Contemporary Buddhists in urban Taiwan show a high international awareness: In their biographical self-descriptions, internationality is ascribed a consistently positive meaning. Buddhism leads them, at times, literally abroad, provides them with a message to the world or enables them to safeguard morality in an environment that is increasingly shaped by transnational flows. Buddhism seems to serve well the need for transnational agency and self-management, a factor which contributes to its attractiveness to people in urban Taiwan. Statistical observations reveal that significantly more Buddhists live in the urban areas of Taiwan than in the rural ones. The analysis of biographical narrative interviews which the author conducted between 2005 and 2007 corroborates the statistical findings and further suggests plausible explanations for this fact: ‘Buddhism’ in urban Taiwan is perceived as internationally open and fitting in a cosmopolitan context, but it also presents itself as compatible with an increased level of education; it is, moreover, regarded as a suitable leisure time activity, serving a growing urban demand for bodily self-cultivation while at the same time allowing flexible commitments of varying intensity. Traditionally, Chinese Buddhism in Taiwan has been esteemed as a source of inspiration rather than dismissed as a burden of tradition.

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This article aims at situating the transnational notion of contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism in the context of the general attractiveness of Buddhism to Taiwanese urbanites. I will start from the statistical observation that an increasingly large percentage of Buddhists in Taiwan live in urban areas. By discussing some of my findings from the biographical interviews, I seek to establish the reasons for this higher percentage, and to highlight the importance of transnational notions in eight of the nine contrastive cases as well as in the organizational development of Taiwanese Buddhism. I will then take a more detailed look at two individual cases in order to differentiate between two understandings of Buddhism's function as an international link-up for urban dwellers. Finally, on the basis of the case studies, I am going to describe Taiwan's role as a “diffuser” within the global interchange of religions, both at an organizational level and through shaping people’s minds.

The biographical analyses that are central to this article are methodologically based on structural hermeneutics, which underlines the importance of the interviews’ textual reality over secondary information such as the organizational structures of Buddhism in Taiwan. The informational priority given to the interviews is, moreover, warranted by the current state of the field; while the organizational development of Taiwanese Buddhism is comparatively well researched, the social context of Buddhist individuals has only recently begun to attract the attention of researchers.

Taiwan has been, over the centuries, under the continuous influence of other cultures. The amalgamation of Fujianese, Hakka, aborigines and, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, American, Japanese and new mainland Chinese influences have transformed urban Taiwan today into a culturally hybrid area. Its population is affected mainly by the migrational flows within Asia. This unique ethnoscape of urban Taiwan shapes the role of ‘religions’ in daily life. While religious affiliation in general occurs no more frequently in the cities of Taiwan, Buddhism is the only ‘religion’ which obviously has more followers in the urban regions than in the developing or more remote areas of the country.

1 For the methodology of structural hermeneutics see Oevermann et al. (1987) and Guggenmos (2010).