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## Chinese Buddhist Tradition in Chengdu

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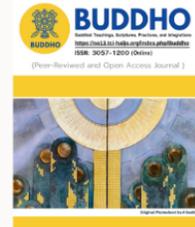


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Academic Review Articles

## Chinese Buddhist Tradition in Chengdu

Wu Cing Chi\*

### Abstract

Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, has been a significant center for Chinese Buddhist tradition for centuries. With its deep-rooted Buddhist heritage, the city is home to renowned temples, monastic institutions, and cultural relics that reflect the influence of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. This paper explores the historical development of Buddhism in Chengdu, emphasizing key temples such as Wenshu Monastery and Zhaojue Temple. Furthermore, it examines the role of Buddhist philosophy, religious practices, and the impact of Buddhism on Chengdu's cultural and social landscape. By analyzing historical records, temple inscriptions, and contemporary Buddhist practices, this study highlights the enduring significance of Buddhism in Chengdu's spiritual and cultural identity.

**Keywords:** Chengdu, Chinese Buddhism, Buddhist Tradition

### Introduction

Buddhism has played a fundamental role in shaping China's religious and cultural landscape for nearly two millennia. Chengdu, as a historical and cultural hub in Southwest China, has been particularly influential in preserving and promoting Buddhist traditions. The introduction of Buddhism to Chengdu can be traced back to the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), when Buddhist monks and scholars disseminated teachings along the Silk Road, leading to the establishment of temples and monastic centers (Lai, 2003). Over time, Chengdu became home to several prominent Buddhist institutions that contributed to the spread of Mahayana Buddhism, particularly through the efforts of renowned monks and scholars.

One of the most significant Buddhist sites in Chengdu is Wenshu Monastery, which dates back to the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE). This temple, dedicated to Manjushri (the Bodhisattva of Wisdom), has remained a center for Buddhist learning, ritual practices, and monastic discipline (Ch'en, 1973). Another important religious site is Zhaojue Temple, historically known as the "Great Forest Monastery of the West," which played a crucial role in the development of Chan

(Zen) Buddhism in Sichuan (Yü, 2020). These temples, along with others in Chengdu, have served as spiritual and cultural centers, attracting pilgrims, scholars, and practitioners from across China and beyond.

In addition to its religious significance, Buddhism in Chengdu has influenced various aspects of society, including art, literature, and philosophy. The integration of Buddhist principles into local customs and traditions has shaped the city's cultural identity, reflecting the broader influence of Buddhism in Chinese society (Wright, 1959). This paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the Buddhist tradition in Chengdu, focusing on its historical development, key institutions, and its impact on the region's cultural and social evolution.

Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, has been a significant center for Chinese Buddhist traditions since ancient times. The city's Buddhist heritage is exemplified by several historic temples, each reflecting the evolution and resilience of Buddhism in the region.

### **Daci Temple**

Daci Temple, established in the 3rd century during the Wei and Jin dynasties, stands as a testament to Chengdu's rich Buddhist heritage. Its historical significance is amplified by events such as the full ordination of the esteemed monk Xuanzang in 622 CE during the Tang dynasty. Despite facing destruction during the Ming dynasty, the temple was meticulously reconstructed in the Qing dynasty, symbolizing the resilience and enduring nature of Buddhist traditions in the region.

Historically, Daci Temple was not only a religious center but also a bustling hub of commerce and culture. The temple's vicinity hosted various markets throughout the year, known collectively as the "monthly markets." These included the lantern market in January, the flower market in February, and the silkworm market in March, among others. Such events fostered a vibrant community atmosphere, intertwining religious practices with daily life and commerce (Cheng, 2021).

In contemporary times, the temple's surroundings have undergone significant urban redevelopment. The integration of modern commercial complexes, such as the Chengdu IFS and Taikoo Li, has transformed the area into a blend of historical reverence and modern consumerism. This juxtaposition raises questions about the preservation of cultural heritage amidst rapid urbanization. While the redevelopment aims to rejuvenate the area, it also presents challenges in maintaining the temple's spiritual sanctity and historical essence (Wang, 2021).

The architectural evolution of Daci Temple reflects broader trends in Chinese temple architecture. The use of wooden materials, characteristic of traditional Buddhist temples, plays a crucial role in creating a "sense of place" and a sacred atmosphere. This architectural approach not only preserves historical context but also fosters a spiritual connection for visitors, enhancing their overall experience (Zou & Bahauddin, 2024).

In conclusion, Daci Temple serves as a microcosm of Chengdu's dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. Its rich history and cultural significance continue to influence the city's identity, even as it navigates the complexities of urban development. Balancing the preservation

of such historical sites with contemporary growth remains a critical endeavor for Chengdu's future.

### **Wenshu Monastery**

Wenshu Monastery, originally constructed during the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE), stands as Chengdu's most well-preserved Buddhist temple. Beyond its architectural grandeur, the monastery houses numerous cultural relics, notably a parietal bone relic of the esteemed monk Xuanzang, underscoring its profound historical and religious significance.

The monastery's journey through time reflects resilience and adaptability. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), many religious sites in China faced destruction or repurposing. Wenshu Monastery was no exception, suffering significant damage and a decline in religious activities. However, with the advent of China's reform era in 1978, a revival commenced. Key strategies employed in this resurgence included the implementation of a binomial system, establishing a centralized organizational structure, and pursuing official recognition. These measures not only restored the monastery's religious functions but also enhanced its status as a cultural and spiritual hub in Chengdu (Tian, 2021).

In contemporary times, Wenshu Monastery has embraced tourism as a means to disseminate Buddhist culture and sustain its operations. The integration of tourism has transformed the monastery into a vibrant site that attracts both pilgrims and tourists. This dual role necessitates a delicate balance between preserving the sanctity of religious practices and accommodating the commercial aspects of tourism. The challenge lies in ensuring that the influx of visitors does not compromise the authenticity and spiritual atmosphere of the monastery (Ouyang, 2021).

The preservation efforts at Wenshu Monastery also highlight broader discussions on authenticity in urban historic preservation within China. Negotiating the demands of modernization while maintaining historical integrity requires continuous dialogue among stakeholders, including religious communities, government authorities, and the public. The case of Wenshu Monastery exemplifies how adaptive strategies can lead to the successful preservation of cultural heritage in rapidly urbanizing contexts (Zhu, 2019).

In summary, Wenshu Monastery's evolution from its Sui dynasty origins to its current status as a religious and cultural landmark exemplifies the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. Through strategic revival efforts and thoughtful engagement with contemporary challenges, the monastery continues to serve as a testament to Chengdu's enduring Buddhist heritage.

### **Zhaojue Temple**

Zhaojue Temple, established during the Zhenguan period (627–649 CE) of the Tang dynasty, stands as a testament to the resilience of Buddhist traditions in Chengdu. Throughout its history, the temple has undergone multiple cycles of destruction and restoration, reflecting the broader socio-political and cultural shifts in China.

During the Song dynasty, under the leadership of Master Yanmei, Zhaojue Temple experienced significant expansion, boasting over 300 halls. This period marked a zenith in the temple's influence, positioning it as a central hub for Buddhist practice and learning in the region. However, the subsequent centuries brought challenges; the temple faced destruction during the Ming dynasty and was later rebuilt in the Qing dynasty, underscoring the persistent efforts to preserve its spiritual and cultural heritage.

The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) posed one of the most formidable threats to religious institutions across China, and Zhaojue Temple was no exception. Many temples were repurposed, desecrated, or destroyed during this tumultuous period. In the aftermath, recognizing the cultural and historical significance of such sites, efforts were initiated to restore them. Zhaojue Temple underwent reconstruction in 1984, symbolizing a broader resurgence of religious and cultural identity in post-Cultural Revolution China.

In contemporary times, Zhaojue Temple continues to serve as a vital center for Buddhist practice. Its enduring presence offers insights into the dynamic interplay between religion, culture, and politics in China's history. The temple's ability to withstand periods of adversity and rejuvenate itself speaks to the resilience of Buddhist traditions and their adaptability amidst changing socio-political landscapes.

The history of Zhaojue Temple exemplifies the broader narrative of religious sites in China, highlighting themes of destruction, restoration, and resilience. Its journey from the Tang dynasty to the present day reflects the enduring significance of Buddhist institutions in Chinese society and their capacity to navigate and adapt to periods of profound change.

## **Conclusion**

The historical trajectory of Daci Temple, Wenshu Monastery, and Zhaojue Temple illustrates the complex interplay between tradition and modernity in Chengdu's Buddhist heritage. Each of these religious sites has endured cycles of destruction and restoration, reflecting the broader socio-political and cultural transformations in China. While they serve as spiritual centers, their significance extends beyond religion, encompassing cultural, architectural, and economic dimensions. The challenges posed by urbanization, modernization, and tourism necessitate adaptive preservation strategies to maintain their historical and religious essence. Ultimately, these temples remain vital symbols of Chengdu's rich Buddhist legacy, embodying resilience and continuity amid change.

## **Suggestions**

1. Sustainable Preservation Strategies - Authorities and conservationists should implement sustainable heritage preservation methods that integrate traditional architectural elements with modern conservation technologies to maintain the structural integrity of these temples.

2. Balanced Tourism Management - While tourism provides financial support, a structured visitor management system should be established to balance commercial activities with religious sanctity, ensuring that these sites retain their authenticity.

3. Community Engagement - Local communities should be actively involved in preservation efforts, as their participation fosters a deeper cultural connection and enhances the effectiveness of conservation initiatives.

4. Government and Religious Collaboration - Effective cooperation between governmental agencies and Buddhist organizations can facilitate the maintenance and development of these temples while ensuring that their religious functions remain uncompromised.

5. Educational Programs - Initiating educational programs and academic collaborations can help raise awareness about the historical and cultural significance of these temples, encouraging responsible tourism and deeper scholarly engagement.

### **Body of Knowledge**

The study of Chengdu's Buddhist temples contributes significantly to various academic disciplines, including religious studies, cultural heritage management, architecture, and urban planning. These temples serve as case studies in understanding the resilience of Buddhist traditions amidst socio-political upheavals, such as the Cultural Revolution and contemporary urbanization.

1. Religious Studies - The evolution of these temples provides insight into the adaptability of Buddhist practices, highlighting their ability to sustain religious functions while accommodating societal changes.

2. Cultural Heritage Management - The preservation and restoration of these temples offer valuable lessons in managing cultural heritage sites, particularly in rapidly urbanizing cities.

3. Architectural Studies - The architectural styles of these temples, which incorporate traditional wooden structures and intricate designs, serve as key examples of Chinese Buddhist architecture and its evolution over time.

4. Urban Planning and Development - The integration of historical sites within modern cityscapes raises critical discussions about sustainable urban planning and the role of heritage conservation in contemporary development projects.

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