

Course: GEC2201 World Religions

Instructor: Thomas Carroll

19 May 2022 (Term 2, 2021-2022)

YU Qinyang 120020054

## **The Secularization and Modernization of Local Buddhism: A Historical and Cultural Perspective**

### **Site Analysis for Xiao Jiuhua Temple in Ping Wang**

Xiao Jiuhua Temple (小九华寺) is located in Ping Wang town, Wu Jiang district, Suzhou city. With elegant landscapes and stories of famous poets and recluses in ancient China, this region has added a color of River South (Jiang Nan) culture to the temple. Buddhist rituals, architectures, and organizations are similar to those elsewhere. However, its unique historical track and cultural legacy profoundly impacted local Buddhist spread, advancing Buddhist localization on philosophical, narrative, and ethical levels. Deep insight into the local Buddhist context requires retrospect of its past trace and experience of its spiritual core. This paper explores localization from two aspects (secularization and modernization), investigates historical origins, and provides current evidence. In the analysis, overviewing the history of Xiao Jiuhua Temple also exhibits a typical



Figure 1. Ande Bridge (安德桥) and Xiao Jiuhua Temple



Figure 2. Historical Reliefs

epitome of the rise and decline of Buddhist development in modern China, reflecting certain universality.

In the temple garden, there is a long scroll of reliefs that records its narrative history. The primitive name of Xiao Jiuhua Temple was Dong Yue Temple, which was essentially a

Taoist temple to worship the god of Mount Tai. Its close relationship with Chinese folk religions showed its affinity for local pilgrims from the beginning, and smoothed its transformation into a Buddhist temple since its future worship Ksitigarbha was shared in both Buddhism and Taoism. In the Ming dynasty, emperor Zhu Yuanzhang suppressed Vajrayana and enhanced the influence of Theravada in the Central Plains. This policy prompted the renovation and expansion of Xiao Jiuhua Temple to last until the late Qing dynasty. After the Taiping Rebellion, the Japanese invasion, and the Cultural Revolution, the temple was severely destructed and reduced to a granary. Until the 21st century, it was eventually rebuilt under the supervision of the government and Master Gong Zhen, with famous architectures like Guanyin on the lake, Wanfo (Thousands of Buddha) Pagoda, the depository of Buddhist Sutras, and the hall of Avalokitesvara Buddhisatva.

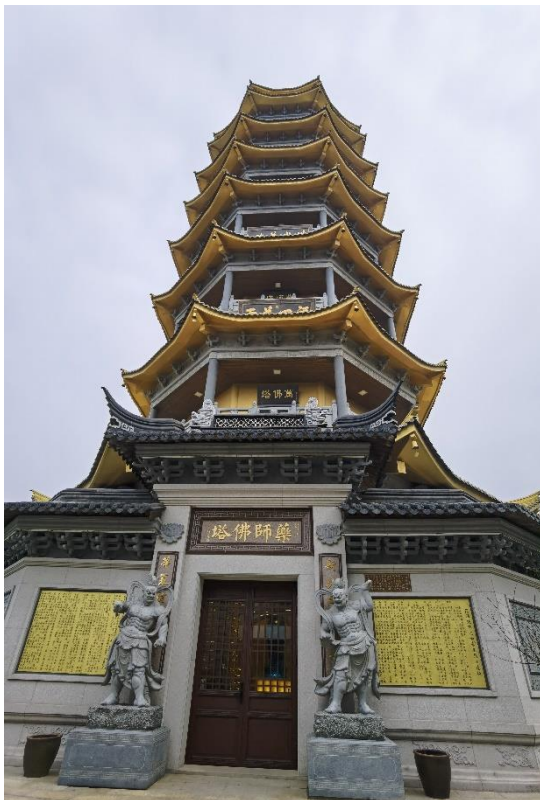


Figure 3. Wanfo (Thousands of Buddha) Pagoda



Figure 4. The Hall of Avalokitesvara Buddhisatva

The historical circumstance offers an explanation for modernization, because the reconstruction allowed for sophisticated design and modern publicity. It focused more on modern adaptation to gain popularity instead of preservation. But rituals like



offering incense or bowing to Buddha and general architectural style were consistent with traditions.

Spiritual legacy has more substantial explanatory power for secularization and modernization. Even though long-period unrest interrupted the inheritance of religious relics, cultural inertia maintains its continuity.

There are two significant events and figures in the history of Xiao Jiuhua Temple. The first was the sacred passing of golden ksitigarbha (金地藏). The flourishing of Buddhism in the Tang dynasty attracted Kim Gyo-gak, the prince of ancient Silla, to give up royal life and come to China for Buddhist doctrine. According to legend, his first stop was Ying Dou Lake in Ping Wang town. Years later, he came to Jiuhua Mountain in Anhui Province and eventually became Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva (地藏菩萨) (Wu, 2016). Due to the long distance to Jiuhua Temple, many Buddhist pilgrims in Suzhou hoped to build a temple along the canal river, given convenient transportation. Kim's sacred stay years ago justified Ping Wang to be the perfect fit, importing the religious discourse of ksitigarbha.

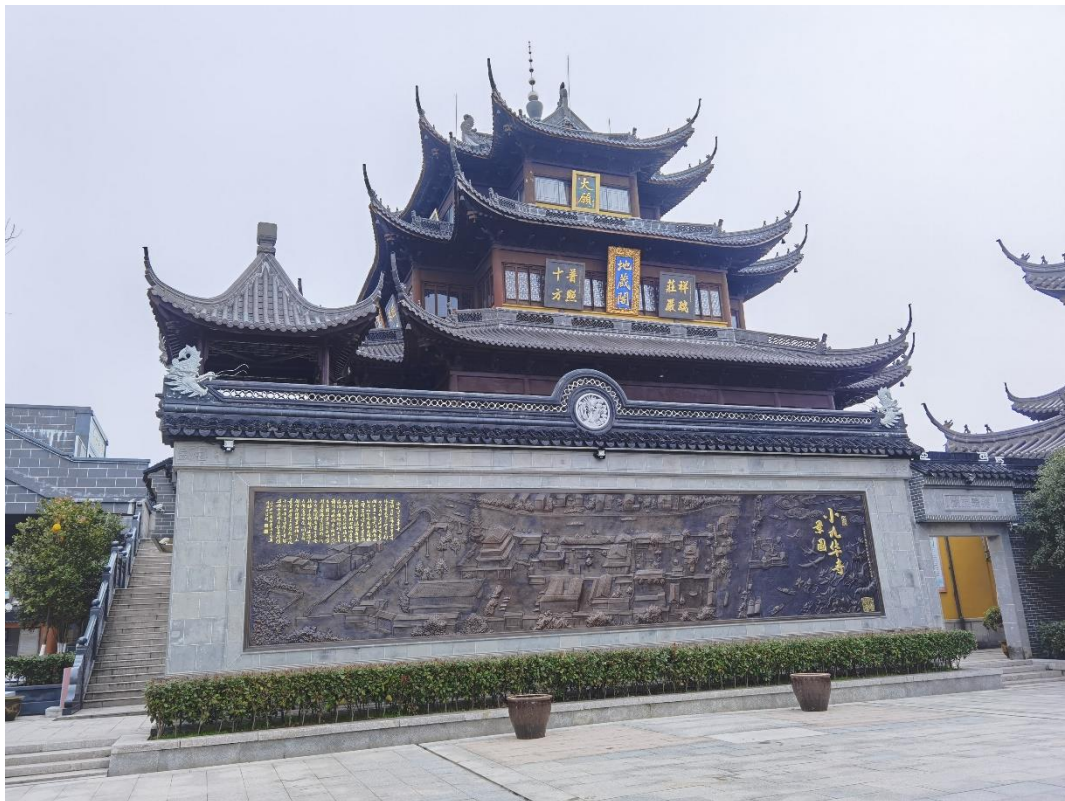


Figure 5. The Hall of Ksitigarbha

Ksitigarbha, who saved his mother in hell and vowed to save all suffering beings, gave rise to the unique “Xiao Jue culture” (孝觉文化) in Xiao Jiuhua Temple. “Xiao” means filial piety to parents with an extension to love everyone. “Jue” means evoking unconditional concern for oneself and the whole world. For hundreds of years, the Confucian-like doctrine encouraged locals to care more about daily life practices than the traditional Buddhist dharma, which was a symbol of secularization. During the reconstruction period, the practical function of Buddhism was emphasized in particular. Xiao Jue Square and Walls were built in memory of Ksitigarbha and 24 stories of filial piety with respect to Confucianism were propagated.



Figure 6. Xiao Jue Walls in the Xiao Jue Square



Figure 7. Posters of 24 Filial Piety Stories



The second event was the Pabbajja and tonsure of Venerable Tai Xu in Xiao Jiuhua Temple, who was the originator and advocator of Humanistic Buddhism. He and Master Hsing Yun laid the foundation of Buddhist modernization as theorists and practitioners in the Buddhist reform movement. Although his reform did not succeed at that time, he planted the seeds for the Buddhist revival. His Humanistic Buddhism became the indispensable cultural label of Xiao Jiuhua Temple one hundred years later. A memorial hall with his sculpture and portrayal was built in the temple to introduce his life experience and main propositions.



Figure 8. The Sculpture of Venerable Tai Xu and Wall Paintings of Buddhism in China's Anti-Japanese War

According to Master Hsing Yun, the modernity of Buddhism contains four domains: the use of modern facilities for the propagation of Buddhism, the establishment of monasteries as modern schools, the modernity of languages, and the modernity of practice in real life (Long, 2000, p. 68). This statement, in general, summarized the modernization in Xiao Jiuhua and other similar temples.

The first two aspects are reflected in the temple's modern organization and

publicity of Buddhism. Technological equipment like videos, electronic blessing bells, figures of Buddha with electric lamps, and Wechat merit boxes are widely used. Educational forms like Xiao Jue College, curriculums, and seminars are conducted as academic discussions, personal moral enhancement, and ideological guidance.

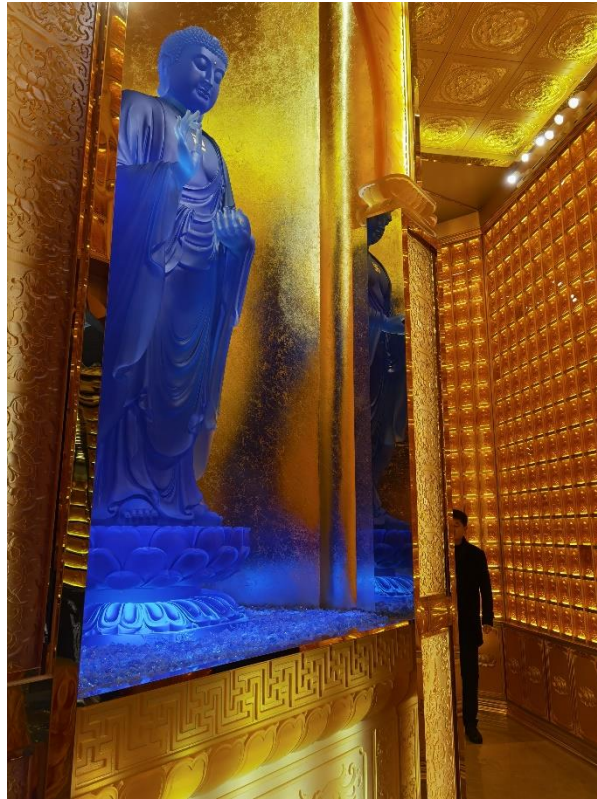


Figure 9. Figures of Buddha with Electric Lamps



Figure 10. Electronic Automatic Blessing Bells



The last two aspects lie in Master Gong Zhen's interpretation of Humanistic Buddhism. His preaching avoided obscure Buddha terminology and transformed Buddhist doctrine into straightforward expressions close to life. Below is a rough generalization using Stephen Prothero's functional analysis structure (Prothero, 2011):

Humanistic Buddhism interpreted by Master Gong Zhen	
Problem	Disasters and accidents in life, Uncertain and unsustainable happiness
Solution	Live in the moment, Gain a sense of achievement
Technique	Active practice in real life (入世), Social service
Exemplars	Venerable Tai Xu, Master Hsing Yun, Zhao Puchu



Figure 11. A Photo of Master Gong Zhen (left) and Me (right)

Modern and secular characteristics of Humanistic Buddhism are fully revealed in its ultimate purpose. The Altruistic essence of Buddhism is stressed in the pursuit of temporal welfare for the whole society. Traditional common utterances like Nirvana

or Afterlife are disenchanted in this discourse. The ethical code requires social responsibilities and relevant practices rooted in reality, adding a humanity spirit to Buddhism. Devoted to charity and carrying forward local culture, Master Gong Zhen also acted as a contemporary exemplar. This new concept of Buddhism has already become the most essential leading doctrine of Xiao Jiuhua Temple nowadays.

This paper examines the secularization and modernization of local Buddhism in Xiao Jiuhua Temple from spatial and time dimensions. The two dynamic processes interlaced with each other and promoted localization on philosophical, narrative, and ethical levels. A historical and cultural perspective is adopted to explain the unique “Xiao Jue culture” and Humanistic Buddhism in Xiao Jiuhua Temple. Notably, the macro developing trend of Xiao Jiuhua Temple overlaps with many Buddhist temples in Chinese history due to similar political environments and time changes. Its fusion with Confucian and Taoist culture also embodies the hybridity of Chinese religions. To sum up, cultural phenomena displayed in this paper attempt to serve as a mirror to reflect religious diversity and cultural integration, a paradigm to investigate religious localization and evolvement mechanism.



## Reference

- Long, D. R. (2000). Humanistic Buddhism from Venerable Tai Xu to Grand Master Hsing Yun. *Hsi Lai Journal of Humanistic Buddhism*, 1, 53-84.
- Master Gong Zhen. (2016). *The brief history of Xiao Jiuhua Temple* [Unpublished manuscript].
- Prothero, S. (2011). *God is not one: The eight rival religions that run the world, and why their differences matter*. Black Inc..
- Smart, N. (1996). *Dimensions of the sacred: An anatomy of the world's beliefs*. Univ of California Press.
- Wu, B. (2016). *From the underworld to the pure land: Contemporary Ksitigarbha (Dizang)-related rituals on Mount Jiuhua*. University of the West.