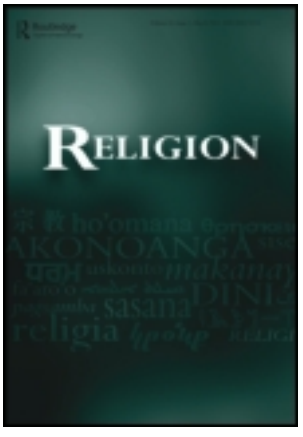

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Modalities of doing religion and ritual polytropy: evaluating the religious market model from the perspective of Chinese religious history

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Modalities of doing religion and ritual polytropy: evaluating the religious market model from the perspective of Chinese religious history

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ABSTRACT This article examines the Chinese religious landscape through the lenses of 'modalities of doing religion' and 'ritual polytropy' and explores the implications such different conceptualisations might bring to the religious-market model. It argues that in Chinese religious culture one can identify five modalities of doing religion (the scriptural/discursive, the self-cultivational, the liturgical, the immediate-practical and the relational), each cutting across broader, conceptually aggregated religious traditions such as Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism. Instead of competition between membership-based churches, there is more typically competition within each modality, especially the liturgical modality. Religious pluralism in China is not manifested as the co-existence of, and competition between, confession- and membership-based denominations and churches, but rather as the co-existence of, and competition between, various ritual-service providers with different (though sometimes convergent) liturgical programmes.

KEY WORDS religious market; religious economy; modalities of doing religion; ritual polytropy; ritual market; religious pluralism; China; funerals

> The historian of death must not be afraid to embrace the centuries until they run into a millennium. The errors he will not be able to avoid are less serious than the anachronisms to which he would be exposed by too short a chronology. Let us, therefore, regard a period of a thousand years as acceptable. (Philippe Ariès cited in Stone & Walter 2008: 1)

> The point being that this paper is not primarily about Utah. It is about the impact of an energetic majority on minority competitors and we would have pursued such an opportunity wherever and whenever it could be found. It just happened to be in Utah rather than in ninth century China. (Stark and Finke [2004]: 297)

This article has been broadly inspired by the 'religious economy' literature pioneered by Rodney Stark, Roger Finke and others. I am generally sympathetic to their contextual approach to the study of religious affiliations and commitment in Western societies. However, I find some of the most basic assumptions and premises in the formulation of their hypotheses problematic, or at least applicable only in

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certain kinds of religious cultures. For example, the kind of religious competition between different Christian denominations they analysed in the American and European contexts is only possible in a religious culture where: (1) the mode of practising one's religion is congregational (meaning one belongs to a particular church and one congregates with one's fellow church members on a regular basis); (2) one's church membership is exclusive (for example one cannot be a Baptist and Anglican at the same time) and enduring (meaning once one joins a church one stays a member of this church unless one quits or joins another church); 3) (one should always be an *active* member of one's church (meaning ideally one should always be 'practising' one's religion); (4) the churches act purposefully and institutionally (i.e., as 'religious firms', in order to promote their religious 'products' and to innovate if necessary so as to retain their own members and to attract new members); (5) the churches' goal is expansionist and conversionist (meaning each church aims at converting members of other churches into their own members, thus gaining an increasingly larger 'market share' in the larger religious economy); and (6) the religious economy is generally open and competitive, with the free and open availability of diverse 'religious products' for consumers to choose from. Obviously these conditions only apply to a small number of historical contexts and therefore the hypotheses and theories derived from analysing the cases in these contexts will necessarily have limited applicability cross-culturally and in other historical milieus. A related issue I find problematic with Stark and Finke's work is the not-so-implicit assumption that 'general compensators' (i.e., an overarching religious explanatory framework) are superior to 'specific compensators' (e.g., magical healing rituals) as religious products, and therefore 'religion' is superior to 'magic'. This evolutionist assumption smacks of Christian/Protestant triumphalism (see Sharot [2002]); we need to be reminded that the kind of competitive Christian denominationalism characteristic of world Christianity in recent centuries (and exemplified in 19th and 20th-century United States) is but a brief episode in the long history of human religious life, and that the last word is far from having been said on whether the days are numbered for 'magic' or if 'real religions' necessarily have staying power. Let's wait and see what things will be like in another 2000 years! Meanwhile, I applaud the advocates of the religious-economy model for having directed our attention to look at religious history as a whole at a larger, national/civilisational level, which have yielded many interesting findings and debates.

This article proposes to look at the Chinese religious landscape through the lenses of 'modalities of doing religion' and 'ritual polytropy' and explores the implications such different conceptualisations might bring to the religious-market model. Without a membership-based church structure, the Chinese religious landscape should best be understood as *competitions between different modalities of doing religion* as well as *competitions within each modality*. This article focuses on the 'liturgical modality of doing religion', i.e., the provision and consumption of paid professional ritual services, and how this modality constituted a *ritual market* in late imperial China (roughly from the 10th century to the early 20th century).[1] Given

[1]The religious situation in China is very complex given the history of severe modernist interventions from the late Qing, Republican and Communist regimes as well as the vastly different trajectories in the various 'Chinas' (the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Chinese diasporic communities). Most of the processes involving religious change or specific historical events discussed in this article happened in the past and are thus described in the past tense, but since some of these dynamics

an 'efficacy-based' religiosity, the Chinese have traditionally resorted either indiscriminately to whichever ritual specialists or deities were available or, when conditions and resources allowed, 'ritual polytropy', i.e., the hiring of as many ritualists from as many religious traditions as possible in order to maximise efficacy on a given ritual occasion, most notably the funeral. A look at the emergence of ritual markets in late imperial China points to the possibility that a longer view on the historical development of religious life might help us better understand the dynamics of religious supply and demand, in the Chinese context as well as in many other cultural and historical contexts.

Modalities of doing religion

In the long history of religious development in China, different ways of 'doing religion' evolved and cohered into relatively easy-to-identify styles or 'modalities'. These are relatively well-defined forms that different people can adopt and combine to deal with different concerns in life; however, the specific contents within these forms can vary widely. These modalities of 'doing religion' are: (1) discursive/scriptural, involving mostly the composition and use of texts; (2) personal-cultivational, involving a long-term interest in cultivating and transforming oneself; (3) liturgical, involving elaborate ritual procedures conducted by ritual specialists; (4) immediate-practical, aiming at quick results using simple ritual or magical techniques; and (5) relational, emphasising the relationship between humans and deities (or ancestors) as well as among humans in religious practices. Even though these modalities of doing religion are also products of conceptualisation and schematisation, I would like to argue that they are far more 'real' than conceptual fetishes such as 'Buddhism', 'Daoism' and 'Confucianism'. The Chinese people have engaged with these modalities of doing religion in real practices, whereas no one ever engages with 'Buddhism' or 'Daoism' because these exist more as conceptual aggregates. Religious thinkers and scholars of religion have of course attempted to make various religious practices into coherent wholes (including by giving them names such as 'Buddhism' and 'Daoism'), but such attempts at arriving at cognitive, conceptual and sometimes institutional coherence have not had much impact on how most people 'do religion' on the ground, where they do not care which deity belongs to which religion or which religious tradition inspired which morality book. What happens on the ground 'religiously' is very much a congruence of local customs, historical accidents, social environment, personal temperaments, configurations of modalities of doing religion and the makeup of the local ritual market (e.g., the availability of which kinds of ritual specialists to cater for the need, as well as to stimulate the need of which kinds of clients).

A focus on form is of course not to say that studying the contents within the modalities is not important; far from it. But it is crucial to recognise the dialectic and mutually constituting relationship between form and content in any domain of socio-cultural productions. Unless we understand the ways in which different religious practices belong to different modalities of doing religion, we will not

have continued into the present or have been revived in the post-Mao era, I have often reverted to the present tense to emphasise the continuity. The reader is advised to consult the following recent works on the issue of Chinese religion and modernity: Ashiwa and Wank [2009]; Chau [2011a]; Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Yang [2008].

fully appreciate the actual significance of these various practices. If we see a particular society's religious culture as consisting of a particular configuration of various modalities of doing religion, then one of the first tasks for studying this religious culture is to identify the contours of these modalities. Needless to say different religious cultures consist of modalities of doing religion that might be very different from those I have identified in the Chinese context. Below I shall explicate in a little more detail each modality of doing religion found in Chinese religious culture. One thing I need to emphasise, however, is that these modalities are more or less ideal types, and that they sometimes overlap (e.g., some actual religious practices manifesting multiple modalities).

The discursive/scriptural modality of doing religion

People are attracted to this modality because of the allure of Confucian, Buddhist, Daoist and other 'great texts' (classics, sutras, scriptures, etc.). This modality often requires a high level of literacy and a penchant for philosophical and 'theological' thinking. Key practices within this modality include compiling and editing scriptures or discoursing about 'the Way' (道), or preaching, and its paradigmatic forms include reading, thinking about, discussing, debating, composing, translating and commenting on religious texts. Also included in this modality is the composing of morality books using spirit writing and Chan/Zen masters' exegesis on *gong'an* 公案 (dharma riddles).

The products of this modality are usually textual (or at least eventually appearing in textual forms) that range from a single religious tract to a whole set of scriptures and liturgical texts (e.g., the so-called Buddhist Canon [大藏經] or Daoist Canon [道藏] compiled under imperial patronage). These texts form the basis of the classical 'religious studies' approach to studying Chinese religions, which was derived from Western religious/theological exegetical traditions. Because of this textual bias, for a long time Chinese religious practices were understood in the West as exclusively this textually transmitted esoteric knowledge or, in the context of New Age or Orientalist consumption of exotic texts, 'Oriental wisdoms'.

The personal-cultivational modality of doing religion

Practices such as meditation, *qigong* (氣功), internal or outer alchemy, the cultivation of the 'Daoist body' (Schipper 1994), personal or group sutra chanting, the morning and evening recitation sessions in a Buddhist monastery, merit-conscious charitable acts (e.g., volunteering to accumulate karmic merit) and keeping a merit/demerit ledger (Brokaw 1991) belong to this modality. This modality presupposes a long-term interest in cultivating and transforming oneself (whether Buddhist, Daoist, Confucian or sectarian). The goals of this transformation and cultivation are different in each religious tradition: to become a so-called 'immortal' (*xian* 仙) in Daoism, to be reincarnated into a better life or to achieve nirvana in Buddhism, and to become a man of virtue or to be closer to sagehood (*sheng* 聖) in Confucianism. But the shared element is the concern with one's own ontological status and destiny, something akin to a Foucaultian 'care of the self' (Foucault 1988). In other words, the practices in this modality provide 'technologies of the self' (ibid.).

Within this modality of doing religion there are both elite and popular forms. For many, working on scriptures itself constitutes a form of self-cultivation. However,

ordinary and even illiterate people can pursue personal-cultivational goals without esoteric knowledge or high literacy or much religious training. For example, illiterate peasants can practice self-cultivation by chanting 'precious scrolls' (Overmyer 1999), which are in metred rhymes and often memorised. The simplest self-cultivation technique is the repeated utterance of the mantra *namo amituofo* (南無阿彌陀佛) (*namo amitabha*) thousands of times a day. Charismatic movements sometimes precipitate out of these personal-cultivational pursuits. The modern *qigong* (氣功) movement also exemplifies the personal-cultivational modality of doing religion (see Palmer [2007]). When Falungong practitioners let the dharma wheel (*falun* 法輪) rotate in their lower abdomen day in and day out as instructed by their master Li Hongzhi (李洪志), they are engaged in the personal-cultivational modality of doing religion. The key words in this modality are 'to cultivate' and 'to craft' (oneself).

The liturgical modality of doing religion

This modality include practices such as imperial state rituals (e.g., the Grand Sacrifice) (see Zito 1997), the Confucian rites, the Daoist rites of fasting and offering (Lagerwey 1987), exorcism (e.g., a Nuo ritual drama), sutra chanting rites, Daoist or Buddhist rituals for the universal salvation of souls, the Buddhist grand water and land dharma assemblies and funeral rituals. Compared to the personal–cultivational modality, practices in this modality aim at more immediate ritual intervention conducted in complex and highly symbolic forms, and are commissioned by and conducted for collective groups – be they families, clans, villages or neighbourhoods, temple communities, or the state. This is the modality of the religious specialists (monks, Daoist priests, *fengshui* [風水] masters, Confucian ritual masters, spirit mediums, exorcist–dancers, etc.) and often involves esoteric knowledge and elaborate ritual procedures. I will be discussing this modality in more detail below as I would argue that developments within this modality can best illustrate how supply and demand play themselves out within Chinese religious culture.

The immediate-practical modality of doing religion

Practices in this modality also aim at more immediate results but compared to those in the liturgical modality they are more direct and involve shorter and simpler procedures. There is minimal ritual elaboration. Examples include divination (oracle rod, moon-shaped divination blocks, divination sticks, coins, etc.), getting divine medicine from a deity, using talismans (e.g., ingestion of talismanic water), consulting a spirit medium, calling back a stray soul, begging for rain, ritual cursing, or simply offering incense, etc. Because of its simplicity and low cost, this modality is the most frequently used by the common people (peasants, petty urbanites). The key concepts in this modality are 'efficacy' (*ling* 靈) (or miraculous power) and 'to beseech for help' (求). The practices included in this modality are usually called 'magic' in the writings of those scholars who would not want to give them the dignity of the label 'religion'.

The relational modality of doing religion

This modality emphasises the relationship between humans and deities (or ancestors) as well as relationships among worshippers. Examples are building temples,

making offerings (i.e., feeding ancestors, deities and ghosts), taking vows, spreading miracle stories (i.e., testifying to the deities' efficacy), celebrating deities' birthdays at temple festivals, going on pilgrimage, imperial mountain journeys, establishing religious communities and forming affiliations between temples and cult communities. This modality also emphasises sociality, the bringing together of people through ritual events and festivals. Obviously the other modalities all exhibit relational and sociality aspects, but the making and maintaining of relations and the production and consumption of sociality seem to be at the foundation of those practices that I have grouped under this modality. The key concepts in this modality are 'social comings and goings' (*laiwang* 來往) and social relations (*guanxi* 關係), or connectedness.

These modalities are frameworks for religious practice and action. They both restrain and enable people to express their religious imagination in words, images, sculptural and architectural forms, and actions. More importantly, these modalities lend religious specialists readily recognisable forms to adopt and practise, not unlike the ways in which the differentiation and consolidation of various literary genres such as the novel, the essay and poetry have facilitated their production and consumption as literary forms. At any one time in any locale of the vast late imperial Chinese Empire – and to some extent today as well in the larger Chinese world – all of these modalities of doing religion were in most probability available to be adopted by individuals or social groups, though factors such as class, gender, literacy level, accidents of birth and residence, position within different social networks, temperament, local convention and the configuration of various modalities might channel some people towards certain modalities and not others. Most peasants in China have traditionally adopted a combination of the relational and the immediate-practical modalities into their religiosity; sometimes they adopt the liturgical modality and hire religious specialists when the occasion requires them, such as funerals and communal exorcisms. Illiteracy and lack of leisure would preclude them from most of the discursive and personal-cultivational modalities. The traditional educated elite tended to adopt a combination of the discursive and the personal-cultivational modalities, but they too often needed the service of the liturgical specialists.

This *modalities framework* focuses our attention on the ways in which people 'do religion' rather than their religious conceptions. Studying people's religious conceptions is important, but it yields a bewildering diversity, whose explanation often lies more in human imagination than social processes; on the other hand, there are only a limited number of forms (modalities) that permeate the Chinese religious landscape. The varieties of Chinese religious life have resulted from the elaboration of differences within these forms as well as the different configurations of various forms. The limited number of forms (modalities) and their lasting stability and versatility, no less than the great variety in the symbolic contents of the Chinese religious world, has been a great achievement in the history of world religious cultures.

A brief history of the elaboration of the modalities of doing religion

But how have these different modalities of doing religion evolved over time and become consolidated as recognisable forms? Here I will attempt a brief account

which must be treated as being very tentative and that requires the verification and corrections by historians of Chinese religion more familiar with the processes described.

Thanks to surviving documentary evidence and archaeological findings, we now have some rather good knowledge of how the elite practised religion in early China (before the so-called Buddhist conquest of China). But very little is known about how the common people practised religion. Presumably there was a prevalence of the immediate-practical modality of doing religion, when people either engaged in simple 'magical rites' (e.g., involving uttering exorcistic formulas) or consulted shamans or spirit mediums. There were also the communal rituals surrounding the village community, known as the *she* (something similar to a parish) (belonging to the relational modality of doing religion). These rituals were mostly collectively staged by the villagers and did not involve any ritual specialists (see Johnson [2010] for a study on late imperial versions of *she* festivities in north China). Every villager belonged to the *she* (社) as an ascriptive member in a way that is similar to villagers in medieval (pre-Reformation) Europe belonging to the Church, except in China there was no centralised religious institution like the medieval Christian Church. The arrival of Buddhism in China and the founding of the first Daoist Church changed fundamentally this picture of ascriptive communal religiosity. Both facilitated, at least in the beginning, a membership-based, sectarian mode of religiosity that potentially could bring about a kind of religious economy premised on competition between mutually exclusive religions/churches. However, such a religious economy did not develop in China, mostly because an alternative, ritual market developed in its place. And to understand the development of the ritual market one has to understand the development of the different modalities of doing religion in China in relation to the Daoist and Buddhist traditions.

The early Daoist Church founded in the 2nd century CE during the chaotic later days of the Han Dynasty, called the Way of the Heavenly Masters (*Tianshidao* 天師道), was one of the first sectarian groups trying to set their members apart from non-members through doctrinal elaboration (not 'doctrinal difference' since it is hard to say that the non-members had any explicit doctrine). The founder, Zhang Daoling (張道陵), claimed to have received revelations from Laozi and began teaching a millenarian message of self-examination, sin absolution (through confession and rituals) and salvation from imminent apocalyptic disasters. The followers were called the 'seed people' (*zhongmin* 種民) who would repopulate the world when all the rest of humanity would have died in the disasters. The sect was based in an area in what is present-day Sichuan Province. The followers were divided into and administered through 24 parishes, and the entire region became a theocratic state, with the Heavenly Master (*tianshi* 天師) at its head. This was a membership-based religion, though it is not clear if they were actively proselytising and recruiting new members. This state did not last long; it was taken over and absorbed by the Wei state and its members dispersed.

The parish organisation did not survive except in some modified form among the Yao minority people in southwest China. Over the centuries afterwards, religious Daoism developed into various modalities identified above (i.e., the five modalities of doing religion). In the discursive/scriptural modality, elite Daoists produced, compiled and systematised thousands of treatises and ritual manuals, culminating in the various versions of the imperially sponsored *Daoist Canon* (*Daozang*道藏) (in

imitation of the Buddhist Tripitaka). In the self-cultivational modality, numerous methods of achieving immortalhood (*xian*仙) were developed and practised, including making and ingesting potions (*dan*丹) and meditation (the so-called external and internal alchemy). The most prominent institution catering to, and perfecting, the self-cultivational modality is the Quanzhen (全真) school of monastic Daoism made up of celibate Daoist monastics (see Goossaert [2007]; Herrou [2005]). In the liturgical modality, elaborate liturgies were invented to cater to the need among the imperial court and the rich to sponsor and consume increasingly long and spectacular rituals, and to rival Buddhist liturgies. The elaboration of liturgy was closely connected to the flourishing of ritual manuals in the discursive/scriptural modality, as the overwhelming majority of Daoist texts were actually liturgical. In the immediate-practical modality, relatively simple exorcistic and healing techniques were invented to deal with simpler problems. Actually a whole new category of Daoist ritual specialists came into being, the ritual master (*fashi* 法師) [distinctive from the Daoist priest (*daoshi* 道士)], who engaged in simpler exorcistic and healing rituals, and sometimes working with spirit mediums (see Davis [2001]). A prominent expression of the relational modality was the lineage structure that many Daoist schools developed, especially the Quanzhen School, which created spiritual kinship based on lines of transmission. One may also argue that the hierarchical structure of the Daoist pantheon mimicking the imperial state hierarchy also resulted from structuring impulses derived from the relational modality of doing religion.

Obviously the vitality and long-term success of Daoism as a religious tradition depended on the ways in which these various modalities of 'doing Daoism' were elaborated. But among the five modalities, the liturgical modality stands out as the most important and relevant modality to the wider population (i.e., beyond the inner circle of Daoist monastics and elite practitioners, for whom the discursive/scriptural and self-cultivational modalities would have been more important). This is the case because the majority of Daoists in China's long history have been priests providing ritual service to customers for a fee. The customers do not need to be Daoists themselves (unlike, for example, in Abrahamic religions where the priest and the ritual congregation need to be co-religionists); in fact, there is hardly such a thing as a non-priest/lay Daoist (except in the case of a minority of lay devotees who are engaged in the self-cultivational modality of doing Daoism). The priests were either household-based and transmit their ritual skills down the generations or managed small temples as celibate priests and trained a small number of disciples. There is a wide variety of regional ritual traditions with different liturgical manuals and ritual-musical styles, but in the late imperial period up to today the majority of Daoist priests have been in the Zhengyi (正一) tradition (which traces its origins to the original Daoist Church), whose head is the Zhang-surnamed Heavenly Master.

The Heavenly Master institution survived through the centuries until today, its power and prestige waxing and waning depending on the degree of imperial patronage. It set itself up on the Longhushan (Dragon and Tiger Mountain 龍虎山) in present-day Jiangxi Province and, before the 20th-century anti-religion campaigns, primarily acted as an accreditation and licensing authority for Zhengyi Daoist priests, ordaining priests for a fee. The reigning Heavenly Master was sometimes dubbed the 'Daoist Pope' by Western observers, though unlike the Pope he was merely the head of the professional Daoist priests (and sometimes that was

in name only) but not any Daoist congregational faith community. But the truth is that even at the height of the Heavenly Master's power and prestige, only a small fraction of Daoist priests operating in communities all over China obtained their ordination certificates from Longhushan; most simply learned the trade from their fathers or uncles and continued practising in the same communities for generations (see Goossaert [2004]).

Given the prevalent tendency in Chinese religious culture towards generating efficacy through rituals, Buddhism also 'behaved' very differently in China compared to, say, in South Asia, Southeast Asia and Tibet, where one's religious identity as a Buddhist is much stronger. The attitude of the dynastic state towards religion was a crucial explanatory factor. Even though many emperors of various dynasties favoured Buddhism during their reign, they stopped short of imposing Buddhism onto the general populace (as opposed to, for example, the case of sovereign-led, population-wide conversion to Christianity in Europe). In fact, many emperors and literati-officials perceived the expansion of Buddhist influence (e.g., in the form of large monasteries with many monks and large tax-exempt monastic estates) as a threat and launched attacks on the Buddhist establishment. There were waves of decrees confiscating monastic estates and forcefully laicising monks and nuns. As a result of these persistent attacks, advocates of Buddhism in China never succeeded in converting the Chinese into the kind of *dharma-based religiosity* that more characterised people in Buddhist kingdoms in, for example, Thailand and Sri Lanka (see Chau [forthcoming] for more explanation of the differences between dharma-based religiosity and efficacy-based religiosity). One can say that Buddhism succeeded in penetrating into Chinese society not by making Chinese people into dharma-following lay believers but by providing ritual (primarily funerary) services to them, which could be understood as an 'amicable' compromise. Such ritual penetration was so thorough that for most Chinese, the Buddhist funerary ritual almost became the norm (though the Daoists and the sectarians developed their own funerary rituals and competed for ritual market share) (more on this below).

Efficacy-based religiosity and ritual polytropy

One important implication of the modalities framework is that different modalities of doing religion might presuppose and produce different kinds of religiosity (defined simply as 'ways of being religious'). In other words, we should speak of a diversity of religiosity in any particular religious culture, especially in places like China, where the prolonged interaction of different religious and sociopolitical forces have spawned a sheer plethora of religious practices. The various modalities of doing religion can cater to, and help consolidate, such radically different religiosities that the people adopting certain modalities might be quite estranged from or even hostile to some other modalities. For example, the religiosity of a Confucian literatus-official in late imperial times who was equally versed in Confucian classics, Buddhist sutras and Daoist inner alchemy texts (i.e., the scriptural/discursive modality of doing religion) might be characterised by a constant introspection and a desire to proximate a sagely life, but he would sneer with impugnation at the kinds of pragmatic rituals the common people were engaged in to beseech divine help from local deities (i.e., the immediate-practical modality of doing religion). Indeed, he would more often than not try to suppress and prohibit all kinds of

religious activities (say within his jurisdiction) in those modalities of doing religion that were alien (and perhaps therefore repugnant) to him. However, the kind of religiosity premised on efficacy, that of a deity or that of a ritual specialist, was the predominant religiosity among the majority of the Chinese, so in this article I will focus on one of the modalities of doing religion that thrived on such religiosity: the liturgical modality of doing religion. But first I need to introduce another crucial concept, *ritual polytropy*, which will help us understand why the Chinese seem so indiscriminate and opportunistic when it comes to hiring ritual specialists for important events such as funerals.

In his article 'On Polytropy: or the Natural Condition of Spiritual Cosmopolitanism in India: the Digambar Jain Case', the anthropologist Michael Carrithers lays out the etymology of his newly minted word 'polytropy': 'I coined the word from the Greek *poly*, "many", and *tropos*, "turning", to capture the sense in which people turn toward many sources for their spiritual sustenance, hope, relief, or defence' (Carrithers 2000: 834). According to Carrithers, one of the consequences of living in a religiously plural society such as that found in India is that each person is necessarily surrounded by, and encounters on a daily basis, holy persons and deities of different religious traditions. People will have developed a general reverential attitude towards all these holy persons and deities, all the while being more or less conscious of the differences between these sources of power and authority. Even though certain elite members of each religious tradition (be it Hinduism, Jainism or Islam) might advocate purist worship and frown upon or condemn indiscriminate 'turnings', it seems that the overwhelming majority of Indians, sometimes including the very protesting elites themselves and their family members, are in practice polytropic. The Chinese have traditionally exhibited a similar polytropic religious orientation. If one for the moment accepts the conventional understanding of China's religious landscape as consisting of 'Buddhism', 'Daoism' and 'Confucianism', then one can say that the Chinese lived in a Confucian-Buddhist-Daoist polytropy, where efficacy mattered a great deal and confessionality was largely absent.

Most 'Han' Chinese throughout China's long history have not had confessional religious identities, with the exception of very small pockets of groups claiming Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish and millenarian/sectarian identities.[2] The overwhelming majority of Han Chinese would not call themselves Daoist, Buddhist or Confucian. In their everyday life the Chinese are not dissimilar to the paradigmatically polytropic Indians characterised by Carrithers. They enshrine Daoist, Buddhist or other kinds of deities on their domestic altars alongside the tablets for their ancestors in a seemingly indiscriminate manner and they too approach in a seemingly opportunistic manner deities or religious specialists of whichever persuasion to exorcise evil spirits, ward off bad fortune, produce a good marriage partner or a long-awaited male descendant, deliver good fortune and blessing for the family or cure for a difficult illness, find lost cattle or motorcycle, or resolve a life dilemma. A person with a particularly difficult problem will go to a Daoist temple, then a Buddhist temple, then a spirit medium and then even a

[2]By 'sectarian' I am referring to the mostly Buddhist-inspired millenarian cults that developed around charismatic leaders that demanded exclusivistic membership adherence. Their occurrence was sporadic in Chinese history and they were often targets of state crackdowns.

Catholic church or a Muslim mosque if the problem is resistant to other interventions. To him or her what matters is not which religious tradition the particular temple or specialist is affiliated with but how efficacious (*ling*, *lingying*, *lingyan* 靈, 靈應, 靈驗) the deity or specialist is in responding to his or her requests (see Chau [2006a]). Typically, a person will make a vow promising that if the problem is solved he or she will bring offerings or money, help with the temple festival by contributing labour or materials, or spread the name of the deity far and wide. For temple festivals that hire opera troupes a devotee and supplicant can also promise to sponsor a number of opera performances. Depending on the extent of engagement over time one has with these various temples, deities and specialists, one develops a network of more or less enduring and meaningful relationships with them which might be maintained for generations (cf. Roberts, Chiao and Pandey [1975]; Roberts, Morita and Brown [1986]). Less efficacious deities and specialists are visited less often and are gradually dropped from the network, while newly discovered, more efficacious ones are added. The temples and specialists might, and do, vie with one another for clientele and donations, but they never take the form of one religious tradition as a whole (e.g., Buddhism) against another religious tradition as a whole (e.g., Daoism) except occasionally at the elite, discursive level and in competition for patronage by the dynastic court (again usually at the elite level).[3]

In contrast to among the commoner majority, more or less coherent religious-group identities did develop among the elite religious practitioners such as members of the Buddhist sangha, the Quanzhen Daoist monastic order and Confucian academies. One key element all these three traditions shared was reliance on canonical texts; indeed, it is these texts that made them into so-called 'Great Traditions'.[4] These elite religious practitioners' main goal was self-cultivation and their penchant for textual exegesis and philosophical reflections necessarily attracted them to one another's textual and conceptual resources. As a result, there was historically frequent and serious trafficking of people and ideas between these three Great Traditions (see, e.g., Mollier [2008]). So at the level of discourse and practice each of these three Great Traditions became rather syncretistic. But one has to remember that the elite members of these religious traditions with a stronger sense of religious identities were a *very small minority*. And even these identities were strictly speaking more akin to professional identities than confessional identities, so a Confucian scholar-ritualist could learn to become a Daoist priest in a process culminating in the Daoist ordination ritual, which was more like additional professional accreditation than a statement of religious conversion.

[3]The form of competition may include Buddhist temples against Daoist temples, Daoist temples against spirit mediums, Buddhist temples against other Buddhist temples, Daoist temples against other Daoist temples, householder Daoist priests against other householder Daoist priests, spirit mediums against magical healers, and so on (see Hymes [2002] on how different religious specialists might work with different 'models of divinity').

[4]It goes without saying that different strands of socio-religious practices only gradually cohered into these distinct traditions through the efforts of a large number of people (usually elite religious practitioners who were far more interested in systematising and differentiating than the common people). Confucius did not found Confucianism, nor did Laozi Daoism, and Buddhism did not arrive in China in one flat-pack. By invoking the notion of 'Great Traditions' I do not intend (nor did Robert Redfield in his original conception of the great and little traditions) to portray them as existing independently of less elite forms of religious practices.

In other words, one accrued more religious identities and 'qualifications' rather than converting from one to another.

Below the elite religious practitioners in term of level of sophistication there were all kinds of religious-service providers such as *fengshui* masters, diviners, fortune-tellers, spirit mediums, magical healers, householder Daoist priests, Buddhist ritual masters and Confucian ritualists who provided their specialist services for a fee or its equivalent. There were also sectarian village-based volunteer ritualists who provided ritual services to fellow sect members and other villagers for free.

There is usually one kind of specialist for each occasion. For finding the best site for houses and graves one needs a *fengshui* (風水 master); for divining one's luck and fortune one consults a fortune teller; for exorcising evil spirits one can hire a spirit medium or an exorcist. But the one ritual occasion that is the most significant in the Chinese world is the funeral, and it is what the Chinese do ritually at the funeral that will be used in this article to illustrate their strongly efficacy-based religiosity. Unlike standard funerals in most societies, where a religious specialist belonging to the same religious group as the deceased presides over the funeral, in China either Daoist priests or Buddhist monks perform the funeral ritual (following different liturgical programmes) depending on the availability of ritual specialists locally and locally salient conventional practice.[5] But what is most interesting is that rich people in late imperial and Republican times would hire as many groups of religious specialists as possible to accrue karmic merits and other spiritual benefits for the deceased (and, by association, his or her kin) as well as to assert the family's social status and prestige. These religious specialists could include groups (always groups) of Buddhist monks, Buddhist nuns, Daoist priests, Tibetan Buddhist lamas and lay sectarian practitioners (more on this below). In other words, the Chinese funeral exhibits the sharing of the same ritual event by groups of religious specialists belonging to different religious traditions. Modifying Michael Carrither's expression mentioned above, I would like to call this condition *ritual polytropy*.

In the employment of religious specialists one observes a major difference between 'Indic' religious polytropy involving respect for the superior 'holy person' or religious specialist and Chinese ritual polytropy, in which specialists are hired with money and little if any respect or honour is paid to them. Chinese ritual specialists, though indispensable because of the ritual role they play, were traditionally considered marginal to society and accorded no special respect as a group (though obviously famous ritualists from well-known temples are accorded due respect). In fact, they were sometimes despised, in part because of a persistent strand of Confucian literati's anti-clerical stance and in part because of the religious specialists' obvious dependence for their livelihood on selling their services in an often-competitive ritual market.

To the majority of the Chinese, it was the efficacy of the rituals (and the ritualists) that mattered, not one's religious identity (if that was even discernible). We can call this an *efficacy-based religiosity*, as opposed to the kind of *dharma-based religiosity* that characterises the way people do religion in the Buddhist countries in southeast Asia

[5]In Japan, the two major religious traditions Shinto and Buddhism have worked out an admirable division of labour (and, one may add, share of income), in which the Shinto priests are in charge of matters relating to life-stage rites of passage and marriage while the Buddhist monks take care of the funeral and after-death matters. (See Suzuki [2000]: chapters 2 and 6).

and in monotheistic religions.[6] Hiring ritual specialists from different religious traditions only when one needs them obviates the necessity to adhere to any one of these traditions. One may speculate that had Western missionaries attempted to merely provide the Chinese with Catholic priests or Protestant ministers as yet another of the many troupes of ritualists and not force them to adopt the Christian confessional framework it would have been a lot easier for the Chinese to accept them; it would mean simply adding one more tradition (and form of efficacy) to the existing ritual polytropy.[7] In a way we can already observe the tendency for the Chinese to use Christian rituals opportunistically as a sign of the incorporation of Christian liturgy and ritual efficacy into the general efficacy-oriented Chinese religious world (e.g., witness the popularity of getting married in a Christian church even if the couple is not Christian or is only nominally so and the attendance of the Catholic Mass on Christmas Eve without being a Catholic).

But how did such a ritual polytropy come into being? To put it simply, the elite specialists of various religious traditions catered to the needs of a market for rituals by having invented and standardised various liturgical repertoires for various ritual occasions; indeed, one may even say that these ritual occasions (e.g., funerals, exorcisms) were largely constructed by these liturgical inventions. But the liturgical repertoires of one group of specialists as religious products were susceptible to being pilfered or copied by other groups, and that was exactly what happened in China. For example, the Daoist funerary liturgy was in large part inspired and influenced by the Buddhist funerary liturgy, and the Buddhist 'water and land dharma assembly' liturgy and the Daoist 'universal salvation' liturgy have many elements in common. One consequence of such mutual borrowing of liturgical elements was the increasing convergence of liturgical goals and therefore the apparent mutual substitutability of rituals from different religious traditions. But there were also enough differences between the liturgical programmes of various religious traditions that there was often a division of ritual labour or segmentation of the ritual market; everyone could make a living out of selling ritual services and no single ritual tradition could have a monopoly in the entire ritual market (although one ritual tradition might achieve prestige and dominance in a local ritual market). In fact, because most ritual specialists in China worked as householder ritual-service providers and could hardly cater for a demand higher than what they could handle as a family troupe, there was little incentive in crowding out other providers (although of course there was plenty of competition for the more lucrative ritual jobs in one's catchment areas).[8] In most cases these various ritual specialists chose a more or less peaceful co-existence. Sometimes arrangements were made so that one family of ritualists would have a monopoly over a certain neighbourhood or district, but such arrangements were more common between ritualists of the same tradition providing the same liturgical programmes

[6]While drawing a contrast that is real, I am aware that there are a wide variety of 'modalities of doing religion' in these other religious cultures as well.

[7]For a historical study of the 'interweaving' of Chinese and Catholic funeral rituals, see Standaert (2008).

[8]See my article on householder religious service providers (Chau 2006b) for an explanation of why most ritual specialists adopted the household idiom. The most important reason was to keep a low profile in order to dodge the attention of the state, which was not always friendly towards these ritual-service providers.

than between ritualists of different traditions, partly because of the division of ritual labour and segmentation of the ritual market mentioned above. One important thing we have to keep in mind is the wide variation in the configuration of ritual markets in different regions and neighbourhoods. In some places, especially rich urban areas, there would be a higher concentration of ritual specialists and therefore more competition for the more lucrative ritual jobs. On the other hand, in some other places, especially poorer rural regions, there is sometimes a dearth of ritual specialists, so people had to make do with whomever they could find. In other words, there is a spectrum between, at one end, an extreme efficacy-maximising ritual polytropy with an abundance of many kinds of ritual specialists in the local ritual market and, at the other end, a sort of involuntary, making-do 'monotropy' without the luxury of either choice or 'efficacy maximisation through ritualist-multiplication'. We can speculate that one of the most important reasons behind the popularity of sectarianism in some parts of rural China was the fact that membership in these sectarian groups guaranteed free ritual services, which most of the people would not be able to pay for a professional ritual provider to do.

Ritual polytropy at funerals: a case of the liturgical modality of doing religion

As traditionally the Chinese have accorded an enormous amount of significance to death rituals, we will look at how funerals have become occasions for ritual polytropy to play out, and how death rituals exemplify the liturgical modality of doing religion. We will look at the different concerns that arise upon the death of a person and how these various concerns are met by various ritual specialists. We will also look at how death rituals in old imperial Beijing reached the height of ritual polytropy in a ritual market saturated with ritual specialists of all kinds because of its status as the imperial capital, as well as the abundance of rich households ready to go to extremes to maximise efficacy and engage in a kind of conspicuous ritual consumption.

Death-related concerns

At a Chinese funeral there are five mutually related yet distinct concerns. *First*, what to do with the body of the deceased? This question can be called the 'geo-corporeal concern', for it deals with transferring the body of the deceased, in a coffin, out of the home to the grave-site and then burying the body in the ground. The host household (*zhujia* 主家) hires a *yinyang* (陰陽) master to take care of these procedures. The *yinyang* master (usually referred to as the 'geomancer' in the Chinese Studies literature) is entrusted with the task of 'siting' the best location and orientation for the house of the living (*yangzhai* 陽宅) as well as the dwelling of the dead (*yinzhai* 陰宅). He (always a male) is also responsible for aligning the coffin properly (with his geomantic compass), arranging in-grave utensils and appeasing the earth god for having disturbed him with the digging of the grave.

Second, what to do with the soul of the deceased? This question can be called the 'salvation concern' for it deals with the passage of the soul through hell and its prospect of reincarnation or 'going onward to Western Paradise' (*shang xitian* 上西天) (cf. Cohen [1988]). Traditionally, Buddhist monks would be most commonly hired to take care of these aspects (but see below). The rite they conducted was called

'doing the merits' (*zuo gongde* 做功德) and involved chanting scriptures to accrue more merits for the deceased so that he or she would receive less severe punishments in the courts of hell and be reincarnated into better stations of life. This rite usually includes feeding the hungry ghosts the night before the burial.[9]

Third, what to do with the inauspicious impact of the death (death pollution)? This can be called the 'pollution concern'. Traditionally Daoist priests specialised in purifying scenes of inauspiciousness, exorcising evil influences and restoring communal or household peacefulness, but a *yinyang* master can equally be employed for this purpose.

Fourth, how to enact proper relations between the people who have converged to the time-space of the funeral (descendants, agnatic and affinal kin, friends, neighbours) within this particular ritual context (i.e., funeral)? This can be called the 'ritual-social propriety concern', for it deals with the ritually proper enactment of social relationships between the mourners and the deceased, between the host family and the other mourners, and between the host family and the guests (including the hired professionals). The chief director (master of ceremony) is in charge of ensuring ritual propriety among all present: the stylised wailing, the graded mourning clothes, the funeral music, the prostrations and kowtows, the proper sequencing of ritual phases, and so forth. Traditionally a Confucian scholar would be invited to sing stylised elegies and to dot the ancestral spirit tablet (*chengzhu* 成主), thus making the deceased into a proper ancestor.

Fifth and last, how to cater to the guests' needs and treat them well? The success of the funeral rests on addressing satisfactorily all five concerns, but it is the guest-catering aspect that the host family worries about the most. The host family's worries are justified because the guests will evaluate the event primarily based on their perceptions of how well the host has treated them (e.g., by the gestures of respect, as well as the quality and quantity of food, drinks and cigarettes distributed). The guests give little attention to the intricacies of the symbolic actions conducted or orchestrated by the ritual specialists relating to the other four concerns.

Funeral as an occasion for liturgical elaboration

But why do the Chinese put so much ritual emphasis on funerals? Death in itself is not ontologically more significant than, say, birth, and the various symbolic and social significances piled onto death are of course cultural constructs. Religious specialists play a large role in constructing these significances. Over China's long history, Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist 'theorists' and ritualists have all contributed to the elaboration of death-related cosmologies and ritual procedures. In time these became so complicated that only professionals could handle them, which of course suited the professionals. Furthermore, people who had had a death in their families could hire professionals to take care of the rituals while they could focus on the mourning. The death rituals are meant for the deceased and spiritual

[9]Hungry ghosts are spirits of dead people who are without descendants to give them offerings on a regular basis. They roam around and try to snatch offerings from others. Hungry-ghost feeding rituals were invented to take care of them so that they will not cause trouble. The so-called 'ghost month', i.e., the seventh month in the Chinese lunar calendar, is a period dedicated to feeding hungry ghosts. But most Daoist and Buddhist funeral rituals have incorporated hungry-ghost feeding liturgies so that the hungry ghosts will not fight over the offerings meant for the spirit of the deceased.

beings, and thus are not meant to be understood by laypersons (who are not really interested in understanding their esoteric symbolisms). Indeed, much of these ritual procedures and symbolisms are professional secrets. Another consequence of the elaboration (or over-elaboration) of death rituals and the consolidation of related symbolisms in China is that a dead person seems to have three souls, one staying with the corpse in the grave, one residing in the ancestral spirit tablet and one going through the courts of hell and eventually being reincarnated (see Cohen [1988]). The history of Chinese death ritual is a long and complicated one. It underwent its classical formulations in pre-dynastic times (when a proper and codified funeral was only reserved for members of the imperial household and the aristocracy), and was subsequently profoundly influenced by the advent of Buddhism, which in turn spurred the Daoists to come up with their own full-blown funerary liturgical structure (with much borrowing from Buddhist funerary liturgy). In the Song Dynasty there was a neo-Confucian backlash against both Buddhist and Daoist ritual practices which resulted in a Confucian ritual formulation. By late imperial times, the three kinds of death rituals (Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian) had all become acceptable and were variously employed by all Chinese depending on the family's wealth and the availability of specialists. Throughout this history the service of the *yinyang* master has always been indispensable because he deals with burial matters (which of course is not simply about the burial of the deceased person but more importantly the posthumous on-going interactions between the dead and the living according to *fengshui* principles).

How many 'sheds' of scriptures?

Despite some regional variations, death rituals achieved a remarkable degree of standardisation in late imperial China (see Modern China [2007]; Watson [1988]; [Naquin 1988]; Watson and Rawski [1988]). The standard funeral procedure is outlined as follows:

Dressing the corpse (*xiaolian* 小殮) [immediately after the death occurs]
Public notice of death and reporting the death to the local gods (*baomiao* 報廟) [immediately after the death occurs]
The encoffining of the corpse (*dalian* 大殮) [usually on the third day after death]
The third-day reception (*jiesan* 接三) [right after encoffining]
The beginning of the condolence-receiving period (*kaidiao* 開弔) [which will last until the coffin leaves the home]
Completing the tablet (*chengzhu* 成主) [during the condolence-receiving period]
Sending off of the deceased (*songlu* 送路)
The burial procession (*fayin* 發引) [when the coffin leaves the home for the burial site or the temporary storage place]
The burial (*zang* 葬) [may take place right after the funeral procession or a long time afterwards]

Even though the linear sequence of the funeral was quite standardised, the timing of some of the actions was very flexible. Poor people buried their dead as quickly as possible because they could not afford good coffins that could shut in the stench of the decaying corpse and did not have a lot of guests who would come to pay

respect to the deceased. Wealthy households in old Beijing and north China in general usually kept the coffin (tightly sealed of course) unburied for a long time in an ostensible display of filial piety – because delayed burial symbolised unwillingness to part with the deceased – and social status. Sometimes the auspicious date the *yinyang* master determined for the burial could be years after the death.

Many of the guests who came to pay respects brought money and gifts, and sometimes specified how many 'sheds of scriptures' (explained below) they would sponsor to help accumulate karmic merits (*gongde* 功德) for the deceased. The typical dwelling in old Beijing is the so-called 'courtyard compound' (*siheyuan* 四合院), which refers to the layout of the dwelling complex: a squarish courtyard surrounded on four sides by one-storey houses (each consisting of multiple rooms) all belonging to the same family and closed in by continuous walls. Wealthier families had multiple courtyards along a south–north axis all flanked by houses. One would always enter a courtyard compound through the main entrance in the southern wall and proceed inward towards the north through the front courtyard and then the second courtyard, and so forth. The rooms towards the back/north side were inner living quarters while the rooms towards the front/south side were the more public quarters (e.g., reception hall, kitchen, servants' quarter, and so on).

Let us consider the hypothetical case of a death that has occurred in a wealthy family living in a courtyard compound with two courtyards. The deceased would be put in the coffin with the appropriate encoffinment procedures and then the coffin rested in the main hall to the north of the back courtyard. The back courtyard would be used for all the mourning and ritual activities, while the front courtyard would be filled with tables and chairs for catering to guests. Four groups of religious specialists would be hired to chant scriptures: Tibetan Buddhist monks (lamas), Daoist priests, Buddhist monks and Buddhist nuns (summarised in the Chinese expression *fan* [番], *dao* [道], *chan* [禪], *ni* [尼]) (see Anonymous [n.d.]; Jin [1996]; Liu [1996]). Each group of religious specialists and their performance were traditionally referred to as a 'shed' of scriptures. Three of the four 'sheds' of scriptures would be gifts from relatives and friends as acts of reciprocity (therefore we might say that the hiring of these different troupes was not done by the host household alone but the host household plus those closely related to it acting together as a social assemblage). A 'shed shop' (*pengpu* 棚鋪) would be hired to construct scaffolded temporarily covered platforms similar to opera stages (hence the expression 'sheds of scripture') over the top of the houses flanking the back courtyard to the south, east and west (the coffin was at the north side). Sheds, even though they are made of fir poles, wood boards, straw sheets, coloured sheets of cloth and are decorated with removable sculptures along the roof ridges (see Liu [1996: 67–68]), look, from a distance, like palaces raised high above the neighbouring one-storey courtyard compounds. The groups of monks, nuns and Daoist priests would ascend to these platforms and chant from above the visitors who gathered in the courtyard below to pay respect to the deceased. The Buddhist monks would chant from the shed-platforms facing north, the Daoists and the Buddhist nuns would take the side shed-platforms, with the Daoists on the east side facing west and the nuns on the west side facing east (Anonymous n.d.). Lamas by tradition usually did not chant from above the ground (though this is not a steadfast rule), so they would be offered a place on ground level in the courtyard below (and in front of) the monks (ibid.). Typically the religious specialists

would take turns to chant, even though sometimes they would be asked to chant simultaneously so as to increase the spectacle (and also perhaps make sure that they would finish the liturgical programme in time). The liturgical programmes could be shorter or longer depending on for how long the religious specialists were hired to chant. According to the principle 'the more the better', the same liturgical programmes could be repeated over and over again with the same set of scriptures.

Buddhist funerary rituals are premised upon the ideas of karmic merits and demerits and reincarnation. Each person born is a reincarnated soul from a previous life, carrying the weight of accumulated karmic merits and demerits from previous lives. His or her actions in this life also affect how the soul will be reincarnated again after death. The soul of an evil-doer would go straight to the Buddhist hell to suffer all kinds of punishments, while the soul of a supremely meritorious person would go straight to the Western Paradise. Most souls get way-stationed in a limbo for a period lasting up to 49 days before being reincarnated. During this liminal period the soul is believed to benefit from the merit-accruing effects of sutra chanting (including messages of repentance on behalf of the deceased) and a better reincarnation can be achieved as a result of 'liturgical assistance' and 'karmic bribery'. This is why sutra chanting is sponsored during funerals.[10] The 49 days are broken down into seven seven-day periods, each of which requires liturgical intervention; each period culminates on the seventh day, until the seventh seventh day (*qiqi* 七七), which is a sort of liturgical finale. The programme also includes a 'feeding the hungry ghosts' ceremony aiming at 'delivering the souls from the hells, nourishing them with food blessed by the Buddha for alleviating their pain, and making them able to be preached to, converted, and eventually saved' (Goossaert 2007: 335). This generous act of course also accrues merit for the deceased and members of the host family.

The Tibetan Buddhist funerary rituals are premised upon similar karmic principles, though there are many more Tantric exorcistic elements. In old Beijing there were numerous Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. The Tibetan monasteries were patronised by the Manchu Qing imperial household and palace dignitaries such as eunuchs and high officials. The lamas would however 'do funerals' for anyone who could afford the fee (the lamas were the most expensive among the various kinds of ritualists). As a group they had the highest prestige among religious specialists during Qing times (because of imperial patronage), and their presence at a funeral testified to the high status of the host household. But one should recognise that during the Qing the presence of Tibetan Buddhist lamas outside of the imperial capital Beijing and certain northern locales was not at all prevalent, therefore it would have been rare to find troupes of lama ritualists at funerals in these other places.

Instead of accruing karmic merits for the deceased and members of the host family, the Daoist priests call upon the Daoist high deities to intervene to ensure the welfare of the deceased. The deceased is actually posthumously ordained and granted a Daoist deity title so that he or she can escape the sufferings in hell courts (Goossaert 2007: 337). Mirroring the Buddhist 'feeding the hungry ghosts' ceremony, the Daoists also engage in a more general salvationary ceremony for

[10]Special sutras dedicated to merit-generation are chanted at funerals.

all suffering souls which shows strong Tantric influences (see Goossaert [2007: 246–255]).

The meanings of the specific contents of these funerary rituals, including the chanting of sutras and scriptures, ritual drama, gestures and *mudras* (stylised hand gestures) are not of concern to most of the people present at funerals (but see Goossaert [2007: 252]), though many enjoy the spectacle. These are highly specialised knowledge and skills, and host households and guests are happy to leave them to the specialists. A host household only needs to ensure that these specialists appear to be doing their jobs properly (e.g., not dozing off while chanting or obviously omitting segments of the ritual).

One indispensable ceremony during the funeral in the late imperial era was the dotting of the spirit tablet (*chengzhu* 成主) (see Chang [1997: 139]). A wooden tablet was prepared to host or anchor the spirit of the deceased and to be installed on the family altar and later in a clan or lineage hall where it would be regularly worshiped. On the face of the tablet was written the title and posthumous name of the deceased with the character 主 (meaning host or master, the traditional term used to refer to the ancestral tablet) written with the dot on the top part left 'undotted'. The host family would invite an accomplished Confucian scholar to add the dot to the character (hence the name of the ceremony). The dotting of the spirit tablet would be one of the most ritually potent moments during the funeral. The 'ink' used for dotting the tablet was actually blood from the pricked middle finger of the eldest son of the deceased, i.e., the chief host of the funeral and chief mourner (see Chang [1997: 139]). Accompanied by a few other well-regarded Confucian scholars who served as assistants, the tablet dotter (*hongtiguan* 鴻題官) took a seat at a specially prepared desk, faced southeast, took an empowering breath, breathed onto the brush while visualising the image of the deceased, completed the character 主 by adding the dot, and thus literally transferred the spirit of the deceased into the wooden spirit tablet. Unlike the troupes of religious specialists (i.e., the lamas, monks, nuns and Daoist priests), Confucian scholars were not hired although gifts (which may very well include cash) appropriate to the invitation were prepared, thus allowing the Confucian ritualists (who were not professionalised as Daoist and Buddhist ritual providers) to appear morally superior to the professional specialists.

Conclusions

As we can see from the example of Chinese funerary ritual arrangements, in traditional China there was a ritual market but not a religious market (if the latter is defined as competition between various membership-based confessional churches), and this ritual market was a market in the literal sense of the word, where ritual services were provided and consumed. Ritual-service providers compete for paid ritual jobs, especially funeral rituals, though such competition is tampered by two factors. First, the small size of the 'firm' (i.e., small groups of temple-based or household-based ritualists) imposed a limit on any one firm's expansion of market share. Second, the widespread preference of ritual consumers to increase the efficacy of the ritual by employing ritualists from multiple religious traditions ('ritual polytropy') has facilitated the sharing of ritual space, liturgical income and relatively peaceful co-existence among these ritualists. This commoditisation of religious service was of course related to the deep-seated commercial

culture of late imperial China ever since the Song Dynasty (see Gates [1996]), but it also resulted from the dynamic interaction between, on the one hand, the late imperial state, which was suspicious and hostile to membership-based religious groups and any religious institution that became inordinately influential, and, on the other hand, the people who practised religion as clerics or as religious-service providers.

But I would like to argue that the rise of the ritual market most importantly resulted from the early differentiation of the Chinese religious culture into the various modalities of doing religion, including the highly prominent liturgical modality, which lent itself clarity as a *form* of religious engagement for both religious specialists and religious consumers alike, which facilitated the elaboration of liturgical contents and variety (analogous to the ways in which the consolidation of the novel as a literary genre has facilitated the production and consumption of novels). Instead of competition between membership-based churches, there is more typically competition within each modality, especially the liturgical modality. Religious pluralism in China is not manifested as the co-existence of, and competition between, confession- and membership-based denominations and churches but rather as the co-existence of, and competition between, various ritual-service providers with different (though sometimes convergent) liturgical programmes.

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