

# **Buddhist Approaches to Cultural Ecology: A Case Study of Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple**

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## **Abstract**

Relatively speaking, cultural ecology in the Buddhist circle is a new area of study. This article, taking Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple (JBT) as a case, delineates the cultural changes in JBT through three areas: 1) JBT adapts to the socialist society; 2) JBT devotes to community services, and 3) JBT cares about the living planet. Through the analysis of these areas, it is found that Buddhists' practices and works in JBT have been greatly changed under the background of modern society, and temple in metropolis. In the view of cultural ecology study, this "change" or "adaptation" as some researchers called, demonstrates the cultural process that Buddhism is being reproduced within the given environment of Shanghai regional culture.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Jade Buddha Temple, culture, cultural ecology, adaptation

## **Introduction**

To review the historical development of China, one might decisively gain a notion that Buddhism is an indispensable footstone of the Chinese culture. Fang<sup>1</sup> in his article "Several Questions on the Relationship between Contemporary Buddhism and Cultural Prosperity," states that Chinese Buddhism is an important part of Chinese Classics. As the first religious culture spread to Shanghai<sup>2</sup>, Shanghai Buddhist circle has long been devoting itself to the development of cultural ecology. Zhuang (2013) reports that in order to engage with the culture of metropolitan city, scholarly discussions and cultural exchanges were frequently held by Shanghai Buddhists, given the background of Republican era that Buddhist presses, scholars, temples, and many Buddhist natured agencies and organizations boosted in the city. Although

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<sup>1</sup> 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Zhuang, 2013.

almost all of these temples and organizations were out of function during the Civil Wars and Cultural Revolution, Shanghai Buddhists rapidly gained back to the ecology when Buddhism revived after the Cultural Revolution.

This article, taking Shanghai Jade Buddha Temples a case, will delineate the Buddhists approaching to the ecology of Shanghai regional culture by focusing on Jade Buddha Temple's daily works today. Therefore, the research question of this case study will be: In what areas the Jade Buddha Temple approaches to the cultural ecology? In order to find out the answers to this question, a framework of Jade Buddha Temple will be introduced and discussed at the following discussion. The author hopes that the findings of the study would offer some type of reference in some way for the future researches in the Buddhist circle, as well as in other cultural environments. At the stage in this study, Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple will be shortened into the characters as "JBT" throughout the article.

### **Construct the Temple with Culture**

In the eyes of many Chinese people, Buddhist temples are the places where people can only pray to Buddhas and burn incenses in the very superficially religious way. To eliminate such misunderstandings, and disseminate the real Buddhist culture to the public, since Ven. Juexing took his position in 1999, JBT has created a new road to cultural construction, which is widely known as: "Construct the Temple with Culture; Thrive the Temple by Education<sup>3</sup>."

Cao (2013) points out that the JBT's cultural construction is based on the ideology of Humanistic Buddhism, also known as "earthly Buddhism<sup>4</sup>," proposed by the great master, Ven. Taixu. Humanistic Buddhism stresses Buddhism's engagement with society and expansions of Buddhism's influence and social exchanges (Sun, 2011). Under the guidance of this ideology, in 2000, the first volume of journal, Juequn, was published; Then Hongyi Library was renovated and open to the public; Later a lot of training classes such as Weekly Buddhist lectures, the Basic, as well as Advanced Buddhist Study programs for lay Buddhists began to

<sup>3</sup> Juequn, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Wang, 2013; Zhuang, 2013.

recruit students.

Then, a new subject that how urban Buddhism better play its active role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, was brought into hot discussion and studied throughout the Buddhist circle intensively. To find the answers to this subject, since 2002 Jade Buddha Temple, as a typical urban temple in Shanghai, has conducted a series of seminars to brainstorm themes like: Buddhism Adapts to the Socialist Society, 2002; Buddhism in the Metropolitan Cities, 2004; Buddhism and Environmental Protection, 2008; Religious Harmony and Civilized City, 2010; Buddhist Charity and Community Service, 2012; and, Contemporary Buddhism and Cultural Prosperity, 2013. Those seminars, attracted a lot of talents discussing their perspectives from different angles, have left very important ideological basis and cultural basis for the cultural construction for Jade Buddha Temple, as well as other urban temples all over the country. Based on the ideology of Humanistic Buddhism, and integrated with the outcomes of these seminars, JBT established its distinctive way to the cultural construction.

### **JBT Approaches to Cultural Ecology**

During the 2004 Seminar of “Buddhism in the Metropolitan Cities”, Ven. Juexing<sup>5</sup> pointed out that compared to the temples located in countryside or remote area, metropolitan temples commonly enjoy at least four strengths: traditional advantage, economic advantage, cultural advantage, and advantage of talents. In the guidance of cultural establishment, JBT gradually confirmed the role as a metropolitan temple in the modern Shanghai. Thus, the following discussions will be focused on three topics: 1) JBT adapts to the Socialist Society; 2) JBT devotes to community services; 3) JBT cares about the living planet.

### **JBT Adapts to the Socialist Society**

China is a socialist society with Chinese characteristics, which means the Chinese Buddhists have to advocate the system of socialism and

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<sup>5</sup> 2004.

support the leadership of Chinese Communist Party<sup>6</sup>. According to Sun<sup>7</sup>, JBT belongs to the state-recognized Buddhist establishments, of which the operations are “directly impinged on by the actions of the religious regulatory agencies and local governments”. The temples need to secure official permission and support for a wide range of activities---procuring land for construction temple expansion, holding major events, and so on<sup>8</sup>.” Ven. Juexing (2002) concluded four aspects that how JBT should adapt to the Chinese Socialist Society.

First, “love Buddhism, also love the country. “One just needs to review the history of Chinese Buddhism: Buddhism flourished only when it was in conformity with the social politics and economic development pace. In other words, Buddhism would decline if it resisted the mainstream of social politics. Second, “Buddhism should strengthen the self-construction.” Juexing (2012) thought that in addition to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, modern Buddhism also should be supported by lay Buddhists. Confucius once said that “people can promote morality but not vice versa.” Therefore, to promote the Buddhist quality, Buddhists should follow the Vinaya, and strive to develop the Buddhist education. In JBT, various Buddhist programs have come to be available since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Third, “try every means to serve the community.” Buddhism was created to bring people out of the sufferings. Since the ideology of Humanistic Buddhism was confirmed, JBT has carried out a series of community services, such as carrying out the Buddhist charity, sponsoring the poor, caring about the elder, helping the disabled, and so on. Last but not least, “carry forward the tradition of self-reliance.” Practicing Buddhism across working has been an admirable tradition for Buddhists since Buddhism was brought into China. Under the background of economic development as the central task for China, JBT opens to the tourists worldwide, which rapidly brings economic returns to the temple. Consequently, JBT managed to adapt to the social society.

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<sup>6</sup> Zhizong, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> 2011.

<sup>8</sup> p. 501.

## JBT Devotes to Community Services

Liu (2012) states that charity is the most effective way for Buddhism to serve the community, while Fang (2012) says that charity is an essential attribute and the intrinsic requirements of Buddhism. Since it established the line of humanistic Buddhism, JBT has been carrying out the Buddhist charity as the central task of community service. Juexing (2012) advocates that charity should be the everlasting theme for the human society. As a result, in May 2008, a department, called “*JueQun-Ci Ai Gong De Hui* (Juequn Charity Group),” exclusively focusing on Buddhist charity was established in JBT.

After the establishment of Juequn Charity Group, in addition to the emergency reliefs like natural disasters, or individual salvation, there are many regular charitable programs implemented by the group every year. The regular programs are:

“One Good One Day, Happy Everyday”: to advocate one-yuan-one-day donation for the charity work.

“Juequn Charity Week”: a seven-day charity activity to disseminate JBT’s charity ideas, invite famous doctors to offer medical inquiries and lectures for the elder, and visit orphans with gifts in the orphanage.

“Juequn Charity Evening”: to report JBT’s whole year charity work. Also, celebrities, the wealthy and charitable people will be invited to join a charitable auction. Then all income of the auction will be donated to the Shanghai Charity Foundation.

“Schooling Program”: to offer schooling for the remote and poor children financially in Tibet, Yunnan and Guizhou Province.

“Library Plan”: to build libraries for the schools in need especially in the areas of Tibet, Yunnan and Guizhou Province.

“You Are My Eyes Plan”: to offer medical opportunities for the blind children mainly in Tibet.

Charitable practices implemented by JBT have proven that Buddhist culture through Buddhist charity work can bring all people together. At the meantime, Buddhist community services demonstrate

the Buddhists approaching to the cultural ecology. Most importantly, the effective and positive functions of Buddhism are also integrating other cultures into a promising ecology.

### **JBT Cares about the Living Planet**

The environmental deterioration such as global warming, frequent disasters, natural pollutions, and species extinction, etc. have become hot topics since the human society stepped into the industrial age. This environmental deterioration basically caused by humans' irrational use of the natural resource, which consequently led to the unbalance of ecological world. As a large popularity, Buddhists around the planet also show their great concerns about this worrying phenomenon. Based on the perception that all creatures are equal, JBT has implemented a lot of programs to protect the ecology since the end of last century.

1) Free-beings Program. Freeing the captive animals is one of the direct practices that show Buddhism's cares about the ecology. In JBT, freeing creature activity on every eighth day of the month in lunar calendar is a traditional practice. This practice is widely known by the Shanghai Buddhists, as well as some non-Buddhists. Everyday there are people donating money for the Free-beings program, and this money will be used to buy the captive animals and some farmed beings in the early morning of the activity day. Then a short ritual will be held before the creatures are set free.

2) "*Wen Ming Jing Xiang* (Burning incense environmental friendly)." Burning incense is the essential activity for the majority Chinese Buddhists who come to the temple. What they do usually is to burn a large handful of incense, to which they think the more and the bigger the incense they burn, the better they feel. However, this misunderstanding would have a very negative effect on the environment. Then in 1991, JBT first in the country advocated the practice of "*Wen Ming Jing Xiang*," which rapidly won the praise and follow-ups in the country.

3) Shanghai Buddhist Eight Year Plan. This program was confirmed when Ven. Juexing was invited to attend the celebration, "The Windsor Celebrations of the Faith Commitments for a Living Planet," held in Windsor, UK, by the ARC (Alliance of Religions and Conserva-

tion). The plan covers detailed practices throughout the Shanghai Buddhist circles through 2010 to 2017. The plan details in eight steps: holding environmental lectures regularly, creating resources to publicize environmental know-how, handing out environmental brochures, setting up programs to disseminate Buddhist mindfully environmental protection, promoting and strengthening the practice of “*Wen Ming Jing Xiang*,” greening temples with ecological plants, cooperating with government to publicize this plan, and advocating vegetarian diet (Ifong.com, 2010).

The Buddhists’ effort on the environmental protection is an important part approaching to the cultural ecology. Those environmental practices have already been accepted by more and more temples in Shanghai. Most importantly, people are benefiting from these practices.

## Discussion

The term, cultural ecology, first coined by the anthropologist Julian Steward, refers to the study of human adaptations to social and physical environments. Steward (1955) employed the term “*Adaptation*” to induce the process or evolution of culture change. Head (2010) also points out that adaptation is a core concept of cultural ecology. Therefore, might we come to a conclusion that the JBT is adapting into the cultural and natural environment of Shanghai? The answer might be positive.

First, the functions of Buddhist temple have been greatly changed. According to the analysis above, JBT functions more like a public welfare organization. Today, JBT is positively facing to the society through cultural construction, charity work and community services. Given the affluent resources of Shanghai, JBT’s charity work is gradually effecting more social stratification, which forces the Buddhist culture to adapt to the Shanghai cultural ecology. In addition, the efforts and successes of environmental protection demonstrate that Buddhists are able to take more social responsibilities. Therefore, the role of Buddhism in the society is changed.

Second, JBT keeps pace with the time. Keeping pace with the time is a way of adaptation. For example, the monks’ life in JBT is changed due to the time changed. The tranquil lives are commonly imagined for the monks in the traditional temples, but in JBT the monks are more

active in the society. They deal with people from all layers with all kinds of businesses. Besides, the monks' work is also greatly changed. Except for the traditional practices, monks in JBT still are taking other social studies. For example, in order to better manage the modern temple, JBT monks use the modern technologies to deal with all the affairs throughout the temple. These changes are what Steward and Head studied, the "*Adaption*," a change of a culture.

Finally, JBT emphasizes more on cultural construction. In addition to the dissemination of Buddhism, the abundant cultural courses offer more opportunities for all ages to be engaged in the Buddhism. In the meantime, the various seminars about Buddhism in the modern society held in JBT are also based on the Shanghai cultural and environmental ecology.

All of these cultural changes indicate that JBT has approached to the Shanghai regional culture, to which, it is an approach to the cultural ecology, as researchers like Steward says.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study is to find out in what areas the Jade Buddha Temple, as one of the most famous temples in Shanghai, approaches to the cultural ecology. According to the delineation above, JBT at least in three areas made efforts approaching to the cultural ecology: emphasizing the cultural construction, keeping pace with the time, and playing active roles in the community service. Therefore, the research question is roughly answered.

However, there are limitations existing. For example, the biggest limitation should be the sample size. This is a case study by focusing on one temple's work among the cultures, so the limitation is unambiguous. One temple's effort approaching to the cultural ecology may not be exemplified to other Buddhists in the country. Furthermore, as a new student in this area, the author's personal attainment is limited too.

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