousness" (1991), I argued that the Chinese language is unlikely to carry with it epistemic content that makes one more sympathetic to China. In fact, by encountering a diversity of Chinese speakers from the University classroom, to the temple and the workplace, these aspiring translators became increasingly aware of the complexities of China's engagement in Africa. This allowed them to make distinctions between big bosses and little bosses, or between the Abbot and the temple manager. As such they also developed a range of critical responses to the Sino-Tanzanian relationship. Here the temple is both contributing to the spread of the Chinese language, indirectly assisting the Confucius Institute in their aims, but at the same time producing bilingual individuals who became well paid and well informed translators who can intervene in Sino-Tanzanian spaces.

While the backpackers' experiences at Tanhua Temple were shorter and less life changing, their production of online content meant that they were key players in framing the China-Africa relationship at Tanhua Temple and beyond. Just as the Buddhist system was an online-offline hybrid entity, so was the world of the backpackers who used it to learn about potential places to visit, arrange travel plans and share their stories. Many of them produced content about Tanhua Temple, which turned it into a place to "check in" among Chinese young people. Travelling content producers are an important, albeit understudied subgroup in the China-Africa relationship. In a world where traditional news media is fast being replaced by reels and moments, these individuals are becoming increasingly relevant to the framing of China-Africa relations. The content produced about Tanhua Temple reveals the wide spectrum of approaches taken, from the production of promotional videos for use by the system, to more independent and even critical takes, to those that are less interested in Tanhua Temple than their own channel's storyline. The connections between content producers and other Sino-African Buddhist sites shows even more potential modes of collaboration. When a Shaolin monastic visited Tanhua Temple he was accompanied by two Chinese live streamers working in Zambia. The nun at Xi Zu temple who was in charge of receiving our party was previously an online cosmetics influencer. It is possible that many

people were first introduced to the temple through these online channels, and she continues to make content that reaches wide audiences. Chinese online content production in Africa has also been the source of great controversy since the BBC exposed Chinese businesses who were engaging across linguistic differences in a highly uneethical manner. This business model involved selling videos of shirtless African men who repeat messages on demand in Chinese (some including highly racist and offensive content) (Celina & Mhango, 2022). As these travellers and Tanhua Temple engage in this media landscape, they demonstrate very different approaches to engaging across linguistic and cultural differences, and as such represent an important current in China-Africa discourse.

Perhaps one of the most significant long term effects of the Sino-African Buddhist missionary movement will be in the field of education, and specifically in the spread of the Chinese language. Like Christian missions' role in education under colonial rule, Sino-African Buddhist spaces have already contributed to the linguistic abilities of hundreds, if not thousands of Africans. While I focused on university students in Chapter 5, the local employees also picked up Chinese proficiency and found jobs with Chinese employers, and many of the children at the temple already had the ability to interpret comfortably. Many of those trained at Nan Hua temple's seminary ended up using their linguistic skills in the private sector, but some also continued to contribute to Sino-African Buddhist institutions. For example, one of the graduates is now the co-director of the school, a role in which he speaks Malagasy, Chinese, and French. At the Shaolin temple in Zambia, their staff are made up of students who spent years living and studying at the Shaolin headquarters in Henan province, and are now fluent in Chinese.

Sino-African Buddhist educational institutions have also produced new types of friction, fracture and fusion in social relations. For example, during conversations with the senior students at the ACC in Eswatini they told us that the villagers around the campus thought they had a different accent now when they spoke Swazi. They also said that Swazi was their hardest exam, because the style they spoke among themselves was not "pure". The ACC school run by local staff has even implemented a rule that for one day a week only Swazi is spoken. While this has created friction with the local society, it has also allowed the ACC students to use Chinese amongst themselves to avoid the unwanted eavesdropping of their local teachers. Some of these students will eventually go to Taiwan for further studies, which will raise new questions about language and identity. In some cases these Sino-African Buddhist institutions have produced new Sino-African identities. The young man running ACC's Bodhi Park project near Cape Town is the son of two Taiwanese business people who

were key lay devotees at Nan Hua Temple during its early years. He grew up around Nan Hua Temple in South Africa, and while he speaks Chinese, he also identified as a South African. He recounted confronting his father about what he called his "racism", and said that he had a very different view of the world having grown up in South Africa. Suffice to say, these mission spaces will also be important sites for linguistic and cultural mixing, and the emergence of new Sino-African identities.

8.4 Conclusion: Continued Comparison

Tanhua Temple is a place of contested comparisons where people of very different backgrounds deal with the problem of pluralism in its many guises. This conclusion has described the way religious, economic and linguistic differences were dealt with at Tanhua Temple and in the broader Sino-African Buddhist sphere, which has demonstrated the polysemic and multifunctional nature of these mission spaces. Rather than being reducible to simple metanarratives, each of the relationships that unfolded at Tanhua Temple were framed and reframed in different ways by those involved. My own framing of this relationship has drawn on insights from comparison in anthropology, and led me to think about the way the field was mapped, how people communicated, and how they negotiated their different purposes. I have also tried to account for the tensions, conflicts and compromises that structured social life. In general there was less friction and fractures caused by the plurality of the temple's Chinese interlocutors, as we saw with the management of internal and external differences through the Buddhist System and the merit model. The temple was far less prepared to deal with pluralism in its Tanzanian context, and relied heavily on Tanzanian and Chinese collaborators to bridge this gap. This is also the case in other Sino-African Buddhist institutions, where the religious, economic and linguistic differences have presented challenges for all involved. Having said that, mission spaces like Tanhua Temple are not reducible to one type of engagement across differences, and shifting framings of these exchanges can produce a wide range of intended and unintended consequences. Tanhua Temple is less than a decade old, and the Chinese/Taiwanese Buddhist missionary movement on the continent is not much older. As these religious spaces continue to establish themselves, I expect new friction, fracture and fusion will emerge along the Sino-African frontier.

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