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SHAOLIN TEMPLE IN THE MIDST OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: TRANSFORMATION OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN A CHINESE MONASTIC COMMUNITY¹

Abstract: This article explores the continuity and transformation that characterized everyday life within the Shaolin Temple amidst the Covid-19 pandemic in China. It reveals the emergent mechanisms that enabled the monastic community to maintain its core religious life during the initial five-month quarantine. The study is based on the data collected during my two-and-a-half-year long anthropological fieldwork in the Temple, which included the period of the outbreak of epidemic and the subsequent isolation. Being caught in the midst of the full quarantine in a Buddhist monastery in China is a unique research experience, which has not been reported in literature. The analysis of the Shaolin Temple case shows that when the socio-cultural transformations jeopardize the reproduction of the core daily life of a relatively closed community, new internal initiatives and mechanisms are produced to safeguard, sustain, and promote the community's basic means of survival and identity reproduction. The study also shows that the community's trust in the monastic leadership's capacity to maintain health safety enables its members to direct their practical consciousness and agency toward sustaining the religious and ontological underpinnings of daily monastic life that are foundational to their communal existence.

Keywords: Shaolin Temple, Covid-19, everyday life, crisis management, China

Introduction

This paper examines the key factors that facilitated the resilience demonstrated by the Shaolin Temple community during the early stages of the Covid-19 epidemic in China. The emphasis of this analysis lies in identifying the key mechanisms—

1 This article resulted from research on the project no. 177017, supported by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

both formal and informal—that enabled the community to adhere to government guidelines, safeguard the well-being of its members, and sustain its religious practices. While the case study highlights the centrality of both interpersonal trust and trust in institutional authority, it does not operationalize these forms of trust as specific practices. From January 23 to June 22, 2020, the Shaolin Temple became a closed community, implementing strict government anti-epidemic measures. Authors from various social and human sciences question whether different levels of government collaborated with the wider society and how the citizen self-organized initiatives contributed to the fight against the Covid-19 epidemic in China. This case study shows a close collaboration between the State and the Shaolin Temple and substantiates the importance of social trust in times of crisis. The question of social trust has been elaborated upon by numerous contemporary scholars, including Fukuyama (2020), Siegrist and Zingg (2014), Ristić, Pajvančić-Cizelj and Čikić (2020), Wu (2020) and Ortiz-Ospina (2016). However, the fieldwork also reveals that the successful local implementation of official measures was significantly reinforced by the monastic community's self-organized initiatives, which aimed to simultaneously ensure the safety of its members and sustain the religious life of the community. This research investigates how external imperatives and self-imposed obligations drove various changes in the monastic existence, including organizational frameworks, interpersonal dynamics, and daily activities. The study takes into account the specific variables—such as the Temple's existing scale, communal ethos, relative insularity, and spiritual commitment—that contoured the community's adaptive maneuvers. Significant emphasis is placed on examining how community members' emerging attempts to adapt their routines are intricately linked with sustaining a unified communal narrative, and the critical role that trust in the monastic leadership plays in shaping this dynamic.

The article is a contribution to the research of daily life and China's early response to the Covid-19 epidemic. Shaolin is at the same time a grassroots institution and one of the most important national religious institutions. This means that within daily life the Shaolin leadership responds to the needs and initiatives of lay and monastic Buddhist communities and to the requirements and demands of the State. It is also engaged in a diversity of activities tied to religious, cultural as well as diplomatic aspects of the Chinese state. This study of a Buddhist monastic community response to the Covid-19 health crisis is based on long-term fieldwork which includes a five-month quarantine period.

The historical and present significance of Shaolin Temple

The Shaolin Temple (少林寺, Shǎolín Sì) is located at the foot of Mount Song, one of the renowned sacred mountains of China, and administratively belongs to Dengfeng County of Henan Province. According to historical records, the Shaolin Temple was established in the nineteenth year of the Northern Wei

Dynasty (495 CE) by Emperor Xiaowen to accommodate the Indian monk Batuo, also known as Buddhahadra, making it one of the first Buddhist monasteries in China. The Temple nurtures the cultural heritage preserved and developed throughout its 1,500-year long history. In 2010, UNESCO designated the Temple as a world heritage site. Shaolin is the birthplace of both Chan Buddhism and a specific form of martial art internationally known as the Shaolin kung fu².

The Temple's position in society is unique because it is one of the most prominent religious and cultural institutions in China, being deeply embedded in its grassroots but also well-aligned with the current policies of the central government of China. The Temple plays an important role in the China's Open-Door Policy. Its well-developed relations with the Buddhist communities around the world enable Chan Buddhism to serve as a diplomatic tool while the fame of Shaolin kung fu allows its integration into global popular culture. The cultural heritage of the Temple has been providing the ground for the educational, scientific and publishing projects its leadership began to undertake two decades ago. The Temple's primary sources of income are from tourist entrance fees to the Songshan Scenic Area, donations from lay Buddhists, and from the self-supported projects that comply with the laws and regulations of the state and religious precepts.

Methodological approach

Prior to the outbreak of the epidemic, I had already been engaged in conducting my doctoral fieldwork in the Temple, focusing on the relationship between the Shaolin martial arts and Chan Buddhism. That research began in April 2018 and ended in August 2020³. Consequently, I was a participant observer during the entire quarantine period. This fieldwork research was based on qualitative anthropological methods (Dewalt and Dewalt 1998; Vučinić Nešković 2013). It included different types of observations, interviews, conversations and discussions in small groups. Living in the Temple guest area (锤谱堂 *Chuí pǔ táng*) and attending the kung fu program for foreign students enabled me to fully participate in the activities which were the focus of my research as well as those activities which constitute the everyday life of the monastery. Participant-observation allowed me to study the internal affairs of the Temple during the time of quarantine and the community members' experience and understanding of the crisis. I also applied the methodological concept of „thick participation” which implies that cultural knowledge is first noted in the body of the anthropologist, only to later be externalized as visual or textual data for analysis (Samudra 2008, 667).

2 For more information about the history of the Shaolin Temple, see Shi 2013, Shi 2014, Shahr 2008, and Lu. 2019.

3 The doctoral dissertation was defended on November 12th 2021. For full content of the dissertation, see Nešković 2021.

The main fieldwork material for this article was gathered through formal and informal interviews conducted both in-situ (during the quarantine) and online (one year later).⁴ As a female and a nonpermanent member of the community, my movement around the Temple was somewhat restricted by the rules of monastic discipline that apply to all Buddhist temples. This also meant that I performed the interviews in the Temple offices or in the common space in which the monks gathered. The interviews with the monks were conducted in the Chinese language, which required both my proficiency in spoken Putonghua and verification of my translations by Serbian sinologists. Furthermore, I gathered data on the overall epidemic situation in China from existing scientific literature, local news, official Chinese government announcements, and the World Health Organization reports that emerged during and after my fieldwork.

In order to understand the narrative of the monastic community on the intertwining of the official epidemic measures with the Temple self-organized initiatives, I asked the community representatives three major questions: (1) What kind of prevention and protection measures were introduced during the five-month isolation? (2) How did the Temple leadership organize the daily activities of its community members? and (3) What changes did they experience in their daily lives during the quarantine period?

Theoretical framework

In analyzing the activities of the Shaolin monastic community across multiple levels of governance, from local to national, I utilize the theoretical framework developed by Gerstein (1987), Collins (1987), and Spasić (2004). This framework advocates against treating any structure as inherently micro or macro. Rather, it suggests that micro processes inherently contain elements of macro structures and can evolve over time and space to contribute to macro processes. In this context, I conceptualize the Shaolin Temple as a grassroots religious institution that integrates official governance directives with both its collective community-organized initiatives and the emergent individual actions of community members. Within this theoretical framework, the Temple's self-organized, internal initiatives, aimed at sustaining the continuity of daily life in times of health crises, are classified as „actions”, following Goffman's approach (Goffman 1969; Handler 2012, 182). These actions, which deviate from the community's regular routine, serve as indispensable „survival mechanisms” (Giddens 1984) in preserving daily life amid significant disruptions (Heller

4 The *in situ* conversations and group discussions, carried out continuously during my stay in the Temple, are embedded into the descriptions of changes in everyday life and are not cited individually. I cite only the interviews conducted online through the WeChat application one year after the outbreak of the epidemic when I already left the Temple.

1978/1970; Pavlović 2016). These survival mechanisms thereby link the actions of community members to the broader sociocultural and governance contexts. Specifically, these actions become essential for safeguarding and promoting both the community's basic means of survival and its identity, especially when external socio-cultural shifts or governance directives pose a threat.

The application of this integrated theoretical framework enables a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics shaping daily life within the Temple during quarantine. On one hand, these dynamics are guided by anti-epidemic measures, both national and local, context-specific. On the other hand, they are shaped by concerted grassroots, communal effort to preserve the religious core of daily life. I contend that when socio-cultural shifts pose a threat to the perpetuation of a community's foundational aspects—especially in a relatively closed setting—novel internal initiatives and mechanisms become imperative for safeguarding and promoting both the community's basic means of survival and its identity. However, within the context of China's centralized, top-down governance structure, such grassroots initiatives must be strategically aligned with official governmental actions for effective implementation.

Everyday life is a continual reproduction of the structures and values that give context and meaning to the actions and interactions in the world (Heller 1978/1970; Giddens 1984; Goffman 1969; Sulima 2005; Morgan 2011). Our identity, i.e., our determinant in the complex web of social interactions, is continually reproduced in the accountable, objective, shared, and somewhat familiar reality of everyday life. Characterized by stability and routine, daily life is exactly what shapes us as the agents that simultaneously reflect and reshape the social world. Current literature (Heller 1978/1970; Pavlović 2016) suggests that major events are defined as having the potential to abruptly, unexpectedly, and even radically transform everyday life. These events bring to the surface the interdependence of different aspects of life, such as health, economy, law, and environment. The transformations not only produce changes in the collective ways of living and value systems, but also produce changes in the status and social role of individuals. Major events are the „critical situations” that represent the unexpected interruptions of the routine, i.e., the radical changes of the embedded stances and ways of acting in the world (Giddens 1984, 41).

Based on theoretical works by Giddens, Heller, Goffman, and Spasić I define two simultaneous tendencies as inherent to all social practices within a relatively closed community of the Shaolin Temple. The first tendency is to preserve daily life as it is⁵, with a minimum of unwanted and unpredictable outside interventions. This tendency is realized through practical consciousness (Giddens 1984, 6) of actors striving to make life secure, predictable and orderly.

5 Similarly, Giddens refers to „protection of social continuity”. Giddens 1984; Also, Goffman (1969) considers that in everyday life people essentially desire to sustain peace and ritual order.

The second tendency is to improve the daily life by means of individual or group actions. These actions are based on the idea that by means of human agency, daily life can be reproduced as a „better tomorrow”, i.e., a step closer to the ideal world corresponding to the already established ontological propositions and value systems, such as the good, the beautiful, and the true or correct (Wilber 1998, 41–42). Both of these tendencies take form through daily encounters (Goffman 1967), i.e., interactions of community members that drive the reproduction of daily life.

On the one side, the stability of daily life allows the preservation of a sense of ontological security, which is attained by different mechanisms of reproduction. These mechanisms are anchored in everyday routine and rituals that constitute the predominant form of usual social activities. Therefore, the rituals of everyday life represent a response to the uncertainty of the world, and can be referred to as „the survival mechanisms” (Giddens 1984, 46; Spasić 2004, 273). On the other side, the continual progress of a community requires a dynamic transformation of its daily life. These transformations are made possible by concrete life situations in which the agents’ actions are dynamically and continually intertwined with the structures they embody and live by.⁶ As Giddens points out, the defining characteristic of the agency is that things could have turned out differently but it has allowed one to introduce the wanted changes in the world. According to this author, the essence of human social behavior and what actually makes one’s individuality is what he/she, as the agent, does (Giddens 1984, 14; Spasić 2004, 271–272, 275). Reproduction of daily life encompasses intertwining between practical consciousness with continual adaptation efforts, and structures that provide order and meaning to individual and collective activities. From this perspective, which avoids both voluntarism and structural determinism, routines are not as constraining. Routines provide „rhythm and predictability” (Martin 1984, 32; Ristić et al. 2020, 527) and are prone to be adapted and transformed in the interaction processes between practically conscious actors with voluntary initiatives.⁷ Everyday life can thus be conceptualized as „a complex relation between fluid, open processes and relatively more permanent forms of belonging and association, both official and unofficial” (Burkitt, 2004, 224; Ristić et al. 2020, 527).

In this case study I investigate the transformation of the collective ways of living, social role of individuals, but also changes in embedded stances and ways of acting of the Shaolin monastic community during Covid-19 quarantine.

6 I here use the definition of structure as given in the structuration theory, which is „the rules and resources recursively implicated in social reproduction” (Giddens 1984, xxxi). As for the analysis of the structuration of social systems, Giddens states that such an endeavor means „studying the modes in which such systems, grounded in the knowledgeable activities of situated actors who draw upon rules and resources in the diversity of action contexts, are produced and reproduced in interaction” (Giddens 1984, 25).

7 Goffman theorises these interactions as encounters, as opposed to routines (Goffman 1967; Jacobsen and Soren Kristiansen 2015).

I therefore raise the following questions. First, what role did social trust play in facilitating the successful local implementation of government measures, and how did this trust manifest itself within the monastic community of the Shaolin Temple? Second, in what ways do practical consciousness and human agency manifest within the Shaolin Temple community during the Covid-19 crisis, and how do these phenomena contribute to either the preservation or transformation of everyday life within this relatively closed setting? Third, how do the daily rituals and out-of-the-routine actions⁸, or „survival mechanisms”, within the Shaolin Temple community serve as both anchors for ontological security and as adaptable strategies in response to the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic? Also, how did these mechanisms interface with broader sociocultural and governance contexts to safeguard the community’s basic means of survival and identity?

State proclamation of national emergency and the accompanying measures

On 27 December 2019, the central government of China warned the World Health Organization (WHO) about having detected cases of pneumonia of unknown cause.⁹ Then, on 31 December 2019, the WHO China Office was informed about a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, Hubei province, caused by a new virus.¹⁰ The fight against the epidemic of the severe respiratory infection caused by corona virus (SARS-CoV-2), named Covid-19, was officially announced on 23 January 2020, by locking down Wuhan one day before the Chinese Spring Festival (春节, Chūn Jié). The central government introduced a state of national emergency of the first level, the highest out of four, which stands for an „extremely serious incident”. From the time of the official announcement of the epidemic in China, the Shaolin Temple was in complete quarantine. The situation in the Temple did not change considerably after the suppression of the first wave of the epidemic, and the quarantine lasted until 22 June 2020.

The central government introduced the general and local epidemic measures, which depended on the estimated level of risk of infection (i.e., green, orange, and red levels) (Tian et al 2020; Altakarli 2020). The epidemic measures for a community at risk included the lockdown within the city or province (封城, fēng chéng), home quarantine (居家隔离, jūjiā gélí – isolation

8 While Goffman wrote about out-of-the-routine, risky actions aiming to satisfy an individual want for entertainment or excitement, the actions I write about, serve to counterbalance unexpected critical situations that introduced disbalance in the routine in the first place. Goffman 1967, 194; Goffman 1969; Jacobsen and Kristiansesn 2015, 73.

9 <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn>.

10 <https://www.who.int/china>.

from two to four weeks for infected or potentially infected individuals), and guards at the community entrance. As a reaction to the national policies, local government authorities established practices that aimed to alleviate the negative consequences of the newly introduced restrictions. All across China, the official initiatives (官方, guānfāng) of the state were complemented with the people's initiatives (民间, mínjiān), which were visible in the social media. Different sorts of voluntary donations and activities were initiated, all aiming to provide sufficient food and medical supplies as well as physical and mental health support to populations at risk.

Everyday life in the Shaolin Temple prior to the Covid-19 pandemic

The Shaolin Temple community comprises around 400 members, some of whom live within the Temple complex¹¹; others live in Shaolin branch monasteries, cultural centers abroad, or are furthering their education elsewhere. Besides the ordained monks (和尚 héshàng), long-term Temple residents comprise Buddhist novices preparing for ordination (沙弥 shāmí) and warrior monks¹² (武僧 wǔsēng). The Shaolin Temple discipleship lineage is organized as a patriarchal clan system¹³ and comprises both the ordained monks and the lay disciples. Domestic and foreign students who come to learn about Shaolin culture and practice Shaolin martial arts reside in allocated housing outside of the Temple gates. On rare occasions and due to work necessities guests can be permitted to reside in the Temple for a limited amount of time. The Temple community respects a strict order, with the Abbot at the top of both the spiritual and organizational hierarchy. The management responsibilities are distributed between seven departments, called halls (堂 táng), which at present are: Abbot's Office, Chan Hall, Guest Hall, Sutra Hall, Dining Hall, Shaolin Pharmacy Bureau, and Shaolin Incense Hall. Each department functions according to the specific rules and regulations that are based on the Baizhang Rules of Purity (See Yifa. 2002, 47; Zen Classics 2005, 15), dating from the

11 In this article the term monastic community refers to all residents of the Shaolin Temple.

12 Warrior monks (武僧 – wǔsēng) are members of the monastic community of the Shaolin Temple who are devoted to the preservation, development and representation of the Shaolin martial arts, both in China and internationally. This group consists of both lay Buddhist and fully ordained monks. Religious monks (和尚 – héshàng) are the members of the monastic community who are fully ordained and have specific duties in the Temple, which are related to religious affairs and organization of daily monastic life. Some of the religious monks have in the past belonged to the warrior monk group, but today practice martial arts in their free time. There are no foreign monks residing in the Shaolin Temple. Nešković 2020, 2021.

13 The clan system was introduced by the Abbot Shi Fuyu (1203–1275) based on Confucian rules on clan genealogy. Lu 2001.

Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), and are currently formulated and regulated by the Buddhist Association of China¹⁴. Each Hall has its own internal hierarchy. Daily affairs of the Temple are handled by the deacons (执事 zhíshì), who are chosen according to seniority, work abilities, progress in Buddhist cultivation and personal affinities. Due to the Temple's vast array of cultural activities other offices were introduced to assist in daily affairs, such as Warrior Monk Office, Office for International Affairs and Office for Digital Affairs.

The ordinary activities of daily Temple life comprise management of its internal and external affairs, religious ceremonies and Chan self-cultivation practices. The monastic discipline (戒律, jièlǜ) in the Chan Buddhist temples in China (丛林 Cónglín) is based on the rules the roots of which can be traced to the Vinaya traditions (Yifa 2002). The day starts with the morning prayer (早课 zǎokè) at five in the morning. Breakfast (6:00 am) and lunch (11:30 am) are part of collective rituals and start with ritual chanting. Dinner is self-service (5:30 pm) and it does not involve ritual proceedings¹⁵. All ordained monks are supposed to be present both at the ceremonial meals and the morning and evening chanting. Exceptions are made when urgent responsibilities do not allow monks to attend. Other religious ceremonies are held on auspicious dates (1st and 15th day of each lunar month, Bathing Buddha Birthday, Water and Land Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, Spring Festival, etc.). The ceremonies are performed by monks educated in official Buddhist Academies and trained in the Temple under supervision of their elders.

The organization of everyday life in Shaolin is characterized by a complex relationship between the monastic discipline and freedom of spiritual practice based on personal affinities and preferences. Apart from the formal obligations within the community and out of the need for orderly functioning of any Chan Buddhist temple, the monks devote a substantial part of their time to religious practice and study of particular domains of the Shaolin cultural heritage, such as the sitting meditation, religious ceremonies, reciting classics, martial arts, medicine, and calligraphy. The self-cultivation in Shaolin is supposed to be exercised through particular religious practices, but also as part of the everyday life, that is, through the daily activities and engagements – from job responsibilities to proper nourishment and rest. Due to the traditional master-disciple relationship¹⁶ the self-cultivation practice is defined on individual level, according to the preference of the disciple and under continual guidance of the master. The monks spend most of their time within the Temple walls.

14 On the relationship between the state and the Buddhist community in China, see Nešković 2017.

15 In the Theravada Buddhist tradition, the monks did not eat after noon, a rule that was abandoned in Mahayana Buddhism.

16 An ordained monk can take on his own disciples, with the approval from his master, after ten years of monastic life (Master YY, interview by author, winter 2019). During fieldwork I noticed that most of the teaching process between a master and his disciple is done casually, over tea.

The time they spend outside the Temple is mostly due to administrative affairs. They visit their families at most once a year.

Shaolin Temple is also very active in organizing cultural, educational and academic activities. The Abbot has already published numerous books (including four in English)¹⁷ on different aspects of the Shaolin tangible and intangible cultural heritage and supports related academic research. Monks with academic affinities are sent to renowned Buddhist academies across China. The Temple publishes journal series, called Dew of Chan, which discusses contemporary application of Chan Buddhist teachings. Thanks to the library and the Scripture Hall, besides ancient scriptures, monks have the opportunity to study classic and contemporary Buddhist literature. Chan Pharmaceutical Bureau offers training in traditional Chinese medicine enriched with the Chan approach to health and well-being. The Incense Hall serves for small-scale production of customized incense with health benefits. Nevertheless, the aspect of the Temple life which has been most popularized internationally is Shaolin kung fu¹⁸, i.e., Chan martial arts. The warrior monk team, comprising both lay Buddhists and ordained monks residing in a separate hall within the monastic complex, popularizes the Temple's intangible cultural heritage through world-wide artistic performances. Also, in cooperation with Henan provincial and Dengfeng county government, Henan University Martial Arts Department and martial arts School of Friendship, the Temple leadership standardized Shaolin Kung Fu theory and practice and organized „Duan-Pin” training consisting of 18 levels of proficiency. Apart from numerous charity projects realized in cooperation with the Henan Charity Foundation, since 2004, the monastery has also established the Shaolin Charity School (少林慈幼院 Shǎolín cíyòu yuàn) in Dengfeng. This school educates orphans, who after finishing their secondary school have the opportunity to integrate into the Shaolin community. According to their interests and performance abilities, they proceed with higher education, become part of a warrior monk team, study and work in the Shaolin Pharmaceutical Bureau, or choose to follow the path of monasticism. If none of the previous options interest them, the monastery tries to help them find a job outside the monastery environment.

Finally, the core of Shaolin daily life is the Chan sitting meditation (坐禪 zuò Chán). The preservation of this tradition in its founding place is the Temple's most important religious activity which justifies its immense contribution to the Buddhist community worldwide. A group of monks who live in the Chan Hall have as their main responsibility intense daily meditation. They live and eat separately from the rest of the community, have almost no contact with the society outside of the Temple gate, and devote their lives to self-cultivation through sitting meditation.

17 More info on Shaolin Temple's publications may be found at <http://www.shaolin.org.cn/news/217/227/233-1.html>

18 The topic of Shaolin kung fu will be treated in detail in a separate monograph.

The internal and external circulation of the community is relatively high. By internal circulation I refer to the dynamics of the Temple's organizational structure. Exemplary members of the community have the opportunity to be part of the management leadership of different departments and offices in the Temple and to rise in the organizational hierarchy. Every year, on the 15th day of the first month of the lunar calendar, which is celebrated as the Lantern Festival, the Temple holds a ceremony at which the changes in hierarchical positions and work assignments of monks are announced. By external circulation, I primarily refer to the important influx of new community members (warrior-monks choosing the monastic path, graduates from Buddhist colleges, ordination ceremony candidates in the Temple that come every three years, etc.), and a temporary or permanent outflow of existing members (allocation of responsibility in Shaolin sub-temples, study in Buddhist or other colleges, leaving the Temple for secular life, etc.).

Changes in the everyday life in the Shaolin Temple during quarantine

The previous description of Shaolin daily life aimed to portray the multilayered activities of this religious institution. At the same time the Temple preserves its ancient intangible traditions that constitute the core of religious life and engages in intense interaction with a wide variety of national educational and cultural institutions. The text that follows reveals how the Temple functioned as a closed community during the epidemic and which necessary changes it introduced to cope with the considerably reduced interaction with the outside world.

This case study of Shaolin shows how a religious community applied the Covid-19 epidemic prevention policies of the government, while at the same time introducing and carrying out self-organized initiatives both within the community and through charity work.

Due to the provincial government decision that all scenic areas must be closed to the public, the entrance into the whole Songshan Scenic Area was guarded by the county officers. The Temple gates were also locked and guarded by monks with no one allowed to enter or exit. In applying the national prevention measures against the Covid-19 epidemic, the Shaolin's leadership introduced radical changes in the organization of daily life of its community. Even though the monastic community members were not leaving the Temple, their temperatures were checked every day. As is the case with all other monasteries in China (Nan 2020), Shaolin was required to provide regular reports on the epidemic to the local authorities. Besides the stock of food supplies sufficient to feed the community for a year, the Temple leadership organized delivery of necessary fresh food, such as vegetables and fruits. If a

community member had a specific request for food or medicine, the delivery was arranged by the Temple management.

During the quarantine period in the Shaolin Temple there was no trace of the cheerful atmosphere with carefree tourists, curious Buddhist devotees and busy monks hurrying through the temple courtyards. Silence prevailed. Everyone was waiting to be certain that no one in the community had been contaminated and expecting to receive further notice of the quarantine end. In the beginning, the community underestimated the rapid spread of the virus and its effects, and thought the quarantine would be over in a few weeks. This was a time of silence but not of tranquility, since the situation in the rest of China and subsequently in the whole world was escalating. The Temple leadership provided the community with the news and updates, reminding them of the seriousness of the situation and the importance of isolation as a means of protection. National and social media provided constant updates on the situation as well.

Under the Abbot's direction, the medical staff of the pharmacy quickly set up a task force for prevention and control of the novel corona virus epidemic. Following special guidelines for the general public under risk of infection, issued by the central government, the Venerable Abbot Shi Yongxin issued a Temple epidemic prevention and control manual, and established the management procedures for the whole community under quarantine. These rules required a redistribution of responsibilities among the community. The religious and organizational hierarchy remained intact, but the character of a certain number of jobs changed completely. The Guest Reception Hall originally hosting visitors and Buddhist devotees, government officials and tourists turned its focus entirely towards the implementation and control of the new rules of discipline. The focus was on disinfecting¹⁹ the Temple facilities and maintaining strict hygiene, updating community members' health records, providing for basic daily needs and coordinating between departments with minimum of social encounter.

To give an example, the nourishment of the whole community required coordination between the kitchen, where the food was prepared and served, the pharmacy which provided special recipes with boosting immunity herbs, the warrior monks who served food, and the team responsible for disinfection (recruited from the Guest Reception Hall). The staff of the Guest Reception Hall turned their focus primarily towards the implementation and control of the hygiene. Prior to the epidemic an external company was in charge of maintaining the hygiene of the whole Songshan Scenic Area. Since during quarantine, no one was allowed entrance, monks distributed the cleaning work amongst themselves. Monks took turns in cleaning the common space. Private space hygiene was also controlled. The warrior monks, who are among

19 The Temple space was disinfected with 75 % alcohol and tricolored effervescent tablets as well by periodic UV irradiation.

the youngest members of the community, share rooms with four to eight beds, while ordained monks sometimes have individual rooms or at most share their private space with three other monks. At the same time, the External Affairs Office (外联出 wàiliánchū) staff, who were at ordinary times coordinating Temple's educational and cultural projects in China and abroad, now took upon themselves communication with the international community of Shaolin disciples to organize charity donations. Various other Buddhist monasteries across China have also contributed by donating financial and medical resources. The monastic community also facilitated Dharma services dedicated to the worship of Yāoshī fó (藥師佛), commonly known as the Medicine Buddha or Healing Buddha, while praying for the well-being of the affected individuals (Nan 2020). As noted by Ashiwa and Wank (2020), in Buddhism, illness is regarded as one of the four fundamental forms of suffering intrinsic to sentient existence, alongside birth, aging, and death. Within the Chinese context, there is a pervasive and longstanding belief that Buddhist doctrines and practices possess the capacity to alleviate illness and avert calamities.

During the quarantine, I noted several occasions in which a community member felt ill. Each time the person was immediately isolated and all individuals who were in touch with the potentially infected person had to keep their distance from others until the medical investigation showed that he was not infected by Covid-19. The Temple's Pharmaceutical Bureau staff used astragalus (黄芪, Huángqí), windproof (防风, Fángfēng), honeysuckle (金银花, Jīnyínhuā), forsythia (连翘, Liánqiào), and other Chinese medicinal herbs to boost the health of all community members and prevent contamination. These herbs were boiled in water and served in a big pot in the dining hall for all to drink. This medicine is supposed to „supplement the qi (气), clear the heat, and detoxify the body to prevent the virus invasion”²⁰.

All collective activities in the Temple, including the religious ones were cancelled and everyone was directed to turn towards self-cultivation. The auspicious dates ceremonies, the morning and evening chanting in the Mahavira Hall (大雄宝殿 Daxiongbao dian), and the chanting before the morning and noon meal proceeded with only the ritual performers present. The community members were instructed to chant sutras, read books, and meditate individually in their own residence rooms (寮房, liáofáng). The warrior monks proceeded with their training after about two weeks of quarantine, when it was evident that no one in the community was infected. The trainings were nevertheless held outdoors. The senior warrior monks would take care of the discipline of the younger accentuating the need for impeccable hygiene. Rooms had to be cleaned and checked on daily basis before the trainings.

With no tourists present and no external affairs to attend to, the monks had more space and time for leisure activities, study, training and individual spiritual practice. Face-to-face interaction and social life were almost inexistant

20 Master YW, WeChat interview by author, July 6th 2021.

during the first few weeks. The Temple leadership, coordinated by the Abbot's office (which included the Abbot and the deacons), collaborated with the medical task force and communicated all the important information through WeChat messaging. The only socialization possible was between the monks who shared rooms and courtyards. The February weather was still cold, so it was not pleasant to spend time outside since catching a cold could cause problems for the whole community. The monks felt that since the Temple complex accommodated a large-scale community in limited space, isolation and health nurturing were crucial for preserving the community.

The Temple leadership had its own initiatives which were formalized along the way. These were, for example, creating a Temple-specific prevention and protection manual, redistributing jobs and praying, and organizing charity donations for severely endangered areas in China and abroad. In my observation, as may be expected, the everyday life of the monks who actively participated in organizing the Temple daily affairs changed the most while the meditation monks' life changed the least.

After a few weeks in quarantine, when it became clear that no one in the Temple community was infected, the atmosphere relaxed a little because the community members felt safe with practically no risk of contamination. During the whole quarantine there was not a single case of infection. When in the end of February 2020, the Chinese authorities announced a decline in the numbers of new cases and fatal outcomes, the confidence in the effectiveness of the national prevention and control measures grew²¹, the atmosphere in the Temple became even less tense.

In my view, the Temple leadership's main objectives were: to protect the community, to allow its members safe and peaceful religious life, to raise donations for the endangered population, initially in China and then worldwide, and finally to proceed with the Shaolin cultural and educational projects. The charity work was achieved by collecting donations and sending protective medical material to severely endangered areas. Despite government embargoes, flight suspensions and logistic difficulties, from January to May 2020, the Temple, its five branch temples and 15 foreign Shaolin cultural centers, donated 29 containers, containing 1.18 million pieces of certified medical protective equipment to hospitals in severely affected areas in China and abroad. The donations were valued at CNY 1.804 million, excluding international and domestic fees.²²

Besides fulfilling basic daily needs and duties centered around prevention and protection practices, all daily activity of the monastic community was low key and informal. The monks described their free-time daily activities to

21 On 24 March 2020, Li Keqiang, the Premier of China, announced a proximate restoration of „the normal economic and social order” on Consumer News and Business Channel (CNBC), China to Lift Lockdown on Wuhan, the Epicenter of its Coronavirus Outbreak.

22 Shi Yongxin, February 4th 2021. Online Conference for the occasion of the celebration of the Chinese Small Year.

be the following: worshipping Buddha, chanting sutras, reading books, and practicing kung fu. Master YQ²³ remarked that, even though the collective activities stopped, the religious practice was not under serious impact because „the monks are self-disciplined and thus a closed life is not difficult for us”. Master YR²⁴ explained that because a monk’s life is always very ordered, he did not have a particular feeling of being in a quarantine or being affected by the isolation. A number of monks used their free time to concentrate on hobbies, such as photography. Master YG²⁵, the head of the Temple library, said that he became accustomed to the new situation and began to deeply appreciate the quiet and orderly life during the isolation.

The Temple lost its capacity to host not only tourists and martial arts admirers, but most importantly Buddhist devotees. Its function as a public religious institution answering the needs of the wide Chinese and international Buddhist community was suspended. Nevertheless, the emptiness of space and time opened new opportunities for monks, created a stronger cohesion among the community members and facilitated open, self-organized educational practices. The activities once „hidden” in the private monastic chambers such as conversations, knowledge transmission and different kinds of Chan practice were now extended through time and space. Due to the highly infections and yet insufficiently investigated nature of Covid-19, it was safer to communicate outdoors. As spring came along the courtyards became centers of activity and social interaction. The monks took leisurely strolls in the afternoon, or walked in groups after the meals making rounds within the walls. Especially in the morning, one could often spot a monk sitting alone in one of the courtyards, enjoying the colorful Temple architecture, reading poetry or admiring blossoming trees. Apart from leisurely conversations, the younger warrior monks, monastic novices (沙弥 shāmí) and newly ordained monks could invest time in acquiring new skills. Simply put, everyone had more time on their hands. The disciples were keener to learn and the masters more prone to teach. Learning did not only happen through the master-disciple relationship, but between monks of the same generation (兄弟 xiōngdì). The administration and the guest reception offices, the library, and courtyards became spaces for communal knowledge making (Ingold 2013, 110). Some were studying Buddhist classics, others practicing calligraphy, while a large number learned to chant new sutras and revised their understanding of the old ones. The study was enhanced by the Temple leadership’s decision to host Shaolin culture exams for the whole community. The youngest among the warrior monks had culture classes (文课 wénkè) on daily basis. The evening training would start only after each student fulfilled his learning tasks for the day. Besides learning about the Temple tangible and intangible cultural heritage, they were supposed to learn

23 Master YQ, WeChat interview with author, July 6th 2021.

24 Master YR, WeChat interview with author, July 8th 2021.

25 Master YG, WeChat interview with author, July 10th 2021.

the Heart Sutra (心经 Xīn Jīng) and the Mantra of Great Compassion (大悲咒 Dàbēi Zhòu) by heart.

The martial arts practice, in its various forms, became more visible. All generations of monks could be seen doing health-oriented exercise (养身功 yǎngshēngōng), fast walking, jogging, practicing bare hand forms²⁶ or weapon forms. For example, a middle-aged monk who after his martial arts performance career within the Temple chose to become an ordained monk and to take part in the organization of religious ceremonies, decided to learn an ancient sword (剑 jiàn) form. His master instructed him at different times of the day, in a quiet spot of the courtyard in which I stayed. After a fortnight, when the disciple learned all the movements, he was left to practice by himself. From time to time, the master would come and check on the progress and give additional instructions.

Old Shaolin practices were explored both from library books and through advice and instruction from senior monks. In one of the courtyards monks organized Chan archery practice (禅弓 chángōng). The target was placed on a movable wooden board covered with strong sponge-like protective cover. There were only a few bows within the community, so each enthusiast would bring his own or would have to borrow it. Ten to twenty monks were practicing actively on a daily basis -- usually before the noon meal, while others would cheerfully observe, inquire and comment. As the quarantine went on, I felt changes in my own interaction with the monastic community. Instead of mostly having to organize my research investigation by asking somewhat formalized permission from the Office for Foreign Affairs, or the Temple leadership, now the monks were more open to spontaneous conversations and informal interviews. Reflecting on the five-month quarantine experience in Shaolin a year later, the monks' general conclusion was that even though the epidemic brought inconveniences and challenges to their daily life, thanks to the decisive measures of the government and the organization of the Temple leadership, the community felt protected. The main challenges for each individual included discovering their ideal life in isolation and cultivating harmonious and peaceful coexistence within the Temple community.

Discussion

The role of social trust and its manifestations

The pandemic has prompted academic discourse that focuses on citizens' satisfaction with governmental crisis management, pinpointing various factors that contribute to elevated levels of trust in the Chinese state among its citizenry

26 The term form (套路 tàolù) here refers to a defined sequence of movement, and is considered to be a unit of practice containing all essential elements of a particular defensive-offensive style of Shaolin martial arts.

(Liu and Watson Raine 2016). As highlighted by Ristić et al. (2020), trust serves as an instrumental social factor for mitigating risks and emergencies. It not only enriches the social capital of a community during crises but also reinforces both individual and collective resilience in facing them (Siegrist and Zingg 2014). Fukuyama (2020) argues that the success in fighting the epidemic does not depend as much on the type of regime, as it does on the state's capacity to provide adequate resources and instill trust in the government (Zhao and Wu 2020, 782). Yang et al. (2021, 1–2) believe that the health crises enhanced the citizens' trust in the government due to the fact that „the nationalist and populist backlash against the regime's foreign and domestic critics helped turn the public opinion around in its favor”. He states that the strategy of the Chinese officials and diplomats against the negative criticisms of the international community was actually oriented towards the domestic audience. Along the similar strain, Sier argues that the Chinese state treated this crisis as a unique opportunity to prove the superiority of its political system on a global stage (Sier 2021, 295). Nevertheless, taking into account a wider socio-economic and cultural perspective, Cary Wu et al. (2021, 4–5) propose three main reasons for the citizens' high level of satisfaction with the central government. The first reason concerns the influence „manufactured by authoritarian dissemination of propaganda”. The second is based on the fact that the organization of the Chinese state is grounded in Confucian teachings and reflects traditional Chinese values such as hierarchy, collectivism and paternalism. Finally, the remarkable growth of the „Chinese economy and strong political performance” in the past decades is primarily attributed to the work of the central government.

Now, I will revisit the first question this article addresses, which is: What role did social trust play in facilitating the successful local implementation of government measures, and how did this trust manifest itself within the monastic community of the Shaolin Temple? In addressing the multifaceted issue of social trust, I explore various dimensions, including intrapersonal trust among community members, as well as the community's trust in the monastic leadership. These aspects provide a comprehensive understanding of how social trust operates on different scales within the community context. The leadership of the Shaolin Temple closely collaborated with the provincial government on health measures during the whole time of the pandemic. The Abbot of the Shaolin Temple is both a political and religious figure. Serving as the deputy of the People's Congress of China in four consecutive terms (1998–2013), as well as being the Chairman of the Henan Province Buddhist Association and the Vice-Chairman of the Buddhist Association of China, have put him in the position to strengthen the autonomy of the Buddhist communities, but in a way that generally does not confront the state politics. The Abbot harmonizes the interests of the monastic community and the state – on one hand by building the relationship of cooperation with the local government, and on the other by representing the interests of the religious community in the National People's Congress. In the case of Shaolin Temple, the local authorities succeeded in

staying close to the people during the epidemic and building a cooperative relationship with the institutions that represent the grassroots society. This reflects one of the Party's „three fine styles of conduct”: to maintain close ties with the people²⁷. I argue that social trust within the Shaolin Temple is facilitated by a multi-layered relationship among the temple leadership, the monastic community, and the government. This intricate web of trust becomes apparent through several mechanisms: First, institutional trust is reinforced by the Abbot's dual roles as both a religious and political leader, providing a stable basis for trust. Second, grassroots engagement is highlighted by the Temple's cooperative relationship with the provincial government during the pandemic, demonstrating alignment with broader governmental strategies to maintain close community ties. Third, layered trust is nurtured by the Abbot's capacity to balance the interests of the monastic community with state politics, creating a stable social pyramid of trust. Fourth, a cooperative governance model is evident in the leadership's willingness to work closely with governmental bodies, reinforcing trust through effective crisis management. Lastly, the preservation of the community's spiritual ethos, even amidst complex political conditions, bolsters trust by signaling that core values will be upheld. In summary, this complex interplay of institutional roles, grassroots engagement, and layered trust mechanisms enables the successful local implementation of government health and safety measures, particularly in times of crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic. This multifaceted structure of trust not only ensures effective governance but also contributes to the preservation and continuation of the community's religious life.

The concept of trust more manifested on a daily basis in several nuanced ways that helped the community navigate the period of quarantine. The temple leadership rigorously applied government prevention policies while innovating with self-organized initiatives, like creating a temple-specific manual for epidemic prevention and redistributing community responsibilities. Trust was evident in the community's compliance with new protocols, such as daily temperature checks, even when they were not venturing outside the temple. The Pharmacy's quick formulation of medicinal herbal infusions, believed to strengthen the immune system, was another example of the community placing trust in both traditional Shaolin wisdom and modern medical guidance. The complex logistics of nourishing the community—from kitchen preparations to herbal supplements—operated smoothly, indicating adequate coordination among various departments, including the Guest Reception Hall staff who took on new roles like hygiene control. Moreover, warrior monks, who are typically younger members, were entrusted with food serving and, later, resumed their training outdoors under supervision, highlighting a multi-layered trust: trust in their discipline, trust in the effectiveness of quarantine

27 The remaining two are combining theory with practice, and conducting criticism and self-criticism. https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2010-10/15/content_29714532.htm

measures within the temple, and trust in the seniors who mentored them on daily basis. As the quarantine prolonged, social activities gradually increased, but within cautiously designed boundaries. The courtyards became communal spaces, the monks took leisurely strolls, shared insights on changing daily life circumstances, and even taught each other new skills like archery or chanting new sutras. This was not just about filling time but represented a sort of trust in the shared meaning of daily life and the efficacy of shared practices to bolster individual and communal well-being. Even though the temple had to close its doors to the public, thus suspending its broader social and religious functions, the internal community found new avenues for deepening their spiritual and social lives, relying on a shared understanding that they could navigate this crisis cohesively. Trust was also apparent in how quickly individuals were isolated if they showed symptoms and how the rest of the community adhered to safety protocols pending medical clearance, relying on the medical staff's expertise and the leadership's crisis management. Interestingly, despite the initially underestimated duration and impact of the virus, the community's trust in both the temple leadership and governmental measures increased as no infections occurred and national statistics improved.

The charity efforts, coordinated by the External Affairs Office, and the participation of community members in donations also shows that the temple was trusted as a global actor capable of significant humanitarian contribution, even in times of internal crisis. This multifaceted trust, woven into the daily activities and long-standing relationships within the temple, appears to have played a critical role in helping the community adapt, survive, and even thrive under the challenges posed by the pandemic. I contend that the community's trust in the monastic leadership's capacity to maintain safety enabled members to direct their practical consciousness and human agency toward preserving the shared religious meaning that is foundational to their communal life. This focus illustrates the very essence of resilience within any religious community.

Grassroots responses and governance:

Understanding temple community adaptations amid health crises

The existing literature on the collaboration between various levels of government and grassroots society in implementing anti-epidemic measures offers valuable context for understanding how the practical consciousness and agency of local community members gave rise to self-initiatives and adaptations of national strategies amid disruptions to daily life. Additionally, this literature offers a framework for understanding the context in which the temple's initiatives intersect with broader sociocultural and governance landscapes.

The determination of the micro and macro structures in everyday life as mutually pervading, offered by Spasić (2004), has helped me analyse the relationship between the daily life in Shaolin and the principal actions

undertaken by the Chinese government and the wider society in fighting the epidemic. The interplay between micro and macro structures provides a nuanced understanding of how different actors—including individual monks, monastic leadership, and the Chinese government—respond to health crises. China's government, acting as a macro-structural entity, implemented policies such as mandatory quarantine in scenic areas, which directly affected the dynamics of daily life at the Shaolin Temple, considered a micro-structure. In adapting to these new conditions, the Temple's leadership assumed a macro-structural role by reconfiguring the daily routines of the monastic community, thereby recasting individual members into micro-structural elements. On another note, individual monks not only contributed through their charity work and religious devotion aimed at public safety in China and globally but also initiated new routinized practices that maintained the shared narrative of religious life. This exemplifies how a network of micro-structures can collectively operate at a macro level.

While Ning et al. (2020, 2) conceive the government and social contributions as separate, Zhao and Wu (2020) analyze the Chinese fight against the epidemic as a collaboration of the government and citizens. These authors explain that the citizen–government co-production was realized through residential committees within communities, as well as informal (nongovernmental NGOs) and formal (self-organized) channels. Apart from the local government offices of the Chinese Communist Party, grassroots branches also served as a medium for implementing central prevention and control measures in local communities (Mittelstaedt 2021). The central government also used the social media to „mobilize citizens and non-profit organizations to support the government response and recovery efforts” (Li et al. 2020, 703; Miao et al. 2020). Nevertheless, the appropriate enforcement of the prevention measures would be impossible without voluntary cooperation of citizens.

The ties between the government and the self-organized grassroots entities are presented rather transparently in Cheng et al. (2020) case study on residential committees in Beijing and Wuhan. The authors argue that even though the committees were self-organized entities, with no formal administrative power, in case of the epidemic, they were funded and supervised by the governments. This clearly shows that the grassroots initiatives were coordinated with the government epidemic policies in managing local communities (Cheng et al. 2020, 869–871). Miao et al. (2020) argue that this health crisis brought to the surface „the value of collaboration among local citizens and civil society including community-based groups, and regional governments to fill the gaps in public services”. The authors describe the crucial role of volunteers in a swift and efficient reaction to providing local, community support. They were well acquainted with „the local norms, relationships, and dialects”, thus, facilitating collaboration between different levels of government and grassroots society. This kind of action fills the gaps created by larger scale actors who are fairly

slower and more rigid due to bureaucratic procedures. For example, a number of government-organized NGOs were founded at the epidemic outbreak to help allocate the necessary financial aid to medical institutions and citizens in need. However, due to the bureaucratic procedures and their non-transparency to the public, they were criticized by the wider public as being inefficient (Zhao and Wu 2020, 780). As Cheng et al. case study of the Zhejiang province concludes, the co-production between community-based organizations and the local governments is dynamic and multi-stage.²⁸

Transitioning to the second question this paper addresses, it's worth noting how the context within the Shaolin Temple community during the Covid-19 pandemic serves as a case study that provides insight into collaborative dynamics between governmental entities and grassroots communities. In this specific microcosm, practical consciousness and human agency manifested in intricate and adaptive ways that align with Giddens' theorization, thereby offering insights into the nature of self-initiated grassroots activities in response to disruptions of daily life. Practical consciousness, in this context, was primarily directed towards the preservation of the religious essence of daily life. When government measures ensured safety through strict quarantine protocols, this created a situation where the main locus of efforts was pivoted towards retaining the core aspects of monastic life—namely, religious practices, rituals, and hierarchical structures. Temple leadership exemplified this by successfully preserving the hierarchical structure and the functional aspects of most major departments, while also adroitly redistributing work responsibilities among those that became non-operational due to quarantine. Practical consciousness was not just a leadership prerogative; it filtered down to individual monks. Once it was confirmed that the community faced minimal risk of viral transmission and was free from Covid-19 infections, monks engaged in informal outdoor activities with added precautionary measures. These activities encompassed a range of pursuits, from scholarly studies of Buddhist scriptures, Shaolin history, and Traditional Chinese Medicine, to specialized skill development in martial arts, archery, health-preservation exercises, and calligraphy, as well as leisure activities such as walks, tea ceremonies, and games of Go. These were not mere recreational pursuits but framed within the contours of Shaolin's spiritual ethics, thus serving as a form of everyday „practical consciousness”. Human agency, on the other hand, was manifested in the community's capacity to adapt and innovate new routines in accordance with both government regulations and Shaolin's unique ontological propositions. Despite the constraints on social activities imposed by the epidemic, monks manifested agency by engendering new, routinized practices that were congruent with the Chan way of life, such as walking in circles after meals, practicing archery, cleaning the temple space,

28 This means that these relationships were constantly changing from one phase of the epidemic to the other according to immediate needs of the communities in question. This is a two-directional process. Cheng et al. 2020, 872.

and gardening. These new practices did not disrupt but enriched the existing religious narrative, serving as novel „survival mechanisms,” to use Giddens’ term. They were spontaneously routinized and served dual purposes—aligning with the government’s health directives while preserving and even renewing the Temple’s religious vitality. In summary, both practical consciousness and human agency during the Covid-19 crisis served to intertwine the dual tendencies of preservation and transformation, not as mutually exclusive but as complementary forces. Practical consciousness facilitated the community’s alignment with external health directives and its internal moral and religious codes. Simultaneously, human agency permitted the community to adapt dynamically, thereby preserving, and even enhancing, the integrity of its daily religious life within this relatively closed setting.

Finally, we come to the third question: how do the daily rituals and out-of-the-routine actions²⁹, or „survival mechanisms”, within the Shaolin Temple community serve as both anchors for ontological security and as adaptable strategies in response to the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic?

Daily rituals and out-of-the-routine actions function as dual mechanisms that negotiate ontological security and adaptability in the face of the Covid-19 disruptions. On one hand, daily rituals serve as anchors for ontological security, providing the community with a sense of stability and predictability. Rituals like chanting, martial arts practice, and sitting meditation facilitate a sense of normality, routine and continuity. They act as grounding activities that, even though performed individually or in small groups, maintain the collective consciousness and shared sense of identity of the monastic community, thus reinforcing a sense of belonging and spiritual alignment. These rituals operate as „survival mechanisms”, i.e., as psychological and sociological tools that offer comfort and mitigate the anxiety produced by the uncertain and ever-changing external world, thereby promoting ontological security. On the other hand, out-of-the-routine actions manifest as adaptable strategies that allow the community to navigate the disruptions caused by the pandemic. When formal collective rituals became untenable due to social distancing measures, the community pivoted towards more individualized and smaller group activities. As previously noted, monks initiated informal outdoor activities with added precautionary measures, but also established new routines, which align well with the Chan way of life. These adaptive strategies demonstrate the community’s capacity for flexibility and innovation in the face of crisis. Such resilience is consonant with the collective agency of community members to transform and enhance daily life. In order to safeguard the community’s basic means of survival and identity the Shaolin community established multiple mechanisms interfacing with broader sociocultural and governance contexts. These were namely,

29 While Goffman (1967, 194; 1969; Jacobsen and Kristiansen 2015, 73) wrote about out-of-the-routine, risky actions aiming to satisfy an individual want for entertainment or excitement, the actions I write about, serve to counterbalance unexpected critical situations that introduced disbalance in the routine in the first place.

multi-level governance interactions, alignment with government measures, external collaborations for internal stability, community cohesion, narrative continuity, intra-community relationships, and cultural preservation through adaptation. The Shaolin Temple is characterized by a dual internal hierarchy that includes both organizational and spiritual dimensions. Both vertical internal structures complement broader sociocultural hierarchies, particularly when seen through the lens of governance, and contribute. Additionally, as an official religious institution regulated by the Buddhist Association of China, it is subject to national and local health and safety measures. This complex status involves a web of governance interactions across multiple levels, though the specifics of these external interactions are beyond the scope of this study. The Temple leadership's adept coordination with governmental agencies during the Covid-19 crisis exemplifies a collaborative rather than adversarial approach to governance. These close ties with the government enhance the Temple's ability to sustain its social standing and its core religious practices. Collaborations with educational institutions and the government on issues such as standardizing Shaolin martial arts and academic research³⁰, as well as national and international charity work, integrate the Temple into broader societal frameworks during the health crises. This enables the Temple not only to preserve its unique identity but also to make meaningful contributions to the wider sociocultural landscape both domestically and internationally.

The communal emphasis on caring for elders and promptly addressing internal conflicts reflects a broader cultural ethos that values collective well-being over individual interests. The inherent nature of the religious community, along with its specific rules and regulations, serves to facilitate intrapersonal trust among its members. This trust, in turn, inspires an extra effort to sustain a shared religious narrative even amid significant disruptions. Also, the dual emphasis on social solidarity and trust has been instrumental in maintaining a functional relationship between the monastic community and local governance, effectively mitigating any potential for large-scale problems. Finally, the Temple's flexibility in shifting from collective to individual religious practices, as well as its creative adaptation to the crisis, illustrates a resilience grounded in its spiritual and cultural traditions. These adaptations occurred within the bounds of the Chan way of life, allowing the community to both preserve and adapt its identity in relation to broader sociocultural norms. The daily life of the Shaolin monks during the quarantine was reproduced on the axiological determinations of the religious discipline, adapted to new social conditions emerging from the State response to the health crisis. This paper concludes that the adaptive flexibility in daily life routines, balancing between tendencies to maintain and transform religious life, is inextricably tied to endeavors to sustain a communal sense of identity. These foundational efforts are deeply rooted in interpersonal trust and confidence in monastic leadership.

30 During one of our informal conversations the Abbot told me that he was working on multiple volumes of the Shaolin Temple history.

Conclusion

The struggle between the processes of social and cultural reproduction and transformation showed that when the transformation jeopardizes the reproduction of the core of daily life, new mechanisms are needed to safeguard, sustain, and promote the communities' basic means of survival and identity reproduction. Coming back to Giddens's definition of „critical situations”, I conclude that the Shaolin monastic community's embedded stances towards religious life and practice did not undergo any radical change. The younger generations of monks' understanding of self-cultivation in daily life became more informed about the importance of self-initiative. In other words, after a few weeks of isolation, the monks who did not have concrete responsibilities in enforcing the anti-epidemic measures, were aware that they had a prolonged period of free time on their hands. The monastic leadership did not officially impose any particular activity, but rather the senior monks motivated their disciples to use this time for study and practice. Finally, the ways of acting within the Temple were different since the members did not have any direct interaction with the non-Buddhist individuals, meaning that there was no activity taking place outside the framework of the monastic rules. The status of the members did not change since both organizational and spiritual hierarchy were maintained. The community also managed to preserve its status due to successful collaboration with the government and continuation of core religious life. The social roles of monks underwent short-term changes since they were unable to host public activities for Buddhist devotees. The individual roles of some of the monks also changed during this time, switching from coordinating the social and cultural activity of the Temple to enforcing the anti-epidemic measures.

Shaolin Temple's inherent relative isolation, monastic discipline and sense of community eased adaptation to quarantine conditions. My research suggests that daily activities were devoted to taking advantage of the secluded way of life, which is something Chan monks ideally seek. This is tied to the historic (but also ideal) image of a Chan Buddhist temple concealed „deep in the forest” (丛林 Cónglín). Religious monks strive for a Chan life, which means that the scope of their spiritual self-cultivation comprises not only the „competent” (Bourdieu 2013/1977) Chan practice, such as sitting meditation, religious rituals, and reciting classics, but also *living Chan* in all circumstances and activities they are engaged in. The establishment of the particular forms of religious practice, which comprise the set of tasks that connect the worldly life with the spiritual realm, is not a purpose in itself, and can adapt to different circumstances. Thus, while collective ritual ceremonies were on suspension, the monks devoted themselves to individual Chan practice, to charity work, as a collective act of Buddhist compassion, and to developing the educational aspects of the Temple's intangible cultural heritage.

The monastic organizational hierarchy implies top-down management, while spiritual hierarchy and the patrilineal discipleship lineage implies trust in elders. Since the official measures were adapted to local epidemic situation all around China, the monks believed that the Temple leadership would coordinate with the local and provincial government for the community's best protection. Given this small community had a large number of elderly members (in my estimation, at least 30 percent), the Temple leadership pleaded with the local government to continue the community's isolation as long as the critical epidemic crisis persisted. Complete isolation was perceived as the safest way to preserve the community.

During the quarantine no out-of-the-ordinary conflicts emerged within the Shaolin monastic community. Also, in up-to-date empirical studies on Chinese Buddhist temples, there is neither evidence of large-scale problems within the local community, nor between the monastic community and the local government. There are a number of possible explanations. First, in my observation, the efforts to preserve the community contributed to its cohesion and monks' attentiveness towards each other. Second, the official narrative, that is, national and local policies prioritized the well-being of the collective over individual interest. Third, the imposed pandemic isolation caused minimal disruption as the usual strict discipline in Buddhist temples allows large-scale religious communities to live productively within limited space. These rules of discipline deal with conflicts at their root. Inappropriate behavior inhibits progress in both spiritual and organizational hierarchy and is, thus, avoided by all community members. Shaolin Temple leadership enforces the rules of monastic life strictly as a way to protect the community from criticism attracted by its popularity and success in cultural promotion on both national and international scale. Finally, the spiritual hierarchy facilitates the regulation of appropriate conduct of the monks in that senior monks are responsible for the behavior of their disciples. I believe this also explains why there was no panic within the community at the outbreak of the virus. Since the scientific reports on the virus presented scarce information on the character of the virus, the community members trusted the competence of the Temple leadership to protect them.

By the end of the quarantine, community members moved beyond mere resilience to actively safeguard their collective sense of religious meaning and communal life. Despite the disruptions, they persevered in weaving the fabric of their shared daily narrative. Individual acts of maintaining religious continuity and fostering communal cohesion not only upheld a sense of purpose but also reasserted their collective identity as disciples of Shaolin each day. This collective endeavor ensured that they continued to operate as a unified community across hierarchical roles, work assignments, scholarly pursuits, and leisure activities.

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Marta Nešković

Hram Šaolin usred pandemije Kovida-19: Transformacija svakodnevnog života u kineskoj monaškoj zajednici

Apstrakt: Ovaj članak istražuje kontinuitet i transformaciju koji su karakterisali svakodnevni život unutar hrama Šaolin tokom pandemije Kovida-19 u Kini. Studija je empirijski utemeljena na etnografskim podacima prikupljenim tokom terenskog istraživanja u trajanju od dve i po godine, koje je uključivalo period izbijanja epidemije i petomesečni karantin. Ova jedinstvena istraživačka pozicija pružila je uvide u adaptivne mehanizme koji su omogućili zajednici da očuva suštinske aspekte svog religijskog života. Rad razmatra način na koji su, suočene sa socio-kulturnim transformacijama koje ugrožavaju reprodukciju svakodnevnog života, unutar zajednice inicirane nove strategije i mehanizmi s ciljem očuvanja osnovnih sredstava za preživljavanje i reprodukciju identiteta. Članak dodatno ističe ulogu koju poverenje u monaško vodstvo ima u omogućavanju članovima da usmere svoju praktičnu svest i delotvornost prema očuvanju zajedničkog religijskog značenja koje predstavlja temelj njihovog zajedničkog života.

Ključne reči: Hram Šaolin, Kovid-19, svakodnevni život, upravljanje kriznim situacijama, Kina

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