




Special Focus: Buddhism in the Anthropocene

The Spatiality of Buddhism in Shenzhen: Exploration through Guattari's Three Ecologies

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This article explores the spatiality of Buddhism in the metropolis Shenzhen through its revitalization process in the past decades alongside the rapid expansion of the city. The author explores Buddhist practice communities within an urban village (*chengzhongcun* 城中村) and the central Buddhist temple build in the same neighbourhood. The article aims to illuminate some of the particularities and tensions of urbanization, environment, and the revival of Buddhism in the PRC. Building on Felix Guattari's thesis of the *three ecologies*, the author presents a descriptive account of the main active communities in the examined neighbourhood. Furthermore, the article argues that, in order to understand the workings of Buddhist configurations in contemporary urban China, we must look at the registers of the environment, social structure, and human subjectivity. The article suggests that these three ecologies are interconnected and make up the ecology of Shenzhen Buddhism.

Keywords: spatiality; Buddhism in China; Felix Guattari; three ecologies; urbanization

For a considerable period of time, research on China's religions, including Buddhist practices, rituals, and communities, has predominantly focused on villages and rural communities. The emphasis on rural areas is not indicative of a bias, but rather a tendency to explore religious expressions outside the urban context. This could be primarily because, until recently, the majority of China's population resided in rural environments (X. Wang 2020: 180).

Another facet for explicating the focus on religious life in the countryside is the cultural revolution. During this period, assaults against religious life in rural institutions, temples, and practices had been arguably missing in many parts in the Chinese countryside. According to Wang Xiaoxuan, the continuation of religious life benefited from the porous nature of state control. Cities were the focus of the most severe attacks on religion in the first few years of the Cultural Revolution. In its later stages, the chaos of the Cultural Revolution even created opportunities for religious groups to expand (X. Wang 2020).

In this article, I wish to join scholars attempting to extend the field of inquiry regarding religion into urban areas, which have, since 2010, become the habitat of the majority of the Chinese population (Statista 2023). I will explore Buddhist traditions while discussing the urban–rural division and related processes, and how these influence the sphere of lay Buddhism in the contemporary People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC).

To achieve this objective, I examine the spatial aspects of Buddhism in Shenzhen's metropolitan area and its revival during the city's rapid expansion over the past few decades. Focusing on the transformation of Shenzhen through urbanization, the article explores Buddhist practice groups in an urban village



(*chengzhongcun* 城中村) and at a modern Buddhist temple that emerged alongside the city's development, both located in Shenzhen's Luohu district (*Luohu qu* 羅湖區).¹

I aim to illuminate some particularities and tensions of urbanization, environmentalism, and lay Buddhism. By examining the spatial and material aspects of Buddhist practice and spaces within the urban village and temple, different sections of the article connect the recent growth of Buddhism in Shenzhen with urbanization, socio-economic transformations, and environmental issues. Through this exploration, the article discusses the interplay between these factors and their impact on the practice of Buddhism in an urban context.

I adopt Felix Guattari's concept of *the three ecologies* as a theoretical framework, positing that the evolution of Buddhism in the urban setting can be understood by examining the interplay between the environment, social structure, and human subjectivity.

First published in 1989, Guattari's essay introduced the concept of "ecosophy," a framework aimed at addressing the social, environmental, and psychological challenges of the time (Guattari 2000 [1989]). Guattari's work touches on a wide range of themes, including religious extremism, loss of community, the mechanization of society, AI ethics, and concerns about the state of our planet. In his essay, he proposes the three ecologies as a means to grapple with these complex problems, offering insights into the impact of increased capitalism and the sense of individual and collective disorientation experienced during that era Guattari studied. Guattari therefore suggests that:

Whereas only an ethico-political articulation which I call ecosophy between the three ecological registers (the environment, social relations and human subjectivity) would be likely to clarify these questions. (Guattari 2000 [1989]: 28)

During the same period when Guattari was writing about the three ecologies, the PRC was undergoing significant social and economic reforms that had a profound impact on social structures, identity formation, subjectivity, and the relationship between individuals and their environment. Shenzhen serves as a vivid example of this transformative process, evolving from a small village to a bustling metropolis.

This study aims to examine the unique characteristics of Buddhism in Shenzhen, a topic that has received only limited scholarly attention. Drawing on Guattari's definition of ecology as the interconnectedness between organisms and their physical surroundings, the article employs this framework to analyze the various dimensions of Buddhism's revival in Shenzhen.

Urbanization and Shenzhen

In the PRC, the process of urbanization has gained significant momentum in recent decades, leading to profound impacts on local cultures, including religious traditions.² The shift in the population from predominantly rural to mainly urban has occurred within a relatively short period of time. In 1978, the urbanization level in China was below twenty percent, but by 2011 it had surpassed the fifty percent mark, indicating a rapid and ongoing urbanization trend. This transformation has shaped the social, economic, and cultural landscape of the PRC, bringing about both opportunities and challenges for the country and its people (Yeh and Henderson 2008).

¹ The study is based on qualitative ethnographic work conducted on the ground in 2019 and online until 2022.

² Over the past few decades, cities have expanded at an unprecedented rate, and urban agglomerations have gradually emerged. Urbanization encompasses the social, economic, and political processes most closely linked with the rapid transformation of habitats, destruction of ecologies, overuse of materials and resources, and the production of pollutants and carbon emissions that are destroying planet earth's natural ecosystems (Hodson and Simon 2010: 299).

Shenzhen has evolved from an agricultural and fishing-based region of 300,000 inhabitants, to become a “factory of the world,” and subsequently a high-tech global metropolis with an estimated administrative population of 20 million residents. In 1979, as part of Deng Xiaoping’s “Opening and Reform” (*Gaige kaifang* 改革開放), the village and the area were made a Special Economic Zone (*Jingji tequ* 經濟特區, hereafter SEZ). Shenzhen was the first place in the PRC where people could “jump into the sea of private markets” (*xiahai* 下海) and experiment with capitalism during the Reform years of the 1980s (Fan, Whitehead, and Whitehead 2004). Shenzhen quickly gained global recognition as an innovation hub and a prime example of fast urban development. These swift economic, geographical, and demographic changes have had diverse implications for social processes in the Shenzhen region.

The Spatiality of Buddhism and the Question of Historical Heritage

The social and economic reforms of the 1980s also had a massive impact on the spiritual and religious aspects of Chinese society. The end of the Cultural Revolution (*Wenhuan da geming* 文化大革命) meant that citizens of the PRC were again allowed to practice religion and re-incorporate religious elements, among them Buddhism, into their daily lives. Places of worship were allowed re-open their gates to the public, and many have been reconstructed from the ruins of the cultural revolution (Goossaert and Palmer 2012). Throughout the rest of China, clergy and laypeople have worked hard to expand the number of temples restored to active religious use (Fisher 2011).

However, in Shenzhen, which had no history as a city, there was almost no physical Buddhist heritage to reconstruct. This particularity of Shenzhen should be taken into account and be explored in relation to other studies on Buddhism in the changing spatiality of urban life, in many cases in Communist or post-Communist regimes (e.g., Abrahms-Kavunenko 2022; Swenson 2021; Jonutytė 2022).

In Shenzhen, the rapid population growth was accompanied by the construction of new infrastructure, including residential and commercial buildings, roads, tunnels, and parks. These urban elements were developed on previously unpopulated land and in-between small villages. The geographical territory that now constitutes the modern city of Shenzhen lacked any significant Buddhist worship places before the 1980’s. Within a span of 15 years, the once vacant fields became transformed into a landscape dominated by towering concrete structures, rendering the city unrecognizable from its appearance in the late 1970s.

The new tower buildings became home to immigrants from different regions of the PRC. As in other parts of the country, urban residents in Shenzhen began visiting temples, and local authorities permitted the reconstruction of religious heritage sites. Among the influx of new citizens migrating to Shenzhen from various parts of China, who continue to increase by several million each year, there has been a growing interest in spiritual and religious practices (Fan, Whitehead, and Whitehead 2004). In the late 1990s, Lizhu Fan et al. conducted research on the resurgence of spirituality in Shenzhen and reported that:

The metropolis of Shenzhen boasts new and refurbished worship sites for each of the five religions officially recognized by law in the People’s Republic of China—Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, and Protestant and Catholic Christianity. (Fan 2005)

More specifically, in the case of Buddhism in Shenzhen, there was a lack of significant material cultural heritage. Therefore, the focus, in my view, should not on refurbishing existing sites, but rather on the emergence of new Buddhist actors who have brought with them and revitalized Buddhist cultural heritage and practices in the city. As in other parts of the country, Buddhism has found a need to adapt and establish an infrastructure to cater to the spiritual needs of the rapidly expanding population of modern Shenzhen.

The following sections investigate two forms in which such a process had taken place. One of these was an institutional form of Buddhist space creation, which facilitated a social capacity for Buddhism to return to society in the somewhat classic form of a monastery that includes a monastic community and a temple open to lay worshippers. The second capacity was the creation of transitional, grassroots forms of communities for Buddhist practice in private or commercial spaces, initiated by lay individuals. These groups took into their own hands the objective of bringing spirituality into their lives. As I will explore below, both forms of space created for Buddhism, which have changed the spatiality of Buddhism, are intrinsically tied to the unique spatiality of the new city, and the material conditions of its population.

Drawing on Guattari's ecological model, we can better understand the interplay between the institutional and grassroots modalities of Buddhism in Shenzhen. Within the specific context of Shenzhen's physical environment, these two other capacities namely the institutional and the individual form an interconnected eco-ecosystem, where their existence is dependent on and influenced by other aspects of the natural environment. Here, the term "ecology" is used in an inclusive sense to depict a dynamic and interconnected process of a city in constant transformation whereby *Environment*, *Social Structure relations* and *Human subjectivity* act as three registers, three ecologies which are interconnected and therefore one.

Hongfa Temple: A Sea of Cement

Guattari discusses the *Social Structure* (Guattari 2000 [1989]) as a distinct yet interconnected ecology, added to that of the ecology of *Environment*. Social Structure can refer to organizations or institutions, material or spiritual, which serve as networks of bondage and human interactions. As mentioned previously, Shenzhen had a dearth of active Buddhist temples and cultural heritage sites to restore in the early 1980s, considering the growing population of the city. In this article, I will specifically focus on the Luohu district of Shenzhen which is home to one primary place of worship built for the expanding city.

In 1985, with the guidance of Chan Master Ben Huan (本煥), the main Buddhist temple, which has been serving Buddhist followers and practitioners in Shenzhen for the past four decades, was established.³ Hongfa Temple (Hongfa si 弘法寺) is situated at the base of Wutong Mountain, in Luohu district, and is closely linked to the Linji school of Chan Buddhism (*linji zong* 臨濟宗). It holds the distinction of being the largest temple in Shenzhen.

The temple is a completely new Buddhist site, emerging during the revival period of Buddhism in the PRC. It was constructed to facilitate the re-establishment of religious practices following years of suppression.⁴ According to Zhou Jiasheng (2013), Hongfa Temple played an essential role in adapting the Dharma to a socialist society. However, this socialist society was going through grand changes. Building the temple in the above-mentioned political and social contexts was, from the beginning, not only a project of the physical construction, but also of cultural construction. This had been accomplished by adapting to the country's economic and social development. The economic development I am generally referring to here is the shift from a closed socialist-oriented economy to a global, growth-oriented economic model, which shared various attributes with capitalist economies.

One of the apparent signs of this adaptation mentioned by Xu is the grandiose architecture of the temple, as well as its size (2010). The renewed religiosity in the new social and economic context of the 1980s correlated with the construction of flashy and impressive religious spaces. It seems to me that the temple had to mirror

³ It is worth noting that Ben Huan, formerly known as Monk Shi Yinshun (釋印順), continues to serve as the head abbot of the temple to this day.

⁴ This is in contrast to numerous religious sites across the country that existed prior to the Cultural Revolution, some dating back to ancient times. For example, the White Horse Temple (*Baima si* 白马寺) is a Buddhist temple in Luoyang, Henan. According to tradition, this was the first Buddhist temple in China, established in 68 AD, and marked the introduction of Buddhism to China.

the city, representing wealth, growth, and prosperity. If a temple was to be built for the residents in a city that would strive to become a multi-skyscraper city, then it made sense that it would not be a modest neighborhood local worship site.

As previously mentioned, Shenzhen is perceived to be a sea of economic opportunities; entering the temple complex, which is aligned with the rest of the city, I mainly noticed the sea of cement that had been poured into the hills of Fairy Lake Botanical Garden (*xianhu zhiwuyuan* 仙湖植物園) during construction of Hongfa Temple. The sheer size of the temple complex is palpable upon entering, rendering drone footage unnecessary to grasp its magnitude. The architecture stretches across the mountain slope, a lavish display of concrete. During my conversations with various individuals, the consensus seemed to be that Hongfa Temple stood out from the revitalized Buddhist sites of Shenzhen. Its newness and striking appearance were often mentioned with excitement. The monks residing in the halls informed me that as a result, it attracts a significantly higher number of visitors than other temples in Shenzhen, although I have yet to verify this claim.



Figure 1: A bird's eye view of Hongfa Temple (photo from Hongfa Temple website, 2018)

During my visits in 2019, I was awestruck by the immense size of the Hongfa Temple and its sprawling complex of halls and towers nestled in the Wutong Mountains. The temple's unique architectural design consists of a series of terraces, which I traversed, eventually arriving at the first level. Here, I was greeted by a spacious courtyard adorned with a decorative screen wall that lined its perimeter.

Moving to the next level, I discovered a bustling array of shops offering a wide range of commodities, including statues, prayer beads, incense sticks, and charms. It was a vibrant marketplace within the temple grounds. As I ascended further, I reached the third level, which was adorned with the majestic presence of the Happy Buddha in the Heavenly Kings Hall (*tianwang dian* 天王殿). On reaching the fourth level, I encountered the focal point of the temple—the Ten Thousand Buddhas Hall (*wan fo dian* 萬佛殿), commonly known as the Buddha Hall. It was a captivating sight, drawing in tourists and devotees alike. Its grandeur and beauty were truly awe-inspiring. Finally, at the highest level, there was a scripture repository, which regrettably was closed to the public.

On one occasion, I had the opportunity to visit the temple on the auspicious first day of Chinese New Year (*danian chuyi* 大年初一), and it was a bustling scene of excitement and celebration. As I made my way up the long and winding path to the temple, I joined the crowds of people who were also eager to pay their respects and seek blessings. The temple's modern, sleek design seemed to perfectly complement the vibrant atmosphere. Many of the visitors were dressed in festive attire, adorned with expensive branded handbags and fine jewelry, adding a sense of elegance and prosperity to the occasion. The sight of such a diverse and well-dressed crowd further emphasized the significance of the temple as a symbol of cultural and spiritual

significance in Shenzhen. Walking with the masses around the route of the temple was a slow process. Most people stopped at every hall. However, on this occasion, only the shops were open, and entry to most halls was not permitted, with prayer and worship only being permitted from the outside. I assumed that this was because of the public holiday, but when I visited on other occasions the entrances to the halls remained closed.

Accelerated Merit Economy

I finally reached the Ten Thousand Buddhas Hall (*wan fo dian* 萬佛殿). Its exterior was covered in beautiful wooden beams, several meters long, and at its center was a big golden Shakyamuni Buddha figure. All around the Shakyamuni, the interior of the hall was layered with glowing Boddhisattva Guan yin (*Guanyin pusa* 觀音菩薩) lamps. Unlike the other halls, in which a vessel for incense was situated at the entrance, in front of the Ten Thousand Buddhas Hall, a few tables were to be found, occupied by lay temple personnel.

On the tables were yellow donation lamps shaped like the Boddhisattva Guan yin lamps inside the hall. Beside the lamps were merit certificates, which could be obtained in return for a donation (*gongde zheng* 功德證), and next to them was another table announcing different donation amounts ranging from 6,999 to 39,000 Chinese Yuan (roughly 1000–6000 USD). When one makes a donation, a Bodhisattva image (*foxiang* 佛像) is enshrined in the hall. The amount of the donation determines in which area of the hall the Bodhisattva statue will be enshrined, different time limits of enshrinement.⁵

In Hongfa Temple, the opportunity to acquire merit seemed overtly commercialized to me, resembling a bustling marketplace, with a clear price list for the spiritual products. Alongside the prices, a printed QR code was provided for convenient payment through Alipay or WeChat, further emphasizing the commodification of the offering.⁶ This practice, which received more attention from the monks and other personnel operating the donation stands than in any other hall, can be seen as a compatible adjustment to the general socio-economic environment of the temple. Shenzhen today is one of the most affluent, developed, and prosperous cities in the PRC. Merit-making is, in both historical and contemporary contexts, associated with material exchange. Scholars point out that some lay Buddhists strongly believe in merit-making and perform merit-making in various ways (Kieschnick 2003; M. M. Yang 2020; Shmushko 2021, 2022a).



Figure 2: From left to right: list of donation options, examples of the Bodhisattva lamps, the Ten Thousand Buddhas Hall (photos taken by author [Shenzhen], 2019).

⁵ Donation (sk. *dana ch. bushi* 布施) is a common practice in Buddhism, which has existed since as early as the time of the first Buddhist communities in northern India, dating to the early centuries of the Common Era. I have witnessed similar donation systems in temples throughout the Chinese world, however, often in a more modest and nuanced manner.

⁶ In contemporary China, temples and monasteries utilize various social media platforms for diverse purposes, including soliciting donations, organizing events, promoting their teachings, and disseminating religious doctrine.

The interplay between materials (such as money, plastic, wood, and cement) and the notions of merit and rituality in Hongfa Temple reflects the unique economic and social context in which the temple exists. It appears that there is a correlation between material growth and spiritual growth, as they align in terms of size and dimensions, resulting in a visually stunning manifestation. This phenomenon illustrates the influence of the specific socio-economic environment on the material expressions of spiritual practices, emphasizing the pursuit of grandeur and visual spectacle in the context of spiritual growth.

The rise of Buddhism in Shenzhen showcases the unique features of capitalist influences in the PRC, particularly during the period of economic reform. The practices of Buddhist worship observed in Shenzhen are specifically tailored to meet the needs of the city's urban population. Scholars argue that these ongoing economic reforms have not only reshaped consumption patterns in the PRC as a whole but have also had an impact on the consumption of religious goods and materials, leading to the emergence of diverse modes of Buddhist consumption (Leung 2005).

Hongfa Temple and the Digital Space

The consumption of religious goods in Hongfa Temple is not limited to physical spaces, but also extends to the online realm, as evidenced by the performative expressions of religiosity among temple visitors. Through my digital research conducted on the social media platform known as Little Red Book (*Xiaohongshu* 小紅書), I have observed a growing phenomenon among Chinese users who express their appreciation, affiliation, or participation in Buddhism by sharing posts related to Buddhist material goods and practices.⁷

Upon inputting the name of the temple into the search bar in the app, I was instantly presented with a plethora of public posts, contributed by private users, who had visited the temple and had tagged their content with 弘法寺 (*hongfasi*), thus making it visible in my search results. Among the numerous posts, a substantial portion (approximately half, as a rough estimate) featured captivating images of the temple grounds. However, what stood out were the remarkably diverse snapshots showcasing merchandise acquired from the temple shops. These encompassed a wide range of items, ranging from renowned bubble tea brands to intricately crafted charms, elegantly framed calligraphy, and an abundance of Buddhist bead bracelets.

Figure 5 shows some examples of posts I have found over the past few years that were tagged with Hongfa Temple. In the bottom left corner of the collage is a post by Lin Huahua. She had tagged Hongfa Temple and shared a photo of her offering of 66,666 Chinese yuan to Guanyin. As a result, she was presented with a merit certificate.⁸ In her post, Lin Huahua explained that this particular offering is valid for only one year. She had actually intended to make a larger offering of 99,999 Chinese yuan (equivalent to 14,000 USD), which would have been a permanent offering. However, all the slots for that type of offering were already fully booked, and there was a waiting list with an estimated waiting time of up to six months.⁹

Another visitor to the temple had a specific purpose in mind during their visit. They shared a post mentioning their heartfelt prayer for their missing pet turtle named Xuanwu (玄武) during their worship at Hongfa Temple. The visitor described the temple as brimming with spiritual energy and expressed their hope for the safe return of their beloved pet. In the accompanying photo, the visitor's hand, adorned with prayer bead bracelets, can be seen holding stone amulets purchased at the temple (located in the bottom right corner of the collage).

⁷ The Little Red Book has often been likened to the Chinese counterpart of Instagram. This social media platform boasts a predominantly visual nature, primarily revolving around photo sharing accompanied by concise textual content.

⁸ The number six is generally considered to be lucky in China because 六 sounds like 流 (liu), which means "flow" or "smooth" in Chinese. Many businesses display the number 6 to bring good fortune, and multiples of 6 are considered good in Chinese culture.

⁹ 久 (jiu), which means a long time or long lasting, sounds like the character for 9. It is often seen at weddings in China due to the association with longevity. The number 9 was also associated with the Emperor of China in imperial times, so is seen to have a continued high standing because of this.

The screenshot in the upper right corner features a Little Red Book user who shared their recent purchase of an enlightenment Buddha bead bracelet from the Museum of Buddhist Culture within the temple premises. Alongside the bracelet, they proudly displayed a certificate of enlightenment. In a manner akin to how some online influencers endorse products, the user provided a detailed description of the bracelet, including its features and price. As I continued scrolling through the posts tagged with Shenzhen Hongfa Temple, I came across numerous similar posts by users documenting their own bracelets. Some even shared a series of photos showcasing other products they had purchased at the temple, in addition to pictures they took of the temple buildings and halls.

The photo in the middle of the top row features a Hongfa Temple branded milk tea drink. This beverage represents a contemporary trend and enjoys significant popularity among younger generations in China. It belongs to a highly profitable industry that encompasses numerous brands and franchises. Interestingly, alongside the post showcasing a cup of this popular product, which can be seen as a symbol of consumerist culture in Chinese society, the user added a tip that reads:

If you are in Shenzhen, you must go to Hongfa temple, not for seeking glory or wealth but for lighting three incense sticks ... to ensure everything you pursue can be as you wish, so that your mind will be at ease.¹⁰

Here we can see a tension between materialistic aspirations and spiritual pursuits, manifested on the online platform, through virtual demonstration of reverence and admiration for Buddhist principles, aside from an evident focus on consumerism.

Referring to a society in the process of modernization and the rise of the internet, Guattari points to the “deterioration of human relations with the socius, the psyche and ‘nature’.” Stating that individuals and societies are accepting negative developments (e’volutions) without question, creating a world “drained of the significance of human interventions” (Guattari 2000 [1989]: 41). Guattari’s observations are tainted with a critique, stating that technological developments such as social media apps are destructive factors to the ecology of society. At this juncture, I consciously opt to detach myself from making judgments and instead focus solely on his reflections regarding the influence of technological advances on social dynamics and communication. It is evident that these developments bring about tangible effects, effectively altering the very fabric of our social ecosystem.

The performativity exhibited by these individuals, as depicted earlier through their posts showcasing items acquired from Buddhist settings, finds its place within the broader context of the escalating global phenomena of social media and consumer culture. The act of sharing purchases made in temples serves as a means of communication, socialization, construction of one’s identity and some will argue the construction of a new form of community.

As a material, spatial, and social phenomenon, it might be useful to look at these posts as, what has been referred to by Amy Y. Zhang et al. as, an “urban-digital spectacle.” Zhang et al. studied the phenomenon of urban spaces and what happens as a result of their representation on social media. They describe the capturing of “Wanghong (網紅)¹¹ urbanism” as operating through a human-generated cycle, supported by algorithms, where spectacle is produced through interlinked digital and urban spaces and affects these spaces in return (Zhang, Roast, and Morris 2022).

¹⁰ Lighting up three incense sticks is usually dedicated to the three elements, the “precepts, concentration, and wisdom” (*jiedinghui* 戒定慧); it also means making offerings to the three jewels, namely, “Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha” (*fofaseng* 佛法僧), or: the Triple Treasures.

¹¹ The Chinese colloquial term for an internet celebrity.

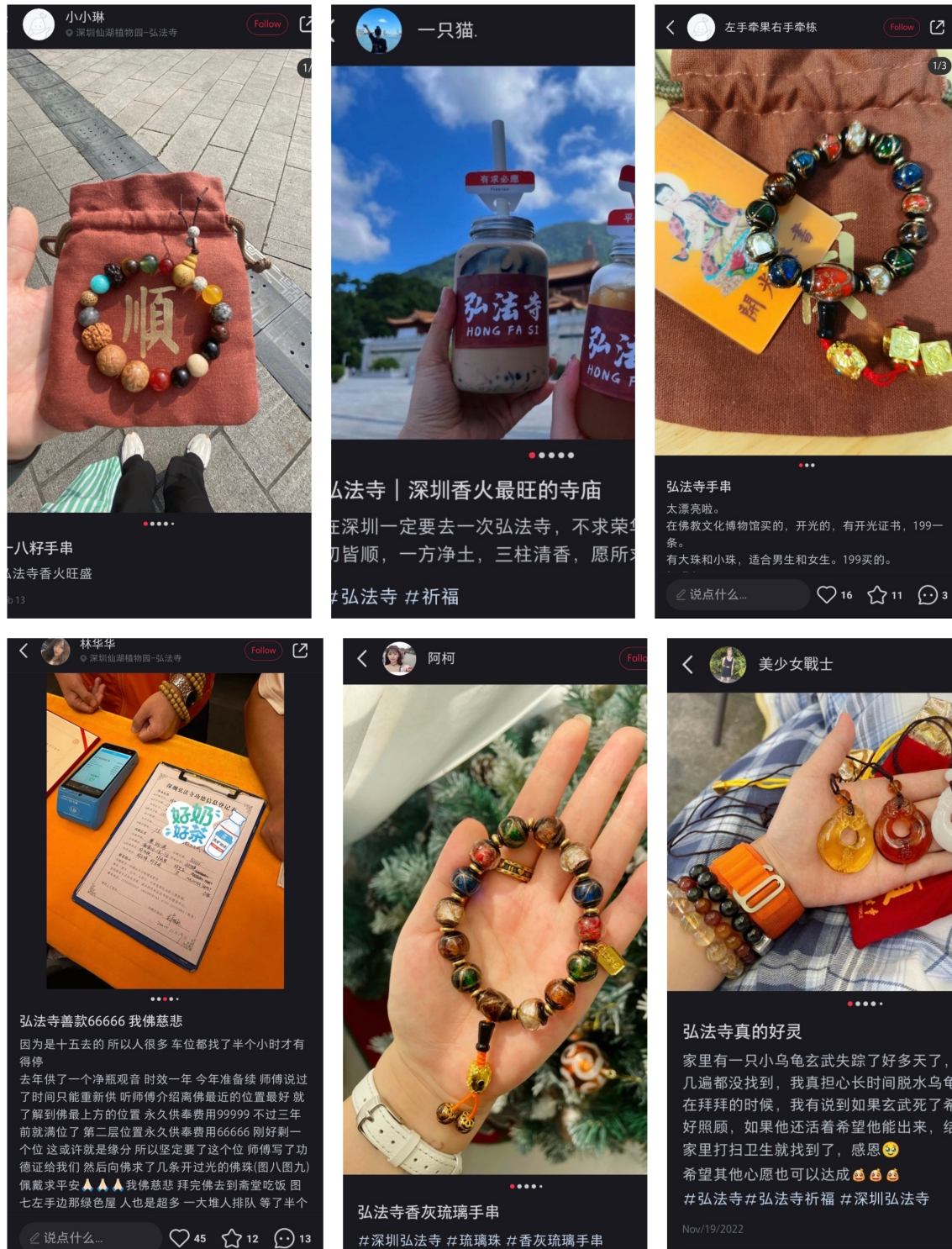


Figure 3: Little Red Book users posting experiences from Hongfa Temple visit (screenshot collage made by author, 2023).

The merit economy associated with Hongfa Temple and captured on the Little Red Book can be fittingly incorporated into this cyclical framework, in which a spectacle is formed within the temple space, where followers engage in purchasing goods for the sake of accumulating merit. This spectacle is subsequently reproduced in the digital realm through posts on Little Red Book. The act of sharing these posts is facilitated by algorithms and followers, perpetuating the performance of purchasing items and visiting the temple, thus “performing Buddhism” within the digital space. Consequently, the material and spatial practice of temple visits extends beyond the physical realm of Shenzhen to the online domain. Similar to other urban spaces that become reposted spectacles, the temple itself becomes subject to commercial interests, intensifying the economic activities revolving around the “urban spectacle” of Hongfa Temple.

Spatialization and State Power

In the context of a temple that operates under the supervision of the Buddhist Association of China (hereafter BAC) and consequently falls under the control of the United Front Work Department (hereafter UFWD) of the PRC, it is crucial to ponder whether these forms of religious consumption are individual, subjective choices, or intentional forms of religious participation promoted by the state. In essence, we should explore whether the excessive commodification and commercialization solely reflect an individualistic and subjective Buddhist revival, or if they are deliberately encouraged and shaped by state influence.

To provide a more comprehensive response, it is important to delve into the social ecology of the temple. The founding figure and first head abbot, Chan Master Ben Huan, held a prestigious position and enjoyed significant respect within PRC political and religious circles. His appointment as the honorary president of China’s Buddhist Association in 2010 further signified a strong relationship between the institution and the ruling party. In line with the observations made by Ashiwa, the BAC encourages Buddhist clerics to establish ethical standards, moral guidelines, and lifestyles rooted in Buddhist principles for people to adhere to. This guidance from the BAC likely influences the types of practices permitted within temple spaces (Ashiwa 2020).

The dynamic of the BAC and the PRC agendas including their influence on temple spaces can be further understood through Henri Lefebvre’s definition of “specialization” (Lefebvre 1991 [1974]: 26). A process wherein the natural space (“absolute space”) is turned to more complex spaces and flows whose meaning is produced in a social way (i.e. social space). Thus, the social space is a social product, where individual agents, namely, the temple visitors, the monks and abbots also create meaning through their presence. Moreover, Lefebvre stresses that the space produced in the process also serves as a tool of thought and of action. In addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power—in this case by the BAC as a proxy of PRC state.

Based on the available information, it can be inferred that the state approves of and encourages the commodification of products offered by high-profile temples such as Hongfa, given the close collaboration with updated regulations. This is evident from the official temple website, where in 2018, an announcement appeared in Hongfa network stating that the UFWD would commence the “governing of commercialization of religion” (Hongfasinet).

However, despite the stated intention to curb commodification, the persistence of highly commodified religious practices within the temple, as observed during multiple visits and verified through online research spanning several years, supports the argument that the state exerts agency in determining how Buddhism is practiced by laypeople within supervised institutions. Paradoxically, while the state claims to crack down on religious commodification in certain cases, it either encourages or tolerates it within the context of this specific temple space.

Another aspect of the relationship between the BAC and the ruling party is their cooperation in promoting Buddhism as a form of soft power in conjunction with the countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative. Hongfa Temple has become involved in this collaboration in recent years. Ben Huan's successor, Master Yin Shun, who also holds the position of Vice Chairman of the Chinese Buddhist Association, appears to actively pursue a politicized Buddhist agenda. This includes promoting Buddhist exchanges along the Maritime Silk Road as part of the government's One Belt One Road initiative (*yidai yilu* 一帶一路) (Ashiwa 2020). Notably, Hongfa Temple has been engaged in frequent and high-level exchanges with Buddhist communities in Southeast Asia and South Asia, aiming to foster integration and cooperation between Chinese and South Asian Buddhism.

The diplomatic role played by the monastery further reinforces the close relationship between institutional Buddhism and the state. Given the temple's prominent status, it operates under government control and supervision, shaping its practices within the discourse defined by the Chinese communist party (hereafter CCP). Hongfa Temple is not only a representative of diplomatic foreign policy but also activates soft power within the lay Buddhist community (Shmushko 2022b). When it comes to understanding the agency of the particular practices conducted by people in the temple, the entire social ecology needs to be taken into account, including the temple leadership and the CCP.

A significant number of people in the PRC have turned to various religions such as Daoism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam in recent years, seeking a sense of purpose and an escape from the country's consumerist culture (Hernández 2017). For individuals living in the area, the temple in Shenzhen represents one of the few centralized and institutionalized Buddhist spaces that allows them to connect with their religious traditions. What we see here is therefore a difference between intentions and actions. The contradictions in sentiments and objectives presented in this section, represent the different actors in the ecology of Shenzhen Buddhism. There is no one coherent narrative telling the story of Hongfa temple, the way people relate to it, and what it represents.

Clean Worship, the State, and Environment

The Social Ecology of the temple, is nevertheless, as suggested by Guattari, interconnected with the ecology of the Environment (Guattari 2000 [1989]). The intricate social ecology of what can be referred to as "Hongfa Buddhism" also extends to the realm of environmental care. Taking a closer look at the practices within Shenzhen's Hongfa Temple, an irony emerges in the temple's promotion of what can be seen as a *clean worship* model.

At first glance, the state's emphasis on environmentally clean worship may appear straightforward. However, I propose that the concept of "clean" holds a dual meaning. Beyond its surface implications, it also conveys a desire to eliminate superstitions and mystical/spiritual practices. This sentiment becomes particularly evident in the incense burning practice at Hongfa Temple. Unlike the customary practice of burning incense, where devotees freely light and burn incense sticks, visitors to the temple are given only three incense sticks upon entry, which they are not permitted to light. When I enquired about the prohibition on incense burning, the monks explained that it was to prevent pollution (*wuran* 污染) and reduce harm to the environment.

As we examine additional aspects of Hongfa Temple, such as its large-scale construction, the presence of plastic-based beverage containers, and the availability of mass-produced merchandise, further questions arise about the true motives behind the prohibition on incense burning. Is the rule primarily motivated by a genuine concern for preventing pollution? Or does it serve a different purpose, tied to a broader "cleaning up" agenda? Alternatively, it could be aimed at projecting an image of ecological awareness, aligning with

the concept of promoting environmental consciousness. The complexities surrounding these factors call for a closer examination and analysis to better understand the underlying intentions behind these practices.

With the presence of closed worship halls and the implementation of organized tours within the temple, it becomes apparent that the Buddhist sphere within Hongfa Temple is restricted to predetermined expressions of worship. Elements associated with the mystical aspects of Buddhism, such as incense burning and deity worship, are also limited. Instead, the monastery places a strong emphasis on cultural, consumerist, academic, and philanthropic activities, such as having an active choir, library, art exhibitions, and painting academy. This approach to Buddhism, particularly the permitted worship practices for lay people visiting the temple, aligns with recent, broader efforts to mold Buddhism into a specific societal role, focusing on it as a tradition rather than solely a religion. These efforts are consistent with the overall soft power initiatives aimed at shaping the image and influence of Buddhism within society (Ashiwa 2020; Shmushko 2022a, 2022b).

Indeed, within the intricate social ecology, the agenda of promoting Buddhism as a “clean” religion in the environmental sense is not solely a top-down ambition. In recent years, environmentalism has permeated various religious communities in the PRC, motivating Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims to actively engage in environmental actions (Hernández 2017). This growing awareness of environmental issues within religious circles creates an opportunity for the government to leverage environmentalism and sustainability for their own agendas, even if those agendas are not primarily focused on environmental issues.

Grand slogans, such as “clear waters and green mountains are as valuable as gold and silver mountains” (*Lu shui kaixin jiushi jin shan yin shan* 綠水青山就是金山銀山), as coined by Xi Jinping in 2005, are part of the government plans and involvement in a greener future and the creation of an “ecological civilization” (*shengtai wenming* 生態文明), which is another slogan that debuted in 2007 (Geall 2017). I suggest to consider the prohibition on incense burning, in light of a further slogan used by the CCP, referring to the “war on (air, water and soil) pollution” (*xiangdaqi, shui, tumai wuran xuanzhan* 向大氣, 水, 土壤, 污染宣戰) (Sun).

However, it is important to recognize that these slogans have both practical and political dimensions. While they signify a vision for a sustainable future, they also serve as policies that should be scrutinized in light of their political implications. It is pertinent to consider the prohibition on incense burning in connection with the CCP’s ongoing suppression of religious freedom. This suggests that the measures taken by the government to promote environmental concerns should be viewed with caution, taking into account the broader context of religious restrictions and the potential impact on religious practices.

In the case of Hongfa Temple, as previously mentioned, a complete prohibition on incense burning has been implemented. However, within the temple’s social ecology, a modern form of worship has emerged, one that has been “cleaned up” in a sense. The sight of numerous individuals walking through the temple on New Year’s Day with three unlit incense sticks is a striking example. This small yet significant observation illustrates how those environmental concerns, both at an individual and institutional level, are influencing the material and social infrastructure of Buddhism.

Indeed, regulations concerning incense burning are part of ongoing efforts to address the potential impact of ancestral and Buddhist worship on air pollution. These actions vary in scale, ranging from smaller initiatives to larger-scale measures. As an example, in 2017, the city of Harbin in northern China announced a complete ban on “feudal superstition,” which included the prohibition of burning paper money—a customary practice in ancestor worship. This ban was intended to discourage the production, sale, and burning of paper money, with potential fines imposed on individuals who violated the regulations (Yan 2017). Yang Xiaodi, the head of the environmental publicity, education, and information center of the Harbin Municipal Environmental Protection Bureau, stated that the measure to ban the burning of paper money aimed to prevent the further

increase of polluting particles. Following the announcement, several manufacturers of paper of money confirmed that they had immediately ceased production. These actions demonstrate a targeted effort to address air pollution concerns and promote cleaner practices within the local context (Luk 2017).

The announcement was followed by various reactions online and on social media. Various experts in environmentalism, policy, and culture expressed their opinions. For example, Tian Zhaoyuan, Deputy Dean of the School of Social Development at East China Normal University in Shanghai, said that the government should control rather than ban the burning of paper money. The act of burning money is a spiritual medium through which Chinese people communicate with their ancestors, according to Tian. “The decision for a compulsory ban will likely be a problem,” he added, “and damage cultural traditions” (Yan 2017).

Assessing the environmental damage of these practices is beyond my expertise and the scope of this article. However, considering the extent to which hundreds of millions of practitioners burning paper money and incense probably does influence air quality, which is already a concern for the Chinese environment, a policy about the matter does not sound far-fetched.

However, it should be noted that the “green” agenda is being used for overall control over the Buddhist religious sphere. A similar case was shown by Tsering Bum, who explored how the PRC is using environmental conservation as one of the reasons for pushing pastoralist communities out of the grasslands and into the cities. According to Tsering, ideologically grounded perceptions of pastoralism as “backward” play a decisive role in the implementation of these projects (Bum 2018).

Another environmental hazard related to Buddhist practices is seen in the form of the Life Releasing Practices (*fangsheng* 放生) that have increasingly become popular in the contemporary PRC among groups of lay practitioners across the country. The practice of releasing animals into the wild, or into designated pools, can have dire environmental consequences, such as death of animals and disturbance of the biodiversity balance in various eco-systems. Furthermore, these practices have led to a merit economy surrounding the breeding and selling of animals for the purpose of the ritual.

This practice has elicited many discussions among environmentalists, animal advocates, Buddhist institutions, the state, and the BAC which had taken various actions against uncontrolled life releasing practices. However, according to Avi Darshani, the BAC is not only concerned about the environmental impact of the practice, but also about the image and reputation that these practices create regarding Buddhism.

The ad hoc manner of uncontrolled life releasing practices is not exactly what the BAC, working under the UFWD, has in mind for the reputation of institutional Buddhism. Buddhism in the past decades has been harnessed by the state to promote all kinds of political and geo-political goals, and to advance the party’s agenda, and it is the uncontrolled manner of this popular practice that worries the local Buddhist authorities more than the environmental aspects (Darshani 2021).

When considering the relatively minor impact of incense stick burning on pollution compared with activities such as burning fossil fuels or the emissions associated with construction, which are more closely associated with Shenzhen, it could be argued that the government’s concern lies less with the environmental aspects and more with what could be termed “spiritual pollution.” The pollution generated by burning incense sticks is seen as a tangible manifestation of the perceived “backward” and “culturally polluting” elements associated with ancestor and deity worship. This discourse surrounding religion and its potential negative influence has a long history, dating back to the early 20th century and later adopted by the CCP. From this perspective, the focus on restricting incense burning is driven by a desire to combat what is perceived as being detrimental to society and to align with a particular vision of modernity promoted by the political elite.

Some aspects of this discourse have been adopted and implemented among Buddhist leaders and institutions and within the various Buddhist modernization processes, such as Taixu's reformed Buddhism movement. This socially and ethically engaged form of Buddhism has impacted the shaping of institutionalized worship forms, next to the control and repression that the state had implemented for decades (Ritzinger 2017; Jones 2021).

Indeed, the environmental pollution problem in the PRC has garnered significant public attention in recent years. According to the 2019 China Ecological Environment Statistical Annual Report, the PRC is one of the largest contributors to global air pollution (Li, Zhai, and Li 2023). However, the claim that Buddhism, as a religious movement, is highly polluting lacks evidence to support its validity. In fact, research indicates the opposite. A recent study examining the relationship between religion and the pollution behavior of enterprises found that between 1998 and 2013, Buddhism and Daoism had a positive influence on leading Chinese enterprises. The regulatory effect of these religious traditions on pollution behavior encouraged the adoption of greener corporate management practices.¹² It is worth noting that this research was conducted before the rise to power of Xi Jinping and the subsequent tightening of religious regulations in various aspects.

Urban Villages in Shenzhen

In this second part of the article, I would discuss another form of Buddhist configuration in Luohu district of Shenzhen, also connected to the spatial predicament of the growing city. China's rapid urbanization since the mid-1980s has led to the development of a new spatial category, the urban village or village-in-the-city (*chengzhong cun* 城中村), which describes rural villages that have been absorbed by urban spatial or administrative growth (Kochan 2015). In Shenzhen, these are villages which existed before the massive urbanization process and continued to be constructed independently from the state's regulatory planning framework and are, in fact, informal urban developments (Luan 2019).¹³

Urban villages have an enormous amount of regional variation; one thing that they have in common is that they are home to a fringe population of city life, and that they have increasingly been seen as informal, transitional, and flexible spaces (Y. Wang, Wang, and Wu 2009; Liu et al. 2010; Wu, Zhang, and Webster 2013). They are typified and recognized by their appearance—dense clusters of poor-quality buildings (containing housing, factories, and commercial units) and a dilapidated environment. Since their development, they have served as low-cost housing for migrant labor. They are spread across the city, with some occupying high-land-value sites in central locations, and they are estimated to house half of Shenzhen's population (O'Donnell 2017).

These descriptions, which I resonate with following my research work in Shenzhen, are why I associate the urban villages not with the state or other formal social structures (social ecology in Guattari's words), but with Guattari's register of human subjectivity (Guattari 2000 [1989]). As articulated by Mary Ann O'Donnell (2017: 108), "In Shenzhen, urban villages have been the architectural form through which migrants and low-status citizens have claimed rights to the city". As I will explore below, these left-behind spaces are places for individual agency, personal creation, and unofficial events, operated almost solely by individual human aspirations. Importantly, should be acknowledge that within social structures, representing a collective agenda, aspirations, and ideology, we begin to witness more and more the ambitions and workings

¹² The study was based on data about more than 40,000 religious sites of Buddhism and Taoism in China, data from Chinese industrial enterprises, and pollution emissions data from 1998 to 2013.

¹³ According to the "Shenzhen Urban Village Comprehensive Improvement Master Plan (2019–2025)", Shenzhen's comprehensive improvement division involves 252 administrative villages and 718 natural villages, with a total land area of 55 square kilometers. The Shenzhen Municipal Planning and Natural Resources Bureau (深圳市規劃和自然資源局) pointed out that most of the urban villages in Shenzhen have problems such as poor living quality, insufficient open space and public facilities, and lack of historical and cultural protection.

of individuals. In urban villages, we see that intertwined with the ecology of *social structure*, there seems to be place for the *human subjectivity* register of ecology to evolve.

The urban villages of Shenzhen have played a crucial role in the city's rise, but they have been regarded throughout the decades as a problem. Some scholars and policymakers have regarded urban villages as "diseases" (*guji* 痼疾), or think of these spaces as a corner of the city (*chengshi jiaoluo* 城市角落) or chaotic slums (*zanluan cha de lei pinminku* 髒亂差的類貧民窟") (Kochan 2015; Zhan 2017, 2021). In the past decade, various solutions have been proposed to reconfigure urban villages in various regions of the PRC. Within the Shenzhen area, different villages are going through two primary forms of change: large-scale demolition (*Da guimo chaichu* 大規模拆除) or micro-renewal (*Wei gengxin* 微更新).

Around these forms of change, debates have taken place concerning cultural heritage and historic preservation, which are connected to renewal approaches (O'Donnell 2017). Since 2018, however, a new gentrification scheme under the rubric of "comprehensive improvement" (*zonghe zhengzhi* 綜合整治) has been introduced in Shenzhen, in which the rehabilitation and formalization of informal housing arrangements in urban villages, instead of sweeping demolition, have become the focus.¹⁴

During the time of my fieldwork in Wutong (梧桐), an attempt at gentrification occurred as part of the reconfiguration of several urban villages into "art villages." While this process was officially supported by the local government, its actual implementation largely relied on families and individuals actively settling in the village and contributing to the development of a distinct social, cultural, and commercial environment. This indicates that the transformation of Wutong into an "art village" was not solely a top-down initiative, but also involved grassroots participation and the organic formation of a unique community with its own characteristics.

While the spatial, economic, and societal attributes of Shenzhen's urban villages have been extensively explored (see for example the work of D. D. W. Wang 2016), the religious sphere in these spaces still needs to be studied. This is despite the fact that major Chinese cities are, in fact, vibrant, prominent locations that reshape the modern religious sphere (Vermander, Hingley, and Zhang 2018). As previously discussed, Lizhu Fan et al. point out that Shenzhen presents a compelling site for examining the impact of social change and religious awareness (Fan, Whitehead, and Whitehead 2004). Their impressions of religious revitalizations still echo the living realities of the Shenzhen area. However, the particularities of religious life in the PRC have been transformed since their study, which was conducted two decades ago, and so has the religious landscape of Shenzhen. By paying closer attention to the agency and subjectivity of Buddhist actors in urban villages, we can gain a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between urbanism and lay Buddhism. In the case of Luohu district the accounts of the village (which is about 5 km from Hongfa Temple) that follow will join the accounts of Hongfa temple to capturing the spatial spread of Buddhism in the neighborhood.

Wutong in 2019: Art, Culture, Spirituality, Subjectivity

As for young people, although they are crushed by the dominant economic relations which make their position increasingly precarious, and although they are mentally manipulated through the production of a collective, mass media subjectivity, they are nevertheless developing their own methods of distancing themselves from normalized subjectivity through singularization. (Guattari 2000 [1989]: 33).

During my fieldwork in Shenzhen, there was a notable plan to transform selected urban villages, including Wutong, into art villages. This plan had been issued a few years prior to my research. As a result, Wutong

¹⁴ "The Plan of Comprehensive Improvement in Shenzhen's Urban Villages, 2019–2025" made the new gentrification scheme official.

gained recognition as one of Shenzhen's renowned "artist villages" (*Wutong shan yishu xiaozhen* 梧桐山藝術小鎮).¹⁵ The village's reputation as an artistic hub had already begun to flourish during the time of the study.



Figure 4: Model of Wutong Art village (screenshot taken by author from the official public Wutong village WeChat application page, posted in 2017)

Wutong has long been a haven for artists and seekers of spirituality, offering a tranquil setting near to the mountains and a nature reserve. Over time, it has developed into a vibrant cultural hub, attracting artists who appreciate the inspiring landscape, low-cost housing, and opportunities for studios, exhibitions, and craft shops. In 2011, the government took steps to formalize and regulate this artistic community within a declared framework, potentially influencing the village's future development.¹⁶

In addition to running art studios, shops, and craft practices, the inhabitants of Wutong village also demonstrate a keen interest in art, spirituality, and various religious traditions. As the following section will investigate, Wutong serves as a temporal home for Buddhist cultural production, among other practices. However, it is not solely limited to Buddhism. The village serves as a fertile ground for a diverse range of religious and traditional activities, such as the traditional Hakka martial art (*Kejia gongfu* 客家功夫), and the traditional practice of organizing firework displays (*fang bianpao* 放鞭炮), which were once widely common throughout China during festivals and other traditional and religious occasions.

The fireworks were originally intended to scare away the "nian" (年, year in Chinese). This mythical beast preyed on people and livestock at the turn of the year but was afraid of loud noises. However, within the current political discourse, as other traditional practices, fireworks are considered superstitious, messy, and polluting, and are therefore banned in most urban centers in the PRC. As with the burning of incense and paper

¹⁵ (Malcolm 2021).

¹⁶ Malcolm (2021).

money, some consider the ban—despite the potential hazards of fireworks, such as air pollution, injuries, and fires—to be an irresponsible move against cultural traditions (Yuan and Zhou 2018).



Figure 5: Fireworks in the streets of Wutong (photos by author [Wutong, Shenzhen], 2019).

The atmosphere in Wutong village was in stark contrast to the clean and well-constructed aesthetics of the city of Shenzhen and the authorized environment of Hongfa Temple. In Wutong, which is located just a few kilometers from Hongfa Temple, the village maintained a different ambiance. During the public holidays of 2019, the streets were filled with smoke and red paper shreds as fireworks were lit, showcasing a more casual and spontaneous approach. This visible contrast between the organized and controlled atmosphere of the temple, where people held unlit incense sticks, and the vibrant energy of fireworks, dragon dances, and sword dances in the village below was particularly striking. It highlighted the juxtaposition between the authorized religious practices and the more lively and traditional expressions of culture in the village.

However, even though Wutong is considered an alternative to the fast-paced city, where people wish to live a quieter, more artistic, or spiritual life, it maintains Shenzhen's innovative and entrepreneurial spirit. Along the streets of Wutong are various artist's spaces and galleries, and many small businesses selling items such as organic produce, hand-made textiles, pottery, traditional silk garments, and other artistic objects. Some of my research interlocutors had moved to Wutong, quitting their jobs, and finding alternative ways to make a living in addition to their different aspirations, as will be discussed further.

Grassroot Buddhist Groups in Wutong

Social ecosophy will consist of developing specific practices that will modify and reinvent the ways in which we live as couples or in the family, in an urban context or at work, etc.... But it will be a question of literally reconstructing the modalities of 'group-being' [l'être-en-groupe], not only through 'communicational' interventions but through existential mutations driven by the motor of subjectivity. (Guattari 2000 [1989])

In this final section of the article, I want to discuss un-registered, grassroot Buddhist groups in Wutong. In the PRC, all religious traditions face various restrictions, including limitations on religious activities being

confined to officially registered “religious sites” (*Zongjiao huodong changsuo* 宗教活動場所). These restrictions are applicable to the citizens of Shenzhen, despite the city’s unique status (AsianLii 2023).

Therefore, the activities of Buddhist lay groups are ambiguous and manifest the “grey market” of contemporary Chinese religion (F. Yang 2006). Nevertheless, as I encountered in my fieldwork in Wutong, these regulations do not prevent multiple individuals and groups of devotees from finding creative ways in physical and cyber space to practice their religions and beliefs, and often in many visible, out-in-the-open ways. In fact, in the past decade, many Chinese people create worship and practice groups that are active in private spaces, offices, and shops outside the sphere of institutional Buddhism, that is, not connected officially to a temple or an otherwise registered religious organization (Fisher 2020; Shmushko 2022a).

In Wutong, I have identified three distinct Buddhist communities. The first group is the Tea Meditation group in the Ru family tea house. Generally, the people I met there could be characterized as associated with the Chan school of Buddhism (*chanzong* 禪宗).¹⁷ The group gathered in a facility owned by the Ru family tea (and guest) house for their meditation and study sessions. Within the intimate setting of the tea house, the practitioners came together to share tea, chant, and meditate together. They also engaged in discussions about Buddhist concepts and delved deeper into their understanding of the teachings. In one of my visits there was a vibrant discussion about the role of faith in Buddhism. This topic was brought up after the recitation and the meditation and was freely discussed in the group. The group, which usually did not extend beyond 15 people, was quite dynamic regarding the changing members. They did not pay for attending the sessions, but they gave a small donation to cover the price of the drinks and light refreshments often served. For this group, the central motivation was the functionality of a space where they could study and hold sessions of tea and meditation in a leisurely manner and according to their schedule. Nevertheless, they were not completely disconnected from temple worship and monastic authority; they visited the Hongfa Temple regularly on weekends and holidays but treated the tea house gathering as a complimentary daily practice, strengthening their particular involvement in personal Buddhist cultivation.¹⁸

The second group practices Tibetan Buddhism in Ms. Li’s courtyard, located at a local drink shop. Ms. Li resides in a house positioned near the entrance of the village. During one of my walks, I couldn’t help but notice her courtyard, which was adorned with an array of colorful Tibetan Buddhist prayer flags. Intrigued by this sight, I approached her to introduce myself. It seemed likely that Ms. Li possessed some kind of merchandise, considering the deliberate arrangement of her yard and the knowledge I had gathered about the village thus far.

Indeed, in addition to serving as her place of residence, Ms. Li’s courtyard functioned as a store where she presented a special homemade beverage made of fermented lemons and vinegar (*ningmengcu zhi* 檸檬醋汁). During my initial visit, she graciously took the time to give me a tour of the back room, revealing the sight of dozens of sizable jars filled with the drink, meticulously arranged on shelves. She further elaborated on the various health benefits associated with consuming the beverage.

Adorning one of the walls amidst the shelves, I noticed a rolled-up Thangka (唐卡) featuring Guru Rinpoche (Sk. Padmasambhava Ch. *lianhuasheng* 蓮花生). Guru Rinpoche is widely regarded as the founding figure of the Tibetan Buddhist lineage (Nyingma), serving as the cornerstone of Ms. Li’s Buddhist practice. Next to the Thangka, a photograph caught my attention, revealing the late Kyabjé Drubwang Padma Norbu Rinpoche (Kyabjé Drubwang Padma Norbu Rinpoche or Thubten Legshed Chokyi Drayang 1932–2009), a distinguished Dzockchen master.¹⁹ In the evening after my first visit, Ms. Li texted me, inviting me to meet her Master

¹⁷ This is based both in their approach to practice and their self-definition.

¹⁸ Tea drinking in a ritual or group setting is, in and of itself, intrinsically connected to Buddhism in the historical and contemporary sense.

(*shifu* 師傅). That evening, I learned that the garden has another function besides serving as a drinks store. On a weekly basis, Ms. Li, her teacher Master Qiuye (*Qiuye shangshi* 秋耶上師), and his other disciples meet in the courtyard for study sessions, conversations, chanting, and meditation.

On my first attendance at their meetings, Master Qiuye arrived together with a group of eight disciples, all between the ages of 20 and 45, and most from Shenzhen. They were just returning from a New Year retreat (*biguan* 閉關) taking place in the master's home.²⁰ On their arrival, Ms. Li vacated her place to let Master Qiuye sit down at the head of the tea table. Master Qiuye told me that he had trained in the Nyingma lineage. He was originally from Qinghai province but spent part of the year in Wutong, teaching his predominantly Shenzhen followers. He lived about a two-hour drive from the village, but he said, the village was an excellent place to meet disciples from Shenzhen and sit in a leisurely manner close to nature.²¹ I could not confirm how many people he was guiding in their practice because he was also quite active online, keeping in touch with disciples via WeChat, and the number of people participating in the practice meetings varied.



Figure 6: Practitioners reading scripture; right: practitioners doing full body prostrations during retreat (photos by author [Wutong, Shenzhen], 2019).

During the month I was in Shenzhen, the attendance ranged between 5 and 9 at a time, but from what they told me, the group changes quite often. People join and leave or come only occasionally. On some occasions, they took the meetings quite seriously and immediately sat down to read or do prostrations. But often, the meetings were very informal: sitting around the Master in the courtyard, casually chatting.

¹⁹ Norbu Riponche was the 11th throne holder of the Palyul Lineage of the Nyingma school. He held the position of head of the school during the period 1991–2001.

²⁰ Contemporary Nyingma lay practitioners often hold a day-to-day practice containing components such as chanting (*fanbai* 梵唄), doing prostrations (*guibai* 跪拜), meditating (*dazuo* 打坐), and reading scripture (*nianfo* 念佛), which takes place in their own private homes. However, some practices take place in a group form, or with guidance, e.g., extensive devotional retreats (*biguan* 閉關), doctrine classes, and pilgrimages (*xingjiao* 行腳).

²¹ Master Qiuye only presents himself by his Chinese name. While he is fluent in Tibetan, his specific status as an enthroned living Buddha is unclear. The practitioners who follow him in Wutong see him as a teacher and follow his instructions for practice.

The third community is a grassroots philanthropic organization led by Nun Niangu, providing shelter, spiritual practice, and support to those in need. Niangu, who had embraced the monastic life (*chujia* 出家), received ordination at the Zhi Lin Nunnery (*Zhi lin zheng yuan* 志蓮淨苑) in Hong Kong. A few years prior to my stay in Wutong, she had moved to the village, where she started to operate a Buddhist community and activity center on the third floor of a village residential building. When I asked why she had left the nunnery to open this center, she said she wanted to “spread the Dharma outside the monastic community and help people in need.” She found a low-cost, spacious, low-maintenance apartment to operate her center, which offered a bed and a meal to anyone who needed it, according to her, with “no questions asked.”

Indeed, charity has emerged as a progressively favored approach for Chinese individuals to engage with and embody Buddhism. It is intrinsically linked to the cultivation of compassion and benevolence of the heart (*cibei* 慈悲心), a fundamental aspect of Buddhist teachings, and an integral part of personal cultivation (McCarthy 2013).²²

Similar to the other two groups, the facility led by Nun Niangu possessed an appearance that could be described as modest and makeshift, almost temporary in nature. At the time of my visits, there were approximately ten residents at the center, predominantly women. In addition to providing a warm bed and meals without any inquiries, the nun wholeheartedly shared her Buddhist ethics and religious teachings. The daily program in the center is voluntary and not obligatory for the residents and appeared on a board in the kitchen. The day began at 07:00 with the recitation of sutras and chanting, while meditation and yoga classes were conducted throughout the day. It is worth noting that the nun did not seek anything in return for her talks, sutra readings, or meals. She mentioned that the upkeep of the place relied on occasional donations received.

Moreover, Nun Niangu’s philanthropic endeavor did not receive support from the state and lacked official recognition. It operated completely under the radar, operating outside the formal structures and systems. Within the dynamic economic, social, and spiritual landscape of Wutong, she was able to sustain her grassroots Buddhist initiative by harnessing the adaptable nature of the urban village. This allowed her to shape her distinctive religious subjectivity and carry out her philanthropic work according to her own religious subjectivity.

Building upon Guattari’s framework, the ecology of subjectivity among these small groups is characterized by their proactive engagement with their spiritual beliefs and destinies. They carve out Buddhist spaces by creatively interpreting their social and material surroundings. These individuals intertwine economic activities with spiritual pursuits, shaping their subjectivity within the context of an authoritarian Communist state. By taking agency over their spiritual lives, they navigate and negotiate their identities in a complex sociopolitical environment.

These modalities of private groups exist, in-between the lines of official regulations. Officially, the Chinese constitution has instructions for the use of spaces in urban villages who must use the land with accordance to the ownership law and “rationally” (Constitution of the PRC n.d.).²³ However, the local context and on-the-ground reality provide a richer and more nuanced understanding of the situation. In Wutong village,

²² Over the past few decades, numerous formal and informal Buddhist organizations have arisen, actively participating in various charitable initiatives. Some of these organizations are affiliated with well-known temples and esteemed clerics, including high-ranking monks. Additionally, there are registered lay associations that run these organizations, carrying out diverse religious programs alongside their charitable endeavors. Furthermore, there are informal and ad hoc initiatives, some of which exist in virtual spaces, such as online platforms, which may or may not have direct connections to clerics or specific religious sites.

²³ “Land in the rural and suburban areas is owned by collectives except for those portions which belong to the state in accordance with the law; house sites and private plots of cropland and hilly land are also owned by collectives. The state may in the public interest take over land for its use in accordance with the law. No organization or individual may appropriate, buy, sell or lease land, or unlawfully transfer land in other ways. All organizations and individuals who use land must make rational use of the land.”

the concept of “rational use” is interpreted and practiced differently by artists, shop owners, and various religious groups. Similar to other urban villages, the streets of Wutong offer numerous possible routes to experience the village, each offering a unique combination of social, spatial, and economic interactions (Kochan 2015). This dynamic environment creates a fertile ground for the flourishing of urban ecologies, where individuals and groups navigate their own paths and shape their subjectivity in diverse and distinctive ways.

Wutong 2019–2025: Green Future for Urban Villages

Environmental concern had also caught the attention of policy makers and is influencing the future plans for Wutong. The village is situated in Wutong scenic area in Luohu district. Wutong Mountain and village are considered to be the “green lung” of Shenzhen. At the end of 2019, the Shenzhen Municipal Bureau of Planning and Natural Resources declared that the official government policy is to avoid large-scale demolition and construction and practice green development. The planning pays more attention to the protection of historical culture and the shaping of unique features, while focusing on the improvement of urban functions, optimization of industrial structures, and improvement of the living environment (Luan 2019).

Wutong has been chosen along with seven other urban villages to be part of a pilot scheme for urban renovation, which is called “Wutong AI Ecological Town” (*Wutong AI shengtai xiaozhen* 梧桐AI生態小鎮). According to the plan, Wutong AI Ecological Town will explore the integration of ecological protection and organic renewal, highlighting the characteristics of the original town. The plan to prioritize ecological protection in the development of Shenzhen’s urban villages aligns with the broader policy framework (2019–2025). This vision is driven by three key concepts: (1) more efficient production, (2) an ecological approach, and (3) improved living conditions. It aims to integrate a new generation of artificial intelligence into the technology industry, creating a sustainable community (China.org.cn accessed on June 4, 2023). The details regarding the specific ecological approaches and the implementation of AI in governing the villages are not clearly outlined in the available information so far nor on the ground, yet they could have impact on the dynamic and freedom in which local Buddhist groups are currently activating in the village.²⁴

Conclusion

Now more than ever, nature cannot be separated from culture; in order to comprehend the interactions between eco systems, the technosphere and the social and individual Universes of reference, we must learn to think “transversally”. (Guattari 2000 [1989]: 34)

Following Guattari’s framework, I first explored the environmental context of Shenzhen and its transformation over the past four decades, highlighting how Buddhism is situated within this evolving landscape. The ecology of Shenzhen has transitioned from scattered small villages amidst fields to small villages surrounded by towering skyscrapers, expansive parking lots, and busy multi-lane roads. It is important to recognize that this ecological register does not exist in isolation, but rather interacts with and influences other actors— the state, individuals and the BAC. These various entities shape the overall landscape of Buddhism in Shenzhen, as they negotiate habits, beliefs, and spiritual needs.

In both forms of Buddhism in Luohu district—the institutional and the grassroot groups—all registers of the ecology play a role. I have examined the Hongfa Temple and its presence within a delicately intertwined social ecology encompassing millions of new inhabitants in Shenzhen, the policies of the PRC, and the influence of the BAC. Environmental concerns, economic behaviors, and the shaping of modern Buddhist practice are

²⁴ It seems that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, proponed these envisioned changes so the 2019 plans does not materialize on the ground according to the original timeframe.

constantly being negotiated in the temple and outside of it (for example on the internet). It is also important to see the use of power relationships in the space of Hongfa temple, as discussed here, yet to acknowledge that power is not employed top-bottom, but in a dynamic manner, capitalizing on social processes and trends (as seen with commodification of temple products and their replacement of traditional worship). By exploring the specificities of Buddhist worship in the temple and its material conditions, it becomes evident that this social ecology of a new Buddhist temple in an authoritarian Communist state is not isolated.

The exploration in the second form of Buddhism stresses the register of human subjectivity, also known as the mental register in Guattari's framework. I have examined this register through the lens of Wutong urban village and the active agents that contribute to its distinct character. These agents, including individual Buddhist practitioners and small Buddhist groups, embody a new voice of individuality in the post-reform era, driven by artistic and spiritual pursuits. However, alongside their subjectivity, which encompasses inspirations, spiritual needs, ethical values, beliefs, and more, they exist in symbiosis with other ecologies. The social structures of Shenzhen as a SEZ, the influence of the state, and other ecologies are also present within the ecology of Wutong village.

Urbanization in the PRC, as in many parts of the world, is an ongoing process that involves various state interventions in culture, religion, and public space practices. These interventions give rise to distinct social structures. However, alongside these social structures, the element of human subjectivity plays a significant role in shaping and transforming social realities. Often influenced by religious or philosophical beliefs and values, individual subjectivities contribute to the evolving fabric of urban life. Furthermore, the natural environment, as discussed earlier, is an inseparable component of this described ecology. It is influenced by both social structures and individual subjectivities and undergoes various transformations as a result.

An accurate representation of modern predicament of Buddhism in contemporary urban China is still far from reach, as local expression of a religion in revival are appearing throughout the country. I suggest that an inquiry built on recognizing ecological structures is useful for studying Buddhism in other locations in China.

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