Turning Ghosts into Ancestors in Contemporary Urban China

It was the psychoanalyst Hans Loewald who said that his discipline was about “turning ghosts into ancestors.” However, I am using the phrase to address the deep, emotional impact of Chinese ancestral rituals in the context of religion, rather than Loewald’s context of psychotherapy, although the two cannot always be easily separated. My fieldwork in China, some episodes from which I will describe shortly, has compelled me to develop a new, theoretical framework for the analysis of ritual life. This involves a logic of religious practice—my debt to the sociological theory of Pierre Bourdieu is apparent—which is centered on the logic of prayer as “ritual rationality.”

I shall begin with an analytical definition of prayer, dealing with issues of agency, intention, sincerity, language, embodiedness, and forms of interaction with the divine. Instead of crediting religion with rationality by analyzing it through rational choice theory, or discrediting religion by challenging its truth-claims, as do the arguments of the New Atheists, I suggest that we should understand prayer as human social action for maintaining meaningful rela-

Making sense of Chinese religious life requires a new logic.

BY ANNA SUN

People pray in a Daoist Temple in Shanghai during Winter Solstice.
tionships with the divine, the dead, and the living. Ritual activities, including prayer, *make sense* to people—in the literal sense of the word *make*, as a creative act that opens connections with God, gods, or spirits of ancestors. People who are well versed in scientific rationality—such as the engineer in Shanghai or the environmental scientist in Beijing, both of whom I interviewed—are as likely to practice such rituals as those with no background in science, for ritual rationality is embedded in ritual action and engages reasoning in a different realm of life than that of scientific inquiry.

This is not only to say that ritual rationality co-exists with scientific rationality, but also to suggest that the boundary between the two is far more porous than might be assumed. Feminist critiques of “universal rationality” over the past 30 years have opened up new ways of thinking about reason and rationality as having multiple modalities, including a gendered dimension that permits epistemological acts of exclusion (Linda Martin Alcoff, Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, and Elizabeth Anderson, to name a few). Theories such as “multiple situated rationalities” (Alister McGrath) and the view that what we think of as “secular modernity” might be understood as rooted in “a logic of fundamentalism” (Bruno Latour) further point to ways of challenging the prevailing modern dichotomies of science versus religion, propositional knowledge versus “superstition,” or belief versus magic. Indeed, it is time for us to examine the unspoken hierarchy in our intellectual understanding of religious life, which implicitly places doctrinal belief above ritual practice, a universal God above local gods and spirits, and established religious identity above a more fluid sense of belonging.

In any culture deeply attached to its traditions, as China emphatically is, despite the last 70 years of its political history, the creativity of ritual life is like a river flowing through a wide valley: no matter how much the river changes its course over time, its banks shifting like an undulating snake, the valley exists both as the foundation and the usual limit to the deviating course of the water. For the flow of ritual life over centuries in China, that valley is the ritual calendar, which the majority of contemporary Chinese continue to follow, hardly conscious of the temporal depth of what they are doing.

Although the Chinese ritual calendar is, of course, specific to China (with great regional variations in this vast nation), it is clearly far from unique in the world. Ritual calendars are essential parts of daily life for people in all religious traditions, including those of the contemporary Western world. Although an increasing number of people no longer have clearly defined religious identities—i.e., the religious “nones” (23 percent of the adult population in the USA in 2015, according to Pew)—many in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions still follow ritual calendars. But far more people who count themselves outside these traditions or any religious organization still pray (38 percent of religious “nones” pray at least monthly, according to Pew).²

Another important aspect of Chinese religious life can be analyzed through the metaphor of “linked ecologies” (in Andrew Abbott’s terms) of pluralistic practices, beliefs, and institutions. I suggest that there exists not a single ecological system of Chinese religious life, but a set of linked ecologies that are somewhat looser in overall structure than the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour would allow. This is where religious traditions, sacred sites,

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ritual objects, religious texts, and people engage one another as in a complex ecological system, with individuals managing and internalizing—in the terminology of Anne Swidler and Michèle Lamont—toolkits and repertories that allow them to develop varieties of ritual habitus, ethical outlooks, and spiritual connections.

As part of what I call “the Chinese religious ecological system” (or “Chinese religious system,” in short), there is a linked ecology of temple life, which refers to the ways religious organizations and sites coexist through competition as well as interdependence. The study of the linked ecologies of local temple life examines not only how temples in a given region coexist and thrive together, or fail together, but also how the linked ecologies of local social, political, and cultural life overlap with those of the temple.

My hope is that, through this new framework, we can begin to understand unfamiliar ritual life in a new light, free from the monotheistic bundle of assumptions with which the sociological analysis of religion (quite unintentionally) has often been saddled. Researchers are inevitably influenced unconsciously by the profound transformations brought about by the rise of monotheism in later antiquity and by its latest convulsion, at the Reformation. The institutional and identity-based framework of an unacknowledged monotheism cannot do justice to the diversity of religious experiences in non-Western societies such as Asia.

What is more, this monotheistic framework no longer works for much of the contemporary Western world today, because the number of people in the West who identify themselves as having “no religion” is steadily increasing, especially in younger generations. Within the framework of a ritual rationality concerned with linked ecologies of religious practice, it may become possible to ask what it truly means for humans to be religious and to pray in the twenty-first century.

My hunch was that I would need to begin by looking back far into the human past for answers about the present, for it appears that the Weberian model of modernity as “disenchantment” may need revision. Rather than being “liberated” from the enchantment of religion (or, on some accounts, being deprived of this enchantment), it looks as if, everywhere in the world and not only in China, we are falling back into the more ancient and enduring paradigm of religious life: multivalent, practice-oriented, and fluid.

This was the hunch that led me to the study of ancient Roman religion, especially in the first and second centuries, as a lens for considering practices in China today. And, of course, if analysis of the Chinese religious situation at present were to throw a little light on the study of ancient Roman religion, so much the better. As we shall see, some scholars in the latter field think this is so. They have been turning in my direction, as I have been turning in theirs.

Now, the juxtaposition of Chinese and Roman religions might be regarded as little more than a heuristic device, though a useful one, a large methodological strategy employing the tactics of social science. But I believe the similarity of the religious ecologies of ancient Rome and contemporary China are symptomatic of

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something much deeper in the historical development of human religiosity, or in the “evolution of religion,” to use Robert Bellah’s terms (while modifying some of his claims). But to see where the models of contemporary China and early imperial Rome are pointing requires a religious imagination freed from the preconceptions of monotheism, and an understanding of rationality—in Pascal’s terms, reason—that is different from that of scientific reasoning: “The heart has its reasons which reason itself does not know: we know that through countless things.”

There are two seemingly straightforward questions in the study of religion in China that are difficult to answer, the one definitional, the other classificatory. Are the Chinese religious? If so, which religions?

The difficulty lies not only in the various forms of conceptual confusion across different religious traditions (what do we mean by “religion” and “being religious”?), but also in the apparent uniqueness of Chinese religious practices (many of these don’t seem to belong to a particular religion). What makes the case of China fascinating is that such difficulty increasingly echoes what we also face while studying religions in other parts of the world, not only in the rest of Asia but also in the contemporary United States and Europe. Who is religious and who is not? How do we categorize people who say they don’t belong to a particular religion and yet still engage in ritual practices? The case of Chinese religion helps us to discover the fault lines underneath the complex and ever-changing phenomenon of religious life in general, and to open up a new way of inquiring what it means to be religious in the first place.

The first question—Are the Chinese religious?—is one that has long given social scientists trouble. In *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities*, I show how the Protestant preconceptions of late nineteenth-century discourse concerning “the great world religions” have affected the way Chinese religions, especially Confucianism, are classified and understood today. A Eurocentric discourse based on a strong linkage between belief and religion leads to confusion when we study religious life outside Protestant Christianity. For instance, in the 2001 World Values Survey, to the question, “Do you belong to a religious denomination?,” 93.9 percent of Chinese respondents answered “No.” The number is about 87 percent in the “Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents” survey (2007 Horizon Survey). The unwarranted conclusion from such an approach is that the Chinese are overwhelmingly nonreligious.

If, however, we focus on everyday religious practices, we find that at least 75 percent of people in China perform some combination of rituals, prominent among them rituals for the spirits of deceased family members (Horizon Surveys 2007 and 2016). Indeed, as many scholars, such as Talal Asad, Robert Weller, Kenneth Dean, and Diana Eck, have argued, a conception of religion that assumes the exclusivity of belief, conversion, and membership cannot capture what is distinctive about Chinese religions in particular, and Asian religions in general. *The time has come for a more post-Eurocentric analysis of a non-monotheistic religious world, starting organically, from*
within. By *from within*, I mean observing what people do, as well as listening to their own accounts of their actions. It is our duty as scholars of religion to do justice to what is real in the lived world, and it is our duty too to make new conceptual tools that can make visible what we have been unable to see.

The second question—Which religions do people belong to in China?—is equally challenging. Scholars have been debating for years about how to understand the diversity of Chinese religious life and its apparent contradictions. For example, a single person visits different temples for different purposes: a Buddhist temple to pray for health or for fertility; a Confucian temple for success in school examinations; a Daoist temple devoted to a local god for protection of one’s fortune in business. In fact, the majority of Chinese perform rituals from different religious traditions largely indiscriminately, and in most cases without any religious institutional membership.

There is also the phenomenon of the so-called syncretistic religious practices, observed when, for example, Catholics perform ancestral rites or when Christians identify themselves as “Confucian Christians.” For instance, the Protestant taxi driver I interviewed in Shanghai, chary of engaging in idolatry because the pastor of his church explicitly forbade it, asked his neighbors to burn paper money (ritual currency, of no monetary value) for his ancestral spirits on his behalf on the ritual date of the winter solstice, so that the dead could buy warm clothes at the outset of winter. He was not doing this because he believed it to be effectual in any objective sense, nor was he doing it for narrowly therapeutic reasons. He was doing it to activate, and to remain active in, the ecology of relationships in which he is an actor—to connect himself not only to the dead but also to the living, and in particular to his own child, who would one day be doing the same thing for him.

Multiple religious actions of this kind are often performed without the actors having, or needing to have, any religious identity at all. How can we make sense of such apparent anomalies in Chinese religious life? If our ideas of religion are tied up with institutions and belief, the subtleties of what is occurring here will always escape us.

Contemporary China is a society in which widespread polytheistic Chinese religious traditions, from veneration of ancestors to worship of local deities, coexist with monotheistic religions such as Christianity and Islam. Today, China has the world’s eighth largest Christian population. Religious practices, especially prayer, which coexist along porous boundaries between distinct traditions, demand a conception of religious rationality that does justice to such intrinsic multiplicity.

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These questions have led me, over the past decade, to study various forms of prayer practice in China, mostly in urban areas. My fieldwork has taken me to 14 quite different cities. But my focus in the past five years has been on the metropolises of Shanghai and Beijing and, to a lesser degree, Hong Kong. I have observed ritual activities at dozens of sacred sites, including Confucian temples, Buddhist and Daoist temples, Protestant and Catholic churches, mosques (including a women’s mosque), and shrines devoted to local gods. I have conducted interviews with over 100 people who have offered prayers at these sacred places. My focus has been primarily on urban religious life, because urbanization is the largest social trend in China today, but I have also been to rural villages where people still perform ancestral rites by the graves of their deceased family members. I also have a strong interest in charting the changing nature of gendered roles for women in religious life in urban China.

There are two other projects that provide the empirical foundations for my work. In 2006–09, I was co-principal investigator of the “Empirical Study of Chinese Religious Life” project (funded by the Templeton Foundation). We produced “The Spiritual Life Survey of Chinese Residents,” with 7,000 face-to-face interviews conducted in more than 50 locations in China. It is widely considered the best survey on Chinese religious life available today and is used by many, including the Pew Research Center. In addition to designing the survey with the other lead investigators, I conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork on temple life throughout the project’s duration. In 2013–16, I was co-principal investigator of the project “The Pursuit of ‘Blessed Happiness’ in Contemporary China.” Most of my interviews on prayer life in urban China were conducted during this time. In 2016 this project yielded its own survey, which was on the social determinants of a good life. Prominent among the questions were those regarding ritual practices.

In most survey data, as I have observed, as many as four out of five Chinese people see themselves as having no religion, a high proportion that cannot be explained away simply by the political situation in China, since the state does not criminalize most religious activities, or indeed membership in a religious organization. Not surprisingly, ethnographic research shows that there is in fact a rich prayer life in temples, shrines, churches, mosques, gravesides, and private homes. In fact, at least three out of four people engage in ritual activities annually, particularly the ancient Confucian ritual of ancestral rites. The thriving ritual life can be seen in some of the most metropolitan areas, drawing people young and old, professionals and migrant workers alike. China is one of the most vibrant religious societies in the world, where monotheistic and polytheistic practices coexist, often in unexpected, creative ways.

Through all these complicated byways of Chinese religious practices—and narratives concerning those practices—I walk the theoretical compass bearing first laid down by Marcel Mauss in 1909 in his unfinished book, *On Prayer*. I seek to discover new regions of practice that Mauss could not know but definitely knew how to find. For, by any sufficiently broad and unbiased measure of what religion means, it is not the case that the Chinese are less religious than the mass of people in the West, or even that they are less religious than people who belong to monotheistic religions. What needs to be

9. Based on responses to the 2016 Horizon Survey.
explored is how they do religion differently, less officially, perhaps, but with equal or greater enthusiasm. I suggest that, far from being unique, the China case is archetypal, in the sense that we are seeing similar patterns arise today around the world: people are moving away from clear-cut religious doctrines and identities without moving away from ritual life. In the United States, for example, people who say they are “not religious” nevertheless still pray. By focusing on prayer life and analyzing its fundamental components, I hope to show what doing religion differently means in our pluralistic and global twenty-first-century world. For many reasons, the Chinese fasti are the best place to begin.

As I mentioned above, when I was doing research in the field in China, I was continually reminded of Roman religion in late antiquity, when temples for local gods and hero cults were found everywhere, coexisting and interdependent, even after the arrival of Christianity. With the significant exception of Christians, Muslims, and, to a lesser extent, Buddhists, most of the people who engage in prayer life have no self-avowed religious identity. And those who do, like the taxi driver to whom I spoke, maintain this identity within a larger ecology that is heterogeneous to it. People who, in answer to Western-devised surveys, declare they have no religious identity are constantly interacting with the sacred, often following an unwritten ritual calendar passed down from ancient times. They do it not for themselves but for the ecology of relationships, of connections, in which they are inevitably (and not, it appears, disagreeably) entangled.

I therefore find accounts of Roman religion in late antiquity—in the work of Jörg Rüpke, Peter Brown, Mary Beard, and Glen Bowersock, to name only the leading figures—to be the closest comparison to what I observe in the everyday religious practices of contemporary China. Although it may seem radical to make such a broad analogical connection across vastly different historical periods, when we take a step back and survey the scenes of ancient Roman religious life and practices in China today, we begin to see how a comparative analysis may lead to a deeper understanding of religion as a rapidly changing but fundamentally constant aspect of human nature, itself a very slowly changing phenomenon, with religion as one important driver of such change.

In the past two years, I have had the privilege of joining in conversations about urban religion, ancient and modern, at the Max-Weber-Kolleg at the University of Erfurt. These conversations are part of the “Lived Religion in Metropoleis” project led by the classicist and anthropologist Jörg Rüpke and Rubina Raja, a scholar of classical archaeology. It has been incalculably beneficial to my thinking and research to have a chance to share my work on contemporary prayer life in Shanghai with colleagues in classics, archaeology, and ancient history, and to learn from their fascinating projects on such subjects as solar worship in antique Rome (Michele Renee Salzman), the city as Jewish ritual space in late antiquity (Charlotte Fonrobert), and the cultural geography of Saqqara, the necropolis of ancient Memphis in Egypt (Lara Weiss).

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My new friends appear to be interested in my research, as well. In November 2018, I delivered the keynote lecture at the conference “The Walking Dead: The Making of a Cultural Geography,” which took place in Leiden at the Netherlands’ National Museum of Archaeology. I spoke of how my recent work in Shanghai in many ways mirrors the rituals performed in the ancient Egyptian necropolis, but in China the celebrants are still walking about the cemetery carrying offerings, cleaning and praying, laying out flowers, food, and wine. If you ask the right questions and listen, they will speak to us, and through them so too will those who have gone before—those who are as far back in time as the First Dynasty of Old Kingdom Egypt.

Let me end with a story. In the autumn of 2016 I spent four months in Beijing for my fieldwork on prayer life in urban China. I was staying at Tsinghua University, a leading science and technology–oriented university on a large, leafy campus. It is often referred to as the MIT of China, although it also has strong humanities and social science divisions. The college where I resided, Schwartzman, was modeled after Harvard Business School. It was established as China’s answer to global elite business and policy education, funded by an American financier who wished to institute the Chinese equivalent of Rhodes Scholarships.

The first class of Schwartzman Scholars, a select international group of master’s students, arrived on campus when I did. Although I occasionally gave guest lectures on Chinese religion and politics, my remit was to focus on my ethnographic research on prayer life in Beijing, interviewing ordinary people who performed ritual activities in sacred sites. One evening in late November, I went to the sumptuous dining hall early for dinner, before a night of fieldwork, for this was a special date on the Chinese ritual calendar, the ritual occasion for “Sending Winter Clothes to the Underworld” (寒衣節 hanyijie).

Mapped out on the traditional lunar calendar rather than the Gregorian calendar, which China adopted only in the beginning of the twentieth century, the Chinese ritual calendar prescribes certain dates of the year with differing degrees of ritual significance. Like the Roman Imperial Period fasti analyzed by Jörg Rüpke, the Chinese ritual calendar is both deeply traditional and surprisingly open to new developments in social and ritual life. It faithfully accommodates millennia-old designated dates from diverse religious traditions—Confucian, Buddhist, Daoist, and many local traditions—as well as incorporating, through constant adjustments, contemporary legally demarcated dates such as national holidays. For Muslims and Christians (respectively, 1.8 and 5.1 percent of the Chinese population in 2010, according to Pew Research Center), ritual dates are unquestionably centered on Islamic and Christian calendars. But many also observe at least some of the dates on the traditional Chinese ritual calendar. It is astonishing how seriously people take these ritual days, especially in the increasingly urbanized and industrialized China of the twenty-first century. In a survey conducted in January 2016, the team of which I was a part learned that nearly 80 percent of the Chinese population participated in requisite rituals in the past year.13


The most important ritual date is the lunar New Year, often called “the Spring Festival,” which usually falls in February on the Gregorian calendar. People travel back to their hometowns to gather with family for the festivities. These are prepared for by elaborate rituals for ancestral spirits, often performed on a home altar or in an ancestral shrine on New Year’s Eve, and often on New Year’s Day as well. These rituals are called “ancestral rites” because they are addressed to the spirits of deceased family members. The Chinese term jie is often translated as “festival,” but another way to understand it is to think of it as a “significant date for rituals,” the way Ash Wednesday or Yom Kippur is not a celebratory “festival” but a date with great ritual significance.

The next most important ritual date is 清明 Qingming, which takes place in early April. Unlike the Spring Festival, this is a somber occasion, for it is the day when everyone—if one can manage it—is supposed to attend to the graves of deceased family members, usually one’s parents or grandparents. This often means traveling to one’s ancestral hometown where the graves are, and as a result this is one of the busiest times for travel over the entire country. At last, in 2008, the Chinese government bowed to necessity and made it a national holiday to better manage nationwide air, train, and highway traffic. The government was also acknowledging that most people would not show up for work anyhow.

On the day of Qingming, which I have observed in several cities over a 10-year period, people go to cemeteries to do what is traditionally called “grave-sweeping.” They sweep the gravestone and place fresh flowers on it; they offer to the spirits food and drink that they had particularly enjoyed in life; they light incense and candles; and they offer prayers. A particularly vital ritual is to offer the deceased “paper money” (also known as “spirit money”) by burning it at the grave. Fire reduces the paper to smoke and ashes, which is supposed to be the only way of transmitting money to one’s deceased family members in the underworld.

The paper money is not expensive: one can purchase a large wad of colorfully printed, fake million-dollar bills for a pittance. As I learned in an interview with a 30-something subway engineer in Shanghai, what matters is not how much money you send, but the very act of sending it. “Of course, there are no supermarkets or shops for the deceased to spend it in,” he laughed when I asked about the use of the money. “Also, if the money were real, imagine how bad the inflation must be in the underworld, for everyone is sending millions!” Clearly, the question of belief has been decoupled from practice.
There are a few other ritual dates involving ancestral rites in the summer and autumn, but one is especially significant in northern China: 寒衣节 hanyijie, the date for “Sending Winter Clothes to the Underworld.” There are great regional variations of the Chinese ritual calendar, with the exception of the most major ritual dates. In the north, 寒衣节 hanyijie (also called 十月一 shiyueyi) takes place in early winter, at the end of October, a traditional time to send paper money to the deceased. In the south, in Shanghai, for example, people do similar rituals in December, at the winter solstice. I had long hoped to observe the ritual activities related to 寒衣节 hanyijie in the north but never had a chance until I was at Tsinghua University that fall semester.

On the evening of 寒衣节 hanyijie, I had my camera and notebook ready when I went to the dining hall at Schwartzman College for an early dinner, knowing that the ritual activities would only start at night. But when I stepped into the well-lit hall, I was in for a surprise: there was a riot of sounds and colors around me, with exuberant students rushing about in strange and elaborate costumes. Several young men carrying what looked like objects for the stage—wooden swords, axes, and other traditional Chinese weapons—were dressed in clothes that must have been borrowed from the wardrobe department of the Peking Opera.

It was Halloween, of course. I suddenly realized that that year, 寒衣节 hanyijie fell on October 31 on the lunar calendar, which happens to be All Saints’ Eve on the Christian calendar. All around me there was a great party happening, with mostly American students leading the merriment, and others—European and Chinese—happily following. I was delighted by this unexpected festivity in Beijing, a place that has not yet added Halloween to its growing list of Western-style holidays. Halloween is probably as religious a holiday to young people these days as St. Valentine’s Day, which is to say, not at all. The spirits of the dead are acknowledged in theatrical reenactments, not in acts of communion. It was a time for celebration, for rejoicing in the simple fact of being alive, and unafraid of the dark.

As the jubilation was reaching its peak, I put on my winter coat and stepped out onto the empty street. None of the festivities could be heard when the front gate of the college closed behind me with a clang. It was a quiet night under a luminous new moon. It was also chilly, and I was glad that I had not forgotten my scarf. As I walked along the deserted street toward the South Gate of the vast campus, it occurred to me why the “Sending Winter Clothes” ritual took place now rather than at the winter solstice: cold weather always arrived earlier in the north than in the south.

My plan was to walk to the residential buildings adjacent to the university, as I was hoping to observe people conducting rituals on sidewalks near their buildings. The only requisite ritual on 寒衣节 hanyijie is to burn paper money for the deceased, something one cannot do in an apartment. I was lost in thought during my walk until suddenly I saw flames rising from the corner of a crossroad one block away, not far from the university buildings, the flare-up stoked by the wind. Could this be what I was looking for?
As I approached, the fast-burning flames were already dying down. A man in his 60s was tending it. He nodded to me as I stopped by the fire, which now looked like red lava shimmering in a pile of pale ashes. I asked if he would mind telling me about what he was doing, and we had a long conversation. He told me that he was sending paper money to his deceased parents for winter clothes, something he has done every year since they passed away. A retired technical manager in the waterworks, whose wife worked for the university, he lived in a building for university employees not far from where we were standing. He was the oldest son in his family, and it was his responsibility to make sure that the proper rituals were rendered to his parents on all the dates for ancestral rites. “Parents have worked hard to raise you to be good, kind, and responsible human beings, and the only thing you can do now, after they pass away, is to show that you genuinely care about them and take your duties seriously. How can you not make sure that you will do all the rituals for them? This is one of the most important duties for any decent person.” Decent is the key word, indicating that the importance of the action has to do with ethical connectivity.

I asked him if he believed that the money would go to his parents after being burned. He smiled benevolently: “That I do not know; and the truth is that I don’t care to know. What I care is to do the right things for my parents, to show that we have not forgotten them. It is getting cold here, and we are buying new winter clothes to keep ourselves warm. I like knowing that we are sending money to do this for them as well, to take care of them in the only way that we know. The rest is beyond us, and not to be thought too deeply about.”

He was not surprised by my next question, which was about the women’s role in these rituals. “Can your wife or daughter do these rituals, too?” I asked, since, traditionally, women are not allowed to conduct ancestral rites, even though they often prepare the food and give indirect logistical and financial assistance. “Of course,” he said, “as long as they learn how to do them right. My wife just lets me do it. But I have been teaching my daughter the rules. She is our only child, so she will be the one taking care of all the ritual things in the next generation. She is actually really interested and wants to learn. And she will be teaching it to her children as well. But she is not home; otherwise she would be with me tonight.”

As we spoke, the evening grew quieter around us, and the wind settled into an unhurried movement of air, as on the shore of a river. Change was clearly in the early winter air, in the seasonal weather, but also in the current of history that sweeps us all along. The women’s role in ancestral rituals was becoming increasingly important, as it was becoming more central in other aspects of contemporary Chinese life. In response to the feeling I had that evening, I would soon be thinking about the lack of “ritual anxiety” in urban China, or the apparent indifference to the “correctness” of ritual activities, that is, ritual orthodoxy, as well as about “gender equality in rituals.” But in that moment I felt wholly in the presence of this man who was telling me about the connections he felt with his deceased parents, how they had suffered while living, and how he thought it was his duty; and his daughter’s too, to honor and attend to their spirits a few times a year. He was keeping that thread, woven of love and care, strong between this present world and the world beyond, which, for him, was perhaps no less real than his own.

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