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The Puhua si 普華寺: Longing for Trustworthiness and Recognition

Transformations in the Religious Identity and Institutional Affiliation of the Chinese Buddhist Temple in Prato

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Abstract

This paper examines, on a religious and institutional basis, the evolution of the Puhua si 普華寺, a Chinese Buddhist temple in Prato (Tuscany, Italy), taking into account local aspects as well as its relationship with China. It presents the history of the temple, its ritual practices and doctrinal traditions. In addressing the questions of its changing religious identities and institutional affiliations, the paper shows that both local and global factors are involved, namely, Puhua si's own board, the Union of Italian Buddhists, as well as Longquan si and the Buddhist Association of China.

Keywords:

Puhua si, Chinese Buddhism in Italy, Union of Italian Buddhists (UBI), Longquan si, Globalization of Chinese Buddhism

尋求信賴與認同當中的普華寺 ——普拉托中國佛寺的宗教身份及其隸屬關係的轉變

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摘要

本文以宗教和制度兩方面為出發點，考察義大利托斯卡納大區普拉托市的中國佛教寺院普華寺的發展歷程，在考量其地域特色的同時兼論其與中國的關係。首先回顧普華寺的歷史，並對其儀軌與教義傳統加以介紹。而在探討關於該寺處於變化當中的宗教身份與組織隸屬問題時，本文提出其中所涉及的本地與國際因素，包括普華寺本身的管理委員會、義大利佛教協會、龍泉寺與中國佛教協會等主體都扮演著相應的角色。

關鍵詞：

普華寺、在義中國佛教、義大利佛教協會（UBI）、龍泉寺、中國佛教的全球化

The Puhua si 普華寺 was founded in 2009 by a group of Chinese migrants living in Tuscany, inside a former industrial building in the city of Prato.¹ The temple, conceived as a cultural association, has functioned as a lay Buddhist society for a few years, only engaging Chinese monks to celebrate Buddhist rituals during important religious events. Since 2014, Beijing Longquan si 龍泉寺 has shown a growing interest in the Puhua si and has attempted to convert it into one of its subsidiary nunneries abroad. In December 2016 the temple's identity seemed to be finally set: the Puhua si was to become an Italian branch of the Longquan si, whose abbot, Xuecheng 學誠, was at that time President of the Buddhist Association of China (BAC).² In the eyes of the local board of the Puhua si, this affiliation enhanced the prospect of admittance into the Union of Italian Buddhists (It. Unione Buddhista Italiana: UBI),³ a privilege that had not been granted before, apparently due to the unclear doctrinal and institutional affiliation of the temple. Surprisingly, one year later the same board ended any relationship with the Longquan si and invited a new abbot from Wenzhou, thus safeguarding the independence of the temple from Beijing. This happened nearly one year before Xuecheng resigned from the BAC and Longquan si, following allegations that he had engaged in corruption and sexual assault. Thus

¹ This paper was originally completed in 2016, but publication was delayed when the original publisher in China demurred, because of its supposed sensitivity. This study was conceived within the research project "Migration, Family and Religion" (Prin project directed by Cristina Papa, Università degli Studi di Perugia, 2013–2016; unit members on China: Ester Bianchi, Daniele Parbuono, Valentina Pedone) and is based on long-term and multi-site ethnography: fieldwork was conducted from 2012 to 2016 in Prato, Florence, Rome and Beijing; new fieldwork in Prato was conducted afterwards, in order to cover the last few years of the temple's evolution (2017–2019). I wish to thank Daniela Campo, Daniele Parbuono, Mario Poceski and Robert Sharf, who offered feedback on earlier drafts of this article, and the two anonymous reviewers, for their insightful criticism and suggestions.

² The BAC was founded in 1953 under the aegis of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as the only legal Buddhist organization in China at the national level. See Ji, "Buddhist Institutional Innovations," 748–756.

³ The UBI signed the Agreement with the Italian State on April 4, 2007; the law currently in force is no. 245/12 (available online: <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:2012;245>, accessed on August 21, 2019). UBI is therefore the Representative body of all Buddhists in Italy and the only direct contact of the Italian government. It follows that the various Buddhist institutions on Italian territory, to be able to aspire to the status of official place of worship, must be admitted in advance to the UBI.

it is fair to state that the Puhua si change of affiliation was not directly influenced by those events.⁴

The present study aims to examine, on a religious and institutional basis, the evolution of the Puhua si, taking into account local aspects as well as its relationship with China. Following a presentation of the short yet rather intricate history of the temple and its search for stability (see Chart II), transformations in the ritual practices and doctrinal traditions of the Puhua si will also be introduced, in connection with the temple's changing religious identities and its shifting allegiances. This will allow us to place the case under study within the wider context of the globalization of Chinese Buddhism in the contemporary era. With this preliminary research I hope to contribute to the study of the development of Chinese Buddhism in Europe and its interconnection with the transnational agendas of Chinese Buddhist enterprises (such as the Longquan si)—a fairly new and, to date, understudied phenomenon.⁵

1. Chinese Buddhism in Italy: An Overview

Officially numbered at more than 20,000 people (around 50% of the local foreign population, not considering the many naturalized citizens and clandestine immigrants),⁶ the Chinese community of Prato is among the largest

⁴ On August 1, 2018, Xuecheng was accused by two of his fellow monks of sexual harassment of Buddhist nuns, illegal construction of buildings, and financial embezzlement. Following the publication of a ninety-five-page accusatory document, which soon went viral both in China and abroad, Xuecheng resigned from BAC. He soon also left the Longquan si and was banished to a small temple in his home province of Fujian. See Johnson, “#MeToo in the Monastery.”

⁵ The study of the globalization of Chinese religions in the contemporary era is still a minor field of research within the broader study of the globalization of world religions. As for Chinese Buddhism, more attention has been given to Taiwanese Buddhism (e.g. Foguang shan or the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation) than to Mainland Chinese Buddhism. See Broy, Reinke, and Clart, *Migrating Buddhas and Global Confucianism*, 7–8, *passim*; also consider Laliberté, “Les religions d’Asie de l’Est mondialisées.” As for the spread of global Chinese Buddhist networks in modern times, see Ashiwa and Wank, “The Globalization of Chinese Buddhism.” For a study of the religions of Chinese migrants in France, including Buddhism, see Ji, “Territoires migratoires et lieux religieux.”

⁶ At the end of 2017, Chinese migrants officially residing in Prato numbered 20,695. “Although we do not have reliable updated data, to have an image of the actual Chinese presence in Prato, one should add to the official residents the many naturalized citizens and the clandestine immigrants. An estimate by Irpet,

in Italy, along with Rome, Milan, Bologna and Florence.⁷ Prato mainly attracts Chinese labor migration; other than manufacturing, Chinese migrants are engaged in commercial activities and catering. As for the majority of those living in Italy, Chinese migrants in Prato come from Southern Zhejiang (more precisely from the Wenzhou area), even though in recent years new waves have been arriving from Fujian and from Dongbei (Northeast).⁸

As for religious beliefs, the place of origin of most Chinese migrants explains the high percentage of Christians among the Chinese in Italy, which is far above the Chinese national average. Chinese Christians in Italy mainly belong to the Evangelical church, and in certain areas they constitute a third of the migrant population, matching the situation in the Wenzhou area.⁹ Despite this, the number of Chinese people engaging in Buddhist practices or going to Buddhist temples on major holidays is rather high, and, apparently, increasing.¹⁰

Chinese Buddhism in Italy is represented by two influential institutions, located in Rome and in Prato, and by an assortment of small Buddhist centers

presented at a conference in 2013, stated a maximum of 8,700 clandestine Chinese citizens, while ... [other sources have] as many as about 30,000 'clandestine migrants'" (Berti and Pedone, "A Bridge Between the Spiritual and the Worldly," forthcoming). For detailed data, also see Parbuono, "The Centre of the Centre," 219–222.

⁷ According to Istat estimation, on January 1, 2018, Chinese migrants holding a residence permit in Italy numbered 309,110. China was placed third in the chart of the most numerous foreign nations present in Italy, after Moroccans and Albanians (Istat Report, "Non-EU Citizens: presence, new inflows and acquisition of citizenship, Years 2017–2018", available on-line: <https://www.istat.it/en/archivio/224319>, accessed on August 21, 2019).

⁸ On Chinese migration in Prato, see in particular the recent collective works by Baldassar, Johanson, McAuliffe, and Bressan, *Chinese Migration*; Berti, Pedone, and Valzania, *Vendere e comprare*; Johanson, Smyth, and French, *Living Outside the Walls*. For general studies on Chinese migration in Italy and Europe, refer to Ceccagno and Rastrelli, *Ombre cinesi?*; Latham and Wu, *Chinese Immigration*; Pieke, Nyíri, Thunø, Mette, and Ceccagno, *Transnational Chinese*.

⁹ The Chinese Evangelical Christian Church was founded in Rome in 1981. Unlike Chinese Buddhists, it has a well-defined organization and structure and is well distributed over the entire Italian territory. See the official website: <http://www.cecn.it/>, accessed on August 21, 2019. On the spread of the Evangelical church among Chinese people, see Yang and Tamney, "Exploring Mass Conversion." On the Evangelical church among Chinese migrants in Prato, see Vicziany, Fladrich, and Di Castro, "Religion and the Lives."

¹⁰ For a sociological study of the lay devotees' commitment in the Puhua Temple, see Berti and Pedone, "A Bridge Between the Spiritual and the Worldly."

or minor temples. While the big temples are called *daochang* 道場 (Sk. *bodhimaṇḍa*, “site of enlightenment”) and are venues for religious practice with a public character, the smaller ones often bear the name of *jingshe* 精舍 (Sk. *vihāra*, “pure abode”), a term traditionally used for monastic dwellings where a few monastics take up temporary residence, and that here indicates less formal places of practice.

Most of these institutions are not officially recognized as religious sites by the Italian government, and thus have the legal status of cultural associations. Founded and financially supported by lay people and devotees, these temples organize religious rituals and practices, and function as formal and informal meeting places for Chinese migrants.¹¹ Even though some temples organize meditation sessions and other activities that are open to Italian citizens, they are conceived as places of worship for Chinese people. As often happens to religions of the Chinese diaspora, exchanges in the religious field with the local population are rather rare.¹²

The Huayi si 華義寺, the other influential institution besides the Puhua si, was the first Chinese Buddhist temple ever founded in Italy. Located in Rome, it was consecrated in November 2005 in the Esquilino district, near Vittorio Emanuele II Sq. In March 2013, the Huayi si Buddhist Association inaugurated its new headquarters in the district of Prenestino, an area on the outskirts of the city with a high concentration of commercial activities run by Chinese migrants.¹³ This new temple in Prenestino houses a community of resident nuns, which has quickly increased the number and variety of activities in comparison to those offered by the Esquilino temple. Both Esquilino and Prenestino temples are affiliated with the Zhongtai chansi 中台禪寺, in Taiwan,

¹¹ On religions among Chinese migrants in Italy, see Bianchi, “Alcune riflessioni sugli immigrati cinesi”; Cao, Giordan, and Pace, *Chinese Religions in China and Italy*; Vicziany, Fladrich, and Di Castro, “Religion and the Lives”; Zoccatelli, “Religione e spiritualità.”

¹² The same is true for the transnational locations of Taiwan Foguang shan 佛光山 and Yiguandao 一貫道, according to a recent inquiry by Nikolas Broy, Jens Reinke, and Philip Clart: “Although both organizations proclaim a universal message, which they deem relevant for Chinese and non-Chinese individuals alike, the dynamics resulting from their roles as providers of diasporic services appear to be important for the transnational space making of these two religious organizations. Thus, the context of their global spread is strongly shaped by the transnational processes of Chinese migration and diaspora building” (Broy, Reinke, and Clart, *Migrating Buddhas and Global Confucianism*, 4).

¹³ See <http://www.nationalgeographic.it/popoli-culture/2013/04/02/>, accessed on August 21, 2019.

but they also maintains ties with Mainland Chinese Buddhists, especially with the island of Putuoshan (Zhejiang). Unlike the Puhua si, the Huayi si is a member of UBI.

The two main Chinese temples in Italy are very different from one another with respect to doctrinal and institutional affiliation. The Huayi si mainly focuses on Chan 禪 practice, while the Puhua si, though influenced by other doctrinal currents, is still primarily a Pure Land place of worship. The Huayi si has a strong affiliation with a Taiwanese monastery, despite having been founded by Mainland Chinese migrants. On the other hand, the Puhua si is managed by an exclusively non-monastic board. It has relations with Mainland Chinese monasteries, but strongly claims administrative autonomy. The two temples are obviously rivals, and, particularly during major holidays, they compete for the favor of the Chinese community in Italy.

In 2016, the Bodhi Zen Center (Puti chanxiu zhongxin 菩提禪修中心), a subsidiary temple of the Huayi si in Rome, was opened in the city of Prato. In order not to overlap with the principle activities of the nearby Puhua si, it claims to be focused strictly on meditation and not interested in the performance of rituals.¹⁴

In addition, the Beijing Longquan si has also founded two small temples in Italy. The first one was established in December of 2016, following the visit of a delegation from the Longquan si to Naples. The Naples Longquan Temple (Yidali Nabulesi Longquan daochang 義大利那不勒斯龍泉道場) opened soon afterwards, hosting a monastic community of four nuns from the Jile si 極樂寺, the female branch of the Longquan si located in Fujian. Despite its name, it is formally still referred to as a *jingshe*. It organizes Buddhist activities for the local Chinese community, and it has launched a Wechat account addressed to all Chinese Buddhists residing in Italy.¹⁵ Finally, in 2018 the Florence Buddha Hall (Yidali Fuluolunsa fotang 義大利佛羅倫薩佛堂) was established in Sesto Fiorentino. Run by three former Jile si nuns, it often organizes meditation and study sessions for the local Chinese lay Buddhists, but it also holds rituals on religious holidays, thus competing with the activities of Prato Puhua si. The two *jingshes* in Naples and Florence are understood to be paving the way to the foundation of formal Longquan si subsidiary nunneries in Italy, and like the Puhua si they are making preparations to seek UBI membership.

¹⁴ Camillo Wang (personal communication, August 2016).

¹⁵ ID WeChat: gh_21be2c9b17ed.

The following table (Chart I) summarizes the basic institutional distributions of the three umbrella Buddhist organizations that have established and currently administer Chinese Buddhist temples in Italy: the Zhongtai chansi, the Shuilu si 水陸寺, and the Longquan si. Both the Zhongtai chansi and Longquan si exercise a significant influence on the administration of activities within their branch temples in Italy. On the other hand, as will become clear in the following paragraph, Prato Puhua si claims administrative independence from China.

Chart I. List of the Chinese Buddhist Temples in Italy (August 2019)

Temple's name	Place	Foundation date	Institutional affiliation	Doctrinal orientation
Huayi si 華義寺	Rome	2005	Taiwan Zhongtai chansi 中台禪寺	Chan
Puhua si 普華寺	Prato	2009	Wenzhou Shuilu si 水陸寺	Pure Land
Puti chanxiu zhongxin 菩提禪修中心	Prato	2016	Taiwan Zhongtai chansi 中台禪寺 and Rome Huayi si 華義寺	Chan
Yidali Nabulesi Longquan daochang 義大利那不勒斯龍泉道場	Naples	2016	Beijing Longquan si 龍泉寺 and Fujian Jile si 極樂寺	Self-claimed non-sectarian
Yidali Fuluolunsa fotang 義大利佛羅倫薩佛堂	Florence	2018	Beijing Longquan si 龍泉寺 and Fujian Jile si 極樂寺	Self-claimed non-sectarian

2. History of the Puhua si: Shaping a Worship Site in a Migration Context

The Puhua si has its roots in the year 2000, when the Chinese population in Prato had already reached 4,300 people (8,000 people according to unofficial data).¹⁶ That year a group of migrants from Zhejiang founded the Buddhist

¹⁶ Parbuono, "The Centre of the Centre," 226.

Association of the Chinese Community (It. Associazione buddista della comunità cinese). Some years later, in 2006, the Association decided to move into a bigger building, with the intention to turn it into a Buddhist temple. In mid-2007, the Association bought former industrial premises not far from the old-city center, and at the end of that same year, the newly elected President of the Association, a wealthy businessman named Huang Shulin 黃樹林, laid the foundation stone. The Puhua si officially opened on September 25, 2009, under the name of Buddhist Association of the Chinese Community in Italy.¹⁷

During the first years of activity the temple was a cultural association that resembled both a Chinese local temple and a lay Buddhist society (*jushilin* 居士林). According to interviews that I have conducted since 2012, in the years 2009–2011 the temple was a venue for basic Buddhist rituals and celebrations, at times intermixed with practices of the so-called “popular religion.”¹⁸ In 2011, the monk Xizhen 西真, a native of Wenzhou, was appointed abbot of the temple with the formal support of his ordination master Xuecheng.¹⁹ Xizhen used to spend most of his time in the Xiuliang si 休涼寺, his own monastery on Mount Daluo 大羅 (near Wenzhou). He would return to the Puhua si only for important religious events, when hundreds of Chinese devotees from all over Italy gathered in the temple at Prato. Meanwhile, other Buddhist masters from both China and Taiwan occasionally visited the Puhua si to give teachings and instructions to the growing lay community, thus

17 The association changed location two times before settling down in Gualchierina Sq. This is a strategic location; it borders both with Macrolotto 0 (the so-called Prato Chinatown) and with Prato old city center. For the institutional details of the foundation of the Buddhist association and of the Puhua Temple, see Parbuono, “The Centre of the Centre,” 226–232.

18 It is worth mentioning that these interviews have taken place in later years, when the concept of “correct/orthodox” Buddhist practices had already taken root in the Puhua si.

19 Xizhen, dharma name Jieru 界如, was born in 1962 in Cangnan (Zhejiang). He entered the monastic order in 1978 at the Guanhai si 觀海寺 on Daluoshan 大羅山 (Wenzhou, Zhejiang), and for a few years he lived a secluded life in the forest. In 1982, Xizhen settled in the Xiuliang si 休涼寺 and the following year was elected secretary of the Rui’an local branch of BAC. In 1984, he received complete ordination at the Guanghui si 廣慧寺 (Pingyang). In 2003, during the movement for the improvement of disciplinary standards among Chinese monastics, he renewed his monastic vows at the Pingxing si 平興寺 (Tailaoshan 太姥山, Fujian). Xuecheng presided over the ceremony, with the well-known vinaya master Jiequan 界詮 serving in the role of master of the ritual. Source: Puhua si UBI Application 2012 (Unpublished).

favoring the development of a multifaceted Buddhist environment. Xizhen was nonetheless still considered the principle master, regardless of the frequency of his visits and of his actual role within the community. This seemed a necessary choice to apply for admission to UBI.



Fig. 1: Abbot Xizhen celebrating Ullambana (August 2014) (Photo E. Bianchi)

The latter issue was considered of uttermost importance by the Puhua si board, since UBI membership would guarantee the temple legal status as a worship venue, thus allowing its transformation from cultural association into a formal religious institution. According to Italian law, such status provided various economic and fiscal privileges.²⁰ In addition, as an official religious venue the Puhua si would be able to apply for religious visas for its resident monastic community. (Monastics are currently issued short-term tourist visas.) After the first application proved unsuccessful,²¹ President Huang and the

²⁰ Among the privileges that are due to officially recognized religions is the so-called “eight per thousand,” referring to the choice of taxpayers in Italy to devolve “eight thousandths” of their personal income tax to a chosen religious institution. For more details, see the dedicated site of the Italian government: <http://presidenza.governo.it/USRI/confessioni/index.html>, accessed on August 21, 2019. Also see Nardini and Muccicon, *L’esercizio della libertà religiosa in Italia*, 71–75.

²¹ I could not see the original documentation, and hence I am not able to report the official reasons given for the refusal. According to Antonio Zhou, at that time

Secretary Zhao Xianyue 趙賢月 devoted all their efforts to being granted admission.²² The transformation of the Puhua si into a monastery with a resident monastic community was considered strategic to achieving that goal. Funds were accordingly raised to buy a nearby building that might host the future resident monastic community.²³ In China, Xuecheng, abbot of the Longquan si and dharma master to some of the most active lay members of the Puhua si, also became involved in this project.

From that point on, monks from the Beijing Longquan si began to pay visits to the temple on a regular basis. The first official visit was paid in December 2014–January 2015 by the monks Xianda 賢大 and Xianqi 賢啟.²⁴ They held the New Year celebrations, thus sanctioning the handover of religious authority from Xizhen to the Longquan si monks. Xianda,²⁵ who had been assigned by Xuecheng the task of founding a branch of the Longquan si in Italy, went back to Prato two more times in August 2015 and November–December 2015, with the declared aim of “normalizing practices and rituals,” as well as “facilitating the Puhua si’s admission to UBI.”²⁶

Secretary of the Puhua si association, among the possible reasons were the worship of popular deities inside the temple’s premises (Caishen 財神, the god of wealth, and Tudigong 土地公, the god of earth) and the absence of a spiritual guide constantly residing in the temple.

²² Lawyers and the Association’s accountant were asked to modify the contents of the statute and to prepare the necessary documentation. The application was submitted in July 2015.

²³ In August 2016 informants at the temple told me that the new buildings were bought after three years of auction and cost one million Euros (which were reportedly collected among the temple’s lay devotees).

²⁴ Xianqi was to become famous as one of the two authors of the ninety-five-page document accusing Xuecheng of sexual, administrative and financial misconduct. See above, note 4.

²⁵ Xianda took monastic vows in the Longquan si in 2011, a year after MA graduation at the University of Mineralogy and Technology of China. Since 2013 he has been working in the research team preparing the new edition of the Monastic Discipline canonical texts (edited by the Longquan si under the auspices of BAC). Source: Puhua si New Year Celebrations Flyer, 2016 (Unpublished).

²⁶ On February 24, 2016, a delegation composed by the same Xianda and Xianqing paid visit to UBI’s Board.



Fig. 2: Establishing Longquan si connections: Xianqi and Xianda (February 2015) (Photo E. Bianchi)

After the Dabei Longquan si 大悲龍泉寺 opened in Utrecht (Netherlands) in December 2015, a group of six nuns from the previously mentioned Jile si moved into the Puhua si, thereby actually transforming the temple into a Buddhist nunnery well before the enlargement of the monastic premises took place.²⁷ The official engagement ceremony was held during the New Year celebrations. Other than the six nuns, three Beijing monks were called to preside over the rituals: Xianqing 賢清, head of the Dharma Propagation Office of the Longquan si and vice-abbot of Utrecht's subsidiary monastery;²⁸ Xianxin 賢

²⁷ These six nuns were: Xian'a 賢阿 (vice-abbot); Xianban 賢辦 (guest receptionist and officer for external relations); Xianzheng 賢箏 and Xiandan 賢誕 (painter and calligrapher); Xianfang 賢防 (expert in Chinese medicine); and Xiandan 賢丹 (cook).

²⁸ Xianqing took monastic vows in the Longquan si in 2008, after he received his PhD in Thermo-physics from Qinghua University. From 2009 to 2013 he was appointed personal secretary of Xuecheng. Since 2013, he has been responsible for the English section of the Longquan si Translation Center and, since 2015, he has been vice-abbot of Dabei Longquan si 大悲龍泉寺, the subsidiary monastery in Utrecht. Since 2016 he has been in charge of Longquan si's Office for the Propagation of the Dharma. Source: Puhua si New Year Celebrations Flyer, 2016 (Unpublished).

信, officer for Longquan si Information and Propaganda Centre;²⁹ and the aforementioned Xianda.



Fig. 3: The Puhua si Delegation at the opening of the Utrecht Dabei Longquan si (December 2015) (Photo courtesy Zhao Xianyue)

The February 2016 celebrations were held in grand style. On the 15th day of the first month, thousands of Chinese devotees attended the Spring Festival rituals and the parade of the “dragon and lion dances,” which were also attended by a large Italian public. The parade obtained permission to enter the city center (this was not allowed before 2015³⁰) and walked to the front of the City Hall, where—for the first time in history—a Buddhist ritual was held in the presence of the major local authorities. (They comprised the Mayor of Prato and various figures representing the Tuscany Region’s management board.) This event seemed the culmination of a long process, with recognition finally coming both from Italian institutions and Chinese Buddhist authorities.

²⁹ Xianxin, with a degree in computer science from Beijing Polytechnic, received his ordination in the Longquan si in 2009 and was soon in charge of establishing the temple’s Information Center. Later he was appointed head of the Propaganda and Information Center of the Longquan si. Source: Puhua si New Year Celebrations Flyer, 2016 (Unpublished).

³⁰ For this issue, see Parbuono, “The Centre of the Centre,” 248.



Fig. 4: The six nuns from Jile si in Florence (February 2016)
(Photo courtesy Guo Yuanping)

However, the situation was far from settled. Due to growing tension between local interests and ties with China, problems arose within the temple's administration immediately after the Spring Festival. According to one informant, the majority of the board intended to safeguard the temple's autonomy against those members that were "inclined to hand over the temple to Beijing."³¹ Following a short standoff between pro-BAC groups and the more Italy-based branch, members of the board linked to the Longquan si were expelled, the new plan being to create a male monastery detached from Xuecheng and his community.

In April 2016, the six nuns returned to China with the official intention to apply for longer visa permits.³² However, they did not come back. The nuns were replaced by four monks from the Shuilu si, a Pure Land monastery in Ruian (Wenzhou), who started presiding over the religious rituals from June 2016. On August 17, two of them performed some rather simplified versions of the Ullambana rituals for two to three hundred lay-devotees (a considerable decrease compared to the eight hundred-odd devotees who attended the same

³¹ Buddhist lay woman in Prato (personal communication, February 2016).

³² Xian'a (personal communication, April 2016).

rituals in 2015).³³ Yuanyi 緣義,³⁴ the abbot to be, went back to Wenzhou together with President Huang in order to discuss details for the establishment of the monastery.



Fig. 5: The Chinese monks from Wenzhou and President Huang (June 2018)
(Photo courtesy Mario Poceski)

Meanwhile, UBI failed to approve the Puhua si's application for the second time. The estrangement from the Beijing monastics was considered one of the major reasons, insofar as the temple had lost the continuity of lineal master-disciple succession that was provided by affiliation of its abbot and abbot-to-be with the same master, Xuecheng. Rumor had it that negative input was also

³³ The four monks are: Yuanyi 緣義, Minghui 明慧, Yuanzhi 緣誌 and Zezheng 則正. Yuanyi (Wechat call, August 17, 2016) and Yuanzhi (personal communication, August 17, 2016).

³⁴ Master Yuanyi belongs to the Linji 臨濟 lineage of Chan Buddhism, of which he represents the 47th generation. His lay name was Chen Dexi 陳德溪. Born in 1981 in Kunyang Municipality, Pingyang County (Zhejiang), he took monastic vows in 1999 with the well-known Pure Land master Shengxiu 聖修 (1920–2010). In 2003, he graduated from the Lindong 嶺東 Institute of Buddhist Studies in Canton and took monastic ordination in the Bailin chansi 柏林禪寺 (Shijia zhuang). From 2004 he was abbot at Wenzhou Shuilu si. In 2017, following the death of his elder master, he renewed his monastic vows at the vinaya monastery Longchang si 隆昌寺, on Mount Baohua 寶華山 (Jiangsu). Source: Puhua si UBI Application 2018 (Unpublished).

provided by the Huaiyi si, the Chinese Buddhist temple in Rome.³⁵ It is worth noting that the Huaiyi si enjoys the support and trust of UBI, while also maintaining friendly relations with the Longquan si.³⁶ What is more, its subsidiary temple in Prato, the aforementioned Bodhi Zen Center, has provided a *de facto* alternative place for religious practices for many Prato devotees ever since the departure of the Jile si nuns.³⁷

The failure to gain admission to the UBI changed the situation once again, even if only for a short time. President Huang and other members of the board, whose principle interest lay in obtaining UBI membership, went to the Netherlands for the first anniversary of the Dabei Longquan si in Utrecht (December 11–13, 2016) “to pay visit to Master Xuecheng and express the wish that the Puhua si be headed by an abbot from the Longquan si, and that nuns from the Jile si take up permanent residence in the newly built monastic premises in Prato.”³⁸ In mid-December of 2016, the Wenzhou monks left the Puhua si, with the plan that six new Jile si nuns were to arrive in spring of 2017.³⁹

³⁵ Xianda (personal communication, July 2016).

³⁶ Xuecheng (personal communication, July 2016).

³⁷ Every Saturday, a master from Rome Huaiyi si, nun Jianqing 見清, used to hold a two-hour lesson in the main hall of the temple that includes the recitation of the *Xinjing* 心經, a meditation session and lectures on Buddhist teachings (Camillo Wang, personal communication, August 2016).

³⁸ Xianqing (personal communication, January 2017).

³⁹ The six nuns were: Xiandi 賢迪, Xiandeng 賢等, Xiandu 賢篤, Xianji 賢冀, Xianju 賢局, and Xianjie 賢界.



Fig. 6: The second group of nuns from Jile si in front of Puhua si (February 2017) (Photo courtesy Wang Haiyou)

Xianqing, vice-abbot of the Utrecht Dabei Longquan si and abbot-to-be of the Puhua si, explained that “to help turn the temple into a venue for ‘regular religious activities,’ as per the suggestion of the UBI board, the Puhua si will sign an agreement of long-term cooperation with the Longquan si. The Prato temple will thus become an Italian branch of the Longquan si, and will follow the guidelines of the Longquan si regarding doctrinal issues and Buddhist practices. This way, its organization will also be gradually normalized.”⁴⁰ For several months the nuns resided in the Puhua si, engaging in various activities both inside the temple (rituals, meditations, lessons in Chinese cooking, cultural events) and outside (e.g., a painting exhibition in the city center), just as the former six nuns had done before them. But this phase only lasted for a short period. In autumn of the same year, the nuns left the Puhua si for the last time.⁴¹

Since September of 2017, Master Yuanyi has been the new abbot and spiritual guide of the Puhua si. As he explained, since he still holds the abbotship of the Shuilu si in Wenzhou, it is possible to consider the Puhua si as

⁴⁰ Xianqing (personal communication, January 2017).

⁴¹ During a lesson at Perugia University, where they were invited to meet students in Chinese Culture and Society, the nuns told me that they were returning to China to apply for visa renewal, but it was clear that they were not planning to go back to the Puhua si (Xiandi, personal communication, September 29, 2017).

its branch temple, even if the Chinese headquarter does not interfere in Puhua si's administration.⁴² This abrupt shift was clearly taken in the effort to maintain independence from the Longquan si, which had requested complete control over the temple's administration. At the same time, new ties with Buddhism in China, and particularly with the Zhejiang area, were established in a clear attempt to reassure the local lay community of the trustworthiness and legitimacy of the temple's religious activities.

The Puhua si's religious and institutional identity was finally set. It was to be inhabited by monastics from the same geographical, cultural and linguistic area as the majority of the local lay population, who ostensibly were not to interfere with the authority of the Puhua si board in administrative matters. On November 23, 2017, a grand ceremony was performed to inaugurate the new buildings (including monastic dwellings and a huge cafeteria) and the renovated halls of the temple, as well as the new monastic community.⁴³ The ceremony was held in the presence of over eighty Buddhist monks from Mainland China and Hong Kong.⁴⁴ The event was also attended by local governmental authorities and members of the Italian Catholic church.

⁴² Yuanyi (personal communication, June 2018).

⁴³ The temple was enlarged from 700 to 1,400 square meters. "According to a report issued on November 24, 2017 by Ansa (the most important news agency in Italy), the Chinese religious community of Prato has invested 2 million euros since 2009 to date on renovating the temple, confirming the strength of their communal network, stronger than other immigrant networks, locally but also nationwide" (Berti and Pedone, "A Bridge Between the Spiritual and the Worldly," forthcoming).

⁴⁴ Among the most influential Chinese monks invited to attend the inauguration ceremony was Changjun 常君, the abbot of Zhejiang Wenling Wanfo si 萬佛寺. Other monks came from Hong Kong Niepan si 涅槃寺, from Dalian Yongqing si 永清寺, and from monasteries in Zhejiang such as Shengshou chansi 聖壽禪寺, Fuhu si 伏虎寺, and Shanyuan si 善願寺. I was able to interview many of these monks at the end of November 2017.



Fig. 7: Inauguration ceremony of the new buildings and new affiliation (November 23, 2017) (Photo courtesy Wang Haiyou)

In late 2018, the Puhua si presented a new application for admission to the UBI. As of February 2020, it is still pending.⁴⁵

3. Evolution of Worship and Rituals: Towards ‘Normalized’ Models of Practice

The process of transforming the temple into a monastery led to the implementation of new and differing forms of worship and practice at the Puhua si, the evolution of which mirrored the shifts in leadership lineage and institutional allegiance. Judging from the descriptive table of Rituals and Religious Activities of the Puhua Temple of Prato that was attached to the applications submitted for admission to the UBI,⁴⁶ on the surface not much seems to have changed since the appointment of Xizhen. However, a closer look reveals a transformation of rituals and practices that reflects the changes in the monastic communities leading the temple.

⁴⁵ Yuanyi (Wechat communication, February 2020).

⁴⁶ I was granted permission to see the documentation presented for the applications submitted in 2015 and in 2018.

Since 2012, two big ceremonies (*da fahui* 大法會) have been held every month on the first and fifteenth days of the lunar calendar. These events were usually attended by local devotees, mainly from Prato and Florence. The liturgical calendar was none other than the official calendar established by the BAC, which was punctuated by fifteen anniversaries of buddhas and bodhisattvas.⁴⁷ On each occasion, a massive crowd gathered at the temple: a few tens of people in the case of minor events, up to several hundred—or even more than one thousand people—for the grandest feasts. These anniversaries were celebrated by means of liturgical ceremonies of the Pure Land tradition. Between one ritual and another, vegetarian meals were offered to all the participants and eaten inside the temple (in the cafeteria but also in the buddha halls).



Fig. 8: Vegetarian meal in front of the Gods of the popular religion Caishen 財神 and Tudigong 土地公 (Photo E. Bianchi)

⁴⁷ The official calendar is available online in the BAC official website. See for instance the 2017 calendar at: <http://www.chinabuddhism.com.cn/xwl/gdfox/2017-08-03/36610.html>, accessed on August 21, 2019.

Over the course of transformation from temple to monastery, not all anniversaries and religious feasts at the Puhua si could count on the presence of officiating monastics. When there were no monks or nuns to officiate at the Puhua si, lay-devotees were entrusted to take care of basic forms of the liturgy. The three major events, for which the presence of the officiating monks was mandatory, were:

- First and fifteenth day of the first month: New Year and Lantern Festival.
- Nineteenth day of the second, third and ninth month: Avalokiteśvara anniversaries. On these days “seven-day meditation sessions” devoted to Guanyin 觀音 were held.
- Fifteenth day of the seventh month: Ullambana (*yulanpen hui* 盂蘭盆會) or the Ghost Festival.

Even though the religious calendar and the schedule of events has remained the same as in 2012, the performance of the rituals has changed over the years. For example, the program of the scriptures and rituals followed during the 2016 New Year celebration was richer and more structured than the program followed by Xizhen in the year 2013. Not surprisingly, the latest program closely matched the schedule followed at the Longquan si.⁴⁸

The temporary affiliation with the Longquan si has also resulted in a gradual transformation in terms of doctrinal tradition. While still officially referring to the Pure Land tradition, the importance of collective meditations and cultivation practices belonging to other Buddhist traditions, such as Chan, Tibetan and Theravāda, has increased. This non-sectarian approach to Buddhist practice is strongly supported at the Longquan si. What has also increased is the social commitment of the lay devotees, grown in accordance with the model of ecumenical and engaged Buddhism strongly promoted by Xuecheng.

In addition, daily religious activities became more rigorously structured. Compared to the past, the community of lay practitioners met more often and engaged in communal practices on a more regular basis. Whether monks or nuns were present or not, from 2014 to 2017 the following activities were performed: daily study meetings (mainly focused on texts produced in the Longquan si), gatherings to listen to the teachings of Xuecheng or other Chinese masters by recorded teaching or video, meditation sessions (Buddha recollection or *nianfo* 念佛, Chan meditation, meditation on the basis of the Chinese translation of Tsongkhapa’s *Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path* or *Lam rim chen mo*, etc.).

⁴⁸ Xianda (personal communication, December 2015).



Fig. 9: Daily activities: meditation in the Puhua si. (Photo E. Bianchi)

Since the summer 2017, after the Jile si nuns left the Puhua si, many of the lay practitioners who used to join the Puhua si meditation and study sessions chose to attend the meditation classes at the Bodhi Zen Center, the Prato branch of the Rome Huayi si. Alternatively, some continued to practice in the Longquan si tradition by following the Wechat teachings of the Naples Longquan Temple, by meeting with the Jile si nuns who had returned to Florence in their private apartment or, more recently, by joining the activities organized by the Florence Buddha Hall.

Since the Wenzhou monks have taken over the temple again, the influence of the Longquan si in religious activities has disappeared, but the monks have tried to maintain the discipline introduced by the Beijing monastics. The religious calendar is the standard calendar of the BAC originally followed at the time of Xizhen, but rituals are always celebrated by the monks and the calendar is followed scrupulously.

Despite the dwindling of committed practitioners that followed their arrival in Prato, abbot Yuanyi and the other three Wenzhou monks at the Puhua si have set out to reshape the religious activities of the temple in an attempt not only to

fulfill its major task of celebrating rituals during Chinese and Buddhist holidays, but also to meet the needs and requests of local lay devotees. The temple holds two services a day (morning service at 6:30 a.m. and evening service at 3:00 p.m.), and a meditation session (*chanzuo* 禪坐) every evening at 6:30 p.m. These daily activities are attended by an average of some twenty lay Buddhists, while as many as fifty to sixty devotees attend the same services on the first and fifteenth days of the lunar months. As before, tens or even hundreds of people come to the temple on major religious holidays, particularly on the occasion of Guanyin and Śākyamuni anniversaries. For the New Year celebrations and Ullambana, Chinese lay people also flock to the Prato Puhua si from different Italian cities, such as Milan, Padua, Rome and Trento.⁴⁹



Fig. 10: Lay Devotees during the evening service (Photo E. Bianchi)

The chanting services follow the Pure Land tradition as before. However, departing from the years under Longquan si's influence, the monks only practice Chan meditation. Yuanyi explicitly explained that he does not practice nor offer instructions on *Lam rim* or Theravāda meditations, clearly showing

⁴⁹ According to Yuanyi, in Trento (North Italy) there is a growing Chinese community and there are plans to establish a Puhua si subsidiary temple in the region (personal communication, June 2018).

his preference for traditional Chinese Buddhist practices in contrast to the ecumenical approach that characterized the years preceding his arrival.⁵⁰



Fig. 11: Chanting services in the Puhua si (Photo E. Bianchi)

Finally, for the Chinese Buddhists migrants in Italy, going on pilgrimage usually corresponds to visiting the monasteries of one's own area of origin (mainly near Wenzhou).⁵¹ During the years under the Longquan si's influence, quite a few lay people from Prato chose to spend periods of retreat at the Beijing Longquan si.⁵² Nowadays, pilgrimage also involves going to the Shuilu si, Yuanyi's monastery in China, which is located in the Wenzhou area.

⁵⁰ Yuanyi (personal communication, June 2018).

⁵¹ The first results of research by Ester Bianchi and Daniele Parbuono, on pilgrimages of the Puhua si lay community and devotees, were presented at the XXVIII Colloque Eurethno: "Migrants Chinois et religions: pèlerinages de retour en Chine" ("Le tourisme religieux en Europe: Saints, pèlerinages, visites et itinéraires interreligieux," Perugia-Assisi, September 12, 2014). See Parbuono, "Da Prato a Wenzhou."

⁵² I met a small community from the Puhua si during my visit to the Longquan si on July 30, 2016. Many of them were Xuecheng's direct lay disciples and continued to go to Beijing even during the following years until he resigned in August 2018.

As for the involvement of Italian people in the Puhua si's religious activities, it hardly exists. According to its statute, the temple has the following three objectives:⁵³

1. To spread Buddhist doctrinal teachings and practices among Chinese citizens living in Prato and in Italy, especially referring to the Three Jewels and the Four Noble Truths;
2. To engage in social, cultural and charitable activities, to promote teachings and practices, and to spread Buddhist culture;
3. To promote Pure Land Buddhist teachings.

The promotion of the Buddhist religion among Italian citizens is not explicitly mentioned, neither in the 2009 version of the statute, nor in subsequent modifications. This makes clear that the temple was and still is conceived as a religious venue at the service of the Chinese diaspora. Ultimately, the Puhua si's target audience in religious matters is the Chinese population in Italy.

The shift from the Jile si nuns to the Wenzhou monks has produced some changes in the temple's relations with the local population. The Jile si nuns were tasked by their master Xuecheng to "promote cultural exchanges and introduce Chinese values and cultural heritage to the people of other countries."⁵⁴ They were thus highly engaged in devising activities to attract Italian people interested in Chinese culture, for which they also took Italian language lessons.⁵⁵ These activities—lessons on Chinese Buddhism and meditation, cooking classes, calligraphy and paintings' exhibitions, lectures on tea ceremony, and so on—were clearly not aimed at propagating a new faith. Rather, they aimed to educate the Italian population about values and cultural attributes of the Chinese civilization, which were believed to be little known or appreciated in Italy.

The Wenzhou monks, on the other hand, do not seem to be interested in such cultural activities aimed at Italian people. On the other hand, they strongly support Puhua si's role of mediation between the Chinese community and

⁵³ "Statuto dell'Associazione Buddista della Comunità Cinese in Italia," September 2009, Art. 2.

⁵⁴ Xuecheng (personal communication, July 2016). For the "International Dharma Promotion" project, see Xuecheng's blog: <http://blog.sina.com.cn/xuecheng>, accessed on February 8, 2017.

⁵⁵ Accordingly, the Jile si nuns in Naples and in Florence are studying Italian, and a few are willing to enroll in Italian universities.

Italian institutions.⁵⁶ As observed by Daniele Parbuono, the Puhua si board is making increased efforts to develop relations with Italian political and religious institutions, which are clearly meant to promote further integration of the Chinese community in the Italian territory.

Chart II. Leadership, Monastic Lineages and Institutional Allegiances in the History of the Puhua si

2000	Foundation of the Buddhist Association of the Chinese Community (It. Associazione buddista della comunità cinese) in Prato (Tuscany, Italy).
2008	Election of the Puhua si board. The President of the Association is a wealthy businessman from Wenzhou, Huang Shulin. The rest of the board is composed of entrepreneurs and restaurateurs living in Prato and coming from the same area around Wenzhou.
2007–2009	Construction of the new site of the Buddhist Association near Macrolotto (Prato). First plans to convert the association into a Buddhist temple.
2009	Foundation of the Puhua si, Buddhist Association of the Chinese Community in Italy (It. Associazione buddista della comunità cinese in Italia).
2011	Monk Xizhen, a native from Wenzhou, is appointed abbot of the Puhua si.
2012	First Application to enter UBI (denied).
December 2014	Xuecheng, whose lay disciples are members of Puhua si board, shows interest in the Puhua si. First visit by Longquan si's monks to Prato.
January 2015	Xianda and Xianqi, from Longquan si, hold the New Year celebrations in the Puhua si.
2015	Second Application to enter UBI (denied).
December 2015	Dabei Longquan si opens in Utrecht (Nederland). Six nuns from Jile si (female branch of the Longquan si located in Fujian) move to Puhua si, turning it into a nunnery.
February 2016	Xianqing (Utrecht Longquan si's abbot), Xianxin and Xianda, from the Longquan si, and the six nuns hold the New Year celebrations in the Puhua si.
Spring 2016	The six nuns from Jile si leave the Puhua si and are replaced by four monks from Wenzhou Shuilu si.
December 2016	The Puhua si Board attends the first anniversary of the Dabei Longquan si in Utrecht, meets with Xuecheng and commits to Longquan si again. The Shuilu si monks leave the Puhua si and go back to China.
Spring 2017	Six new nuns from Jile si move into the Puhua si for a few months. Then they also leave the temple and go back to China.

⁵⁶ See Parbuono, "The Centre of the Centre."

September 2017	Yuanyi from the Shuilu si is appointed abbot of the Puhua si.
November 2017	Yuanyi and over eighty Buddhist monks from Mainland China and Hong Kong hold a grand ceremony for inaugurating the new Puhua si buildings.
2018	Third Application to enter UBI (still pending in February 2019).

Final Remarks

From the case-study of the Puhua si it can be inferred that many different factors, both local and global, can be involved when Chinese Buddhism takes roots in a migratory context within the borders of a contemporary European country. The tension between the Puhua si's claims for administrative independence and religious autonomy, the UBI's criteria and requirements of admission, and soft-power strategies implemented by the BAC, particularly in the years 2013–2018, produced a standoff in the development of the Chinese Buddhist temple of Prato that lasted for nearly two years. The risk of ending up in complete institutional isolation was avoided thanks to the decision of the Puhua si board to initiate dialogue with Buddhists of prestigious pedigree in China, while remaining unrelated to the Longquan si and less involved with the BAC, and at the same time choosing to open up again to local Italian institutions. The turning point was the grand inauguration ceremony held in November of 2018, which was attended by a large audience of Chinese migrants and Italian citizens. The local Italian media reported on the event extensively,⁵⁷ thus sanctioning the temple's resumption of the institutional and social roles it used to play before the crisis.

This article makes clear that most developments and changes in the temple activities and identity were carried out by the Puhua si lay board in order to meet the UBI's criteria and requirements for admission. Over a ten-year period, the Puhua si has been turned into a venue for 'regular religious activities,' and various attempts have been made to provide it with the traditional background and trustworthy lineage of masters that the UBI's statute requests from its

⁵⁷ See for instance the following selection:
La Nazione (<https://www.lanazione.it/prato/cronaca/tempio-buddista-pi%C3%B9-grande-ottanta-monaci-per-la-festa-video-1.3542068>, accessed on August 21, 2019); *Il Tirreno* (<https://iltirreno.gelocal.it/prato/cronaca/2017/11/17/news/il-tempio-buddista-raddoppia-gli-spazi-1.16130900>, accessed on August 21, 2019); and *Toscana Oggi* (<https://www.toscanaoggi.it/Toscana/Prato-il-Tempio-buddista-raddoppia-piu-di-mille-alla-cerimonia-di-consacrazione>, accessed on August 21, 2019), etc.

members.⁵⁸ As noted above, UBI membership is deemed important because it can guarantee the temple legal status as a religious venue, with the resulting legal benefits and fiscal privileges.

The stated reasons for UBI's denial of membership to the Puhua si are the absence of a spiritual guide constantly residing in the temple (first application, 2012) and the lack of continuity in the lineage succession of presiding masters (application 2015).⁵⁹ A more detailed picture was provided to me by a lawyer who was consulted by the Naples Longquan Temple, which is also planning to apply for UBI membership. In addition to requiring that the applicant institution have a formal statute regulating all religious activities and clearly assigning responsibilities and tasks to the religious community, the UBI also demands that the temple be open to Buddhists of other nationalities and to Italian citizens. On top of this, the UBI also informally requires that the abbot not be involved with the Chinese Administration of Religious Affairs and its local bureaus, and requests a statement on political issues such as freedom of religion in PRC and the Tibetan question.⁶⁰ These last requirements are very difficult to meet for monastics with Chinese citizenship, and they do not bode well for admission of both Puhua si and the Longquan si's subsidiary temples. On the other hand, the Huayi si's affiliation with a Taiwanese temple allows for more liberal positions and is probably to be considered as the main reason for its UBI membership.

As for the interest in the Puhua si shown by the Beijing monks, it should be understood in the light of the policies implemented by the Longquan si, which prior to Xuecheng's fall in 2018 was aiming at expanding its influence beyond the national borders. The transnational involvement of Longquan si in Europe, America and Africa was modeled on earlier and more successful Taiwanese cases,⁶¹ and responded to the Chinese government's will to use Buddhism as a soft-power tool in foreign relations (at least in the years 2013–2018).⁶² In

⁵⁸ See: <http://www.buddhismo.it/documenti/statuto>, accessed on August 21, 2019.

⁵⁹ I was twice requested to supervise applications, and to mediate with the UBI board, in 2015 and in 2018. I could thus assess all relevant material and have been in touch (via mail and telephone) with UBI board members.

⁶⁰ Attorney Massimo Urzi (personal communication via e-mail, August 3, 2018).

⁶¹ On Foguang shan's "transnational space-making" see the recent "Working paper" by Broy, Reinke, and Clart, *Migrating Buddhas and Global Confucianism*.

⁶² Buddhism was already employed in diplomacy during the Republic of China and the Maoist era. After the 1980s, its potential use as a tool of soft power in international relations was highlighted, in particular with Taiwan and the other Asian states of Buddhist faith. More recently, the "One Belt, One Road" policy (*yidai yilu* 一帶一路) has given Buddhism an important role in the policies of

addition to the American branch in Los Angeles, the African branch in Botswana, and the first European branch in Utrecht, Longquan si subsidiary monasteries were also planned for Germany (Frankfurt) and Italy. The choice of the temple of Prato was due to its location and history, and to the personal relations that some of the lay devotees on the Puhua si board had with Xuecheng. But when it became clear that the bottleneck with the Puhua si was not to be solved easily, another site in Italy was chosen instead. Already in December of 2016, half a year before the final crisis at the Puhua si broke out, a delegation from the Longquan si visited a center of Chinese migrants in Naples with the express wish to found a Chinese Buddhist temple there.⁶³ According to my informants, in 2018 Longquan si was also about to buy a country house on the outskirts of Florence for this purpose.⁶⁴ The delay in the establishment of an official public Longquan Temple in Italy is probably due to the personal vicissitudes of Xuecheng, and thus unrelated to the Puhua si's own destiny.

Considering that the interruption of all relations with the Longquan si occurred nearly one year before Xuecheng's fall from power, it appears clear that his legal case did not directly influence the Puhua si's decision to distance itself from the Longquan si. However, it is fair to state that those events—and, more generally speaking, the increasing restrictions on religious freedom in China and the loss of importance of Buddhism in Chinese soft-power politics since 2018—are all factors that served to diminish the possibility for Longquan si to further interfere with decisions at the Puhua si.

In conclusion, in the Puhua si's search for stability, the interconnection between the religious sphere of the Chinese diaspora and the transnational goals of a Chinese Buddhist enterprise such as the Longquan si only lasted a few years and eventually led to the latter's defeat. In the Puhua si's vicissitude, the main actor was always the Puhua si board, whose members are all wealthy Chinese businessmen from Prato. The temple is their own space, and they were not ready

promoting the “new silk roads,” in particular along the sea routes that connect China with the Southeast Asian countries. As for non-Asian countries, Buddhism was used to provide a gentle, refined and reassuring image of China. See Laliberté, “Buddhist Revival under State Watch,” 114–118 and, on the promotion of Buddhism in the “One Belt, One Road” project between the years 2013–2018, see Bianchi, “Itinerari buddhisti lungo la Via della Seta.” The role given to Buddhism within the project “One Belt, One Road” seems to have been significantly reduced since 2018, if not abandoned, following the increase of restrictions on religions in China. This topic deserves to be further investigated.

⁶³ Xianda (personal communication, December 2016).

⁶⁴ The purchase was not yet completed in August 2019. Xiandi (personal communication, August 2019).

to give it away easily. When they realized the extent of the Longquan si's demands, even admittance to the UBI became of secondary importance. In addition, it should be considered that all members of the board originally hail from the area around Wenzhou. They form the central core of a community of people—those regularly connected to the temple—with common geographic origins and linguistic-cultural traits. In this light, the choice to replace the Beijing/Fujian nuns with monastics from Wenzhou is not surprising at all.

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