

## *Lay Buddhism in Contemporary China: Social Engagements and Political Regulations\**

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### *Abstract*

Lay Buddhism is situated at the center of intersecting power relationships between politics and religion, and between sangha and laity. The understanding of its evolution is fundamental to explore the logic of the recomposition of the whole Buddhist landscape in contemporary China. Based on historical materials and fieldwork, this article examines the organizational form, social participation, and political space of lay Buddhism over the past century. In the first half of the 20th century, new intellectual and economic elite Buddhists renewed their mobilization modalities, deeming their participation in the building of the Chinese modern state and society as an accumulation of religious merits. After 1949, under the policy of state corporatism that aims to control and use sangha Buddhism, lay Buddhism was extremely marginalized. This lasted long following the 1980s. In the ongoing Buddhist revival, lay Buddhism has much less political power for development than sangha Buddhism, since the post-Mao

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communist state consistently tries to limit the religious mobilization outside of official frameworks. However, since the end of the 20th century, many new forms of lay Buddhism have emerged in the PRC under the influence of transnational Buddhist organizations based on overseas Chinese societies. Such diversification and globalization of lay Buddhism has created a challenge for both the authority of sangha and the efficiency of religious policy.

If we define “lay Buddhists” (居士 *jushi*) as lay people who have at least partly accepted Buddhist worldviews and occasionally participated in Buddhist activities,<sup>1</sup> we might find that “lay Buddhism” (居士佛教 *jushi fojiao*) in China could date back to almost the same time as the introduction of Buddhism into China. With its clear self-identity and independent values, lay Buddhism did not appear until much later and has since become a kind of social force. Some scholars believe it was not until the Song dynasty that “popular Buddhism” or “lay Buddhism,” in contrast to “elite Buddhism” and “Sangha Buddhism,” began to rise.<sup>2</sup> Lay Buddhism, with its philosophical contrasts to Buddhism, may have sprouted in the late Ming.<sup>3</sup> With their lack of religious exclusivity, which is so common in Chinese culture, lay Buddhists in China have long embraced Buddhism without much distinction to their religious identity. To our knowledge,<sup>4</sup> “The Records of Lay Buddhists on the Transmission of the Lamp” (居士分燈錄 *jushi fendeng lu*), compiled by a lay Buddhist called Zhu shi’en during the late Ming, might be the first confirmation of the identity of lay Buddhists ever recorded. For perhaps the first time, it identified “lay Buddhists” as lay people contributing to Buddhism and recorded 110 lay Buddhists’ biographies. Moreover, it even borrowed the terminology of “Transmission of the Lamp” (燈錄 *deng lu*) as its title, which is believed to refer to biographies of eminent Chan monks and nuns. Henceforth, similar historical narratives of lay Buddhism have never died up.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, we could still easily point out that lay Buddhist beliefs and practices have long been kept on a personal level and have never formed a sizeable social movement. Even though lay Buddhists occasionally participate in collective Buddhist activities—such as Dharma Assembling and making donations and pilgrimages—these activities were primarily organized by the sangha.

At the end of the 19th century and during the first half of the 20th, both the roles and modalities of lay Buddhism were profoundly