



Review of Gregory Adam Scott, Building the Buddhist Revival: Reconstructing Monasteries in Modern China

Daniela Campo

► To cite this version:

Daniela Campo. Review of Gregory Adam Scott, Building the Buddhist Revival: Reconstructing Monasteries in Modern China. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews, 2022, <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=55412>. halshs-04006569

HAL Id: halshs-04006569

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04006569>

Submitted on 27 Feb 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Gregory Adam Scott. *Building the Buddhist Revival: Reconstructing Monasteries in Modern China.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 264 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-093072-1.

Reviewed by Daniela Campo (University of Strasbourg)

Published on H-Buddhism (October, 2022)

Commissioned by Jessica Zu (USC Dornsife, School of Religion)

Gregory Adam Scott's *Building the Buddhist Revival* is a remarkable study documenting the material, religious, and social reconstruction of Buddhist monasteries in China from the end of the Taiping war in 1866 to the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. It is based on a large typology of historical sources, including local and temple gazetteers, stele transcriptions, and Buddhist periodicals—a diversity itself attesting to the major historical changes that occurred in the one hundred years considered in the study—and it also makes use of digital tools to collect historical data. Focusing on a selection of religious sites across the country, the author highlights the different types of destructive forces affecting Buddhist monasteries (including national and international conflicts, targeted destruction linked to political movements, and natural disaster) and skillfully explores their physical rebuilding, institutional renewal, and relationships linking donors, elites, and devotees. Why were monasteries reconstructed and how did the implications of these reconstructions change over time? Scott's study sheds light on the major shift occurring between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, when the increasing interest taken by the state in monastery reconstruction led to a modification of both the aims of the reconstruction and the very nature of the reconstructed sites

—from sacred sites to national symbols, and later to cultural relics. Scott's highly readable monograph includes an introduction, four chapters (each covering one successive key period of reconstruction of Buddhist monasteries), and a conclusion (plus two appendices, a bibliography, and an index).

The extensive introduction begins by sketching the evolution of the plan of the Chinese Buddhist monastery up until the eleventh century, when it began to assume a customary layout, and considers the monastery's religious, cultural, political, and economic functions, especially the merit economy on which fundraising for reconstruction was based. To model monastery reconstruction, the author identifies and describes a core set of narrative elements included in historical accounts; these narrative patterns also emerge in detailed case studies of the following chapters. Scott observes that the reconstruction of a Buddhist monastery was an event with deep religious significance, understood as one phase rich in potentiality of a larger historical cycle. He especially underlines the interdependent nature of all facets of the reconstruction, as well as the importance of the restoration leadership, most often embodied by a local layperson or monastic, or a well-known Buddhist figure. In the last section of the introduction before the overview of chapters, the author

explains how the chronological scope of the book, from one major campaign of religious destruction at the end of the Qing dynasty to the dawn of the next during the Maoist period, allows him to consider developments within modern Chinese Buddhism as both part of a long history and the beginning of an era “with its own unique challenges and opportunities” (p. 38).

The first chapter begins with a survey of the unprecedented damage, both intentional and collateral, caused by the Taiping war to Buddhist monasteries, especially in the Jiangnan region, and covers the period up to the new ideological and legal approach to religion brought about by the 1898 Wuxu Reforms. Scott makes use of computing technology to sketch, in useful figures and charts, trends and ratios of war destruction and of postwar reconstruction. Historical accounts from Buddhist records and the biographies of two reconstruction leaders are considered to show how Chinese Buddhist understandings of the period were formed. The core of the chapter is devoted to the reconstruction of two Buddhist monasteries in the Nanjing area (Jiangsu Province). While the prominent Linggu Monastery, rebuilt only on a smaller scale, found itself in a ruinous state by 1929 and never regained its leading position in the region, the reconstruction from the ground up of the Jiangtian (Jinshan) Monastery, on the contrary, allowed it to continue to prosper as the site of one of the most effective Chan monastic trainings—a reputation it still maintains today. This was especially due to Jiangtian’s capable monastic leadership, innovative reconstruction project, and patronage of powerful officials Zeng Guofan 曾國藩 (1811–72) and Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 (1823–1901), who exceptionally invested state funds in its reconstruction. These two case studies attest to the indelible effect of the Taiping war on the fate of sacred sites and to the way the war reshaped the religious landscape of China.

Chapter 2 begins by introducing the unstable political situation and shifting ideological condi-

tions that, from the 1890s to the late 1920s, deeply affected the evolution of religious traditions in China, especially influencing local religion and local temples but also, to a lesser degree, monastery reconstruction. The chapter further presents some organizational, publishing, and educational reforms undertaken by Buddhists in order to cope with the threats they were facing. In the crucial period 1899–1904, when national policies recommending to “build schools with monastic property” (*miaochan xingxue* 廟產興學) imposed new pressures on religious institutions and when the beginning of the national educational reform seriously endangered the educational role of Confucian academies, the long postwar reconstruction of Tianning Monastery in Jiangsu Province came to a halt because of a conflict over power with the local Confucian academy. The pressure to provide modern-style education and the criticism faced by Buddhist monastics as “uneducated social parasites” also prompted the Tianning Monastery (as other reconstructed sites) to incorporate institutional innovations, such as print culture and education, in order to maintain their autonomy in the context of modernization and to also play a role in it (p. 115). The second case study considered in this chapter is Qixia Monastery, also near Nanjing, rebuilt in 1919–21 with the direct intervention of high-ranking Nationalist civil and military officials and used a few years later as the stage for political negotiation. The case of Qixia exemplifies a new state interest in religion at a time when all available resources had to be mobilized to build up the nation. It marks the beginning of a new pattern of state intervention in monastery reconstruction, a pattern announcing more direct involvement in religious sites on the part of the Nationalist state during the following period of national crisis.

Chapter 3, covering the period 1929–49, focuses on the impact of the Nanjing decade and the Second Sino-Japanese War on monastery protection, destruction, and reconstruction. While threats of Nationalist confiscation continued well into the 1930s, the notions of national spirit (*jing-*

shen 精神) and national salvation (*jiuguo* 救國), which replaced the imperial idea of protecting the country (*huguo* 護國) from disasters and calamity, brought a new level of official attention toward “cultural heritage.” In the 1930s, the party-state shaped religious practice at Huiju Monastery on Baohuashan by incorporating visual national symbols and hosting a series of nation-protecting Dharma assemblies. The Linggu Monastery, already examined in chapter 1 and located like Huiju in the area of the new Nationalist capital Nanjing, was even more deeply affected by the state when finally transformed into a national monument for the martyrs of the revolution. The reconstruction of Xingjiao Monastery, hosting the relic stupa of the famous Buddhist Master Xuanzang (ca. 602-664), began almost six decades after its Taiping destruction. It was accomplished thanks to the active participation of the lay-led Shaanxi Buddhist Association and the donations of many powerful figures in the political realm at the local, regional, and national levels, including highly placed officials of the Nationalist party-state. As the significance of historical sites as concrete symbols of a Chinese national identity was growing, so was the importance of their protection: the intervention of highly ranking state officials in reconstructing historical Buddhist monasteries became decisive and increased in frequency and intensity. However, as is emphasized by the author, what was restored at this point was not only a Buddhist but also a Chinese site, as the symbolic value of monasteries was gradually replacing their religious dimension as centers for Buddhist practice.

Chapter 4 focuses on the first seventeen years of the People’s Republic of China (1949-66) and is based on a chronological approach more than on specific case studies. Scott analyzes the new national and international political situation of the early Cold War era, a period during which approximately one hundred Buddhist sites were repaired or reconstructed with state funds and for state purposes; the extent of Chinese Communist Party

intervention into religious institutions was unprecedented. Why did the party-state invest substantial resources into preserving religious institutions? And how did these reconstructions differ from the previous ones of the modern era? Since Buddhism was used by the party as a cultural link to establish international relations with neighboring Asian nations and potential allies sharing historic religious ties with China (such as India, Burma, and Cambodia), monasteries were restored to be used as venues for Buddhist diplomacy. The Guangji Monastery and the Yonghe Temple, both located in the new capital of Beijing, were respectively reconstructed in 1952 and 1954 to showcase the PRC’s respect of cultural heritage and policy of freedom of religious belief, including for the Tibetan and Mongolian traditions, to the attention of visiting Buddhist and foreign delegates. The promulgation of the first Communist regulations granting legal protection to repaired and rebuilt Buddhist sites in the early 1960s is but the last moment of the evolution begun at the end of the imperial period and skillfully outlined by the author: at the dawn of the Cultural Revolution, monastery reconstruction had become a state enterprise in which only historical buildings were being reconstructed—as cultural relics to be displayed rather than frames to religious life.

The conclusion points out the intrinsic ephemeral nature of monastery reconstruction and the fact that reconstructions are not to be viewed as a mere return to the past but instead as a rebirth of religious communities bringing changes, innovations, and adaptations. The author further recapitulates and discusses important emerging trends within the century-long history considered in his book: the increased role played by Buddhist periodicals to circulate relevant information on monastery reconstruction; the increasing identification of Buddhist monasteries with Chinese civilization and the Chinese nation; and the process resulting in a shift in power from lay Buddhists and monastics toward the state, with the ensuing gradual reconfiguration of monasteries from reli-

gious sites to symbols of cultural heritage and later to stages for cultural diplomacy and to museums.

Building the Buddhist Revival is a very important contribution to the flourishing scholarship on Buddhism, and more generally on religion, in modern and contemporary China. Besides the diversity of sources on which the book relies and Scott's dexterity and rigor in handling and analyzing them, which I find remarkable, the book is highly relevant for different reasons. In the first place, *Building the Buddhist Revival* makes a point in providing a continuous history on a comprehensive phenomenon from the late Qing to the Maoist era, profitably bridging together three historical periods that are often investigated separately in Chinese studies. Moreover, the destruction of Buddhist monasteries during the Taiping war and their postwar reconstruction lies at the core of the complex process of religious and institution-

al restoration and renewal leading to the birth of a modern Chinese Buddhism at the turn of the nineteenth century, and although this evolution has presently become standard Buddhist history, its starting point had never previously been independently and thoroughly explored. Finally, another cycle of destruction and reconstruction of Buddhist monasteries has been accomplished after the final point of this book, a process on which both historians and anthropologists can gain a better insight by considering it against its most recent historical precedent analyzed by Scott. Although it is important to note that after the Taiping war just as after the Cultural Revolution Buddhist monasteries have also been reconstructed as frames to religious life, the growing importance of both the cultural dimension of historic Buddhist sites and state interest and patronage in reconstructing them are of extraordinary relevance in contemporary China as well.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism>

Citation: Daniela Campo. Review of Scott, Gregory Adam. *Building the Buddhist Revival: Reconstructing Monasteries in Modern China*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. October, 2022.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55412>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.