Typologizing Religious Practice at Buddhist Monasteries in Contemporary China

Brian J. Nichols
Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, Mount Royal University

Abstract

In order to understand the lived religion of Buddhist monasteries it is necessary to go beyond doctrinal labels such as Chan or Pure Land which mask more than they reveal when it comes to understanding how religiosity is expressed by varied actors at these sites. One way to get beyond the traditional focus on beliefs and canonical Buddhist ideals is to approach religiosity as a diverse and person-centered phenomenon. This approach enables us to identify groups of actors according to their modes of religious behaviors, rather than by how well they conform to some canonical ideal. While Adam Chau has taken such an approach in his study of popular religion in China (2006), scholars have been slow to apply such an approach to Buddhist monasticism. Based on fieldwork carried out from 2005 to 2012, this article will identify modes of “doing religion” at Buddhist monasteries in contemporary China and propose a typology of such modes to account for the varieties of lived religiosity found there. The person-centered approach enables sharper focus on both the different types of actors found at sites (monastics, lay Buddhists, and worshipers) and a broader range of activity including administrative and charitable activities.

Keywords: religious practice, lay Buddhists, worshipers, monastics, person-centered, Adam Chau, monastery, belief, administrative monks
Researchers engaged in the study of lived religion in China are generally confronted with a bewildering array of behaviors and beliefs that defy easy classification in terms of doctrinal or religious affiliation. Buddhist monasteries offer a degree of coherence in terms of the forms of practice and expressions of belief that one encounters, however, there are limits to this coherence as well. In addition to sites where one finds traditional approaches to Buddhism thriving, researchers find “Chan” monasteries without a formal revived tradition of Chan and monasteries that have few or no resident monastics and are managed by the bureau of tourism. Many sites have gate tickets and entries marked with turnstiles; such sites often swarm with tour groups and megaphone toting tour guides. One also encounters fake monks who work at temples from nine to five. In short, some temples are being revived as sites of practice, others as museums, and many others as something in between, which may be referred to as hybrid institutions. The question that interests me in this paper, however, is not the forms that monastic Buddhism is taking, but rather, what forms religiosity is taking at functioning Buddhist monasteries in contemporary China.

One of the problems that I wish to examine is the phenomenon of individuals who worship at Buddhist monasteries who do not self-identify as Buddhists and who do not exclusively worship at Buddhist sites. The solution I wish to explore lies in focusing on forms of practice, rather than relying on a fixed set of doctrine and belief to account for the full range of religiosity found.

---

1 This paper is primarily based on about two years of fieldwork carried out in China from 2005 to 2009 for my dissertation.

2 My research into the forms monastic Buddhism is taking in contemporary China has been presented at conferences such as the Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies in Taiwan 2011 and is included in my dissertation, “History, Material Culture and Auspicious Events at the Purple Cloud: Buddhist Monasticism at Quanzhou Kaiyuan”.
at Buddhist monasteries. In this paper, I first review the problems of relying on beliefs and doctrinal understandings in the study of lived religiosity, I then propose a typology of religious practice that is based on a modification of one presented by the anthropologist Adam Chau (Chau 2006, 2011).

**The Problem with Belief**

Because beliefs and notions of religious identity tend to be more fluid and less-committal in China, a focus on practice is a more reliable gauge of religiosity. A groundbreaking survey of religious experience in contemporary China conducted by Xinzhong Yao and Paul Badham carried out from 2004 to 2006 found a striking disconnect between statements about religious identity (which we normally think of in terms of beliefs) and the behaviors and attitudes of interviewees. Regarding Buddhism their survey found that:

Only 4.4 percent identify themselves as Buddhist and only 5.3 percent say ‘yes’ when asked bluntly whether they believe in reincarnation. Yet 27.4 percent pray to Buddhas or Bodhisattvas and over half think that their families and friends are the result of what they had done in a previous life. Even more surprising 77.9 percent tend to affirm the Buddhist concept of causal retribution and the doctrine of karma.  

Similar results were found for Christianity, folk religion and Confucianism—

---

3 Yao, and Badham, *Religious Experience in Contemporary China*, p.9 Their study was based on a survey of 3,196 Han Chinese (drawn evenly from ten provinces or municipalities, excluding Xinjiang and Tibet) consisting of structured (using 51 page questionnaires) interviews averaging 47.3 minutes conducted by 110 Chinese assistants in 2005. Three types of information were collected: personal and demographic data, and reports on religious experience and religious conceptions, beliefs and practices.
low rates of religious identification, high rates of behavioral and other forms of affirmation. While decades of anti-religious campaigns and propaganda must account for much of this reluctance to identify oneself as a believer in a particular faith, it is also the case that popular Chinese religiosity is not as susceptible to neat categorization in terms of doctrinally-based faiths.

Both Chau in his study of popular religion in China and Robert Buswell in his account of Zen monasticism in Korea (Buswell 1992) explicitly raise the problem of belief in their studies of lived religion in East Asia; but they do so in different registers. Chau raises the problem of the language of belief, whereas Buswell focuses on the importance of recognizing what he calls the context of belief.

Chau points out that the language of “belief,” so important to Christian religiosity, is simply absent from the discourse of the people in his study; they simply did not explicitly speak of “belief in deities.”\(^4\) While words for “believe” (xiangxin) and “belief” (xinyang) exist in the Chinese language, people in Shanbei do not use them to describe their religious experiences.\(^5\) I found precisely the same phenomenon in my research in Quanzhou, people will say “I believe what you are saying,” but they do not say “I believe in hungry ghosts,” nor do they affirm “I don’t believe in hungry ghosts.” They also do not speak about their “beliefs” (xinyang). Interviewees tended not to express themselves in such ways. The only time I’ve encountered the use of the nominal form “beliefs” is in conversations with more educated people, especially officials speaking about “folk beliefs” (minjian xinyang) or “freedom of religious belief” (zongjiao xinyang ziyou). This is the kind of language that Stig Thøgersen has referred to as “Ganbunese” (the

---

\(^4\) Chau, Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China, p. 60.

\(^5\) Chau, Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China, pp. 60-61..
language of *ganbu* or cadres), which he contrasts with “Baixingese” (the language of *laobaixing*, common people) in order to highlight its politically constructed status. This way of talking about beliefs is the official and modern way of speaking about religion so that it may be categorized and thereby regulated. It thus belongs to the modern nation-state building enterprise of the CCP, not to the ordinary people who don’t use those terms; it is not how they conceptualize the world. They have not brought critical distance between themselves and what “we” would call their “beliefs.”

In his discussion of the “context of belief” Buswell points out that Zen beliefs cannot be adequately understood by reading canonical Zen literature such as the lamp anthologies (e.g. *Jingde Chuandenglu*). Hagiographies and other teaching materials offer idealized portraits of Zen experience, they expressly, Buswell argues, do not “provide an accurate account of how Zen monks of the pre-modern era pursued their religious vocations.” Buswell suggests that non-canonical sources such as gazetteers and epigraphic sources are important for correcting the idealized views of Zen masters derived from Zen teaching stories and hagiographies, but goes further and insists that “much of the import of Zen beliefs and training may never be known, or at least may be prone to misinterpretation” without taking into account the lived experience of Zen monastics. Buswell frames his concern by citing I. M. Lewis’ Religion in Context (1986):

> As I. M. Lewis has convincingly argued, religious beliefs are ‘functions of situations and circumstances,’ and describing those beliefs is ‘meaningless

---

unless accompanied by a minutely detailed exposition of their deployment in actual situations….The detachment of beliefs from their ambient circumstances produces gross distortion and misunderstanding."  

Buswell and Lewis suggest that we must focus on the living context in which religious beliefs are deployed rather than idealized accounts in the literature of a tradition. Regarding the problem of belief I wish to emphasize two points. First, one must remain circumspect when treating the lived religiosity of Chinese people—it should not be expected to fully conform to expectations one may have developed based on normative accounts that are portrayed in elite corpuses of texts. One should not expect the monks and their patrons to exhibit the roles portrayed in the vinaya, Buddhist sutras and treatises, tales of eminent monks or Chan genealogies. They may sometimes think and behave in ways recognizable in Buddhist literature, but very often they do not. To give a simple example we may look at an account of the monastic rule forbidding eating after the noon meal. In the early twentieth century Heinrich Hackmann, taking normative oral accounts about Baohua Shan 寶華山 at face value, wrote in his Buddhism as a Religion that “the evening meal is forbidden…[the monks] are only allowed tea to drink.”  

Prip-Møller was able to clear up this confusion by spending several weeks at Baohua Shan and discovering that “drink tea” in this context was an euphemism for having a evening meal.  

This is now well known, but what a difference the corrected understanding makes for

---


11 Prip-Møller, Chinese Buddhist Monasteries: eir Plan and Its Function as a Setting for Buddhist Monastic Life, p. 221.
assessing the level of ascetic commitment of monastics. What else, we should ask, do monastics do or not do? It was recently reported, for example, that Bhutanese health officials have begun to provide condoms to monks in Bhutan in order to prevent the spread of sexually-transmitted diseases which have been found among the monastic community.\(^1\) Reports like this need not cause one to jump to conclusions, but they certainly remind us that any monastic precept may have found an unexpected cultural interpretation. In this case, scholarship suggests that there is a tradition among Himalayan branches of Buddhism that has turned a blind eye to non-penetrative “thigh sex.”\(^2\)

The second point to recall is that the Chinese do not express their religious identity in the neat and clear ways that are suggested by the labels Buddhist, Daoist or Confucian. Religious professionals may be meaningfully identified as Daoist priests, Buddhist monks, or spirit mediums, but non-professional religious individuals are more difficult to categorize. Monastics who have formally taken the monastic precepts (shoujie) may reliably be referred to as Buddhist monks, and laypersons who have formally taken refuge or who otherwise identify as Buddhists may reliably be considered lay Buddhists. But there are many visitors who offer incense and bow to Buddhas and bodhisattvas who neither profess to be Buddhist, nor exclusively worship at Buddhist temples. These individuals constitute the majority of visitors at many temples, but should they be considered Buddhists?


\(^2\) This behavior is associated with The *ldab ldob* or the “working monks” in Tibetan Buddhism who engage in menial forms of labor, not the scholarly or meditative monks (Cabezón, *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, p. 93).
Non-Buddhist Worshipers at Buddhist Monasteries

In Chinese culture, offering incense and bowing to a Buddha at a Buddhist shrine does not make one a Buddhist—at least not in the usual sense of the term (which is more properly reserved for individuals who have taken refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha). Scholars working on religion in contemporary China continually struggle to label such people. Some refer to them as “believers” (e.g. Luo 1991:107). Xiaofei Kang “for convenience” has labeled them “lay Buddhists” (Kang 2009:236). Sangren has used “devotee” (Sangren 1983) and Chau uses “worshipers.” In my research I have found these individuals referred to as xiangke 香客, which literally means “incense guest.” It refers to visitors whose indentifying rubric is their desire to offer incense and bow to the Buddha (baifo shaoxiang); I feel the term xiangke is best rendered as “worshiper.”

While lay Buddhists do indeed offer incense and prostrate to Buddhas, they are not the only ones who worship Buddhas and bodhisattvas; as suggested by Yao and Badham’s survey, they are in the minority. This was the case at my field site, where some of the monastics decry the ignorance of these “worshipers” regarding Buddhism; they complain that the worshipers believe in gods that have nothing to do with Buddhism and don’t understand the teachings. One monk has said that as recently as the late 1990s worshipers would bring ducks and chickens as offerings. Once he saw a pig head being offered to the Buddhas and as he began to remove it a worshiper argued with him; he had to explain that non-vegetarian offerings were not appropriate in Buddhism.

There are differences between Buddhists (monastic and lay) and “worshipers” at the level of self-identity, understanding, and practice. In order to identify such differences among those engaged in worship at Buddhist sites one must take a person-centered approach to religiosity, an approach which
enables one to perceive patterns within lived religiosity. Scholars have used person-centered approaches, which focus on understanding the religiosity of individuals, to shed light on religious phenomena in China and India (Roberts, Chiao and Pandey 1975) and in Taiwan (Harrell 1974). This approach led to the recognition of what Roberts, Chiao and Pandey called a “personal pantheon” or “meaningful god set” which differ from individual to individual based on personal experiences. Worshipers at Buddhist temples who are not lay Buddhists can be found exercising the same form of religious behavior at temples to Guanggong, Mazu, or the Jade Emperor, depending on the makeup of their “personal pantheon.” Other scholars have taken a person-centered approach to understanding sacred places (Roberts, Morita and Brown 1986). Worshipers, again, worship at Buddhist, Daoist and folk temples and tend to have a set of religious sites they consider most efficacious. Such a set may vary from person to person, but for our purposes the composition of such “god sets” and groupings of sacred sites is not important, simply the fact that individuals visit Buddhist and non-Buddhist sites for religious reasons is helpful in identifying them as “worshipers” rather than as lay Buddhists.

Using a person-centered approach we can identify three groups of religious actors at Buddhist monasteries: monastics (chujia ren), laypersons (jushi), and worshipers (xiangke). It is worth pointing out that this grouping does not

---

15 In addition to these three groups there are tourists (youke) and bureaucrats such as those associated with the temple administrative commission, who also form aspects of monastic communities in China. Some tourists are lay Buddhists, others are worshipers, and others may best identified as tourists engaged in activities that do not fit in the current schematization. It may be worth incorporating them into future articulations. Bureaucrats might similarly be made a class of actors associated with temples, but for convenience sake will be ignored in the current analysis of religious life at Buddhist monasteries.
exhaust the groups one finds at temples in contemporary China; there are, for example, tourists who do not engage in worship and members of the state-mandated temple administrative commission (寺院管理委员会 siyuan guanli weiyuanhui) who may be found at temples throughout China. To the extent that members of these groups identify as Buddhists or worship at temples they fall into the categories of layperson and worshiper respectively. Otherwise they are not part of the concern of this paper as their identifying rubrics stand outside the purview of voluntary religious affiliation implied above and outlined below. A closer examination of these three groups will introduce the forms of religiosity most characteristic of each group.

The Monastics

First and foremost are the monastics, a category which I take to include novice (shami) and fully ordained monastics, both male (sengren) and female (nigu). Monasteries are institutions which range in size from two or three monastics to two or three hundred monastics. Each institution has institutional concerns, which is to say each is concerned with surviving within given economic and political realities. These institutional concerns are met by an administrative hierarchy that has been a hallmark of Buddhist monasticism since the imperial period. Monasteries are headed by an abbot (fangzhang) or head monastic (dangjia) below whom are assistants to the abbot (yibo), general managers (jianyuan) and their assistants (fusi), proctor (sengzhi), guest prefect (zhike), and clergy in charge of halls. Monastics with positions in the hierarchy are generally required to perform service for the monastery, much of it carried out to meet institutional needs. In addition to their administrative roles, these monastics also engage in forms of practice which vary considerably from individual to individual. A range of practices concern scripture; these include: studying, reciting,
chanting, copying, printing, distributing, and preaching the contents of scripture. Other practices include forms of meditation, *nianfo*, forms of asceticism, and prostration.

Rank and file monastics exhibit a range of interests and degrees of dedication; they also differ, along with all monastics, in the forms of personal cultivation they choose. Some choose to chant sutras, some copy sutras, other meditate or practice *nianfo*. Communal forms of practice are manifest in morning and evening services, meal times, liturgical services (*fahui*), *nianfo* and, if available, sutra recitation, meditation, or dharma study and instruction. Within each type of activity available at a given monastery there are monastics who possess greater and lesser degrees of competence, those who lead, those who follow, and those who train to participate in a given sphere of activity be it recitation, playing dharma instruments, ritual action or administrative service.

My research has found that some monastics are more literate than others; some join the daily services, others do not; some participate in rituals, others do not; some meditate, most do not. Those with positions are often busy with monastic duties and are often left with little time for forms of cultivation. Among clerics at any monastery one can expect to find a considerable degree of diversity in behavior, abilities, disposition, motivations, and knowledge.

**Laypersons**

I propose four types of laypersons based on their relationships to monastics and/or monasteries. The first are volunteers and staff associated with monasteries in various capacities; these individuals are service oriented. These lay persons wish to be close to the monastery and offer it support; this type of lay-relationship is defined by the offering of time and labor. A second type is
more strictly devotional in orientation. Devotion is expressed by regularly joining ceremonies or dharma talks at the monastery, these include such activities as niánfó sessions, morning and evening services, sutra chanting, and festival days. In Fujian, where I conducted research, these are generally older women, joined by an occasional man, who dress in dark gowns. They are engaged in personal-cultivation of a devotional nature. They may not show great sophistication in their understanding of doctrine, but they express dedication. Their reliable presence at monastic events provides a visible sign of the role monasteries play within their communities. A subgroup of this type are lay people who form a layperson association that holds its own liturgical services and dharma talks. The monastics may have little or no relationship with these persons, but may provide them with a space in which to meet.

A third group of laypersons are those Buddhists who are younger and have different kinds of interest in Buddhism. Some have an interest in meditation, some have intellectual interests in the tradition, some are eager to propagate Buddhist teachings through the distribution of Buddhist literature, or they may be motivated by their faith to support charitable activities. These individuals may visit at any time, but tend to be present in greater numbers on major festival days and on lunar first and fifteenth. Some lay Buddhists in this category may seldom, if ever, visit monasteries.

A fourth and final type of layperson are those who cultivate relationships with certain monastics or the abbot and regularly visit with them; they may also treat them to a vegetarian meal. These lay Buddhists exhibit different forms of religiosity. Some are more intellectually interested, entering into discussions on various topics about Buddhist thought, practice, history, or current events. Others are interested in personal cultivation and find it inspiring to be near monastics
and enjoy cultivating a relationship with a member of the Sangha. Some of these lay Buddhists are invited to travel with the monastics; they may be invited to special events or ceremonies at other locations. These invitations may be based on friendship, mutual needs to develop or maintain connections (guanxi), economic considerations (the lay persons may be important donors) or face (it enhances a cleric’s reputation to have lay disciples).

A subgroup of this final type are members of local and provincial offices of the China Buddhist Association who have relationships with the abbot and higher-ranking monks at monasteries. They stop in to keep tabs on what is happening or to discuss an issue, meeting, or plan. The relationship between these individuals and the monks or abbot is based on a bureaucratic basis, however, and is not marked by particular reverence, and certainly not patronage.

**Worshipers**

My research has identified three types of worshipers all of whom engage in ritualistic forms of practice. These are a) those who regularly attend major festivals, but who are not lay Buddhists, b) travelers or pilgrims who tour the temple and worship, and c) those with a specific need who either worship with incense and offerings or request a liturgical service either related to the death of a family member (chaodu 超度) or to be blessed from hardship or disaster in one’s immediate life (xiaozai 消灾). Common concerns for individuals sponsoring ritual services at my field site were for success in a business venture, concern about a legal issue, or some other personal or family problem. Such rituals are most often commissioned by men, typically businessmen. 

---

16 Gender, age, and income differences emerge as salient features in the descriptions above which are based on my fieldwork in Fujian. Further research is required before
A Consideration of Chau’s Modes of Practice

In his 2006 study of the temple of the Black Dragon King (Heilong dawang) in contemporary North China Adam Chau develops a notion of “doing” religion to capture what his fieldwork revealed as the nature of religion at his field site—the subtitle of his book is “Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China.” While Chau’s object of study was a popular or folk temple with no clerics, he sought to develop a description of religious action that could be applied more broadly to Chinese religion.

Chau situates his modes of doing religion as an alternative approach to the debate in anthropological scholarship that first emerged between Maurice Freedman (1974) and Arthur Wolf (1974) over whether Chinese religion is best considered one unified tradition (the position of Freedman) or whether it is irreducibly multiple and we can only speak intelligibly about Chinese religions (in the plural). Chau points out that this debate hinges on religious conceptions, rather than on religious behavior and proposes that focusing on practice rather than belief is a way to progress beyond this debate. He proposes a group of five modalities of “doing religion” to capture the religious life of his Shanbei subjects. He proposes that these five modes of doing religion are applicable to Chinese religion throughout imperial history. He writes:

Studying people’s religious conceptions is important, but it yields a bewildering diversity; on the other hand, there are only a limited number

broader generalizations about such matters could be made. While of interest to future research, these demographic features are peripheral to the concerns of the current paper.

17 Chau, Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China, pp. 73-74.
18 Chau, Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China, p. 75.
of forms (modalities) that permeate the Chinese religious landscape. The great variety in the symbolic contents of the Chinese religious world, as well as the limited number of forms (modalities) and their lasting stability and versatility, are both great achievements in the history of world religions.19

The five modes proposed by Chau and their characteristics are identified in the following chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chau’s Five Modes of “Doing” Chinese Religion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mode of Practice</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discursive/ scriptural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal-cultivational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liturgical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate-practical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first mode is the “discursive-scriptural” mode which is represented within the Buddhist tradition among clerics and laity who read, translate, contemplate, discuss, expound, publish, or distribute Buddhist sutras or other Buddhist writings. The maintenance of Buddhist libraries, the selling and free distribution of sutras and other religious texts, the giving of dharma talks, and private discussions of sutras and their content are all common activities one may find at Buddhist monasteries involving monastics, laity, and other members of the public. This mode serves to capture a particular kind of religiosity that is more literate in orientation, if not intellectualist.

It is worth noting that most monastic interaction with scripture is not in reading (dujing) or studying it (xuejing), but in chanting (nianjing) or reciting sutras (songjing) which are forms of cultivation or parts of liturgical ritual, rather than discursive engagement. The only place one would expect this to be different would be at a Buddhist seminary, where monastics are engaged in the academic appreciation of Buddhist scripture, thus emphasizing discursive engagement.

The second mode, the “personal-cultivational,” includes nianfo, daily services, keeping the precepts, meditation, sutra recitation and other forms of regular personal or communal activities designed to effect transformations of character, outlook, or insight. This mode of practice is the most important in shaping the communal identity of the sangha. It is represented at Buddhist temples large and small throughout China in the form of communal daily services. It is also represented in the shaved heads, the robes, celibacy, sobriety, and vegetarian diet of the monastics; more than an external sign these five qualities reflect the precepts one has taken (shoujie 受戒) and is putting into practice (shoujie 守戒).  

Although there are officially 250 precepts for monks and 348 for nuns according to the Dharmaguptaka-vinaya, the five qualities just related are the only means I have heard monks or non-monastics use to distinguish the lifestyle and identity of monas-
Along with the discursive mode these represent the most orthodox of Buddhist monastic vocations: sutra study/recitation and meditation.

The third mode is the liturgical mode and includes the more or less elaborate rituals and ceremonies led by clerics that punctuate the monastic week and year, including ritual services for the dead (e.g. chaodu) and the fangyankou ritual. This mode captures an important dimension to religious life in the Buddhist monastic setting which is framed in time by liturgical performances held on special days such the three days marking Guanyin’s birth (2/19), ordination (9/19) and passing (6/19), the Ghost Festival (Mulian jie, 7/15), and two Chinese (not especially Buddhist) festivals Qingming Festival (traditionally tomb-sweeping day, 4/4) and Spring Festival (Chinese New Year1/1-1/15). Such occasions are marked by ceremonies such as the three thousand Buddha recitation (Sanqianfo hongming boachan 三千佛洪名寶懺).

The fourth mode is “immediate-practical” and refers to simple ritual practices intended to bring about immediate results such as divination or health. The fifth mode is what Chau refers to as “relational.” As Chau writes, “This modality emphasizes the relationship between humans and deities (or ancestors) as well as relationships among worshippers. Examples are building temples, making offerings, ...taking vows, spreading miracle stories...celebrating deities’ birthdays at temple festivals, going on pilgrimage...establishing religious communities...”

While many of the activities classified as “relational” are important parts of monastic life, I find the category “relational” much too general to be meaningful.

21 All dates are based on the lunar calendar.
23 tics from non-monastics. See also Welch, Practice of Chinese Buddhism.
Sure these activities involve relationships with either deities or other humans, but so does every other kind of activity at a temple and within Chinese culture more broadly. This mode is delimited in too broad a fashion to capture meaningfully specified actions or behaviors.

As I considered Chau’s modes of doing religion I began to wonder if he had not escaped the preferencing of belief over practice because his modes all seemed to refer to behavior associated with scripture, interactions with supernatural powers, or spiritual cultivation. While these are important features of religiosity, I noticed that they did not exhaust the range of behavior one finds at religious sites, Buddhist, Daoist or folk. In particular they did not represent the commonly found forms of behavior that sustain the religious organizations through administrative activities and volunteer labor. Should we not consider the duties of the abbot, vice abbot, guest prefect and others as modes of religious doing? What about the volunteers who count money or cook food? In addition to administrative and other practical features of monastic life, there are also charitable activities and social engagements that don’t seem properly captured within Chau’s five modes. Charitable and social involvement such as building schools or sponsoring orphanages are becoming increasingly valued as expressions of compassionate engagement with the world. This level of social engagement is most clearly articulated in explicitly renjian traditions that have begun to thrive in Taiwan.

Missing in Chau is the everyday, quotidian upkeep of the monastery which includes bookkeeping, budgeting, keeping items in stock and, in general, keeping the monastics housed and fed. In addition to the administrative side of institutional religious life, Chau also fails to account for, it seems, charitable activities. Excluding the administrative, practical and engaged dimensions of
monastic life seems to be influenced by a doctrinal conception of religion as dealing with the transcendent or the supernatural. It seems akin to insisting that an activity must involve the sacred for it to be considered religious, otherwise it is of the mundane. Insisting on such a dichotomy between sacred and profane does not properly fit Chinese religiosity in general or the religious life of Buddhist monasteries in particular.

To account for both the everyday institutional dimensions of running a monastic institution as well as the charitable activities of monasteries I propose to add a category called “right action.” This category includes administrative duties associated with the operations of a monastery as well as charitable activities and ethical behavior influenced or directed by Buddhist precepts and ethical teachings. It is a combination of the traditional Buddhist idea of right action embodied in the five precepts, compassion, and loving-kindness extended to include contemporary notions of charity and social justice as well as actions conducted in support of the monastic institution.

The following chart shows the five modes of religion that I provisionally propose. These five modes are intended to encompass the full range of religious activity that one finds at Buddhist monasteries in contemporary China.
### Five Modes of Religiosity Found at Buddhist Monasteries in Contemporary China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Right Action</strong></td>
<td>A central feature of religious traditions, manifest in a variety of ways, both negative (as prohibitions) and positive (as virtuous, constructive, supportive behavior).</td>
<td>Ethical behavior, following of precepts, charitable action, working for social justice, providing material support for the monastery and its activities including administrative duties.</td>
<td>Includes activities not covered in Chau and overlaps with his relational mode.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discursive Engagement</strong></td>
<td>Discursive, literate activity to cultivate understanding of the teaching and/or to propagate the teaching.</td>
<td>Reading, study, translation, interpretation, debating, preaching, publishing, distribution of texts</td>
<td>Overlaps with Chau’s category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultivation</strong></td>
<td>Regular or repeated practices intended to bring one’s body, mind and speech into line with the goals of the teaching. This can be individual or communal.</td>
<td>Meditation, <em>nianfo</em>, morning and evening services, regular chanting of sutras with the goal of personal transformation.</td>
<td>Arguably the traditional raison d’être of monasticism; this mode overlaps with Chau’s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Liturgical Ritual</strong></td>
<td>Formal ritual practice led by clerics and/or laity individually or communally, typically involving liturgies not as part of regular individual or collective cultivation.</td>
<td>Includes all manner of ritual not performed regularly as part of cultivation, but as part of ritual calendar, celebration or at the request of patrons.</td>
<td>This mode overlaps with Chau’s liturgical and relational modes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Ritual</td>
<td>Simple rituals performed by individuals for benefits not transformation. This includes behavior related to use of talismanic objects, mantras, divination traditions.</td>
<td>Offering incense or other offerings, prostrations (unless part of a regular/daily practice), use of divination techniques.</td>
<td>This mode overlaps with Chau’s immediate/practical. These practices can be part of personal cultivation, difference is frequency and motivation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

Does this typology offer improvements over Chau's?

In short, the proposed typology of five modes of religiosity overlaps significantly with Chau’s, but eliminates Chau’s category of “relational,” which was found to be too broad and it adds the category of right action, which enables us to include institutional and charitable actions. Rather than dwell on the weaknesses of the relational mode, I will focus on the advantages of adding the category of right action.

Recent scholarship has begun to draw attention to the importance of institutional features of Buddhist monasticism. Jonathan Silk has written a monograph on the role of service or administration (vaiyāpytṛtya) in Indian monastic Buddhism (Silk 2008). His book helps draw attention to the importance of administrative aspects of the monastic vocation, which a close study of the sources reveals was recognized as an important dimension of the monastic enterprise alongside the careers of study and preaching (adhyayayana) and meditation (dhyāna).[^23]

[^23]: Silk, Managing Monks: Administrators and Administrative Roles in Indian Buddhist Monasticism.
Taking a macrodimensional approach to the phenomenon of medieval Buddhist monasticism in China, Michael Walsh, focusing on Tiantong Monastery, has argued that monasteries are sacred spaces as well as fundamentally economic institutions and concludes that monasteries represent “sacred economies.” Central to his argument is the fundamentally economic nature of monasteries:

Throughout East Asia, and particularly in China, the sangha became, among other things, one of the most powerful economic forces in society. Those Buddhist monasteries in the Chinese empire that sought to accumulate wealth increased their chances of institutionalized longevity. A large Buddhist monastery was thoroughly institutional, that is, a social and physical structure that defined, imposed, and maintained sets of social values, and sought to acquire and distribute capital—economic, cultural, or otherwise—in a competitive manner.…Producing an income, and preferably owning property, was a necessity for early Christian monastic institutions; so too, it turns out, with Chinese Buddhist monasteries.

Monasteries, according to Walsh, saw survival as a paramount goal, the survival of Buddhism was seen to rest on the survival of the Sangha. The question that Walsh asks is how did Buddhists get land owners to donate their lands? In short, they offered a precious product in exchange, merit. They convinced the elites that being a good Buddhist meant donating land to the Sangha. Today, the wealth of monasteries in mainland China is not based on land, it is largely based on donations by the faithful, the collection of fees for ritual services, the collection of entrance fees at more famous or scenic sites, and, in some cases, the running of tertiary enterprises such as vegetarian restaurants, guesthouses, or gift

24 Walsh, Sacred Economies: Buddhist Monasticism & Territoriality in Medieval China.
shops. What was a merit-land paradigm during the imperial period, has largely been replaced by the merit-cash relationship and commerce in the contemporary period.

While the merit-cash exchange is a fundamental part of monastic-lay and monastic-worshiper relations and an important dimension of the institutional life of the monastery it is not the defining characteristic of intra-clergy relations. Intra-clergy relations are the normative raison d'être of the monastic sangha and typically involves communal forms of religious cultivation or at least the opportunity for personal cultivation. These intra-clergy relations are the true core of the religious life of the monastery, but they are made possible through the social and economic relations that form the web of life of the monastery. These five modes of religiosity provide a means of disentangling key elements of this web and identifying points of commonality and difference between the practices of monastics, lay Buddhists, and worshipers. The five-fold typology specifically enables one to appreciate a range of religious behaviors including the administrative aspects, which include fundraising, and the charitable dimension, aspects which are largely invisible to outsiders.

In conclusion there are three main points with respect to the academic understanding of Chinese Buddhism as a living tradition. 1. Scholars should distinguish “worshipers” from laity and monastics in order to appreciate different types of religiosity represented by the different groups at Buddhist monasteries. 2. We should make room in our understanding of Buddhist monasteries for the quotidian features of running a monastery as an institution. Doing so helps prevent one from idealizing the monastery as an otherworldly place. 3. In line with expanding our understanding of administrative work as serving religion, we should also make room for charitable and engaged forms of Buddhism in order
to recognize this as a feature of the tradition today and as part of the tradition’s imperial past as well.
Bibliography


Nichols, Brian J. “History, Material Culture and Auspicious Events at the Purple Cloud: Buddhist Monasticism at Quanzhou Kaiyuan.” Ph.D. dissertation, Rice
University, 2011.


