



Dragon dance by a resident in the community, China. Photo by Wei Zhu, July 2023.

# In what I believe: Identity conflict in a Chinese Community Worker

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Sister Lan was the most senior staff in her community, located in the southeastern China<sup>1</sup>. After having worked there for 15 consecutive years, she became the affectionate “sister” for everyone. Meanwhile, for anyone who saw her on a regular basis, some of her behavioral traits that belonged to a Buddhist were hard to miss.

To start with, she would recite in a low voice *Namo Amitābha* when trying to stay calm during an unpleasant encounter, or, if such attempt failed, to recover her equanimity. When there was nothing left on her task list, she would – in a quite serene manner – transcribe the *Diamond Sutra* with golden ink into a well-kept scroll, instead of fiddling with mobile phones like her younger colleagues. She kept a strictly vegetarian diet for ten days a month, and for the rest of time she avoided meat as much as possible. One month

1. Due to the safety and privacy reasons, names and locations in this article have been anonymized.

after knowing each other, she gave me – as well as some of her colleagues – a bodhi bracelet as a gift. It cost little but signified much: the Buddha is believed to have attained enlightenment under a bodhi tree, making bodhi seeds common materials for prayer beads. “You should wear it and turn it by touching every bead constantly so that the beads will shine,” she said, with joyful pride in her voice, when showing me the prayer beads she was wearing, “see how shiny mine are!”

## A Conflicting Identity

None of this would have been problematic if Sister Lan had not been a community worker and a member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The original Chinese word equivalent to community, *shequ* (社区), contains different shades of meaning from what its English translation suggests. It is a grassroots institution at the bottom level of the urban governance system, designed to serve multiple purposes of the Party-State and extend its reach to people’s everyday life. It is through the community that people experience the Party-State, and this holds true not only for residents but also for community workers like Sister Lan. As salaried agents on the ground, community workers are heavily relied upon by the Party-State for their local knowledge to do all sorts of tasks (Zhu 2023). However, they work on a contractual basis, with no access to the welfare and guarantee promised only to those who have life tenure within the system. In other words, community workers occupy a functionally indispensable yet organizationally marginalized place in the governance system, and the way they experience the Party-State – from within – becomes thus complicated and subject to conflicts.

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Sister Lan was no stranger to such conflicts. She found herself caught up between conflicting values and identities. Certain transcendental values are revealed to and embraced by her in her Buddhist way of living on one hand, while on the other hand, as a government employee and a CCP member, she is forbidden from having religious beliefs. Although it is stated in the Constitution that Chinese citizens enjoy freedom of religion, the Party-State remains officially atheist and all religions and “superstitions” are banned for its members (Leung 2005). In a later interview, I asked Sister Lan about her

beliefs. She answered with a hesitating smile: “Well I cannot be called a Buddhist...It is not allowed for a Party member after all.” After a short pause, she added in a hurrying tone: “But I myself quite believe in Buddhism.”

The way Sister Lan negotiates between her two conflicting identities seems straightforward: she denies one and confirms the other. What makes this statement noteworthy is the hesitance in her denial and the fact that such an identity claim diverges from the lived reality of her everyday life. She was apparently unwilling to renounce her commitments to Buddhism even after she refused to be identified as a Buddhist. The identity she chose in a matter-of-fact way, was her membership of the CCP. However, despite this explicit choice, this identity label comes with no substantial content underneath: unlike her daily adherence to practices that befit a Buddhist, she seldom did anything that could be attributed to her Party membership. For the five months I stayed in the community, she did not even attend the regular study sessions of Party ideology – she would only be present if too few people showed up and the room seemed therefore embarrassingly empty.

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## A Thick and Thin Identity

I propose that the incongruity in the identity claim of Sister Lan can be understood in a contrast between a thick and thin identity. Here a “thick identity” resonates with what Mattingly (2014: 18) called a “thick self”: it is embedded in a lived present that one finds ethically at stake and has a temporal dimension that directs toward one’s project of moral becoming. In contrast, a thin identity is static and involves no such becoming; it is a label one puts onto oneself for practical purposes – for getting a potential promotion within the Party-State system, for instance – and its highlight is the very moment of acquisition. The thick identity does not have to be acknowledged; it may even get denied publicly for various reasons. But it informs what one commits and aspires to in everyday life. Sometimes, it emerges to the front stage and pushes aside the declared thin identity in unexpected ways. In the current case, the thick identity announced its existence even at the risk of contradicting what is imposed by the Party-State. In the same interview, after much complaining about her job, Sister Lan started to talk about what motivated her to continue after 15 years as a community worker. “I keep telling myself,” She said, “perhaps this is what the Boddhisatva (*Pusa*, 菩萨) has planned for me.”

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### About the author

Wei Zhu is a PhD student at the Department of Anthropology, Aarhus University. Her ongoing work investigates everyday ethics in Chinese urban communities, with a focus on how people negotiate their way of being and live an ethical life against the backdrop of the pervasive presence of the Party-State.

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