

# *The Contemporary Revival of Traditional Belief: A Comparative Study of Yonghe Gong Temple and the Guozijian in China's Youth "Incense Offering"*

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**Abstract:** Current data reveals that Chinese young people's interest in temples has gradually grown in recent years. The popularity of Yonghe Gong Temple has continued to grow, whereas the Guozijian, once regarded as the traditional "the highest imperial educational institution", has gradually faded from public attention. This paper investigates the cultural phenomenon of the youth "incense offering" in China using Yonghe Gong Temple and the Guozijian in Beijing as case examples. Based on methods including textual analysis in religious studies, fieldwork in cultural anthropology, and sociological statistical analysis, this paper analyzes the forms, cultural construction, and underlying motivations forces of this phenomenon from the perspective of religious studies, and offers an interpretive framework for understanding the contemporary "revival" of traditional beliefs among young people.

## 1. Introduction

"Between going to work and getting ahead, young people choose going to incense offering; between asking others and relying on themselves, they choose asking the Buddha", is a proverb that is now making the rounds on Chinese social media. In recent years, famous temples and Daoist sites across China have attracted large numbers of young visitors, including students, new workforce entrants, and self-employed entrepreneurs.

## 2. Youth Participation in "Incense Offering"

In recent years, youth participation in "incense offering" has increased noticeably, marking a sharp contrast to the traditional pattern where religious practices were mostly associated with middle-aged and elderly believers. In Beijing, Yonghe Gong Temple, a Buddhist monastery, has become a representative destination where young people burn incense and pray for blessings. Continuous online promotion of its perceived "efficacy" has further increased its popularity year by year[1].

### 3. A “Bustling” Yonghe Gong Temple and a “Quiet” Guozijian

If you look at a map, the Confucius Temple and the Guozijian Museum (henceforth Guozijian) are separated from Yonghe Gong Temple (henceforth Yonghe Gong) just one street in Beijing. But nowadays, the two sites present a striking contrast: one is “quiet”, and the other is “bustling”. The Guozijian has a prestigious past, it used to be the the highest educational institution and administrative authority throughout from Yuan to Ming and Qing dynasties. The important task of Guozijian is cultivating administrative talents for the government. Yonghe Gong Temple, was built in the 33rd year of the Kangxi reign (1694), started as the princely residence of Yongzheng (the fourth son of the Kangxi Emperor, the next emperor). In the 9th year of the Qianlong reign (1744), Emperor Qianlong (the forth son of Yongzheng) converted this Palace (Yonghe Gong) into a Gelug monastery of Buddhism[8,12].

If you look at their historical roles, Not only the Guozijian was the central administration of education, it also the traditional Chinese cultural ideal of honoring Confucius and venerating learning. Meanwhile, it served as a symbolic place for those who aspired to join the ranks of scholar-officials. In contrast, Yonghe Gong have the function, which is the Qing court managed religious affairs related to Mongolia and different regions, and serving lamas from different places. In 1981, Yonghe Gong opening to the public, nowadays it has grown into one of the most influential Beijing’s Buddhist temple, it has become a principal site for young people for “incense offering”.

## 4. The Contemporary “Revival” of Traditional Belief

### 4.1 Data Comparison between Yonghe Gong Temple and the Guozijian

To present the current situations of Yonghe Gong Temple and the Guozijian more directly, and to highlight the ongoing “incense-offering” surrounding the former, the author has gathered recent data from the official websites of both sites, and presents it in tabular form below.

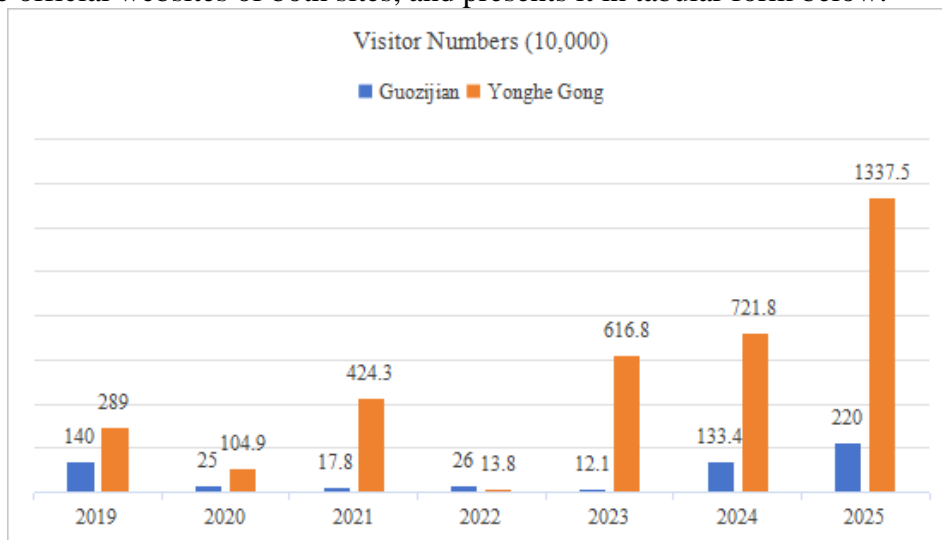


Figure 1. Guozijian and Yonghe Gong Visitor Numbers, 2019-2025

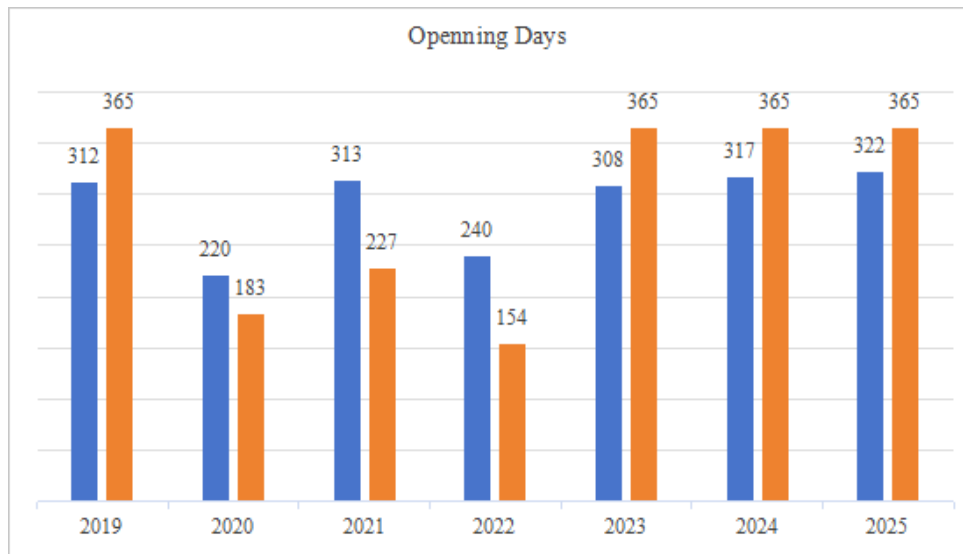


Figure 2. Guozijian and Yonghe Gong Opening Days, 2019-2025

The data in these two tables are from 2019 to 2025, from publicly official website. As the 2025 tourist attendance data of the two sites remain undisclosed, the adopted figures are estimated values. Visitor numbers of Guozijian and Yonghe Gong showed an U-shaped trend (see Figure 1). In 2019, visitors at the two sites remained relatively stable. From 2020 to 2022, both sites experienced sharp declines due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, COVID-19 was no longer designated a global public health emergency, visitor numbers at both sites began to rise. From 2023 to 2025, the increase at Yonghe Gong was particularly pronounced, rapid year-on-year growth, even to 60,000 visitors in a special festival day. According to the data presented from two tables, visitor numbers of Guozijian remained relatively stable before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, about 1.4 million people visited in 2019, and that figure only dipped slightly to around 1.335 million in 2024, reflecting only limited fluctuation. In contrast, Yonghe Gong experienced explosive growth, from about 2.89 million visitors in 2019, to 7.22 million visitors in 2024. As shown in the figure 2, the difference in opening days between two sites also should be taken into account when comparing visitor flows. Even when the differences in Opening Days between the two sites are taken into account, the growth in visitor flow at Yonghe Gong remains striking under increasingly favorable access conditions[14].

#### 4.2 Questionnaire and Data Analysis

To better understand how Yonghe Gong and the Guozijian figure into China youth's religion practices today, the author designed an online questionnaire, mainly focused on the phenomenon of “incense offering”, followed conducted a comparative analysis. The questionnaire have 11 questions, organized around three key dimensions: what incense offering is, why the phenomenon occurs, and how it is experienced, to reveal the deeper motivations underlying young people’s enthusiasm for incense offering.

The questionnaire focused on 6 dimensions: (1) basic demographics; (2) visit experience and frequency—to compare the two sites' popularity; (3) information channels—to trace media pathways and dissemination mechanisms; (4) visit motivations—to reveal differences in faith-related functions; (5) post-visit subjective evaluations—to understand how youth faith practices are further circulated; and (6) perceptions and attitudes toward the two sites—to analyze the cultural construction behind the enthusiasm for incense offering.

There are 136 responses in this questionnaire, including 82 males and 54 females. The sample spanned multiple age groups, increasing its diversity and representativeness. The detailed distribution of the questionnaire responses is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Questionnaire about Yonghe Gong and the Guozijian

Question	Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 3	Variable 4
Age	0-18	18-35	36-50	Over 50
Number	44	24	50	18
Visit preference	Guozijian	Yonghe Gong Temple	Neither attractive	Both attractive
Number	10	28	45	53
Information access	Friends / relatives	Social media	Mass media	Other
Yonghe Gong	50	19	27	40
Guozijian	33	15	17	71
The number of Visit	0	0-3	More than 3	
Yonghe Gong	72	47	17	
Guozijian	69	57	10	
Purpose of visit	Make wishes / pray	Sightseeing	Other	
Yonghe Gong	30	37	69	
Guozijian	32	44	60	
Trust in the efficacy of prayer	Effective	Not effective	Do not believe	Other
Yonghe Gong	45	2	26	63
Guozijian	50	5	55	26

## 5. Why the “Incense Offering” has “Revival” among Youth

James George Frazer summarized religion as consisting of two elements: “a theoretical and a practical, namely, a belief in powers higher than man and an attempt to propitiate or please them” [15]. From the perspective of the psychology of religion, Kenneth I. Pargament contends that religious experience assumes particular salience under conditions of heightened social uncertainty and pressure [16]. Survey data indicate that Chinese youth’s participation in incense offering could be attributable chiefly to three factors: economic pressure, inner psychological needs, and online dissemination[11].

### 5.1 Economy: Moderating Growth and Employment Pressures

#### 5.1.1 Economic and Employment Pressures

China’s GDP growth rate decreased from 8.6% in 2021 to 5% in 2025 due to issues like declining traditional growth engines and inadequate effective demand. Young people’s job and entrepreneurship prospects are now more uncertain due to moderating growth. Against this backdrop, the difficulties in graduate employment have become increasingly prominent. In 2025, the number of college graduates in China reached 12.22 million. There remains a supply-demand mismatch between the absorptive capacity of traditional industries, the supply of emerging jobs, and

the extraordinarily large cohort of university graduates. Additionally, due to industrial restructuring and related factors, individuals over the age of 35 also encounter unemployment and reemployment difficulties, further intensifying the tensions in the labor market.

### **5.1.2 Involution and the Relief of Pressure**

At present, Chinese youth face intense competition in both education and employment. Although many are still willing to “work hard”, they are increasingly uncertain whether effort will actually bring rewards. Therefore, some youth turn toward what is often called “lying flat”. Fu Qianqian argues that the phenomena of “lying flat” and “involution” are not simply a matter of giving up, but rather ways of seeking new modes of self-protection and meaning-making under high pressure [7]. Continuous pressure and competition have reshaped how young people turn to spiritual resources. Religious sites like Yonghe Gong are increasingly regarded as tools for emotional release, it also helps us understand the popularity of Yonghe Gong. The Guozijian is an educational institution in ancient China, understand its backgrounds and history demands long-term accumulation, cultural understanding, and educational ethics, whereas Yonghe Gong Temple does not require doctrinal study or ritual mastery. In periods of moderating growth and rising uncertainty, that ease of access fits young people's immediate needs far better[4,13].

## **5.2 Inner Drives: Individual Weakening and Spiritual Demand**

### **5.2.1 The Theory of Disappearance “Nearby”**

According to Xiang Biao’s theory of “rebuilding the nearby”, contemporary young people live in an environment in which the “nearby” has been attenuated. Interpersonal ties, community, and the everyday social order have grown increasingly tenuous, rendering urban individuals more susceptible to a sense of drifting and insecurity. Consequently, they long for spaces that are reachable, tangible, and repeatable [2,5,6].

Yonghe Gong Temple fits satisfies these conditions, and also have many convenient conditions. Such as: situated in the central of Beijing, it is easily accessible to youth, entry for free, and suitable for repeated visits. That tangible action is exactly what many young people need. The Guozijian? That's a different beast. It is more historically oriented, demanding long-term reading, comprehension, and immersion. When anxiety and uncertainty hit, young people gravitate toward spaces that offer immediate emotional grounding. And that's why, in everyday life, Yonghe Gong feels more like “nearby” than the Guozijian ever could.

### **5.2.2 Spiritual Comfort and the Reconstruction of Meaning**

The data from questionnaire shows youth’s motivations. Yonghe Gong’s popularity is explicitly about sightseeing, but implicit motives revolve around practical concerns, such as: find a good job, academic success, financial luck. The survey also reveals an interesting split: 45 respondents said prayer there was “effective”, while 63 respondents selected the category of “other”. This reflects the diffuse belief structure aptly captured by the Chinese expression “if you believe, it is there; if you do not, it is not.” At a deeper level, many young people appear to seek the reassurance of feeling that “at least I did something”. Even without expecting direct supernatural intervention, they may still interpret incense burning as a practice of “accumulating blessings” or gaining positive fortune.

This explanation aligns broadly with existing scholarship. Studies of the “religious boom” among youth indicate that they are primarily motivated by a search for emotional comfort and affective support, rather than by doctrinal allegiance or institutional commitment. The attraction of Yonghe Gong lies not chiefly in Buddhist doctrine itself, but in its function as an accessible

spiritual symbol that facilitates emotional regulation and meaning reconstruction within a secular society [5,6,9].

### 5.3 Peer Effects from a Communication-Studies Perspective

To understand the transmission pathways of the incense offering, the questionnaire included an item that asked respondents how they had first learned about Yonghe Gong Temple. The results indicate that recommendations from friends and relatives, along with social media, constitute the primary channels. To a considerable extent, Yonghe Gong's popularity has been generated and amplified through online circulation, with incense offering emerging as a social touch-point within peer dynamics. Platforms such as Xiaohongshu (Red Notebook) and Douyin (China TikTok) provide worship scripts, blessing guides, and bracelet recommendations, transforming religious rituals into a highly replicable behavioral template that young people can directly imitate.

This phenomenon can be interpreted through the theory of “the fashionization of religion”: religion becomes a widely circulating cultural trend among youth, and incense offering or prayer for blessings is treated as part of popular culture [10]. Such practices constitute what may be termed functional belief, which differ fundamentally from traditional religious devotion. Participants generally do not observe doctrine, their piety is limited, and religion is approached mainly as a practical tool invested with supernatural meaning or as part of a social trend[3].

In this process, young people adopt the identity of “religion enthusiasts” in order to seek group labels, emotional relief, and a sense of belonging, yet they do not necessarily move toward deep religious conversion. In essence, what is pursued is a symbolized form of sacredness and a functional means of relieving pressure, which remains somewhat detached from the spiritual core of religion itself.

## 6. Conclusion

From the perspective of functional belief, the “gods” to whom contemporary youth appeal are not necessarily religious ontologies in the traditional sense, but rather flexible solutions and spiritual resources to be drawn upon in different situations. Individuals may turn to multiple deities and symbolic systems, selecting their objects of appeal based on perceived “effectiveness” or “usefulness”. This selective logic forms the basis of what may be termed the “new faith” of Chinese youth. This phenomenon is closely related to several conditions: moderating growth of the economy, intense educational and employment pressure, and the weakening of the “nearby” in urban life, all of which undermine stable identity positions and future orientation. Under the influence of media publicity and peer participation, highly accessible, action-oriented religious spaces have therefore become important sites where young people deposit their anxieties and reconstruct the meaning of daily life.

In sum, the emergence of this “new faith” among Chinese youth is not a simple return to traditional religion, but a novel expression of spiritual need within a secularizing society. Its practicality, fashionability, and plurality reveal both the inward spiritual demands engendered by contemporary pressures and the reshaping of individual meaning-making amid evolving social structures.

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