

The Interaction Mechanism Between the Spatial Structure of Theravāda Buddhism in China and Contemporary Religious Governance Institutions

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Abstract. This paper traces the historical development of Theravada Buddhism in the Yunnan region, examining the evolution of its spatial structure since its introduction in the seventh century. By combining this with contemporary practices in the reform of monastic governance systems, it analyses the relationship between the two. Historically, Theravada Buddhism, drawing on cross-border cultural exchanges, local power structures and ethnic networks, gradually formed a multi-nodal spatial pattern centred on Xishuangbanna and extending to areas such as Dehong and Lincang. In the contemporary era, with the increase in the number of religious venues, the acceleration of monastic mobility, and the polycentric development of religious networks, the traditional governance model—based on village-level support and master-disciple transmission—has gradually revealed its inadequacy. The institutional framework established around the certification of monastic qualifications and the assessment of monastic ranks provides a relatively unified system for cross-regional religious activities and the hierarchical management of the monastic community. The author contends that the expansion of Theravada Buddhism's spatial structure is not entirely unrelated to the standardisation of its governance system; on the contrary, the two actually interact and adapt to one another, jointly constituting the key conditions for the stable operation of Theravada Buddhism within multi-ethnic regional societies.

Keywords: Theravāda Buddhism, spatial structure, monastic governance, management of religious personnel

1. Introduction

Theravada Buddhism, also known as 'Pali Buddhism', is one of the three major traditions of Chinese Buddhism. After spreading from ancient India to South and Southeast Asia, Theravada Buddhism was introduced to China's south-western border regions from Thailand and Myanmar in the 7th century. Over a thousand years of propagation and development, it has evolved into a form of Theravada Buddhism with distinct Chinese characteristics, having integrated with local beliefs and ethnic cultures. Throughout the history of its propagation in China, Theravada Buddhism has given rise to numerous sects. Among these, the five sects of Runba (Forest, Red Forest), Runsun (Garden,

Pastoral), Baizhuang, Duolie and Zuodi flourished for a long period; however, there are now no distinct differences between them [1].

Historically, Theravada Buddhism did not exist in isolation, but gradually developed a spatial configuration with distinct regional characteristics against a backdrop of cross-border cultural exchange, local power structures and ethnic interactions. As the social environment has evolved, the organisational structure and operational practices of monasteries have undergone constant adjustment. Particularly against a backdrop of increasingly complex social structures and heightened population mobility, traditional governance models reliant on community ties face new challenges, whilst institutional norms have gradually become a vital safeguard for the smooth functioning of monasteries. Changes in spatial configurations not only influence the organisational forms of religious activities but also impose new demands on governance; conversely, the formation and refinement of institutional frameworks have, to a certain extent, shaped and stabilised the operational order of religious spaces.

2. The evolution of the spatial structure of Theravāda Buddhism in China

Theravada Buddhism in China is mainly concentrated in six prefectures and cities: Xishuangbanna, Dehong, Pu'er, Lincang, Baoshan and Honghe in Yunnan Province. At present, there are over 1,700 active religious sites in the region, as well as more than 1,000 ordained monks. The religion is primarily practised by the Dai, Blang, De'ang and Achang peoples, as well as some Wa and a small number of Yi people. Historically, a cross-border Theravada Buddhist cultural sphere has existed between Yunnan and Southeast Asia, and this transnational transmission route was one of the primary driving forces behind the introduction of Theravada Buddhism to the southern frontier regions of Yunnan. The distribution patterns of Theravada Buddhism in Xishuangbanna and Dehong correspond closely with the routes of Buddhist transmission in Southeast Asia, and these spatial patterns of transmission convey the historical trajectory of cross-regional cultural exchange to the present day [2].

The local history text *Lishi* records that "in the seventh year of the Chunxi era of the Song dynasty (1180), Ba Zhen took control of Mengle, proclaimed himself the Supreme Buddha-Ruler of the Jinglong Golden Palace Kingdom, and established his capital at Jinglan" [3]. This account indicates that Theravada Buddhism enjoyed a certain degree of influence and authority amongst the ruling classes of Xishuangbanna, suggesting that its early dissemination had begun to permeate the region's power structures; however, its overall social influence remained confined to specific ethnic groups and political factions. Some scholars have discussed the relationship whereby "the Dai Tusi system and traditional Buddhist monastic education mutually supported one another" [4], pointing out that a close interactive relationship formed between Buddhism and the Tusi system.

In the Lincang region, the introduction of Theravada Buddhism was supported by local rulers. In 1473, with the political backing of Han Bingfa, the Tusi of Gengma, Theravada Buddhism was introduced from the Jingdong region of Burma, and a temple was built outside the city walls. Subsequently, Buddhism gradually spread to the Tai, Wa, and Blang ethnic settlements in the Gengma region. Concurrently, in 1480, Han Tingfa, the Tusi of Mengmeng in Shuangjiang County, purchased Buddhist scriptures, further promoting the spread of Buddhism in the region. According to survey statistics, when the Thai population in the Shuangjiang region peaked during the Ming Dynasty, Theravada Buddhist temples had been established in approximately 47 villages in the Mengmeng and Mengku River basins [5]. It can be said that the geographical expansion at this stage was not merely a matter of spreading religion, but rather a process of cultural transmission achieved

through the cultivation of ethnic identity, the support of local lords, and integration into the local social structure.

The Qing Dynasty was the peak period of the development of Theravada Buddhism in Yunnan; During this period, its spatial structure not only significantly expanded in geographical scope, but also gained wider recognition and organization in social depth. The Annals of Lin'an Prefecture 臨安府志, compiled during the reign of Emperor Yongzheng, records: " In the various Cheri kingdoms, there are an abundance of temples and stupas; every village has a temple, and every temple has a stupa; ten thousand villages, ten thousand stupas." Compared with the spatial nodes of the Ming Dynasty, the structure of Hinayana Buddhism in the Qing Dynasty formed two core nodes, Xishuangbanna and Dehong, while Lincang and its surrounding areas became the central nodes, and its spatial influence gradually extended to Pu'er, Jinggu, Ximeng and other places.

The formation of this structure is closely related to factors such as social governance, allocation of religious resources, and interweaving of ethnic networks in the Qing Dynasty. Numerous historical records indicate that Buddhist temples in the Qing Dynasty exhibited a clustered expansion pattern in areas such as Xishuangbanna and Dehong. Meanwhile, through multi-level interactions involving institutional integration, religious festivals, education, and cultural exchanges, Theravada Buddhism has gained stronger social cohesion in the local multi-ethnic society.

This evolution reflects the regional dependence and institutional interdependence of religious transmission channels. In the initial stage, the dissemination clearly followed the contours of the lowland border areas and showed a high degree of spatial similarity with the Buddhist cultural field in Southeast Asia; In the diffusion stage, the integration of local power structures (such as the Dai tusi system) and religious organizational structures provides a stronger social support mechanism for spatial expansion; In the mature stage, the trend of multi center organizations and social governance functions interconnected within religious systems gradually emerges. The spatial evolution of Theravada Buddhism has always been accompanied by interactions between ethnic groups; In multi-ethnic areas where the Dai, Wa, and Bulang ethnic groups reside, their cultural heritage is particularly profound and their sense of social identity is particularly evident. The development of Hinayana Buddhism in China's border areas has gradually formed a religious and cultural system with Chinese characteristics, known as the "Chinese Hinayana Buddhist Culture" [6].

3. The standardization and procedural transformation of monastic governance institutions in Chinese Theravāda Buddhism

If the preceding section has outlined the evolution of Chinese Theravada Buddhism from a single core to multiple centres, and ultimately to a contemporary spatial pattern spanning six prefectures and municipalities, then the changes in contemporary monastic governance have unfolded precisely against this backdrop of spatial expansion, increased population mobility and the densification of monastic networks. As the spatial structure shifted from localised clustering to a multi-point distribution, monasteries ceased to be merely the religious centres within village communities; they increasingly became governance nodes in religious exchanges spanning counties, prefectures (cities) and even provinces. Governance systems must respond to two realities: firstly, with the rise in the number of monasteries and the density of places of worship, the traditional management approach centred on 'familiar social circles—village support—master-disciple transmission' struggles to cover the entire chain of affairs—including daily religious affairs, finances, personnel qualifications and cross-regional activities—that must be 'auditable, traceable and interconnected'; secondly, a religious landscape characterised by the coexistence of multiple ethnic groups and regions requires a set of institutional tools that are applicable nationwide whilst remaining compatible with the traditional

disciplinary codes and monastic order of Theravada Buddhism, in order to establish clear definitions of 'individuals' and 'monastic hierarchies'.

The evolution of contemporary Theravada Buddhist monastic governance systems can broadly be understood as a transition from a traditional community-based autonomous model to a modern normative management system. In traditional society, the governance of Theravada Buddhist monasteries was primarily constituted by village-based support relationships, the master-disciple lineage system, and a religious sphere centred on the monastery. This governance mechanism was organically embedded within the social life of ethnic communities, ensuring the operation and continuity of religious activities through forms such as lay support, village festival organisation, and monastic education. However, this governance model, reliant on traditional community networks and spontaneous social mechanisms, has gradually revealed its shortcomings under the pressures of contemporary society and the demands of the legal system. The impact of the market economy, increased mobility among the faithful, and the expansion of monastery scale have made it difficult for the governance model, which relies primarily on community support, to meet new organisational, financial, educational and social functional requirements. As previous research has pointed out, the traditional village-based support system and monastery management model face limitations in resource allocation and organisational capacity in the face of contemporary economic and social structural changes, becoming significant variables affecting the efficiency of monastery governance [7].

The Buddhist Association of China has, at the institutional level, separated the 'certification of religious personnel' from the 'assessment of monastic ranks', thereby establishing a clearer procedural framework and chain of authority and responsibility. In particular, the 'Measures for the Qualification Certification of Theravada Buddhist Clergy' (hereinafter referred to as the '2025 Qualification Measures') [8] and the 'Measures for the Monastic Rank Evaluation of Theravada Buddhist Clergy' (hereinafter referred to as the '2025 Monastic Rank Measures') [9], adopted on 30 June 2025, clearly demonstrate a shift in governance logic from one 'dominated by traditional titles and local experience' to a 'certification—filing —database—cross-regional transfer", which is precisely the key driver of the "standardisation and proceduralisation" of contemporary monastery governance.

Building upon the basic definition of who constitutes a Theravada Buddhist clergy member, relevant regulations have established clearer criteria regarding the scope of this category. The 2009 'Measures for the Certification of Qualifications of Theravada Buddhist Clergy' [10] defines the scope of clergy as 'Bhikkhus who have received the Bhikkhu ordination and hold corresponding professional titles or honorary titles (such as Dū, Fǎ, or Zhāo Zhāng), Pāṭhiti (Wuba Sai), Pasami, Pahuba, Pasongle, Pasongle Shankara, and other Theravada Buddhist monks". A key feature of this definition is that it ties 'clerical status' to traditional monastic ranks and honorary titles within a single framework, broadening the scope of those subject to governance and incorporating local titles and hierarchies directly into the institutional text. In the 2025 Recognition Measures, Article 2 explicitly defines "Theravada Buddhist clergy" as "Theravada Buddhist bhikkhus", thereby first establishing "clerical status" within a more operational and standardised identity unit; The corresponding distinctions in monastic ranks are addressed separately in the 2025 Monastic Rank Regulations (Article 2 explicitly classifies ranks as Bhikkhu, Siti, Sami, Huba, Songlie, and Songlie Shankara). This separation of "qualification recognition" from "monastic rank assessment" essentially standardises the aspect of monastic governance most prone to regional variations and most in need of a unified approach: first confirming "whether or not one possesses clerical qualifications", and then discussing "monastic rank" on that basis. This shifts governance from

"multiple standards" to "tiered governance", and is better suited to the needs of horizontal mobility within the contemporary multi-centred spatial structure of Theravada Buddhism in Yunnan.

The refinement of the system reflects a transition in governance from 'organisational recognition' to a procedural approach characterised by 'coordination between administrative bodies, organisations and venues'. Article 3 of the 2025 Certification Measures stipulates that the qualifications of religious personnel shall be certified by the Buddhist Association of China or provincial-level Buddhist associations. Article 6 breaks down the filing procedure into a chain of steps: application and preliminary review by county (city, district) Buddhist associations; re-examination by prefectural (district-level city) authorities; provincial-level certification and the establishment of a Theravada Buddhist Working Committee; subsequent filing with provincial-level religious affairs departments; and finally, the issuance of the 'Certificate of Buddhist Clergy' [11].

This tiered procedural design ensures that 'recognition' is no longer confined to internal approval within monasteries or local monastic communities, but is instead incorporated into a traceable institutional framework: the review of original documents, the approval stage by government religious affairs departments, tiered re-examinations and final registration are all explicitly stipulated in the regulations. When contrasted with the spatial distribution of contemporary Theravada Buddhism in Yunnan—spanning multiple prefectures and cities including Xishuangbanna, Dehong, Pu'er, Lincang, Baoshan and Honghe—this procedural framework constitutes a response to the need for clear accountability amidst a multi-point distribution, cross-regional interactions and the requirement for clearly defined administrative responsibilities, thereby preventing a governance vacuum characterised by population mobility and unaccountability.

The standardisation and proceduralisation of contemporary Theravada Buddhist monastery governance in China constitutes an institutional response to the organisational complexity arising from the long-term evolution of Theravada Buddhism's spatial structure. As the spatial configuration shifts from a single core to multiple centres, governance must transition from customs and conventions to certificates, registration, procedures and chains of responsibility. As the composition of the monastic community shifts from being predominantly local residents to one characterised by increased cross-regional mobility, governance must incorporate database updates, the transfer of management responsibilities, and inter-provincial registration. As monastic order evolves from a coexistence of local traditional titles to a nationally standardised hierarchical system, governance requires the tiered handling of 'qualification certification' and 'monastic rank assessment'. In this sense, the modern transformation of monastic governance systems and the spatial expansion of Theravada Buddhism are not two unrelated strands, but rather a single process in which they mutually influence and shape one another: spatial expansion gives rise to governance needs, whilst institutional norms in turn reorganise the operational modes of the monastic community and temple networks. This enables a local religious system, which has developed within the context of a cross-border cultural sphere, to continue functioning and maintaining its traditions within contemporary multi-regional, multi-stakeholder governance structures.

4. Conclusion

This article mainly studies the evolution of the spatial structure of Hinayana Buddhism in Yunnan region. By linking this with contemporary temple governance reform, this article aims to explore the interactive mechanism between these two aspects from a dual perspective of historical depth and contemporary institutional framework. The examination of the dissemination route, expansion of key nodes, and organizational changes of Theravada Buddhism since the 7th century shows that its development in Yunnan has always been closely related to the geopolitical landscape, ethnic

composition, and local power structure. From the early introduction to the border areas centered around Xishuangbanna, to the multi-point expansion supported by the chieftain system during the Ming and Qing dynasties, and to the formation of a dense network of temples during the Qing dynasty, the phased evolution of its spatial structure not only reflects the process of religious dissemination, but also is a historical product rooted in the regional social structure and governance environment. The evolution of this spatial distribution not only demonstrates the lasting impact of cross-border cultural fields, but also reflects the gradual localization and integration of Theravada Buddhism in the multi-ethnic society of southern Yunnan.

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