

Urban comparativism and studying secularity: Interpreting young Chinese swarming to Buddhist temples



**By Weishan Huang, Hong Kong Shue
Yan University**

In previous research, I discussed

the difficulties faced by urban planners in China due to various unforeseen social factors. These factors have been partly influenced by the rapid growth of religious activism among young city residents and the government's control over religious expansion in urban areas. I highlighted two patterns of Buddhism's continued presence in Shanghai. One is the traditional, tourist-oriented temple activities sponsored by the government to generate revenue. The other is the less visible but progressive grassroots initiatives, socially engaged Buddhism, that aim for social issues through the intersection of religion and social welfare but lack "legitimate" physical spaces. After briefly introducing the latter trend, I

will in this piece engage in a discussion why urban Chinese youth flock to the previously-mentioned established, government-sponsored temples and how this can be assessed with a global sociological lens.

The visible religious infrastructure in China consists of temples supported by the state, as cultural heritage sites featuring impressive architectural designs. The less visible (or invisible) religious infrastructure pertains to the emergence of non-monastic Buddhist movements, which have gained popularity among young, middle-class city dwellers. The invisible religious infrastructure potential becomes an invisible strength in civil societies. In

2014, I discovered that urban youth in Beijing were turning to engaged Buddhism to address social welfare issues. Non-monastic Buddhist movements, such as reform Buddhism, emerged as the major agents for the moral aspirations of the new urban middle classes. I observed a similar trend in Shanghai (Huang 2018), where cosmopolitan and well-educated middle-class individuals were attracted to groups that could provide answers about the relationship between religion and modernity. Unlike public monasteries, I view Buddhist Tzu Chi's volunteer mobilization as a public expression of moral reform in a more secular setting, placing it in the social context of the religious revival in contemporary China. These grassroots efforts

were carried out at the local neighborhood level. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Buddhist Tzu Chi volunteers stepped up as neighborhood volunteers, including daily COVID-19 testing. In the post-COVID-19 period, I learned that young local volunteers in Tzu Chi Shanghai had taken over leadership roles in all local branches of this global network.



Young individuals have been expressing their eagerness to volunteer at Buddhist temples, taking inspiration from renowned abbots. 2018.

Currently, in my research, I turn my attention to another phenomenon in this context: the ongoing development of visible religious infrastructure and how it influences the faith of urban youth in the context of the period after COVID-19, within the framework of infrastructuring religion (Burchardt, 2023). Burchardt turns to the material embedding of religion in urban space and considers

“the ways in which religious life is premised upon the production, maintenance, and working of mundane materials that link spaces into networks of provision and make possible the circulation of

energy, goods, coded meanings, and bodies. This means that religion is mediated not only by sacred architecture, rituals, and holy objects, which operate as ‘sensational forms’ (Meyer, 2009), but routinely also by infrastructures – building materials for temples, roads used for processions, water involved in religious hygiene, and electricity used to illuminate prayer rooms and power microphones, amplifying the Holy Spirit.”

The concept of infrastructuring religion helps us understand the recent fever of young Chinese flocking to established urban Buddhist temples. With the crisis of economic recesses and the anxiety about future careers, many

urban youths rush into Buddhist temples and hope for numinous responsiveness from the prayers. This new phenomenon provoked media attention but so far little academic explanations.

Why are urban youths visiting Buddhist temples? It's important to understand that this trend of worshipping deities in temples is different from the stereotype of the "*foxi* youth" in Chinese culture. The "*foxi* youth" (*foxi qinian* 佛系青年) is seen as having a carefree attitude, looking down on everything, and not having any career or life aspirations. However, current urban youths are flocking to temples due to anxiety about their career prospects and job opportunities during the

economic downturn. In fact, these youths are showing a strong desire to participate in capitalist society. This was also observed among urban youths in Sri Lanka, where the Buddhist "Bodhipuja" movement in 1970 became a collective representation of Sri Lankan youth (Seneviratne & Wickmereratne, 1980). The Bodhi tree is worshipped for both worldly and spiritual gains. Modern Buddhist movements in urban Sri Lanka emphasize Buddhist worship for gaining particularly this-worldly benefits. Can we in this vein attribute the rise in temple visits of Chinese youth to this new focus on job opportunities? In modern urban China, Buddhism is often practiced with the intention of achieving intangible benefits in

this life. However, for these educated, unemployed urban youths, temple visits provide an outlet for expressing their religiosity, which differs from the secular piety of society.



There has been a growing interest among young people in socially engaged Buddhist groups located in urban Shanghai. 2017.

Why do urban youth choose Buddhist temples? The Chinese government, after the Mao era, has allowed some degree of freedom for religious beliefs and practices. However, there are legal and regulatory limitations to this freedom. The government owns all urban land, and while they consider the recovery of religious sites as cultural heritage or tourist sites, their usage is still restricted. Religious practices and rituals may only be conducted in government-approved religious sites, and any practices outside of these sites are considered illegitimate. Predestined spaces for religious purposes have specific limitations and opportunities for different

religious communities. In an effort to revitalize neighborhoods, the government is focusing on consumer activity and increased real estate values. With Buddhism being the state-approved religion, Buddhist temples benefit from a monopolistic arrangement where each temple is given a defined territory in urban areas. Following the start of the new millennium, urban temples persisted in utilizing their business district locations for reconstruction and expansion. However, this necessitated increased effort in negotiating land acquisition and resolving conflicts with neighboring communities. According to Burchardt, the practice of infrastructuring, the linking of profane materialities and artifacts

into assemblages which enable religious life, brings religious practices into the secular realm of everyday urban life, with potential effects of either secularization or re-enchantment.

Global qualitative sociology, to me, is above all the methodology of comparison. It involves comparing local case studies in different countries to identify patterns and anomalies in the data, provoking skepticism on existing theories. My primary method of data collection is through ethnography and informal interviews. At the beginning of my study, I believed in investigating and scanning the similarities and differences of cases in the field, locally and historically, before narrowing down my focus to target

groups. This approach helps me to identify the strangeness of the data and gain a better understanding of the research subject. For instance, I have applied the framework of religious infrastructure to my old data in Shanghai to interpret current events. In the context of infrastructuring, it is possible to understand the reasons behind the increasing popularity of Buddhism in downtown Shanghai. My earlier findings point out that the Chinese government has given institutionalized Han Buddhism, along with Daoism, a privileged position in preserving and passing on "Chinese culture" to the present generation since the beginning of the revival. According to my research up to 2018, there are 122

Han Buddhist temples in Shanghai, while there are only 31 Daoist temples. My study found that institutionalized Han Buddhism's leadership has achieved more significant results in terms of temple claiming and renovation. The location in downtown areas is also a vital factor in the development of the temple economy. After 40 years, it is evident that downtown temples are more resourceful in terms of temple economy and manpower due to continuous temple expansions or infrastructuring.



A beautiful ritual of receiving Buddha relics in the Buddhist communities of Shanghai. 2018.

In addition, I analyze past data using the new framework. The building of astonishing Buddhist temples highlights how religious architecture serves as a symbol of power in urban areas. The association between these temples and the real estate industry and consumerism signifies the perspective of urban space in

modern neoliberalism. I can undoubtedly make a connection to Burchardt's work (2023). Thus, insights gained from his ethnographic fieldwork in Cape Town, South Africa, can be applied to cities in other parts of the world, such as China. Another source I consulted was the work of Seneviratne and Wickmereratne (1980) on the youth Buddhist movement. Both helped me conclude how Buddhist infrastructure can shape human behaviors. The construction of Buddhist infrastructure, which is carried out by both the Chinese state and temple leaders, shapes human behaviors, habits, and social interactions. Therefore, when the economy experiences a downturn, young people often turn to

Buddhism, not only for iconic buildings but also for the most elaborate faith practice in the urban setting.

In “Comparative Urbanism,” Robinson (2016) emphasizes the importance of “Thinking with variation and repetition, rather than trying to ‘control for difference’” when conducting comparative studies. It’s crucial to consider different urban contexts by focusing on the revisability of inherited (and located) understandings and incorporating insights from diverse sources. Inspired by Robinson, to me, global sociology involves examining social processes rather than fixed city spaces, analyzing repeated instances instead of controlling for differences, and

focusing on mid-level theory instead of universal grand theory.

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