

The Buddhist Revival Movement: An Investigation into the Mutual Relationship between Chinese Buddhism and the Chinese Government

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ABSTRACT

It has been four decades since the Buddhist revival started. To comprehensively document the process, I divide the paper into three sections. The first section summarizes the history of the revival movement and the Chinese government's policies before 1978. The second section analyzes three categories of policies in the 21st century: support, suppress, and distort Chinese Buddhism. In the final section, I examine the case of one particular temple, the Xingsheng temple in Baita village, China. Because it is among the temples reconstructed in the recent decade, the paper investigates how this temple was successfully rebuilt while others were not. Unlike the previous section, the primary supporting evidence are interviews with abbot Hui ren – the builder of Xingsheng temple – government officials, and villagers.

Introduction

Sitting under the Bodhi tree, the awakened Buddha transcended time and space, basking in the wisdom that encompasses the whole universe. If his gaze was permitted to land on 21st-century China, what the Buddha would have seen would have perplexed him. He might have asked: *Will my teachings remain the same when they encounter this modern Chinese context?*

0.1 The Central Idea of the Paper

A Buddhist Revival Movement in China revitalized Buddhism after the Cultural Revolution (1967–1977), which famously and fiercely persecuted all religious beliefs in the land. During the revival movement, and with the government's support, temples would reemerge, monks would begin organizing religious rituals, and a substantial quantity of citizens would convert back to Buddhism.

However, though a flurry of Buddhist activities would appear, the interactions between governments and Buddhist temples would remain complex. Specifically, the government would adopt hybrid methods: support, regulation, and distortion—a systematic yet subtle means to guide to control Buddhism following a period of intense indoctrination to Communism dogmas. It is the goal of this paper to examine the history of the Buddhist Revival Movement and analyze the current government's policies towards it to depict a modern picture of this revival movement.

0.2 Methodology and Description of the Temple

Because of central-local distinctions in Chinese society, policies enacted by the central government find various expressions as they are implemented in different localities. The specific example examined, therefore, should also be local, providing the most original lens through which readers will better understand how policies are truly implemented.

Accordingly, this paper focuses on a revived Buddhist temple—XingSheng Temple¹, in Hebei province—to offer additional factual details of these policies; it also serves as an example to illustrate the Buddhist Revival Movement more generally, the history of which is perhaps more characteristically illustrated by another more exemplary revival story: namely, of the temple complex in Mount Wutai.

0.3 Literature Review

There are a number of studies discussing religion and politics in China. They can be broadly categorized into two distinctive groups, one of which focuses on the conflict between Buddhism and the government, while the other approaches the issue differently, simplifying the Revival Movement as the sheer collaboration between the religion and the government.

The first group of researchers focus on the conflict between temples and the state. In his paper “Politics of Religion,” Timothy Brook positions China as a “Regulatory State” that aims to control and limit Buddhism’s influence.² In a second article, “Buddhism in Communist China: Demise or Co-Existence,” the same author employed a dualist view, which presents Buddhist temples and the Chinese government as adversaries.³ What I find to be missing in Brook and Yu is the state’s vital role in the temples’ revival and the subtle infiltration of state power into the administration and even the practice of Chinese Buddhism. Although the government proposes policies that seemingly benefit the temples, they are in some cases ill-intentioned measures to spread the government’s influence. For example, the government founded the Buddhist academies to educate “future Buddhist leaders of China,” but it controls the teaching and textbooks and makes sure that these “future leaders” are socialist—as will be discussed in greater detail in section three of this paper.⁴

Other articles establish an exemplary model that generalizes how temples revived after China’s opening up to religion. In these papers, scholars describe an ideal form of the Buddhist Revival Movement wherein most Buddhist temples were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and rebuilt after 1978 when the CCP issued tolerant policies. These papers include “The Religious Revival in China,” by scholar Harry Lai and “Chinese Buddhism as a Social Force,” by scholar Zhe Ji, who holds an optimistic view that Buddhism might become a leading force of social changes and soft power. In “Buddhist Revival in China: Values of the Development of Mount Wutai,” the au-

¹ Xingsheng Temple is located in Baita Village, Hebei. Though destroyed during the Chinese Civil War, the abbot, master Huiren, ultimately rebuilt it in 2010 thanks to the government’s tolerant policies after the Revival Movement. The history of the Xingsheng Temple dates back to Tang density when Buddhism first became the national religion. Unlike most Han Buddhist temples, it is the home of Zen (Chan)—a Buddhist genre transmitted to China in 400 A.D. by Bodhidharma, popularized in Japan and the Western world.

² Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, eds., *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2009).

³ David C Yu, “Buddhism in Communist China: Demise or Co-Existence?,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39, no. 1 (1971): 15.

⁴ For other references about the conflict between the nation and temples, see scholar B. Potter’s *Belief in control: regulation of religion in China*, Buddhist Revival under State Watch by scholar André LALIBERTÉ, and Buddhism since the Cultural Revolution by Holmes Welch.

thor recounts the process of Mount Wutai's revitalization after the Cultural Revolution.⁵ In my view, what these papers fail to address is the nuance between a wide variety of revival stories, some of which divert from the typical trend and involve conflict with the government and the economy, sometimes resulting in moral decay as discussed in "Money for the Gods," an article by Hill Gates. This issue will be discussed in greater detail below.

Though many of them have unique insights, no paper that I have come across comprehensively explains the complex interaction between Chinese politics and Buddhism. By contrast with an early method, the present-day Chinese government does not directly counter Buddhist practices as it did during the Cultural Revolution, nor avidly support it as some scholars assumed. Rather, it gradually leads Chinese Buddhism to conform to the values of the Chinese government by founding Buddhist Academies and turning temples into tourist sites, sources of government revenue.

While my study necessarily covers much of the same ground covered—and covered well—by the authors mentioned above, I believe my study corrects for their oversight of the state's distortions and gives examples beyond the oversimplified model. Thus, this paper aims to provide a thorough analysis of Chinese policies and fully dissect the relationship between the state and these revived Buddhist temples.

Section 1: History of Buddhist Revival Movement

This section divides the focus into two periods: destruction period, which includes both the Civil War (1927–1950) and the Cultural Revolution (1967–1977); and the construction period, which starts from the Opening Up in 1978 and continues to the present.⁶ The second period is most widely known as the Buddhist Revival Movement.

To illustrate the most representative pattern of the Buddhism Revival Movement, this paper employs Mount Wutai as an example, a well-known Buddhist region consisting of several temples and regarded as a holy site to many. On the other hand, the Xingsheng temple — the main example explored in this paper—diverges from the traditional pattern of the Movement, so only its divergences will be elaborated in this first section.

1.1: Road to Destruction—Chinese Civil War and Cultural Revolution

Buddhist temples underwent two waves of destruction issued by two generations of the Chinese government.⁷ Under the reign of Kuomintang, Chinese Buddhism was disturbed by the Smashing Superstition Movement and the Convert Temples to Schools Movement. Identical persecutions happened under the Communist party's regime. Buddhism was devastated during the Cultural Revolution by Red Guards, and its spiritual ground was swept by communist idealism.

According to scholars Yoshiko and David, the Kuomintang launched atheist policies to inhibit Buddhism in the form of the Convert Temples to Schools Movement (*miaochan xingxue yundong*) and the Smashing Superstition Movement (*mixin dapo yundong*).⁸ According to Paul Katz, the key prompters of the movements were activists in the May Fourth Movement in 1919, which advocated for democracy and science. Diving into "new culture (*Xin*

⁵ Chunyu Zhang, "Buddhist Revival in China: Values of the Development of Mount Wutai" (Thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology, University of Alberta, 2016).

⁶ Arthur Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History* (Stanford University Press, 1959).

⁷ I am using the word destruction here in a broad sense. Many of the temples were "destroyed" in the sense that they were closed by the government; for example, monks in these temples were dispelled and converted to lay status during the Cultural Revolution. In fact, the destruction was not a violent demolition but a restructuring of the temple's nature so that it was no longer what it was. Though physically undisturbed, the temples were "destroyed" on the level of their essence—*converted* into something new.

⁸ Ashiwa and Wank, *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China*, 14

Wenhua)” and receiving education in burgeoning industrial cities after 1919, these young activists regarded religion as vestiges of the feudal system and signs of conformity to traditional values.⁹

First comes the Convert Temples to Schools movement. According to Wang’s 2017 study, the National Party held the national education conference in 1928, in which the Minister of the Interior proposed the Miaochan Xingxue movement out of economic reasons.¹⁰ Government’s program to expand its national education system encountered the great recession during the 1920s. Since temples were great owners of land, converting temples into schools also involved confiscating lands, forcefully converting monks, and taking temples’ properties. McGuire mentions that 70% of temple property was seized by the government and repurposed for newly constructed schools.

Another wave of destruction is the Smashing Superstition movement. Kuomintang published a government document, *The Significance, and Methods for Destroying Superstitions* in 1929, which articulated criteria for “superstitions”. If they were not fulfilled, including possessing elaborate cannons, highly educated and well-trained clergies, and complicated hierarchical management,” religions were labeled as “superstitions,” which exposed them to government persecution.¹¹ Specifically, the government prohibited Buddhist conventions at the local level, remaining only physical structures as cultural heritages.

The situation became even worse during the reign of the Communist Party. Zhang 2016 pointed out two types of atheism in the ideological lexicon of the party: Scientific Atheism and Militant Atheism. The former repels religions by counter-propaganda concerning the unscientific nature of religion, while the latter aims to conduct a complete crackdown as advocated and performed by Lenin and Bolsheviks.¹² Unfortunately, the CCP followed the hard line of militant atheism during the Cultural Revolution, closing Buddhist temples and forcefully converting monks back to lay status.¹³

Because temples possessed lands, they were regarded as remnants of local landlords, the “most wicked enemy against the working class”. According to Welch 1966, the CCP initiated a campaign against what in Chinese is called “the Four Old”: Old Ideas, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Customs. By the end of September, every Buddhist monastery—as well as all churches and mosques—were closed as representatives of “the Four Old.” According to Ji 2012, the number of Buddhist Monasteries was 40,000 in 1949, later slashed to almost zero during the Cultural revolution.¹⁴ Welch also pointed out that some temples were simply locked; some were stripped of religious images; and some were converted into factories, offices, apartments, or barracks for Red Guards.¹⁵ Shepherd also mentions that Lin Biao, one of the party leaders, turned some buildings into his personal villa. As a result, the total number of temples was reduced from over 400 to less than 60. These are the sorts of actions taken against the temples at Mount Wutai; by contrast, because Xingsheng Temple was bombarded during the Chinese Civil War, it “escaped” these atrocities.

As proprietors of temples, monks themselves could not escape this torrent. Based on Luo 1987’s estimation, the population of Buddhist clerics reached about 500,000 around 1949, all of whom were forcefully converted to lay

⁹ Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919*, vol. 27 (University of California Press, 1986).

¹⁰ Paul R Katz, “Superstition’ and Its Discontents – On the Impact of Temple Destruction Campaigns in China, 1898-1948” (第几届国际汉学会议, 台北: 中央研究院, 2013), 660–82.

¹¹ Katz, Superstition’ and Its Discontents – On the Impact of Temple Destruction Campaigns in China, 67

¹² Zhang, *Buddhist Revival in China: Values of the Development of Mount Wutai*, 12

¹³ Fenggang Yang, “Between Secularist Ideology and Desecularizing Reality: The Birth and Growth of Religious Research in Communist China,” *Sociology of Religion* 65, no. 2 (2004): 101–19.

¹⁴ Ji, *Chinese Buddhism as a Social Force: Reality and Potential of Thirty Years of Revival*, 24

¹⁵ Parts of these buildings, such as in the Xiantong Monastery, are still used today as offices for the Buddhist Associations.

status during the Cultural Revolution.¹⁶ Among them was the teacher of the abbot of Xingsheng Temple, Master Jinghui. The abbot narrated that these “religious refugees” were instructed to “abandon superstition”: shedding their robes, growing their hair, eating meat, and marrying. On the other hand, some devotees still maintained their devotion to the Buddhist code: a nun from Shanghai continued to abstain from eating meat even after she was forcefully converted to lay status and made to work in a factory.¹⁷ Aside from the monks and nuns, lay Buddhist devotees themselves were also subject to government persecutions. Based on the study of the scholar Yang Fenggang 2012, they were “forced to make public renunciation or sent to labor camps.”¹⁸

According to scholar Zhang Chunyu’s case study of Mount Wutai, Red Guards brutally attacked this holy site during the Cultural Revolution.¹⁹ Robert Shepherd in his 2013 study²⁰ also states that monks in and around Mount Wutai were beaten, evicted, forcefully converted, and in some cases killed.²¹ Moreover, the destruction was not merely the whim of Red Guards, but rather, a systematic persecution. Most monks were relocated to Nanchan temple because the government confiscated Mount Wutai’s properties. In 1972 when practitioners were allowed to return to Mount Wutai, only 12% were allowed to serve in the temples, some of whom were restored to clerical status after years of having been stripped of that status in later years of the Cultural Revolution.²²

1.2: Road to Reconstruction - Revival Movement after the Opening Up:

As China restored the rule of law and began its transition to a modern country after 1978, the Party lifted the restrictions on religions. Issued in 1982, the document—*The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during our Country’s Socialist Period*—dictated five official religions, namely Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism.²³ Others, however, were deemed “evil cults” and were under exposure of crack downs, the most famous of which is Falun Gong.

Buddhism surged during the revival movement. According to Ji, from 1977—when the Cultural Revolution ended—to 2006, 15,000 temples were reconstructed or reactivated; the number of monks recovered from almost zero to 100,000 members, demonstrating a landslide success of the Revival Movement.²⁴ Behind the success were government policies and social forces, which will be discussed more thoroughly in the next section of the paper. They include the impact of influential Buddhist lineages, government permission on new constructions, official recognitions, Buddhist Associations, etc.

For instance, relying on both government permission and the influence of prestigious Buddhist lineages, Xingsheng Temple was reconstructed from 2010 to 2020, consisting of three main buildings and a white tower. With the vice president of the Hebei Buddhist Association celebrating its opening ceremony, the temple was no longer an incarnation of superstition, but a fully recognized Buddhist site protected by the government.²⁵ Another example is Mount Wutai. The government funded the reconstructions of Mount Wutai’s major monasteries destroyed during the

¹⁶ Zhufeng Luo, *Zhongguo Shehuizhuyi Shiqi de Zongjiao Wenti (Religious Questions under Socialism in China)* (Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Press, 1987).

¹⁷ HuiRen. Interviewed by the author. Personal Interview. Hebei, Baita Pu village. 2020.

¹⁸ Fenggang Yang, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁹ Zhang, Buddhist Revival in China: Values of the Development of Mount Wutai, 13

²⁰ Robert Shepherd, “Tourism, Heritage, and Sacred Space: Wutai Shan, China,” *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 7, no. 2 (n.d.): 145–61.

²¹ Zhang recounts an interview about an anecdote during the physical destruction. A few red guards burned the statue of the Black Dragon King, a traditional god worshiped by Chinese rural areas in Mount Wutai, but those participants died from a strange disease in the following years. Because of this incident, none of them have dared to damage statues ever since.

²² Wenzheng Hou, *Records of Wutai Mountain (《五台山志》)* (Shanxi Renmin Press, 2003).

²³ Ashiwa and Wank, *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China*, 28

²⁴ Ji, Chinese Buddhism as a Social Force: Reality and Potential of Thirty Years of Revival, 26

²⁵ Hui Ren. Interviewed by Xiaochen Liu. Personal Interview. Hebei, Baita Pu village. 2020.

Cultural Revolution.²⁶ Researchers in their study state that the number of monasteries increased to 82 in Mount Wutai region, which are all officially registered and managed under the local bureau.

Xingsheng Temple's story has some similarities with that of Mount Wutai, but also some important deviations from the normal pattern. Though it was rebuilt under the influence of important lineages during the 21st century, it did not undergo the Cultural Revolution because it had been bombarded during the Chinese Civil War prior to 1949. Additionally, the period of construction is comparatively delayed compared with other more prominent temples because of its lack of reputation, which made the fundraising campaign more difficult. Despite differences, Xingsheng temple is fundamentally a fruit of the Buddhist Revival Movement, fueled directly by the government.

Despite Buddhism's sweeping return, the government never intends to loosen its control on religions but rather reconstruct them based on Communist ideologies. In the document that recognized the religion in 1982—the *Basic Policies and Viewpoints regarding the Religions in our Socialist China*—the government emphasized that the “religions will naturally disappear as China enters a higher stage of Socialism”, sticking to the same rationale as that in the Cultural Revolution.²⁷ Admittedly less militant, though, it laid the foundation for government's later restrictions and distortions. For the former, the government regulated religious activities; targeted individuals; and issued a stringent registration policy; for the latter, the government not only monopolized Buddhist academies—education facilities for future Buddhist leaders—but also commercialized temples as sources of income, all of which corrupted Buddhism's historical goals and values.

To implement the hybrid policies, the government founded three departments. Apart from the Chinese Buddhism Association—which supports Buddhist practices—was the Religious Affairs Bureau, reestablished after the Cultural Revolution. According to Ashiwa and Wank 2002, its personnel are often demobilized soldiers from rural backgrounds who know little about the religions and are often hostile to them.²⁸ The United Front Work Department—which was restored by Deng Xiaoping in 1979—serves the same purpose to control Chinese religions.

For instance, the government never spared the opportunity to control Mount Wutai. Indeed, Zhang in his paper states that religious affairs and activities were directly controlled by the United Front Work Department (Tongyi Zhanxian) and the office of the Minority and Religion of Mount Wutai.²⁹ He states that all large-scale religious activities have to be reported to the local government. During his interview in the temple, he was constantly monitored; he also encountered religious workers who graduated with bachelor degrees in religious studies from government-controlled institutions.

Section 2: Overview of government's Buddhist policies

The Chinese government employs a complex strategy to manage Chinese Buddhism, one consisting of support, suppression, as well as distortion. Scholar Andre Laliberte states that the CCP has shown direct support for the growth of Buddhism.³⁰ For other scholars, such as H. H. Lai, religions are regarded as potential rivals for organizational,

²⁶ For example, one of the temples under reconstruction was Yuhua temple

²⁷ Chinese Central Committee. “关于我国社会主义时期宗教问题的基本观点和基本政策.” Shanghai ethnic and Religions bureau. November 11, 2020. <http://mzzj.sh.gov.cn/syxw/20201111/49e64c8126374b9ab4452091fcafe2e6.html>

²⁸ Wank David, “The Politics of a Reviving Buddhist Temple: State, Association, and Religion in Southeast China,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 65, no. 2 (2006): 337–59.

²⁹ Other departments involved in the management include Mount Wutai Administration, Office of Ethnic and Religious Affairs, the People's Government of the Mount Wutai National Park, People's Government of Wutai, County Branch Office of Religion of Mount Wutai, and etc. They have different management roles, including the protections of heritage sites, regulations of the religious practices, and management of the funds.

³⁰ André Laliberté, “Buddhist Revival under State Watch,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 40, no. 2 (June 2011): 107–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261104000205>.

ideological and economic resources.³¹ Guided by this principle, the government, though favoring Buddhism as a domestic religion unlike Islam, still deters the influence of Buddhism by targeting both ideological and organizational realms.

The above quotations might seem like conflicting theories of the Chinese government's policies, which will be covered in the following paragraphs. But the government's stance towards Buddhism is complicated indeed; neither the concept of support nor the idea of suppression tells the whole story. What previous research papers have failed to stress is the government's explicit attempts to distort Buddhism, which will be discussed in detail in the 2.3 section.³²

2.1: Government Policies to Support Buddhism:

The government is playing a vital role in the Buddhist revival movement. Without the government's support after 1978, Chinese Buddhism would not have expanded at such a pace.³³ For an atheist party, it is admittedly rare to support any religions that were once regarded as "superstitions." In the following, I will explain both the reasons behind the government's support of Buddhism as well as the specific ways it offers such support: establishing the Buddhist association, starting Buddhist academies, as well as reconstructing and directly funding temples.³⁴

The first reason for the support is that Buddhism is in line with certain visions implicit in government's domestic and foreign policies. Scholar Laliberte notes that the Chinese government aims to achieve a "harmonious society" with its domestic policies.³⁵ This objective aims to unite different social classes and ethnic groups, thereby achieving social stability for the regime. Similarly, Buddhism is an all-encompassing religion that singularly promotes "harmonies." The Jueding Zongchi scripture describes Buddha's outlook for harmony: "the aggressive shall [...] live harmoniously with all beings."³⁶

Scholar Zhe Ji in a 2012 study points out that beyond promoting social harmony, Buddhism was also an excellent medium to propagate Chinese soft power on the international stage, which was repeatedly emphasized in the 18th CCP convention.³⁷ Zhe also points out that because Chinese Buddhism—unlike Christianity³⁸ and—does not present an obstacle to national loyalty and can be regarded as a genuine Chinese "product," it is quite a suitable tool for use in China's international mission. Due to the Buddhist traditions of neighbouring countries, Buddhism could be an agency to foster international communications with those participating in the "Belt and Road Initiative."³⁹ One such example is the "Chongsheng Forum" organized by the Dali Lama's Chongsheng Temple. It invited

³¹ H. H. Lai, "Religious Policies in Post-Totalitarian China: Maintaining Political Monopoly over a Reviving Society," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 11, no. 1 (March 2006): 55–77, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02877033>.

³² Unlike genuine support, the distortion in fact aims to take greater control and spread the state's influence. In other words, if the support is interpreted in its literal meaning, the distortion is a masked "support" that ultimately weakens the religion. The most profound difference between the distortion and suppression is their means rather than ends. Metaphorically, if Buddhism were a train, support aims to fuel it, suppression aims to slow it down, while distortion aims to accelerate it in a direction that diverts from Buddhist ideas.

³³ Even though the Chinese government indeed distorts Buddhism with seemingly supportive policies, I use the word "support" in its literal and genuine meaning in the first section to set up the discussion about how Buddhism expands, or flourishes, under certain policies of the Chinese government. Policies mentioned in this section are mostly positive.

³⁴ The word "cultivating" means that the government regulates Buddhist activities so they do not divert from the original Buddhist cause. They are regulations indeed that seem like restrictions, but such regulations bear positive outcomes that prevent the religion from over secularization.

³⁵ Laliberté, "Buddhist Revival under State Watch", 105

³⁶ Zhu, "佛说决定总持经", 3 http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/BDLM/sutra/chi_pdf/sutra9/T17n0811.pdf

³⁷ Ji, Chinese Buddhism as a Social Force: Reality and Potential of Thirty Years of Revival, 28

³⁸ See next paragraph.

³⁹ The former leader of BAC, Zhao Puchu, describes the Buddhism as a "golden link (Huangjin Niudai)" for non-official diplo-

monks across Southeastern Asia to form an “asian Buddhist commonwealth,” which solidified the international relationship between partners. Buddhism therefore has become a social force that embodies social stability and fosters international harmony.

The second reason the government supports Buddhism in China is that it wants to encourage a spiritual dimension of society that goes beyond but not in conflict with the political dimension of society. According to the data from the Chinese Religious Freedom Report, there are estimated 200 million Buddhist believers in China, most of whom have not formally declared themselves such in government documents.⁴⁰ In fact, Buddhist belief and practice is so deeply rooted in Chinese society that even atheists identify themselves more or less with Buddhism as a part of their cultural identity. For example, during my interview at Xingsheng Temple with a party member who sanctioned the temple’s reconstruction, he acknowledged that he “dreamed of three golden statues of Buddha rising from the ground.” So dazzling and magnificent these statues were that he cried in his dream. This personal anecdote indicates that even for party officials, who underwent a stringent atheist education, Buddhist culture itself is a significant part of their subconscious. Filling the spiritual vacuum in an atheist country with Buddhism is indeed an irony, but Buddhism seems to be the only viable option. Scholar Zhe points out that among the five recognized religions, Islam and Christianity⁴¹ encourage loyalty, not to any national community itself, but to a larger spiritual community—the Ummah for Muslims and the Church for Christians—that transcends national boundaries; meanwhile, Taoism’s influence is not strong enough in China to meet the spiritual needs of the people of China.⁴² By contrast, and buttressed by lasting Buddhist traditions in Chinese society and a singular diplomatic advantage, Buddhism is an extremely influential but also safe dimension to add to their social identity—a spiritual side of society that does not conflict with the political aspect of that identity.⁴³

Having given the reasons for the government’s support of Buddhism, let me now turn to detailing the specific ways the government offers that support. Scholar Ji Zhe states in his second paper that the government’s role is occasionally constructive despite government’s control.⁴⁴ One agency that plays such a constructive role is the Buddhist Association of China (BAC). According to Alan Sponburg, the BAC was established in 1953 by esteemed monks, including master Xuyun and Dalai, with a charter listing its objectives: uniting Chinese Buddhists and securing the freedom of religious belief.⁴⁵ Indeed, it is the only official department regulated by Buddhists. Its primary contribution is the creation of a Buddhist media: Fa Yin (The Voice of Buddha) and Xiandai Foxue (Modern Buddhism) magazine. Despite the BAC’s leadership in advancing Buddhism, the party inevitably steps and corrupts its purity by appointing BAC’s top leaders, taking away its autonomy. This is indicated by the increased number of officials in the BAC appointed by the party. For example, the secretary-general of the BAC Liu Wei and the head of Chinese Religious Bureau Wang Jianyi swapped their positions in 2015. Similar changes also occurred in Taoism in recent years.

macy with other asian countries, such as Japan, Thailand, and South Korea — all countries have long Buddhist tradition.

⁴⁰ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). “中国（包括西藏、新疆、香港和澳门）2020年国际宗教自由报告”, 8

⁴¹ The five religions the government officially recognizes are Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. I use the word Christianity to refer to both Protestantism and Catholicism.

⁴² Ji, Chinese Buddhism as a Social Force: Reality and Potential of Thirty Years of Revival, 28

⁴³ The former Chinese statesman Chen Yun suggested to president Jiang in the early 1990 that using religion to win over the masses has always been a favorite trick of our foreign class-enemies. However, Buddhism does not evoke such worry because it promotes harmony and is a domestic religion.

⁴⁴ Zhe Ji, “Buddhism in the Reform Era: A Secularized Revival?,” *Religion in Contemporary China*, 2011, 32–52.

⁴⁵ Alan Sponberg, “The Study of Buddhism in China: Some Observations on the Chinese Buddhist Association and Its Seminary,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 12, no. 1 (January 1984): 65–76. <https://doi.org/10.1179/073776984805308276>.

Another significant deed is the creation of The Chinese Buddhist Academy, with 488 undergraduate monks between 1980 and 2009. Multiple graduates are holding critical positions. For instance, as a graduate in 1986 himself, Master Shenghui is the vice president of BAC and the abbot of Mount Gulu Temple. Another example is master Jiqun, the author of 15 academic Buddhist books and the professor at Minnan Buddhist Academy. Despite the many distortions caused by the government—which will be discussed in a later section—this Chinese Buddhist academy still prepared a generation of Buddhist intellectuals for work in the nation’s major monasteries.

The government also started the reconstruction movement. More than 15,000 temples in total were reconstructed after the Cultural Revolution. Behind this reconstruction boom were government policies that granted permission, land for the reconstruction, and facilitated financial investments. According to scholars Huang and Yang’s 2005 research, guided by the famous 19th document, many local governments aided religious organizations in restoring places of worship that were damaged or destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.⁴⁶ Reconstructions still have limitations, however. In terms of sheer scale, scholar Lewis Lanchester points out that the number of temples never returned to that before the Cultural Revolution.

Finally, the third way the government supports Buddhism is directly funding the temples. Though the government’s investments are not motivated by religious concerns, protections of cultural heritage sites and establishments of reserved areas for tourism funded by the National Cultural Heritage Administration (NCHA) in effect promulgate the influence of Buddhism. According to scholar Haul, NCHA had begun funding since Xuankong Temple was identified as an archaeologically valuable site by the local government.⁴⁷ After several renovations ranging from 1978 to 2015, the government recently invested 3 million rmb to renovate the temple’s canopy. Another example is the Donglin temple, which was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. After being identified as a cultural heritage site by Jiangxi province, the government funded a renovation program to revive the temple from scratch.⁴⁸ However, temples that carry little or no prestige cannot retain government funding. Xingsheng temple, though destroyed in the Cultural Revolution as well, was revived via a fundraising campaign carried out personally by abbot Hui ren. Without the government’s financial support, he turned to lay patrons such as business owners. Still, the economic and cultural concerns outweigh the spiritual concern for the religion itself.

2.2: Government Policies to Suppress Buddhism:

Buddhism is fundamentally irreconcilable with the Communist Doctrines that reject religious beliefs.⁴⁹ According to Lai, the government takes a post-totalitarianism framework, acting as a “calculating monopolist” to suppress religions.⁵⁰ The following section specifically discusses three policies: imposing a strict registration process before any temples’ reconstruction, controlling religious activities organized by temples, and persecuting individual monks for their acts identified as transgressive by the government.

The government indeed supported Buddhism after the Opening Up, but its policies changed during the 1980s. According to scholars Potter and Pitman, significant social unrest occurred in Tibet and Xinjiang between

⁴⁶ Jianbo Huang, “The Cross Faces the Loudspeakers: A Village Church Perseveres under State Power,” *RELIGION AND THE SOCIAL ORDER* 11 (2005): 41.

⁴⁷ Adam Kaul and B Feinberg, *Cosmopolitanism and Tourism: Rethinking Theory and Practice* (Lexington Books, 2017).

⁴⁸ Hua, “大事记：庐山东林寺年谱（公元 366-2016）”, DongLin ZuTing, <http://www.donglin.org/zhuting//dl/20170706/4505.html>.

⁴⁹ Yu, “Buddhism in Communist China: Demise or Co-Existence?”, 15

⁵⁰ Lai, “Religious Policies in Post-Totalitarian China: Maintaining Political Monopoly over a Reviving Society”, 66 <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02877033>.

1988–89, coupled with the national crisis of the democracy movement in 1989, which served as an incentive for the government to tighten ideological control.⁵¹ As a result, the party’s “Document No.6” reflects its will to “co-opt” religions in case they might threaten the party.⁵² Though it allegedly protects the freedom of religions, the policy in fact requires believers to comply with imperatives of the party’s leadership: the document states that “implementing administration of religious affairs is aimed at bringing religious activities within the bounds of law,” but its true intention, as the following policies indicate, is to tighten the government’s grip on Buddhism. Apart from the law itself, the Religious Affairs Bureaus at the local level are empowered to issue their own policies, most of which are stricter than those of the central government.⁵³ For example, Shanghai’s local government supervised all religious activities, personnel, places of worship, and education in 1996. Because of the document and the overpowering local government, there are inevitably repressive policies in place to contain the influence of Buddhism.

Government restrictions of Buddhism have their basis in the legal procedures that inaugurate the establishment of temples. According to the Religious Bureau’s document, *Basic Ideas of Regulating Buddhist Temples*, unregistered or private⁵⁴ temples are prohibited from collecting funds and organizing religious activities.⁵⁵ Additionally, another 2004 government document, *General Regulations on Religions*, suggests three strict criteria that must be met by the temples in order for them to be registered as official religious sites: a sustainable income, a registered monk recognized by the government, and registration with patriotic organizations like BAC.⁵⁶ As a result, many small⁵⁷ temples that do not meet all of these criteria—even though they may meet one or two—do not stand a realistic chance of being officially registered.

Unfortunately, unregistered temples are subject to demolition by the government, especially when the lands are repurposed for other uses. For example, Sanmen village in Zhejiang province destroyed 25 unregistered temples consisting of 11 thousand square meters in total from 2013 to 2014.⁵⁸ In extreme cases, even if temples are indeed registered, the local government still sacrifices them for economic objectives.⁵⁹ The Ruiyun temple in Fuzhou was forcefully destroyed by the local government, which reasoned that developing the land would be more lucrative.⁶⁰ Thus, when in conflict with the local government’s political agenda, Buddhist temples can be readily sacrificed.

⁵¹ Pitman B. Potter, “Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China,” *The China Quarterly* 174 (June 2003): 317–37, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009443903000202>.

⁵² Chinese Religious Bureau, “中共中央、国务院关于进一步做好宗教工作若干问题的通知”<http://www.sara.gov.cn/zjzc/316532.jhtml>

⁵³ Sarah Cook, “自由之家中国宗教自由报告” (Freedom House, 2017).

⁵⁴ The word “private” means that some religious conventions are organized on the basis of each household. For example, the government cracks down on individual priest organizing preaching sessions in his believers’ home.

⁵⁵ Chinese Religious Bureau, “关于处理涉及佛教寺庙、道教宫观管理有关问题的意见”,http://www.cscc.gov.cn/pub/newsite/flb/flfg/bmgf/zh/qt/201402/t20140211_243685.html

⁵⁶ Chinese State Council, “宗教事务条例”,http://www.gov.cn/xxgk/pub/govpublic/mrlm/200803/t20080328_31641.html

⁵⁷ When using the word “small” I do not mean that the temple itself is physically small. Rather, it refers to those that do not have enough social influence and connections to the government, which is crucial for temples’ legitimization because otherwise they will have neither a presiding monk or the government’s approval. For example, organizing religious activity centered around the community or households is illegal because they can barely meet three requirements.

⁵⁸ The local government’s document *The plan to tackle illegal religious builds* specifically emphasizes that “illegal sites for religious activities” and “unregistered temples” must be cleared: there are overall 7 situations in which the government “must take action” — all of them target small scale temples built by villagers themselves and allegedly “unregistered” buildings.

⁵⁹ Temples might be sacrificed for other reasons as well, such as the national stability, in Tibet. Though the paper does not discuss the Tibetan Buddhism, the Wuming Buddhist academy and Yaqing temple are two examples of demolished Buddhist sites: the reasons are better development and safety concerns.

⁶⁰ The abbot was threatened and bribed. Officials even required him to sign a contract stating that the abbot himself may stay in the demolished temple, but his personal safety is not guaranteed.

Though it is an exception to the rule, Xingsheng Temple represents a successful and important example of how small temples can fulfill these requirements. What abbot Huiren discovered was that his temple wouldn't have been officially registered had it not been for the genuine Buddhist faith of the party members, which is not always a given. It may be, then, that there are three criteria to be met for registering the temple; but practically speaking, unless an unofficial fourth criterion is met—namely, the willingness of the officials to perform their duties—the registration process might never be completed. This does not amount to an official “suppression” policy (there's no conspiracy, here); but in effect, this set up means that several temples go unregistered due to “red tape,” the registration process is effectively killed by the bureaucratic process.

The second policy is controlling religious activities. During the interview, abbot Huiren stated that whenever he organized an activity involving a large group of believers, he had to report to the Hebei Religious Bureau and the Buddhist Association. Guided by document No. 6, the local government in Hebei states in its own document, *The Regulation on Religious Affairs*, Rule 27, that temples have to report religious activities to the local government 30 days prior to the activity itself, so that the government can check whether it contradicts the “state administration.”⁶¹ The abbot related the following story of his teacher, Master Jinghui in Bailin Temple. Shenghuo Chan summer camp for teenagers was halted in 2019 because the government thought it interfered with the public education system. In fact, as scholar Yang Fenggang estimates, the number of summer camps organized nationally fell from 47 in 2016 to only 15 in 2019—a drastic decrease that coincided with the rollout of the government's tight policies.⁶²

Apart from repressive policies against Buddhist temples, the government also targets specific individuals. For instance, Monk Lin Bin in Fujian province was arrested because he participated in a peaceful demonstration against a heavy metal factory that brought about environmental damages according to the religious freedom report in 2015. The persecution against individuals is even more prevalent in Tibetan Buddhism, where all monks are prohibited from traveling abroad.⁶³ In fact, that monks are arrested or prosecuted is not the result of their Buddhist belief: they either break Chinese laws and counter the will of the government, as evidenced in Lin Bin's case, or violate Chinese government's core interest to secure its territories.

2.3: Government Policies to Distort Buddhism

Aside from policies designed to directly suppress Buddhism, the Chinese government also gives apparent support for the purposes of control, which results in the deformation and corruption of the religion. This support is not genuine and might even be called “specious support,” meaning that it is intended to *look* genuine while not truly being so.

There are two main ways that the government distorts Buddhism with this specious support. The first is through the politicization of the temples, where the government-backed Buddhist academies overlook faith and religious practices as well as fuel teaching materials with socialist ideals. The second is through the commercialization of the temples, where Buddhist tourism distorts both temples and monks—pulling them away from an authentic religious pursuit. In the following section I will discuss each of these aspects in turn.

⁶¹ Hebei Province Religious Bureau, “河北省宗教事务条例”, <http://asianlii.austlii.edu.au/chi/cn/legis/he/laws/1d7e05d4c843f1d44fdb141009dc8e445b82d0e9/>

⁶² Fenggang Yang and Dedong Wei, “THE BAILIN BUDDHIST TEMPLE: THRIVING UNDER COMMUNISM,” *Religion and the Social Order* 11 (2005): 63.

⁶³ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), “中国（包括西藏、新疆、香港和澳门）2020年国际宗教自由报告” (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), n.d.), <https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/zh/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom-china/>.

Buddhist academies, as managed by the central government, are in conflict with traditional Buddhism in both their purpose and methodology.⁶⁴ Buddhist academies hold secular perspectives, treating Buddhism as a part of a theology that can be analyzed and understood, while traditional Buddhist practices emphasize pious devotion and physical and mental exercises. According to scholar Feng Youlan, what defines a religion is not only a philosophy, but also a superstructure, an institution, and a way of life.⁶⁵ Such academies treat the religious dimension of Buddhism as a mere chapter in a curriculum, rather than as the foundation of the way of life to be inculcated among the monks and nuns—as it was traditionally taught.

According to scholar Rongdao Lai, the construction of Buddhist academies started in the 1920s—a period commonly called “a period of fervent growth.” Led by Master Taixu, the movement produced the first Buddhist academy (*foxueyuan*), Wuchang Buddhist Academy, as well as Minnan Buddhist Academy and Sino-Tibetan Buddhist Studies Institute.⁶⁶ Newly constructed academies follow the primary objective of Master Taixu: to improve the life of its people by the cultivation of virtues as a countermeasure to the moral decay witnessed by this same master during the domestic war. To this end, he contended that “knowledge, action, and skills—physical labors” should be combined.⁶⁷ The chairman of the Nationalist Party, Lin Sen, who closely worked with Master Taixu, further described Taixu’s vision: “Those who develop the Buddhist ideal are the vanguards of social change. Their fundamental aim is to create a paradise on earth, a Western land here and now.”⁶⁸ This vision demonstrates that Taixu encouraged monks to be reformers, a force for the common good, rather than scholars who are detached from daily practices. Indeed, Taixu himself named his vision “*Renjian Fojiao*,” the Buddhism of the people, aiming to spread “East Asian good word of peace” to improve the world.⁶⁹ Undoubtedly, a practice-centered Buddhism—as opposed to a Buddhism stripped of this focus—is an essential component of Taixu’s Buddhist academies.⁷⁰

However, as the communist party took power, the physical structures of the academies were preserved, but the ideals of Master Taixu were reversed: The government deliberately dropped the training in physical practices, controlled the curriculum, and distorted Buddhism with Socialist doctrines, transforming the fundamentals of Master Taixu into a mere moment in monks’ academic studies.

In the first place, Buddhist academies reduce the existential aspect of religion, the beliefs of the monks and their religious way of life—to a mere intellectual concern. As graduates from the Academy hold management positions in the Buddhist Association of China and prominent temples, the line between scholars and monks becomes blurry. During my interview with abbot Hui ren, he expressed his concern that monks striving for Nirvana are the “rarity of the rarest,” and almost no monks still hold to the practice of meditation.⁷¹ That said, his own temple is still

⁶⁴ Stefania Travagnin, “Buddhist Education between Tradition, Modernity and Networks: Reconsidering the ‘Revival’ of Education for the Saṅgha in Twentieth-Century China,” *Studies in Chinese Religions* 3, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 220–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23729988.2017.1392193>.

⁶⁵ Youlan Feng, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (Simon and Schuster, 1997).

⁶⁶ Master Taixu is referred to as “the Martin Luther of China” because of his contribution to Buddhist reformation, including building Buddhist Academies and other contributions to Buddhism’s secularization.

⁶⁷ Taixu, “Zhishi xingwei nengli zhi sanzhe nengfou yizhi 知識行為能力之三者能否一致,” TXQ 27:137.

⁶⁸ Bart Dessein, “The Heritage of Taixu,” *Asian Studies* 8, no. 3 (September 22, 2020): 251–77, <https://doi.org/10.4312/as.2020.8.3.251-277>.

⁶⁹ Ji Zhe, “Zhao Puchu and His Renjian Buddhism,” *The Eastern Buddhism* 44, no. 2 (2013): 35–58.

⁷⁰ In the 2005 interview with master Taixu, he powerfully contended that [the term] “‘renjian Fojiao’ expresses that one in no way has to instruct people to leave mankind and become a spirit, or that it would be a Buddhism in which everyone should go forth and become a monk in a temple, on a mountain, or in a forest. [The term] expresses that one should improve society with the Buddhist principles and make sure that mankind makes progress. Buddhism that improves the world.... In order to establish ‘renjian Fojiao,’ it is therefore necessary to start from the thinking of the common people.”

⁷¹ In fact, young abbot Hiren asked master Jinghui—the abbot of Bailin temple—whether he should attend a Buddhist Academy. Jinghui, knowing that the Buddhist teachings are overly secularized, forestalled his enrollment.

an exception to this rule: monks rise at 4 a.m. each day and participate in chanting for 2 hours at Xingsheng Temple. Still, many other academies more closely resemble universities, where classes start at 8 am when undergraduate monks are submerged in readings and lectures. Scholar Li Silong pointed out that the Chinese Buddhist Academy—the highest ranking Buddhist Academy—aims to educate Buddhist followers to show patriotism and love of teaching, manage temples, and do research about Buddhist history; meanwhile, the traditional objective of achieving Nirvana and Holy Land is absent.⁷² By and large, faith and religious practice, once alive in the life of the monk, has been deformed into discrete bits of knowledge to be learned from books and confined safely in the memory and notebooks of mere scholars and students. This is a great distortion indeed.

A second distortion is found in the actual content of the knowledge now disseminated in the academies: knowledge selected by the government for the purpose of control. The government controls course arrangements and compiles teaching materials. According to the Zhejiang Religious Bureau, 17% of the Wenzhou Buddhist Academy's courses are about socialism, with at least 3 periods weekly.⁷³ Teachers are secularized as well. According to the interview with Abbott Hui ren, teachers in Buddhist academies are mostly professors of Sociology or Religious studies, having little knowledge and less experience of Buddhist practices.⁷⁴ To demonstrate academies' "study results," Hui ren points out, the government regularly organizes "preaching competitions," in which monks are judged by officials from the Buddhist Bureau for their ability to offer "correct" interpretations—that is, those endorsed by the bureau itself—of the scriptures.⁷⁵ Because the awards are related to promotions in temples, monks in academies have a great incentive to actively participate in such competitions.

Admittedly, Master Taixu also emphasizes Buddhism's connection with patriotism, but his argument is based on the tense international atmosphere during the 1920s, when China was under the threat of foreign invasions: if the Nationalist government collapsed, Buddhism would be subject to persecutions. To this end, patriotism was a means to preserve Buddhism⁷⁶—but the communist party holds another ground distant from cultivating virtue and practicing meditation. Redesigned by the government, Buddhist teaching becomes a channel to form political connections with the party and to practice socialist ideas.

"The craving for money," Buddha once taught his fellow listeners, "is the source of worries and stress."⁷⁷ Despite the great sage's warning, as China progresses from isolation to the Opening Up, it has prioritized economic development. As a result, the party's pursuit of utilitarian legitimacy leads local officials to make a top priority of economic performance in the criteria of its political promotion system. In the following paragraphs, the paper will describe the Chinese promotion system, its connection with the commercialization of temples, how it affects the monks, and how the temples' business models gain revenue from tourism.⁷⁸

⁷² Li Silong, "The Practice of Buddhist Education in Modern China," *Chinese Studies in History* 46, no. 3 (April 2013): 59–78, <https://doi.org/10.2753/CSH0009-4633460304>.

⁷³ Zhejiang Province Religious Bureau. "Regulations concerning the Zhejiang Buddhist Academy." <http://mzw.zj.gov.cn/Public/Leader.aspx?id=F9ABBD31-14C3-41D6-B032-0C785D6F3E3A&type=10>

⁷⁴ Hiren also mentions that these "experts" are appointed by the government. Some of them travel around the nation day by day to give lectures to Buddhist academies.

⁷⁵ This connection also aims to justify that Buddhism conforms to the party. For example, the *Community of Shared Future for Mankind* was a term used by Xi Jinping in the 18th CCP's convention to describe China's political agenda. Some monks in these conventions connected this concept with equality of all beings, a Buddhist concept that describes the universal love to all humankind.

⁷⁶ Darui Long, "Humanistic Buddhism From Venerable Tai Xu to Grand Master Hsing Yun," *Hsi Lai Journal of Humanistic Buddhism*, no. 1 (2000): 53–84.

⁷⁷ E Nichtern, *The Road Home: A Contemporary Exploration of the Buddhist Path* (North Point Press, 2015).

⁷⁸ The commercialization adopted by local officials is more of a reaction to the promotion system, rather than the central government's policy itself. In fact, the central government sometimes actively protects the purity of Buddhism and opposes commercialization. For instance, 12 departments, including the Chinese religious bureau, issued restrictions on enterprises investing in Bud-

In scholar Zhou's paper, the author dissects the Chinese promotion system into four levels: central, provincial, prefectural, and county.⁷⁹ For example, Chinese premier Li Keqiang was promoted to the central committee, among nine of the most powerful officials in China, because he revitalized the sluggish economy of Henan province, growing it to be the 5th nationally.⁸⁰ Officials in the same hierarchical level engage in an ultracompetitive hunger game, spurring them to follow morally questionable means to develop the local economy. Indeed, the connection between economic performance and promotion is so clear that scholar Li Hongbin concludes that economic statistics define the official's career.

Driven by better results, officials began to exploit the values of Buddhist temples, which are uniquely positioned to be commercialized as tourist destinations. Scholar Keji Huang points out that temples, which rely on their cultural and historical significance to attract visitors, are among the most popular traveling destinations both for devoted pilgrims and secular tourists.⁸¹ More specifically, 5 out of 40 Chinese UNESCO world heritage sites are Buddhist.⁸² Thus, temples were already positioned to have singular advantages to generate revenues—collected from tourist fees, donations, etc.⁸³ Scholars Graeme and Selina state that many of the new temples were given government support in order that they may be conscripted into the goal of promoting economic development at large. Government-affiliated entities also borrow millions of RMB from local banks to build new temples, aiming to achieve long-term economic gain for local districts. However, everything comes at a cost. Due to such self-serving purposes, temples degrade themselves to become mere instruments in the pursuit of local economic development.

It isn't just the temples considered as systems that experience such reduction; monks themselves are similarly distracted from Buddhist practices in favor of financial concerns. Many of these abbots became "CEO monks," holding MBA degrees from top tier Chinese business schools, according to scholar Jue Wang.⁸⁴ For example, the abbot of the Shaolin temple in Henan, Shi Yongxin, was awarded a Volkswagen SUV for his tremendous contributions to the local economy.⁸⁵ In fact, Shi Yongxin himself acknowledged in an interview with *China Daily* that "several monks have turned into tourist workers rather than Buddhist followers."

The time that should have been invested by the monks in Buddhist teaching and practice is co-opted by the task of making business plans or even moving towards IPO. Some temples are absorbed into state owned companies as their subsidiaries, thereby bringing the temple into an organization with the appropriate managerial infrastructure already in place. For instance, the Qujiang Cultural Tourism Corporation planned an IPO for a WuluCaishen Miao, the Temple for the God of Wealth, which would generate a revenue of 0.5 billion Yuan a year, which is perceived as clearly "blessed" by this god.⁸⁶ For other monks who have not advanced to managerial positions, Scholars Yang and Huang also point out in a 2017 study that the practice of daily meditation has been demoted to a very low priority, as monks are spending the bulk of their days selling souvenirs and interacting with tourists.

dhism; the IPO plan of Mount Putuo, a renowned Buddhist holy site, was also halted.

⁷⁹ Qi Zhou and Jing Zhang, "Promotion Incentives, GDP Manipulation and Economic Growth in China: How Do Sub-National Officials Behave When They Have Performance Pressure?," *International Review of Economics & Finance* 69 (2020): 582–98.

⁸⁰ Cheng Li, "The Battle for China's Top Nine Leadership Posts," *The Washington Quarterly* 35, no. 7 (2012): 131–45.

⁸¹ Keji Huang, "Voices from the Margin: Journey of Sacredness: Assessing How Commercial Activities in China Affect Religious Tourists' Spiritual Values" (PhD, James Cook University, 2017).

⁸² United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. "Properties inscribed on the World Heritage List." United Nations. 2021. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/cn>

⁸³ Lori Qingyuan Yue, Jue Wang, and Botao Yang, "The Price of Faith: Political Determinants of Commercialization of Buddhist Temples in China," *Academy of Management Proceedings* 2016, no. 1 (January 2016): 11762, <https://doi.org/10.5465/ambpp.2016.87>.

⁸⁴ Yue and Yang, "The Price of Faith: Political Determinants of Commercialization of Buddhist Temples in China", 15

⁸⁵ Yongxin, Shi. Interview by Wen Li. Personal Interview. BBC HQ, 1'13"

⁸⁶ Yue and Yang, "The Price of Faith: Political Determinants of Commercialization of Buddhist Temples in China", 18

All of these transformations put tourism revenue at the center of Buddhism in China. Money spent in Shaolin tourism constitutes an astonishing one third of the government of Dengfeng's income. In fact, temples have formed their business model to maximize economic gain. The primary way to do so is charging additional fees: the entrance ticket, the incense, and other services. According to a journalist from *Xinhua.net*, Chaoyin Temple, which was credited as the "paramount mountain" in Hainan, was in fact a "religious scam" controlled by tourist firms.⁸⁷ The journalist was led to a monk who was allegedly responsible for "Kaiguang," a religious ceremony that infuses spiritual power into an object, for which the temple charges 50 yuan per spiritually charged object.⁸⁸ The tour guide charged 1 yuan per person even as tourists only began to kowtow. He also encouraged tourists to burn "Gaoxiang," a very large incense stick that costs over a hundred yuan. These ceremonies, including "kaiguang" and "kowtow" are indeed sacred, but "monks" took advantage of tourists' homage to Buddhism, covering up their money-making scheme with a ceremonial facade. The tour guide deceitfully implied that if they don't comply, the tourists might "lose their luck." Such connection not only contrasts with Buddhist dogma, but it also detracts from the holiness of such Buddhist sites, taking from it all of its vitality.

The upshot of such commercialization is the radical deformation of the temple's mission and practice. Fueled by economical concerns, and run by money-making monks, temples are no longer able to promote belief and practice over the "desire for money." They are a far cry from the Buddha's vision.

Section 3: Xingsheng Temple and Case Studies

The above-mentioned arguments seem to suggest that the role of the government itself is more adversarial than constructive: temples are not only bound to a registration process approved by the government, but also are limited or distorted by other policies in place when these temples operate. Therefore, a puzzle that remains is how Xingsheng Temple, without historical legacies that attract government's support, can be reconstructed in only a decade.

In the following paragraphs, I will introduce how the prestige of Buddhist lineages⁸⁹ expanded the temple's influence and how the collective memories of local villagers contributed to their approval of the reconstruction. Throughout, I will pay special attention to the benefits such a temple brings to Baita (The White Tower) village. Unlike previous sections, I will use my personal observations as the primary supporting evidence.

3.1: The Temple and Lineage

The influence of prestigious lineages is historical. Scholar Schlutter defines Chan lineages as "transmission families," the individual Buddhist sects that hold different means to enlightenment while still being unified by the basics of Buddhist belief and practice.⁹⁰ The *locus classicus* distinction could be traced back to *Lengqie* scripture and *Chan Prolegomenon*.⁹¹ Each lineage of Buddhism performs the "transmission of Dharma," a religious ritual carried out for centuries, which recognizes a spiritually accomplished disciple, appoints him as his successor, and offers the legiti-

⁸⁷ Yingcheng, Wang. "海南第一山"假和尚泛滥坑害游人." *Xinhua.net*. March 8, 2012.

⁸⁸ Some people enjoy "free" service, given the condition that they purchase the object from the Chaoyin temple itself, which costs much more than 50 yuan.

⁸⁹ Buddhist lineage is a typical Chinese Zen tradition. It requires previous master monks to pass down their knowledge and their specific Buddhist genre to a group of apprentices: different lineages have distinctive understandings about Buddhist methodologies. The lineage itself is not only a school of thought, but also a congregation of influence. On a similar note, Pythagoras organized his "lineage" in ancient Greece and accumulated tremendous influence.

⁹⁰ M Schlutter, *How Zen Became Zen* (University of Hawaii Press, 2008).

⁹¹ Jimmy Yu, "Revisiting the Notion of Zong:," *Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal*, no. 26 (102AD): 113–51.

macy to establish the leadership.⁹² According to scholar Heinrich Dumoulin, the earliest record of Dharma transmission dates back to the 6th-century Wei Dynasty, when Bodhidharma transmitted his knowledge to Huike, his only devoted disciple at that time.⁹³ He was later titled “the second master” after his teacher.⁹⁴ Chinese Chan Buddhism reached its peak at “the 6th master,” Huineng, whose disciples are the source of five burgeoning lineages: Weiyang, Linji, Caodong, Fayan, and Yunmen.⁹⁵ According to scholar Daniela Campo, the Buddhist saying, “one flower with five petals,” refers to these five branches which have subsisted to modern times from the period of the Tang and Northern Song dynasties.

The lineage is more than an academic commonwealth; indeed, it is also an aggregation of tangible power. For example, the power struggle for the leadership in the lineage itself forced the 6th master Huineng to flee. His self-exile lasted for 15 years after he inherited the Dharma because other disciples sent a small army to hunt him down in opposition to the 5th and the previous master’s decision to appoint Huineng as the leader of his lineage. The lineage was thus divided into its Southern part, which endorsed Huineng, and the Northern part, which claimed their leadership themselves.⁹⁶ Nowadays, lineages do not resolve conflicts violently, but they have evolved into influential platforms of interpersonal connection between monks, which is a source of prestige for monks belonging to them. For instance, the abbot Hui ren followed master Jinghui, the 44th generation of Linji Chan lineage. His connection to this lineage cloaked him with prominent authority throughout the process of the reconstruction of the temple itself. During my interview with him, he constantly drew connections with his peers, other disciples of the master Jinghui. Most of them are abbots of other influential Chinese temples. For example, his *Shixiong* (the elder disciple of Master Jinghi), Master Minghai, inherited Bailin Temple; Master You Ming, a member of Linji lineage, was the abbot of Linji Temple according to the Buddhist Association’s website.⁹⁷

His identity as a member of a prestigious Buddhist lineage indeed helped abbot Hui ren even before the process of reconstruction started. According to my interview with a local official, the reconstruction required a presiding abbot, so they invited Hui ren because of his membership in the prestigious lineage: officials believed that this lineage, which takes its root in Hebei province, guaranteed the quality and capacity of the monk himself. The swift reconstruction with the assistance of the lineage validated officials’ presumptions. Other benefits include smoother fundraising campaigns and more authority when negotiating with local corporations and officials.

3.2: The Temple and Collective Memories

His distinguished identity as a member of the lineage alone did not necessarily bring about a successful reconstruction. The acceptance of villagers, encouraged by their remembrance of the village’s prosperous past and its strong Buddhist faith, was also a vital requisite for Xingsheng Temple’s return. We turn in the next section to consider the importance of these collective memories.

⁹² David Campo, *Buddhism after Mao* (University of Hawaii Press, 2020).

⁹³ Hu Shih, “Ch’an (Zen) Buddhism in China Its History and Method,” *Philosophy East and West* 3, no. 1 (1953): 3–24.

⁹⁴ This story of transmission is also a widely acclaimed tale among Buddhists to demonstrate the power of belief. It says that Huike, eager to show his devotion to Buddhism, cut his right arm in a heavy show. Touched by his grit and diligence, Bodhidharma accepted him as a disciple.

⁹⁵ David Campo, *Buddhism after Mao*, 16

⁹⁶ A Chan story illustrates that Huineng was nearly captured by a renowned general, but due to his supernatural power, the general himself could not even lift Huineng’s robe. As a result, the general converted to Huineng’s lineage.

⁹⁷ Linji Chan Buddhist temple. “正定临济寺.” The Buddhist Association of China. 2014.

<http://www.chinabuddhism.com.cn/zdsy/11/2012-03-13/239.html>

Collective memories, according to scholar Maurice Halbwachs, are a community's shared memories of the past, and these communal recollections might affect the values and behaviors of the members of the community.⁹⁸ In the example of Xingsheng Temple, collective memories of villagers indeed contributed to the reconstruction process. In the following paragraphs, I broadly divided the collective memories of villagers into two categories: memories of the prosperous past of the village, and memories related to this village's Buddhist faith.

Baita Village, as the only route to southern China, used to be a renowned highway for commercial activities. It was called *Jiusheng Tongqu*, a central node of nine provinces. Elder villagers recounted to me that caravans used to pass through the village all day long. Because of the refined transportation system in present-day China, Baita Village no longer maintains this significant position as a central hub of communication, which accordingly marginalizes the village itself, making a stark contrast with the memories of its flourishing past. In 2013, the excavation of a stone tablet revoked villagers' long concealed memories. Inscribed on it was the story of Zhuangyuan Bridge donated by a government official in the Ming Dynasty, who briefly lived in the original Xingsheng temple. Villagers, especially young people, realized for the first time that the village, now small and lifeless, was once a bustling hub of commerce. According to my interview with the former head of the village, who presided over the reconstruction, Xingsheng Temple itself symbolizes a return of Baita Village's booming past. Inscribed on the wall of Xingsheng Temple is a maxim expressing the hopefulness of the villagers: "the day when the Baita culture revitalizes is when the village itself thrives again." The Baita culture is embodied in the physical constitution of the temple, a spiritual realm for cultural activities, religious rituals, and remembrance of the village's history, into which villagers can readily withdraw for spiritual training and a meditative respite.

Aside from memories of the village's prosperous past are memories of the village's vibrant Buddhist faith. Baita Village had a long tradition of Buddhist belief that lasted until the destruction of the temple, after which it naturally began to wane, only to reawaken again after the rebuilding of the temple. The generational memories of past Buddhist belief served as an important basis for acceptance and emotional support during the reconstruction phase, without which the villagers would have opposed the return of the temple. As a counter-example, I encountered a deserted temple near the Xingsheng temple. On the wall of the dilapidated main hall were scribbles of a desperate monk: "May I stay here for one more day; I nearly give up," and "Hostile villagers are not supportive." These disturbing expressions suggest how support from the villagers is a crucial ingredient in the success and survival of any temple.

Most supportive villagers in Baita village inherited the belief from their parents. For instance, one permanent worker, Lanying Wang, related her experience that she in fact did not believe in Buddhism at all prior to the reconstruction. As the daughter of the head of the village, she was instructed by her parents to help with the temple's daily affairs—work that eventually led her to develop her own Buddhist faith. She told me that Buddhist faith was still present even during the spiritual vacuum created by the temple's destruction. Naturally, the faith was much less widespread. Without sanctioned leadership, the faith was influenced by folklore and belief in other gods: most villagers turned to Nainai Temple, a temple centered on a folk belief that mingled Chinese Taoism and Buddhism. After the temple was rebuilt, most villagers returned to genuine Buddhism.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (University of Chicago Press, 2020).

⁹⁹ I used the word genuine because the adapted folklore belief, though preserving Buddhist elements, is far from Han Buddhism, or Chinese Buddhism. For example, it worships gods unincorporated in the Buddhist canon, such as the god of fortune and the god of medicines. In some extreme cases, there are even gods of cars or gods of exams — praying for better grades. Even if the Nainai belief is not "genuine" enough, it still carries the core of Buddhism: contributing to the public goods. It at least familiarizes villagers with Buddhism and prepares them for the return of real Buddhist temples.

The collective memories of the village's deep Buddhist faith had tremendous impacts not only on recruitment of volunteers, but also are crucial for the government's consent. Because the central committee, including the head of the village and other local officials identifies itself with Buddhism spiritually, it reached an agreement to exert influence on the local government, especially the Buddhism association, to acquire the building permit for the reconstruction. For example, the committee wrote an open letter to the bureau, persuading the office to prioritize their proposal of such reconstruction, in case it was red taped.

Memories of belief also attracted donations for the temple. The major statue in the temple cost 50,000 yuan, and the supporting columns cost 3,000 yuan each; the main hall required 3 million yuan altogether according to the temple's blog.¹⁰⁰ A typical donor is Li Hui, a Baita villager who donated the large censer in front of the main hall. During my interview with her, she related how childhood stories told by her parents shaped her view of Buddhism: "They had lived in Baita village before the civil war and had seen the white tower." Because many eye witnesses of the tower transmitted their memories to later generations, individual memories became communal. They are no longer vague images of the past, but rather vivid living experiences of the new generation in the village—symbolized by the imposing beauty of the newly constructed temple.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have traced the history of the Revival movement in China, the Chinese government's current policies concerning Buddhism, and a case study about Xingsheng Temple answering the questions of why it was successfully reconstructed while most others were not.

In the first section, the paper divides the modern history of Buddhism in China into two parts: the road to destruction, which focuses on how Buddhism itself was nearly wiped out in China during the Cultural Revolution and Kuomintang's regime; and the road to reconstruction, which summarizes the history of the Buddhist Revival Movement after the Opening Up in 1978, during which temples were rebuilt and the number of monks increased.

In the second section, the focus turns to a more complex picture of the Buddhist Revival movement by detailing government policies. This paper broadly categorizes the government policies into three types: support, suppression, and distortion.

In the subsection about supportive policies, the paper points out two reasons for such support. First, the Buddhist idea is in fact in line with domestic and foreign policies of the Chinese government. Second, the government has incentives to provide a spiritual dimension other than the political dimension to its people. Specific supportive policies include establishing the BAC, starting the reconstruction movement, and directly funding Buddhist temples. In the subsection about policies that suppress Buddhism, three policies are discussed: imposing a strict registration process before any temples' reconstruction, controlling religious activities organized by temples, and persecuting individual monks for their acts identified as transgressive by the government. Unlike most other scholars who solely focus on the previous two kinds, I also include a section on government policies that indeed distort Buddhism—namely, the construction of Buddhist academies and commercialization of temples.

In the third section, I discuss a case study of Xingsheng Temple, which answers the question of why it was successfully reconstructed. By and large, there are two reasons: the abbot's connection with the lineage, and the collective memories of the village's prosperous past, which provided the foundation for the villagers' support.

¹⁰⁰ Xushui Xingsheng temple. "兴圣万佛宝塔动工了." Xingsheng temple. April 7, 2013. http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_97ecb3a40101hg05.html

This paper finally answers the question Buddha asked in the beginning: Will the Buddhism I established remain unchanged when translated into new contexts? Chinese Buddhism in the 21st century is far from that created by the Buddha himself, far from it, indeed. What we have now is Buddhism altered by the government's interventions, infiltrated by local folk beliefs, and, more importantly, shaped by Chinese history. But Buddhism itself is actively changing Chinese society as well: encouraging Chinese people to live harmoniously and contributing to the common good of others. The Buddhism that came to China has become its own phenomenon: Chinese Buddhism. Similarly, China itself has been changed by the presence of Buddhism. It will never be the same China as the one it was before Buddhism was introduced. An important question remains: What will become of Buddhism and China as these two phenomena continue to interact with one another in the years to come?

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