The Intersection of Architecture and Culture: the Spread and Development of Buddhism in Yonghe Temple

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Keywords: Yonghe Temple, art history, architecture, cultural integration, heritage preservation, sociology

Abstract: This article examines the cultural and architectural significance of Beijing's Yonghe Temple, a legacy of Tibetan Buddhism and Qing Dynasty. The study explores the temple's twofold function as a place of worship and a political instrument that promotes interethnic cooperation, and findings are explained by drawing on firsthand accounts, interviews with resident monks, and historical documents. Specifically, this paper will argue that Qing government's approach to racial and ethnic integration could be traced from the conversion of Yonghe Temple from a Qing royal home to a Tibetan Buddhist temple, and the "three wonders of wooden sculptures," which serve as the architectural centerpiece of Yonghe Palace, exhibiting a blend of Manchu, Tibetan, Han, and Mongolian cultural aspects. This paper shall go on to explore the relationship between ancient religious practices and recent challenges, by examining the temple's recent development into a sought-after tourist destination , through in-person interviews with the monks. It draws attention to the ways that monastic routines have been disturbed by commercialization and an unprecedented increase in tourists, endangering the maintenance of its spiritual and cultural purity. The monks respond by calling for more stringent visitation control and public education in order to maintain the temple's somber ambiance. However, despite those challenges, Yonghe Temple's ongoing appeal, particularly among young people, demonstrates the importance of Buddhist concepts like compassion and generosity in resolving contemporary problems. This study emphasizes the need of combining cultural preservation with current demands, providing insights into how ancient religious traditions adapt to modern circumstances.

1. Introduction

Yonghe Palace is the most popular temple in Beijing. As someone born and raised in Beijing, I have frequented there since I was a child. I have had conversations with Master Jiamuyang Tubutan, a 98-year-old abbot, and the Great Lama of Baifeng Pavilion, an eminent, 96-year-old monk, among many other masters. Every year around Spring Festival, I would visit for the famous Laba porridge cooked by the monks there. The auspicious and solemn vibe there had left a very deep impression on me[1].

"Yonghe Temple is not only a royal Tibetan Buddhist temple for Qing emperors, but also an eminent museum featuring Tibetan Buddhist art, especially for modern visitors. Anyone, upon walking in here, will inevitably become impressed by its spectacular royal architectural style, the magnificent Tibetan Buddhist statues, and the rich Tibetan Buddhist culture that it tries to convey. It feels like a holy ground created jointly by gods and humans."

In order to research on the intersection of architecture and culture in Yonghe Temple, I have conducted an interview with Master Dai, a monk at the Temple. The following paragraphs make up a summation of my findings from the interview.

2. Historical significance

"'One Yonghe Temple, half of the history of Qing Dynasty.' Because it has been either the

  DOI: 10.25236/ssehr.2024.029

birthplace or residence of two Qing emperors, Yongzheng and Qianlong, Yonghe Temple has been known as the 'Blessed Land for Dragons' (as dragons are viewed as tokens of Chinese emperors, my annotation). The temple served as the symbol of the Qing royal family and culture of Qing Dynasty. It was once the center for diplomatic affairs, talent training, and religious affairs related to Tibetan Buddhism in the mainland. Historically, it enjoyed a high social status and casted a material influence on the development of Tibetan Buddhism in the mainland. It was first built in the 33rd year of Kangxi (1694). Subsequently, in the 48th year of Kangxi (1709), it was upgraded to become 'Prince Yong's Mansion' (Prince Yong would later become Emperor Yongzheng, my annotation). Then, in the 3rd year of Yongzheng (1725), it started to serve as a temporary residence and was bestowed the name "Yonghe Palace." The word "Yonghe" incorporates the longing for harmony in Chinese culture, and expresses Qing emperors' emphasis on ethnical and social harmony. In the 9th year of Qianlong (1744), the palace was converted into a Tibetan Buddhist temple ("Yonghe Temple"), and the emperor appointed the prime minister to become in charge"[2].

"The motivation behind converting Yonghe Palace into a temple deals with the emperor's concern with national unity and ethnical harmony: in the face of the aggravated tension between Mongolia, Tibet, and the mainland, Emperor Qianlong adopted the strategy of 'governing each ethnic group with respect to their own beliefs and customs.' In other words, Yonghe Temple served, in addition to a religious function of 'promoting Buddhist benevolence,' the political function of bridging different ethnicities: 'promoting the Yellow Sect (Monks from that sect wears yellow hat in the shape of an umbrella), to keep Mongolia in peace,' and 'managing Tibet, to build a foundation for national peace and tranquility.' [Toward this specific goal,] Emperor Qianlong established four learning halls at Yonghe Temple: Xianzong Hall, Tantric Hall, Kalachakra Hall, and Medicine Hall. Masters were selected from three major monasteries in Tibet, to serve as sutra teachers and khenbu (the head of the monks), and 500 young monks were recruited from Mongolia to study Buddhism there, to be educated into religious talents who 'obey state affairs, understand regulations, and manifest etiquettes'"[2].

"Having become a center for Buddhist ceremonies, and having been serving as a temple for over 280 years, Yonghe Temple has made significant contributions to promoting the cultural integration of various ethnic groups, especially Han, Manchu, Mongolian, and Tibetan. In 1981, it became opened to public as a religious venue. Since then, it has hosted more than 200 political and religious leaders, in addition to countless international tourists and Buddhist practitioners. Over time, Yonghe Temple has solidified its reputation as a window that showcases Tibetan Buddhist culture and art"[3].

3. Architectural style

"As the family temple of the Qing royal family, Yonghe Templ's architectural style differs from any other temple. It features red walls and yellow tiles, which are similar in style with those of the Forbidden City […]. The temple consists of seven courtyards. On the 400-meter central axis extending from south to north, the main buildings of each courtyard are arranged in order: Archway, Zhaotai Gate, Tianwang Hall, Yonghe Palace, Yongyou Hall, Falun Hall, Wanfu Pavilion, and Suicheng Hall, with each building in different forms but equally magnificent. A popular singing describes Yonghe Temple as 'the realm of the Qing capital; the garden of immortality.' Across the temple, sit dozens of various buildings such as steel pavilions, stone lions, and bronze tripods […], as well as more than a thousand rooms, spanning an area of more than 66,000 square meters. From south to north, all the buildings together form a pattern of 'tall main halls and deep courtyards,' incorporating architectural characteristics of Han, Tibetan, Mongolian and Manchu ethnicities. Integration of these four ethnic cultures is reflected in many architectural components, such as its layout, sculptures, painting, and thangka (A scroll painting painted on cloth, my annotation). The name plaques on every main building are written in four languages: Chinese, Manchu, Mongolian and Tibetan. […] The use of minority languages on name plaques reflects Qing government's policy of respecting the cultures of, and uniting people of all ethnic groups"[4].

The very architectural style of Yonghe Temple is best represented by what is called the "three

wonders of wooden sculptures." "The first of the 'three wonders' […] is the 'Statue of Maitreya Buddha.' In the 15th year of Qianlong (1750), Kelsang Gyatso, the seventh Dalai Lama, donated a piece of white sandalwood from Nepal that was 3 meters wide. It took three years for the wood to be transported to Beijing all the way from Tibet […]. Craftsmen from the [royal] Construction Office carefully carved the sandalwood into an 18-meter-high standing Buddha statue […]. This statue later made its way into the Guinness Book of World Records, certified as the world's largest monolithic wooden statue. This Buddha statue features a Buddha in Tibetan-style image, wearing a crown decorated with five Buddha figures and a Bodhisattva costume. It has a majestic body and a solemn appearance. Together constructed was a series of pavilions, including the main Wanfu Pavilion, and the auxiliary Yongkang and Yansui Pavilion as 'protectors' of the Buddha statue. The three pavilions are intricately connected by corridors, in a way that the three pavilions appear as if one entity […]. Because the Buddha statue was too tall, the statue had to be sculpted and erected first, before any pavilions could be built. Therefore, a saying about Yonghe Temple goes 'the Buddha goes first, and then the temple.' "[4].

"The second of the 'three wonders of wooden sculptures' at Yonghe Temple is the 'Five-Hundred Arhat Mountain,' with nearly 5 meters in height. The mountain was made with red sandalwood, and the "Arhats" were made with five metals: gold, silver, copper, iron, and tin. The five hundred Arhats are each about 10 centimeters high and feature various poses […]. Each has a unique facial expression and posture, showing the exquisite skills of Qing craftsmen"[4].

"The third of the 'three wonders of wooden sculptures' in Yonghe Temple is the 'Golden-nanmu Altar' situated in the Zhaofo Tower. [As its name suggests], the altar was carved from the precious golden Nanmu. It is as tall as a double-storey house, and consists of three layers. On the altar sit 99 golden dragons. And behind the Buddha statue was carved a large flame, guarded by Garuda and fairies. The two sides of the altar adopted the shape of golden dragons hovering around pillars. Within the altar, stand a bronze statue of Sakyamuni Buddha. Next to the Buddha stand […] the two great disciples of Sakyamuni. With a golden foil attached to the wooden core, the entire statue come off as lively, dazzling, and exquisite. Zhaofo Tower is the ancestral hall where Xiaosheng Queen Mother Niohuru, Emperor Qianlong's mother, worshiped Buddha. When the original Yonghe Palace was converted from a palace to a temple, Emperor Qianlong purposefully ordered to have its original form maintained out of respect for his mother"[1].

"Also worth noting are the paintings within Yonghe Temple, which are equally distinctive in form. In addition to adopting techniques conventionally associated with the Qing royal family, such as golden dragons with royal seals, and entwining lotus flowers, the paintings innovatively incorporated characteristics found in paintings and crafts in Tibetan Buddhist temples, such as the seven treasures, eight auspicious signs, […] Vajras, six-petal lotuses […], sutras and mantras, Buddha portraits, and large-scale murals. The incorporation of Buddhist artistic styles is representative of the high artistic achievements of the Qing painters, as well as the successful integration of multiple ethnic cultures [within Qing dynasty]"[4].

4. Role in religious and cultural practices

"During the Qing Dynasty, Yonghe Temple served as an imperial family temple, with more than 900 monks at its peak. The monks assumed the responsibility of praying for the royal family as well as the public. Specifically, the Temple not only sent people to chant sutras every day at the royal palace, they also accompanied emperors as the emperors left the city for Buddhist ceremonies. At Yonghe Temple, religion and politics are closely intertwined. For instance, when Mongolian and Tibetan officials visited Beijing, it used to serve as the center for religious affairs and ceremonies. Monks at Yonghe Temple received outstanding treatment, to an extent that a saying goes 'monks in Beijing are no less than princes.' In fact, the social status and treatment of Yonghe Temple's Khenpo (abbot, my annotation) exceeds that of average princes. For example, in the 21st year of Qianlong (1756), Emperor Qianlong rewarded the first Khenpo of Yonghe Temple with a golden chariot" (my photos). Before then, rewards like this had remained almost unheard of.

"The third Zhangjia was appointed by the emperor to preside over converting Yonghe Palace

into a temple. He had suggested that Emperor Qianlong authorize the 7th Dalai Lama to establish a position called 'Kashag,' who would then become in charge of managing all municipal and religious affairs in Tibet, at the discretion of Qing's own ministers stationed in Tibet. A faithful adherence to this strategy has brought about an integration of political and religious systems in Tibet. The 1st Cemo Lin, for example, was a Khempo of Yonghe Temple who assumed office of the regent of Tibet. With his profound knowledge in Buddhism and outstanding political acumen, he had not only reconciled many regional conflicts, but also […] shaped the way in which religious affairs are handled in Tibet"[1].

"Typically, people have associated China with two palaces: 'Yonghe Temple' and 'Potala Palace.' Both palaces enjoy a high religious as well as social status. Yonghe Temple's architecture, statues, thangkas, ceremonial objects, plaques, couplets, and inscriptions are all representations of the cultures of the Qing royal family, Buddhism, and a plethora of ethnic groups. They are each unparalleled first-hand source for studying Qing society, culture, and art"[1].

5. Development and influence of buddhism in yonghe temple

Today, Yonghe Temple is one of the world's most famous religious sites, attracting countless Buddhist practitioners and tourists at home and abroad, and has become an exemplar of Chinese and Buddhist culture. Yonghe Temple now receives tens of thousands of tourists every day, and more than 60,000 people a day during holidays. Especially following three years of nationwide lockdown throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of visitors spiked, reaching 6 million in 2023, with the majority of tourists being young people[2].

So, why are young people now in love with Yonghe Temple? On the one hand, Yonghe Temple enjoys a reputation of "unconditionally granting requests." People feel that, after a visit there, everything feels better. In an age with accelerating pace and pressure, especially as the Chinese economy goes downhill following the pandemic, young Chinese people become crippled with anxiety, which rationalizes their motivation to resort to deities, in search for wealth, successful career, academic performance, peace, health and longevity, wisdom, and marriage. In Beijing, a popular saying goes "Yonghe Temple for males, and Hongluo Temple for females," which refers to the two temples in Beijing that are alleged to be "most effective" in answering to people's needs. Men often choose to go to Yonghe Temple to pray for promotion, wealth, and success in career. On one hand, this reflects Yonghe Temple's inveterately high status among the public. On the other hand, it also manifests precisely the unparalleled power that the Buddhist ideals of compassion and benevolence possess in liberating human mind from burdens and troubles[2].

But, at the same time, as we find ourselves in an increasingly modernized society, many people regard Yonghe Temple simply as a place for "making wishes" or "praying for blessings," rather than a cultural center worthy of in-depth understanding and learning. Therefore, the rich historical and cultural background of the temple often remain regrettably unnoticed. In recent years, a particular trend has featured what is called an "incense ash bracelet," which are bracelets made from incense ashes burnt at Yonghe Temple, to buy which, people queue up outside Yonghe Temple for a minimum of two hours. But this is only part of the picture. While taking turns to buy an "incense ash bracelet" takes two hours, doing so to get a consecration now takes three hours, and to burn incense and kowtow takes no less. In the past, activities such as circumambulating the temple and spinning prayer wheels were restricted to the monks, but as it became open to the public, now tourists queue up in long lines to do so as well. In the past, most people came to Yonghe Temple for Buddhist knowledge; these days, tourists' agenda centers almost exclusively around buying "lucky charm bracelets," posing for photographs in rented ancient costumes, and making short videos, in hopes of harvesting a monetary benefit upon posting them onto streaming platforms such as Douyin (Chinese version of Tiktok) and Xiaohongshu[2].

The fact that people queue up for hours to buy "lucky charm bracelets" reflects the modern population's relatively utilitarian take on religion: in an ideal scenario, religious practices offer something material in return. In light of recent phenomena like this, the monks at Yonghe Temple

worry that the cultural heritage of Yonghe Temple might inevitably give place to many negative impacts casted by commercialization[2].

6. Contemporary challenges and prospects

The unprecedented increase in the number of visitors in recent years has been casting a negative impact on the daily religious activities of the temple; specifically, on the daily routine of the monks. To start with, it takes away monk's capacity to concentrate on chanting sutras. In the past, monks would get up at 4:30am every day, and spend the entire day on religious routines, also known as "making offerings to the Buddha." But now, with the swarming tourists (tens of thousands every day), monks are forced to preoccupy themselves with monitoring and guiding waves of tourists, to prevent against stampedes and filming of confidential information. With the emergence of this new responsibility, many Dharma ceremonies had to be canceled. The challenge now faced by Yonghe temple is an unprecedented one: they have to figure out a way to accommodate tens of thousands of daily visitors, while at the same time best preserve a solemn, religious atmosphere. This challenge is a particularly tricky one, because on one hand, the democratization of digital devices helps to quickly make Yonghe Temple known to a greater audience, but on the other hand, too great a number of visitors is fundamentally incompatible with the solemn and serene atmosphere, and a compact schedule of religious routines that any temple is entrusted to preserve and observe[2].

Historically, Yonghe Temple has enforced strict regulations on monks. Cellular devices are prohibited within sutra sessions, and phone calls are banned inside main halls. Study sessions are hosted each night, and monks observe no weekends and no holidays. The abbot is persuaded that an excessive dependence on mobile devices is detrimental to committed learning of Buddhism[2].

In addition to the monks' religious routines, the rapid increase in the number of visitors to Yonghe Temple has also taken a toll on the building itself, which has also been a factor contributing to the reduction of ceremonies at Yonghe Temple[2].

It has then become evident that, one of Yonghe Temple's most important project at hand is one that requires managing the huge flow of tourists, while maintaining its religious and cultural functions. Within my conversation with the monk, I had mentioned the idea of adopting the pattern of the Forbidden City, which closes on Mondays, but I soon came to realize this might not be effective enough in reducing the number of victors: even if the temple does indeed close on Monday, it only mean even more visitos on any other day. The aforementioned challenge that Yonghe Temple now faces is one that is brought upon by modernization, the commercialization of the tourism industry, and the rapid development of technology. Precisely how to balance the needs for cultural preservation and those for commercialization, or at the core of this conundrum, how on earth are religions such as Buddhism, which traces its origin from centuries ago, "supposed to" be practiced in a modern society, is a question that calls for more than a one-sentence answer. In our case of the Yonghe Temple, the monk I interviewed with has mentioned ways whereby he believes would help maintain an atmosphere that is clean, quiet, and respectful: better management, stricter regulations, and democratization of knowledge about the temple's cultural background[2].

In the society that we now share, Buddhism has become more and more popular, and Buddhist practices have become increasing democratized. The monk holds the conviction that Yonghe Temple will evolve toward a positive direction, because more young people are visiting, and precisely young people are shaping the future. According to the monk, educating young people about Yonghe Temple and Buddhism consists not only having them burning incenses and kowtowing, but instilling in them key Buddhist ideals, such as benevolence and altruism, which would hopefully serve as an antidote to the overly utilitarian beliefs that prevail our society today. Not only should people pray to the Buddha for their own good, in an ideal scenario, they should also be following and emulating the Buddha: refraining from committing the evil, practicing good deeds, and praying for the well-being of the community at large[2].

7. Conclusion

This research has offered a thorough investigation of the interaction of architecture, culture, and Buddhism as represented by the Yonghe Temple. The study traces the temple's history from an imperial home to a significant religious and cultural hub using historical studies, interviews with monks, and firsthand observations.

The study identifies the "three wonders of wooden sculptures," which represent the Qing Dynasty's creative and religious accomplishments, as one of its most notable features. The article also discusses challenges that are associated with modernization, like the conflict between commercialization and cultural preservation, and offers perspectives on how modernization has affected traditional Buddhist practices.

The study is important because it helps readers understand how places of cultural heritage can best preserve its historical and spiritual qualities while adjusting to the needs of a contemporary society. Future studies can examine creative ways to strike a balance between religious rituals and tourism, highlighting the contribution of modern tools to raising awareness of the rich history of Yonghe Temple. In the end, this study is a call to action for maintaining the temple's legacy as a symbol of spiritual and cultural integration in a world that is always changing.

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