

## Article

# Sacred Resurgence: Revitalizing Buddhist Temples in Modern China

Yifeng Liu

School of History (Institute for Global History), Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing 100089, China; liuyifeng@bfsu.edu.cn

**Abstract:** This paper examines the construction and maintenance of Chinese Han Buddhist temples in modern China against the backdrop of societal transformation. Initially, it analyzes the profound impact of social changes since the mid-19th century on Buddhist monasteries, including political turmoil, economic development, and urbanization. Furthermore, the paper explores how temples were reconstructed and revitalized within this historical context, highlighting the monastic community's unwavering commitment to protecting the Dharma and ensuring its enduring presence. Additionally, this paper also explores the role of charismatic monks in enhancing the sanctity of temples and the influence of Buddhist institutional frameworks on the dynamics of state and society. The study employs a multifaceted analysis to understand the complex interplay between temple construction, economic development, and the cultural heritage of Buddhism in China.

**Keywords:** modern Buddhism; temple space; temple construction; charismatic monks

## 1. Reconstruction of Buddhist Temple Spaces in Social Transformation

The social transformation of China in modern times, particularly since the late Qing Dynasty (1840–1912) and the Republican period (1912–1949), marks an era of transition from a traditional agrarian civilization to a modern industrial one. Traditional culture emphasizes on “benevolence 仁” at the core of its social value system, “authority 權” at the core of its social control system, and “adherence to the classics and understanding of the way 遵经明道” at the center of its knowledge system. These deeply ingrained values have been thoroughly overturned under the influence of Western politics, culture, religion, and economic modernity. The traditional worldview of “Family-Governed Monarchic Country 家天下” has been completely shattered (Dong 2016, p. 163). The social structure has evolved from a static, isolated rural model to a dynamic, interconnected urban patterns. Social organization has transitioned from rigid uniformity to flexible diversity. Social systems have shifted from moralistic clan-based governance to rational legal structures, and interpersonal relationships have transformed from patriarchal clan leadership to contractual interactions (Chen et al. 2005, p. 23). These changes are not only reflected in various aspects of social life but have also profoundly influenced the construction and development of Buddhist temples. Since the mid-19th century, there has been a shift in the trend of Buddhist temples, transitioning from a decline to a gradual resurgence. During the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864) 太平天國運動, numerous temples experienced destruction, with monks being displaced, leading to substantial material and spiritual harm to Buddhist temples. The portrayal of Buddhist temples in the travel accounts of foreign scholars during this time often presented a picture of deteriorating structures, desolation, and monks who had forfeited their previous dignity (Williams 1883; Thomson 1898). In the descriptions provided by John Macgowan (1835–1922), a British missionary, regarding the Bailu Temple 白鹿寺 in Hunan, one discerns the monks' indulgence in opium and their lack of religious fervor, intimating a spiritual decay amongst Buddhists (Macgowan 1912). Similarly, Japanese scholars Naito Konan (1866–1934) and Kuwabara Jitsuzo (1871–1931), during their visits to Hanshan Temple 寒山寺 in Suzhou and Kaiyuan Temple 開元寺 in Xi'an,



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observed the neglect of the temples and the dilapidation of historical relics (Kuwbara 2007; Naitō 2007). These descriptions not only showcase the decline of the physical environs of the Buddhist temples but also reflect a crisis of culture and spiritual belief.

While the conflict wrought considerable destruction upon the temple spaces, the ensuing eras of Tongzhi 統治 and Guangxu 光緒 (1862–1908) witnessed a significant amount of restoration and reconstruction efforts, with records indicating that some of the rebuilt temples were even grander in scale than before. Taking the Wuhan 武漢 as an example, from the Tongzhi era to the outbreak of the Xinhai Revolution (1911) 辛亥革命, a total of 46 temples were either reconstructed or newly built. Between the Xinhai Revolution and the Japanese occupation of Wuhan, there were 95 temples for which records of construction or major repairs exist. Throughout the entire Republican period, the number of temples that were either newly constructed or rebuilt amounted to 196 (Wu 2017, p. 14). According to the records in the local gazetteer, in the Jiangnan region 江南地區,<sup>1</sup> between 1850 and 1900, 174 temples were destroyed, and a total of 348 temples were built, making this one of the most active periods of temple construction since 600CE (Eberhard 1964, pp. 264–318). Among the Jinshan Temple 金山寺 Jiaoshan Temple 焦山寺, Baohuashan 寶華山 and Tianning temples 天寧寺 in Jiangsu; Huacheng Temple 化城寺, Ganlu Temple 甘露寺, Baisui Palace 百歲宮 and Yingjiang Temple 迎江寺 in Anhui; and Jingshan Temple 徑山寺, Lingyin Temple 靈隱寺 and Liuhe Pagoda 六合塔 in Zhejiang were expanded the most (see Table A1). Baohuashan became fully operational in 1885, while the Mahavira Hall of the Lingyin Temple, the largest temple in Hangzhou, underwent comprehensive renovation in 1911, with expenditures amounting to an impressive 150,000 taels of silver (Fitch 1929, p. 29). Dinghushan 鼎湖山, the largest temple in Guangdong, was rebuilt in 1878. Another notable example is the reconstruction of Chanyuan Temple 禪源寺 on West Tianmushan 西天目山. Despite the neighboring region being ravaged by the Taiping Rebellion and suffering extensive destruction, Chanyuan Temple was remarkably reconstructed within five years, emerging with grandeur. In 1913, upon visiting Tianmu Mountain, the Scottish diplomat Reginald Johnston noted the temple's exceedingly prosperous condition (Johnson 1913, p. 276). During his 1911 visit to Mount Wutai 五台山 in Shanxi, the German sinologist Heinrich Hackmann remarked, "It seems to be undergoing a revival, for I observed numerous temples being meticulously restored" (Hackmann 2013, p. 25). When Bishop Huntington visited Jiuhuashan 九華山 in 1920, he found that the condition of the temples and roads had greatly improved since his previous visit five or six years earlier (Letter of November 28, 1920, from Bishop D. T. Huntington to Lewis Hodous, in the Hodous Collection, Hartford Theological Seminary, Hartford, Connecticut, as cited in Welch 1968, p. 316).

The aforementioned details reflect the regional construction of temples. In response to the state of Buddhist temple construction in China in the decades following the Taiping Rebellion, Professor Gregory Adam Scott, a specialist in modern Chinese history, has compiled and analyzed an extensive collection of local gazetteers. He established a historical database on temple destruction and reconstruction, unveiling the specific circumstances of the wartime devastation endured by Buddhist architecture and the subsequent post-war restoration efforts.<sup>2</sup>

Scott's research indicates that in the decade commencing from 1864, despite the reconstruction efforts typically taking place 10 to 22 years after the destruction, the restoration of temples progressed at a modest but steady pace, primarily driven by local monks and the lay populace. Scott's discovery aligns with sociologist Wolfram Eberhard's (1909–1989) 1964 assertion that the last of the four historical peaks in temple construction in China occurred between 1850 and 1900.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, sinologist Holmes Welch (1921–1981) offers a unique viewpoint, highlighting that the flourishing of modern temple construction represents a phase in the long-term "monastic cycle" rather than being solely driven by the spontaneous efforts of Buddhists or a distinct revival movement. He argues that the construction of temples in modern times does not exhibit any uniqueness compared to a century earlier (Welch 1968, p. 98). While Welch's critique provides valuable insights into

the historical and architectural development of religious buildings, it also has its limitations, particularly in focusing on the history of specific temples and the patterns of spatial changes in modern Buddhist temples. To fully understand the characteristics of reconstruction and construction of modern Chinese Buddhist temples, a more comprehensive observational perspective is required. This encompasses, but is not limited to, considerations of the temples' geographical locations, new forms and functions, and the composition and motivations of those involved in their rebuilding. Through the analysis of these dimensions, one can more accurately grasp the relationship between temple space and societal transformation, showcasing the distinct spatial characteristics of modern Buddhism, thus offering a richer and more diverse perspective for understanding the vitality of Buddhism in contemporary China.

## 2. Patterns of Spatial Changes in Modern Buddhist Temples

### 2.1. Regional Differences: The Impact of Economic Development on the Evolution of Buddhist Temple Spaces

A comprehensive overview of the spatial distribution changes in modern Chinese temples, whether through destruction or construction, reveals a close correlation with the economic development patterns of the new era. Earlier research by Eberhard suggested that, although the peak periods of temple construction were not directly linked to economic factors, economic fluctuations nonetheless remained a significant influence on temple architectural activities. Taking the Taiping Rebellion as an example, temples in the Jiangnan region, particularly in areas like Suzhou 蘇州, Shanghai 上海, and Hangzhou 杭州, suffered extensive damage, with destruction rates ranging from one-fifth to one-third. This was primarily due to the economic prosperity and abundance of temples in these regions, making them targets in the warfare as many temples were used as military fortifications or destroyed. The wealth of temples in the economically prosperous Jiangnan region ironically made them resources to be contested during the conflict.

Looking at the temple damages caused by the Temple Property for Education Movement 廟產興學運動, the extent of destruction in the temples of North China far exceeded that of Jiangnan, with a destruction rate of up to 90%, compared to 40–50% in Jiangnan. North China, being economically less developed compared to Jiangnan and having a weaker consciousness for the protection of traditional religious architecture during the modernization process, coupled with a more tense political environment than the South, saw a large number of temples requisitioned under the government's policy of converting temple property to fund education. Additionally, the degree of temple destruction exhibited a distribution pattern that gradually decreased from "metropolises–county towns–market towns–villages".<sup>4</sup> This diversity reflects the unevenness across different regions in terms of economic development, policy implementation, and modernization demands. In Shanghai, the temples most thoroughly destroyed during the conversion of temple properties for educational purposes were predominantly located in the city center, accounting for 72.9% (414 out of a total of 568). Of these, only 13.3% (76 temples) were converted into schools (Ouyang and Zhang 2010, p. 153). Temples situated in the city center, being located on high-value land, were more likely to be demolished or repurposed to meet the demands for commercial and educational land use, resulting in a greater degree of destruction.

The observation of the connection between temple construction and economic development provides a foundation for understanding the role temples have played in the reconstruction process of the new era. Beginning in the Tongzhi period, with the transformation of the economic structure, China's economic and cultural centers gradually shifted eastward. The economies of southern coastal cities and the Yangtze River basin rose rapidly, with merchants and capitalists providing financial support for the reconstruction of temples. The rapid development of urbanization also spurred interest in and reconstruction of temples, particularly in the southern regions, which excelled in post-disaster reconstruction. Taking Shanghai as an example, as a trading port, a significant increase in temple activities occurred after its opening, demonstrating that economic vitality played a

promotive role in temple reconstruction. Of the 73 Buddhist temples documented in Shanghai, a diverse range of funding sources have been incorporated, showcasing the varied origins of these temples: 8 were commissioned by the imperial court, 30 were generously donated through alms, 15 were contributed by devout believers, 13 were privately constructed by affluent individuals, and 7 originated from miscellaneous sources ([Shanghai Yearbook 1935](#), p. 4). The data illustrate the significant influence that the upper echelons of society exert on temple construction at both the economic and cultural levels. Shanghai's temples, positioned as core areas in the reconstruction process, starkly contrast with the severe damage they sustained during urbanization, showcasing the dual impact—both destructive and facilitative—of economic development and urbanization on temple construction. As a bustling commercial hub, Shanghai's high land prices and concentrated resources lead to the destruction or conversion of existing temples to meet new commercial, educational, and other needs during urban expansion. However, it is precisely the vibrancy of the economy and the rapid pace of urbanization that also concentrate funds and attention, thereby driving the repair and construction of new temples. This phenomenon vividly demonstrates the “double-edged sword” of economic development on temple construction activities.

In stark contrast to the expanding spaces of Buddhist temples in the southern cities, the construction status of temples in the north presents a different picture. When the Western observer, Mr. Bradt, a professor of philosophy from Williams College, visited China to survey temples during 1923–1924, he observed a vibrant Buddhist community along the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River, from Jiujiang 九江 to Ningbo 寧波. However, as his journey extended to northern provinces such as Beijing, Shaanxi 陝西, and Jilin 吉林, he encountered dilapidated temples and monks lacking in knowledge.

Taking the Buddhist temples in Beijing as an example, the temples in Beijing were primarily of smaller scale, known as “descendant temples or family temples 子孫廟”, with fewer large temples compared to Jiangnan. According to Master Tanxu 倓虛 and local monks, Beijing had over 1000 temples, of which there were only about 70 large monastic complexes and over 2000 smaller temples. During the Republican period, there was a noticeable decline in the number of Buddhists in Beijing, with an average of only 3–6 individuals per temple, and even the larger temples with Buddhist colleges, such as Fayuan Temple 法源寺, Bailin Temple 柏林寺, and Guangji Temple 廣濟寺, did not have more than 50 individuals. By comparison, the population of modern Beijing grew from approximately 760,000 in 1908 to about 1.51 million in 1948; yet, the number of monks and nuns saw almost no increase, accounting for less than 0.3% of the total population ([Zhang 2016](#), p. 67).

Although the number of temple buildings remained stable, many were in disrepair. The Japanese scholars who organized the compilation of Beijing Chronicles in the Late Qing Dynasty (清末北京志资料 Qingmo Beijing Zhi Ziliao) also made the following evaluation after personally inspecting the temples in Beijing: “Temples that were once famous in ancient times have undergone many changes, with many now barely worth visiting, and the old large monastic complexes have been abandoned, having no value... The degradation of temples outside the city is even more severe than within the city, with some being used as schools, military barracks, factories, or even storage warehouses 古時曾經著名的寺廟, 幾經變遷, 今之幾無可觀者居多, 且舊時之大伽藍現已荒廢, 多為無賽脂之價值... 外城寺刹的荒廢程度比內城更為嚴重, 有的寺刹已作為學堂, 有的已充當兵舍, 有的改作工廠, 有的甚至充當倉庫” ([Zhang 1994](#)).

The decline of Buddhist temples in Beijing serves as a lens through which to view the societal transformations of modern China. During the imperial era, Beijing's temples not only conducted various Buddhist ceremonies for the royalty but also served as lodging for officials from other regions upon their arrival in the capital. The imperial court placed significant emphasis on the temples, not only allocating funds for the renovation or reconstruction of key temples but also bestowing generous regular donations upon monks and nuns, sufficient to sustain thousands of clergy members. However, following the fall of the Qing Dynasty, the modernizing Republic government, adhering to Sun Yat-sen's “Three



Principles of the People 三民主義”, adopted a policy of separating religion and state in its management of temples. This left temples, which had primarily served the Buddhist needs of the royal family, with little relevance, deprived of government funding and, conversely, subjected to compulsory participation in public welfare and charitable activities, leading to their evident decline. (Zhang 2016, pp. 69–70). Moreover, the conservatism of the political situation in the north and the issue of ancestral temples also made the reconstruction of temples particularly challenging, leaving them much to be desired compared to those in the Jiangnan region.

Table 1 presents the 1930 survey on the number of monks in various regions, clearly illustrating the differences between Buddhists in the north and the south. The contrast between temples in the north and south highlights the regional differences in economic growth, cultural heritage, and religious activities across China.

**Table 1.** Distribution of Monks and Devotees in Southern and Northern Chinese Provinces (1930) (Image source: Helch, p. 251).

Southern Cities	Monks	Devotees	Northern Cities	Monks	Devotees
Jiangsu (江蘇)	914,000	1,139,540	Shandong (山東)	2890	5730
Zhejiang (浙江)	643,000	1,367,800	Henan (河南)	2450	4070
Hunan (湖南)	44,600	64,100	Hebei (河北)	1780	12,120
Fujian (福建)	28,900	96,870	Shaanxi (陝西)	780	3490

Observations of the relationship between temple construction and economic development reveal the complex role temples have played in the socio-economic transformations within Chinese society. The economic prosperity of the south provides ample funding for temple reconstruction, allowing Buddhist culture to flourish with its unique charm, whereas the north faces challenges in temple maintenance and the transmission of Buddhist culture due to policy restrictions and insufficient economic support.

## 2.2. Urban Buddhism and the Evolution of Temple Spaces

Within urban Buddhism, lay followers constitute the largest group of adherents to the Buddhist faith. They tend to participate in devotional activities like vegetarianism, releasing captive animals, and performing acts of charity. While these practices may not directly align with the fundamental teachings of Buddhism, they genuinely mirror the prevailing urban Buddhist environment during the Republic era (Shao 2017, p. 309). The escalating demand for religion among the public has subsequently led to a rise in the number of temples within urban locales. This urban demand for Buddhism is also mirrored in the proliferation of smaller-scale Buddhist spaces, such as An 庵 (small chapels) and Miao 廟 (small temples) rather than the more expansive Yuan 院 (large monasteries). This trend is not only linked to the economic aspects of temples but also correlates with the distribution of their founders. Eberhard’s studies have found that when the number of government-sponsored temples increases, the count of temples established by monks tends to decrease, and vice versa. Government-sponsored temples are typically large monastic complexes, seldom involving smaller forms such as An or Miao. Due to financial constraints, temples initiated by monks often adopt the form of An or Miao more frequently. In addition, the amount of land donated by devotees to the temples had a significant impact on the scale of the temples. Before 1250, the land donated to temples by devotees typically amounted to around 300 mu 畝.<sup>5</sup> Afterward, it averaged between 20 to 30 mu. It was during this time period that temples in the form of Yuan began to decrease, while those in the form of An started to increase. If viewed in relation to the donations, the smaller parcels of donated land were ideally suited to the existence of buildings in the form of An (Eberhard 1964). As the government’s interest in building temples has diminished in modern times, the reconstruction of Yuan which require more financial resources has decreased, and the restoration of Miao and An has occurred relatively more frequently. Taking Nanjing Buddhist

temples as an example, the number of Buddhist temples and monks in Nanjing remained at a relatively high level during the Republican period. After the Taiping Rebellion, the number of monks gradually recovered and peaked before 1937. According to a survey in 1936, there were approximately 450 temples in Nanjing, and the numbers of Buddhist temples, monks, and devotees were all no less than those in Nanjing in the Ming and Qing Dynasties (Nanjing Municipal Government Administrative Statistical Report (Annual of 1935)—[Nanjing Municipal Government Secretariat, Statistical Office 1937](#), p. 103). From the perspective of urban structure, the large temples in Nanjing were mostly located in the suburbs, such as the Great Baoen Temple 大報恩寺, Linggu Temple 靈谷寺, Tianjie Temple 天界寺, Qixia Temple 棲霞寺, and Jinghai Temple 靜海寺; medium-sized temples, such as Jiming Temple 雞鳴寺, Chengen Temple 承恩寺, Xianglin Temple 香林寺, Jinling Temple 金陵寺, Qingliang Temple 清涼寺, Waguan Temple 瓦官寺, and Jiufeng Temple 鷲峯寺, along with a greater number of Miao and An, were more distributed in densely populated urban areas, and Miao and An were more numerous than Yuan. Although Miao and An in the city did not possess as many monks, nuns, or extensive real estate and land as Yuan, they provided pragmatic functions for urban residents, such as ceremonies for weddings, funerals, illness healing, exorcisms, and places for celebrations and birthdays. The archives of the Nanjing Buddhist Confession Association 南京市經懺聯合會 show that the temples registered to hold Buddhist confession rituals in the city are concentrated in the southwest-district of the city ([Shao 2017](#), p. 118). Hence, it is evident that while urbanization has indeed impacted temple spaces, the power of faith has ensured that temples continue to exist in various forms within people's lives, fulfilling the spiritual needs of devotees. All these reflect the enduring presence of religion and faith in human society, regardless of the changing times.

### 3. Monks' Motivations for the Buddhist Temple Construction

#### 3.1. Emotional Appeal: The Revitalization and Construction of Temple Spaces in Jiangnan Region by Charismatic Monks

The revitalization of Buddhist temples in modern China has led to mass participation activities such as Buddhist statue-making and pagoda-building, which have profoundly affected the material and cultural space of society. "Such rapid reconstruction required massive financial support from Buddhist devotees and protection from government officials. It is unlikely that their support and protection would have been forthcoming unless the religious practice of the monks had retained the respect of the community. This is one reason why in China, wealth was an index of religious vitality. The largest and richest monasteries were the highest in moral strength and seriousness of purpose. Such monasteries were found above all in Kiangsu 江蘇 and Chekiang 浙江" ([Welch 1968](#), p. 251). The success of these monasteries was predicated on the monks' capacity to earn widespread respect and acknowledgment for their religious observance. Charismatic religious leaders, distinguished by their compelling personal magnetism and unwavering adherence to religious precepts, were particularly adept at securing this recognition and respect.

According to the German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), a charismatic leader born out of a crisis possesses a unique "supernatural" endowment, encompassing both physical and spiritual attributes. This endowment is based on the spirit of unattached striving and the capacity for heroic selflessness in the individual ([Weber 2016](#), p. 254). In a sense, the evolution of the history of Buddhism in China is remarkably marked by a developmental path dominated by a group of eminent monks who possessed outstanding charisma and cultivation achievements ([Li and Liu 2007](#), p. 223). These monks, known as "holy monks 聖僧", demonstrated outstanding ability and leadership in both spiritual practice and temple construction.

Following the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, the four renowned Chan temples in the Jiangnan region—Zhenjiang Jinshan Temple 鎮江金山寺, Ningbo Tiantong Temple 寧波天童寺, Yangzhou Gaomin Temple 揚州高旻寺, and Changzhou Tianning Temple 常州天寧寺—suffered complete destruction by fire. Subsequently, amidst the concerted efforts of

the eminent monks belonging to each temple, a resurgence flourished. These eminent monks were often the abbots of their respective temples. The abbot, historically revered with titles such as elder 長老, spiritual guide 教化主, one with discerning insight 有道眼, and paragon of venerable virtues 有可尊之德, is esteemed for both moral integrity and seniority 德腊俱高者. In the traditional monastic setting, governance is distinctly personal in nature, with the abbot serving as the pivotal enforcer of the monastic system. Under the leadership of these abbots, the Chan temples not only rebuilt but also realized revival and promotion in religious and cultural aspects.

For instance, Guanxin Xianhui 觀心顯慧 (1810–1875), the abbot of Jinshan Temple, demonstrated an indomitable spirit and profound knowledge, persisting in teaching his disciples even after the temple was burned down by war. He earned the deep respect of notable figures such as Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 (1823–1901) and Zeng Guofan 曾國藩 (1811–1872), securing their financial support for the temple's reconstruction. Later, through the profound contributions and meticulous efforts of Dading Miyuan 大定密源 (1824–1907), Changjing Michuan 常靜密傳, Xinglian Mifa 性蓮密法, and Yinru Mizang 隱儒密藏, a systematic reformation of Chan regulations was undertaken successively. Thus, Jinshan Temple emerged as the preeminent monastery of Chinese Chan Buddhism. A similar circumstance also unfolded at the Gaomin Temple in Yangzhou. The Gaomin Temple also suffered a catastrophe during the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom period. In the aftermath, the abbot Deci Hengyan 德慈恆演 embodied unparalleled resilience, “his heart as unyielding as diamond, demonstrating forbearance that surpassed ordinary measure 鐵石心硬比金剛, 忍辱力超諸數外”. Amid the most challenging conditions, he devotedly sought solace in solitude. Later, the abbot Yuelang Quanding 月朗全定 (1855–1915) made an outstanding contribution to the resurgence of Gaomin Temple. During the Republican period, under the vigorous efforts of the abbot Laiguo Miaoshu 來果妙樹 (1881–1953), Gaomin Temple established regulations and rectified its discipline, significantly bolstering its sectarian influence and projecting its renown far and wide (Yu 1995, p. 99). It is noteworthy that these eminent monks, while dedicated to the reconstruction of their temples, also committed themselves to the preservation and flourishing of the Dharma lineage. For example, Chan Master Wuyuan 悟圓 from Jinshan Temple revived Haichao Temple 海潮寺 in Hangzhou during the Jiaqing period; Master Faren 法忍 from Jinshan revived Bore Temple 般若寺 in Chishan 赤山, Nanjing, during the Guangxu period; Jingxin 淨心 from Jinshan revived Tiantong Temple 天童寺 in Ningbo; Renzhi 仁智, the first seat in Jinshan, revived Xianqin Temple 顯親寺 in Yixing 宜興; Qingzong 清宗 of Tianning Temple revived Shizi Zhengzong Temple 獅子正宗寺 in Tianmu Mountain; and Fayi 法一, the first seat in Gaomin Temple, revived Shiziling 獅子嶺 in Nanjing (Li 2010, p. 1812). While reconstructing the temples, the monks spread the Dharma lineage or used the Dharma lineage to gather the strength to overcome difficulties and foster the prosperity of the temple together, unifying, from the historical perspective, the revival of the temples and the continuation of the Dharma lineage.

Master Xuyun 虛云 (1840?–1959) stands as yet another distinguished exemplar within this developmental trajectory. As a venerable Chan master affiliated with five different Chan lineages, Master Xuyun devoted his life to the establishment or restoration of at least fourteen temples, leaving an indelible mark on the religious landscape of China. His efforts were particularly concentrated in the provinces of Yunnan, Fujian, Guangdong, and Jiangxi. In Yunnan, he played a key role in revitalizing a series of temples, including Xizhu Temple 西竺寺, Zhusheng Temple 祝聖寺, Yingxiang Temple 迎祥寺, Xingyun Temple 興雲寺, Huating Temple 華亭寺, Luoquan Temple 蘿荃寺, Songyin Temple 松隱寺, and Shengyin Temple 勝因寺, each serving as a testament to his dedication to the Chan tradition. His influence extended to Fujian, where he played a pivotal role in the rejuvenation of Yongquan Temple 湧泉寺. In the provinces of Guangdong, Xuyun's contributions were equally significant, with his involvement in the restoration of Nanhua Temple 南華寺, Dajian Temple 大鑿寺, Yuehua Temple 月華寺, and Yunmen Temple 雲門寺, which have become emblematic of the region's Buddhist heritage. Additionally, his work in Jiangxi

province with the Yunju Shan 雲居山 complex further underscores his commitment to preserving and promoting Chan Buddhism.

In addition to revitalizing the temples, Xuyun placed a greater emphasis on the revitalization of the intrinsic spirit of Buddhism. He tried to change family-owned temples with monks breaking precepts and violating fasts into Chan temples through strict discipline, the implementation of statutes, and the teaching of precepts to truly restore the vitality of Buddhism. In 1933, General Hanhun Li 李漢魂, director of the appeasement of northern Guangdong, invited Xuyun to revive Nanhua Temple, a famous temple in Guangdong. Nanhua Temple is where the real body of the Sixth Patriarch lies. At that time, the Temple had already severely declined; i.e., “(The descendants and disciples) each lived in the village with their family members, plowing and herding livestock, without any differences from other farmers... Slaughtering and cooking, gambling and smoking, human and animal excrement all existed. Except for the Ancestral Hall, the Pagoda and a part of the Sucheng An, which are slightly intact, the Mahavira Hall and scripture buildings were all destroyed, and there was no place to accommodate the abbot and monks (子孫徒眾) 各攜家眷住於村莊耕植牧畜, 無殊俗類。... 宰殺烹飲, 賭博吸煙, 人畜糞穢, 觸目掩鼻, 廢除祖殿, 寶塔及蘇程庵一部份稍為完整外, 其大殿, 經樓, 方丈, 僧素均皆摧朽, 容眾無所” (Xuyun 2009, p. 148). After Xuyun went to Nanhua, he immediately began to strictly rectify the precepts. After ten years of hard work, i.e., building temples, buying more property, and promoting the Dharma and the monks, Xuyun finally revived the tradition of the Sixth Patriarch and built Nanhua Temple into the largest temple in Guangdong. After rebuilding Nanhua, Xuyun went to Yunmen Temple in Shaoguan, Guangdong, in 1943 to rejuvenate the temple’s venerable traditions. The revival of Yunmen Temple occurred “during the Second Sino-Japanese War, i.e., the Japanese occupied most parts of China, fires were spreading across the country, and financial resources were limited, with construction difficulties and a lack of materials and personnel; therefore, the revival was ten to a hundred times harder than that for Nanhua Temple 時值抗戰軍興, 倭寇深入, 烽火漫於全國, 財力限於一隅, 物質缺乏, 人事周章, 建設艱難, 固有十百倍於南華時代者” (Cen 2009a, p. 188). Xuyun overcame all types of difficulties by “gathering a handful of workers, blasting his own stones, burning his own bricks and tiles, felling his own timber, building his own construction, exploring his own lacquer, making his own statues, reclaiming his own land, and planting his own seeds 集少數工人, 自爆石, 自燒磚瓦, 自伐木材, 自建造, 自採漆, 自造像, 自開墾, 自種植” (Cen 2009b, p. 213). Xuyun established the Yunmen Dajue Farm 雲門大覺農場 to encourage the monastic community towards self-sufficiency, moving away from reliance on rent income, alms solicitation, incense offerings, and the conducting of repentance rituals for sustenance. Through the unrelenting efforts of Xuyun and his assembly, Yunmen Temple ultimately emerged as a major monastery in Lingnan 嶺南,<sup>6</sup> second only to Nanhua Temple.

### 3.2. Sustaining the Sacred: The Role of Dharma Transmission in Revitalizing Jiangnan’s Buddhist Temples

The foregoing discussion highlights the pivotal role played by eminent monks in the reconstruction of temples and the revival of Buddhism. The Monastic Rules of Monk Baizhang by Imperial Order 敕修百丈清規 states that “If the abbot cannot function properly, the temple will be abandoned and ruined, and the impact will continue for many years; therefore, the temple will be ruined for decades 苟非其人, 一寺廢蕩, 又遺黨於後, 至數十年蔓不可圖” (Taishō Tripitaka, Vol. 48, Sutra No. 2025, p. 1119, p. 1119). This underscores the critical influence of the abbot’s personal decisions on the operation of the monastic system. In the modern tradition of Jiangnan Chan temples, the method of succession for the abbot is predominantly through the Dharma scroll transmission system 法卷傳法 (Welch 1963). Initially, Dharma transmission referred to the “Entrustment of the Dharma 付囑傳法”, where the abbot selects disciples with profound spiritual aptitude or clear insight into the nature of mind to receive the teachings. With the influence of Chinese clan systems on Buddhism, Dharma transmission evolved into a method



for recruiting disciples and preserving ancestral rules and enterprises: “In the old days, the testamentary transmission of the Dharma is for the inheritance of the Dharma, with a whisk of origin, so that the heir can go to various places to expound and develop, having no initial relationship with the present abbot of the temple; once there is no abbot, the heir can also be invited to fill in the abbotship. However, the true nature of the transmission of the Dharma is gradually being lost, and no one can hold the abbotship unless he is a direct heir 古之付囑而為法嗣, 授以源流拂子, 使往諸方闡化, 與本山住持無初關係; 然本山一旦缺席亦可受請遞補, 後代漸失本真, 非親授嫡嗣不能據座” (Zhenhua 1944, p. 3). The characteristic feature of the Dharma transmission system in modern Jiangnan Chan temples lies in its internal lineage within the Dharma family, resembling a familial succession from father to son, thus creating a dynastic mode of transmission. The abbot holds significant control over the temple’s property and management, a practice that, akin to ruling a family or a clan, has profoundly impacted the stability and longevity of the temple’s organizational system.

However, the method of appointing abbots through Dharma transmission has been criticized in modern times. Some highly respected monks in the religious community strongly oppose linking the transmission of Dharma with the position of abbot, as they believe it introduces a very personal relationship into the public sphere.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, some scholars argue that the concentration of administrative power and familial responsibility might be one of the reasons why some Chan temples were able to remain prosperous during the Republican period when other temples were declining. Chinese religious history scholar Zhang Xuesong believes that the traditional clan system of the monastic community should not be completely abandoned because it underpins monks’ renunciation, identity construction, the acquisition of religious legitimacy and sanctity, and even the attainment of sectarian identity. Traditional Chinese Buddhism has been a longstanding “family business”, with temple property being a critical aspect of the Dharma transmission system. Dharma transmission and sectarian succession represent a cultural identification, legitimizing the tremendous achievements Buddhism has made over thousands of years. A temple may be destroyed by natural or man-made disasters, but as long as there is a lineage and succession, a sect can ensure its future with outstanding individuals emerging in subsequent generations to rejuvenate the sect and restore the temples. This was particularly evident in the Jiangnan Buddhist community after the Taiping Rebellion. Although the modernization of temple properties posed a significant challenge to Buddhism, the religion saw a resurgence in the 1920s and 1930s and again after the Cultural Revolution in China. The Dharma transmission system ensures the purity of the Buddhist “bloodline”, requiring even new and heterogeneous elements to undergo the rite of Dharma transmission before entering mainstream Buddhism, thereby preserving its self-identity over millennia (Zhang 2015, p. 206). Hence, it is evident that the revitalization of Buddhist temples in the Jiangnan area and the traditional operation of their monastic Dharma transmission system are closely intertwined as a continuation of cultural and spiritual heritage.

### 3.3. Disciplinary Practice: The Core Assurance of the Sacredness of Buddhist Temple Spaces

The construction of physical space is often accompanied by the reshaping of mental boundaries. From the perspective of the sociology of religion, the maturity of a religion or school depends to a large extent on the maturity of the institutional system (Huang 2008, p. 54). The precepts are the institutional guarantee of the sanctity of Buddhism and have a core value in the sacred constructional system of Buddhism. Samantapasadika 善見律 clearly states that “Vinaya is the life of the Dharma; if Vinaya abides, so does the Dharma 毗尼藏者, 是佛法壽, 毗尼若住, 佛法亦住”. In modern times, these aforementioned charismatic monks have also realized that the maintenance of the soundness of the internal sacred system of Buddhism is the foundation of the long-term existence of the Dharma and even the practice of Buddhism; therefore, the reconstruction of a temple is often accompanied by the revitalization of the precepts. Eminent monks who adhered to the traditional system, such as Xuyun and Laiguo, all committed themselves to the pu-

rification and regulation of both monastic ethos and discipline. During the Republican period, several temple regulations appeared, such as the “Gaomin Si Four Departments Regulations 高旻寺四寮房規約”, credited to Master Laiguo in 1932, the “Five Regulations 五條規約”, credited to Master Yinguang 印光 (1861–1940) of the Pure Land School for the Lingyanshan 靈岩山 in Suzhou in 1937, the “Four regulations 四條規矩”, credited to Master Xingci 興慈 of the Tiantai School for the Fazang Temple 法藏寺 in Shanghai in 1942, and the “Eternal Record of Yunqi Temple 雲棲寺萬年簿記” for Yunqi Temple in Yunnan (1930), the “Reestablishment of the Residential and Seating Regulations at the Yongquan Temple in Gushan 鼓山湧泉寺重訂安單規則” for Yongquan Temple in Fujian Province (1930), and the “Three Comprehensive Regulatory Framework 三大全面規範” of the Dajue Temple 大覺寺 in Guangdong, credited to Xuyun.

The revival of Buddhist precepts and institutional frameworks represents a long-term endeavor that brings together religious and political elites in a shared commitment to the pure ideals of the monastery. This approach is adept at addressing specific issues that arise within monastic communities and is capable of integrating creatively with the institutional innovations of Buddhism.

#### 4. Summary

This paper focuses on the revival of traditional Chinese Han Buddhist temples since the modern era. Through a comprehensive analysis from multiple perspectives, the main factors influencing the dynamic changes in temple construction activities include: the country’s economic prosperity, shifts in political power, urbanization, the charisma of eminent monks, and the religious inclinations of the ruling or elite class. Although these factors do not directly correlate with the increase or decrease in temple construction, they are often considered significant indicators of changes in the number of temples. Amid significant societal transformations, the flourishing of trade ports in coastal cities, the rise of industry and commerce, and the emergence of revolutionary consciousness, these phenomena collectively mark a new historical starting point. In this context of spatial transformation, the layout of modern Buddhist temples exhibits that those in the south surpass those in the north in terms of destruction and reconstruction speed, and the number of temples in cities exceeds those in mountainous and forested areas yet urban temples tend to be smaller in scale. Regarding the motives behind temple construction, the efforts often revolve around organizing the monastic community, restoring discipline, and promoting the spirit of the sects, reflecting the Buddhist monks’ unwavering dedication to the preservation and transmission of the Dharma. In this process, the charisma of eminent monks and the emphasis on discipline during construction significantly enhance the sanctity of the Buddhist monastic space.

A thorough examination of the spatial transformations in modern Buddhist temples also calls for a renewed comprehension of the concept of “revival”: the reconstruction of temples after the Taiping Rebellion is not merely a process of regaining vitality but has significantly shaped Buddhist culture. The restructured spaces of modern temples do not simply revert to their pre-Taiping Rebellion status; rather, propelled by the prevailing momentum of the era, they transform into a more stable ecosystem. Similarly, the revival of Buddhism is not a straightforward return to the status quo but represents a crucial opportunity to construct new forms of Buddhism and its new societal functions.

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## Appendix A

Table A1. List of Temples Mentioned in the Paper (A–Z).

English Name	Chinese Name	Province	Region
Baohuashan Temple	寶華山寺	Jiangsu	Southern
Baisui Palace	百歲宮	Anhui	Southern
Bailin Temple	柏林寺	Beijing	Northern
Bailu Temple	白鹿寺	Hunan	Central-Southern
Baotong Temple	寶通寺	Sichuan	Southern
Chanyuan Temple	禪源寺	Zhejiang	Southern
Chengen Temple	承恩寺	Jiangsu	Southern
Dajue Temple	大覺寺	Guangdong	Southern
Dajian Temple	大鑿寺	Guangdong	Southern
Kaiyuan Temple	開元寺	Shaanxi	Northern
Jiming Temple	雞鳴寺	Jiangsu	Southern
Jinshan Temple	金山寺	Jiangsu	Southern
Jinling Temple	金陵寺	Jiangsu	Southern
Jingshan Temple	徑山寺	Zhejiang	Southern
Jiaoshan Temple	焦山寺	Jiangsu	Southern
Jinghai Temple	靜海寺	Jiangsu	Southern
Jiufeng Temple	鷲峯寺	Jiangsu	Southern
Ganlu Temple	甘露寺	Anhui	Southeastern
Gaomin Temple	高旻寺	Jiangsu	Southern
Guangji Temple	廣濟寺	Beijing	Northern
Hanshan Temple	寒山寺	Jiangsu	Southern
Huacheng Temple	化城寺	Anhui	Southern
Huating Temple/Yunqi Temple	華亭寺/雲棲寺	Yunnan	Southern
Lingyin Temple	靈隱寺	Zhejiang	Southern
Linggu Temple	靈谷寺	Jiangsu	Southern
Liuhe Pagoda	六和塔	Zhejiang	Southern
Luoquan Temple	蘿荃寺	Yunnan	Southern
Nanhua Temple	南華寺	Guangdong	Southern
Qixia Temple	棲霞寺	Jiangsu	Southern
Qingliang Temple	清涼寺	Jiangsu	Southern
The Great Baoen Temple	大報恩寺	Jiangsu	Southern
Tianning Temple	天寧寺	Jiangsu	Southern
Tiantong Temple	天童寺	Zhejiang	Southern
Tianjie Temple	天界寺	Jiangsu	Southern
Xingyun Temple	興雲寺	Yunnan	Southern
Xianqin Temple	顯親寺	Jiangsu	Southern
Xizhu Temple	西竺寺	Yunnan	Southern
Xianglin Temple	香林寺	Jiangsu	Southern
Yingjiang Temple	迎江寺	Anhui	Southern

Table A1. Cont.

English Name	Chinese Name	Province	Region
Yingxiang Temple/Boyuan An	迎祥寺/鉢盂庵	Yunnan	Southern
Yongquan Temple	湧泉寺	Fujian	Southern
Yunmen Temple	雲門寺	Guangdong	Southern
Yuehua Temple	月華寺	Guangdong	Southern
Yunju Temple	雲居寺	Jiangxi	Southern
Fayuan Temple	法源寺	Beijing	Northern
Waguan Temple	瓦官寺	Jiangsu	Southern
Shengyin Temple	勝因寺	Yunnan	Southern
Songyin Temple	松隱寺	Yunnan	Southern
Zhusheng Temple	祝聖寺	Yunnan	Southern

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In modern Chinese history, the “Jiangnan region 江南地區” referred to the areas south of the Yangtze River, including parts of present-day Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces.
- <sup>2</sup> The dataset was part of a research workshop on Chinese chorography, computer data analysis and visualization held from 1 to 19 August 2016 at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin. The processing of full-text data from 11 chorographies revealed that religious buildings (temples, monasteries, etc.) had been either destroyed or reconstructed between 1850 and 1949. In total, there are 423 entries representing 584 instances of destruction or reconstruction. The data are part of a three-year research project, Buddhist Reconstruction in China, 1866–1966, funded by the Leverhulme Trust and the University of Edinburgh. The related research results are presented in detail in his new book, Scott (2020).
- <sup>3</sup> Eberhard chose Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Anhui 安徽, and parts of Hunan 湖南 and Hubei 湖北 to represent central China and Fujian and Guangdong to represent the coastal areas of southern China. In total, 43 districts were selected from more than 1000 districts, and information on more than 10,000 temples was processed to serve as data for the preliminary study. Please see Eberhard (1964).
- <sup>4</sup> Written by Paul R. Katz and translated by Tingyou Chen, Spatial Characteristics of the Temple Destruction Movement in Modern China—Focusing on the Jiangnan Metropolis 近代中國寺廟破壞運動的空間特征—以江南都市為重心, edited by Katz and Goossaert (2005), pp. 1–38.
- <sup>5</sup> The term “畝” (mǔ) is a traditional Chinese unit of area measurement, which is commonly used in the context of land area. It is equivalent to approximately 0.0667 hectares or about 0.165 acres.
- <sup>6</sup> Lingnan 嶺南, historically, refers to the southernmost region of China, which is characterized by its unique geography, climate, and cultural identity.
- <sup>7</sup> Daniela Campo and others also referenced the stringent selection criteria that esteemed monks such as Tanxu 倓虛, Yinguang 印光, Xingci 興慈, and Xuyun 虛雲 applied when ordaining disciples. For further details, please refer to Ji et al. (2016, pp. 137–50).

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