



# Contesting Commercialization: Political Influence, Responsive Authoritarianism, and Cultural Resistance

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## Abstract

We develop theory on how a contentious moral market can develop, and we test it with data from a study of the commercialization of Buddhist temples in China from 2006 to 2016, as local government officials try to boost the local economy by transforming temples into tourist enterprises that charge admission fees. The practice is resisted by monks and the public such that the central government, which values public appearances of social justice, is pressured to support their resistance to local officials' economic demands. Using a data panel of 141 temples, we show that temples' admission fees are significantly related to the pressure that local government officials face to develop the economy. We also find that resistance to the fees exploits a factional political structure, as the monk-led movement leverages the influence of one political clique that is highly concerned with public appearances of social justice to resist the request of another. In addition, bottom-up channels such as the Internet and marketized media help the public voice its grievances, coordinate collective action, and therefore align with and mobilize the central government to override local government. The contentious view enhances our understanding of how resistance can be possible and effective, especially in an authoritarian regime.

**Keywords:** cultural resistance, politics in authoritarian regime, moral market, political economy, market contention

Whether or not goods of intrinsic value—human organs, intimate relationships, or connections with the divine—should be traded is a subject of heated debate. While economists have advanced the many virtues of the market in general, scholars from many other disciplines have argued that the commodification of certain things should be prohibited as it violates principles of social justice or

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undermines their actual value (e.g., Titmuss, 1971; Walzer, 1983; Satz, 2010). The advance of the market into traditional nonmarket spheres has been most extensively studied in the literature on the moral market, which sees the market as saturated with moral meaning and has thus examined how the moral valuation of goods or exchanges is socially constructed. A central topic of the literature concerns “the mechanisms and techniques by which such [marketization] projects are realized in practice” (Fourcade and Healy, 2007: 285). Because such an advancement often provokes profound social discomfort, existing studies have identified public opposition as the key obstacle to commercialization and emphasized how entrepreneurs can work creatively to align their economic activities with the rules of society to expand the market (Zelizer, 1978, 1985; Healy, 2006; Almeling, 2007; Chan, 2009; Anteby, 2010; Rossman, 2014). Along the line, moral market scholars have conducted a series of remarkable studies, showing how taboos can be transformed into culturally acceptable forms of investment (Zelizer, 1978), the exchange of human organs and cadavers can involve monetary payments (Healy, 2006; Anteby, 2010), and the care of loved ones, or even the bearing of children, can be routinely outsourced to professional companies (Hochschild, 2003; Almeling, 2007; Livne, 2014).

While these and other cases powerfully demonstrate the deep penetration of markets into many domains of social life, marketization is not necessarily an unstoppable force. In fact, in *Pricing the Priceless Child*, a book that laid the foundations of this literature, Zelizer (1985) documented precisely a situation in which the market retreats from the moral domain. Since its publication, however, Zelizer’s followers have heeded primarily her emphasis on legitimation while paying relatively little attention to the process in which de-marketization may occur (with the exception of Turco, 2012).<sup>1</sup> Their studies have looked mostly at cases in which marketization was ultimately successful but have rarely explored ways in which commercialization can be resisted or even reversed. Although scholars do recognize that marketization can progress at different speeds and achieve different levels of success, they often attribute such variations to the effectiveness of various legitimation strategies (e.g., Healy, 2006; Almeling, 2007; Chan, 2009; Anteby, 2010; Rossman, 2014). The general public, though identified as the key obstacle to commercialization, has often been treated as a relatively passive body of actors duped by entrepreneurs’ euphemistic campaigns that frame commercial activities in a traditional, non-market discourse.

In this paper, we address the lack of studies on resistance in moral markets by developing theory that introduces political forces to explain when resistance to commercialization can be effective. We build on recent developments in the economic-sociological literature that claim that complexity, politics, and contention are inherent to the market and that market development is shaped by political regimes (Davis et al., 2005; King and Soule, 2007; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012; Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury, 2012). We argue that the moral market is a natural battleground for pro-market forces and cultural preservationists, as

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<sup>1</sup> Turco (2012) studied resistance from organizations’ internal members at the micro level. Our paper differs from hers in that we focus on how the political environment from outside organizations enables the public to resist commercialization and that we treat the pro-commercialization forces as being factional rather than monolithic.

market and morality are often depicted as “hostile worlds” (Zelizer, 2005: 20). The market provides a central mechanism for resource allocation in society, and thus political actors have incentives to leverage markets while competing for the control of a society’s institutional structures (Carruthers, 1996). Moreover, as issues revolving around the question of whether or not certain goods are exchangeable are often highly contested, political actors who enjoy the upper hand in certifying market institutions have enormous power when it comes to defining the appropriate boundaries of markets. Whenever cultural norms and political power clash, power may trump culture and allow socially unpopular commercial projects to proceed.

When marketization is unapologetically backed by political power, it is likely to trigger resistance among cultural preservationists. Resistance can be enabled if different political cliques have different levels of concern about public appearances of social justice, as cultural preservationists can pressure a clique that is more concerned about the publicity of moral issues to stand by their side and leverage its influence to resist the commercial demands of other cliques. In this process, publicity is a mechanism for resisters to exploit the factional structure and increase their ability to successfully resist marketization. The push and pull of different social forces generate a rugged landscape, and heterogeneities within the moral market are thus shaped by macro political forces that the earlier moral market literature has largely ignored.

In this paper, we analyze whether and how resistance can halt a power-driven market by studying the controversial “admission fees” charged by many of the 141 nationally prominent Buddhist temples in China in the period between 2006 and 2016. We show that the practice is driven by local government officials’ attempts to generate revenue by transforming Buddhist temples into commercial scenic spots. The practice, however, is resisted by monks and the public. The central government takes a more delicate approach because it has an interest in maintaining an image of upholding social justice. Taking advantage of the discrepancy between the goals of the central and local governments, the Chinese Buddhist Association has launched the Free Entrance Movement to resist the rise of admission fees in temples. In addition, the information feedback channels through which the central government collects local information have provided opportunities for the public to voice outcries, foment social instability, and consequently increase the effectiveness of resistance against local governments. Overall, the contentious view suggests that the moral market is not simply a world in which the market marches into various domains of social life, but rather is a contested one filled with conflicts and resistance that lead to substantial variations.

## A CONTENTIOUS VIEW OF MORAL MARKETS

The moral market is highly contested. As some goods are tied to the essential properties of social life, they may be valued (or valuable) in dimensions that prices cannot capture. The notion that spiritual gifts can be purchased with money and that a connection to the sacred is thus available only to those with means has propelled moralists to assert that the monetization of certain goods is unjust, self-destructive, or both. To deal with the opposition to commercialization, the traditional moral market literature has identified legitimation as a key mechanism in market expansion. In a typical case, market entrepreneurs frame

their work in a traditional, nonmarket discourse to cloak their commercial objectives and thus neutralize resistance (e.g., Zelizer, 1978; Quinn, 2008).

Depending on the context, effective strategies may be rhetorical, procedural, or structural (e.g., Healy, 2006; Anteby, 2010; Rossman, 2014). This type of moral approach is generally consistent with work in other subfields of economic sociology, in which scholars have shown the ways in which innovative practices or new organizational forms may gain legitimacy by framing themselves within the master rules of society (Hirsch, 1986; Haveman and Rao, 1997; Rao, 1998).

Although the traditional moral market approach has made considerable progress toward understanding when and how a market may expand, its emphasis on the means by which the public's acceptance is won has blinded it to other factors. This approach tends to oversample successful cases—those in which market conversion has ultimately been achieved (Turco, 2012; Vermeulen, Ansari, and Lounsbury, 2016)—while ignoring scenarios in which the battle was not won or the process actually reversed itself. It is not that scholars have failed to recognize that the progress of marketization often varies or that some projects have a better chance at success than do others. When explaining variation in the moral market, they have often attributed the difference to the micro-foundations of legitimacy by examining, for example, how different procedures of exchange influence the public's acceptance of marketization (e.g., Anteby, 2010).

This micro-focus comes at the expense of attention paid to macro-institutional forces (Reich, 2014). This is an important gap in the literature because marketization happens in a certain institutional environment, and the activities of market players can be both constrained and enabled by the macro-institutional environment in which they are embedded. In fact, as Zelizer (2012: 163–164) herself acknowledged, as economic life enjoys a “complex historical, cultural, and social structural variability . . . relational work is thus not only complex and constant but often also highly contested.” To account for this, we must attend not only to the “bottom-up” process shaped by people's everyday interactions but also to the “top-down form(s) of monetary earmarking, such as those instituted by the state or other powerful agencies” (Zelizer, 2012: 163).

Regulatory authorities enable markets and govern transactions (Campbell and Lindberg, 1990; Fligstein, 1990; Dobbin, 1994). As regulatory norms have binding effects on the behaviors of market actors, and any deviance from them may result in legal sanctions, political forces have a sweeping influence on the construction of a market. When political actors promote marketization, they may not even bother to go through the effort of legitimation. For this reason, the market's advance into a domain traditionally governed by nonmarket logics is likely to agitate resistance and result in a social-movement-like situation in which the aggrieved portion of the civil population makes an organized effort to resist political power and thus potentially disrupts civil order and stability.

Studying the contention between political forces and cultural preservationists thus provides a new perspective from which to explain heterogeneity in the moral market. By focusing on contention, we may also discover that the moral market is more dynamic than prior studies have suggested. The contentious perspective is consistent with a shift in the view of markets in several subfields of economic sociology; scholars now generally agree that any given market is characterized not only by its homogeneity and isomorphism but also

by its complexity and contradictions (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Davis et al., 2005; King and Soule, 2007; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012; Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury, 2012). When an existing field animated by religious devotion is remade into a market, collective resistance against market incursions will arise.

Resistance has been observed in local communities that view economic concentration as a threat to local autonomy and self-sufficiency. Thus when small community banks are threatened by large corporate ones, local banking professionals may oppose the trend by founding a variety of new community banks (Marquis and Lounsbury, 2007). Similarly, when mom-and-pop stores lose ground to external big-box stores, local people may mobilize to oust the latter from their territories (Ingram, Yue, and Rao, 2010). Several recent studies have also revealed that cultural preservationists can actively defend both their professional identities and established tradition. For example, a company's euphemistic discourse on commercial expansion can drive its own employees against it (Turco, 2012). Similarly, attempts by the Dutch state to commercialize childcare organizations have met with collective resistance from childcare managers (Vermeulen, Ansari, and Lounsbury, 2016). Building on these insights, we argue that the heterogeneities in the moral market are the results not only of more or less successful legitimation efforts but also of the interaction between coercion and resistance.

Political intervention in markets is pervasive in authoritarian regimes. Although governments in Western democratic countries also enjoy the upper hand in certifying market institutions (see Healy's 2006 discussion on the impact of federal regulations on transactions involving human organs, for example), those in authoritarian regimes are more likely to intervene in markets to achieve political goals. In addition, authoritarian regimes not only often lack an active civil society capable of ensuring that power-holders are accountable to society, but also they offer limited space to the free press and public participation. A critical question therefore is whether and how cultural preservationists in authoritarian societies can resist market advancements backed by political power. Thus the study of the role of power and resistance in moral markets in authoritarian contexts is important not only on the theoretical level but also on the practical one. Below, we turn to China, the world's largest authoritarian country, to reveal how structural conflicts in the political sphere and related social feedback mechanisms enable resistance among cultural preservationists.

### **The Structure of Political Governance in China**

Although China is the world's largest authoritarian state, its political structure is far from monolithic (Lieberthal, 1992; Mertha, 2009). Due to its gigantic size, enormous population, and regional diversity, the central government at Beijing cannot manage the country without delegating important tasks to lower levels of government. Decentralization of the decision-making power has accelerated in the past three decades after the Chinese Communist Party began shifting its focus to motivating local governments to develop the economy (Lieberthal, 1992, 2004; Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2006; Nee and Oppen, 2012). A system of fiscal contracts has since been established between the central and local governments; a certain portion of the fiscal revenue is collected by local governments and paid to the central government, while the rest is kept by local governments for their own spending (Oi, 1992; Qian and Weingast, 1996,

1997; Suzuki, 2012). Local governments thus have an incentive to exercise their political authority and, as “policy entrepreneurs,” vigorously work toward the region’s development and economic growth (Mertha, 2009; Lei, 2016).

While decentralization has unleashed enormous energy and creativity on the local level, it has also made it challenging for the central government to assert its authority. Empowered local authorities occasionally undermine or even ignore commands from the top (Lieberthal, 2004). To strengthen its legitimacy and authority, the central government has resorted to a strategy of maintaining an image of representing social morality and justice—a strategy with a historical legacy of two thousand years of imperial rule, during which the Chinese emperor, known as “the son of heaven,” embodied society’s highest moral standard (Fairbanks, 1986). As the central government takes ultimate responsibility for social issues, local governments do not have an equally strong incentive to attain a high degree of legitimacy because, as merely agents of power, they derive legitimacy from the central government. Popular polls confirm this, repeatedly showing that citizens tend to trust the central rather than local governments when it comes to ensuring rectitude in the exercise of social justice (Li, 2004).

Another way in which the central government maintains authority is through the centralization of personnel placement (Huang and Rozelle, 1996; Landry, 2008). As China has no electoral system, subnational government officials are appointed from above. There are four levels of government: central, provincial, prefectural, and county. Government officials in the same jurisdiction and at the same level compete to win positions in the next-higher level of government, which leads to a “tournament-based” promotion system (Zhou, 2009). As top leaders at a certain level of government decide on the promotions of all subordinates in their jurisdiction, the system allows power to be concentrated in their hands and underscores the prevalent “rule of man” (*Ren Zhi*), according to which government policies reflect the will of leaders (He, 2012).

This decentralized decision-making power, coupled with centralized control over personnel, creates serious structural problems for China’s formal political system. Empowered local officials have plenty of leeway to manipulate local policies, but they often do so to maximize their own prospects of landing promotions (Lieberthal, 2004). Because local government officials aim to please their supervisors rather than the populace, they tend to pursue more measurable objectives, such as GDP growth, while ignoring the less quantifiable benefits of social, environmental, and moral issues (Qin, Strömberg, and Wu, 2017). Moreover, it is not unusual for local government officials to bend or ignore policies and laws and report false information to their superiors. Obtaining accurate information in this traditional authoritarian system is a challenge for the central government, as it generally does not allow independent sources of information to develop. Most data, in fact, are reported by the very subordinates who have incentives to distort the information in their own favor (Stockmann, 2013). The authoritarian system thus limits the national leaders’ understanding of what is happening throughout the country.

Due either to its limited ability to collect local information or a feigned ignorance meant to grant local governments autonomy, the central government takes a delicate approach toward local economic affairs, refraining from intervention except in the case of public outcry or serious accidents (Nie, 2017). The central government benefits from the economy’s growth as it enhances

the legitimacy of its rule. When economic growth comes with a significant social cost, however, the central government faces a trade-off between pursuing it and maintaining its social legitimacy. This trade-off explains why enterprises with negative externalities (such as polluting the environment or posing public safety hazards) exist widely in China. Nevertheless, severe accidents or public outcry can disrupt the balance and push the central government to curb them. The controversial high admission fees charged by some Buddhist temples offer a useful case for demonstrating this point.

### Controversy over Temple Admission Fees

Introduced by Indian missionaries to China during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. to A.D. 220), Buddhism was localized and widely accepted by most Chinese people after several centuries of assimilation. The religion also came to be blended into the indigenous philosophies of Confucianism and Taoism, and it is this combination that constitutes traditional Chinese culture today. Buddhist temples are an important aspect of China's culture and heritage, as they hold and ensure the preservation of artifacts such as paintings, sculptures, and architecture. After the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese Communist Party allowed religion to revive, and in 1983, the State Administration for Religious Affairs designated 142 historical Buddhist temples in the Han region as Nationally Prominent Buddhist Temples.<sup>2</sup> In 1993, the National Conference of the Buddhist Association of China passed the "Regulation Policy on Han Buddhist Temples," which included detailed guidance on temple management. Although these regulatory policies specified that Buddhist temples should be monk-governed and financially self-sufficient, they also imposed on them the principle of "love the state, love religion," meaning that religious organizations had to be loyal to the party and the government (Ashiwa and Wank, 2009). Party members were nonetheless prohibited from practicing any religion.

Side by side with rapid economic development, the tourist market in China has also experienced explosive growth in recent years. According to the *Tourism Industry Yearbook*, the number of domestic tourists more than tripled (from 1.39 to 4.44 billion) between 2006 and 2016, and the domestic tourism market grew sixfold (from 620 billion to 39,400 billion RMB). The rapid growth in demand has tilted the power in the supply–demand balance toward supply. As the number of historical temples is limited, any nationally prominent temple is regarded as a highly precious "asset" by its local area. A typical case of a commercially operated temple is Shaolin, which has been regarded as the spiritual home of Zen Buddhism for 1,500 years. It also marks the original site of a school of martial arts (popularly known as kung fu in the U.S.). The temple was turned into a moneymaking enterprise after its current abbot, Shi Yongxin, took charge in 1999 and launched several projects for which the temple has charged a relatively high admission fee. According to a recent journalistic report (Liu, 2016), the temple's income of admission fees was over 300 million RMB (about \$46 million) in 2015. Seventy percent of the ticket revenue went to the local government, while the temple kept the remaining 30 percent. In 2006, the Dengfeng municipal government awarded Shi Yongxin a Volkswagen SUV

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<sup>2</sup> The Han are the largest ethnicity in China, accounting for about 90 percent of the population. This list excludes temples in regions where Tibetan Buddhism prevails.

for his “extraordinary contribution to developing local tourism” (Weller and Sun, 2010: 38). The income from Shaolin Temple accounts for nearly one-third of Dengfeng City’s fiscal revenue (Liu and Tao, 2011).

Shaolin Temple is not exceptional in this respect. Weller and Sun (2010) reported another case in Fengxin, a relatively poor county in Jiangxi Province with few economic resources that is nonetheless the home of Baizhang, a historically significant temple. Local government officials saw the potential of exploiting the temple to develop tourism. Not only did they allocate 192 acres of land for the temple’s reconstruction, but also they paid five visits to Shenzhen City to persuade a renowned monk to assume its abbotship. A magnificent new temple complex was opened in 2011; since then, the local economy has benefited from an influx of pilgrims and tourists.

Admission fees are the primary source of revenue for commercially operated temples (Zhang, 2012). Yet the high admission fees charged by some temples have also become a target of fierce public criticism. Collecting them goes directly against the Buddhist principle of “universal salvation” (*Pu Du Zhong Sheng*). Some people see the practice as a way of transforming a temple into an amusement park for the rich and blocking access to the poor. Others wonder whether temples still represent the pure land of Buddha, while posing questions such as “Does Buddha love money?” Buddhist temples outside China—as was true of those in China before the era of economic reform—typically do not charge an entrance fee. But in today’s China charging an entry fee is a common practice, and the price of admission varies significantly. While it is not unusual for places of worship in the West to charge tourists, the practice is usually justified as a way of maintaining these sites. In China, however, maintenance costs alone cannot explain the ticketing practices of temples, as the income generated by the most prominent ones far exceeds the cost of maintaining them.<sup>3</sup> According to one report by National Public Radio of the U.S. (Lim, 2010), some Buddhist temples have become “cash cows” of local governments. The term “ticket economy” has been coined to describe a development model based on a reliance on admission fees as a principal pillar of the local economy.

The price of admission is set by the local government. As Lou Yulie (2014), director of the Religious Research Center at Peking University, stated, “It is essentially the case for all temples that charging entry tickets is not a decision of the temple but is dictated by the fiscal demand of the local government.” When determining the fee, the local government appoints a temple management committee (usually composed of monks, government officials, and representatives of the tourist industry who have invested in the temple or its surrounding area). After the committee proposes a ticket price, it needs to be approved by the local government department in charge of commodity pricing (Wang, 2014). Although charging high admissions is not necessarily beneficial to the sustainable development of the local tourist industry, the practice increases local government officials’ ability to boost the local GDP in the short term. A historically significant temple is usually the foremost tourist attraction in its immediate area. Expenditure on admission tickets is therefore a must,

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<sup>3</sup> For example, one prominent national temple, Nanputuo, which charged a ticket fee as low as 3 RMB (50 U.S. cents) per visitor, still collected over 10 million RMB (\$1.6 million) in 2010 (Zhou and Wu, 2011).



while the purchase of other items is likely to be variable and deemed optional. Although any increase in the volume of tourists has a spillover effect on related businesses such as restaurants and hotels, the development of such industries takes years, and the tax revenue generated by them flows at a much slower pace. Given that local government officials face term constraints, they tend to grow impatient while waiting for this form of revenue to generate (Jia, 2014) because greater fiscal revenue can instantly increase their autonomy to invest in other domains, which in turn can have a direct impact on local GDP growth (Yu, Zhou, and Zhu, 2016).

Although maintaining political stability is an important task, local government officials tend to ignore citizens' grievances as long as they do not lead to mass incidents that disrupt social stability or attract the attention of their supervisors (King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013, 2014; Chen, Pan, and Xu, 2015). Temples' high admission fees, despite their unpopularity with the public, tend to fall into this category, as the social cost is hard to measure and the financial burden is diffused among many visitors. Furthermore, local government officials often justify any increase in admission price by citing renovations or the addition of man-made scenic spots. Compared with other strategies, the commercialization of temples may even be regarded as a relatively "benevolent" form of development and is therefore more likely to be adopted. We may thus hypothesize that the pressure to develop the economy increases the tendency among local government officials to target Buddhist temples as a means of generating revenue.

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** An increase in economic development pressure is related to a subsequent increase in the admission fee charged by a temple.

### Resistance to Temple Admission Fees

The high admission fees charged by some temples have been resisted by the general public and many monks. During a commerce and culture forum involving both mainland China and Taiwan in 2010, John Chiang, the then-vice president of Taiwan's Nationalist Party, criticized the fees that certain Buddhist temples charged for admission. He pointed out that most Buddhist temples in mainland China charged for admission while their counterparts in Taiwan did not. Chiang's comments were widely reported on Chinese social media. In a mere three days, tens of thousands of people showed their support of his criticism by clicking the "Like" button on the Sina website that had posted the news and shared over 8,000 comments to express their contempt, ridicule, and regret.<sup>4</sup>

The revenue generated from admission fees also makes temples easy prey for various interest groups, which further threatens the legitimacy of their religious foundations. The aforementioned Shaolin Temple, for example, has found itself at the center of controversy and scandal due to the luxurious lifestyles of its monks, allegations of embezzlement by abbots, and lawsuits filed by the local government over the distribution of admission fee income (Jacobs, 2015). Several polls conducted by news websites have found that public opinion on Shaolin's business tactics is overwhelmingly negative. Monks at many temples

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<sup>4</sup> Sina is one of China's most popular website portals.

elsewhere have likewise denounced the practice of charging for tickets. According to Monk Ji Qun (2006) at the Minnan Buddhism Academy, for example, "pricing debases Buddhism because this practice goes against its sacred value and over time will make temples no different from other worldly places." Awakened by the threat, religious leaders have led a collective resistance to the practice of charging high admission fees. On July 24, 2012, Monk Jinghui, a vice director of the Buddhist Association of China (BAC), issued a public statement calling on all prominent Buddhist temples to abandon the use of admission fees and open their doors freely to the public. This action marked the official launch of the Free Entrance Movement, which has since gained wide support from the public. In May 2013, under the leadership of Master Shenghui, another vice director of the BAC, the movement successfully converted 29 temples in central China's Hunan Province into admission-free sites.

The Free Entrance Movement is enabled by the inconsistency in attitude toward social legitimacy that divides the central government from its local subordinates. On the one hand, as the central government relies on local governments to develop the economy, it has refrained from intervening in local affairs in order to motivate local government officials. In the case of temple admission fees, the central government has the authority to order all temples to drop admission fees, but it has never done so. This fact indicates that the central government does not want to alienate local governments by cutting an important source of local revenue. On the other hand, the central government has an incentive for maintaining its image as champion of social morality and justice. Once public pressure is sufficiently high, it reacts by curbing local governments' attempts at commercialization. When a public outcry over frequent increases in admission fees arose in 2007, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) issued a ruling that limited the frequency of increases in ticket price to once every three years. Once again in 2012, faced with fierce public criticism over a few temples' IPO attempts, the State Administration for Religious Affairs halted these attempts and issued a public statement condemning the rampant commercialization of sacred sites and temples.

Headquartered in Beijing, the BAC is a major civil Buddhist association that serves as a bridge between the Buddhist community and the government and shares jurisdiction over Buddhists in China with the State Administration for Religious Affairs. Its *de facto* leadership role in the movement reflects the central government's delicate attitude toward temple commercialization. Because the Chinese central government is extremely sensitive to any form of collective action in civil society, however, the movement maintains a low profile. Its activities are publicly reported primarily in speeches by religious leaders on occasions such as Buddhist conferences. Nevertheless, its influence is reflected in the increasing prevalence of admission-free temples. It remains to be seen whether the campaign can effectively curb temples' tendency to charge high admission fees.

**Hypothesis 2 (H2):** An increase in the strength of the Free Entrance Movement in a region is related to a subsequent decrease in the admission fee charged by a temple.

The central government has difficulty monitoring local governments, as obtaining undistorted information is a challenge for authoritarian regimes (Wintrobe, 1998). Recent research has shown, however, that political participation institutions such as parliaments, as well as the development of social media, have increased the Chinese regime's responsiveness to social feedback (Weller, 2008; Reilly, 2012; Stockmann, 2013; Chen, Pan, and Xu, 2015; Qin, Strömberg, and Wu, 2017). These developments have two potential consequences. First, more effective top-down monitoring may make local government officials more responsive to citizens' demands (Chen, Pan, and Xu, 2015), and second, as these channels enable the public to voice its concerns, they can potentially foster collective action and threaten social stability.

**Top-down feedback channels.** Although parliamentary representatives in an authoritarian regime are traditionally viewed as tone-deaf, recent studies have revealed that such regimes are in fact interested in having parliamentary representatives who can convey public opinion, as information on citizens' grievances helps autocrats avoid policies that might endanger their own survival. Truex (2016), for example, has shown that half of a randomly selected group of opinions gathered at a provincial People's Congress in China exerted genuine influence on policy outcome. The impact of parliamentary representatives is particularly strong in the case of issues that do not demand democratic reform, the category to which the controversy surrounding high temple admission fees belongs. Local officials care about their superiors' perceptions of their performance, and thus "bad news" about their governance is likely to jeopardize the possibility of their political advancement. They are also more responsive to citizens' complaints when faced with threats of being tattled on to upper levels of government (Chen, Pan, and Xu, 2015).

According to the Chinese constitution, the National People's Congress (NPC) is the legislative institution, and the China People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) is a consultative body whose members represent various social groups. As representatives of the Buddhist community, monks typically hold positions in these two institutions. Anecdotal evidence suggests that participation in parliamentary institutions offers them opportunities to resist pressure from local governments. For example, when the Wujiang district government of Suzhou City attempted to build a park encircling the Lingyan Mountain Temple in order to collect admission fees, the abbot reported the event to the central government while participating in the CPPCC, and the local government was forced to back down. Temples with parliamentary connections to the central government should thus be better able to resist the pressure of charging high admission fees.

**Hypothesis 3 (H3):** The appointment of the abbot of a temple to the national NPC or CPPCC is related to a subsequent decrease in the admission fee charged by a temple.

**Bottom-up feedback channels.** Aside from top-down input institutions, the central government also collects information from bottom-up channels. Recent studies have shown that the development of the Internet increases the space for public discourse and consequently provides a channel for leaders of the

central government to gather social feedback (e.g., Esarey and Xiao, 2008, 2011; Egorov, Guriev, and Sonin, 2009; MacKinnon, 2012). Because conventional activist tactics involving public gatherings are heavily restricted in China, the Internet has become the primary channel through which the Chinese public expresses its voice (Chinese Academy of Social Science, 2005). According to the report released by the State Council's Information Office in June 2010, 66 percent of Chinese Internet users have expressed their views on web forums, and 60 percent of "netizens" report that they have used the Internet to express opinions intended to "monitor" government activities (Esarey and Xiao, 2011). The report of the State Council's Information Office also confirms that the Internet has opened a window for the central government to monitor public opinion.

Although the public participation facilitated by the Internet has also generated extensive criticism of the regime, King, Pan, and Roberts (2013) reported that the country's censorship apparatus actually refrains from suppressing the bottom-up criticism because such information is useful for the central government to manage local leaders, gauge public opinion, and address social problems before they become threatening. Similarly, Qin, Strömberg, and Wu (2017) found a shockingly large number of posts on highly sensitive topics published and circulated on Sina Weibo, a leading social media website in China. These social media posts on corruption are highly predictive of corruption charges directed at local government officials (Qin, Strömberg, and Wu, 2017).

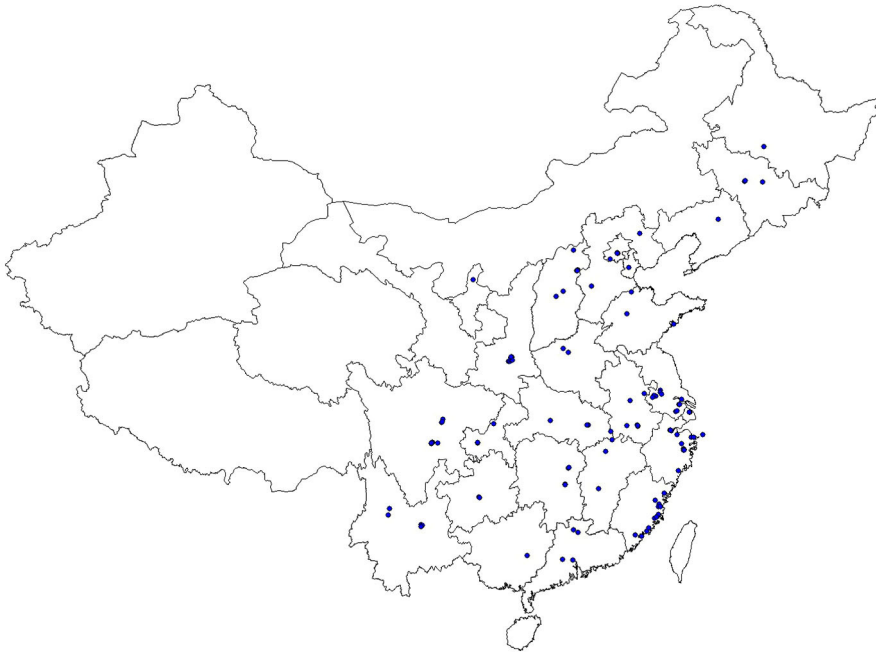
Public outcry on the Internet has influenced political outcomes, exemplified by the case of Sun Zhigang. When the news of the murder of Sun, who was detained in the city of Guangzhou for not carrying residency documentation, broke out in the spring and summer of 2003, the public outcry prompted the central government to reform regulations governing migrant workers (Liebman, 2005). Sun's case proved to be the first of a growing number of Internet mass incidents that have pressured the central government to respond to local government officials' abuses of power (Tong and Lei, 2010). In another study of charitable donations after a catastrophic earthquake in 2008, Luo, Zhang, and Marquis (2016) reported that Internet activism in China effectively held large public firms accountable. In our context, the Internet is an important forum for the public to condemn temple commercialization. In the aforementioned case, for example, John Chiang's criticism went viral on the Internet and provoked tens of thousands of people to express their opinions. Moreover, in addition to its informative function, the Internet provides a channel for directly coordinating collective action. A public outcry on the Internet also propels the central government to intervene, as indicated by the IPO scandals in 2012 that led to a ban on leasing temples to private companies. A high Internet penetration rate may thus enhance the public's ability to keep local government officials in check.

**Hypothesis 4 (H4):** An increase in a region's Internet penetration rate is related to a subsequent decrease in the admission fee charged by a temple.

## METHOD

Our study looked at 142 temples designated as nationally prominent temples in 1983 by the State Administration for Religious Affairs. We chose this sample for two reasons. First, due to their fame and historical significance, these

**Figure 1. Geographical location of nationally prominent Buddhist temples.**



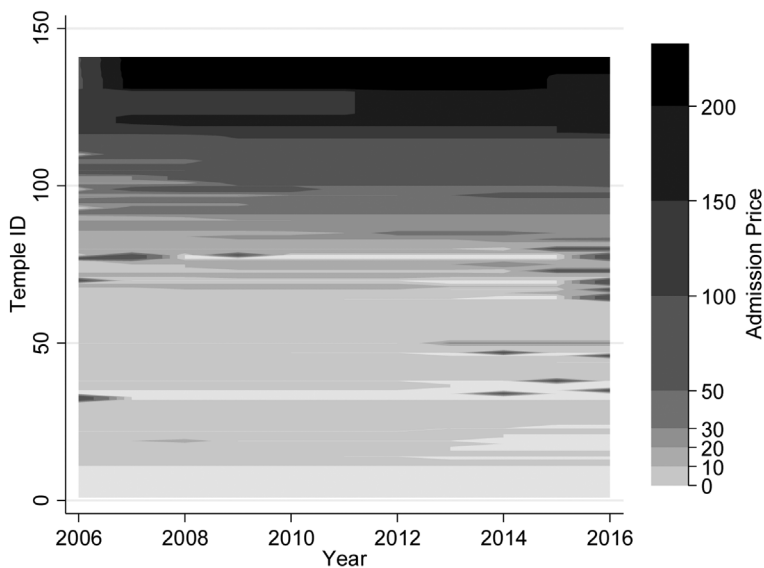
temples had the potential to develop the tourist industry. Second, they were ancient temples that were usually hundreds if not thousands of years old, and thus their locations—compared with those of newer temples—placed them outside the recent trend of commercialization. Buddhist temples in China are all autonomous organizations, i.e., they are unaffiliated. One of the 142 temples in our research, the Xihuang Temple, was converted into a Buddhist Academy in 1987 and has remained closed to the public since; we thus ultimately excluded it from our sample. Figure 1 shows the geographical locations of the 141 temples.

### **Dependent Variable and Estimation**

Our dependent variable is the fee that a temple charges for admission for the most time in a year, which we measured in three ways. The first is the level of admission fee, which shows the continuous change in ticket price. The second are two dummy variables that indicate significant changes in price. The third are two dummy variables to indicate whether a temple can be entered at no charge and whether a previous fee-collecting temple abandoned the admission fee in a year, as being free to the public is the ultimate goal of the Free Entrance Movement. Besides ticket prices, we also adopted non-admission-fee-related indicators of commercial activities (or the lack of such) to measure a temple's commercialization. Overall, these different measurements help capture the controversy surrounding the high admission fee and temple commercialization from different angles.

**Level of admission fee.** Our first measurement is the price of admission fee charged for a regular adult who wishes to visit a temple. Admission fees are the primary source of income for temples. A high admission fee increases a temple's revenue because temples are in short supply and tourist demand is not particularly price-elastic. Nationally prominent temples are typically foremost local attractions, and visitors to them tend to come from out of town and have therefore already incurred the high cost of traveling to the sites.<sup>5</sup> We coded the ticket price of a temple at zero if the temple did not sell tickets at all. As for the rest, we found their prices on three major online crowd-sourced review websites: Ctrip, Mafengwo, and Dianping. We triangulated the accuracy of the reported ticket price in three ways. First, for each temple, we looked at reports by multiple reviewers to confirm the ticket price. Second, we confirmed the ticket price with information provided by other online sources that list the temple's ticket prices, such as the temple's own website, tourist websites, or public statements issued by local commodity pricing bureaus. Third, if a temple's ticket price could not be confirmed in either of these two ways, we called the temple's box office. We collected the information from 2006—the year that online websites first published many reviews—until the end of 2016. During this period, admission fees ranged from zero to ¥233 at the 141 temples we studied. In total, 92 temples made 149 price adjustments, including 106 increases and 43 decreases. Figure 2 is a heat map that shows the history of price adjustments. The horizontal axis of the graph indicates the year in

**Figure 2. Heat map of adjustments to temple admission fees over time.**



<sup>5</sup> According to the *Southeast Morning Post* (2012), 70 percent of tourists are from out of town ([http://www.fjnet.com/shxx/shxxnr/201201/t20120111\\_188978.htm](http://www.fjnet.com/shxx/shxxnr/201201/t20120111_188978.htm)). Nevertheless, in the section where we check robustness, we limited our sample to mountain and forest temples, the demand for which is even less elastic than for those located in urban areas, and found that the basic patterns of our results held.

which a price is shown, and the vertical axis indicates each of the 141 temples. To facilitate presentation, we order the IDs of temples by the average price that they charge during our observation period so that the top of the graph shows darker colors and includes the temples that charge high prices, while the bottom is lighter and includes the free and low-priced temples.

**Qualitative measurements of admission fee.** Although continuous measurement captures precise changes in admission fees, it is useful to measure qualitative changes as “milestones.” We therefore defined a dummy variable that indicates *substantial increases* in admission fees that rise 25 percent or more over those of the previous year or in which the absolute growth level exceeds ¥15.<sup>6</sup> We similarly defined a dummy variable that indicates *substantial decreases* in admission fees that drop 25 percent or more below those of the previous year or in which the absolute decrease in price exceeds ¥15.<sup>7</sup> In addition, as the Free Entrance Movement’s goal is for Buddhist temples to be free to the public, we included a dummy variable to indicate that *a temple has no admission fee* in a year, and another one to indicate that a temple *abandoned the admission fee* in a year. In our sample, 40 out of the 141 temples did not charge admission fees by the end of 2016; of these, 19 had never charged admission fees, 21 abandoned them, and 2 initially free ones started to charge admission fees during our observation period.

**Non-admission-fee-related indicators of commercialization.** We coded six *non-admission-fee-related indicators* of temple commercialization: (1) whether a temple is rated as being commercial in three or more online reviews in a year; (2) whether a temple offers paid entertainment or services such as bell ringing, scenic viewing, and fortune telling; (3) whether man-made scenic sites have been added to a temple or its vicinity in the past year; (4) whether a temple is located in a scenic park; (5) whether a temple offers free incense to pilgrims; and (6) whether a Buddhism academy or association is located in a temple.<sup>8</sup> We coded these variables by searching through over 80,000 online reviews from the aforementioned three websites, nearly 300 news reports, and each temple’s website. We conducted a principal component analysis of these six indicators and found that the first principal component (PC1) explains 47 percent of the total variance. Moreover, the significant gap in the eigenvalue from the first to the second principal component justifies the appropriateness of choosing the first principal component as a measurement of temple commercialization. The results are shown in table 1. The correlation between the first principal component and the admission ticket price is .74, indicating that the admission fee is a valid indicator of commercialization.

We estimated the level of ticket price and the non-admission-fee-related measurement (PC1) of commercialization through the temple fixed-effect OLS

<sup>6</sup> We consulted a panel of ten informants (including three government officials, two monks, and five tourists), and they generally agreed that a growth over 25 percent or ¥15 can be regarded as a substantial change in admission prices.

<sup>7</sup> In the robustness check section, we also test results of defining substantial changes as those that increase or decrease over 50 percent and find similar results.

<sup>8</sup> Another indicator, a vegan restaurant, is not a good measurement of commercialization because offering vegan food is a Buddhist tradition.

**Table 1. Principal Component Analysis**

Component	Eigenvalue	Proportion	Variable	Comp1
Comp1	2.81	.47	Being rated commercial	.44
Comp2	.95	.16	Location in a scenic park	.49
Comp3	.89	.15	Addition of man-made scenic site	.50
Comp4	.81	.14	Paid entertainment and service	.45
Comp5	.37	.06	Location of Buddhist academy or association	-.22
Comp6	.16	.03	Free incense	-.24

model. The fixed-effect model allowed us to control for time-invariant unobserved heterogeneities and limited estimation to within-temple variations. The Hausman test further shows the appropriateness of choosing the fixed-effect model. Ticket prices, as non-negative values, have traditionally been estimated through the Tobit model. We did not adopt the Tobit model because it is a non-linear function, and thus the likelihood of estimating fixed effects is biased and inconsistent (Green, 2002). We also included the year fixed effect to control for the impact of omitted variables that may have exerted a common effect on all temples at the same point in time. For the qualitative measurements of admission fees, we adopted the fixed-effect linear probability model, which has advantages over the probit or logit model in that it facilitates the interpretation of coefficients, especially with regard to interaction effects (Ai and Norton, 2003; Simcoe and Waguespack, 2011). Finally, to model the abandonment of admission fees, we adopted the survival analysis using the exponential hazard model with a risk set that included all the temples that had charged admission in the previous year.

### Independent and Control Variables

We measured *economic pressure* by using the ranking of the GDP growth rate in the county (or equivalent unit of jurisdiction) in which a temple was located in the previous year. We first calculated the GDP growth rate as the change in GDP per capita from the previous year ( $(GDPper\ capita_{t-1} - GDPper\ capita_{t-2}) / GDPper\ capita_{t-2}$ ). We then standardized the county's GDP growth rate by subtracting the mean value of all county-level jurisdiction units within the same prefecture city in the previous year and divided the difference by the standard deviation. Standardization renders government officials' performance in different regions comparable because in a country such as China, where economic development is uneven, per-capita GDP grows faster in some regions than it does in others. We collected GDP data from the statistical database of the *China Economic Information Net* (CEINet) and the *China Statistical Yearbook for Regional Economy*.

We measured the strength of the *Free Entrance Movement* as the number of nationally prominent temples that did not charge admission fees in the previous year in the province where a focal temple was located. We collected data on a temple's *political ties* from websites with information on temples—*China Temple Net* (<http://www.simiao.net/>), *China Buddhism Net* (<http://www.zgjf.cn/>), and *Chinese Buddhist Culture Network* (<http://www.zhfgwh.com/>)—as well as those dedicated to individual temples. From these sources, we coded each



**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Variables**

Variable	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Ticket price	50.26	68.36												
2. Price increase	.06	.23	.17											
3. Price decrease	.03	.17	.01	-.04										
4. No ticket	.18	.39	-.36	-.12	.14									
5. PC1	.00	1.67	.74	.16	-.03	-.36								
6. Population (10k)	48.76	25.06	-.34	-.04	.00	.18	-.30							
7. GDP per capita(10k)	3.90	3.75	-.32	-.10	-.03	.13	-.31	.29						
8. Tourist economy	.20	.25	.18	.01	.01	-.03	.13	-.03	.05					
9. Visitor rating	3.93	.37	-.02	.00	-.01	.04	-.06	.07	.18	.02				
10. GDP growth ranking	-.31	1.72	-.06	-.07	.04	.05	-.05	.02	-.13	-.07	.00			
11. Free Entrance Movement	1.68	2.36	-.22	-.06	-.01	.32	-.21	.04	.17	-.08	.03	-.05		
12. Parliamentary tie	.11	.31	.04	-.07	.00	-.10	.05	.02	.02	.01	.00	.07	-.08	
13. Internet development	.16	.14	-.32	-.11	.04	.17	-.35	.25	.57	.04	.15	.03	.30	-.02

\* N = 1,410. The descriptive statistics of the dependent variable, abandoning admission fees, are not included because its estimation involves a substantially smaller sample, but they are available upon request.

temple's political ties to the central government by creating a dummy that equaled 1 if a temple's abbot was a member of the NPC or CPPCC at the central government level in the previous year. We measured *Internet development* as the percentage of people in a prefecture city's total population that had used the Internet in the previous year. We collected this data from the *China City Statistical Yearbook*.

Because we adopted the temple and time-fixed effects when estimating continuous dependent variables, we needed to control only for the set of time-variant variables that may have affected a temple's ticket price. First, we controlled for the county's *population size* and *per capita GDP* in the previous year. Temples located in relatively rich areas with large populations may receive more public donations, which reduces the pressure to charge high admission fees. Moreover, relatively wealthy areas have more resources with which to develop the economy, so local governments may be less likely to turn to temples for revenue. Second, we controlled for the *tourist economy* in local areas by including the percentage of income generated by the tourist industry in the local GDP in the previous year. Third, we controlled for the average *reviewers' ratings* of each temple on the Dianping website (the most popular one among the three review sites) to check a temple's appeal to visitors. Table 2 reports the descriptive statistics of all these variables.

## RESULTS

Table 3 reports the fixed-effect model of the ticket price. Model 1 presents a baseline model that includes all the control variables. It shows that the growth in GDP per capita is negatively related to the increase in temple admission fees. The result is consistent with our expectation that in relatively rich areas, local governments have more resources and are thus less likely to rely on temples to generate revenue. In addition, the development of the tourist industry is directly related to higher admission fees, so this result confirms that the level of an admission fee is an indicator of commercial tourism. Model 2 tests

**Table 3. Fixed-effect Model of Admission Fees\***

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Population	-.169 (.112)	-.185+ (.111)	-.198+ (.111)	-.217* (.110)	-.174 (.112)	-.168 (.111)	-.220* (.110)
GDP per capita	-.642* (.261)	-1.141*** (.277)	-.582* (.260)	-1.130*** (.275)	-.653* (.261)	-.626* (.261)	-1.131*** (.275)
Tourist economy	4.875* (1.988)	4.940* (1.971)	4.444* (1.982)	4.415* (1.960)	4.869* (1.988)	4.549* (1.989)	4.220* (1.962)
Visitor rating	-.035 (1.298)	-.018 (1.286)	.543 (1.301)	.679 (1.287)	-.059 (1.298)	.082 (1.296)	.689 (1.287)
GDP growth ranking		-1.416*** (.278)		-1.145*** (.347)			-1.169*** (.347)
Free Entrance Movement			-2.439*** (.654)	-2.983*** (.658)			-2.781*** (.667)
GDP growth ranking × Free Entrance Movement				-.181+ (.097)			-.165+ (.098)
Parliamentary tie					-6.309 (7.087)		-6.379 (6.976)
Internet development						-12.216* (4.878)	-8.407+ (4.883)
Constant	69.288*** (7.717)	71.308*** (7.659)	73.824*** (7.777)	76.625*** (7.707)	70.406*** (7.819)	71.957*** (7.776)	79.236*** (7.848)
F	15.135	16.110	15.183	15.702	14.177	14.598	14.263

+  $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; two-sided.

\* N = 1,551. Standard errors are in parentheses.

the main effect of the ranking of GDP growth rate and reveals that this variable has a significant negative effect on ticket price ( $b = -1.416$ ,  $p < .001$ ). When the ranking goes from one standard deviation below to one standard deviation above the mean, the ticket price decreases by ¥5, thus supporting H1.

Although the amount of per-ticket reduction seems small, the change can add up to a significant amount of income as these temples enjoy a huge number of visitors per year.

Model 3 tests the effect of the Free Entrance Movement and shows a significant negative effect ( $b = -2.439$ ,  $p < .001$ ). When a second temple in a focal province abandons its admission fee, the predicted level of admission fee for other temples decreases by ¥2.44. This result lends strong support to H2. In model 4, we further test the interaction effect between economic pressure and the Free Entrance Movement and find it to be marginally significant ( $b = -.181$ ,  $p < .10$ ). The result shows that, besides a strong main effect, the Free Entrance Movement also reduces the level of admission fees through moderating the impact of GDP growth ranking.

Model 5 tests the effect of parliamentary connections. Consistent with our prediction of H3, this variable shows a negative coefficient ( $b = -6.309$ ), but the effect is not statistically significant. Thus the addition of ties to the central government's NPC or CPPCC is not associated with a significant reduction in admission fees charged by a temple, and H3 is not supported. Model 6 tests the effect of Internet development and shows a significant negative effect ( $b = -12.216$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This result suggests that the development of the

Internet reduces the pressure to charge high admission fees, lending support to H4. In an unreported analysis, we also tested the impact of *media marketization* by using the number of commercial newspapers in the previous year in the prefecture city in which the temple is located. The result similarly shows a marginally negative effect of commercial newspapers on the admission fees.

The effectiveness of the bottom-up feedback channels stands in contrast to the ineffectiveness of the top-down channel of political input institutions. The difference can be understood in light of the publicity theory of scandal (Adut, 2005): a transgression won't become a scandal unless it is publicized. Once a scandal breaks, the authorities tend to show extraordinary zeal to sanction the offender so that they can signal rectitude. In the Chinese context, because the central government is supposed to stand for the morality and justice of the society, it is more likely to curb commercialization once the media and the Internet publicize the problem and generate a public outcry. Finally, model 7 reports the full model, showing that the basic pattern of the hypothesized effects remains robust.

### **Alternative Measures of Admission Fees and Commercialization**

Models 8 and 9 in table 4 investigate substantial increases and decreases in admission prices, demonstrating that ranking in GDP growth predicts both price increases and price decreases, but the effect is more significant when predicting price decreases. In addition, the Free Entrance Movement has a significant negative impact on the tendency to substantially increase prices. Internet development has a negative impact on substantial price increase and a positive effect on substantial price decrease, but only the latter is statistically significant. These findings confirm that de-commercialization plays an important part in the dynamics of the moral market and that the process is subject to the influences of political forces.

Model 10 reports the results of predicting the dummy indicator of no admission fees. The results show that temples located in counties where the GDP ranking is high and the Free Entrance Movement is strong are more likely to be admission-free. In addition, a high Internet penetration rate also increases the likelihood of having admission-free temples. Model 11 reports the results of the survival analysis of abandoning admission fees, showing that high tournament ranking is related to a high tendency to abandon admission fees. The strength of the Free Entrance Movement in the local region significantly increases the tendency for a temple to abandon admission fees, and the development of the Internet also shows a marginally significant effect.

Model 12 reports the analysis of using the principal component of the six non-admission-fee-related indicators of temple commercialization. It confirms that an increase in the ranking of local economic growth is related to a decrease in the level of temple commercialization. When the Free Entrance Movement is stronger in a region, the level of temple commercialization tends to drop. The Free Entrance Movement also moderates the effect of GDP growth ranking to further reduce temple commercialization. Finally, the development of the Internet is directly related to a lower level of commercialization.

**Table 4. Alternative Measurement of Commercialization\***

Variable	(8) Substantial price increase	(9) Substantial price decrease	(10) No admission fee	(11) Abandoning admission fee	(12) PC1
Population	.001 (.002)	-.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)	.007 (.008)	.000 (.003)
GDP per capita	-.001 (.004)	.001 (.003)	.003 (.003)	-.029 (.071)	-.019** (.006)
Tourist economy	.024 (.030)	-.011 (.021)	.033 (.025)	-.788 (1.147)	.015 (.045)
Visitor rating	.026 (.020)	-.018 (.014)	-.016 (.016)	-1.265*** (.250)	-.004 (.030)
GDP growth ranking	-.013* (.006)	.012** (.004)	.006 (.005)	.239* (.110)	-.022** (.008)
Free Entrance Movement	-.020* (.009)	.004 (.004)	.002 (.004)	.162* (.073)	-.032* (.015)
GDP growth ranking × Free Entrance Movement	.000 (.002)	-.000 (.002)	.005* (.002)	.008 (.040)	-.005* (.002)
Parliamentary tie	.091 (.119)	.020 (.083)	.046 (.090)	-.679 (.808)	.050 (.161)
Internet development	-.014 (.074)	.135* (.065)	.280*** (.078)	2.412+ (1.449)	-.249* (.113)
Constant	-.083 (.127)	.095 (.088)	.137 (.100)		.152 (.181)
N	1410	1410	1551	1264	1551
F-value	4.349	4.565	6.197	75.829	2.631

+  $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; two-sided.

\* Standard errors are in parentheses. The sample size in models 8 and 9 drops because of the missing values of the price change variables in the year 2006. Model 11 is estimated by a Cox model, and the space of F-value reports log-likelihood.

**Additional robustness checks.** We conducted four sets of additional analyses to check the robustness of our findings. First, we tested the interaction effects between the local government officials' age and the GDP growth rate ranking. Due to the mandatory retirement requirement at age 60, county-level government officials in their final years before formal retirement have few incentives to compete in the GDP race because the probability of their promotion is close to zero. If the high admission fees of temples are driven by the incentive of local government officials' political promotion, then officials should be less motivated to increase the fees if they are approaching the terminal years of their career. We created two dummy variables to indicate either one or both of the two local leaders (mayor and party secretary) were over 55 in the previous year. The results show that the age of local government officials not only has negative main effects but also moderates the effect of the GDP growth rate ranking. The pressure exerted by the political tournament on temple commercialization works mainly through the efforts of younger government officials who are motivated to seek political promotion, and when either or both of the local government leaders are over age 55, the admission fees charged by local temples do not significantly relate to the economic

performance of the region. These findings provide strong evidence that it is the political incentives of local government officials that impose pressure on temples to increase admission fees.

Second, we adopted a stricter definition of substantial price changes by limiting it to those that increased or decreased over 50 percent compared with the previous year or over ¥15. We then further limited the definition to only those that increased or decreased over 50 percent compared with the previous year, thus retaining only 53 percent of substantial price increases and 63 percent of price decreases compared with those used in models 8 and 9 in table 4. These results show that the pattern of our hypothesized coefficients remains with stricter definitions of substantial price changes. Third, we restricted our sample to mountain and forest temples. There are two types of Buddhist temples in China: those located in mountains and forests, and those situated in or close to towns or cities. The difference in location is based on classic Buddhist rules regarding Aranya Bhiksu and Worldly Bhiksu (Shih, 2003). As mountain and forest temples lie far from urban centers, visitors to them incur substantial traveling costs and tend to be relatively insensitive to their ticket prices, as these constitute only a small portion of their overall expenditure. Fourth, we restricted our sample to the years in which ticket prices were freely adjustable to rule out the confounding effect of price freezes in certain years. These unreported results generally confirm the robustness of our hypothesized results and are available on request.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, we develop a contentious view of the moral market. While earlier literature has depicted marketization as a process in which market entrepreneurs work to overcome cultural discomfort with commercialism by promoting a vision of the market as moral, the contentious view suggests that a political environment can enable cultural preservationists to resist marketization and that resistance consequently results in heterogeneities in marketization. We find broad support for this contentious view in a study of the commercialization of Buddhist temples in China. As local government officials spare no effort to fuel the market engine, temples are transformed into tourist enterprises that charge admission fees, a practice that has been resisted by monks and the public. By generating public outcries, these cultural preservationists are able to pressure the central government, which shows greater concern for the public appearance of social justice, to stand by their side to resist the economic demands of local government officials. Using a data panel composed of 141 temples over 11 years, we show that temples' admission fees are significantly related to the pressure faced by local government officials in developing the economy. Yet the strength of the monk-led resistance movement can effectively reduce the admission fees and moderates the influence of the pressure to commercialize temples to develop the economy. In addition, bottom-up channels such as the development of the Internet and marketized media provide means for the public to voice its grievances and coordinate collective action and therefore enable resisters to align with and mobilize the central government to override the local government. These findings have implications for and contribute to both the moral market literature and the study of the political economy of authoritarian regimes.

One central question in the moral market literature is how markets expand into nonmarket spheres. The traditional approach has shed light on this question by focusing on micro-level strategies of legitimation. Though the existing literature does not necessarily expect the process of moralization to proceed without conflict or evenly, it has tended to focus on cases in which marketization is ultimately achieved (e.g., Zelizer, 1978, 1985, 2012) and to attribute heterogeneities in the moral market to the effectiveness of different legitimation strategies (e.g., Healy, 2006; Anteby, 2010; Rossman, 2014). Although scholars have recognized cases in which the market retreats from the moral domain (as in the case of priceless children), their focus has been on how transformed normative systems de-legitimize the justification of economic valuation in the eyes of the public (e.g., Zelizer, 1985). The general transformation of a social atmosphere is still regarded as something that is largely beyond the control of individual actors.

The contentious perspective provides a new angle from which to explain heterogeneities in moral markets. It moves beyond the traditional focus on micro-level interactions by bringing a macro-level understanding of politics back into the study of moral markets and exploring how macro-political forces shape market construction and enable resistance. More specially, the contentious perspective highlights the importance of a factional political structure in enabling resistance in moral markets. In our study, resistance against commercializing temples has been enabled under conditions of non-monolithic, factional political interests of the Chinese central government and local government officials and an underlying power structure within which the central government is concerned more about regime legitimacy and is ultimately more powerful than local governments. In addition, the mechanism of publicity has played a key role for resisters to exploit the factional structures, as resisters' ability to be successful in resisting marketization has to do with their ability to align with and mobilize the central government, which has a more macro-level interest in appearing to promote social justice. As such, from the perspective of contentiousness, the moral market is not merely a world in which the market marches into various domains of social life; it is also filled with conflicts and negotiations and is therefore dynamic. Moreover, by depicting actors as having the capacity to resist the hegemony of commercialism, the contentious view offers an actor-driven account of de-commercialization.

The contentious perspective suggests that institutional forces, especially political powers, can play important roles in moral markets. Market expansion critically depends on institutions because for markets to be sustainable, there must be norms and rules that guide the interactions of market actors and support their activities (Fligstein and Sweet, 2002). The moral market literature, however, has been criticized for ignoring the role of institutional forces. According to Reich (2014: 1577), a fundamental flaw of the traditional moral market approach is that it has "focus[ed] on micro-interactions at the expense of broader institutional forces." The contentious perspective suggests that political powers are influential because they have the power to define the appropriate market boundaries. Thus when political actors attempt to leverage markets in order to control society's institutional structures, and when their interests conflict with those of the public, political power is likely to overshadow the influence of culture, especially in an authoritarian context in which power-holders are not held accountable to the public.

We also find that political power, even when authoritarian, is not necessarily a monolithic body. The fracturing of the government by different cliques provides opportunities for cultural preservationists to leverage the influence of one clique to resist the demand of another. In our context, the central government has a stronger motivation to maintain political legitimacy than do local governments. Their differing incentives have led the central government to use the news media and the Internet as feedback channels for monitoring local government officials. The differing incentives have also enabled the Buddhist Association of China to launch a Free Entrance Movement to resist commercialization and have enabled the public to use feedback channels to generate outcry and pressure the central government to curb commercialization. Our study thus shows that different levels of governments function differently and that their different strategic goals have an impact on organizations. Future studies investigating the influence of political forces should be cautious in treating political power as unitary.

While past moral market research has been based mostly on qualitative studies, our large empirical sample, which is based on hand-collected data, grants us the analytical power to reveal the systematic causes of heterogeneities in the moral market. Moreover, the multiple measurements of temple commercialization that we adopted help demonstrate the robustness of our findings, while the fixed-effect model allowed us to tease out confounding time-invariant factors related to the idiosyncrasies of specific cases. By distinguishing substantial changes in price increases from those in price decreases, we were able to show that some factors affect both processes, while others help explain a change in one direction rather than the other. Future studies should unpack the asymmetry in the processes of commercialization and de-commercialization, as once the damage is done, de-commercialization may not be as simple as reversing the social process of commercialization. Finally, our paper also uses crowd-sourced websites as a unique data source. The availability of big data and the application of its analytical tools can lead to methodological innovations in the traditional moral market field and thus potentially open up new research frontiers.

Our paper also contributes to our understanding of moral markets in authoritarian regimes. Authoritarian regimes often lack an active civil society capable of ensuring that power-holders are accountable to society and offer only limited space to free press and public participation. A critical question is whether and how cultural preservationists in these societies are able to resist market advancements backed by political power. This is important, as only 4.5 percent of the world's population lives in full democracies while more than a third (34 percent residing in 52 countries) live under authoritarian rule (*The Economist*, 2017). In the case of Buddhist temples, as commercialization has transformed spiritual retreats into façades for business ventures, the public's understanding of temples' function changes. While high admission fees generate wealth in the short term, they also make people wonder whether Buddha in fact loves money or favors the rich over the poor. By revealing a more dynamic process within moral markets, our paper informs cultural preservationists about strategies for leveraging institutional structures to their advantage.

Our paper also shows that the mechanisms capable of preventing the power-backed march of markets are—somewhat ironically—embedded in the system that the authoritarian regime uses to strengthen its rule. Because

people living under repression are often reluctant to state their true opinions, authoritarian regimes have difficulty collecting social feedback on their policies. Furthermore, the lack of such a mechanism, coupled with the absence of democratic elections, leads to the problem of how to monitor the behavior of local governments and officials. To solve this dilemma, many authoritarian governments have become more “responsive” by developing “input institutions” that allow them to respond to social forces in ways that facilitate their continuing rule (Shi, 1997; Nathan and Gilley, 2003). In China, a system of “representation within bounds” has been deliberately engineered into parliaments (Truex, 2016), a limited space in the media has been devoted to soliciting public opinion (Stockmann, 2013), and Internet censorship is now strategically executed to foster the gathering of information (Qin, Strömberg, and Wu, 2017). The information channels designed to enhance the central government’s ability to acquire local information have also provided opportunities for the public to voice its concerns. The public is able to leverage these input institutions to generate outcries, pose the threat of collective action, and consequently hold local government officials accountable.

Admittedly, cultural preservationists have limited space in which to maneuver, and their effectiveness hinges largely on the central government’s attitude toward a particular issue. By being responsive, the authoritarian regime walks a complicated middle road. Parliamentary representation fosters the revelation of information but prevents political activism, yet the regime’s general tolerance for investigative reporting has shifted over time, and topics permitted on the Internet are constantly changing. Although the different goals of different levels of government have enabled temples to resist the pressure to commercialize, these mechanisms may be less effective in other areas that demand democratic reform. Moreover, the efficacy of resistance largely depends on the central government’s deliberation over the trade-off between economic growth and political legitimacy (Nie, 2017). Factors that shift the preference of central government leaders or alter the urgency of obtaining a certain type of benefit can significantly shift the balance and consequently affect the efficacy of resistance. Future scholars therefore need to test the range of issues on which public opinion can exert substantive influence as well as the factors that influence the preferences of the central government.

Although China is an interesting empirical context in and of itself, studying an authoritarian regime like it may also lead to general theoretical contributions. China can be viewed as a “critical case” in Patton’s (1990: 174) sense; if something happens there, it will happen anywhere. We find that the feedback channels that generate public outcries on the Internet or other news media can force pro-market forces to back down. If these channels matter in an authoritarian regime such as China, they would almost certainly matter in the U.S. or other less authoritarian countries. Therefore future research should examine how the media and the Internet can influence the success of commercialization projects in other countries. Similarly, we find that the divergent goals pursued by different levels of governments offer cultural preservationists leverage. The political discrepancy of different levels of government exists in many countries, and competing political parties in democratic countries often have different agendas for addressing social problems and advocate different social values. Future studies should extend our contentious view to explore how different



types of political conflicts can influence the contention between pro-market forces and cultural preservationists in various countries.

Ever since the publication of Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, it has been widely recognized that religion and markets are intertwined. According to Weber's (1905) essay, religion was a source of inspiration for the emergence of modern capitalism. In today's China, however, Weber's causality works in reverse; China's rapid economic growth has influenced the operation of religious organizations. Our paper demonstrates that the mechanism through which markets encroach on religion in modern China is deeply embedded in the country's political system. Yet the system has also created opportunities for cultural preservationists to effectively resist the advancement of markets. The contention between power and resistance has led to substantial variation within the moral market.

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