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Materiality, Experience and the Body: The Catholic Pilgrimage of Sheshan in Shanghai, China

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Abstract: This paper foregrounds the Turnerian experiences of pilgrims themselves, for whom pilgrimage is perhaps first and foremost the process of experiencing faith with their whole body and mind. At the Chinese Catholic pilgrimage site of Sheshan, located in western Shanghai, multiple meanings and possibilities are written onto the body of the pilgrim as it interacts with sacred materialities. In the process, the pilgrim materially orients themselves towards the transcendent other and to people and events throughout time. The boundary between subject and object is increasingly blurred in the pilgrim's imagination, and pilgrimage becomes a 'porous' mind-body experience for them. In the process, as pilgrims repeatedly physically enact doctrine and doctrinal texts in the course of pilgrimage—while simultaneously rooting them in their own personal lives—Sheshan is, through the concrete actions of worshippers layered up over time, continually being re-made as sacred.

Keywords: Sheshan pilgrimage; religious experience; materiality; body; anthropology of experience

1. Introduction

On the mountain of Sheshan, located in Songjiang District, about thirty kilometers from downtown Shanghai, curious onlookers often stop to watch Chinese Catholic pilgrims praying and chanting as they approach the basilica at the summit—the peak of the pilgrimage. Yet, although observers may be attracted by the pilgrims' movements and expressions, it would be impossible to fully understand the pilgrim experience merely by watching. Instead—and contrary to prevailing views, which tend to focus on the political, economic, or otherwise functional facets of pilgrimage—we argue that from the pilgrim's perspective, pilgrimage is, first and foremost, the act and process of experiencing faith with one's whole being¹. In this, drawing on interviews and participant observation fieldwork carried out between 2020 and 2021 with pilgrims at Sheshan and followed up in their home parishes, we foreground pilgrimage as the expression and practice of pilgrims' faith, which we explore in this paper through a focus on experience—specifically, Sheshan pilgrims' experiences of body, materiality, and the imagination.

Generally speaking, since the burgeoning of pilgrimage studies in the 1970s, two broad types of pilgrimage studies have emerged. One is the examination of the foundation and establishment of a pilgrimage, focusing on its construction within particular historical and political processes. Another is to focus on the social trappings of pilgrimages; scholars in this vein have discussed the connections between pilgrimage and tourism, secularization, migration, political and economic processes, globalization, gender, and more. For example, pilgrimage as constituting a regional sacred space (Bhardwaj 1973); as the production and usage of power to achieve specific social or political ends (Sangren 1993); as an economic process for the people and organizations that participate in it (Kosansky 2002); as a core part of ethnic, regional, national, religious, and gender identity construction (Borland 2003; Bowman 1993; Galbraith 2000; Astor-Aguilera and Jarvenpa 2008; Feldman 2007; Jansen and Kühl 2008; Jansen and Notermans 2012). Others have focused more



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directly on the pilgrims themselves, such as studies of the healing effect of pilgrimage on the body and mind of pilgrims (Peelen and Jansen 2007; Notermans 2007).

In the following ethnographic case study, we foreground experience, as developed by Victor Turner in *The Anthropology of Experience*, a collection of essays co-edited with Edward Bruner shortly before Turner's death in 1986. Turner's conception of experience was influenced by the German scholar Wilhelm Dilthey's differentiation between 'Erlebnis,' which means 'what has been lived through' and refers to lived experience and subjective internal perspective, and 'Erfahrung,' which focuses on the acquisition of intellectual knowledge and refers primarily to external, objective experiences. For Dilthey—and for Turner—'experience' is a basic unit of life: a 'living stream,' a fluid structural correlate. Turner then further distinguishes between pure experience as the passive reception of an event and experience as an intersubjective expression with a "beginning and an end, like a stone in a Zen dry landscape," forming what Dilthey calls "the structure of experience" (Turner 1978, p. 35). In this, then, 'experience' for Turner refers not only to the passive reception of the subject in internalizing external stimuli but also to the subject's attitudes, views, and feelings towards the external world. Turner argues that Dilthey saw experience as a collection of all human thoughts, visions, desires, and sensations that interpenetrate subtly and differently on multiple levels (Turner 1978, p. 35). Experience is thus also an attempt to transcend the boundaries between subject and object and to connect the 'inner' and 'outer' worlds; experience becomes, then, a matter of meaning, a relational structure that links past, present, and future. It "deals with how individuals actually experience their culture, that is, how events are received by consciousness" (Bruner 1978, pp. 3–4).

Furthermore, applying this to the Chinese context, the English word 'experience' is often translated in two ways in Chinese—*tiyan* (体验) and *jingyan* (经验). Some Chinese scholars have tried to distinguish between these two concepts, arguing that *jingyan* is all the perceptual impressions and inner evaluations that the subject gets through the senses. At the same time, *tiyan* is the subject's own strong feeling of 'meaning' in the process of seeking meaning (Xu and Yang 2010). The use of the term *tiyan*, as *Erlebnis*—instead of *jingyan*, as *Erfahrung*—here is intended to refer to an "inner experience" that is related to meaning and is also closely related to the body. In this way, the two concepts of *zongjiao tiyan* (宗教体验, religious experience/*Erlebnis*) and *zongjiao jingyan* (宗教经验, religious experience/*Erfahrung*)—which are also often used confusingly—can be distinguished. *Zongjiao jingyan* is something that anyone can acquire during religious activities, while *zongjiao tiyan* is the intense feeling of 'meaning' that believers have during religious activities—and should be regarded as the most important of all (Xu and Yang 2010).

This distinction provides a viable way of thinking about the discussion of pilgrimage as a religious experience, but it leaves out a key element—the body.² At Sheshan, bodily participation is essential to pilgrimage, and bodily experiences are often foregrounded by Chinese Catholic pilgrims themselves as of primary importance. As such, for this study, the body must be understood as the foundation of religious experience. In focusing on experience in the Turnerian sense, then, we are also moving away from an account of Christian (Catholic) spirituality that denies the body or focuses on the "ephemerality of the material world" (Badone 2017, p. 204). In her seminal analysis of Christianity's enduring influence on anthropology, Cannell (2005) pointed to anthropology's ascetism as a reflection of Christianity's own denial of the body; as Norget et al. (2017) have pointed out, however, this denial is more often a feature of Protestantism than it is Catholicism, which tends—overall—to place much more emphasis on materiality and embodiment. Napolitano (2017, p. 245), for instance, notes the Catholic Church's "long history of animating bodies, affect, souls, things, and landscapes . . . with particular political agendas of inclusion and exclusion."

As such, in the following discussion of pilgrimage at Sheshan, we foreground experience as understood with Turner's lens in mind, through pilgrims' own apprehensions of what they experience in the process of pilgrimage and with a particular focus on the porosity of the mind/body boundary (cf. Taylor 2007). In this way, in this article, we take the

view that focuses on pilgrimage as dynamically built on the actions of countless pilgrims. Their experiences, behaviors, and actions—rooted in their minds and bodies—ultimately constitute pilgrimage, and this substance of pilgrimage interests us in this article. The holy, sacred space of pilgrimage is a place and time where the pilgrim aspires to a psychological or physical connection with the divine.

2. At the Feet of Our Lady: Sheshan and the Sheshan Pilgrimage

The Sheshan Basilica is located on the western peak of Sheshan, in a district that has historically hosted an array of religious communities: during the Yuan dynasty, Songjiang featured a mosque for a local Muslim population, while during the Tang and Song dynasties, the area hosted flourishing Buddhist and Taoist populations. Catholicism was introduced to the area during the Ming Wanli period, with Protestantism following during the Qing Guangxu period. Sheshan itself has not always been a Catholic site; it has previously hosted many other Buddhist and Daoist temples—including Pu Zhao Temple, Zhao Qing Zen Temple, Hui Ri Temple, Xuan Miao Lecture Temple, Chao Yin Temple, and Maitreya Temple—but today the only remaining is the Xiu Daoist Pagoda. Nor is the county a heavily Catholic one; today, the county has hundreds of Buddhist temples and nunneries, often mixing Buddhism with Taoist traditions.³

Nevertheless, it is in Songjiang that the Sheshan Basilica was founded in 1863 by French Jesuits. Today—hosting a statue of Mary, Help of Christians, and an image of Our Mother of Sheshan—it is the only international Catholic pilgrimage site still active in Shanghai or China.⁴ Sheshan hosts multiple pilgrimage opportunities, some annual, some monthly, accommodating different intensities and varying levels of devotion to the faith. May—traditionally the month of the Virgin Mary in the Catholic tradition—is the peak time for pilgrimages to Sheshan, with tens of thousands of Catholics descending from all over the country and, in pre-COVID-19 times, the world. Even the more indifferent faithful go on pilgrimage to Sheshan during this time, mostly with a church-organized pilgrimage group. The second most popular time of the year is October (the month of the Holy Rosary). There are also small spikes in attendance on the first Saturday of every month because it is a day of devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. At these times, those in attendance tend to be Catholics who are more actively devout and visit Sheshan regularly.

In the Catholic tradition, pilgrimage is considered a ‘good work.’ This concept—of ‘good works’—is especially prevalent among older local Catholics, who often emphasize the act of doing ‘good works’ in a way that resembles the Buddhist term ‘merit.’ However, although pilgrimage is seen as a kind of good work that is also considered an act of ‘accumulating merit’ in the presence of God when asked, worshippers at Sheshan maintain that the favor they receive for performing good works depends on God, not on the amount or quality of the good works they perform.

Sheshan is a Marian pilgrimage site, like most Catholic pilgrimage sites worldwide—many of the most famous, such as Guadalupe, Lourdes, or Fatima, are similarly centered on the Virgin Mary. Unlike Protestantism, especially low-church Protestantism, which generally regards it as a form of idolatry, the Catholic Church has special veneration for the Virgin Mary, considering her the mother of the Church as well as the mother of God. The image of Mary as a merciful mother is deeply rooted in the hearts of Catholics at Sheshan, and their affection for her is reflected in their daily words and actions. Chinese Catholics often affectionately refer to Mary as ‘Mother Mary’, and regular pilgrims refer to visiting Sheshan not as ‘going on pilgrimage’ but rather in more intimate and colloquial phrasings such as ‘seeing Our Lady’ or simply ‘going to Our Lady.’ Some interlocutors described the feeling of going to Sheshan as ‘like going back to one’s mother’s home’ and referred to Sheshan as ‘Our Lady’s land.’

From a catechetical point of view, the faithful pilgrim can pray only to God. The saints do not enact any favors on their own; rather, they are meant to act as mediators, interceding on behalf of the worshipper before God—they are, as the Turners imagined, akin to a God ‘hotline’ (Turner and Turner 1978, p. 16). As our interlocutors dutifully repeated, “through

the Blessed Virgin, we reach Jesus.” However, in practice, the phrases our interlocutors more often employed in daily conversation can obfuscate this, such as when they said that they would ‘pray to the Blessed Virgin,’ ‘ask the Blessed Virgin,’ and so forth. Indeed, despite the official stance that Mary and the saints act merely as intermediaries, the Virgin Mary is often treated by our interlocutors if she were the main character of the narrative, whether in daily mentions of ‘worshipping the Virgin,’ the practice of praying directly to the Virgin for favors such as the healing of illnesses, or in the written texts displayed in pilgrimage sites. For them, the Virgin Mary is frankly more approachable than God and perhaps a better conversational partner—and Sheshan, as a place of pilgrimage to Mary, has naturally become a place often visited by those who are partial to her.

Although tourists visit Sheshan, the standard pilgrimage route is different from the tourist one. Among the several entrances to Sheshan, tourists usually enter through the northern gate, while pilgrims take the eastern entrance, the “Entrance to the Church of the Blessed Sacrament,” commonly referred to by believers as the “Laity” or “Friends” Gate. The entrance is a Chinese-style stone pagoda with a plaque inscribed with the words “Enter, to the Blessed Sacrament.” Halfway up the hill from the gate is a small church, the “Our Lady of Zhongshan Church,” commonly known to the faithful as simply the “Zhongshan Church.” In the square in front of the church—which can accommodate a thousand people—a couplet is displayed reading: “Stay for a moment in this hillside chapel and practice the rites of filial piety. Climb a few more steps to the hall at the peak and seek the grace of a loving mother.” Above the couplet is inscribed the line: “Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, pray for us.” The subsequent path from the gate to the Sheshan Basilica at the top of the mountain is relatively structured, centered on the ‘four points and one line’ of Zhongshan Church, the Three Holy Pavilions, the Way of Sorrows, and the Basilica. The church buildings and statues located in the pavilions are the most conspicuous material components of this pilgrimage, and they divide the pilgrimage journey into different stages following their respective positions on the hillside.

On weekdays, as part of regular worship, the faithful often attends Mass at Zhongshan Church early in the morning and afterward go to pray in front of the Three Holy Pavilions. These pavilions are located just to the west of Zhongshan Church and are each dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, St Joseph, and the Virgin Mary. Prayer in front of these Three Holy Pavilions is also considered an essential part of pilgrimage; most pilgrims we spoke to will begin by kneeling and praying there, even if they are in a hurry. Reciting Scripture, meditating, or singing hymns are common forms of prayer mentioned.

Next, pilgrims follow the Way of Sorrows—also known as the Via Crucis, or the Stations of the Cross—as it proceeds in a zig-zag path up the mountain, a path which was formerly called the ‘folded path’ as it was originally created to carry building materials up the mountain by hand during the construction of the basilica. Many Catholic pilgrimage sites around the world have a Via Crucis for pilgrims to follow. At Sheshan, it encourages the faithful to participate bodily in commemorating the suffering of ‘Jesus’ universal salvation’ through prayer and reflection at each of the fourteen ‘stations of the cross’—images of Jesus’ suffering on the day of his crucifixion. The fourteen stations at Sheshan were originally iron statues placed in 1873, but they were all destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Today, the fourteen statues are all wooden carvings.

The Via Crucis at Sheshan begins at a pair of statues erected in 1907 on the stone wall near Zhongshan Church—a white statue of an angel facing Jesus, praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. Eventually, the stone steps that zig-zag up the hill—with a Station of the Cross at each turn—will lead pilgrims to the basilica at the summit. Directly across from the south entrance of the Basilica is the altar known as the ‘Altar of Consecration’ or the ‘Altar of Thanksgiving,’ where a painting of the Virgin embracing Jesus is enshrined. It is placed in the same place as the altar in the previous basilica, an arrangement that was deliberately made when the current iteration of the church was built. As the place where the priest celebrates Mass and bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, the sacredness of the altar is self-evident to the faithful. For some Catholics

we spoke to, the imagery of sanctity being perpetuated through materiality leads them to believe that the graces received by praying at this location might be greater. That is, they understand the altar and surrounding area as a place ‘closer’ to God and Our Lady. Doctrinally or catechetically speaking, the favor granted to the pilgrim is not meant to depend on physical proximity to these material places or images. Nevertheless, pilgrims at Sheshan often understood the site in this way: building not just on Catholicism as taught, but Catholicism as lived and experienced (cf. Orsi 2002)—on the rich meanings that these materialities have been and are still being given by the faithful, their practices, and ways of thinking.⁵

3. ‘Tangible’ Experience: Materiality, the Body, and the Senses

In front of the three pavilions, the most immediate sensorial and material impact is not only the sight of the three snow-white statues overlooking the pilgrims dotting the space before them, praying with the scriptures and rosaries in their hands and cushions under their knees; but also the sound of chanting that emanates from them, echoing in the air without any sense of conflict and sometimes accompanied by catchy hymns. In this sacred space and time, people and objects interact in a variety of ways, involving the use of Scripture, rosaries, candles, and other objects—easily distinguishing pilgrims from tourists in the crowd.

Religions “always involve material forms,” and it is “in this materiality that they become part of the experience and elicit responses, that they take on a communal life and enter into a continuous chain of cause and effect” (Keane 2008, p. S124). As scholars have noted, Catholicism places particular emphasis on materiality (Norget et al. 2017), wherein the sacred can manifest itself through material objects by being imbued with divine power and becoming ‘sacred’ through the act of blessing. For example, the rosary used by the faithful is usually a rosary blessed by a priest, and the images in a shrine are blessed—and so the rosary is not just a string of plastic or wooden beads, and the image is not just an ordinary statue or picture. Instead, they take on and are transformed through consecration to have a sacred meaning and function, helping the faithful connect with the divine or the transcendent other. This materiality also extends to, for example, the natural material properties inherent to a sacred site may also be considered sacred and potent. Spring water from the French Marian pilgrimage at Lourdes is commonly considered by pilgrims to have healing properties, and the water is often bottled for various uses—indeed, the water is available at the site for such purposes. Such ritualistic acts are familiar across many pilgrimages, a form of symbolic continuity that is common to various ritual systems: the fragmentation of something sacred and the mixing of the old and the new in order to accelerate its sanctification (Turner and Turner 1978, p. 116). In Sheshan, some parishioners told us that worshippers used to drink the muddy water that flowed directly from a statue in front of a garden on the mountain after a rainstorm, to pray for healing.

At Sheshan, a crucial aspect of its materiality is that it is—in addition to a site of pilgrimage—an active cemetery where many local officials and people have buried and continue to bury their dead. There are many famous shrines and tombs, as well as countless unlabeled tombs. Already in the 19th century, Father Gabriel Palatre recorded in his *Pilgrimage to Sheshan* that “the graves are arranged in all directions on the slopes of the hill. There, generations have rested for centuries. You can hardly tap a few times on this cemetery without causing the vaults of the graves to shake . . . Enter these dense thickets and you will soon find your feet on the graves, the roots of which often grow on the mounds of earth that cover the dead. Rich and poor, peasants and officials, priests of the Buddha, followers of Confucius, all these people’s ashes are piled haphazardly on the side of Sheshan” (Palatre 1875, p. 23). This practice continues: many parishioners have brought the ashes of their friends and family, specifically to be scattered or buried behind the Three Holy Pavilions. A nun at Sheshan said that this was “especially [true for] the Jesus pavilion, there are [lots of] ashes behind it.” Indeed, many elderly Catholics in the area ask expressly for their ashes to be taken to Sheshan after their death.

Pilgrims at Sheshan explained that there is both a theological and a practical dimension to this practice. On a theological level, Chinese Catholic catechism classes commonly teach that the Church is divided into three states: the church militant, referring to the Church on earth; the church suffering, referring to purgatory; and the church triumphant, referring to heaven and the glory of God. Communion is the point of unity across these three facets of the Church. In this sense, when the pilgrim prays for the souls in purgatory, the space and time of pilgrimage at Sheshan acts as a communion of these three facets of the Church—between the present, the departed, and the transcendent other. As such, for the deceased, burying the ashes at Sheshan means that ‘others come to pray, and you benefit too.’ According to the Catechism, when pilgrims pray for souls in Purgatory—where almost all souls go after death—these souls will be able to be purified of their sins and ascend to heaven more quickly, even if they had never met in life. The ashes and graves also serve as material markers to remind believers to pray for the souls in purgatory during their pilgrimage. Of course, some ashes have been buried for many years—but in that case, one parishioner told us that this did not matter, as “[the souls] may have gone to heaven, then they can be asked to pray for we who are alive.” This is an expression of their inner desire to be close to their faith by connecting themselves materially to what they consider to be a holy place, to be closer physically to their faith just as the space around the altar is considered to be more sacred. Other Catholics said they buried ashes behind the Three Holy Pavilions so that ‘it would be convenient for prayer.’ One parishioner joked that there were so many ashes buried on Sheshan that people often came during Qingming, the annual Chinese grave-cleaning festival so that they could accomplish both a pilgrimage and a grave-cleaning at the same time.

Materiality is a constant element of pilgrimage at Sheshan; as Coleman (Coleman 2014, p. S287) has noted, pilgrimages are often “mediated through new layers of sociality and alternative forms of materiality,” which build up over time. The process of pilgrimage is also a process of interaction between the pilgrim’s body and different materialities. Here, we next move to propose that for understanding pilgrimage at Sheshan, how pilgrims imbibe the materiality of Sheshan through their senses must also be incorporated; materiality includes more than substance, such as Scripture or a chair—i.e., ‘non-human’ existence in the ontological sense. After all, the faithful have “always carried holiness and sanctity in a specific material form, which exists both inside and outside their bodies” (Verrips 2008, p. 217). The pilgrim mobilizes all their senses to take in the holy place, and these sensory experiences are inseparable from the materiality of the pilgrimage. The layers of these bodily, sensory experiences are woven into sacred materiality—accumulated and repeatedly over time—constantly construct pilgrims’ understandings and conceptions of the materiality of Sheshan and the pilgrimage practices of the faithful, and vice versa.

3.1. *The Suffering Body*

Among pilgrims at Sheshan, one set of techniques for curating or effecting the desired bodily experiences is deliberate physical suffering. This, of course, is not unique to Sheshan; physical suffering is a recurring theme across various world religions, and it often turns up in pilgrimages—such as in long distances to trek on the pilgrimage path, or physical suffering, such as kowtowing and kneeling for extended periods of time. For example, Nordin’s (2011) study of Hindu pilgrimage in the Himalayas argues that pilgrims perceive physical or emotional hardship as simply a part of the pilgrimage process. They consider the experience of hardship during the pilgrimage to be valuable; afterward, the pilgrimage experience is re-told as an experience of overcoming hardship and gaining spiritually and mentally from it—whether this gain is in the form of proximity to God, a sense of atonement, or something else. Indeed, the pilgrim will intentionally increase physical labor and even physical pain during the pilgrimage. At this time, physical desire often merges with rejection and longing to be free of the flesh.

The Catholic Church does not officially encourage the faithful to deliberately undergo physical suffering simply for the sake of it; it is meant to be a voluntary choice. Neverthe-

less, what Morgan (Morgan 2009, p. 50) has referred to as a “material and penitential economy of the sacred” is a crucial part of lived Catholicism for many around the world, including at Sheshan. Many of the Catholics we spoke to said that they sometimes still intentionally ‘do penance,’ with the idea that this would help them to pray more effectively, or to receive better favors, etc. At Sheshan, fasting is one of the most common methods for ‘penance’; a significant number of those we spoke to argued that it was, in fact, the most effective method. Many fasted before coming to Sheshan with the direct purpose of reducing bodily waste. Still, fasting is not necessarily directed at controlling the body in the biological sense per se—rather, it is aimed at trying to experience the ‘sacred’ through control of the body. As pilgrims explained, the body is meant to be ‘emptied’ to allow itself to be more fully engaged in Mass and the pilgrimage as a whole; simultaneously, it evinces their belief in bodily suffering to atone for bodily sins. Fasting is a form of “the denial of the body, the foretaste of physical death that is experienced in pilgrimage practices . . . privileges the life of the spirit” (Badone 2017, p. 203). At Sheshan, pilgrims frame their decision to fast as both the ‘objective’ demand of the Church and as the ‘subjective’ choice to ‘do penance.’

Similarly, the act of kneeling and prostration in pilgrimage is not a dogmatic requirement; it should, formally, be considered the private gesture of the believer in order to express their respect for Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and other saints through such physical gestures that indicate reverence. For example, in the context of the pilgrim’s prayer at the Three Holy Pavilions, kneeling is not required by Church rules, or is it a liturgical necessity. Nevertheless, as a lay female pilgrim at Sheshan told us, “I have to kneel when I see the word of the Lord. I am comfortable when I kneel, but it is uncomfortable to stand. If you venerate, you will kneel down even if you don’t want to.” She knows quite well that the image she looks upon is certainly not God Himself, but the image mediates that encounter, and she ‘sees’ the God she venerates through the image and feels and expresses this veneration through their physical posture. The kneeling body becomes a figure that expresses multiple meanings related to faith; identity as a believer; various feelings, expectations, and emotions, such as a desire for favor and a sense of humility that they themselves are merely sinners before figures such as Jesus and the Virgin Mary. Furthermore, this kneeling posture also brings with it a physical sensation common to the pilgrimage process—pain. The ground in front of the Three Holy Pavilions and the start of the Via Crucis is an uneven stone path. Many pilgrims who are accustomed to praying in the kneeling position carry kneeling pads with them when they come on the pilgrimage. The purpose of the pads is to protect the knees and reduce the pain and damage caused by kneeling for a long time, but there are always those who choose to kneel on the ground without any protection.

Certainly, sensitivity to pain varies from person to person, and the interpretation of said pain varies according to one’s own understanding of faith and one’s own experience—but one thing remains the same across the accounts we gathered: pain is not meaningless. Not only pain but also the discomfort and suffering that the body undergoes in the course of a pilgrimage. Whether it is the pain of kneeling for a long time or the exertion of climbing a mountain, whether it occurs naturally during the movement of the body or deliberately, these physical labors are an expression of the faith and—intentionally or unintentionally—elaborate upon the underlying meaning to faith and action. Thus, from the pilgrim’s point of view, the pilgrimage body is not merely a figure of expression or a representation of faith but a medium that actually connects with and produces effects transcendently—leading to, as we shall see next, an often porous boundary between the body and the transcendental.

3.2. *The Porous Mind and Body*

The term ‘porous’ here comes from two concepts proposed by Charles Taylor in his work *A Secular Age*: the ‘porous self’ and the ‘buffered self.’ Taylor uses these two concepts to refer to the human imagination of the boundary between the internal and external

worlds in pre-modern and modern, non-Western and Western societies. The ‘porous self’ refers to the fact that “the boundary between agents and forces is fuzzy in the enchanted world; and the boundary between mind and world is porous . . . the boundary between self and other is fuzzy, porous. And this has to be seen as a fact of experience, not a matter of ‘theory,’ or belief” (Taylor 2007, p. 39). In other words, the world affects us not simply by presenting us with definite states of affairs which we react to, nor simply by generating chemical-biological conditions within us—but through the way we act, behave, and imagine, this condition generates excitement or depression. In all these cases, meaning somehow emerges only when the world affects the mind/organism. In this respect, meaning is endogenous. But in the enchanted world, meaning exists outside of us; it already exists ‘out there’ before it makes contact with us; it can erode us, and we can fall into its force field. It comes upon us from the outside. In contrast, the ‘buffered self’ refers to “taking a distance from, disengaging from everything outside the mind.” (Taylor 2007, p. 38). Recently, Tanya Luhrmann and others in her interdisciplinary Mind and Spirit research project have explored the theme that the human mind is fragile—that ideas are powerful and can penetrate the mind (Luhrmann 2020). Under this hypothesis, cultural differences in how people imagine the boundary between the inner and outer worlds can alter the most basic of human experiences—their sensory experiences. Ng’s fieldwork with Pentecostal Christians in China, for example, found that urban Christians were less likely to have a sensory experience of God than rural Christians. Her findings echo Taylor’s contrast between the ‘buffered self’ and the ‘porous self’ with the modern West (especially the United States) and the pre-modern non-West, i.e., that the two selves’ can co-exist in the same social space and time (Ng 2020).

Inspired by this concept of the ‘porous mind,’ we argue that—although different from the larger ‘field’ of social space and time—at Sheshan, in the sacred space and time of pilgrimage, a pilgrim’s body can also become ‘porous.’ One parishioner surnamed Gao, explained her feelings to us as such: “Every time I cross the threshold of the Laity Gate I feel happy that I am ascending the holy mountain of the Lord. In fact, there are times when one is tired, but after singing a (holy) song, or praying the rosary, one climbs very easily and is not tired at all. While walking and praying the rosary, God takes away your sore feet, takes away your tiredness, and one is happy to have His company, and climbs up the mountain at once.” The phrases and descriptions Gao uses, such as ‘friendly,’ ‘happy,’ ‘joyful,’ and ‘relaxed,’ were recurring ones in pilgrims’ descriptions of the feeling of coming to Sheshan. Another pilgrim surnamed Lu, gave us an illustrative and exuberant description: “As soon as I stepped through the door, it was a ‘wow’ feeling of being graced—gosh! Mother, I am home! That’s what it feels like! Once you get to Sheshan, you’re relaxed!” In these accounts, as the body moves through physical space, closer and closer to the focal point of the sacred at the peak of the mountain, the religious emotions of the faithful become stronger and stronger—in other words, the experience of the sacred becomes more and more intense. The door of the Laity Gate is, as Gao put it, like a threshold—and stepping through it marks entry into the sacred, a place and moment “within time and outside of time,” accompanied by a distinct physical and mental change. As Lu said, “It’s that feeling of release, feeling like Mother Mary is going to save me!”

This ‘release’ and ‘relaxation’ is a physical and psychological experience, often resulting from a series of physical practices during the pilgrimage. For example, conversations with and gazing with purpose at images is a common practice among Sheshan pilgrims. Unlike in most Protestant denominations, images—or icons—hold a very important place in Catholic and Orthodox traditions, and the role of images is directly linked with their physicality and materiality (Norget et al. 2017). In Catholic pilgrimage sites around the world, it is common to see the faithful kissing images or reaching out to touch them and then themselves (e.g., Peña 2011). In conversation with the images, the content of the prayers of the faithful in front of the Three Holy Pavilions varies depending on the object of the prayers. Another parishioner, surnamed Hui, said that when she comes to Sheshan,

she always goes to the Three Holy Pavilions to pray first, and specifically to St Joseph first. She told us that she does this because

“great St. Joseph did not say a word in the Bible, but always gave quietly. He is the protector of laborers, so in front of him we always pray for the men in the family, because the man is the head of the family. This is not to say that women are inferior to men, but that men should love women too, and women are like his body, and both sides are complementary. Although my husband is not a believer, I would like God to keep him safe, and I would like him to be tolerant when I am not very reasonable at home. I pray for the women in my family in front of Our Lady, and I will also have friends who ask me to intercede for them in front of Our Lady, and for the parishioners who cannot come to Sheshan. Also, if I see someone who is sick, I will pray for them before Our Lady. In front of Jesus [pavilion], I confess myself—for example, the sins I committed this recent week—and hope that God will forgive me. Although they are all small sins, I hope that they can be washed out often, just like putting them in the washing machine, otherwise they get dirtier and dirtier.”

As one of the priests at Sheshan explained to us, “One needs to see something, feel something, and the role of images is to help one lift one’s heart up through them. No one will take an image to be the real God.” Images are meant to help, then, to create the sacred atmosphere of a holy place and serve as a tool to help the faithful pray. The image is redolent with the power of the divine that is bound up behind it; their prayers in front of the image are considered to have a practical, tangible effect. At Sheshan, praying in front of the images in the basilica, through the ‘touch’ of their senses with the image—such as gazing and calling upon the name of God and the saints with their words—they enter into a certain interaction with the transcendent other through the image. This interaction indicates both the ‘outer world’ and the ‘inner world’ and is a reflective and embodied process.

3.3. Bodily Release

Another form of making the invisible, transcendent other tangible or able to be sensed is the organization of one’s thoughts and language.⁶ Whether it is parishioners Lu, Gao, or Hui, each said that they would “think about what they want to ask Mother Mary and confess to Jesus this time.” Each time they prayed at the pavilions might well be different from the previous, “depending on the specific needs of each visit.” Their prayers often involve—as detailed above—conversation with the image, either in one’s thoughts or out loud or through reciting Scripture. Their words are—as they were for Hui, above—a form of ‘release.’ But, there is also a physical release too, often sought by pilgrims at Sheshan. Lu, for instance, told us that she had once made a special pilgrimage to Sheshan for a young woman in her congregation who was suffering from depression. The woman called Lu one day to tell her that she was feeling bad, and Lu felt that while she “didn’t have the strength to help [the woman],” she would go on a pilgrimage to Sheshan the next day to pray for her.

During that pilgrimage, she felt so ill that she vomited while holding onto the railing. Undertaking the Via Crucis, she told us, “I felt bad from the first station, but I couldn’t throw up. I reached the seventh station and I kept throwing up, I wanted to vomit out all my intestines and all my internal organs, it was so uncomfortable.” She had fasted, however, that day, so there was “nothing to vomit up, just dry heaving, I felt very nauseous, I wanted to vomit out all my organs, so uncomfortable I wanted to kneel, but I could not breathe or stand up, ow, at that time I really wanted to sit on the stone steps to take a break, but then I also couldn’t sit down.” But, as she told it, by the end of this difficult path—by the time she reached the peak—she was no longer uncomfortable. The next day, the girl told her that she was feeling much better. As she put it, “that’s how it is sometimes, right, you pray for someone, she will feel it, she can feel it.”

Gao told us that she had also gained a similar experience of release in the process of praying Via Crucis:

Gao: You know what? Maybe the Holy Spirit touched my body, I don't know why I just wanted to cry, but I kept crying for a long time. I had seldom been so involved. I brought a friend with me that day to pray the Via Crucis, and he had not yet entered God, so maybe the Holy Spirit was working on me. The environment around me was very noisy, but my heart was always very determined. It was the experience of being with God's Holy Spirit, and I kept kneeling over there and just couldn't leave. My friend kept tapping on my shoulder, three times. When we were praying together on the Via Crucis, when we reached the seventh station, didn't we see Sister Ashi vomiting over there? That day, when we reached the seventh station, I vomited myself. When I vomited, I was clearing my inner sins or past traumas.

Interviewer: How long did it last?

Gao: I stayed for about 20 min, but I couldn't leave, I stayed there, and the experience of staying there was simply the happiness of the presence of the Holy Spirit of God.

Interviewer: What kind of happiness was it?

Gao: It was a feeling of relaxation and joy, a feeling of being connected at that moment, a feeling of being able to communicate with Him (God). It is comfortable, just comfortable all the time, very comfortable.

The Via Crucis allows the faithful to experience and feel the suffering of Jesus on his way to the crucifixion and, then, the joy at his resurrection. The great cross erected at the final point of the Via Crucis at Sheshan symbolizes the resurrection of Jesus, which means light and help—it is supposed to be joyful. As the pilgrim's journey progresses, the pilgrim's emotions change from initial suffering to relief and joy, accompanied as they are by Mary and Jesus. By the time Lu and Gao reached the final station, the 'suffering' was over. Gao gained a strong sense and experience of the Holy Spirit, the Divine Presence—the climax of the pilgrimage. This intensified perception of the divine is not merely a strong and firm belief in a passively accepted consciousness. Still, an active interpretation is given to the experience through the practice of the holistic body and mind, building on previous similar experiences. The 'happiness of being with the Holy Spirit,' in Xiao Gao's words, would have been something she had experienced before, given that it was something she recognized.

Gao and Lu's experiences are not a demonstration of what Coleman (2022) has argued is a trope of pilgrimage studies, the "spontaneous, unmediated experience of communitas-like connection with unknown others" (Coleman 2014, p. S288), but rather an experience thoroughly mediated by and building on their past bodily experiences, connecting not to unknown others but with the divine and known fellow faithful. Scholars have long argued that (Protestant) linguistic models for understanding faith overlook the "important roles of the body, experience, and emotion in religious processes—processes of belief" (Mitchell and Mitchell 2008, p. 80)—especially for Catholicism. Rather, faith is developed as part of a "process through which primarily non-linguistic knowledge is produced and reproduced to generate a distinctive orientation to the world" (Mitchell and Mitchell 2008, p. 81). Mitchell and Mitchell point, for instance, to how Maltese Catholics embody a Catholic habitus through bodily performance, such as learning not to bite the Eucharist or the learned appropriate postures and gestures of children taking their First Communion—eyes lowered, bowing at the knees. The reverence that Maltese Catholics display toward the Eucharist "does not demonstrate an inner orientation to the host in Communion—a 'belief in its capacity for salvation—but actively constitutes it" (Mitchell and Mitchell 2008, p. 86). In this process, the boundary between the body and the external world interpenetrates: on the one hand, the believer dedicates their pain, tears, nausea, and suffering to God; and on the other hand, the invisible and Divine Spirit crosses over from the 'external' 'supernatural' world and affects the body of the believer and, through the body, makes itself perceptible and tangible by entering the 'secular' realm. Here, the body is not only a

vehicle/representation of the meaning/text but a presentation of the meaning/text itself—bringing out the faith into the realm of the tangible.

4. Conclusions

This paper foregrounds the religious practice of pilgrimage in order to better understand the act of pilgrimage as understood by worshippers themselves, with a specific focus on the pilgrim's experience. Here, we dovetail with Coleman's recent call against "rigid characterizations of what is and is not a genuine or authentic pilgrimage," contending that scholars must "widen our horizons in recognizing physical, cultural, and intellectual terrains of pilgrimage activity" (Kosansky 2002, p. 15). Drawing on the Turners, we emphasize experience beyond a single transcendental moment and towards the wider foundation and layers of sacred materiality, understood and internalized through a porous body.

We have shown that materiality is a constant element in the pilgrimage process at Sheshan. Originally a place where Buddhism and Taoism flourished, Sheshan was constructed in a specific historical context and built on the concrete practices of the faithful to be the international Catholic pilgrimage site that we see today. This process 'sanctified' the materiality of Sheshan, such as the church, images, and so forth, which—over a long period of time—were created and given collective or individual, sacred or secular meanings. The sacred place as a tangible location necessarily involves many materialities, such as the natural material properties inherent in the sacred place itself; the materiality of substances or objects with religious symbolic meanings, such as buildings and pilgrimage artifacts; and the materiality of imagination with regards to ghosts or sacred images. On the one hand, the process of pilgrimage may be seen as a form of religious figuration. On the other hand, it is also a field in which the materiality of history and the present, the human body and the imagination, are constantly intertwined. These materialities help to construct the sacred space of Sheshan; create the sacred atmosphere; deepen the pilgrim's perception of the presence of the transcendent other, and stimulate the pilgrim's inner religious devotion and emotion. Furthermore, pilgrims' imaginations of the materiality of the past and present accumulate and repeat through time, constantly constructing the materiality of Sheshan as a sacred place and the pilgrimage practices of worshippers—and vice versa.

The process of pilgrimage at Sheshan is a process of interaction between the pilgrim's body and the materialities of the sacred site. This is particularly evident in the sensory experiences of pilgrimage, such as physical suffering, dialogue with the image, gazing upon the image, and so forth. In the continuous interaction between subject and object, the pilgrim can materially connect and interact with the transcendent other—such as God and the Virgin Mary—and point to people, events, and objects of the past, present, and future. Here, again, through the process of interaction between the body and materiality, the pilgrim gains the experience of transformation. The transformation can be physical or spiritual; in many cases, it is a dual experience of mind and body—such as the 'release' that worshippers often say they experience after a pilgrimage. Finally, when the pilgrimage is a religious experience, the 'body in pilgrimage' brings out the body in three senses—the physical, the social, and the theological—as the physicality of the time and space of the sacred place asserts itself. The Sheshan pilgrim's body is given multiple meanings and possibilities, interpenetrating the boundary between one's body and the external world. Pilgrimages are often 'functional' in terms of their immediate motivation, such as encountering difficulties and disappointments in life or hoping to accumulate good works, gain favor, or help someone in distress. But, from the perspective of the worshipper, pilgrimage is not simply an act of asking for blessings but a physical and mental practice that produces practical effects within a specific faith system and discourse.

The pilgrimage at Sheshan demonstrates how faith can be experienced simultaneously in the external physical body and the internal mind. At the external, visible level, pilgrims express their faith and longing through the material interaction between their bodies and holy spaces. At the internal, invisible level, worshippers experience pilgrimage as the spiritual activity of integrating the texts and doctrines of the faith, such as the

Catechism, with their own lives and experiences as lived. Although Catholicism is a religion with a strict ecclesiastical and hierarchical organization, the faith as lived contains immense room for personal expression to be imagined and acted upon, on top of the foundational meanings provided by texts such as doctrine and catechism. Thus, on the one hand, at the practical level, the faithful physically act out the doctrinal and catechetical texts in their pilgrimage while at the same time attaching their personal meanings to them. In fact, it is not difficult to find that a pilgrim's whole life—from birth, old age, sickness, and death to the extremely trivial events of daily life—may be closely linked narratively to Sheshan, and that pilgrimage is also a moment of encounter with the saints and with God in their religious tradition. On the other hand, through the pilgrim's imagination of the blurred border between the body and the transcendent other, the body tries to transcend the boundary between 'inside' and 'outside,' between subject and object, so that the pilgrimage can become an experience of the 'porous body and mind.'

For Catholics at Sheshan, pilgrimage might be thought of as divided into two senses: one, narrow, where the faithful physically go to holy places to make wishes, give thanks, and do penance; and two, broad, where the long road of a believer's life is metaphorically a pilgrimage to God and heaven.⁷ In this sense, the term pilgrimage is not merely an act of practice in a specific physical space and time but also reflects a psychological or spiritual state in which the faithful desire to be close to the divine presence materially, physically, and psychologically. For them, pilgrimage is a holistic experience that connects the pilgrim to the world in which he finds himself and to their own ongoing process of becoming whole on the path of faith—"always on the way," as they themselves put it.

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Notes

- ¹ The dominant approach in pilgrimage studies has been to emphasize the political-economic processes and social functions of pilgrimage, while pilgrims themselves and their experiences are often neglected. Related reviews and discussions can be found at [Huang and Zheng \(2021\)](#). Return to Person and his/her Experiences: Another Approach to the Study of Pilgrimage. Journal of ECNU, No. 6.
- ² Indeed, although it is beyond the scope of this particular article, a better umbrella term may be *tizhi* (体知), referring to bodily knowledge, reasoning and sensation.
- ³ Data from Songjiang County History, published in 1991 by the Shanghai Songjiang County Local History Compilation Committee. 上海松江县地方史志编纂委员会. 松江志[M]. 上海: 上海人民出版社, 1991.
- ⁴ In Catholic tradition, the "B" class of shrines is the second class of shrines after the only four Extraordinary Basilicas (in Rome and the Vatican), such as the famous Basilica of Our Lady of Lourdes in France. The Basilica of Our Lady of Sheshan was also the first basilica in the Far East to be dedicated by the Pope.
- ⁵ Here again the distinction can be seen between Christianity preached and Christianity perceived and practiced, in other words, the doctrine taught in texts and pulpits cannot simply be equated with the actuality of the faith of believers. A discussion of this can be found in [Huang \(2013\)](#). Local Culture and the Formation of a Faith Community. Beijing: Zhishi Chanquan Press (黄剑波: 《地方文化与信仰共同体的生成》, 知识产权出版社, 2013 年)

⁶ The Judeo-Christian tradition is generally considered to be typical of “literal” religions, with an emphasis on language and its use. We agree with this broad view, but the reason we have devoted a lot of ink to the details of the physical actions of ordinary believers during the Catholic pilgrimage to Sheshan is to point out that the non-verbal practice of faith is also a fundamental element that cannot be ignored, and that its exaltation of language or words does not automatically block out other messages, perhaps even equally important and crucial ones.

⁷ In terms of this imagery, John Bunyan’s “Journey to Heaven” is probably the most eloquent expression of it.

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