

Temples, Texts, and Textual Communities:
The Emergence of Lay Buddhist Networks in Contemporary Mainland China

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My presentation will discuss the revival of Buddhism in contemporary mainland China in terms of both the rapid construction of new temples and the spread of discursive communities of lay Buddhists who participate in the creation, reproduction, and discussion of Buddhist-themed texts. I suggest that as these textual communities expand to fill the social and theological spaces of these new temples, they are contributing to the spread of new Buddhist discourse with the potential to challenge both the Chinese state's monopoly on the distribution of information and its disenchanted, rationalist worldview. I will begin by discussing how the state's complex policies toward the revival of organized religion have contributed to a political and economic climate amenable to the construction of new Buddhist temples. I will then follow by outlining how both the construction of new temples and the creation and distribution of Buddhist literature is fueled by a strong emphasis on the meritorious fruits of those actions. The substance of my argument will focus on how the construction of new Buddhist temples facilitates the introduction of new Buddhist literature and the spread of popular Buddhist discourses that present an worldview to that of the state. I will conclude by inviting the audience to explore how the process by which temples, texts, and textual communities have spread throughout contemporary mainland China is – paradoxically – facilitated in part by the state's own restrictions on religious activity.

At present, the Chinese communist state recognizes five religious traditions: Protestant and Catholic forms of Christianity, Buddhism, Daoism, and Islam. Adherents of these five traditions are free to practice in their homes, but they are forbidden from proselytizing their teachings to others in public places. This includes the distribution of any forms of religious literature. Their public activities must be confined to specified “religious activity sites” (*zongjiao huodong changsuo*) approved by the government’s Religious Affairs Bureau (*zongjiao shiwu bu*). There are many loopholes and exceptions to this policy but it is generally respected by individual practitioners. However, my own research findings suggest that the Religious Affairs Bureau shows a surprisingly high degree of tolerance to the nature of religious discourse that takes place *inside* religious venues it has already approved. At the Temple of Universal Rescue (*Guangji Si*) in Beijing where I have conducted the majority of my ethnographic field research, lay practitioners who gathered in the temple’s outer courtyard frequently used Buddhist teachings on karmic retribution to address problems of official corruption and on the importance of compassion to challenge the market reform policies of the post-Mao regime.

The state has also shown a willingness to permit the construction of new Buddhist temples. The reasons for this willingness is complex and varied (for a full account see Fisher 2008): my research informants explained to me that, as part of restitution for the excesses of China’s Cultural Revolution when many temples were destroyed and clergy forcibly laicized, if the local branch of the Chinese Buddhist Association (*zhongguo fojiao xiehui*) could prove that a temple once stood in any given location, the local government had to return that site to the local Buddhist Association. In practice, however, no local authority is likely to surrender land currently in active use – whether as a school, a police station, or a lucrative high-rise housing complex – regardless of whatever temple may have once stood there. But if the land the local

Association claims land not currently being used in a way that directly benefits the income of the local authorities, particularly when a new temple can bring in important tourist money or overseas investment, local officials often return the site to the Association in the name of restitution. In seeking restitution, the Association is often connected with a monk or nun, often from another part of the country, who is interested in spearheading the new construction and installing himself or herself as abbot.

In recent years, the growth of new temples has proceeded at a rapid rate. Even more rapid has been the explosion of new Buddhist literature distributed free of charge at temples all across China. At any of the twice monthly dharma assemblies (*fahui*) held on the first and fifteenth days of the lunar month, one can find gatherings of lay practitioners moving among crowds of temple-goers to distribute free Buddhist literature. The materials these distributors pass out range from professionally-bound books to flimsy photocopied handouts. In addition to printed literature, lay practitioners have been known to distribute large laminated posters of mandalas, DVDs featuring sermons by well-known monks, and plastic music boxes that recycle tinny praises to Amitabha Buddha. Some temples even provide tables or bookshelves for interested practitioners to drop off and pick up books and handouts. A growing community of lay practitioners has gained much of their knowledge of Buddhism from reading or viewing this distributed media.

Chinese Buddhists emerging in the early 1980s following the end of the Cultural Revolution faced a significant loss of Buddhist texts and images. Many of these materials originally found their way back into mainland China from Buddhist communities in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and among Chinese living overseas (see Yoshiko and Wank 2005; Fisher forthcoming). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, most materials available

for distribution at temples in mainland China are domestically produced or, at the very least, have been altered significantly through the process of their redistribution in the mainland. In a survey of 131 books, booklets, and photocopied handouts I collected in temples between 2002 and 2004, 107 (81.7%) were written in simplified Chinese; 77 (67.5%) referred to historical events specific to mainland China, related the biographies of contemporary monks in mainland China, or related miracle narratives set in contemporary mainland China. One text, for instance, provides a short biography and excerpts from lectures by the Ven. Xiyuan (1917-2002) who died in residence at Wutai Mountain where he had first taken the tonsure at age thirteen. Another text describes the miraculous appearance of Amitabha at the deathbed of a pious Beijing lay practitioner in 1997 and another describes how the corpse of a woman who died in Hebei province ten years ago has yet to decay. A primer on Buddhist ethics relates how practitioners in Beijing successfully avoided catching the SARS virus in 2003 because of their vegetarian lifestyle.

Some texts and handouts refer to the need for education in cultivating moral virtue (*daode*) and in doing good works (*zuo shanshi*) following the decline of Maoist-era values that united the Chinese people to a common goal. There are even texts that suggest that Mao himself was a Buddhist. Also available for distribution at several temples I visited in different cities was a laminated picture of former president Jiang Zemin standing next to several prominent Buddhist leaders. When distributed, this picture was sometimes accompanied by a short article, purported to have been published in an obscure regional newspaper in South China, that Jiang was really a practicing Buddhist; he had not divulged this practice publicly for fear that it would contradict the official position of the communist party that all of its members must be atheists. Some preachers and literature distributors who passed out this photo and article asserted that the

government had conducted experiments with powerful monk-adepts who had developed clairvoyant insights useful in espionage.

While some more wealthy practitioners (and well-endowed temples with attached printing houses) can afford to pay for the printing of hundreds of Buddhist texts at professional publishing houses, many more practitioners pool meager resources to reproduce particular texts usually at small, private printing houses that print, collate, and bind the literature for a fee. Practitioners also write and distribute their own smaller handouts. These handouts are usually type-written, printed, and then photocopied. Often the authors of these handouts distribute their materials themselves in temple courtyards. Both the quantity and diversity of literature available to contemporary Chinese Buddhist practitioners has facilitated not only a shared community of readers but also helped to create interactive communities of practitioners centered around both networks of distribution and interest in a particular text and, occasionally, its author. Many authors of texts or distributors who expound on the meaning of the texts take on the role of lay teachers (*laoshi*) and attract regular groups of followers who consider themselves the students of those teachers. Some of these teachers employ charismatic styles of preaching to interest listeners in their message and generate readers for their distributed texts. Borrowing from anthropologist Joanne Rappaport (1997), I use the term textual communities to describe these groups that gather around the discussion of a text or texts whether with a central teacher or without. These textual communities play a crucial role in using the content of the distributed literature to generate lively discourses.

Practitioners believe that both the construction of new temples and the production and circulation of Buddhist literature are highly meritorious. In parts of the country where temple reconstruction proceeds at a feverish pace, visitors are usually confronted with overt propaganda

urging them to donate, describing grandiose (and sometimes unrealistic) plans for the finished temple, and extolling the moral authority and vision of the temple's abbot (*zhuchi*). Very often clergy angling to construct new temples who lack connections to wealthy patrons will travel to temple-based communities in other cities, often securing free room and board in the homes of lay practitioners. As a public space where lay Buddhists gather in relatively large numbers and are not preoccupied by ritual activities, the outer courtyard of the Temple of Universal Rescue represents an excellent target for the fund-raising campaigns of these wandering clergy. Dressed in the robes that mark their sacred authority and far more accessible to ordinary lay practitioners than the monks inside the temple, they quickly establish in the minds of many the meritorious fruits of helping to construct their temples.

Contributions to temple construction are often recognized in a variety of different ways; here, I will mention two: at almost any newly constructed or renovated temple in China, a prominent stele or plaque will list the donors to the temple project, sometimes with the approximate amounts of their donations inscribed next to their names. Practitioners making relatively smaller donations are often encouraged to donate a fixed amount (such as Y100) to have their names inscribed on the *inside* of temple eaves or on a small statue of the Buddha to be placed inside a newly constructed temple building: they are told that, in this way, they will receive any blessings accrued from the prayers said in those halls.

Similarly, lay practitioners who participate in the creation, reproduction, and/or distribution of Buddhist literature are driven by the belief that their actions are highly meritorious. Like their historical counterparts, many practitioners believe that the reproduction of a particular scripture or commentary (whether canonical or not) will lead to specific rewards such as the birth of a child or grandchild or relief from a chronic illness. While it can never hurt to distribute

many copies of a highly profound or efficacious text, however, my research informants stressed that it is not necessarily the case that the more texts one reprints, the more merit one will gain: more crucial is the amount of wisdom gained by a text's readership, the amount of suffering the text can relieve, and the number of good deeds done and bad deeds avoided in which the reading of a text will actually result.

For these reasons, practitioners in present-day temples are careful not to distribute too many copies of the same text to a potential readership already saturated with free texts. In order to maximize the merit gained from the circulation of Buddhist literature, practitioners often seek out new texts to distribute that can contribute original insights to the community. They accomplish this by reproducing a scripture not currently in circulation or by circulating a newly-written text (including those they write themselves). It is for this reason that the diversity of circulated materials in Chinese Buddhist temples is so great and that miracle narratives and moral commentaries relating to contemporary China have emerged so quickly. It is this creativity that engenders the textual communities of practitioners who discuss and debate the merit of ideas presented in the new literature.

Through the depiction of supernatural intervention into everyday life, much of the literature distributed by lay practitioners in contemporary China challenges the disenchanting and rationalist visions of reality spread by the communist state through its official media. By suggesting that Mao was a Buddhist and that government officials have used monk-adepts in top-level experiments, it even challenges the notion that the state itself is truly disenchanting and rationalist. The distribution of Buddhist or other religious literature containing moral instructions and making miraculous truth claims has been practiced for centuries in China. In the past the creation and distribution of this literature was facilitated by people of all social classes

and positions including officials of the imperial state. In twenty-first century China, however, the moral visions and truth claims of this distributed literature is shirked by both the state and the majority of its citizens who have been socialized from a young age by an atheist regime. Very few Chinese people would accept the idea that the bodhisattva Guanyin is as likely to appear in one's living room today as she might have to a cave-dwelling hermit in the Song. Yet because of the spread of Buddhist literature and the discourses generated by the textual communities that surround this distribution, more potential adherents accept the possibility of miraculous actions in everyday life.

The construction of new Buddhist temples is central to the process by which these alternative discourses spread. In addition to producing a diversity of Buddhist texts, lay practitioners involved in literature distribution eagerly seek out opportunities to circulate literature to new communities of Buddhists: in the newly built temples I have visited to this point, I have encountered several adherents arriving with armloads of tracts in the hope of interesting a fresh group of adherents. To appreciate the potential potency of this distribution of literature to newly constructed temples, it is important to understand that, whatever the legal framework under which they have been built, these temples are very often wholly new temples rather than reconstructions or renovations of existing or past temple sites. Even if a temple previously stood on the site of the newly constructed temple, in my research to date, the newly appointed abbots seemed to take little interest in its history, particularly as imagined by the people of the area. With local forms of religion and spirituality sometimes decimated by the experiences of Maoist-era repression, the construction of a new Buddhist temple may fill a spiritual vacuum. This is clearly the hope of the literature distributors who make their tracts available at the temples.

By the same token, the lay practitioners who have funded the temple construction - be they wealthy overseas Chinese or ordinary laypersons each making small donations - are often too physically remote from the new temple site to have much influence on the day-to-day life of local adherents who may begin to participate in activities at the temple. In my experience, even the abbot and the temple monks have not seemed to concern themselves much with the everyday practices of the laity. They have also been happy to depend on eager lay practitioners to provide free Buddhist literature to new adherents so that they themselves do not have to finance it. As a result, practitioners attending the temple for the first time may gain much of their knowledge of Buddhist teachings by reading these free texts. Thus, rather than (or in addition to) embracing the temple as an extension of local folk religious practices or receiving the instruction of the temple clergy in canonical expositions of doctrine, these new practitioners become exposed to versions of Buddhist teachings that are closely situated within the lives and experiences of ordinary lay practitioners in contemporary China and that challenge the disenchanted, rationalist discourse of the state and society at large. If the literature distributors stay to expound on these teachings as preachers or if new Buddhist adherents gather together to discuss these readings and perhaps even produce their own, then new textual communities will form which may extend the discourses that these texts have generated elsewhere.

Because Buddhist literature can only be spread at approved religious sites, new temples are among the only venues where practitioners can share their literature with large groups of new adherents. Yet because so many new temples are indeed being built, these alternative discourses have great potential to find new listeners. Moreover, both the construction of new temples and the spread of popular Buddhist literature facilitate the integration of regional and nationwide networks of lay Buddhists. By visiting temples in other provinces in an effort to raise funds, the

would-be abbots of new temples form connections with lay practitioners in faraway parts of the country. They sometimes invite these practitioners to return with them to visit the temples being constructed or even to provide logistical help in the construction. In general, lay practitioners themselves, even those on small fixed retirement incomes, are surprisingly mobile taking advantage of state-subsidized rail fares and using their conversion certificates (*guiyizheng*) to secure free room and board at temples all over the country. When these lay practitioners bring Buddhist literature with them for free distribution, it facilitates the circulation of a variety of popular Buddhist ideas among a nationwide community of Buddhists. Given the meritorious nature of both helping to construct new temples and spreading Buddhist literature to new audiences, the construction of new temples motivate practitioners to travel and expand their networks to other areas.

With this in mind, I would like to conclude by suggesting that the state's regulation on the distribution of religious materials, designed to restrict and control the expansion of religious groups in contemporary China, may have paradoxically facilitated and strengthened both the construction of new temples and the spread of popular Buddhist literature throughout China. Throughout Chinese history and also presently in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and within overseas Chinese communities, religious practitioners of all types actively spread diverse forms of religious and spiritually-themed media in a variety of public settings including hospitals, train stations, shops, parks, and local temples. Were Buddhist practitioners in present-day mainland China free to distribute their literature publicly, they could do so more easily in their own localities. This might make the distribution of these materials easier but it would mean that Buddhists were competing with many other schools of religious thought. It would also mean that the practitioners distributing this literature would be likely to travel over lesser distances to

spread their materials and, as a result, create fewer networks among like-minded fellow practitioners. One might go so far as to suggest that lay practitioners would have less motivation to invest time and money in promoting the construction of new Buddhist temples if these were not the only new venues in which they could proselytize. As it is, by restricting the spread of Buddhist teachings to approved temples but then permitting and even encouraging the expansion of those temples, the communist state has facilitated the spread of institutions through which its own worldview can be called into question.

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