




Book Review

The Space of Religion: Temple, State, and Buddhist Communities in Modern China

By Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023, xxii + 417 pages, ISBN 978-0-2311-9735-9 (paperback), \$35.00; ISBN 978-0-2311-9734-2 (cloth), \$140.00; ISBN 978-0-2315-5212-7 (ebook), \$34.99.

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Among the increasing number of studies on contemporary Chinese Buddhism, *The Space of Religion* marks a watershed moment. In the first place, it is an invaluable retrospective look at the extraordinary revival of Buddhism in mainland China over the last forty years as seen through the history of one of its most prominent temples, the Nanputuo Temple in Xiamen. It contains long-term analysis on the political and social factors that shaped the temple over a period of several decades, drawing on painstaking research that has taken up much of the academic careers of the two authors.

In the second place, it advances the field of modern Chinese Buddhism forward in two important respects. Firstly, it draws on the work of Henri Lefebvre (1991) to introduce a robust theoretical model for the analysis of Buddhist space. Specifically, the authors analyze the Nanputuo Temple with respect to its (1) “physical space,” the actual space of the temple and the objects within it; (2) “institutional space,” the laws and regulations that either permit or constrain the temple’s physical space; and (3) “semiotic space,” the imagination people have about the space, such as perceptions about its religious or sacred character (34). Through their book, the authors show how Buddhism, “which had been existing in a semiotic space ‘hidden’ in people’s minds” (339) during the Cultural Revolution, has unfolded into physical space during the post-Mao period through negotiations between key Buddhist actors and the state. At the same time, changes to physical space which are directed by these negotiations constantly inform new semiotic imaginations of what Buddhism can be.

The Space of Religion’s second important contribution to advancing the study of modern Chinese Buddhism is its periodization of the post-Mao era. Rather than treating the forty-year period since the death of Mao as one long historical moment where Buddhism has “revived” following its Cultural Revolution-era persecution, the book draws on its wealth of empirical research on the Nanputuo Temple to subdivide this period into four significant stages: (1) 1982–1989, when the state encouraged previously persecuted religious figures such as Nanputuo’s abbot Miaozhan to return to the *sangha* and revive local religion; (2) 1989–1995, when the state, concerned about maintaining public order in the wake of the Tiananmen Square protests, placed greater expectations on religion to serve its interests; (3) 1996–2004, when the state continued to encourage legal religious revival but asserted more control over Buddhism’s development; and (4) a period from 2004 to the present when, the authors argue, the state has emphasized Buddhism’s role in spreading traditional



Chinese culture. In each of these phases, Buddhist leaders have adapted to state interests in ways that have influenced the physical and semiotic spaces of temples like Nanputuo. However, this does not mean that local Buddhist actors have merely reacted to policy changes from the central state. As Ashiwa and Wank demonstrate throughout their richly detailed book, the making of Buddhist space at temple sites like Nanputuo is the product of conflicts and compromises between key Buddhist leaders; local and national governments; institutional bodies such as Buddhist associations; and rank-and-file monks, devotees, and worshippers.

After an introduction which recounts the historical development of the temple from its establishment in the late seventeenth century as a site of devotion to Guanyin to an influential site in the making of modern Buddhism from the early twentieth century, Ashiwa and Wank divide their book into three parts, each of which contains three chapters. Taken together, these parts provide a rich description of temple “space” (in its semiotic, institutional, and physical forms); its “networks,” that is, the collection of actors that operate within the temple and connect it to other important actors operating in both domestic and international spheres of influence; and the key “episodes,” temporal sequences within which key actors in a network intensively interact, that have defined its recent history (34–39). The study focuses mostly on the 1989–2004 period which roughly spans the abbotships of Miao-zhan and Shenghui, Miao-zhan’s successor, who enabled the temple to further revive under a period of greater central government oversight.

The book’s first part examines how the physical, semiotic, and institutional spaces of the temple work together to make “the space of religion.” The authors describe in rich detail the temple’s physical space and how it is bifurcated into sections for monastic and non-monastic devotee use. They then lay out how the central government’s publication of a legal framework for religious practice in China in the early 1980s formed an institutional apparatus enabling the temple’s physical and semiotic spaces to be remade. They then recount how the temple’s abbot Miao-zhan, who had served as its prior (*jianyuan* 監院) before the Cultural Revolution, survived political persecution to return and lead the temple. Miao-zhan’s credibility and connections enabled him to mobilize the political and economic resources of Buddhist networks both within and outside of China to spur the temple’s development. Particularly impressive in this section of the book is the authors’ rich description of the rituals that occur within the temple and the significance of its poetry and artwork.

The second part of the book examines the conflicts and compromises between temple leadership and local and national authorities that led to the expansion of the temple’s physical and semiotic spaces along with its rise to prominence as a site of national significance in the 1989–2004 period. They describe how Miao-zhan revived the temple’s Buddhist academy which had been led by the famous reformer Taixu 太虛 in the early twentieth century. The restarted academy provided a vital means of reviving both local Buddhist traditions and the study of Buddhist thought, all while growing the ranks of monks and nuns to meet the needs of both Nanputuo and other regional temples. Through the support of overseas donations, the temple also expanded both at its initial site and in other areas of the city. Conflicts emerged between the Xiamen Buddhist Association, led by Miao-zhan, and the state-controlled Xiamen Religious Affairs Bureau, which had ties to local business interests in developing the temple as a tourist site. The temple was often able to leverage its connections with the national Buddhist Association of China and more powerful state organs like the United Front Work Department to succeed in these confrontations, but it never gained complete control over its own space.

After Miao-zhan died, he was succeeded by Shenghui, a non-local monk appointed by the Buddhist Association of China when a local successor could not be found. Serving in the post-Tiananmen period, Shenghui aligned the temple more closely with the interests of the central state but also used his political power as a monk of national prominence to gain leverage in conflicts with the Xiamen Religious Affairs Bureau. Shenghui was less interested than Miao-zhan had been in supporting local religious customs, most notably banning the burning

of spirit money inside the temple. This led many worshippers and devotees to frequent other temples in the area.

The third part of the book focuses on the expansion of the local Buddhist scene. Ashiwa and Wank explore different ways in which local temples were constructed, often benefiting from the political influence of Nanputuo leaders. They also explore non-monastic Buddhist groups focusing firstly on *jushi* 居士, whom they call “devotees.” The authors explain how, following the end of the Cultural Revolution, prominent devotees, many of whom had earlier faced political persecution, provided an important link between the reviving temple and the surrounding Buddhist community. Later, however, when Nanputuo had educated a younger generation of monastics, the temple leadership needed the devotees less. Similarly, “lay nuns” (a local Minnan tradition of celibate women who lived together in lodges and practiced vegetarianism but did not take full nuns’ precepts) were supported by Miaozhan, who allowed them to take classes at the Buddhist academy along with *bhikṣuṇī*, but were less supported under Shenghui, who restricted the category of female monastic to those had taken full nuns’ precepts.

Ashiwa and Wank devote the final chapter in this part of the book to a detailed examination of the three annual festivals to Guanyin which have traditionally been the main popular worship events at the Nanputuo Temple. In one of their most interesting sections, the authors present findings from their interviews with dozens of participants at both the 1989 and 1999 festivals. Participants share their reasons for coming and their degree of engagement with Buddhist teachings, providing interesting comparative data on the similarities and differences between worshippers in the same space, but a decade apart.

The Space of Religion is both the culmination of decades of careful ethnographic and archival work and a trend-setting manuscript that provides important new ways of thinking about the evolution of Buddhism in post-Mao China. It will also interest scholars of modern Buddhism in all geographic areas who work on relations among *sangha*, state, and society amidst changing political landscapes. The study could have benefited from a closer critical engagement with other recently published works on contemporary Chinese Buddhism, most particularly the research of Brian Nichols, whose own manuscript (Nichols 2022) also explores the rich history and modern evolution of a single prominent temple in Fujian province and likewise analyzes the conflicts generated between the competing interests of temple authorities and local state developers. The work of Kuei-min Chang (2018, 2020), whose research also focuses on the spatial politics of Buddhist temple revival in the post-Mao period, could also have informed the text. Nevertheless, at over four hundred pages of rich description and careful analysis, there is little room for more in the volume. Overall, we are deeply fortunate to have access to this detailed and thought-provoking study which has set a high benchmark for future work in the field of modern Buddhism.

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