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Eating Like a Buddhist: Vegetarianism and Ethical Foodscapes in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract This paper focuses on oft-overlooked vegan and vegetarian practices among contemporary Buddhist communities in Asia and Europe. It synthesises findings from a range of Buddhism-related contexts with an emphasis on transnational and Internet-based communities. Exploring multifaceted food imaginaries, foodways and place-making practices, it argues that communities of engaged Buddhists, at different scales, deliberately resist mainstream food markets.

Keywords Vegetarianism. Buddhism. Environmental sustainability. Ethical eating. Asia. Europe.

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1 Refiguring Foodways and the Buddhist Everyday

This article pursues the question of how vegetarianism influence ways Buddhists relate to themselves and their communities. We ask what can be learned about ongoing Buddhist belonging and community formation from analyses of how the experiences, values and practices of Buddhist vegetarians relate to (or differ from) 'Big Veganism/Big Vegetarianism'. The specific cases we examine extend from socio-historically embedded 'traditional' Buddhist communities to emerging or expanding traditions. We take the on-the-ground and the everyday of material practices seriously, focusing our attention beyond conventional understandings of doctrinal frameworks and notions of authenticity. In particular, our contribution discusses oft-overlooked vegetarian/vegan dietary restrictions and practices in contemporary Buddhist communities with an emphasis on their emic relationality with the global ethics and discourses of sustainability (Virtanen, Saarinen, Kamppinen 2012; Liu 2005; Cohen 2001).

First, we consider Buddhist ideas regarding the relations between humans and non-humans and the ways through which consumption of meat and dairy, vegan and vegetarian foods, can be materially, spatially and emotionally experienced, produced, circulated and consumed pursuant to doctrinal prescriptions and following individual and collective experiences of karma, purification, compassion and care.[1] After a historical premise, where we examine some of the main texts from which the meat-eating and vegetarian traditions are derived, we will then address the debates regarding the existence (or re-emergence) of eco-centric vegan/vegetarian values, and even of codified vegetarian *cuisines*, in the main Buddhist traditions.[2] We assess the relevance of nationally and transnationally engaged eco-Buddhist networks, groups and individuals to spread vegan and vegetarian habits as a form of religious activism aimed at peacefully resisting unsustainable food chains and the global economic and political systems that legitimise them.

The categories of "care ecologies" (Carolan 2015; Abbots, Lavis, Attala 2016) and "enchanted modernity" (Greenspan, Tarocco 2020), we argue, can help to shed light upon the multifaceted food imaginaries, foodways and placemaking practices through which engaged Buddhists intentionally resist mainstream food markets at

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1 Harris 1991; 1995; Swearer 2006; Duara 2015; Elverskog 2020.

2 Sterckx 2005; Stewart 2016; Klein 2017; Mohd Nor 2021; Tarocco 2023.

different scales, simultaneously inspiring non-confrontational alternative strategies of ecological sustainability for the future. In our comparative discussion of local Buddhist communities, we remain also attentive to the importance of transnational and virtually mediated communities. Our work contributes to ongoing discussions about Buddhist communities, including studies on Buddhist moralities, human/non-human relations and foodways (Kolata, Gillson 2021; Rambelli 2001) and offers some new perspectives on Buddhist practices and belonging.

Our first case study presents an overview of the role of Buddhism in shaping the current popularity of vegetarianism and veganism in Thailand. It discusses the interplay between Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions in religious festivals, city temples and online. The second case study consists of a preliminary investigation of a network of Chinese Buddhist vegetarians and their strategic cultivation of community-based practices. The third case-study shows how the charisma of a diasporic Vietnamese monk Thích Nhất Hạnh has stimulated the adoption of vegan practices among western Buddhists in dialogue with state authorities, scientists and policy-makers. As they explore contrasting geographical, historical, social, and political contexts of Buddhist practice, the contributors employ a variety of methodological and theoretical tools to highlight intersections with economics, gender, ethnicity, and temporality. By paying attention to the formulation of Buddhist ideas and practices of vegetarianism within institutions and in vernacular contexts through text-based and ethnographic research, this article aims to provide new insights into ethical dimensions of Buddhist dietary practices and community-building that apply beyond Buddhist contexts. We look in particular at some radical changes in the relationship between Buddhists and the environment that have occurred in recent decades: are contemporary interpretations mere reflections of the influence of modern environmental discourses on Buddhism? Are there continuities with the past? And if yes, what do they look like? How do Buddhist vegetarians' experiences, values and practices relate to (or differ from) "mainstreamed" Big Veganism/Big Vegetarianism (Clay et al. 2020; Sexton, Garnett, Lorimet 2022) and which ideas of the future and of environmental sustainability are brought about by the concern for the sacredness of food by engaged Buddhists? How are vegetarian dietary values, feelings, practices, experiences and experimentations impacted by the global efforts for a just ecological transition?

2 Buddhist Dietary Prescriptions and Practices: A Preliminary Overview

Buddhism is profoundly heterogeneous. Such multiplicity is also reflected in the set of possible dietary practices historically adopted by Buddhist monks, nuns, and laypeople since the early centuries of the diffusion of the religion in Asia, up to the present day. Of course, the main traditions of Buddhism share important ideas regarding nature and sentient beings. Indeed, the shared belief, that the Buddha praised *ahiṃsā* (commitment to not violating or damaging other sentient beings), is one of the main precepts, consistent with the Four Noble Truths, that express the ontological relation between human actions and the cosmological order: damaging other beings is a bad karmic action and causes suffering, preventing souls from achieving the *nirvāṇa*. At the same time, Buddhists tend to disagree with regard to the dietary prescriptions concerning meat consumption for monastic and lay communities alike (Ruegg 1980; Schmithausen 2003). The schismatic potential surrounding meat eating is still being discussed, as it has proved to be particularly relevant for practitioners interested in Buddhist views of the environment (Capper 2022, 191-203). In Sri Lanka, there are still significant debates over the doctrinal requirements and practical necessity of vegetarianism (Stewart 2016). Generally speaking, in many Mahāyāna countries, vegetarianism is ubiquitous.

2.1 Meat Eating in Theravāda Traditions

For the followers of Theravāda Buddhism, practiced mainly in Sri Lanka and in South East Asian continental areas (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia), the prohibition of eating animal meat only refers to specific animals. Namely, this interdiction applies to humans, elephants, horses, which are perceived as sacred; leopards/panthers, tigers, lions, hyenas which might attack wandering monks; dogs and snakes, because they are impure and poisoning (but in the case of snakes, also because they are perceived as relatives of the sacred Nagas) (Mahanarongchai, Marranca 2015, 2-3). For what concerns the *Vinaya* (monastic) rules, the prohibition to eat meat only applies to monks (*bhikkhu*) in specific situations: namely, the *bhikkhus*, whose subsistence depends on alms collections from the laity, cannot eat meat when they know, suspect, or have seen that an animal (including fish and aquatic animals) was killed expressly for nourishing a monk. Only under such conditions, the meat can be considered

trikoṭipariśuddha 'pure in three aspects'.[3] Crucially, according to the *Majjhima Nikāya Sutta* 55, such a prescription can be ascribed to the Buddhas' physician, Jivaka Komarabaccha, who showed how the issue of meat eating is intrinsically related to human health and karmic purity. A monk, thus, can eat *trikoṭipariśuddha* meat despite being aware that the animal suffered for being captured and slaughtered. His *karma* is not affected by meat eating, provided that there was not a direct intention of acting against that animal and creating its suffering. The karmic neutrality of the act of eating meat is explained with the fact that a *bhikkhu* must detach from any selfish behaviour, included the egoistic attitude implied in expressing an intention, as the one of choosing a specific food for satisfying a personal physical desire (it doesn't matter if it is a vegan, vegetarian or animal food option). In this view, the necessity to avoid any form of choice, even with regard to food preference, is prioritised over the prescription to avoid indirectly damaging other sentient beings (*ahiṃsā*) by eating their meat. From a moral point of view, such approach – which emphasises the *bhikkhus*' individual path to avoid selfish intentionality over the wellness of animals and the principle of *ahiṃsā* – is aimed to solve a tension between two doctrinal priorities apparently at odds (abstaining from killing versus abstaining from choosing). Such contradiction was considered to be a potentially schismatic issue in the fourth century C.E., when the prescription of avoiding meat for monks became a key point of departure of Mahāyāna hermeneutics from other Buddhist traditions (Schmithausen 2003; Ham 2019). This process instigated different cultural attitudes towards meat eating up to the present day.

2.2 Meat Eating in Mahāyāna Traditions

Multiple variations of dietary prescriptions exist in different Buddhist traditions, also in the light of specific environmental and climatic niches and the geo-cultural areas where the cult expanded around the Asian continent (Bodhipaksa 2009; Greene 2016). According to Schmithausen (2003, 315-16), the debate regarding meat eating aligned with the Pāli Canon in the early period of Mahāyāna Buddhism and in Tibet.[4] However, the emergence of vegan and veg-

3 Mahanarongchai, Marranca 2007, 1-8; Dhammavuddo Thero 2008; Stewart 2016; Ham 2019.

4 With regard to dietary restrictions for monastics in Tibet, Barstow points out that the prevailing traditions were not prescribing vegetarianism but tended instead to portray meat eating as a bad action that monks should avoid. The author also underlines that in the period of major flourishing of Buddhism in the area in the fourteenth century: "Tibetan monastics were not vegetarian. With some localized exceptions [...]

etarian positions is connected to the availability of new texts in the early fifth century C.E. (namely, the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* and the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*), which insisted that Buddhist ideals such as compassion required clerics to be vegetarian (Greene 2016). Crucially, in China, begging for alms was frowned upon. In fact, in the centuries of its expansion toward East Asia, the monastic order had to cope with the fact that begging was perceived as a low-class practice, and was associated with vagrancy (Welch 1967, 10-13). In this respect, the Mahāyāna tradition shaped up differently from other Buddhist schools. Monks and nuns tended to replace begging for alms with other forms of material transaction, by encouraging donations and gifts to monasteries, and by enhancing food production within the monastery properties, along with the ancient tradition of self-sufficiency (Mather 1981; Walsh 2010). In his *Sacred Economies: Buddhist Monasticism and Territoriality in Medieval China*, Michael Walsh argues that "Buddhist economic activity is not in itself surprising given the necessity of the Chinese Sangha to establish themselves as a social group with societal efficacy" (Walsh 2010, 58-9). We also know that, by the fifth century C.E., the Chinese Sangha had a high degree of economic independence. Monasteries became land-owners and farmers thanks to "generous grants of tax-free land from sympathetic rulers and pious donors" (Mather 1981, 418-19). They leased the land to farmers, or directly employed them, or farmed the land exploiting the labour of novices and probationers (Walsh 2010). Besides Buddhist scriptures, there exist many other sources that encourage vegan and vegetarian dietary restrictions among lay practitioners in both Mahāyāna and Theravāda contexts. These comprise apocryphal texts and a plethora of vernacular texts (Kieschnick 2005; Greene 2016, 32-3; ter Haar 2014). For instance, the para-canonical *Jātaka* tales, also known as Buddha's birth stories, which are very popular among the laity, have a very strong anti-hunting and anti-animal killing agenda (Stewart 2016, 44). Moreover, ideal models of conduct fostered the adoption of veganism and vegetarianism among the laity in both premodern and modern times (Kieschnick 2005; Tarocco 2023). In detailing the history of one of the most successful religious movements of late imperial China, the Non-Action Teachings, from its beginnings in the late sixteenth century in the Lower Yangzi to the middle of the twentieth century, Barend ter Haar demonstrated that it was fundamentally a lay Buddhist movement whose core commitments were vegetarianism and following the five precepts

vegetarianism largely remained a practice available to, but not expected of, most monks and nuns. Nevertheless, despite the fact that most monks were not vegetarian and that different monastic lineages emphasized vegetarianism to different degrees, it remains the case that vegetarianism as a diet remained a largely monastic phenomenon" (Barstow 2019, 3).

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(ter Haar 2014). In Chinese Buddhism, strict veganism is mandatory for monks and nuns and is also taken on by exceptionally pious laypeople in connection to practices of purification (Kieschnick 2005; Welch 1967; Tarocco 2023). These dietary restrictions seem to suggest that monks and nuns are fundamentally different from ordinary laypeople. And yet, the latter too can regard veganism as an appropriate dietary regime to reach purity and moral perfection. The process that leads Buddhist laypeople to embrace (even intermittently) veganism and vegetarianism is not necessarily only rooted in identitarian feelings, and is achievable through culturally embedded, bodily experienced routine practices that follow the example of clerics and religious leaders (Tarocco 2023). Buddhist dietary restrictions and prescriptions, also encompassing pious practices such as chanting and praying for the beings being killed or sacrificed – asking for their forgiveness or thanking for their sacrifice, for instance – are present today in other Mahāyāna countries, including Japan, Korea, and Taiwan (see respectively Ambros 2019; Park et al. 2020; Cheng Yen 2021). In recent years, Buddhist temple restaurants and kitchens have played a key role in spreading ethical eating practices among the laity. Importantly, such connotations are also revitalised in contemporary transnational Buddhist movements, as exemplified by the farms in Buddhist temples associated with the Plum Village network discussed here below in this article (Thích Nhất Hạnh 2014). The emphasis, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, is ultimately not just related to food consumption: indeed, restricted dietary practices may also encompass specific food production methods in which both monastics and lay followers are encouraged to engage by employing organic, sustainable, chemical free, regenerative agriculture. The farm model is experienced by the laity that visit the monastery for temporary retreats in Europe and the United States, showing how, for decades, veganism and vegetarianism in the West have found a steady anchor in well-established East Asian monastic practices. Moreover, today, we will argue in the following pages, vegetarianism and veganism are being reinforced by food consumption trends like, for instance, the mainstreaming of tofu and soybean-based food.[5]

5 According to a recent report "64% of US consumers rank sustainability as one of their goals. All told, younger shoppers are the most motivated to limit their personal impact on climate change". See McKinsey & Co. "Hungry and Confused: The Winding Road to Conscious Eating", 5 October 2022. https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/hungry-and-confused-the-winding-road-to-conscious-eating.

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3 From Fringe to Mainstream: Vegetarianism, Veganism and the Role of Buddhism in Thai Foodscapes

The state-sponsored Theravāda Buddhist tradition is hegemonic in Thailand. Veganism and vegetarianism are not prescribed for monks. Local Thai *cuisine*, despite using a great variety of plants and vegetables in its recipes, is typically a non-vegetarian diet. Moreover, campaigning for animal rights is very rare among clerics. This is despite the fact that ecologically-minded monks in Thailand have been pioneering representatives of the eco-Buddhist movements in South East Asia (Taylor 1991; Darlington 1998; Swearer 2006). Animals are usually regarded as impure and inferior beings when compared to humans, and the worst insult to a person is labelling her or him *sat* สัตว์ (animal). In recent years, however, eating habits have started to change and there is an increasing offer and appreciation of vegan and vegetarian choices in restaurants and temples. Vegan religious festivals in tourist destinations like Phuket, Hat Yai, Pattaya, Bangkok and Chiang Mai are increasingly popular. Asaree Thaitrakulpanich and others note that Facebook, YouTube, TikTok and other social media platforms are filled with Thai language channels promoting vegan dishes and recipes. In an online article titled "Veganism in Bangkok: A Successor to Buddhist Vegetarianism, Fueled by Trendiness" (2021),[6] Thaitrakulpanich describes the diet's popularity among middle class youth in urban areas. In fact, argues Edoardo Siani, there is a clear connection between food preferences and social status in Thai institutional discourses (2022).

Our preliminary investigation seeks to open up a new line of inquiry on these as yet scarcely investigated topics. Our sources range from Thai and international social media to blogs and websites on Buddhism and veganism/vegetarianism. The analysis covers the period May-October 2023. The study also relies on interviews and personal communications with scholars of Thai studies and with Europe-based Thai nationals involved in the business and trade sectors. In this section, we will present an overview of some of the dynamics at play and investigate the role of Buddhism vis-à-vis the discourse of environmental sustainability (*kwam yang yeun dan singhuedlom* ความยั่งยืนด้านสิ่งแวดล้อม).

The mainstreaming of vegan/vegetarian products in Asian societies plays an important role in the rapid spread of vegan and vegetarian habits among the Thai population, especially in urban contexts

6 See https://th.boell.org/en/2021/04/26/veganism-bangkok. The article was published on the website of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung Foundation, a German environmentalist Foundation connected to green movements and parties in Germany.

and tourist venues.[7] This development is connected to the mainstreaming of vegetarianism and veganism brought about by large food companies that have adapted to the 'green and healthy' consumerism fashions of the last few decades. These market adaptations, which do not necessarily indicate a contraction of meat production, may well entail, in some circumstances, the use of ethically questionable bio-technologies (Chatterjee, Subramaniam 2021). New start-ups are entering the markets with cruelty-free, vegan, plant-based products, and more and more business events are seeking to reorganise markets and marketing strategies in order to cope with an unprecedented change in consumers' behaviours (Clark et al. 2019).

In the 1980s, Thailand was labelled 'the kitchen of the world' because of its significant production and export of foods, especially rice, corn, pork and poultry. The label was used in the advertising campaign of one of the largest Sino-Thai corporations, the Charoen Pokhpand group (CP), one of the protagonists of the food industrial boom at that time. Today, CP, together with its partners, is joining western companies in the production of meat substitutes:

> Thailand's CP Foods has struck a deal to supply a plant-based alternative to chicken to the country's Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants as it seeks to grow the new brand Asia-wide. The meat substitute will have the same taste and texture as the real chicken used in KFC's recipe, the company says. Branded as Meat Zero [...] the menu change aims to cater to health- and sustainability-conscious consumers. CP Foods, a core member of top Thai conglomerate Charoen Pokphand Group, aims to become the leading Asian brand of plant-based meat substitutes by 2022.[8]

The mainstreaming of vegan food in Thailand appears to be predicated on transcultural discourses of 'health' and 'sustainability'. And yet, it is also interacting with the local religious sphere. In particular, the popularisation of veganism is reviving and expanding in the context of Buddhist practice.

The Thai word for vegetarian is *mang-sawee-rat* มังสวิรัติ, but, more commonly, Thais use the word *jay* เจ, a word with Chinese roots that describes foodways that do not include meat, fish, eggs, dairy products and vegetables with a pungent taste, including leeks, garlic and onions. The term is used when referring to the dietary regimes and

7 "Demand for Vegan Meat to Spike by 200 Percent in China and Thailand by 2025. New research conducted by ingredient giant DuPont shows that plant-based foods are poised for massive growth across the Asia Pacific region" in https://bitly.cx/dqSKx. See also the projection in the Asia Pacific Food Industry website, https://bitly.cx/vWwfz.

8 See https://bitly.cx/JvMy.

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religious habits practised by Chinese migrants, some of whom follow periods of abstinence from meat for ritual purification of the body at least twice a month, and in particular religious occasions (Sterckx 2005; Tseng 2020). As reported by my interviewees, Thai Theravāda Buddhists can sometimes join in during public religious celebrations, which are performed in Chinese/Thai neighbourhoods all over urban Thailand. To eat *jay*, then, is commonly perceived by the majority of Theravāda Buddhists as 'eating the way Chinese Buddhists eat'. Such a way of eating was generally perceived as marginal and minoritarian, at least until the early 2020s. Today, despite being a Theravāda country, statistics and projections show that Thailand is about to dramatically increase the demand for vegan and vegetarian foodstuffs. The country promises to become a global vegan hub, offering more vegan options to citizens and tourists than any other country in Asia and beyond. A statistic commissioned by an influential vegan lifestyle blog named *The Vegan Word*, reveals that, in 2023, the two cities in the world with more vegetarian and vegan restaurants per capita are two Thai cities, Pukhet and Chiang Mai.[9] The traditional Phuket Vegetarian Festival, which is actually a vegan one, is more and more successful. The celebration of vegan diets' purification effects is the focus of the festival, which – as remarked by the anthropologist Erik Cohen (2001; 2008, 68-88; 2012) – since the early 2000s met the growing appreciation of Thais who would normally follow the Theravāda tradition. This religious festival originally celebrated the miraculous release of the Chinese diasporic population from an epidemic that invaded their community in 1880. The communal abstention from eating meat as a means of purification was understood as key to the survival of the community. According to Cohen, the growing participation to the festival is part of a tendency among Thais of Chinese descent to revive their ancestral culture "without jeopardizing the Sino-Thais' adherence to Thailand or their Thai identity". At the same time, Thai adhering to Theravāda practices, increasingly tend to absorb Chinese cults (2008, 68-9). Starting from Phuket Island, the festival has now spread to the main Chinese communities of the largest Thai cities, to Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Hat Yai, Patthaya and many other tourist venues, combining Buddhism, veganism, spectacle and business. The festival takes place for nine consecutive days in September or October in accordance with the Chinese lunar calendar. In 2023, it was celebrated from the 15th to 23rd of October. Self-mutilation and body piercing practices by pilgrims and spirit mediums make the event particularly memorable, attracting visitors from Thailand and from abroad. The festival is an important space for vegan activists. For instance, in October 2021, the activist Thai

9 See https://bitly.cx/lth9p.

network *Root the Future* promoted the Thai vegetarian festival as a model for "a sustainable future of food".[10] It is also profitable for private businesses. Food brands and business enterprises are indeed looking at the space opened up by the vegetarian festivals in Thailand as an opportunity. Interestingly, as pointed out by Sims (2020, 1), this popularity benefits the business sector all over the country:

> The number of participants joining the Vegetarian Festival in Thailand has shown an increase by 9.6%; from 57.1% in 2018 to 66.7% in 2019. This indicates that people are becoming more interested in the festival. Consequently, [this indicates] a market value of 4,650 million baht which contributes to a 2.4% year-on-year growth of the Thai market.

Youth participation in fostering the growth of Buddhist Vegan festivals suggests that veganism in Thailand is connected with the creative revival of non-Theravāda Buddhist traditions but recent transformations are also beginning to have an impact on the behaviour of clerics. It is important to note that the schismatic potential inscribed in the adoption of vegan/vegetarian dietary patterns by Thai monks, nuns and laypeople has already challenged the Thai Sangha in the late 1970s, with the emergence of the Asoke movement. Santi Asoke, a temple on the northeastern outskirts of Bangkok, accommodates a vegetarian restaurant, a kitchen, a supermarket and some 50 *kutis* for the housing of monks and nuns known as Sikkhamats. There are several other vegetarian Asoke temples located in various parts of Thailand; the oldest ones are Pathom Asoke in Nakhon Pathom, Sisa Asoke in Sisaket, Sima Asoke in Nakhon Ratchasima. There are also Asoke communities in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Trang, Chumphon, Khon Kaen, Chaiyaphum, Petchabun and other places. Founded in 1975 by Phra Pothirak, Asoke is in favour of strict veganism. According to Charles Keyes, the introduction of Asoke veganism was criticised by many senior monks, and, perhaps surprisingly, by Buddhadasa Bikkhu, who is generally regarded as one of the founders of eco-Buddhist approaches in contemporary Thailand. Keyes, notes that:

> Santi Asoke's vegetarianism became the subject of a heated debate in the 1980s with the very well respected Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Phra Prayudh Payutto both defending non vegetarianism as orthodox Theravāda practice. (Keyes 1996, 18)

Nevertheless, today, Santi Asoke manages one of the main temple-based vegan restaurants in Bangkok, Chamlong's Asoke Vegetarian

10 See https://bitly.cx/6REII.

Restaurant, which is very popular among visitors, many of them Chinese, as well as local people (Essen 2005).

A last example from Thailand will show the unexpected way Mahāyāna Buddhists peacefully confront the millenarian tradition of meat eating among Theravāda monks. Indeed, some international NGOs and Buddhist western associations are actively implementing actions aimed to change Theravāda monks' attitudes and behaviour towards meat eating, under the principle of *ahiṃsā*. One of the most active organisations in this sense is the Dharma Voices for Animals (DVA)[11] network, founded around 2010 in the US by a group of practitioners willing to engage in the reduction of animal suffering caused within Buddhist communities still embracing a non-vegetarian diet. Since its foundation, this network started to engage Buddhist leaders around the world, and establish several national branches (named Chapters) in Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Thailand. Each one of these branches operates through the work of local directors, who push forward projects for the elimination of meat from meals consumed by Buddhist followers, especially monks. The Thai Chapter is managed by a famous Thai blogger and influencer, known by the pseudonym of Coach Bank. Cheera Thawornthawat is a bilingual (Thai and English) expert in human nutrition, and a former monk.[12] His broadcasts on vegan nutrition are followed by more than 200,000 supporters. He works within the traditional milieu of Theravāda Wat (temples) in order to raise awareness among monks on the virtues of a vegan diet. Crucially, more than half of the monks residing in temples is obese or overweight and several state campaigns have attempted to encourage healthier dietary behaviours (*Bangkok Post* 2016).[13]

Coach Bank's programme on YouTube and Facebook describes the intimate space of Theravāda temples' kitchens to the public. More, he encroaches upon the work of the *mae krua* (literally, 'mothers of the kitchen', the women who cook the daily meals for monks), teaching them how to prepare tasty vegan food for clerics, instead of meat-based dishes. The discourse around 'healthy and sustainable food', the fact that taking care of the body through a vegan diet can also help the environment, is repeated like a mantra in his cooking sessions and during the meetings with monks. This last case epitomises an effort from cosmopolitan Buddhists to 'bring back' into Asian countries the Mahāyāna version of Buddhist teachings regarding meat eating. Rather than portraying vegan habits as religiously purer than non-vegan ones, it avoids insisting on schismatic approaches. Even if the mission of the DVA is to save animals in the name of *ahiṃsā*, it would

11 See the website www.dharmavoicesforanimals.org.

12 See the website www.dharmavoicesforanimals.org/thailand-project/ (in Thai).

13 See https://bitly.cx/zrlw.

be inappropriate to try to teach the Mahāyāna interpretation of such concepts to mainstream Thai monks and risk a pushback (as demonstrated by the Santi Asoke case). For this reason, it may be more effective to use a sort of (westernised) rhetoric of health and sustainability to convince them. Ultimately, ideas of health and sustainability are the modern ingredients being added to Mahāyāna veganism in order to make it appetising for the palate of Theravāda *bikkhus* without returning to the ancient doctrinal tensions between the precept of *ahiṃsā* and the impossibility for monks to express choices or preferences. In conclusion, veganism in Thailand does not merely connect to the global mainstreaming of food fashions among urban middle-class youth. Rather, the historical interplay between Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions also contribute to create a fertile ground for the 'veganisation' of local food markets. In the Thai context, the reception of the mainstream rhetoric portraying vegan/vegetarian eating practices as forms of care for the body (health) and the environment (sustainability), is also accompanied by individual and collective ambitions to understand such practices as a way to cultivate spiritual purity: a form of modern enchantment (Tarocco 2023), otherwise unavailable to local Theravāda practitioners.

4 The Urban Refashioning of *Sushi*: Vegetarian Practices in Contemporary Shanghai

Today, Chinese Buddhist-inspired food cultures and ethical eating are experiencing a major resurgence and "many renowned monks and nuns strongly encourage their followers to practise *sushi* on a daily basis" (Tarocco 2023, 8). This phenomenon, notes Jacob Klein (2017), takes place in the context of urban China's unprecedented socio-cultural changes and increasing concerns around food safety. As a response, Chinese Buddhists have actively engaged in reshaping vegetarian foodways. The Shanghai-based Buddhist communities we have engaged with are discursively entangled with non-vegetarians by ideas and practices of 'care' (*guanai* 关爱), not merely for non-human animals, a traditional Buddhist principle, but also for vulnerable people. Based on in-depth interviews, site visits and participant observation conducted from March to August 2023, this section looks at a constellation of actors involved in vegetarianism in Shanghai. Primarily linked to Buddhist institutions, our interlocutors not only engage in manufacturing vegetarian foodstuff, they also create novel venues for self-cultivation, promoting teachings and values aligned with changing everyday lifestyles in Shanghai. One of the sites we have engaged with is La Fonte (*fangtan* 方壇), a vegetarian café and multifunctional cultural space adjacent to Jade Buddha Temple in Shanghai (*Yufo si* 玉佛寺) founded by the Buddhist entrepreneur Xue

Baozhong 薛宝中 and her son, the film producer Huang Yue 黄悦. Xue and Huang are part of a growing network of local and transnational Buddhist communities in Shanghai and beyond.[14] Thanks to the support of Buddhist monastic institutions, they have established a gathering space for those urbanites interested in the regular (or occasional) consumption of vegetarian food, ethical engagement, and helping vulnerable social groups. The narratives, practices and social spaces that these practitioners inhabit are not necessarily aligned with mainstream vegetarianism and sustainability politics. Rather, Buddhist dietary habits are cultivated along an expanded and reinterpreted awareness of 'protecting sentient life' (*husheng* 护生) (Tarocco 2023). In other words, their vegetarian practices are aligned with the global rise of plant-based urban lifestyles, on the one hand, but also infuse Buddhist tenets into contemporary notions of care and 'community cultivation' (*shequn yingzao* 社群营造).

In pre-war Shanghai, there were many institutions aligned with Buddhist values and embedded in novel cosmopolitan convivial practices (Tarocco 2023; Welch 1967), and in 1922, the Shanghai Buddhist world welcomed the opening of one of the most famous vegetarian restaurants in the Chinese-speaking world, Gongdelin 功德林. Its resourceful manager, the layman Zhao Yunshao 赵云韶 (1884-1964) had fundraised among wealthy Buddhists to create a space for gathering and engage with ethical eating. Over the decades, the restaurant branched out in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Macau and elsewhere. The Shanghai Wuyuan Road 五原路 branch has been conducting brisk business for more than fifteen years, welcoming a mixture of office workers and devoted practitioners. Its inviting dishes are presented as healthy and nutritious. References to Buddhism are everywhere, from the couplets on the walls, to the altars and shrines, to the names of the dishes on the menus. Many of the regular clients are practising Buddhists, who also tend to be concerned about the quality of the ingredients in their dishes, the water and oil used to cook them, as well as banquet culture and food waste. They are also concerned about health and sustainability. "I am really worried about overeating meat consumption in China" tells us Mrs. L. a retired teacher in her early 60s. "When I was a young woman, we were very frugal (*jiejian* 节俭) and thrifty but now meat is everywhere". Her concerns are shared by China's leadership. Effective immediately on 29 April 2021, the Chinese government issued its latest law regarding food waste and food security. The law's official title is 'Anti-food Waste Law of the People's Republic of China' (*Zhongguo renmin gongheguo fanshepin fanfeifa* 中华人民共和国反食品浪费法). It includes articles on

14 We thank Mrs. Xue and Mr. Huang for their kind help and valuable insights and for agreeing to use their real identities.

environmental protection, the promotion of sustainable development, and the importance of educating society on dietary and nutritional knowledge to limit food waste. Due to these various similarities, in this chapter, there is no subsection included among the food waste law's implementations and its specific changes regarding consumer behaviours, like under the section of the provincial regulation ('Anti-food Waste Law of the People's Republic of China', 2021). At Gongdelin, shop attendants tell us that women are more likely than men to buy the famous plant-based so-called 'mock' or vegetarian meat (*fangrou* 仿肉or *surou* 素肉) for which the brand is famous. Interestingly, meat eaters are as likely as vegetarians and vegans to buy plant-based meat and higher meat attachment predicts higher purchase likelihood. The key attitudinal predictors of purchase intent, the shop owner tell us, were perceived healthiness, tastiness, and sustainability as a long term food source. Right next to the second Gongdelin-operated vegetarian bakery on Shanghai's Wuayuan Road, the Australian company Oatly displays (in April 2023) a big poster that reads, in English: "We Are the Post-Milk Generation".[15] The choice of the location is perfect, in that it capitalises on Shanghai older vegetarian foodways as well as the more recent appeal of coffee and coffee shops, with a rapid rise of vegetarian and vegetarian-friendly businesses catering to middle class consumers (Cao 2018; Klein 2017). And yet, while, vegetarian trends can be mediated by emerging discourses of sustainability and carbon emissions, we also should bear in mind that environmental politics and animal welfare are still touchy subjects in China, since the majority of the population consumes meat, especially pork (Cao 2018). As one of the China-based managers of Oatly told us in a long interview, marketing strategies for plant-based products in China deliberately dilute environmentalism and the ethics of non-killing:

> To promote vegetarian diets, we either fashion a cool, young lifestyle that prioritises health and nutrition, or work with Buddhist communities [...] being vegetarian in China is nothing new as it is intuitively a Buddhist culture [...] people already know that.[16]

While these companies cannot afford to antagonise the meat-consuming mainstream public, on the other hand, vegetarian eating is considered culturally acceptable. Buddhists are non-confrontational active promoters of the 'vegetarian scene' both online and offline. In one of the many online group forums managed by China's Vegan

15 A slogan created by Oatly, an oat drink company that advocates non-dairy consumptions. See `https://www.oatly.com/en-us/oatly-who`.

16 Private communication with Oatly manager D., Shanghai, 22 April 2023.

Society (*huamanghui* 华鞔会), for instance, a collective with a dedicated lay Buddhist following, one can read hundreds of daily massages from clerics, doctrinal teachings, ritual announcements, and exchanges between young vegetarians (Tarocco 2023).

Shanghai's three major Buddhist institutions, Jing'an Temple, Longhua Temple, and Jade Buddha Temple have each historically maintained unassuming canteens and shopfronts selling vegetable noodle soups alongside Buddhist paraphernalia. In recent years, however, each temple has rebranded their vegetarian food outlets, opening vegetarian cafes and even designer food markets to cater to younger visitors. The most successful café, La Fonte, is adjacent to Jade Buddha Temple. It has featured heavily on Chinese social media platform since it first opened its doors in 2021. It is a multifunctional library, vegetarian café, pastry store and cinematheque. Together with her lay Buddhist husband, Xue Baozhong, also manages the vegetarian restaurant *Yufosi suzhai* (玉佛寺素斋) across the street. Xue launched the new space with her son, film producer Huang Yue. The Huang family 'took refuge' (*guiyi* 皈依) in Jade Buddha Temple as followers of Abbot Juexing (觉醒法师) in the early 2000s. In 2009, Xue joined the institution as the manager of the vegetarian canteen. Subsequently, she became a core member of Juequn's Cultural and Educational Foundation (觉群文教基金), a charity and welfare organisation affiliated with Jade Buddha Temple with the Abbot as its leader. Xue tells us that working with Jade Buddha Temple and its administration, the vegetarian business "has grown significantly" over the past decade.

Over the past few years, they tell us, Xue and Huang saw the need for a variety of charity programmes and decided to "branch out with a new open mind". They created a new space that is different from the ones attached to monastic institutions, or even from Gongdelin. The traditional restaurant business is considered by Xue as "too complicated and old-fashioned". For her, managing a Buddhist business today requires a "more professional attitude". She followed the Abbot's call to expand and refurbish Jade Buddha Temple for "promoting Buddhist doctrines" (*Hongyang fofa* 弘扬佛法), thus reflecting the "more progressive outlook" of major Buddhist institutions in metropolises like Shanghai to appeal to new followers, including younger urban residents. For Huang, opening a new space to "complement contemporary ideas and cultural spaces", outside the temple, which could sustain Buddhist ways of eating and scale up the vegetarian pastry business, aligns with "new urban lifestyles". Huang is a Yale University graduate who returned to Shanghai after graduation. For him social spaces, book salons and community gatherings are a necessary part of life. As we sat down to eat and talk, the space was populated by visitors curiously inquiring about vegetarian products packaged in exciting new designs. Huang's plans also entail several new branches in other parts of the city, all of which would only serve vegetarian

food. Through several interviews and an invitation at the vegetarian restaurant, Huang walked us through the ways dishes, recipes and ingredients were designed and selected. For example, prepackaged pastries and freshly cooked dishes must not involve processed ingredients. Often, he noted, Buddhist-inspired 'fake meats' can be heavily processed, factory food. Learning from and incorporating *cuisines* from other Buddhist restaurants, Xue's vegetarian business, "privileges vegetables as they are". Fake meat, according to her ideal of health and wholesomeness, is "unhealthy, processed, too greasy".

Xue sat down with us for a long interview in July 2023, after taking part in a ritual at Jade Buddha Temple. A pious Buddhist and dedicated vegan, Xue's journey began with her son's illness. At the age of 9, the child suffered from a severe heart disease. Hoping for her son's recovery, Xue went to Jade Buddha Temple where, thanks to the help of a monk, she started on a path of religious commitment. In 2000, her child recovered fully and took refuge becoming the first Buddhist in the family. Later, Xue's mother fell ill and was hospitalised. Witnessing the suffering and powerlessness of many families at the hospital and recalling her own experience at the temple, Xue soon vowed to follow Buddhism, and became a vegan ever since. "Miraculously", Xue said, "I completely lost my desire for meat, which is very different from those who go vegetarian solely for the sake of health or because of peer pressure". Her Buddhist practice, based on the experience of the family's suffering, not only brought her tremendous healing and inner peace, but also turned other members of the family into vegetarian. For example, Huang's brother refused to eat meat since he was born. The Huang attribute later achievements in their business and individual personal life to Buddhist belief and healthy vegetarian diets. The Huang story of suffering and healing undergirds the establishment of La Fonte. Both Xue and Huang believe that their mission must be grounded in extending karmic care to the community and vulnerable others in need. Although a major motive to create La Fonte was out of Huang's passion for independent film screening and social gatherings, Xue suggested that the space also mediated more traditional Buddhist activities and other charitable practices. For instance, the temple offers events to protect sentient nonhuman animals, which are organised by Juequn Cultural and Educational Foundation on the temple's behalf. Every eighth day of the lunar month, followers gather in front of the temple to release eels and river fish collected from wet markets into Dianshan Lake outside Shanghai. Some spiritual events are even coordinated and held digitally (see also Yang 2015; Tarocco 2017). Huang believes that establishing La Fonte as a public-facing social space increases the visibility of physically impaired teenagers. In fact, one of the many La Fonte's programmes that has gained significant public attention is its inclusion of young autistic adults as baristas and employees. La Fonte

and the Foundation host training programmes and further employment opportunities for these young adults, as well as art workshops, movie screenings, and reading groups open to the public. In fact, participatory practices, community centres and alternative spaces have been emerging in urban China in an effort to re-stablish community ties (Chen, Qu 2020). Huang told us of his reluctance to imagine La Fonte as "just a coffee business". Rather, he wants to create a space that is engaged with wider social causes. He referred to his placemaking practices as "community cultivation". Not only does he hope that the space will gather diverse social groups, but that it will also extend care, a core Buddhist value, to the everyday life of all visitors. In fact, the parents of autistic children and adults also enjoy their leisure time at La Fonte's library while the training programme is taking place. They socialise and share caretaking experiences with each other, as well as with other visitors. Some of the caretakers are already lay Buddhists associated with Jade Buddha Temple. Many more will soon convert, tells us Xue.[17]

La Fonte engages in a variety of activities, from hospice care to food catering, to companionship for solitary elders. Xue makes clear that vegetarian food and the idea of 'protecting life' (*husheng* 护生) are key to these social programmes. The food provided to participants is strictly vegetarian. Crucially, for Xue, *husheng* includes any practice that sustains 'vitality' (*yousheng mingli* 有生命力). Every programme initiated by the Foundation aims to care for living beings, which entails care extended to both nonhuman animals and human communities, especially those who are disabled, impaired and need community support. The idea of *husheng*, then, departs from practices of non-killing based on ethical eating or dietary restrictions, and is instead redefined as 'care ecologies' foregrounding affective and visceral experiences. Carolan (2015) has in fact suggested that alternative foodscapes can become a way care is extended and imagined, incorporating "tastes, cares, textures, and practices". During several of our visits, we met parents of autistic children who, together with Huang, carefully packed vegetarian pastries into bags designed as gift for other visitors and followers in the social network.

Jacob Klein (2016) has suggested that seeking health benefits is a major motivation for the consumption of vegetarian food. And many La Fonte's customers are young Chinese urbanites or foreign expats who seek a healthier and fresher lunch option. Xue, while expressing

17 Ethnographic observations and journalistic accounts confirm that there is a significant growth of interest for Buddhism in post-COVID Shanghai. See for example Ye Zhanhang, "Young Chinese Embrace Temple Visits to Evade Life's Pressures". *Sixth Tone*, 21 March 2023 (`https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1012524`). Online travel platforms are seeing a surge in bookings to religious sites from young people seeking a "heart-cleansing experience". See `https://bitly.cx/LP570`.

multiple times the importance of vegetarian food for her own health, sympathises with urbanites' struggles working in a fast-paced environment full of stress. She feels that eating "freshly made vegetarian soup" will improve young urbanites' "deteriorating health" due to the overconsumption of grease and meat and having an unbalanced life rhythm. For her, the *sushi* 素食 experience extends beyond either Buddhist principles or environmentalism to highlight the everyday welcoming and caring for guests, participants, and visitors in the community. Thus, through events and community-making activities, La Fonte conflates Buddhist practices with socially oriented urban practices of care. Cultivating communities becomes a crucial way for La Fonte to engage with trends and discourses taking place in Shanghai and elsewhere in the Sinosphere. Its creative refashioning of vegetarian eating fosters everyday urban practices not necessarily confined by either sustainable lifestyle trends or traditional Buddhist doctrines (Greenspan, Tarocco 2020; Kolata, Gillson 2021).

5 A Framework of Practice Between Sustainability and Ethical Eating: The Communities of Plum Village

While the previous case-studies, focusing on two Asian countries, witness the embeddedness of current urban vegetarian trends within larger contexts of care and self-cultivation, in this section we discuss the presence of Buddhist vegetarian and vegan regimes in regions and countries where Buddhism is not a majority religion. In Europe, vegetarian and vegan diets are embodied mostly for health or environmental considerations. With the widespread adoption of Buddhism in Europe, Australia and North America since the late nineteenth century, however, the value of compassion towards all living beings has slowly become one of the main drivers for adopting vegan and vegetarian diets. In this section, we will focus on the work of the Vietnamese monk Thích Nhất Hạnh. With no critical biography yet available, this focused, ecocritical interpretation, looks at the Vietnamese monk's dialogues with western practitioners around interconnected issues like peace, socio-environmental sustainability and ethical eating. According to environmentalist and engaged Buddhist practitioner Stephanie Kaza,[18]

> Buddhists may actively promote non-harming through food choice as a form of socially engaged Buddhism. As interest in Buddhism

18 Stephanie Kaza is Professor Emerita in the Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources at the University of Vermont. She is a writer, a practicing Soto Zen Buddhist, and has taught religion and ecology.

> grows in the west, I believe it will see increased receptivity to Buddhist moral concerns which could influence western food choices in a significant way. (2005, 386)

The choice of food, for her, becomes the practice itself. Likewise, in "Nets of Beads, Webs of Cells", Buddhist poet and environmentalist Gary Snyder argued that western vegetarians are usually educated members of a privileged class, living in countries that are the largest per capita meat consumers of the world (Kaza, Kraft 2000, 346-52). Snyder also predicted the need to recognise the world's dependence on fossil fuel agriculture, which produces vegetables and grains in a manner that degrades soil, air, and water and which endangers the health of underpaid immigrant labourers. For Snyder, it is not only about choosing what to eat, but also about interpreting the First Precept (*ahiṃsā*, cause no unnecessary harm, refrain from taking life) and the first of the Bodhisattva vows within a frame of individual possibilities and never indulging in self-righteousness. It is important to remark that if within Kaza's and Snyder's reflections, vegetarianism is mainly understood as an individual practice, it is with the Vietnamese monk Thích Nhất Hạnh (1926-2022), that the prescription for vegetarianism first, and of veganism later, can be understood as an explicit political act.

Thích Nhất Hạnh is a preeminent figure in contemporary Buddhism, and one of most revered spiritual leaders in the world. Also known as Thầy, he was a poet, prolific author, scholar and activist, and due to his efforts to promote peace and build a new vision of a compassionate world.[19] The monk witnessed death and suffering from an early age, during the Japanese occupation of Vietnam, the Great famine of 1945, and the return of the French occupation. One of his most influential contributions, an essay titled "A Fresh Look at Buddhism", was published in 1955 in the front page of *Democracy* (*Dân Chû*, a Vietnamese politically-neutral daily newspaper): in this contribution, Thích Nhất Hạnh's vision for an engaged Buddhism was presented for the first time.[20] With it, a new way to look at Buddhism was forged.[21] In 1958, the monk co-founded the com-

19 Thầy is the informal Vietnamese word for 'teacher' and the name by which Thích Nhất Hạnh is known to his students.

20 "Engaged Buddhism is born in such a difficult situation, in which you want to maintain your practice while responding to the suffering. You seek the way to do walking meditation right there, in the place where people are still running under bombs. And you learn how to practice mindful breathing while helping care for a child who has been wounded by bullets or bombs". See "In Memoriam: Thích Nhất Hạnh", *Insight Journal*, Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. https://www.buddhistinquiry.org/article/in-memoriam-thich-nhat-hanh/.

21 Subsequently, in the first decade of 2000, the term 'engaged Buddhism' will change into 'Applied Buddhism' to indicate the importance of truly applying the Buddhist teachings of mindfulness and interbeing (cf. below) to every aspect of life and society.

munity of "Fragrant Palm Leaves" in a land in the heart of the Dai Lão Forest, "a rural practice center", dedicated to spiritual practice and community-building. It was the first experimental model for the renewal and the reinvigoration of Buddhism, the prototype of many "mindfulness practice centers" that would eventually flourish in many parts of the world (Thích Nhất Hạnh 1999).[22]

Founded in France, Plum Village (named after the 1.250 plum trees they planted), quickly turned into a world-wide movement. Established in 1982 near Bordeaux as a small, rustic farmstead, Plum Village has become the 'International Plum Village Community of Engaged Buddhism', Europe's largest Buddhist Monastery, with over 200 resident monks and nuns and thousands of visitors. Every year, Plum Village hosts thousands of practitioners from all around the world who experience communal living through mindful eating, walking, and working. Today, there are eight monastic practice centres in the Plum Village tradition in Europe, the USA and Asia, all founded by Thích Nhất Hạnh himself. Together with Alfred Hassler (of the Fellowship of Reconciliation) and other leading intellectuals and scientists, the monk helped convene Europe's first conference on the environment in the early 1970s. The 'Menton Statement' – which addressed environmental destruction, pollution, and population growth – was meant as "a message to our 3.5 billion neighbours on Planet Earth".[23] In 1972, he hosted the 'Dai Dong' Environmental Conference alongside the UN Summit on the Human Environment in Stockholm, the milestone conference on environment. Deep ecology, 'interbeing',[24] and the importance of protecting the Earth continued to evolve as a powerful theme in his teachings and writings. In the early 2000s, Thích Nhất Hạnh became a leading Buddhist spokesperson for 'deep ecology'. The insight about interbeing became a foundation for his engaged action.

In *The World We Have* (2008), the monk outlines a Buddhist approach to the growing environmental crisis. "Walking lightly on the earth" and practising the three precepts ("do no harm, do good, protect and preserve life") are the principles that inform the communities of Plum Village since the very beginning. In "Love Letter to the Earth" (2013), the monk invites his followers to think themselves not as separate entities from the Earth and recognise that people and the

22 Thích Nhất Hạnh collected journals from 1962 to 1966 chronicle the first-hand experiences of the Zen Master as a young man in both the United States and Vietnam and detail the first practice centre he founded during the war.

23 See `https://bitly.cx/MgOH`.

24 During a retreat at Tassajara Zen centre in California, Thích Nhất Hạnh coined the word 'interbeing' to describe the way in which everything 'inter-is' with everything else. "Everything co-exists", he explained. The insight of inter-being became central to his teachings on ecology.

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environment are one and the same. Fear, hatred, hunger, and feelings of separation and alienation, all come from the idea that humans are alienated from nature. For Thích Nhất Hạnh, caring for the Planet implies a radical change of the whole human relationship with the Earth (Ives 2016). Crucially, before returning to his native Vietnam in the last years of his life, the monk opened an organic 'happy farm', where resident farmers combine ecology and mindfulness as they cultivate vegetables for the community's vegan meals. Plum Village now hosts three organic vegetable farms, two of which are run by nuns and laywomen. The 'Happy Farms' actively promote mindfulness, community-building and sustainability. To a certain extent, Plum Village represents a revolution in the overall concept of sustainability. It attempts to translate Buddhist teachings of interdependence and non-separation into an embodied practice, possible only through a non-anthropocentric understanding of nature. Sustainability becomes a sanctuary, where every action, not just the act of eating, is an opportunity. It is not just the 'what' is in the plate, but also the 'how' it is produced, both in terms of systems of production, as well as intention and mindfulness. As Plum Village practitioners say, "the farms are a concrete expression of meditation engaged with action, in the area of ethical and sustainable vegetable farming".[25] Eating is a chance to nourish the body "with the wonders of the cosmos". "In Plum Village communities around the world", they continue,

> we practice not only to be mindful of food, but also of our spiritual friends sitting with us. Sharing a meal together is not just to sustain our bodies and celebrate life, but also to experience freedom, joy, and the happiness of brotherhood and sisterhood, during the whole time of eating.[26]

Thích Nhất Hạnh recommended that

> lay communities should be courageous and give rise to the commitment to be vegetarian, at least 15 days each month. If we can do that, we will feel a sense of well-being. We will have peace, joy, and happiness right from the moment we make this vow and commitment.[27]

Crucially, Plum Village practice centres and retreats have been vegetarian since their foundation, and since 2007, they have all became

25 See the presentation of the Organic Happy Farms at the Plum Village website: https://plumvillage.org/community/happy-farm.

26 See https://bitly.cx/5YFQ.

27 Quoted in Erin Sharaf (2022), *How Thích Nhất Hạnh Changed My Life by Encouraging a Vegan Diet*. https://bitly.cx/P8Mi6.

vegan. In October 2007, the monk wrote the "Blue Cliff Letter" where he explained that the community was turning vegan to nourish compassion and help save the planet.

> As a spiritual family and a human family, we can all help avert climate change[28] with the practice of mindful eating. Going vegetarian may be the most effective way to stop climate change. Being vegetarian is already enough to save the world.[29]

He addressed his teachings regarding food consumption also to people with non-Buddhist backgrounds, referring to dietary restrictions in other religious traditions in order to stress the universal, transcultural matrix of ethical eating. In the essay *How to Eat* (2014), Thích Nhất Hạnh considered eating as one of the activities that could influence everything else during the day:

> While we eat, we can try to pay attention to two things: the food that we're eating and our friends who are sitting around us and eating with us. This is called mindfulness of food and mindfulness of community. (Thích Nhất Hạnh 2014)[30]

In conclusion, Thích Nhất Hạnh attempted to entwine compassion for all living beings, interdependence among human and non-human, inter-being with farmers who grow the food and with the people who cook it. The farmers become 'annadatas', they enshrine human and non-human animals' health, protect seeds and biodiversity, and define the relationship between the soil and the Sangha. The practice of cultivating the land, growing and sharing food becomes the Dharma of the food. The meal, at Plum Village, is not just a means to nourish the body, but also "the consciousness, and the spirit" (Thích Nhất Hạnh 2002).

28 The term 'climate change' replaced the original term 'global warming', used by Thích Nhất Hạnh in his letter. In 2014, the spiritual leader received a letter from scientists recommending replacing 'global warming' with the more appropriate term 'climate change'. This change was received by the community as a chance to reflect on what the practitioners buy and eat, as – as they say – "these activities can contribute to climate change, or they can help stop it".

29 Thích Nhất Hạnh's 2007 "Sitting in the Autumn Breeze: Thầy Blue Cliff Letter, 2007" in `https://bitly.cx/45Eeg`.

30 Kindle edition, position 147.

6 Concluding Remarks

In this essay, we looked at the relation between religious ethical eating and the discourses of health and sustainability in contemporary Buddhism. By investigating various Asian contexts and their entanglements with mainstream Big Vegetarianism and with western visions and experiences, we showed how the global revival of Buddhist views on meat eating frame future-oriented food spaces and practices and contribute to shaping alternatives in ethical food production, circulation and consumption. This process, we argue, has a potential to impact the food systems at a global level. As showed in our case-study on Thailand, the value of sustainability of veganism/vegetarianism, (indirectly) understood as karmic purity and the impact of Buddhist social media and transnational activism among the young generation, are likely to represent a fundamental ingredient to 'veganise' mass consumption habits and to challenge Theravāda traditional dietary approaches, with unprecedented impacts on both religious and lay Thai foodscapes. In China, Buddhist cultures and foodways have become intertwined with urban communities and new ways of refashioning vegetarian food through everyday practices, rendering care for the human body and for non-human sentient beings central to the practice of Buddhist vegetarianism. Our case-study on foodscapes in Shanghai, illustrates how Buddhist vegetarians creatively deploy placemaking and social support programmes to foster vegetarian habits that are alternative to vegetarianism broadly conceived by mainstreamed sustainability agendas or by strictly monastic Buddhist dietary restriction. In western contexts, Buddhism vegetarianism and veganism have become a political act. Indeed, they are understood as effective practices to tackle global issues, such as climate change and planetary health. They are both part of the individual understanding (*vidyā*) of interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and inter-being, of the need to heal the wound of separation between humans and nature, and to embody compassion (*karuṇā*) towards all beings. At Plum Village, vegetarian and vegan conscious eating are conceived as a dialogue with society in an attempt to shift anthropocentric views to 'biocentric' ones.

In countries like Thailand and China, urban youth strongly support vegan and vegetarian lifestyles. They find Buddhist veganism a modern, trendy way to personally and spiritually engage in the global struggle for environmental sustainability and for human and non-human health. This trend, in urban and metropolitan environments, is importantly accompanied by the emergence of Buddhist vegan food manufacturing and processing sites, factories and services, particularly vegan and vegetarian restaurants. The alternatives, anyway, are not reduced to food production and consumption in urban centres: indeed, contemporary Buddhist dietary practices can also encompass

production methods and practices of sustainable, ethical agriculture according to the 'farm model' in temples and monasteries: food production is part of a cycle of karmic acts, with potent spiritual, material and political implications. It is worth pointing out that ethical concerns are not the only source for the revival of Buddhist veganism/vegetarianism. The belief regarding the miraculous power of purification practices achieved by avoiding meat eating shows us that revived Buddhist vegan practices are embedded in individual and collective efforts to take part in enchanted narrations, cosmological visions, and in corporeal, social and ecological practices of care and reciprocity. Buddhist veganism as a purification practice enables a dialogue with heavenly forces, is a path to achieve the power irradiated by miraculous karmic perfection. Also, it can be perceived as an intimate way for self-cultivation, self-determination and well-being in the material realm.

A growing body of evidence supports the idea that cultural behaviours and trends in food consumption are key contributing factors both in the production of the climate crisis 'and' in its possible mitigation. This is why environmental justice activists and critical scholars interested in environmental sustainability as well as engaged citizens in different global contexts advocate for a 'vegan/vegetarian turn' in mass consumption practices and habits in order to prevent violence on animals, greenhouse gas emissions (GHGE), the overexploitation of water and land sources and a better human and non-human health.[31] They also try to offer alternative solutions both in production and consumption chains, and in dietary recommendations, thereby challenging culturally established food geographies and foodscapes (Clay et al. 2020; Vonthorn, Perrin, Soulard 2020). Given that industrial meat and dairy production are deemed responsible for an average of 14% of the GHGE in the global food system (FAO 2023, 8), their position tends to be corroborated by scientific research and sustainability policies in high income countries. Scholars interested in the relationship between sustainability goals and global dietary patterns underline the fact that dietary shifts are key to reduce environmental impacts of food consumption and dietary patterns are used to assess human and planetary health, as these

31 After the COVID-19 pandemic, the idea that human health necessarily depends on the wellness of other beings and ecosystems led the international community to develop the concept of One Health. A high-level expert panel and the Quadripartite represented by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Organization for Animal Health, the UN Environment Program, and the World Health Organization, have proposed this definition: "One Health is an integrated, unifying approach that aims to sustainably balance and optimize the health of people, animals, and ecosystems. It recognizes the health of humans, domestic and wild animals, plants, and the wider environment (including ecosystems) are closely linked and interdependent" (`https://www.who.int/health-topics/one-health#tab=tab_1`).

different combinations of foods that build diets (e.g. western, Mediterranean, or vegetarian) have been linked to significantly different health and environmental outcomes.

Vegan and vegetarian diets have the lowest climate footprint, compared to other diets, and to the dietary patterns recommended in FBDG. They are also associated with positive health outcomes compared to prevalent western dietary patterns (Aguirre-Sánchez et al. 2023, 560). In this sense, the transition to a vegetarian or a vegan diet, our Buddhist informants tell us, usually involves taste, ethical concerns and skills that were formed since childhood. It also depends, we argue, on the interaction of elements specific to a context, such as a supportive social environment and/or availability of meat replacement products. Indeed, while in Europe and the US, feminist and radical animal liberation movements, among others, are leading the current vegan and vegetarian movement of critical consumerism, there are also many other future-oriented engagements elsewhere. In particular, in regions where ethical, religious and ideological backgrounds have historically supported the practice of vegetarianism/veganism, many practitioners try to revive them (also, but not only) for the sake of environmental sustainability. In this paper, we address the issue from the point of view of vegan and vegetarian practices among contemporary Buddhist communities in Asia and around the world. The relevance of the impact of Buddhist dietary restrictions on the global GHG emissions has been remarked upon by scholars attempting to create statistic models and projections showing the critical impact of religiously prescribed vegetarianism in Asian societies, particularly among Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhists.[32]

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