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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Typology of religious spaces in the urban historical area of Lhasa, Tibet

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**KEYWORDS**Tibetan Buddhism;  
Religious space;  
Mandala;  
Typology**Abstract**

This work focuses on the spatial compositions and characteristics of religious sites and surrounding pilgrimage space in the city of Lhasa, which is the sacred center of Tibet. The modernization and urbanization of the city in recent decades have transformed the spatial and socioeconomic positions of its urban religious sites. The present study offers insights into the composition of urban religious spaces in the city of Lhasa with consideration to the spatiality and sociality of these spaces. After examining the current situations of religious spaces, we classify the target spaces into five types using the cluster analysis method and identify the characteristics of each type. We then discuss the socioeconomic values of each type of religious space and derive recommendations for planners. The analysis performed in this study may contribute in the special planning for the protection of religious traditions.

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## 1. Introduction

Mankind has always desired to replicate the sacred world in the physical world (Michell, 1994), thereby endeavoring to receive the goodness of their gods through pilgrimages (Popi et al., 2012). Therefore, cities have long been symbolically and materially associated with various religions (Goh and van der Veer, 2016). This association is particularly true for the historical cities of Tibet, which has experienced

theocracy for a hundred years—religion has profoundly influenced every aspect of the Tibetan society.

Similar to early Indian Buddhism, the conception of the world in Tibetan Buddhism is perfectly represented by the theoretical Mandala (Figure 1). As the birthplace of Tibetan Buddhism, the city of Lhasa was deemed by the adherents of Buddhism to be the world center of sacred Tibet. By replicating the sacred spirit world of Mandala in its construction, the ancient and sacred city of Lhasa formed the original single-core urban structure, with the Jokhang Temple (24) serving as the urban core (Zhang et al., 2011). Simultaneously, a religious activity developed, involving pilgrimages to sacred places that follow a route in clockwise direction around the sacred places, as seen in Figure 2 (Funo, 2006;

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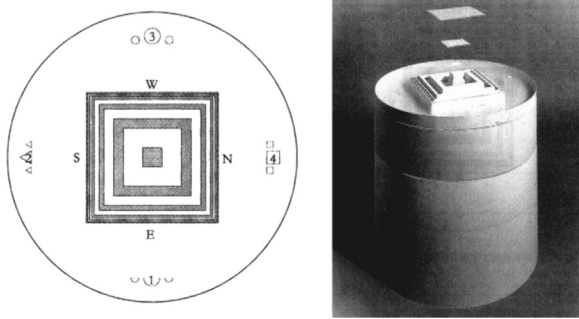


Figure 1 Mandala (Brauen, 1997).

Kanagisawa and Funo, 2004; Zhang et al., 2012). In the 17th century, more than 90% of Tibetans became Buddhists with the establishment of theocracy in Tibet. Over the next 300 years, Tibetan Buddhism played a decisive role in the development of Lhasa, which is the capital city of Tibet, and affected the city in both spatial and social aspects. First, Buddhism practitioners sanctified the city of Lhasa by constructing temples and pilgrimage locations. Second, religious rituals (including pilgrimages) developed into one of the most important aspects of the daily social life of residents. As a result, the relationship between sacred beings, urban space, and social order became deeply rooted in the city of Lhasa.

After the incorporation of Tibet into the People's Republic of China during the 1950s, theocracy was replaced with a socialist system, which resulted in the transformation of the social structure in Tibet (Chen and Gao, 2003; He et al., 2010). In the early republican period, the religious buildings of Lhasa and their surrounding spaces suffered varying degrees of damage for political reasons (Li, 2010). Nevertheless, atheism did not succeed in displacing Buddhism. By the 1980s, religion began to resurge. In the early 1990s, Potala Palace (26) and Jokhang Temple (24), which are

listed as world cultural heritage sites, triggered the development of tourism, which subsequently resulted in socioeconomic transformation (Zhang et al., 2016). Lhasa's religious significance as the center of the spirit world was modified to that of a city of culture, where the religious sites became heritage attractions for tourism and investment. This situation has been a double-edged sword for the urban religion of Lhasa. On the one hand, the government strengthened the protection of religious buildings to boost tourism and investment (Li, 2010). On the other hand, urbanism and modernity have resulted in secularization, and the consumption culture of contemporary globalization has increasingly impinged on religious beliefs and practices (Zhou and Zhu, 2011).

In this process, the pilgrimage spaces surrounding the religious destinations have undergone conversion to multifunctional spaces through imaging, marketing, and commodification according to their different relationships with the city. Therefore, we hypothesize that the religious spaces have been converted into different categories with different spatial conditions.

Over the centuries, these religious buildings have been invaluable to the social and cultural life of the city, serving as the center of life. The pilgrimage places that surround the sacred architectural objects determine the identity of the space and give it significant characteristics (Wang, 2005). Additionally, the socioeconomic values of the urban religious spaces, which are influenced by religious values, social norms, and spatial conditions, play an important role in urban development. Therefore, an appropriate protection system is required. Classification analysis on the heritage site aids in understanding the values and elements of protected objects (Zhou and Zhang, 2001). Thus, this study focuses on the conversion of religious spaces with the aim of clarifying the characteristics and socioeconomic values of the different spaces via typological analysis.



Figure 2 Daily religious activities of Tibetans.

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