

URBAN ANTHROPOLOGY



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Buddhist Temple Economies in Urban Asia

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On the same day in early 2020, two Buddhist priests in Kyoto independently told me a similar story. Resident priests (*jūshoku*) in charge of a specific temple visit those of their parishioners who so desire to perform memorial rites in front of the house altar (*butsudan*), usually once a month on the most senior ancestor’s death day. As is also common, this service is rewarded with a donation (*o-fuse*): parishioners hand over an envelope containing bank notes when the priest is finished, and only exceptionally is the amount noted on the envelope. To my surprise, both priests claimed that they passed these envelopes unopened to their wives, who are in charge of temple finances. The priests preferred to remain ignorant of the contents, lest they reward the more generous parishioners with special attention and thereby violate the ideal of equality.

Neither of the two priests denied that *o-fuse* after funerals and memorial rites are crucial for the upkeep of the temple. Both practiced ordinary economic rationality in their everyday decision-taking, using their resources prudently. Yet they insisted on a moral firewall to separate Buddhist donations from everyday economics. So do their parishioners when using an envelope, instead of presenting the bank notes openly; as for the amount given, they observe regional standards and heed the advice of other laypeople, rather than negotiating a sum with the priest.

This anecdote takes us to the heart of what the research group “Buddhist Temple Economies in Urban Asia” has investigated since its launch in 2014. In five separate ethnographic projects, members have explored the economics of a religion that tends to downplay earthly resources but, like all non-ephemeral organizations, nonetheless requires them. The morality that specialists and laypeople employ in their economic dealings was a key concern. One monograph has already been published (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019a) and a second is under way (Świtek); two doctoral dissertations have been successfully defended (Jonutyte 2018, Klepeis 2020); and our research has also led to a number of journal articles (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2015a, 2015b, 2019b, 2020; Abrahms-Kavunenko and Milligan forthcoming; Jonutyte 2020a, 2020b, forthcoming) and a book chapter (Klepeis forthcoming).

After all group members had completed their fieldwork, we organized the conference “Sangha Economies: Temple Organization and Exchanges in Contemporary Buddhism” at the Max Planck Institute in September 2017. This enabled us to

compare our results with those of eleven international colleagues. David Gellner acted as principal discussant, supported by other specialists including Stephen Covell, Patrice Ladwig and Nikolay Tsyrempilov. A selection of the revised papers is currently under production as an edited volume, to which all group members also contributed chapters (Brumann, Abrahms-Kavunenko and Świtek 2021).



Participants in the workshop “Sangha Economies: Temple Organization and Exchanges in Contemporary Buddhism,” September 2017. (Photo: MPI for Social Anthropology)

While individual members of the group broached a wide range of topics, including the special challenges of urban environments and the relation of Buddhism to ethnic and national identity, our core focus was on the proper way to deal with money. This is a preoccupation for both religious specialists and laypeople. It is also a touchstone for assessing the authenticity and trustworthiness of clerics. An expectation that Buddhist transactions be distanced from ordinary profit-oriented economic exchanges appears to be universal. This similarity was striking, especially since the societies we studied were quite distinct. Two projects were located in the postsocialist contexts of the Russian Federation and Mongolia, one in “late socialist” China, and two in Japan, a paragon of capitalism. While Japan, Mongolia and the federal republic of Buryatia can be classified at the lenient end of a clerical discipline spectrum, with priests allowed to live family lives, drink alcohol and eat meat, celibacy is strictly enforced in the Buddhism of the Tibetan areas of China. Theravada monastics in South and Southeast Asia follow an even more rigorous discipline. The cases discussed at our conference included strict adherence to the monastic rules (*vinaya*) that prohibit monks from handling money among the forest monks of Sri Lanka,

where financial matters are left to the abbot and trusted lay assistants.¹ The other extreme is represented by the cash register positioned squarely in the main hall of an Ulaanbaatar temple, where adherents pay for rituals to be carried out by the monks (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019: 144); and by the one-off, “rent-a-priest” Buddhist rites advertised for fixed prices on Amazon Japan (Świtek 2021).

Despite this diversity, the impulse to draw a symbolic line between Buddhist and everyday practices is universal. It is expressed in the aforementioned envelopes for *ofuse*, in the use of crisp new bills presented in special scarfs when remunerating tantra practitioners in Tibet,² or in silently leaving bank notes on the table after consulting a Buryat priest, rather than handing them over in person (Jonutyte 2021). Verbal etiquette requires a de-facto payment to be called a donation. Temples in Buryatia and Japan – even in popular touristic locations – invariably require a “worshiping” rather than “entrance” fee from their visitors. More often than not, however, behavioural expectations are implicit. People become conscious of them only when confronted with actual or imagined breaches. For example, after my presentation of our research group’s results, a circle of priests in Kyoto were surprised to find that they disagreed as to what kinds of shopping were acceptable when wearing Buddhist robes. Visiting a bank, they all agreed, would require changing to plain clothes. Open solicitation of donations by the clergy, beyond the customary alms rounds of Theravada Buddhism, is often considered inappropriate, be it in Bangkok,³ in Shangrila (the former Zhongdian in the Tibetan part of Yunnan province; Klepeis 2021) or by a Kyoto friend of mine who was outraged when, following his father’s death, the family’s regular temple priest lost no time in stipulating the funeral fee. Similarly, Caple reports a visitor’s shock when seeing lay clerks at work in the shop of a Tibetan temple in Qinghai province, undermining all her expectations of monastic businesses being distinct and therefore more trustworthy than ordinary establishments.⁴

The symbolic boundary also manifests itself in more general worries about monks, priests and other religious specialists becoming corrupt and obsessed with money. Gossip assessing clergy in this regard (with a penchant for zooming in on the bad examples) is found across the Buddhist world (Jonutyte 2021, Świtek 2021),⁵ even though open criticism of the sangha – the community of Buddhist priests, monks

¹ Sirisena, Prabath. Wealthy mendicants: The balancing act of Sri Lankan forest monks (Brumann et al. 2021).

² Sihlé, Nicolas. Ritual virtuosity, large-scale priest-patron networks and the ethics of remunerated ritual services in northeast Tibet (Brumann et al. 2021).

³ Borchert, Thomas. Merit, “corruption,” and economy in the contemporary Thai sangha (Brumann et al. 2021).

⁴ Caple, Jane. Monastic business expansion in post-Mao Tibet: Risk, trust and perception (Brumann et al. 2021).

⁵ Borchert, Sihlé (Brumann et al. 2021).

and nuns – is often out of the question. Conscientiousness in money matters, rather than doctrinal erudition or ritual experience, often appears to be the laity’s key criterion for assessing clerics. In Shangrila, for instance, “bad” monks are the ones who divert lay donations to their own private business ventures or to their natal families, and “good” ones those who reject contributions from shady Han Chinese businessmen (Klepeis 2021). These worries are shared by the clerics: priests and monks fear that engaging in ordinary business ventures, even if for the collective good of the temple’s, might drag them away from their true purposes, taint them with a market mentality associated with deception or instil in them a capitalist mind set.⁶ Given that capitalism and monetization are expanding across all the studied societies, Buddhist clerics have ever more reason for such concern.

One countermeasure is to question the old formula according to which the laity supports the sangha, and pious giving generates karmic merit in quasi-automatic fashion as the only return. Instead, Buddhist temples and practitioners feel driven to justify their own existence and ease the laity’s burden by generating their own income and/or by contributing to the welfare of the surrounding society. Examples presented at our conference included projects of “Socially Engaged Buddhism” in Ladakh and the hospitals and schools that the *khru*ba – the charismatic Buddhist saints of the upper Mekong region – finance from the donations showered upon them.⁷ Even the Sri Lankan forest monks who observe the old rule not to channel lay contributions back to the laity know full well that the ordinary monasteries to which they transfer their surplus are more permissive in this regard.⁸

The umbrella organization of Buryat Buddhist temples runs the “Social Flock” charity project to give impoverished laypeople sheep to start their own flock. Some of the lambs have to be returned and are then given to the next family in line. These and similar initiatives challenge the dominant view of Buddhist exchanges as bilateral affairs between clergy and laity. Jonutyte speaks instead of “pooling,” with all participants aware that their economic interactions contribute to the common cause of rebuilding Buryat Buddhism from near-extinction and making it visible in the urban context of Ulan-Ude (Jonutyte 2021).

Another way to domesticate concerns is the cultivation of ambiguity and grey zones. I found this prevalent in my own research in Kyoto. To a surprising degree and despite occasional hassle from an exacting tax office, religious corporations –

⁶ Casas, Roger. Monks and the morality of exchange: Reflections on a village temple case in Southwest China; Caple (Brumann et al. 2021).

⁷ Horstmann, Alexander. Sainly entrepreneurialism and political aspirations of Theravadin saints in mainland Southeast Asia; Caple (Brumann et al. 2021); Williams-Oerberg, Elizabeth. 2017. Socially engaged sangha economies in Ladakh, India. Paper presented at the workshop “Sangha Economies: Temple Organization and Exchanges in Contemporary Buddhism,” MPI for Social Anthropology, Halle, 21 September 2017.

⁸ Sirisena (Brumann et al. 2021).

the legal status that most Buddhist temples choose – are exempt from the detailed financial reporting required of other bodies enjoying tax privileges, such as NGOs. Many temple priests hesitate to prepare accounts and parishioners often support this approach. Monetary questions are muted and ignorance of financial details appears to be desirable. Such an approach thwarts efforts to consolidate temple management: a seasoned business consultant who, upon becoming a Buddhist priest, has been recruited by his denominational headquarters into temple crisis management told me that he had never seen such patchy accounting. In a similar case reported by Świtek (2021), a priest stipulated precise contributions to a costly joint activity but then failed to police their implementation, to the parishioners’ dismay.

Buddhist clergy and laity often employ a split vision. Neither priests nor laypeople in Kyoto openly challenge the view that *o-fuse* after rituals should be voluntary donations determined by one’s feelings, not quasi-obligatory remuneration. Yet laypeople told me that rates are fixed by custom and some priests admitted to suggesting specific sums in the rare cases where uncertain parishioners pressed them. Likewise, Buddhist laypeople in Shangrila hesitate to confront monks about a lackadaisical conduct of house rituals. Even though these are services rendered on demand, a contractual logic that would allow the parties to insist on correct implementation of the negotiated terms does not fully apply. Rather, faith is required for ritual efficacy (Klepeis 2021). Parallels can be found in anthropological work on the Janus-faced character of the gift: to be acceptable, it must be presented as a one-off, altruistic prestation, yet in reality it is often carefully calibrated to the ongoing relationship between giver and recipient and to earlier gifts exchanged. While Bourdieu prioritizes the element of calculation, others have emphasized the co-presence of both perspectives in people’s minds.⁹

Money continues to be a challenge for contemporary Buddhists in urban Asia. The popular image of the world renouncer indifferent to financial matters shapes the expectations of clergy and laity alike. Even where actual practices have long diverged from the strict terms of the original monastic rules, Buddhist clerics still feel driven to avoid or mask anything that might smell like ordinary business. Money-mindedness and avarice are censured in other world religions, but Buddhists’ concern with the potential polluting effects of money is of a special order.

⁹ Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 194; Brumann, Christoph. 2000. Materialistic culture: The uses of money in Tokyo gift exchanges. In: John Clammer and Michael Ashkenazi (eds.) *Consumption and material culture in contemporary Japan*, pp. 224–248. London: Kegan Paul International; Smart, Alan. 1993. Gifts, bribes, and guanxi: A reconsideration of Bourdieu’s social capital. *Cultural Anthropology* 8(3): 388–408.

Subsequent Research: Opening up Kyoto Temples

Buddhist temples have continued to occupy me beyond the formal end of the research group. In my fieldwork in Kyoto between October 2019 and March 2020 I investigated how the economic questions discussed above form part of the larger task of sustaining Buddhist temples through time as a resource shared by clergy and laity.

Buddhist temples in Japan usually function as both religious establishment and family residence, with a (most often male) priest, his wife, who often plays a crucial role in temple management, and their children, often including the designated successor, living as a household on the premises. This differs from the monastic arrangements found in most Buddhist temples elsewhere. This Japanese practice has considerable historical depth, going back to the Meiji period or, in the case of the Shin denomination, to the Middle Ages. At the same time, temples are typically supported by a fixed circle of households (*danka* or *monto*) of many generations' standing, continuing a pattern imposed by the seventeenth-century government. These parishioners have their family grave in the cemetery or their family ashes in the columbarium (*nōkotsudō*) – if the temple has such facilities –, rely on the priest for memorial services in the temple and their homes, and come to the temple for collective rituals several times a year.



Buddhist priests discussing temple futures at a workshop in Osaka. (Photo: Christoph Brumann, 2019)

This leads to some ambiguity as to whose temple it actually is. Most temples are independent religious corporations (*shūkyō hōjin*) controlled by a board of trustees (*sekinin yakuin*), often with the priest as head representative (*daihyō yakuin*) and his wife as one of the trustees. Most parishioners are more than willing to follow the priest’s lead in temple decision-making. Since he and his family live there, the temple is treated as their quasi-property. Formally, however, the priest and other family members are salaried employees of the corporation over which the parishioner trustees have no less a say than the priest.

This can give rise to tensions, such as when priests’ wives feel under pressure to be constantly available to receive spontaneous worshippers or when a priest resents being envied for the comfort of his living quarters when these are not his personal property, a fact that his homeowner acquaintances tend to overlook. In the case of the two Shin temples to which I developed a specially close relationship, however, the priests strive to open up the temples, encouraging parishioners to see them as more of their own affair.

One of these priests, on top of his routine ritual activities, has been a trailblazer in holding Buddhist study groups, debating circles, live concerts, science talks coupled with Buddhist sermons and other special events; he also makes appearances on TV and in live talk shows, where he engages with priests of other denominations. This unfolds independently from his parishioners and does not help him to attract new ones and the priest’s sense of Buddhist mission plays a larger role than his economic concerns. The other priest has a larger number of parishioners and meeting their ritual needs keeps him and his son and successor fully occupied. However, he too wishes for more outreach. Participation in a workshop aiming for “healthy” temples, organized by the denominational headquarter temple, provided an opportunity to discuss the future of the temple with parishioners for the first time.

Together, they agreed to organize a culture festival in 2021, based on the parishioners’ special skills. They also decided to launch *konkatsu* activities, that is, events that, in a country with a plummeting marriage rate, would bring together parishioners looking for a partner. Following the progress of these initiatives and examining their impact on parishioner commitment to the temple will be an important task in future research visits to a city that has occupied me for more than two decades now.¹⁰

¹⁰ Brumann, Christoph. 2009. Outside the glass case: The social life of urban heritage in Kyoto. *American Ethnologist* 36(2): 276–299; Brumann, Christoph. 2012. *Tradition, democracy and the townscape of Kyoto: Claiming a right to the past*. London: Routledge.

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