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Being a Monk for a Day. Really ? The Case of Pu-Tuo-Shan

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Title: Being a Monk for a Day. Really ? The Case of Pu-Tuo-Shan

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Abstract:

It is possible for laypersons to purchase a tour package allowing them to ‘cross the line’ and, for a day or two, ‘live as a Buddhist monk’ in some Chinese monasteries, with the result that they might intrude into the life of its religious members much more deeply than a simple visitor with some degree of religious interest would. This paper investigates whether visitors who choose to experience the life a Buddhist monk for a day or two in a Buddhist monastery are looking for the opportunity of experiencing some degree of “peak/extramundane experience.” In Buddhism, a peak/extramundane experience is supposed to be a truly meaningful religious experience that can lead one to become enlightened. It is also a core objective, to a Buddhist practitioner, of undertaking a pilgrimage to and spending some time in a monastery. Yet lay visitors with various degrees of faith in Buddhism may have different purpose(s) for living for a while in a monastery. Each case can put the resident monks in a particular situation. This paper reports how Buddhist monastic members rationalize their acceptance of such ‘religious-touristic’ experiments. The current study adopts a phenomenological approach based on participant observations, casual conversations, and interviews with such visitors and with the monks who host them. The research locus is one of the four sacred mountains of Chinese Buddhism, Pu-Tuo-Shan, where about a thousand monks and nuns live in a large complex of monasteries and nunneries. The findings suggest that, due to the inclusive nature of Buddhism, everyone is welcome to experience Buddhist monastic life in Pu-Tuo-Shan, to the extent that even visitors bereft of religious motivation can attend sacred religious rites.