

Converted to Buddhism or Longing for an Idyllic Imaginary Life? Conflict and Fantasy Liberation under Employment Pressure in China

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Abstract: At present, there is a phenomenon of “temple craze” among young people in China when choosing careers. Contemporary young people do not believe in Buddhism, but they are willing to work in temples, which, to a certain extent, reflects the phenomenon that Chinese Buddhism adapts to Chinese local society and turns from secularization to localization. This article aims to analyze how Buddhism, a religion, has been localized and secularization in China through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis based on grounded theory, starting with four themes: media, treatment, pressure and self. The current popularity of temples cannot be separated from the development of the Internet era and the assistance of social platforms. At the same time, the high salary and leisurely content of temple work itself provide a good outlet for young people facing enormous pressure. There are various reasons for the popularity of temple work, but in the process of its popularity, it also invisibly increased the influence of Buddhism and promoted its dissemination in China.

Keywords: Buddhism, media, treatment, pressure, self

1. Introduction

In the public impression, only middle-aged or elderly people like to go to temples and worship Buddha on holidays, Saturdays, and Sundays. Most young people are materialists who only believe in science and disdain placing their wishes on the Buddha. However, a phenomenon has recently emerged in Chinese society: young people choose to burn incense between work and school, and choose to seek Buddha between seeking others and seeking oneself [1]. Compared to entering internet companies and Ctrip data [1], ticket orders for temple-related scenic spots have increased by 310% year-on-year since 2023; Since February, nearly 50% of people born in the 1990s and 2000s have booked tickets. Taking data from a weekend in mid-February as an example, the daily order volume of temple-related scenic spots has increased by 150% compared to last week's average daily order volume; As a comparison, taking theme parks as an example, the daily order volume of related scenic spots increased by 75% compared to the average daily order volume last weekend. From this, it can be seen that temples have become a channel for young people to wash their souls. Secularism is the theory that denotes “a system which sought to order and interpret life on principles taken solely from this world, without recourse to belief in God and future life [2]. Among the employment choices of Chinese young people, Buddhism, as one of the most important

religions in China, reflects the current situation and development of religion's localization and secularization in China. The research question of this paper is how Chinese Buddhists were challenged by regulation and localization, through the lens of the young generation in job hunting? This research will analyze how Buddhism has been localized and secularization in China through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis based on grounded theory, starting with four themes: media, pressure, self and treatment.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Current Situation of Localization of Buddhism in China

Since the introduction of Indian Buddhism to China [3], it has undergone over two thousand years of inheritance, and development, forming a unique and distinctive Chinese style of Buddhism. As a result, China has become a true second hometown of Buddhism. In Buddhism, karma theory is an important part. Karma derives from human consciousness, is expressed through actions and words, and further generates effects on the larger context [4]. Individuals who convert to Buddhism need to constantly help ordinary people to build up their karma for the life [5]. With the development of Chinese Buddhism, due to the comprehensive influence of various factors, Zen has gradually begun to emphasize the connection with secular life, demonstrating the idea that realizing the principles of Buddhism or becoming a Buddha does not rely solely on the formal form of reading scriptures to learn Zen, but rather on experiencing it in daily life [6]. In modern times, a major characteristic of Buddhism is its close integration with society and the times, so the products of social and historical development are reflected in the temples of urban society. Scholar Li Xiangping [7] analyzed the relationship between Chinese society, Chinese religion, and Buddhism from the perspective of traditional context and classics, rather than a binary opposition structure between sacred and secular. Chinese Buddhism and Chinese society have a special and mutually embedded relationship. Master Nature [8] also mentioned in his article that in the past 20 years of reform and opening up, there have been significant changes in the politics and economy, as well as significant changes in people's hearts and concepts. Based on the inherent social adaptability of Buddhism and historical experience, Buddhism will make significant self-adjustments in times of drastic changes. That is to say, the localization of Buddhism is close to the times and fluctuates with the pulse of the times. Religion is an integral part of social reality, with a social aspect. As a socialized organizational entity, religion is closely related to the construction of political, economic, and cultural systems in real society. Therefore, any religion that is in a period of social transformation will inevitably become a component of the overall transformation of society.

2.2. Employment and Spiritual Discourse

In recent years, with the continuous development of the social economy, the employment choices of young people have also undergone changed. In terms of the current employment situation of young people under the new situation, both internationally and domestically, there are many difficulties presented. According to the investigation and analysis of international organizations, due to the economic downturn under COVID-19, new challenges brought by science and technology, and the decline in the return rate of higher education, the unemployment rate of global youth is high and the quality of employment is worrying [9]. There are also many new phenomena in the employment process of young people in China, such as going from "involution" to "lying flat" [10]. According to the article "Deep Changes in the World and China's Progress towards the Stage of Technological Innovation Development", Porter believes that the development of China's national economy can be divided into four stages: the production-factor-oriented stage, the investment-oriented stage, the innovation-oriented stage, and the wealth-oriented-stage [11]. China's economy is currently

entering a stage of technological innovation and development [10]. The reduction of demographic dividend will lead to the reduction of the labor force, which will lead to the reduction of employment opportunities. From Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, human needs include physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, respect needs, and self-actualization needs [14]. Physiological needs are the primary needs of human life and survival, and the most fundamental driving force behind human behavior [12]. From a practical perspective, excessive work patterns have become the norm for most urban employed youth, who have been working excessively for a long time without guaranteed time for meals and sleep. Especially for young people who have just joined the workforce, their income and benefits are not directly proportional to the tasks they undertake. Secondly, Maslow believes that once the need for respect is thwarted, there will be feelings of inferiority, weakness, and incompetence, leading to a loss of confidence [13]. Nowadays, social competition has become extremely fierce, and employed young people are forced to join the meaningless competition. Some enterprises have reduced and increased the work pressure on young people through overtime work, weakened benefits, and other means. In addition, Maslow also believed that young people require for self-actualization [12]. For young workers, facing work and life pressures, contemporary young workers are more rational and realistic, with a focus on self-actualization needs.

3. Method

The first research method is the semi-structured interview method. In terms of the selection of research subjects, the author selected six young people around the age of 25, who had just graduated and started working, as the research subjects, taking into account the scope of young people's employment. Around the research topic, the author has set several basic questions, namely: Have you ever learned about temple recruitment? How did you learn about it? Are you willing to work in a temple and why? Do you have an understanding of the work content of the temple? How much do you know? What is your understanding of Buddhism? These questions cover young people's understanding of religion and career choices, basically covering the scope of research. At the same time, an open-ended interview method was adopted during the interview, allowing the interviewees to freely express their opinions and experiences, and freely express their thoughts and feelings. Before the interview, the researcher will inform the interviewees of the research purpose and the processing method of the interview text, and all interviewees express informed consent. The interview duration for each interviewee is approximately 45-60 minutes, mainly based on the data obtained through online observation for further analysis of young people's employment choices and the reasons behind them.

In the analysis phase, the second research method adopted is the theoretical analysis based on grounded theory. After completing the interview section, based on the interview content, the keywords of each interview result were coded and a total of 46 codes were obtained, including Weibo, Diamond Sutra, Elderly Generation, Journey to the West, Childhood, TV, Leisure, Cleaning, Early Training, Answering Doubts, Journey to the West, Advertising, TV Station, Mythology, Good Treatment, Worship to Buddha, Incense Burning, Chanting, Living Buddha Helping the Public, Tourism, Online Search, Internal Examination, Pressure for Continuing Education Employment pressure, self-improvement, contentment, randomness, Tiktok, food and housing, travel to the west, simple work, social media, good conditions, low requirements, leisure work, high salary, extracurricular books, TV works, WeChat, Tiktok, good treatment, purifying the mind, leisure, purity, self-survival, concentration. It is not difficult to see that these codes have commonalities. After summarizing and organizing them, the author has extracted a total of five themes and sub-themes, namely (1) Media - social platforms, TV dramas, fairy tales, extracurricular books, tourism promotion, advertising, and online search. (2) Treatment - high salary, good

conditions, free food, and accommodation, simple work, burning incense, worshipping Buddha and chanting scriptures, cleaning up, solving guests' questions, and working leisurely. (3) Pressure - high pressure for further education and employment, and introversion. (4) Self-improvement, casual, purifying the soul, and living oneself.

4. Discussion

4.1. Media

For most respondents, when asked about ways to learn about temple recruitment and Buddhism, 'media' is a way that everyone mentions. For the majority of contemporary graduating students and young people entering the workplace, their birth date is around 1997, and most people were exposed to Buddhism through channels such as TV dramas, mythological stories, and extracurricular books when they were young. As frequently mentioned in the interview results, "Journey to the West" and "Living Buddha Ji Gong". Taking the TV drama "Journey to the West" as an example, the theme of this novel is originally the story of Tang Monk and his disciples four people learning from the West, so Buddhist culture is everywhere in the entire novel. The novel extensively promotes Buddhist ideas through the mouths of characters such as Tang Seng and Guanyin Bodhisattva. When Tang Seng and his disciples encounter disasters, they often seek help from Buddhist deities. The ending of Tang Seng's three disciples from demons to monks, who ultimately achieved positive results, also explains the cultural ideology of Buddhism. The novel reflects the clear rules and regulations of Buddhism, such as not eating meat, not killing animals, and not lusting, through the daily life of Tang Seng and his disciples [14]. In addition, most respondents learned about temple recruitment through online media platforms. According to sorting out, most of the respondents saw the recruitment notice of the temple through social media, such as WeChat, Weibo, Tiktok and other platforms. Nowadays, society has entered the era of the Internet. Whoever holds the dominant position on the internet can have a greater impact on society and guide the public. The internet provides the most effective new way for the popularization and dissemination of Buddhism [15]. This also shows that Buddhist temples are keeping up with the times and expanding their influence through online platforms, which is also a reflection of Buddhism's compliance with the trend of the online media era in China.

4.2. Treatment

In each respondent's response, the benefits of working in temples were mentioned. A respondent mentioned that "its conditions are relatively good, its requirements are not very high, and its work is also very leisurely." The salary of work is an important factor that most young people consider when choosing a career. According to Chinese media reports, the recruitment notice of Fahua Temple in Zhejiang mentioned that the working hours were nine to five in the morning, weekends were off, the monthly salary after becoming a regular was 10000 yuan, and five insurances and one fund were paid. Nanhai Buddhist Academy recruits lecturers, provides career staffing, and also provides channels for talent introduction policies, enjoying benefits related to talent introduction [1]. In terms of working hours and wages, the treatment in temples is indeed better than in most enterprises, so it is not difficult to understand why every respondent mentioned being willing to work in temples if given the opportunity. Under the impact of the epidemic and the new situation of "double reduction" in 2022, among other changes in the job market, young people are also increasingly aware of the importance of stability. A respondent mentioned that "temple jobs are all organized and very good." Young people who have seen social phenomena such as layoffs and industry disappearance are increasingly seeking stability. In this situation, temple jobs are stable and offer high salaries, making them a new career choice that attracts young people. Meanwhile, all

respondents believe that the job responsibilities of temples are relatively relaxed and leisurely. “I clock in at 9 o’clock every day, then look at the wooden fish in the temple, recite sutras, clean up, then have lunch, take a nap, entertain Xiangke in the afternoon, then go out to help others, and then clock in and out at night, and then finish.” “Worship Buddha, burn incense, recite sutras.” “I work as a clerk in the temple to organize materials. Also, I manage the temple in the library and organize flowers and plants.” These are the respondents’ opinions on temple work. Indeed, work in temples is relatively easy compared to regular work. In addition, temples have now become more diverse in their positions, giving young people more choices. In addition to clerks, modern temples also recruit technical personnel, lecturers, photographers, propaganda personnel, and other types of work [1]. The Longquan Temple in Beijing has attracted many top students, professors, and technical personnel from prestigious schools, using online technology to spread Buddhism. Master Xuecheng from Longquan Temple said, “Modern Buddhism requires more highly educated intellectuals to participate. Working together here to serve society and achieve one’s own value is a manifestation of a more enterprising and responsible spirit [16].” It can be seen that the absorption of outstanding young people is an important embodiment of the localization and secularization of contemporary temples and Buddhism.

4.3. Pressure

When it comes to young people’s career choices, the external environment is an indispensable factor. In the interview, some interviewees mentioned that “the introversion behavior of college students in today’s society, as well as the pressure of our education, employment, and family, has somewhat restrained my idea of following myself and following my heart.” It can be seen that excessive external pressure in society is also a very important reason why young people are willing to work in temples. Marx once said, “The essence of a person is not an inherent abstraction of a single person. In reality, it is the sum of all social relationships [17].” After entering the 21st century, Chinese society has undergone tremendous changes, and the younger generation is facing both “the increasing inter-generational transmission of social capital and the narrowing of the upward path of class [18]” and the practical problems of overtime, layoffs, and high housing prices. According to Maslow’s theory of needs, the accumulation of material wealth in society will shift people’s social needs from low-level to high-level, from three meals a day, clothing, food, housing, and transportation to obtaining respect, love, care, and realizing personal value [12]. Currently, the overall material conditions of society are increasing, but external pressure is too great. Young people generally tend to find jobs that are easy to work with and have more personal time, which happens to be in line with temple work.

4.4. Self

In addition to the reasons mentioned above, working in temples and being exposed to Buddhism can help young people purify their souls, live themselves, and live more freely. A respondent mentioned: “Our Buddhism emphasizes the improvement of personal cultivation, reaching a state of being close to others and having nothing to do with it, and being able to improve oneself in the environment of a temple.” “When you are in this Buddhist environment, you will be influenced by this subtle influence, that kind of spiritual sublimation, which is what we Buddhism should focus on. In Buddhism, following one’s fate and following one’s heart is an attitude towards life, which is somewhat different from the material desires we currently pursue.” “Through the responses of the interviewees, it is not difficult to see that one of the important reasons why young people are willing to work in temples is their desire for a Buddhist environment, believing that they can purify their souls and improve their own realm through exposure to Buddhism in temples. When young people

are enduring and enduring the pain brought about by social development and cannot effectively resolve it, the profound and unfathomable Dharma has become a good medicine for young people to face life. In temple life, one can freely feel every moment and find a balance between life and work. “People in today’s society are too tired, and what they need is not being forced forward by the fast-paced pace, but some inner comfort and tranquility to slow down [1].”

5. Conclusion

The phenomenon that contemporary young people do not believe in Buddhism, but are willing to work in temples reflects the phenomenon that Buddhism has turned from localization to secularization in China. Most of them do not believe in Buddhism, but yearn for temples to bring another life experience. Religion is closely related to social development at all times. The current popularity of temples cannot be separated from the development of the Internet era and the assistance of social platforms. Young people share their work experience and insights in temples through social platforms, and temples publish recruitment notices on social media platforms, which will increase public participation and interest. At the same time, the high salary and leisurely content of temple work itself provide a good outlet for young people facing enormous pressure. There are various reasons for the popularity of temple work, but in the process of its popularity, it also invisibly increased the influence of Buddhism and promoted its dissemination in China.

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