

The Power of Wish-Vows: Ethics and Ritual Transformation in Buddhist Temples in Contemporary China

Yang Shen

To cite this article: Yang Shen (2023) The Power of Wish-Vows: Ethics and Ritual Transformation in Buddhist Temples in Contemporary China, *Material Religion*, 19:3, 211-235, DOI: [10.1080/17432200.2023.2251356](https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2023.2251356)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2023.2251356>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 26 Oct 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 155



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

**the power of wish-vows:
ethics and ritual
transformation in
buddhist temples in
contemporary china**
yang shen 

the institute of anthropology, department of sociology, zhejiang university; and
max planck institute for the study of religious and ethnic diversity, göttingen,
germany

ABSTRACT

Among the most noteworthy practices in Buddhist temples in China today are *yuan* or wish-vow actions. Wish-vows encompass both wish-making (*xuyuan* 许愿) and vow-giving (*fayuan* 发愿), with both modalities embraced by average temple-goers from a general population. Chinese Buddhist liturgies encourage ritual performers to adopt a bodhisattva stance, wishing/vowing for the well-being of all beings. This introduces an ethical dimension to *yuan* performances. This paper analyzes the continuity in practice between wish-making and vow-giving, exploring how popular and Buddhist understandings of ritual entangle and how ritual generates meaningful narratives for practitioners. The article shows how the human pursuit of ritual effects and ethical self-transformation are not contradictory but rather complementary processes. Considering this Chinese ritual situation deepens our comprehension of votive practices in syncretic religious traditions. Additionally, it offers a new direction for considering religious potentialities in late socialist societies. Furthermore, it usefully challenges the use of the term “prayer” in Chinese contexts. In this way, the article bridges anthropology, Chinese studies, and religious studies and enhances our conceptual toolkit for studying ongoing human transformation.

Keywords: ritual, wish-making, vowing, temple religions, Chinese Buddhism, ethics, self-transformation

Yang Shen is a cultural anthropologist of religion and secularism. She received her Ph.D. from Boston University in Anthropology and was a post-doctoral research fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen, Germany. She also taught at the Department of Asian Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem as a Frieberg-Glorisun Fellow at the Louis Frieberg Center for East Asian Studies. Dr. Shen is currently an Assistant Professor in Anthropology at the Department of Sociology at Zhejiang University in Hangzhou, China.
ysanthro@zju.edu.cn

Material Religion volume 19, issue 3, pp. 211–235

DOI: [10.1080/17432200.2023.2251356](https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2023.2251356)



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Witnessing a temple-goer kneeling before a god statue, who maintained a controlled posture and closed his eyes—oblivious to his surroundings, gives us pause: how can we aptly describe this brief, fleeting encounter that typically lasts mere seconds? (Figure 1). Approaching such a common scene in Chinese Buddhist temples, ethnographers confront a challenge to translate between forms of life. Native Chinese speakers, regardless of religious or atheist attitudes, find the concept of *yuan* self-explanatory. In various contexts, the idiom translates to wishes, vows, desires, aspirations, prayers, hopes, willingness, readiness, and more—not to mention the polysemy of all these English terms. Moreover, since no single phrase in conventional Euro-American cultural-religious traditions encapsulates the entirety of *yuan* actions, observers often overlook or misinterpret the meaningful worlds as unfolded within the dynamic ritual spectacles in Chinese temples. The paper demonstrates and clarifies that the brief moment of encounter observed is a profoundly humanistic interaction within the human-divine relationship.

The article focuses on a simple gesture widespread in Chinese temple spaces, exploring how this paradigmatic ritual action, *xuyuan*, undergoes a critical transformation of meaning within the syncretic context of Chinese Buddhist temples. It is well known that popular religious participation in Chinese society typically stems from pursuing divine power or



FIG 1
Temple-goers making wishes/vows; wish-slips overhead (Photo Courtesy of Mengping Xu).

numinous efficacy (*ling*) (Feuchtwang 2003; Chau 2008; Lin 2015). Additionally, participants in Chinese Buddhist temple activities come from the general public, often without formal religious affiliation or a belief in the necessity of religious identity for their ritual engagement (Overmyer 1990; Leamaster and Hu 2014). Despite scholarly consensus on the popular face of Chinese Buddhist temples, limited research has investigated the interaction of co-existing ritual processes. Consequently, the ritual effects at work remain unclear, especially when private worship, group rituals, and public liturgical assemblies transpire simultaneously in Buddhist temples in late socialist China.

We begin by discussing the utility or insufficiency of anthropological insights on ritual for explaining the ritual dynamics in Chinese Buddhist temples. Next, we present the concept of *yuan* or wish-vows as an alternative framework for understanding what is referred to, from an etic perspective, as “praying.” Ethnographically, we examine (1) Chinese temple-goers’ generic wish-vow performances and how wish-vows, as ritual framing of actions, transform the objects of average human desire; (2) the resignification introduced by Mahayana Buddhist monastics to temple-goers’ *yuan* practices, and (3) the narrative and liturgical framework supporting the Mahayana Buddhist reframing of wish-vow actions. The materials were collected from Temple Commons, a major urban temple, and its rural branch Temple Hillside, in the City of Glory, a metropolis of ten million residents in eastern China during 2015–2016.¹

Chinese Worshippers and Ritual as a Framing of Actions

The article draws from performance studies to analyze the process and effects of ritual transformation (Austin 1975; Schechner 2010; Y. Shen 2015). While scholars agree that rituals maintain and creatively transform social structures through patterned practices over time (Gluckman 2017; Turner 2018; Turner 1977; Bloch 1992), the implication of non-membership-based rituals, such as those in Chinese Buddhist temples, are not always self-evident. Additionally, under the historical conditions of state secularism, which subordinates religious institutional frameworks under the constitutional authority of the modern state, the conventional assumption of coextensive ritual spaces and life spheres is often untenable (Asad 2003, 2015).

In late socialist China, for example, religious engagement is institutionally marginalized in “Religious Activity Venues” (*zongjiao huodong changsuo*), meaning that spatial policies are imposed to separate so-called religious activities from a presumably secular, mainstream life (cf. Anagnost 1994; Yang 2004; Fisher 2011, 2014; Y. Shen 2020). Contrary to expectations for ritual engagement by “members of a confessional Buddhist

community," these segregated ritual activities are open to the public and do not structure role-based community interactions.²

In the context of Chinese Buddhist temples, the question arises regarding a temple ritual's ability to alter social relations—beyond rituals' reputed capacity to "reproduce" a given establishment. My proposition is to build on the work of anthropologists and ritual theorists who focus not only on ritual behaviors as embodied practices but also on ritual framings as providing an orientation to action (Bell 1992; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, 2007; Seligman et al. 2008; Seligman and Weller 2012, 2018; van der Veer 2020). My goal is to look beyond defined ritual programs and examine how people may contingently alter their ethical and practical stance as a result of their participation in *yuan* activities. In such an action-oriented ritual analysis, what is at stake is apprehending the realities that ritual activities construct *in situ*.

The distinction between ritual practices per se and ritual as a framing of contingent actions allows us to reconsider the utility of the idiom of "prayer" in cross-cultural contexts. Recent anthropology has given much ethnographic attention to acts of prayer, particularly in relation to their effects on reconstituting ethical and moral subjectivities in Christian and Islamic cultural-religious lives (Mahmood 2011; Henkel 2005; Simon 2009; Luhrmann and Morgain 2012; Bandak 2017). Especially building on Mauss (2003) and later Foucault (2019), scholars of prayer practices productively explored the interplay between agency and authority and revealed how the embodied capacities of the self are formed within specific traditions or ways of life. However, it is crucial to note that in these studies, prayer as a ritual technique is rooted in an understanding of "prayer" that is already a product of ritual framing specific to Christian and Islamic liturgical traditions. It means that the idiom of prayer tends to carry the weight of a Creator/Creature divide prevalent in Islamic-Christian ontologies, which can overwrite other conceptions of divine power and agency when used interchangeably (c.f. Song 2018).

Regarding Chinese temple practices, it is misleading to view supplications as communication with a transcendental God because it fails to recognize the humanistic presupposition of the human-divine relationship (Mair 2014; Teiser 2009, 2022). A prominent case illustrating such Chinese acceptance of the divine capacity of humans is the worship of apotheosized humans, sometimes directly through their flesh or body parts preserved in Chinese temples, including in my field sites.³ In this context, the ritual acts through which Chinese worshippers articulate their hopes and desires to a broad range of human-divine beings are rather indistinct from one another. In other words, the vernacular idiom of "praying/prayer" does not adequately capture what is happening or the effects produced during *yuan* activities.⁴

Wish-Vows as a Ritual Framing of Desire and Action

Considering ritual as a frame of action, rather than a set of embodied practices, addresses the limitations of applying categories from one tradition to another and enables alternative ontologies to emerge conceptually. This approach requires us to examine each case *in situ*, taking into account the empirical processes of ritualization that refine the ritual actor's self-definition. This perspective is especially relevant when exploring Chinese ontologies that emphasize humans' innate transformative potential. As Sangren observes, for considering Chinese cultural-religious practices like *yuan*, "worship" should be viewed as an idiom of self-construction and desire as intimately connected to the pursuit of a growing awareness of innate divinity. He writes:

Although many devout lay worshippers are fond of recounting how the god or goddess miraculously intervened in their lives, such stories are often prefaces to an additional recounting of how these miracles were merely the beginning of a more profound process of learning and self-transformation. I was often told how gods employ miracles as a means to recruit individuals to a commitment to this transformative process. In other words, what starts out as an engagement with a reified, alienated divinity becomes a more reflective engagement with the self; "enlightenment" amounts to the discovery that the self is itself divine and for some, divinity is but a projection of the self... Those who sincerely seek guidance [from gods] are thought inevitably to learn eventually that prayer for solely individual benefits is only the beginning of the [self] cultivation process (*xiude*). (Sangren 2020, 80–86)

It would be redundant to repeat that indigenous Chinese theories tend to postulate ritual as a means of transforming human agency (Cua 2005; Neville 2008). The key for cross-cultural observers is to maintain an empathetic attitude; so that one can be aware of the heterogeneous possibilities that can arise when encountering a personal project in which a human being is realizing his or her innate goodness. In the words of a comparative philosopher, recognizing desire as a motivation for ontological movement illuminates that the first movement is the "nascent orientation to the desirable," and that desire itself "always constitutes a dynamism towards... the realization of the good" (V. Shen 2018, 43, 2019). From this perspective, a distinctive aspect of Chinese religious psychology lies in the unique sense of agency expressed through a human yearning for ontological self-transformation.

In ordinary lives, this yearning for ontological agency is poignantly manifested through a Chinese cultural fascination with understanding the movements of one's fate (*mingyun*) (Lupke 2005). Underlying such obsessions is "the wish to control the future... a psychologically more fundamental desire to claim ownership of one's being—or, in contemporary parlance, to assert agency" (Sangren 2012, 117). Sangren notes

that desire in the Chinese religious world is a human universal, “with little need of explicit elaboration or justification” (Sangren 2012, 122). While this is true, we still need to add that desire as a mode of human orientation must be understood within the contexts of possible actions and the ontological stakes one sets for oneself. In the absence of a radical boundary between the human and divine, the Chinese desire for agency and self-enhancement is simultaneously fraught with an ontological risk regarding what one might become. Thus, while Sangren draws on Freud and Lacan to argue for recognizing desire as a human condition, I take a more performative approach to the unfolding of rituals. As the ethnography demonstrates, suspending universalist expectations and lending space to ontological uncertainties can be productive in clarifying the transformative ritual process of human desire in Chinese temples. By tracing the moments of ritual framing, we can observe how the human condition of desire undergoes experiential re-orientation and how tentative, interactive interstices eventually help render certain desires more meaningful and desirable than others.

In short, employing the analytics of ritual as a frame for action allows us to identify that the Chinese idiom “*yuan*” encompasses more than just “desire,” which Sangren elaborated extensively. Etymologically, *yuan* is a compound character consisting of characters for “source/origin” and “heart.” Since Chinese grammar does not distinguish between singular and plural nouns, it denotes both concept and object. Moreover, *yuan* functions as a transitive verb, indicating the actions of the heart-mind, which are broadly regarded as a source of life.⁵ As both a noun and a verb, *yuan* denotes a critical action essential to the capabilities of a hearty spiritual being, which includes humans and anthropomorphic beings (such as spirits and animal fairies), as well as humane-divine beings (such as celestial deities, buddhas, and bodhisattvas).⁶

The particular framing of narratives and rituals in Chinese Buddhist temples leads me to translate and conceptualize *yuan* as “wish-vows.” Admittedly, from a liturgical and scriptural perspective, *yuan* in Chinese Buddhism refers specifically to the aspirational commitments of buddhas and bodhisattvas, who wish/vow to benefit all beings. However, as mentioned, given the broad spiritual-divine continuum of the Chinese temple space, there is a critical continuity rather than a radical discontinuity between various divine instantiations. Therefore, to the extent that *yuan* acts run through all activities in Chinese Buddhist temples, the term allows us to consider a more general mode of agency manifested in a free human being’s vision and commitment to action and realization. Returning to the scene in [Figure 1](#) with this new insight, we can now observe that the man is giving a wish-vow.

Spiritual Efficacy and the Ritual Effects of Plausibility

Rooted in what scholars refer to as the prominent Han “traditional expectations of miraculous powers” (Palmer 2007, 84; Feuchtwang 2008), numerous ordinary temple-goers have worshipped for their unique ends at Temple Commons, an illustrious Buddhist temple in the City of Glory. Recalling its history since the sixth century, the temple enjoys a far-reaching reputation as amazingly efficacious.

Typically, temple-goers’ *yuan*-acts consist of expressing their most cherished desires or feelings through a para-narrative beginning with “I wish...”. Within this genre, the content of each wish is contingent on individual biographical experiences. Meanwhile, wish-making in a Buddhist temple space assumes a communal performative aspect that is socially intelligible. Particularly when temple-goers visit temples with relatives and friends (in the cities) or neighbors (in the countryside), a unique inter-subjective moment arises when they hear the wishes of others. Ioana, a 28-year-old participant in a Buddhist summer camp, shared her first memorable experience of Buddhist temples during a tourist trip, saying:

I did not expect to find myself so touched when hearing my mother and father, in a Buddhist temple, saying they only wished me to own happiness. They held their wish card as if carrying gold. I saw what was in their eyes when they looked at the bodhisattva’s statue; I watched every movement as they knelt to pray, despite my mother’s waist injury. It was an expression of genuine concern for me. We were traveling and on the edge of fighting after having spent too much time together. They were unsatisfied with my job [in a small private business]; “too insecure.” I cannot tolerate their banal security within state institutions either. Stuck there. However, I am convinced by how they care.

Clearly, Ioana would have been aware of her parents’ concerns even without the temple encounter. However, the ritual situation, which required affective commitment and physical alignment, allowed Ioana to perceive her parents’ care through their careful movements, despite her mother’s physical pain. In a ritual setting not directly oriented to interpersonal communication, Ioana was touched by an attitude fostered by the ritual orchestration of mind and body, which demonstrated a regard for others. One might wonder what elements contributed to this effect of plausibility.

Besides the momentary act of prostration, Ioana’s story highlights the significance of wish-cards as relational tokens. The occurrence of votive texts is widely noted by historians, archaeologists, and philologists of ancient religion (C.f. Lubin 2001, 566; Pinch and Waraksa 2009). However, the ritual production and effects of votive texts are not always clear when examined outside their situational context. Ethnographic methods can provide valuable insights in this regard. In contemporary Chinese temples, wish-cards are essential tools

for soliciting and sanctifying the desires of ordinary wish-makers (Figure 1). Beyond transient bodily movements, temple-goers inscribe their speech acts onto wish-cards, giving their wishes a tangible form. Through votive practices, these cards are transformed into personal monuments. Depending on each temple's layout, wish-cards can take different forms, such as cloth slips tied to tree branches, wooden tablets affixed to a wall, small cards attached to the tails of great lanterns, and so on. Regardless of their specific form, these materialized wishes accumulate massively.

Inscribing wishes on wish-slips generates a distinctive genre of "text act" (c.f. Chau 2008, 95–98) and a surplus of collective orality. The act of inscription obliges wish-makers to articulate their relationships with their wish-addressees using relational terms. Not surprisingly, family collectives (*hejia*) are among the most common agents in making or receiving a wish in the text-act. Companies, and occasionally pets, also frequently appear on lists of concerns. Other regular topics in the wish texts at Temple Commons and Temple Hillside include the future of Buddhism, the nation-state (written as "ancestral nation"), and general references to an international community (*shi jie*). Yet few wish-makers nominate voluntary associations or other social organizations in their wish-writing. As the inscriptions appear in semi-public Buddhist temple spaces, we should note that their contents reflect current social imaginaries, and that the ritual writing act serves as a productive nexus for social discourse. This generative impetus resonates with Bourdieu's observation that,

"Private" experiences undergo nothing less than a *change of state* when they recognize themselves in the *public objectivity* of an already constituted discourse, the objective sign of recognition of their right to be spoken and to be spoken publicly. (Bourdieu 1977, 170, italics in original)

Such discursive affirmation provides wish-makers with the confidence that their private wish is part of a collective and shares a pre-existing source of authority. Indeed, the act of writing or performing "text acts"—such as writing, inscribing, or bidding for characters—is a heavily power-laden drama in Chinese political and religious stories (Santos 2013). Katz's study of Chinese vows also suggests that wishing/vowing "legitimizes" one's claims, and if successful, can help to create or reinforce facts in ways that are considered culturally sanctioned" (Katz 2008, 61). In a temple setting, we may view the extravagant display of wishes as an assembly of non-elite voices from ordinary people, validated and supported by divine forces. As bold authors of their wishes, ordinary wish-makers authorize their works of the self through the unveiling of their innermost desires.

The sheer volume of wish-cards also plays a crucial role in signaling ritual efficacy. In the context of Chinese village

religions, the public recognition of spiritual efficacy depends on the measure of scale—which, in Chau’s Durkheimian analyses, amounts to a condition of collective effervescence (Chau 2008). That is, gods as collective representations are energized by human veneration; the more worshippers, the more powerful the gods (Chau 2008, 153–156). Although we cannot assume a pre-given collectivity (in terms of sociological membership) in the case of Chinese Buddhist temples, the vast number of wish-slips presents a spectacle of effervescence and symbolizes a sense of relational engagements on its own terms.

The drama created by a seemingly endless array of wish-offerings is as indicative of a Buddhist temple’s success and credibility as the unceasing incense fire (*xianghuo*). Like the red-hot incense fire, the sensorial quality of abundant wish offerings bespeaks human-divine communications untrammelled by the passage of time. As visible traces of past and present human engagement within a shared ritual space, wish-slips make wish-making acts both contiguous and contagious, enticing more participants to join the carnival to express their unique yearnings. Fortune, health, career success, passing national exams and entering higher education, lasting marriage, domestic peace, joy, and happiness are just a few common themes that repeatedly appear on the wish-slips; each has their own unique signature. In this way, the apparent repetition carries inexhaustible layers of emotional force, creating an intertwined blend of social visions and hope.⁷

Ritual Technologies for Efficacy and Its Reframing

The expectation of efficacious outcomes is crucial to ordinary Chinese temple-goers who place less emphasis on Buddhist doctrines. This prioritization is clear when many temple-goers visit Buddhist temples to seek lottery divination (*qiuqian*). Hatfield’s research on lottery divination suggests that it is a form of self-help that “involves the patterning or configuration of agencies and their relative positions” (Hatfield 2002, 861). This understanding helps us view wish-making and divination-seeking as complementary ritual technologies that aim to facilitate human-divine breakthroughs during moments of stagnation, confusion, or quandary. Underlying both practices is a desire to improve one’s current condition.

At Temple Commons, eyes glimmering with desire, temple-goers making wish/vows under divine witness ask continuously and expectantly—“I have heard Temple Commons is extraordinarily effective (*ling*)! Are there bamboo sticks [tool for divination] too?” Shifu (“Venerable”) Lofty, a well-educated Buddhist nun in her late fifties, had cut the bamboo herself because “so many people had asked about and needed it.” The Shifu believed that a lottery divinatory revelation she received years ago had accurately predicted the course of her life. Although she had spent time studying various divination

theories, she did not offer divinatory consultation. Instead, the Shifu provided a book of interpretation, so divination-seekers could “take pictures with their phones and study it at home if needed.” The Shifu seemed confident in the ability of ordinary temple-goers to “help themselves” in ritual matters. She explained,

Many people visit temples only to look for divination rituals. Most of them probably need to make critical decisions. Seeking out (*qiu*) Guanyin Bodhisattva [who is the most well-known Buddhist divinity in Chinese societies] will always generate the extraordinary efficacy (*ling*) they desire. It is the case [i.e., responsiveness is guaranteed] whichever [manifestation of] Guan-yin you seek. It is because the Guan-yin bodhisattvas are compassionate, and by compassion, one feels the suffering conditions of all sentient beings. However, when one seeks for (*qiu*) something, one also needs to make a wishful promise (*xuyuan*). After giving your word, you must return to it. Who have money promise money; who do not have money promise to eat vegetarian food (*chi zhai*) or do good deeds.⁸

Encountering a ritual device that sparked both excitement and suspicion in late socialist China, one might wonder about the opinions of a religious specialist. Without delving into an ideology of modern rationality that dismisses many ritual engagements as “superstitions” (*mixin*), Shifu Lofty admitted that negotiating complex human lives requires many ritual techniques. Rather than distinguishing between justifiably “proper” religious practices and suspiciously “irreligious” customs, the Shifu and her like have formulated their views in line with the widespread social concern for ritual efficacy. Noticing that the Shifu positioned the self-help divination practice along a fine continuum of ritual means for producing desired effects, I further inquired, “One must pray/worship (*bai*) very sincerely to achieve effectiveness, isn’t that correct?”

Praying/worshipping (*bai*) is not really the best word [to speak about efficacy]! When I was a new monastic, I also prayed/worshiped (*bai*). Only much later, I realized that if you look for effectiveness (*ling*), you must give a wish-vow (*fa yuan*). You must raise your heart (*fa xin*). The power of wish-vows is most critical. To own the power of wish-vowing, you must be sincere (*cheng*) in your heart. It is like swearing an oath (*fa shi*). In general, people dare not take an oath. When they do it, their purpose must be utterly determined.

Here the Shifu introduced a re-interpretation of wish-vows that is not commonly evidenced by average temple-goers. It pertains to a claim that a petitioner should strive to become a bodhisattva personally and persevere in their commitment to benefit all sentient beings. In this sense, the evidence of wish-vow powers lies in the perseverance that encompasses old and new circumstances over a long-term trajectory of a wish-vow commitment. Indeed, Chinese Buddhist monastics often

recount how Guan-yin is ready to respond to the cries of anyone because the bodhisattva has given a wish-vow to respond to everyone's wishes. In popular memory, many buddhas are venerated precisely based on the wish-vows the then buddhas-to-be made in their past lives—when they were still cultivating a bodhisattva way.

At the time of my conversation with the Shifu, I had observed the prevalence of wish-vows and wish-vowing power in temple spaces, although I did not grasp the concept. So I parroted the common idiom used when discussing monastic individuals. I asked the Shifu, "Was it a *great* wish-vow-giving act (*fa da yuan*) for you to go monastic?"

"Absolutely!" The Shifu burst out, before returning to a casual tone, "It also demands a lot of felicitous conditions (*fu fen*) to walk out of the household life (*chu jia*). Even with this intention, many people could not make it happen in their current lifetimes (*zhe yi beizi*) because formidable obstacles prevent them.

According to the Shifu's account, the difference between monastic and non-monastic ways of life is a function of both personal determination and favorable circumstances.

It is important to emphasize that bodhisattva practices are central to the Chinese Buddhist monastic way. Mahayana Buddhist monks and nuns (the great majority of Chinese Buddhist monastics) only obtain fully-fledged monastic status after pledging a set of Bodhisattva Precepts (*pusa jie*) in addition to the standard monastic precepts they share with their Theravada counterparts.⁹ Thus, besides adhering to disciplinary rules that distinguish a celibate monastic life from average lifestyles, Chinese Buddhist monastics are also required to commit to acting like a bodhisattva in everyday circumstances and maintaining a sense of kinship with their fellow human beings. While the same bodhisattva precept-taking ritual is available to qualified laypersons, most non-monastics do not take these precepts. Nonetheless, the universal human potential for self-perfection is widely recognized. In fact, monastics use the term "bodhisattva" as a general form of address when interacting with people from all kinds of backgrounds, including illiterate men and women from rural areas, government officials, and educated urban professionals in a shared temple space.

Shifu Lofty's narrative exemplifies a common approach Chinese Buddhist monastics use to encourage an ethical shift during popular *yuan* performances. As temple-goers pursue efficacy in honoring the power of buddhas and bodhisattvas, the monastics recommend a self-obliging power working upon one's desired outcomes. However, without dismissing the quest for efficacy, the monastics recognize that ordinary desires carry a self- uplifting potential and, thus, are openings for self-transformation. The act of petitioning a god could become an act of pledging self-authorial agency, particularly if

temple-goers were to broaden their mindsets and consider making wish-vows for others and taking a path in the bodhisattva tradition. Our next focus will be how ritual structures support this narrative reframing.

Buddhist Attunement: Performative Bodhisattva Wish-Vows as a Ritual Stance

In Chinese Buddhism as a discursive tradition, the ideal of bodhisattva practice for attaining Buddhahood is what sets Chinese Buddhist traditions (Mahayana traditions, including the Tibetan Buddhist traditions in China) apart from Theravada Buddhist traditions (informed by the “Pali imaginaire,” c.f. Collins 1998). The ideal of the bodhisattva way is, above all, expressed through honoring the wish-vows characteristic of a bodhisattva, which are systematically integrated into Buddhist temple liturgies. Every day, during both resident ritual sessions and various public assemblies, a diverse array of buddha and bodhisattva wish-vows are recited. The best-known and most generic group is the Four Immeasurable *yuan* (*si hong shi yuan*), typically translated into English as “the Bodhisattva vows.” The vows reads,

All beings beyond measure, (Bodhisattvas/I) vow (*shi yuan*) to liberate.

Endless blind anxiety, (Bodhisattvas/I) vow (*shi yuan*) to uproot.

Methods without a count, (Bodhisattvas/I) vow (*shi yuan*) to learn.

The great way of Buddhas, (Bodhisattvas/I) vow (*shi yuan*) to accomplish.

In Chinese, the *yuan*-text lacks a pronoun, thus allowing for a dual agency to be incorporated into its recitation.¹⁰ In the textual context, the collective bodhisattvas are agents giving these four immeasurable wish-vows. However, during ritual enactment, the speech-act performers utter the speech in the first person, while ritual participants—during their small talks in a temple-keeping daily life—constantly encourage one another to take ownership of their speech acts. Recalling the ideogramic composition of the character “*yuan*”—an “origin” arising from a “heart”—we can observe that it is precisely the elasticity of the folk usages of “*yuan*” that makes its semantic boundaries remarkably malleable. Thus, individuals who recite the bodhisattvas’ *yuan* are often urged to envision these conventional formulations as their own wish-vowing orientations, that is, as the ideal shape or emerging direction for their formless, unexpressed, or suppressed desires.

Another example can further illustrate the duality of bodhisattva *yuan* performers. In residential Buddhist temples, the community begins and ends daily with bell striking and bell-verse singing. When monastic novices or lay Buddhists first take up the task, veteran practitioners teach them not to forget to give their personal wish-vows before singing the verse. It is

said that “the best *yuan*-singer should be a *yuan*-giver.”
Consider the evening *yuan* text; the singers are prompted to see this as one of the ideal templates for personal wish-vows. It goes,

The gold bell tolls at my very first (second/third) strike
The rising hymn winds high without a mike
My homeward song fills up the heavens’ estate
Then plunges into hades behind all the gates

Now bless buddhas, bodhisattvas and the like
Shining through sky and earth is their radiant light
Now bless the sentient beings of endless dharma realms
Nations flourish and peoples at the helms

May all beings of the three worlds in the four forms of life
Each be free from their repeating destinies
May all beings in the nine jails or of the ten varieties of ghost
All shy away from their own flood of sufferings

May the climate bring regular rains and winds
So that peoples are rid of famine, enjoying peaceful means
May the residents in the southern fields and the
eastern suburbs
See their days brightened by Yao and Shun, the
virtuous rulers

May military arms rest in peace forever
May the armored horses no longer go to war
May the spirits of the defeated, wounded and deceased alike
Together revive in the pure land with no spite

May all flying birds and roving beasts meet no snares
May prodigals and traveling merchants drink from their
countryside
Time and space unbounded,
Earth and sky long-lived,
May the contributors, far and near, increase in welfare
and life

May the body, mouth, and mind be tranquil
So that the Buddhist teachings thrive and do not
become dry
May the earth and water deities in the area tribes
Assure the sangha and care for the Dharma

May parents, teachers, seniors, relatives, partners,
and followers,
And the parents, teachers, seniors, relatives, partners,
followers of each,
Together with the deceased of all past generations,

All reach enlightenment without the loss of a single one

[Each stanza followed by a strike]

[Sing different buddhas and bodhisattvas' names, each a strike]

[Repeat the bell-verse three times¹¹]

Notably, the Chinese Buddhist *yuan* verse highlights the human protagonist as the speaker who claims to penetrate the realms of heaven and hell and who offers their commitment to live with every kind of being across time and space. This emphasis serves to remind yuan-singers of their own potential to embody the bodhisattva ideal to relate to all sentient beings compassionately.

It is also vital to note that these self-originate and other-oriented bodhisattva wish-vows are decidedly performative. As mentioned previously, Chinese temple-goers often display an indifferent attitude toward the question of faith. Instead, they readily participate in a broad range of temple rituals based on their private understandings of "devoutness" (*qiancheng*) and specific needs. When ordinary ritual practitioners encounter various *yuan* texts in their temple activities, they sing, chant, or mimetically recite aloud sample wish-vows. Belief operates at the practice level as a faith in the effects of their ritualized acts (Morgan 2010). Practitioners trust that the ritual recitation will ultimately fulfill their desire for extraordinary efficacy by introducing responses in their everyday lives.

After years of studying Chinese religious practices, Bell observed that "ritualization and ritual mastery are not only circular; they are also an exercise in the endless deferral of meaning and purpose. The effectiveness of exercising ritual mastery as strategic practice lies precisely in this circularity and deferral" (Bell 1992, 109). The circular productivity of Chinese ritual engagement is exemplified in the case of bodhisattva liturgies. On the one hand, ordinary temple-goers' expectations of extraordinary efficacy are perpetually deferred through their ongoing participation in bodhisattva rituals. On the other hand, the ritual's mimetic schemes, as forms of reality, increasingly become absorbed into temple-goers' sense of self and environment. Ultimately, an agent's sense of ritual transforms into a sense of reality itself.

Ritual Differentiation and the Challenge of Staking a Greater Wish-Vow

In light of an action-oriented ritual analysis, the key empirical change induced by bodhisattva performances is that they produce an awareness of the size of the performer's heart. That is, the Buddhist ritual framing repeatedly orients mimetic performers' attention to their individual degree of resoluteness and commitment to the standardized wish-vows they recite.

Through rituals and informal conversations, temple-goers are introduced to a bodhisattva claim stating that bodhisattvas, buddhas, and individuals of their rank can give “immeasurable” wish-vows and remain unwavering throughout. Whether one understands “immeasurability” through a Buddhist “non-existence” theory in a philosophical sense or *via* a popular fascination with magical powers, a critical distinction is imposed on popular cognitive schemes. In addition to professing a *yuan* (*wo de yuanwang shi*) before a diviner or promising a *yuan* (*xu yuan*) before a patron deity, Chinese temple-goers encounter the ritual need to give a *yuan* (*fa yuan*) through enacting divine bodhisattva performances. As a result, temple-goers learn to speak of a grand wish-vow (*da yuan*) alongside cherishing personal wishes of the heart (*xin yuan*). While both dimensions of wish-vows serve to validate conduct, the former makes a claim of authenticity, while the latter asserts awe and outstanding credibility.

This performative epistemic differentiation does not necessarily entail ontological transformation unless ritual performers “raise” their own hearts. In a temple conversational space, the urge for ritual differentiation often takes the form of performers posing personal ethical challenges to one another as fallible fellow human beings. Overwhelmed by the bodhisattva level’s incredible wish-vows, many temple-goers readily admit their inability or unreadiness to offer comparable wish-vows. Their narrative usually goes, “Think about so-and-so’s wish-vow [mostly but not exclusively monastic individuals]. Ask yourself, can you do it? I dare not!”

The expectation is that Chinese Buddhist monastics must prove their extraordinariness by performing daunting tasks, including caring for the sick amid messy conditions, attending 4 am morning classes daily, or cooking for the entire resident community and a dramatically varying number of visitors without help. In some ways, the situation is similar to a competitive Chinese feasting culture, where personal power differentials are established during the back-and-forth of toasting acts in drinking games (Harmon 2010). In both situations, competence is overridden by willingness, while participation in the play implies ranking in a fluid status hierarchy.

The conflation of willingness and competence places significant pressure on Chinese Buddhist monastics. Firstly, the ethical imperative for monastics to embrace the bodhisattva way stems from undertaking standardized Bodhisattva Precepts during their monastic initiation. Then, in addition, it becomes a moral obligation for them to maintain the social role and reputation of a bodhisattva in a broader Chinese society. Thanks to dramatic renditions, including TV adaptations of popular stories featuring the well-known bodhisattva Guan-yin, even those with little interest in Buddhism are familiar with the bodhisattva ideal of embodied universal compassion. Consequently, a social expectation exists that Chinese monastics, who publicly declare their commitment,

must live up to their claim as practicing bodhisattvas in this world. In other words, individual monastics have to earn credit and trustworthiness in their social interactions with all kinds of non-monastics when they, on a case-by-case basis, satisfy the standards imposed by the public imagination of the bodhisattva way.

Both legendary bodhisattvas and human bodhisattvas—the Chinese Buddhist monastics—reside in temples. Often, temples are considered spatial entities that are the product of a pre-existing wish-vow project and, hence, an indexical sign of wish-vows. A temple, once built, is supposed to last many generations and dynasties. Upon seeing a temple, many temple-goers quickly perceive it as demonstrating the temporal aspects of worldly accomplishment and seek to ascertain the role of wish-vows in its creation and continued existence.

This desire for association with an auspicious site was evident among tourists at Temple Hillside, a relatively new temple. Mr. Wang, a retired policeman, and his ex-colleagues were on an intra-province tourist trip. Although Temple Hillside was not on their itinerary, their tourist bus stopped there because Temple Hillside's architecture and scale caught their attention on the way. Thanks to the local government, the state-built highway had an exit leading to this "fantastic geomantic" (*hao fengshui*) spot. Gazing around the temple courtyards like a geomancer, Mr. Wang stopped a temple-keeper and asked expectantly, "Who is the residency chair (*zhu chi*, abbot) of this temple? Do you know any of his/her stories?" As a resident layperson responded to his inquiry, the ex-policeman's eyes grew wider and wider until he finally exclaimed "Incredible" (*liao bu qi*) three times, declaring,

Grand temples and small temples deserve respect alike. They are all sustained by the wish-vow power of some cultivation practitioners (*xiu xing ren*). But to build and sustain a new temple of this scale, the power of *yuan* is inconceivable!

When Mr. Wang's wife joined him, he immediately retold the story, emphasizing that the residency chair had burned 48 incense spots on her arms. The extraordinary act was undertaken to solemnize her determination to fulfill her wish-vow to build a temple that would be a pure land "where everyone can find a place." The number 48 emulated the 48-grand wish-vows (*da yuan*) made by Amitabha Buddha, whose wish-vows for believers were incredibly potent. The most famous of Amitabha's forty-eight wish-vows among Chinese Buddhists concerns the wish-vow to deliver the souls of dying individuals to a pure and peaceful land whenever they call out Amitabha's name and seek his help (de Bary 1969, 197–204). Without asking for more information about Amitabha, Mr. Wang's wife exclaimed her admiration, took out her phone, and urged their colleagues to take a group picture in the temple.

Wish-vow stories like those of the abbot at Temple Hillside hold great justificatory value for Chinese temple-goers. It is as if a narrative of “he/she/I/you have given the wish-vow” was a magical mantra, sufficient to suspend doubt and validate a normative scenario. Whenever specific wish-vows are revealed, they influence and refine the expectations placed on *yuan*-givers. As a result, the pressure intensifies, as fulfilling a wish-vow is no longer just about private self-actualization; rather, it becomes a moral demand supervised by those who respect other people’s wish-vow projects and may potentially benefit from them.

Shifu Gentle, another resident monastic at Temple Hillside, once conveyed this pressure by showing me a text message thread:

(Temple-goer:) “I have a question, Shifu. My family recently rented our house to my brother, but my husband says this is bad for our home’s future fortune (*jia yun*). What should be the solutions to this problem? Please help us!”

Shifu Gentle: “Amitabh! Thank you for your trust! Please come up to the hillside when you have time and see what the Guanyin Bodhisattva may say/reveal to you! [referring to the self-help lottery divination device that was available in Temple Hillside]”

Then the Shifu commented to me with a tone of concern, “You see, so many people just assume that we monastics must know everything and can solve every problem!” The Shifu sighed and returned to her work; temple constructions were ongoing, and engineering logistics needed daily examination. In Shifu Gentle’s words, her “tiny little wish” (*xiao xiao de yuan wang*) was simply to help Shifu Grandiose (the temple abbot, who burned 48 incense spots on her arms) to fulfill her grand wish-vow to bring the Pure Land into reality. In other words, it is not only the action of *yuan* that is honored everywhere in a Chinese Buddhist temple; it is the interlocking of wish-vow powers that have fueled a world-creating dynamism that is both open-ended and self-sustaining in an interactive Chinese Buddhist world.

Efficacy Re-situated and Ritual Effects Reconsidered

The article examines overlapping ritual processes in Buddhist temples in China by exploring the temple encounters of average temple-goers. In their ritual actions, these non-exclusive ritual practitioners predominantly pursue divine power or numinous efficacy (*ling*). In the study of Chinese religions, the pursuit of *ling* is, by default, situated in the realm of so-called “popular religions” (*minsu/minjian/minzhong zongjiao*), in which context *ling* is often rendered as “magical power.” Recent anthropologists of Chinese religions have attempted to move beyond the framing of efficacy as a matter of magical effects and instead elaborate on the generative, efficacious processes that produce

cultural-historical dialectics (Sangren 2012, 2020); disruptively reformulate the terms of social order (Dean 1998); organize collectivities and communities (Chau 2008; Murray 2018); or constitute the self (Hatfield 2002). However, few have discussed the efficacy question in Buddhist temple encounters, where popular practitioners and state-institutional stakeholders share their ritual spaces.

We will not delve into lengthy and often unhelpful debates about the problems arising from adopting the category of “magic” itself. Instead, suffice it to say that the “magic” category is primarily established through a distinct, morally charged hierarchical ordering between generalized rationality and its antithetical irrationalities. Accordingly, the challenge of situating the experiences of efficacy in Chinese Buddhist temples comes from the limits of conventional understanding that sees the pursuit of practical effects in the world and the concern for the ethics of action as two distinct journeys. To overcome the false dichotomy between the “magical” rituals of the masses and the “ethical” stances of rationalist religionists, I show how generic and Chinese Buddhist temple liturgies interpolate one another and co-produce reframed understandings of human desire, action, and divine powers. Even in a narrowly-conceived “religious” realm (such as “Buddhist temples”), so-called ritual activities do not have to rely exclusively on formalized liturgical programs that institute prescriptive religious norms.

In this article, I have offered a more productive approach to the multifaceted nature of Chinese Buddhist temples, illustrating how a reframed ritual analysis enables us to see what is precluded by conventional scholarly idioms. By not presupposing a rationalist view of religion, we have thought through the paradigmatic non-exclusive ritual culture prevalent in Chinese Buddhist temples.

The article examines multiple layers of *yuan* performances, focusing on the ritual transformation of human desire into wish-vows and the Mahayana Buddhist ritual transformation of wish-vows from ordinary to extraordinary. Often, the this-worldly orientation in popular wish-making practices is unfairly labeled as too utilitarian, too self-oriented, and profaning the “ideally” transcendental goals. However, in Chinese Buddhist temples, even mundane desires are inherently part of a movement toward self-awareness of the countless activities an active human heart-mind can achieve.

Our analysis of the *yuan* narratives generated in temple rituals reveals that worshippers’ wishful yearnings are relational rather than egoistic, as demonstrated by loana’s parents’ wishes for her, the daughter who finally heard her parents through a ritualized movement infused with personal meanings. Furthermore, when expressed through ritualized *yuan* performances, desire itself is restructured and becomes a solemn commitment

that can cause or induce concomitant actions. From a performative perspective, wish-making ritualists develop new terms to speak of their lives without assuming a uniform purpose, and they gain the momentum to align with their unique relational ritual realities.

This article conceptualizes *yuan* as “wish-vows” to capture the Chinese temple’s production of a willing agent fulfilling their unique visions. Specific to Chinese Buddhist temples, Mahayana Buddhist liturgical structures provide additional ritual incentives for performance-loving temple-goers in China to expand the range of their wish-vow beneficiaries and to imagine and commit to otherwise unlikely ties. In this way, wish-vowing performances in Chinese Buddhist temples provide a concrete example of ritual technologies that can transform pathos into words, words into actions, and actions into self-obligations.

It is important to note that the long-term ritual effects of wish-vows are not always immediately noticeable and often involved *ex post facto* attributive narratives. Future inquiries may investigate the social production of “optative” selves more thoroughly—namely, by following how subjects persist in bringing wish-vows to non-temple settings. Nonetheless, in the very moment of wish-vowing, ritualistic performances concretely document specific possibilities for what a performer may become, ensuring that at the epistemic and normative level, nothing can dismantle those possibilities, visions, and optative realities.

Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of the manuscript were presented at colloquiums at the “FRED” Writing Group at the Department of Anthropology at Boston University, the Institute on Culture, Religion & World Affairs at Boston University, the Anthropology Graduate Student Conference at John Hopkins University, the Workshop of Anthropology of *xiuxing* convened by the Institute of World Religions at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences et al., the Religion and the Human Sciences Workshop at The University of Chicago Divinity School, and the Department of Religious Diversity at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity. I owe particular thanks to Kimberly Arkin, Robert Weller, Adam Seligman, Gareth Fisher, Peter van der Veer, Alice Yeh, Jessica Zu, and Der-Ruey Yang for their revision advice that enhanced the manuscript’s argument and structure. I also wish to express my gratitude to many more colleagues and friends who shared insights and encouragement with me. Their valuable feedback, while not individually acknowledged here, is greatly appreciated, and I look forward to addressing them in future endeavors.

Funding

The research for this article was enabled by a Graduate Research Abroad Fellowship from Boston University (IRB Exempt Approval 3795X), a Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF), and a Dissertation Fellowship in the Global Religion Research Initiative (GRR) at the University of Notre Dame. The Open Access publication of this article was supported by the Max Planck Society. I extend my gratitude to these institutions for their invaluable support.

ORCID

Yang Shen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2895-3068>

notes and references

¹In the paper, I have chosen to maintain pseudonyms for both the temples and the city to respect the temples' key institutional actors' desire to remain low-key. This decision also allows for consistency with my discussions elsewhere and helps to differentiate my anthropological portrayal of temple activities, emphasizing the experiences of occasional temple-goers, from the preferred representations of various organizational stakeholders. At the present stage of late socialist modernism in China, institutional discourses surrounding ritual activities tend to be quite narrow, while the representation and evaluation of these activities within temple entities are closely regulated according to Chinese understandings of secularism. More discussions see Y. Shen (2020).

²The study is interested in anthropological framings and the general implications of spontaneous, unorganized temple encounters in a ritual arena shared by resident Buddhist monastic actors and a broad public audience. The focus thus differs from recent ethnographies of contemporary Chinese Buddhism, which tend to emphasize the play of community identities or organizational innovations (Borchert 2017; Weller et al. 2018; Ji, Fisher, and Laliberté 2019; Nichols 2022).

³The relic-body is called the flesh-body *bodhisattva*. C.F. Gildow and Bingenheimer (2002).

⁴This is not to say that the notion of "prayer" cannot be reconstructed to apply to non-monotheistic situations; Sun (2016) offered a sociological attempt.

⁵For philosophical treatises on the Chinese articulations of "heart/mind" (*xin*), see Angle and Tiwald 2020.

⁶The boundary between these spiritual beings, again, is porous rather than absolutist. c.f. Shahar and Weller 1996; Meulenbeld 2016.

⁷Shi (2019, 5–6) lists the wishes inscribed on 801 wish-cards in a Chinese Buddhist temple in Australia. Popular topics are quite similar.

⁸For readers interested in the economic aspect of wish-vowing, it is helpful to distinguish between a divine economy of the gift and a technical economy of

temple management. As wish-makers return to the temple where they started a specific wish after its fulfillment, temples—as spatial markers of an endured event—are likely to receive a sum of donation. Playing a custodian's role, a temple becomes a key agent in the sustenance of the personal, private relationships between a wish-maker and a divinity. The temple's role in mediating the temporality of a wish-making event is crucial for enabling a structure of exchange. Thus, in a Maussian sense (Mauss 2003), the emergence of a non-dyad structure of exchange motivates a unique divine economy of the gift, powerfully inserting Buddhist temples into the fabric of contemporary Chinese social lives. The monetary value of donations—either in the form of returned gifts or as expressions of excess generosity—varies from case to case and rests upon one's free will. Occasionally, a significant amount can help secure funding for a temple agenda. However, such gains are not comparable in significance to the unfolding of a divine economy of the gift, a game in which a temple can assert its social presence.

Regarding the technical economy of temple management, when temple-goers leave their wishes and signature in a text-card and look for temple storage and display, temples do charge a space-usage fee. As temples are rule-makers for this amount, the fees constitute a regular and non-negligible source of income. Campergue (2015) offers an illuminating discussion about the cultural construction of understandings of gifts and merits in French Buddhist centers, where French visitors carry assumptions of money and exchange that differ from their Asian hosts. It would be interesting to explore the cultural economy of wish-making along this line in the context of global Buddhism and anthropology of religious economy more generally. For example, outside Buddhist situations, Werbner (1988) discusses the extension of moral space in a Pakistani migrant setting, and Kreinath (2020)

examines recursive ritual encounters with Muslim saints.

⁹On the standardization of bodhisattva ordination in a program of “triple-platform ordinations” in the monastic initiation in mainland China today, c.f. Bianchi 2019; Chiu 2019; Péronnet 2022.

¹⁰For a textual-scriptural analysis, c.f. Nattier (2007, 118–120).

¹¹Translation is my own, inspired by Thomas Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’ (1750). Reading the yuan verse alongside Gray’s elegy, it becomes strikingly clear that the Chinese Buddhist yuan verse prominently features a human protagonist. This speaker claims to have the ability to penetrate even the realms of heaven and hell.

Anagnost, Ann S. 1994. “The Politics of Ritual Displacement.” In *Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast Asia*, edited by Charles F. Keyes, Laurel Kendall, and Helen Hardacre, 221–254. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Angle, Stephen C., and Justin Tiwald. 2020. “Moral Psychology: Heartmind (Xin), Nature (Xing), and Emotions (Qing).” In *Dao Companion to ZHU Xi’s Philosophy*, edited by Kai-chiu Ng, and Yong Huang, 361–387. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.

Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Asad, Talal. 2015. “Thinking about Tradition, Religion, and Politics in Egypt Today.” *Critical Inquiry* 42 (1): 166–214. doi:10.1086/683002

Austin, John Langshaw. 1975. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Bandak, Andreas. 2017. “The Social Life of Prayers—Introduction.” *Religion* 47 (1): 1–18. doi:10.1080/0048721X.2016.1225904

Bell, Catherine. 1992. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bianchi, Ester. 2019. “Transmitting the Precepts in Conformity with the Dharma.” In *Buddhism after Mao: Negotiations, Continuities, and Reinventions*, edited by Zhe Ji, Gareth Fisher, and André Laliberté, 152–170. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Bloch, Maurice. 1992. *Prey into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Borchert, Thomas A. 2017. *Educating Monks: Minority Buddhism on China’s Southwest Border*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Campergue, Cecile. 2015. “Gifts and the Selfless Work Ethic in Tibetan Buddhist Centres in France.” *Religion Compass* 9 (11): 443–461. doi:10.1111/rec3.12183

Chau, Adam Yuet. 2008. *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Chiu, Tzu-Lung. 2019. “Bodhisattva Precepts and Their Compatibility with Vinaya in Contemporary Chinese Buddhism: A Cross-Straits Comparative Study.” *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 17: 193–224.

Collins, Steven. 1998. *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cua, Antonio S. 2005. *Human Nature, Ritual, and History: Studies in Xunzi and Chinese Philosophy*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press.

Dean, Kenneth. 1998. *Lord of the Three in One: The Spread of a Cult in Southeast China*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

De Bary, William Theodore. 1969. *The Buddhist Tradition: In India, China and Japan*. New York: Vintage.

DeBernardi, Jean Elizabeth. 2006. *The Way That Lives in the Heart: Chinese Popular Religion and Spirit Mediums in Penang, Malaysia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Feuchtwang, Stephan. 2003. *Popular Religion in China: The Imperial Metaphor*. London: Routledge.

Feuchtwang, Stephan. 2008. “Suggestions for a Redefinition of Charisma.” *Nova Religio* 12 (2): 90–105. doi:10.1525/nr.2008.12.2.90

Fisher, Gareth. 2011. “In the Footsteps of the Tourists: Buddhist Revival at Museum/Temple Sites in Beijing.” *Social Compass* 58 (4): 511–524. doi:10.1177/0037768611421130

- Fisher, Gareth. 2014. *From Comrades to Bodhisattvas: Moral Dimensions of Lay Buddhist Practice in Contemporary China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 2019. *Power: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*. London: Penguin UK.
- Gray, Thomas. "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," Poetry Foundation, accessed September 13, 2023, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44299/elegy-written-in-a-country-churchyard>.
- Gildow, Douglas, and Marcus Bingenheimer. 2002. "Buddhist Mummification in Taiwan: Two Case Studies." *Asia Major* 15 (2): 87–127.
- Gluckman, Max. 2017. *Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Society*. London: Routledge.
- Harmon, Brian. 2010. "China's Ritual Feasts: Elite Men, Social Change, and the Imagination of Rural Authenticity in Luzhou, Sichuan." *Asian Anthropology* 9 (1): 95–115. doi:10.1080/1683478X.2010.10552597
- Hatfield, Donald J. 2002. "Fate in the Narrativity and Experience of Selfhood, a Case from Taiwanese Chhiam Divination." *American Ethnologist* 29 (4): 857–877. doi:10.1525/ae.2002.29.4.857
- Henkel, Heiko. 2005. "Between Belief and Unbelief Lies the Performance of Salât: Meaning and Efficacy of a Muslim Ritual." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11 (3): 487–507. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9655.2005.00247.x
- Humphrey, Caroline, and James Laidlaw. 1994. *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual: A Theory of Ritual Illustrated by the Jain Rite of Worship*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Ji, Zhe, Gareth Fisher, and André Laliberté, eds. 2019. *Buddhism after Mao: Negotiations, Continuities, and Reinventions*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Katz, Paul R. 2008. *Divine Justice: Religion and the Development of Chinese Legal Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Kreinath, Jens. 2020. "Playing with Frames of Reference in Veneration Rituals: Fractal Dynamics in Encounters with a Muslim Saint." *Anthropological Theory* 20 (2): 221–250. doi:10.1177/1463499619841212
- Leamaster, Reid J., and Anning Hu. 2014. "Popular Buddhists: The Relationship between Popular Religious Involvement and Buddhist Identity in Contemporary China." *Sociology of Religion* 75 (2): 234–259. doi:10.1093/socrel/srt057
- Lin, Wei-Ping. 2015. *Materializing Magic Power: Chinese Popular Religion in Villages and Cities*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lubin, Timothy. 2001. "Vrata Divine and Human in the Early Veda." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121 (4): 565–579. doi:10.2307/606499
- Luhrmann, Tanya M., and Rachel Morgain. 2012. "Prayer as Inner Sense Cultivation: An Attentional Learning Theory of Spiritual Experience." *Ethos* 40 (4): 359–389. doi:10.1111/j.1548-1352.2012.01266.x
- Lupke, Christopher. 2005. *The Magnitude of Ming: Command, Allotment, and Fate in Chinese Culture*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2011. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mair, Victor H. 2014. "The vocabulary of prayer in Modern China." *Language Log*, April 7. Accessed 4 December 2020. <https://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=11582>
- Mauss, Marcel. 2003. *On Prayer*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Meulenbeld, Mark. 2016. "Death and Demonization of a Bodhisattva: Guanyin's Reformulation within Chinese Religion." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84 (3): 690–726. doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfv104
- Morgan, David. 2010. "Introduction: The Matter of Belief." In *Religion and Material Culture*, edited by Morgan, 1–10. London: Routledge.
- Murray, Daniel M. 2018. "The City God Returns: Organised and Contagious Networks at the Xiamen City God Temple." *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 19 (4): 281–297. doi:10.1080/14442213.2018.1476578
- Nattier, Jan. 2007. "Indian Antecedents of Huayan Thought: New Light from Chinese Sources." In *Reflecting Mirrors: Perspectives on Huayan Buddhism*, edited by Imre Hamar, 109–138. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag.

- Neville, Robert Cummings. 2008. *Ritual and Deference: Extending Chinese Philosophy in a Comparative Context*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Nichols, Brian J. 2022. *Lotus Blossoms and Purple Clouds: Monastic Buddhism in Post-Mao China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Overmyer, Daniel L. 1990. "Buddhism in the Trenches: Attitudes toward Popular Religion in Chinese Scriptures Found at Tun-Huang." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 50 (1): 197–222. doi:10.2307/2719227
- Palmer, David A. 2007. *Qigong Fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Péronnet, Amandine. 2022. "Embodying Legacy by Pursuing Asymmetry: Pushou Temple and Female Monastics' Ordinations in Contemporary China." *Religions* 13 (10): 1001. doi:10.3390/rel13101001
- Pinch, Geraldine, and Elizabeth A. Waraksa. 2009. "Votive Practices." In *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, 1 (1): 1–9.
- Sangren, P. Steven. 2012. "Fate, Agency, and the Economy of Desire in Chinese Ritual and Society." *Social Analysis* 56 (2): 117–135. doi:10.3167/sa.2012.560209
- Sangren, P. Steven. 2020. *Chinese Sociologics: An Anthropological account of the Role of Alienation in Social Reproduction*. London: Routledge.
- Santos, Gonçalo dos. 2013. In *Ordinary Ethics in China Today*, edited by Charles Stafford, 194–221. London: Bloomsbury.
- Schechner, Richard. 2010. *Between Theater and Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Seligman, Adam B., and Robert P. Weller. 2012. *Rethinking Pluralism: Ritual, Experience, and Ambiguity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Seligman, Adam B., and Robert P. Weller. 2018. *How Things Count as the Same: Memory, Mimesis, and Metaphor*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Seligman, Adam B., Robert P. Weller, Bennett Simon, and Michael J. Puett. 2008. *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shahar, Meir, and Robert P. Weller. 1996. *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Shen, Vincent. 2018. "Confucian Spirituality: Desire, Self-Cultivation, and Religiosity." *Journal of Korean Religions* 9 (2): 33–54. doi:10.1353/jkr.2018.0011
- Shen, Vincent. 2019. "Desire, Representing Process, and Translatability." *Philosophy East and West* 69 (2): 316–336. doi:10.1353/pew.2019.0028
- Shen, Yang. 2015. "Rethinking 'Traditions': Reading the Classics as Ritual." *Journal of Chinese Humanities* 1 (2): 363–383. doi:10.1163/23521341-01010019
- Shen, Yang. 2020. "Sidestepping Secularism: performance and Imagination in Buddhist Temple-Scapes in Contemporary China." Doctoral diss., Boston University.
- Shi, Juwei. 2019. "Buddhist Merit in the West: A Case Study from Australia's Nan Tien Temple." *Studies in Chinese Religions* 5 (2): 165–179. doi:10.1080/23729988.2019.1639464
- Simon, Gregory M. 2009. "The Soul Freed of Cares? Islamic Prayer, Subjectivity, and the Contradictions of Moral Selfhood in Minangkabau, Indonesia." *American Ethnologist* 36 (2): 258–275. doi:10.1111/j.1548-1425.2009.01134.x
- Song, Bin. 2018. "A Study of Comparative Philosophy of Religion on 'Creatio Ex Nihilo' and 'Sheng Sheng (Birth Birth, 生生)'" Dissertation, Boston University.
- Sun, Anna. 2016. "A Sociological Consideration of Prayer and Agency." *TDR/the Drama Review* 60 (4): 118–129. doi:10.1162/DRAM_a_00599
- Teiser, Stephen F. 2009. "Ornamenting the Departed: Notes on the Language of Chinese Buddhist Ritual Texts." *Asia Major* 22 (1): 201–237.
- Teiser, Stephen F. 2022. "Prayer and Buddhism? The Supreme Offering." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 90 (4): 892–915.
- Turner, Victor. 2018. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Turner, Victor, Roger D. Abrahams, and Alfred Harris. 2017. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Van der Veer, Peter. 2020. "Ritual and anti-Ritual." Paper presented at Seminar at Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen, September 28.

Werbner, Pnina. 1988. "Sealing' the Koran: Offering and Sacrifice among Pakistani Labour Migrants." *Cultural Dynamics* 1 (1): 77–97.
doi:[10.1177/092137408800100105](https://doi.org/10.1177/092137408800100105)

Weller, Robert P., C. J. Huang, K. Wu, and L. Fan. 2018. *Religion and Charity: The Social Life of Goodness in Chinese Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Yang, Mayfair Mei-Hui. 2004. "Spatial Struggles: Postcolonial Complex, State Disenchantment, and Popular Reappropriation of Space in Rural Southeast China." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63: 719–755.