

Religious Narrative and Ritual in a Metropolis: A Study of the Taoist Ghost Festival in Hong Kong

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I. ISSUES

Religious myths or narratives, to most phenomenologists of religions, can never be separated from the rituals they accompany. Mircea Eliade, by far the most famous spokesperson for the phenomenological study of religion, pointed out that living religious myths or narratives are often recited or re-acted in rituals so that believers can re-experience *sacred* events such as the creation of cosmos or the establishment of divine models for daily meaningful activities. When religious myths or narratives are separated from their rituals, they are no longer religious myths or narratives, but merely literature or art.¹

Scholars in ritual studies have found that believers in rituals and religious festivals tend to perform or act out their beliefs much more than they articulate them in myths or narratives. For instance, R.R. Marrett found that savage religion was something not so much thought out as danced out.² In fact, through the studies on rituals appearing in the mid-1970s made by Kenneth Burke,³ Victor Turner⁴ and Clifford Geertz,⁵ the circle of religious studies was gradually made aware that religion goes beyond a structure of belief; it simultaneously weaves together emotive experiences,

¹ Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1973), 5-10.

² W. Richard Comstock, ed., *Religion and Man: An Introduction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 35.

³ See Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 3d ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

⁴ See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977).

⁵ See Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

social attitudes and social functions.⁶ Thus, studying a religion through its narratives and its rituals can help us to better grasp and understand the implicit religious ideas and values, human desires and expectations underpinning the religion. By studying so, we can get a more holistic understanding of a particular religion.

With the above understanding, this paper studies both a Chinese religious narrative circulated in Hong Kong, and its corresponding rituals. Chinese religious narrative and ritual are considered here because, though Hong Kong is seen as a Westernized, rational, and highly developed city, traditional Chinese religious narrative and ritual are still being cultivated and practiced. Yet, to some Hong Kong people, Chinese religious narrative and ritual are irrational, unscientific and meaningless.

What interests me is why some modern Hong Kong people make the choice to keep alive traditional Chinese religious narrative and ritual, and what underlying meanings can be ascribed to these narratives and rituals. In addition, I am curious as to whether the traditional Chinese religious narrative and ritual really contradict the ethos of modern Hong Kong society, or have been expanded in accordance with the demands of Hong Kong's cultural changes with a resulting continuity occurring between them. If Chinese religious narrative and ritual are not radically different from the ethos of a society, how can they, as suggested by contemporary scholars of religious studies, function as "other"⁷ resources to challenge the

⁶ See Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth S. Goldstein, eds., *Folklore: Performance and Communication* (The Hague: Mouton, 1985).

⁷ To Ricoeur, narrative is through the act of emplotment to organize events and characters in an ordered movement. However, narrative is not simply a work of redescription. It is creative text to present something about the possibilities of everyday existence. As narrative, including religious narrative, is not a copy of the actual world, it can act as a resource of "other" world to give challenge, shape or meaning to one's existence. For more details, see Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols., trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-88).

Victor Turner finds that people in ritual will experience three phases, that is separation, margin (*limen*) and aggregation. Through these three phases, the ritual subject, or the ritual participant, firstly experiences the detachment of the individual or group from his/her fixed point in the social structure, or a set of cultural conditions. Secondly the ritual subject is in the ambiguous position assigned and arranged by cultural and ceremonial realms. Turner states that in the second phases, the ritual subject experiences sacred or "holy" and is released from daily social action and structure. Lastly, the ritual subject thinks and behaves in accordance with the

values and practices of this-world. All these concerns constitute the major content of this paper.

Among all Chinese narratives and rituals, the Taoist Ghost Festival particularly catches my attention. This festival is the second most important festival of the year. First appearing in medieval times in China, it is held annually in Hong Kong and attracts a large population of believers and participants from different Chinese religious traditions such as Taoism, Buddhism and popular religion. An in-depth study of the narrative and the rituals of this festival can help us to know more about Chinese religious believer's worldview, emotional experience, and values. All this information can assist in responding to the questions raised above concerning the significance of Chinese religious narrative and ritual in general (the Ghost Festival in particular) to some modern Hong Kong people; whether the Ghost Festival displays continuity with the ethos of modern Hong Kong society; and whether it shows significant transformative, critical power in the secular society.

II. THE NARRATIVE OF THE TAOIST GHOST FESTIVAL IN HONG KONG

In Hong Kong, the Ghost Festival is held on the fifteenth of the seventh month according to the Chinese calendar. However, giving offerings to ghosts on that day was not the custom of the indigenous Chinese religious systems.⁸ In popular religious tradition, this day, as Wolfram Eberhard discovered, originally was the Field Festival, during which the Gods of the Field were worshipped with special offerings in order to thank them and ask for a good harvest. As one of his interviewees states, the Field Festival was

models generated in myths and rituals, which are different from daily social thoughts and habits. For more details, see Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*.

⁸ According to "Monthly Ordinances" (月令) in the Han ritual book entitled *Li Ji* (禮記), there are second religious meaning on the day of the fifteenth of the seventh month. First, it is a day beginning of cooling winds and frozen morning dew. Second, corresponding to the rhythm of the weather, the plant begins the cycle of turning from ripening to decay. On that day, the emperor and his ancestors taste the first fruits of harvest. See *Li Ji*, 1:284.

In addition, other celebration was held around this day. For instance, on the fourteenth of the seventh month, the Han people brought world-renewal through the methods of purification and sexual union. Derk Bodd, *Festivals in Classical China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 273-88.

celebrated on the fifteenth of the seventh month, in late August according to our calendar. It probably was in some places originally a harvest festival; in some regions it was a kind of repetition of the lantern festival of the fifteenth day of the first month, exactly half a year earlier. This is all completely forgotten by now.⁹

Similarly, Morris I. Berkowitz found that some of the villagers of Tai Po, a rural area of the New Territories of Hong Kong, did not offer ghosts anything on the fifteenth of the seventh month, but only worshipped the Earth God on that day. On the other hand, also noted by Berkowitz, even though some of other villagers of Tai Po celebrated the Ghost Festival, the original emphasis on thanksgiving for a good harvest on the fifteenth of the seventh month was not forgotten. The celebration for a good harvest was held one day earlier than the Ghost Festival.¹⁰

In Taoist tradition, the fifteenth of the seventh month, originally was the “Middle Primordial Festival” (*zhongyuan fahui* 中元法會).¹¹ Around the third century C.E., the Taoist faithful had a belief that the Taoist gods assembled in heaven on that day. The Taoist parish took this opportunity to hold assembly to worship them, and also particularly to ask the Three Officials of Heaven, Earth and Water, who were responsible for inspecting human acts, to forgive human’s wrongdoings by performing a confessional rite.¹² Thus, to the fifth-century Taoist believers, the fifteenth of the seventh month was a day of assembly for both the gods and the parish, and also a day of confession.

Not until the Tang dynasty when Buddhism had penetrated Chinese society, did the offerings to ghosts on the fifteenth of the seventh month become the Chinese people’s religious practice.¹³ This day became the Ghost Festival and was called as “*Yulan pen*” (盂蘭盆). The term *Yulan pen* was the imitation of Buddhist sound, and it did not carry any Chinese

⁹ Wolfram Eberhard, *Chinese Festival* (New York: Henry Shuman, 1952), 129.

¹⁰ Morris I. Berkowitz, *Folk Religion in an Urban Setting: A Study of Hakka Villagers in Transition* (Hong Kong: Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, 1969), 63.

¹¹ Concerning the historical development of the “Middle Primordial Festival”, see Rolf Stein, “Religious Taoism and Popular Religion from the Second to Seventh Centuries,” in *Facets of Taoism*, ed. H. Welch & A. Seidel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 53-81.

¹² See Henri Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, trans. Frank A. Kierman, Jr (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 34, 82.

¹³ Stephen F. Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 58-77.

literal meaning.¹⁴ In Buddhism, *Yulan* means to hang upside down and *pen* is a container filled with food offerings. Though *Yulan pen* was a Buddhist term, the Tang people understood that the term was closely related to a Buddhist narrative about the two major figures Mu Lian (目蓮), a Buddhist disciple, and his mother Qing Ti.

Different versions of this Buddhist narrative, ranging from oral tales to Tang Dynasty Buddhist sutras,¹⁵ tell how Mu Lian attempts to save his mother from suffering in hell. In all different versions of this narrative, we read that Mu Lian finds only his father, without his mother, enjoying a comfortable life in Braham's Heaven. He then enters into the underworld and moves deeper and deeper into the subterranean region. In the deepest level of hell, Mu Lian discovers his mother suffering for the evil deeds performed in her previous life, her body nailed by forty long metal spikes. At this point, the Buddha intervenes, and brings Qing Ti to a higher rebirth.

It is in this scene that the term *Yulan pen* enters into the narrative. Mu Lian finds his mother reborn as a hungry ghost; her appetite cannot be satisfied because of the endowment of a needle-thin neck. Mu Lian attempts to offer his mother food through the ancestral altar, the traditional Chinese religious practice; however, the food immediately bursts into flame as soon as it reaches Qing Ti's mouth. The Buddha instructs Mu Lian to use a "Yulen bowl," similar to the one that the Buddhist monks use after the summer retreat, to provide his mother a grand feast on the fifteenth of the seventh month. Finally, Mu Lian succeeds, and his mother ascends to Heaven. The Buddha prescribes this method to other sons to bring salvation to their ancestors.

As giving thanks and making offerings to the ancestors were highly emphasized in Chinese society, the Ghost Festival provided the Buddhist community with power to claim its efficacy in ancestral salvation.¹⁶ Taoism, as an indigenous religion, however, was unwilling to offer a place to Buddhism to develop as the only religion to bring ancestral salvation.¹⁷ It took advantage of its Middle Primordial Festival, which marked a time of cosmic rupture when humankind could communicate with heavenly realm

¹⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁵ See *The Yulan pen Sūtra* 盂蘭盆經(ca.265-313), T.no.685; *Yulan pen jing zenshu* 盂蘭盆經讚述 (578-ca.645), T. no.2781.

¹⁶ Stephen F. Teiser, 196-208.

¹⁷ Ibid., 40

on that day, to extend its communicative power to the underworldly realm to release and save the faithful's ancestors and the dead from suffering in hell, similar to Buddhist practice in the Ghost Festival. Thus, Taoism's Middle Primordial Festival became incorporated in Buddhism's Ghost Festival.¹⁸ As the Ghost Festival was practiced both in Taoism and Buddhism, this festival gradually gained its popularity in and after the Tang dynasty.¹⁹

In Hong Kong nowadays, the Taoist believers, as well as the followers of Chinese religions, not only give offerings to ghosts on the fifteenth of the seventh month, but throughout the month. It is because the Taoist believers hold that the gate of Hell will be opened throughout this month and ghosts will wander everywhere. Thus, the seventh month is also regarded as the Ghost Month. The climax of the Ghost Festival is one week or three days before the fifteenth of the seventh month. On these days, the Taoist priests will perform a series of rituals to save the wandering ghosts and the Taoist believers' ancestors. The rituals of the Ghost Festival are also highly structured so that each type of ritual is performed in relation with another. The following was the timetable performed by Fengying Xianguan (蓬瀛仙館),²⁰ a Taoist temple which has been established for more than seventy years in Hong Kong, from the eleventh to the seventeenth of August in 1999.

¹⁸ See OuYangxiu 歐陽修 (557-641), *Yüwen leiju* 藝文類聚 (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 80: "A Taoist Scriptures says, 'The fifteenth day of the seventh month is the day of the Middle Primordial [zhongyuan]. The Officer of Earth checks his figures, searching through the human world to distinguish good from evil/ All of the gods and assembled sages arrive together at the palace to decide upon the length [of people's lives]. Ghosts from the human world summon the records, and hungry ghosts and prisoners all coverage at once. On this day grand dark-metropolis offerings should be made to the Jade Capital Mountain: select myriad flowers and fruits, precious gems and rare items, banners and jeweled vessels, delicacies and food, and offer them to all of the assembled sages. All day and all night Taoist masters should preach and chant this scripture, and great sages of the ten directions together should sing from its numinous pages. All of the prisoners and hungry ghosts can eat their fill, completely escape from suffering, and come back among humans.'" Translation is borrowed from Stephen F. Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China*, 36.

¹⁹ Stephen F. Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China*, 40-2.

²⁰ For a general history of Fengying Xianguan, see Bartholomew P.M. Tsui, *Taoist Tradition and Change: The Story of the Complete Perfection Sect in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, 1991), 76-9.

	9:00a.m.	10:30a.m.	11:00a.m.	12:00p.m.	1:30 p.m.	3:00p.m.	4:00p.m.	6:30p.m.
Day 1				Lunch	Raise banners	Starting Inviting the spirits		Confession rite
Day 2	Confession rite	Worshipping god(s)	Rite (12:00 p.m.)	Lunch (1:00 p.m.)	Confession rite (2:00p.m.)	Worshipping god(s) (3:00 p.m.)	Calling for ghosts	Opening the gates of Hell
Day 3	Confession rite	Worshipping god(s)	Calling the ancestors back to earth to take meal	Lunch (1:00 p.m.)	Confession rite (2:00p.m.)	Worshipping god(s) (3:00 p.m.)	Calling the ancestors back to earth to take meal	Confession rite
Day 4	Confession rite	Worshipping god(s)	Calling the ancestors back to earth to take meal	Lunch (1:00 p.m.)	Confession rite (2:00p.m.)	Worshipping god(s) (3:00 p.m.)	Calling the ancestors back to earth to take meal	Cleansing the ghosts
Day 5	Confession rite	Worshipping god(s)	Calling the ancestors back to earth to take meal	Lunch (1:00 p.m.)	Confession rite (2:00p.m.)	Worshipping god(s) (3:00 p.m.)	Calling the ancestors back to earth to take meal	Comforting the ghosts
Day 6	Confession rite	Worshipping god(s)	Calling the ancestors back to earth to take meal	Lunch (1:00 p.m.)	Confession rite (2:00p.m.)	Worshipping god(s) (3:00 p.m.)	Confession rite	Rite (6:00 p.m.)
Day 7		Worshipping god(s) (10:00 a.m.)		Lunch (1:00 p.m.)	Worshipping Ursa Major			

Table 1. The Taoist Rituals Performed in the Ghost Festival in Hong Kong

III. THE RITUALS OF THE GHOST FESTIVAL IN HONG KONG

The major act in the Ghost Festival is to make offerings, and act of “giving.” The main recipients include both ghosts and ancestors, the two major classes in the supernatural realm. There also occurs the giving of alms to fellow humans. In the following, I will investigate why the Taoist believers emphasize making offerings to different types of beings. As ghosts are the major receipts in the Ghost Festival, my investigation will start with this group, and then will move to the groups of ancestors and fellow humans.

Offering/ Giving to, and Expectation of a Return from Ghosts

In Taoist belief, only two types of the deceased will turn to ghosts. The first type consists of those who do not have any living family members such as beggars, bandits, widows, spinsters and etc. They are the disinherited of

society. Without family, these deceased individuals have nobody to provide care and worship; therefore they cannot ascend to heaven or undergo rebirth. As they receive no offerings from their relatives, they wander everywhere in the human world to gain direct fulfillment of their needs. They then become undisciplined spirits, *guei* (ghosts).

The second type consists of those who suffer a “bad” death. Although Taoism holds the belief of immortality, it is given to only a chosen few. Death, to most people, is the inevitable end of life’s journey. In Taoism, a “good death” is regarded as better than a “bad” one, and is measured by the deceased’s dying time, place and form of death. These two forms of death do not occur randomly, but are determined by one’s good or bad deeds performed in life. Those who acted well during their life will have a good death; otherwise, it is the reverse case. Different forms of death bring the deceased to a different destiny: either ascending to Heaven to transform into immortals to enjoy eternal life, or falling into Hell as ghosts to suffer bodily torture.

To understand why the Taoist believers give offerings to ghosts in the Ghost Festival, it is important to begin with their perception of the life of ghosts in Hell. In most Taoist scriptures chanted during the rituals of the Ghost Festival by the Fengying Xianguan Taoist temple in Hong Kong, ghosts are closely associated with “suffering.” For instance, the *Xuanmen poyu ke* (玄門破獄科) describes nine different levels of hell.²¹ They are all “dark,”²² but some are “cold”²³ and some are “extremely hot.”²⁴ Ghosts in Hell undergo various bodily sufferings such as “hunger,” “thirst,”²⁵ “torment”²⁶ and “fragmentation of the body.”²⁷ In Hell, ghosts feel “loneliness,”²⁸ “bitterness” (苦), and “misery.”²⁹

²¹ *Xuanmen poyu ke*, 39-56. They are Wind-Thunder Hell (風雷地獄) Hot Fire Hell (火鬚地獄), Golden-Hard Hell (金剛地獄), Icy-Cold Hell (溟冷地獄), Soup-in-Wok Hell (鑊湯地獄), Copper Pillar Hell (銅柱地獄), Kill-and-Cut Hell (屠割地獄), Fire Chariot Hell (火車地獄), Continuously Torture Hell (拷掠無間地獄).

²² *Ibid.*, 25

²³ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14, 40; c.f., *Xuanmen kaiwei ke* 玄門開位科, 8-9.

²⁵ *Xuanmen kaiwei ke*, 8-9.

²⁶ *Xuanmen poyu ke*, 34.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁸ *Xuanmen kaiwei ke*, 33.

²⁹ *Sanyuan pochán* 三元寶懺, 68.

The Taoists believe that during the seventh lunar month, when the gates of Hell open, ghosts will roam the human world. They will seek whatever comfort they can find, and will wander around in search of victims. If their desire is not satisfied, their accumulated bitterness brings them to change into angry ghosts. Their anger is believed to change into destructive power to disturb the human realm.³⁰ It is for this reason that the seventh lunar month is considered the most dangerous month of the year. The number of accidents is believed to appear higher than at any other time of the year. Fear of ghosts has resulted in offering various things in a variety of rituals designed to ward off evil. However, Taoist believers make offerings to ghosts not only due to their fear, but also out of compassion towards them.

The things offered to ghosts reflect both the Taoist believers' perceptions of Hell and of what is appropriate to offer in order to satisfy the needs of the ghosts. The offerings can be classified into two types: material and spiritual. Generally the Taoist laity are responsible for offering material things; the Taoist priest, spiritual things.

Since Hell, as stated in the above, is seen as being extremely "hot," the first essential material thing given by the Taoist laity in the rituals is "water." It is symbolized as "honeydew"³¹ and "spring" to decrease the high temperature of Hell³² and to quench the ghosts' tremendous thirst.³³ In addition, the Ghost Festival in Chinese society is held in late summer, a period regarded as turning to cold, dark and decay.³⁴ The Taoist laity naturally provides the material things that can give ghosts protection before the onset of cold and darkness. Thus, in addition to water, clothes are given to protect ghosts against cold; and food, which gives ghosts energy to walk towards the heavenly realm.

³⁰ Cosmos in the Taoist circle is constituted by three parts, namely the Heavenly, earthly and human realms.

³¹ Xuanmen poyu ke, 5,6.

³² Ibid., 14.

³³ See Xuanmen kaiwei ke, 8.

³⁴ Stephen Teiser studied *Li Ji* carefully and found that prior to the development of Taoist and Buddhist ceremonies in the seventh moon, Han people regarded the seventh month as the beginning of cooling winds and frozen morning dew. As Stephen Teiser noted in *Li Ji* 1:283-84 to write that, "Cool winds come; the white descends; the cicada of the cold chirps. ..." For more details on Han people's understanding of the seventh month and corresponding ceremonies in this month, see Stephen Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China*, 26-31.

According to convention, the Taoist laity offers authentic water and food to ghosts, but the clothes are virtual clothes, in paper form. They place food and water on the public pavement so that the wandering ghosts can enjoy their banquet. At the same time, the paper clothes are burned to transfer them to the realm of the ghosts. More importantly, the Taoist laity hope that the ghosts will stop right where the food is and not go into the houses of the living. The giving of all these material things indicate that the Taoist laity care about and attempt to satisfy the material needs of the ghosts.

Regarding the spiritual aspect, the Taoist priests predominantly bring “salvation” to ghosts. Salvation is precious gift to ghosts as it frees them from loneliness, bitterness and misery, and lets them undergo a favourable rebirth. Bringing salvation to ghosts with anger is not a simple task. It involves three major rituals in which two spiritual things are given to assist ghosts to leave Hell, namely merits and comfort.

The first ritual that the Taoist priests perform is called “breaking the gates of Hell (*po diyu* 破地獄).” In this ritual, the gates of Hell are represented by tiles, arranged in a circle around a central tile. The Taoist priests perform different symbolic actions such as breaking the tiles and waving their swords to represent their power to break the heavy gates of all the hells, and to reach even the darkest depths. This ritual aims at summoning ghosts to receive “merits” (yin 因).³⁵

In Taoism, the doctrine of “merit” is intertwined with the doctrine of “salvation.” Merit has connotations of a good and moral act; merits performed in one’s lifetime can bring an individual to ascend to Heaven after death.³⁶ Only those who are in Heaven are considered to have achieved salvation.³⁷ The doctrines of merit and salvation together transmit an explicit moral message: accumulated merits bring the dead salvation in the form of living in Heaven; demerits, on the contrary, lead the dead to fall into earth-prisons and suffer the consequences of their evil deeds in Hell. Following this logic, to save ghosts from suffering in Hell, the Taoist priests have to unload the ghosts’ burden of sinfulness and immorality accumulated during their lifetime on earth. The most direct way is to give ghosts “merits.”

³⁵ Xuanmen poyu ke, 22.

³⁶ Ibid., 24.

³⁷ Ibid., 26: 仰承救度之功，即逐往生之願。

“Giving merits” is done through the ritual of “cleansing.”³⁸ In Taoism, cleansing is linked with goodness and morality; a stain is linked with sinfulness and immorality, and will internally corrupt one’s heart.³⁹ In the Chinese epistemological system, “heart”, like “reason” in the West, is the primary and most important faculty with which to acquire all knowledge of the external world. Thus the corrupted heart blocks one from finding the right way and understanding the “truth,” the teachings of the Tao. In the *Xuanmen poyu ke*, we read two metaphors: “... to save all the living from *going astray*. All the living are in the state of ignorance, they are like *the blind* who cannot see the sun and the moon.”⁴⁰ Without the guidance of the teachings of the Tao, one is limited to know what is right and wrong, and to perform moral acts.⁴¹

In the ritual of “cleansing the heart,” the Taoist priests predominantly chant scriptures such as *Xuanmen poyu ke*. They believe that their prior performance of the ritual “breaking the gates of Hell” enables the sound of their chanting to transcend spatial limits and reach the ghosts in Hell. It is supposed that when the ghosts hear the chant of scriptures, they will become aware of their evilness and immorality and be willing to convert to the Tao’s teachings.⁴² Thus, “cleansing the heart” can be regarded as a ritual for transformation, to bring ghosts from the state of ignorance to that of enlightenment. By their conversion, ghosts take the route back to the Tao by which their evilness is cleansed and forgiven. Once this happens, ghosts are freed from earth-prisons and so achieve favorable re-births. Their destiny and their mode of existence are correspondingly changed.

“Comfort” is provided in the third ritual called “lighting the lamp and scattering the flowers” (*Kaideng sanhua ke* 開燈散花科). “Lighting the lamp” and “scattering the flowers” are two rituals. The first ritual is to provide light for ghosts so that they may see the way out of Hell. Only the second ritual, “scattering the flowers,” really functions as a ritual of comfort. To the Taoist priests, some ghosts are not willing to reconnect to the Tao during the performance of the ritual “cleansing the heart” because they are still carrying extreme grievance and waiting for a chance to seek revenge for the harm done on them previously. The Taoist priests believe that not

³⁸ Ibid., 17.

³⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁰ *Xuanmen poyu ke*, 8.

⁴¹ See Sanyuan pochán, 24.

⁴² See *Xuanmen poyu ke*, 15: 朗誦罪福句，萬遍心垢清。

until the ghosts' grievance is settled can ghosts hear the message of salvation and the human world can achieve ultimate happiness and peace. Thus, offering comfort is involved in the process of offering salvation.

In the ritual of "lighting the lamp and scattering the flowers," the Taoist priests make appeal by means of chanting a scripture such as *Guandeng sanhua ke* (關燈散花科). This scripture includes a metaphor of "flower in four seasons," which alludes to human life having to undergo birth, growth, decline and death.⁴³ If ghosts are willing to accept these stages as an inevitable life journey, they can unload their resentment, abandon the intention of revenge, and hear the message of salvation.⁴⁴ Once the ghosts' anger is tamed, they can cultivate a pure heart to hear the Tao's teachings and consequently, are given a chance to undergo rebirth.

The rituals performed by the Taoist priests indicates that from the Taoist believers' viewpoint, becoming "ghosts" is never the final destination of the dead. If ghosts avail of the chance offered during the performance of the cleansing ritual to convert to the Tao's teachings, they can still change their fate and mode of existence. Thus, in Taoism, one's determination of fate is not limited to one's lifetime, but also to the time after death. The difference between them is that the former case does not encounter any horrible sufferings after death, but the latter does. By the Taoist believers' offerings, the fate of ghosts can be changed.

The Taoist believers lay emphasis on giving offerings to ghosts because it is regarded as an important means for seeking "fortune." Traditionally, ghosts are thought to exist on a lower position than ancestors and gods on a continuum from lowest power to highest in the supernatural realm. Ghosts have no power to bring human beings fortune but only death and destruction. By making offerings, the Taoist believers hope to minimize the destructive influence of ghosts, and at the same time maximize the appearance of peace. Their wish is that they and their family members will not be chosen as victims, that they can be free from any disturbance or bad fortune caused by ghosts, and ultimately can achieve a peaceful life during their time on earth.

Offering to, and Expectation of a Return from Ancestors

Taoism, as an indigenous religion, upholds certain Chinese social values; filial piety is one of them. To the Taoist believers, parents in death do not

⁴³ Guandeng sanhua ke, 65, 59-64.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 69.

lose their place within the kinship structure. They serve the ancestors' needs and wishes by offerings as if they were still living.

The Taoist believers hold that their ancestors depend heavily on the offerings of the living descendants, otherwise, they would be turned into hungry ghosts. Once the ancestors turn into hungry ghosts, they are lost. Thus, offerings are regarded as a way of protecting the ancestors, and also as a way of repaying the parents' kindness in bringing the descendants to the world, and in supporting and nurturing them. Failure to do so is regarded as disrespecting the ancestors, who would then retaliate by inflicting misfortune on descendants.⁴⁵ The amount of expiation given will determine the ancestors' position in the supernatural realm, and vice versa.

The Taoist believers think that in the Ghost Festival the best offering to their ancestors is to reduce the ancestors' transgressions accumulated in their terrestrial life. This will save their ancestors from being punished in Hell, and they can be reincarnated again.⁴⁶ Or, they can live a fairly content life as an ancestor in a shadowy afterworld. Or, they may be appointed to a position in the celestial bureaucracy and be gods. Briefly, the Taoist believers hope that their ancestors can leave the entire process of rebirth,⁴⁷ and ascend to Heaven to enjoy everlasting happiness. To the Taoist believers, only when their ancestors transform to be immortals, have they repaid their ancestors and fulfilled their filial obligations.

In order to achieve this aim, certain confession rituals are held in the Ghost Festival, as listed in the table 1. In the seven-day Ghost Festival, there are a total of thirteen confession rituals which are held each morning, afternoon, and sometimes in the evening. The confession rituals performed in the Ghost Festival by the Quanzhen sect (全真派) are *Sanyuan miezui shuichan* (三元減罪水懺), *Sanyuan cifu pochán* (三元賜福寶懺) and *Luzu wuji pochán* (呂祖無極寶懺). The first two are particularly held for ancestors; the last one, both for the living and the dead. After the confession ritual, the Taoist believers offer respects to several celestial deities, including All Heavens (*zhu tien* 諸天), Jade Emperor (*yu huang* 玉皇), Three Primodials (*san yuan* 三元), Thunder god (Leizu 雷祖), the Great Origin (Taiyi 太乙), Ursa Major (Doumu 斗姆), Lu Emperor (Lüdi 呂帝), Seven Masters (Qizhen 七真), Literate Emperor (Wendi 文帝), in order to seek favour from them.

⁴⁵ William R. Jankowiak, *Sex, Death, and Hierarchy in a Chinese City: An Anthropological Account* (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1993), 263.

⁴⁶ Xuanmen kaiwei ke, 16-7

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 21

The Ancestors' transformation to be immortals generates a new relationship with their descendants. The ancestors are not merely receive from the descendant, but are also providers. Once the ancestors are transformed into immortals, the ancestors gain new resources of supernatural power and in turn bestow blessings upon their family members, ensuring continuous offering to the ancestors. These blessings motivate the descendants to start another cycle of "repaying the ancestors' kindness." It is by such a familial cycle of exchange, "offering sacrifice → expectation of blessings → repaying the ancestors' blessings," to maintain the relationship between the deceased and the living family members.

The appearance of harmony and peacefulness and the absence of mischief in a family indicate that the ancestors have accepted their descendants' offerings. In a harmonious and peaceful family, no one is sick. There are no financial hardships. Sons are not killed in war. There are no major accidents. Crops are not destroyed by insects, floods, or drought. There are no domestic quarrels, nor jealousy between brothers, nor friction between daughters-in-law and mother-in-law. A family that is "inharmonious" (不平安), on the other hand, is cursed by disaster. It is a household in which family members quarrel, or in which there are grave financial difficulties, a place where luck is generally bad or where (most commonly) there is sickness or death.⁴⁸

Giving to, and Expectation of a Return from Fellow Humans

In the Ghost Festival, the Taoist believers' strong sense of obligation to assist deceased non-kin in suffering situations is extended to strangers in difficult situations, especially those who do not have family and hence gain no care and no food, similar to the case of hungry ghosts. It is worth mentioning that rendering assistance to such kind of strangers is not a common practice in traditional Chinese society. It is because, as shown in the studies of William R. Jankowiak, traditional Chinese society was organized around tightly-woven family bonds. Therefore they merely strived to maintain a peaceful relationship with their family members and relatives.⁴⁹ This led the Chinese in traditional society to develop a low degree of commitment to public welfare, particularly to strangers. Though

⁴⁸ James L. Watson, "The Structure of Chinese Funerary Rites: Elementary Forms, Ritual Sequence, and the Primacy of Performance," eds., James L. Watson & Evelyn S. Rawski, *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 9.

⁴⁹ William R. Jankowiak, *Sex, Death, and Hierarchy in a Chinese City: An Anthropological Account*, 163.

as such, the Ghost Festival provides a domain to facilitate an awareness of the fate of those one does not know. To put in another way, the Taoist believers through the festival extend their care from the private to the public sphere.

The things that the Taoist believers give to strangers in the Ghost Festival basically have the function of sustaining the strangers' lives. Life-giving is the central gift in the festival, and this has been partly revealed in the above through the efforts of Taoist believers to transform their ancestors and non-kin deceased from either suffering from rebirth, or the tortures in Hell, to be immortals, the beings that are supposed to *live* everlastingly. To the Taoist believers, nothing is more important than food, particularly grain, to sustain one's life in the human realm. Thus, there appears the activity of "distributing grain" for the hungry near the end of the Ghost Festival ceremonies in Hong Kong. To the hungry, such grain bears a supernatural power. It not only helps the hungry to be full, but also brings them "peace." For this reason, the grain delivered in the Ghost Festival is regarded as "peace grain."

Though the Taoist believers' assistance to hungry strangers cannot bring them any higher reputation in their community, their act is considered as one kind of merit that can be accumulated and will be recognized as such by celestial deities. The more merits accumulated, the more blessings that the believers will receive in this life and in the after-life. In addition, the believers hope that through their assistance, they can prevent the hungry strangers from dying of hunger. The ultimate aim of this is to decrease the number of hungry ghosts and to strive for long-lasting social harmony.

Here we clearly see that by invoking compassion towards the hungry ghosts, the Taoist believers concomitantly develop a social responsibility to give alms to strangers locked in a difficult physical situation, especially those who are in bondage to hunger. It is the striving for social harmony that leads the believers to perform acts of social responsibility spontaneously. It is not the case that they are unwillingly forced to do so by authoritative institutions such as their religious community or government.

IV. RETHINKING THE GHOST FESTIVAL AND THE PRACTICE OF OFFERING

The Psychological and Economic Dimensions of the Ghost Festival

From the above, one notices that there are two major factors that drive the Taoist faithful to make offerings to the deceased and the living in Ghost Festival; one is a psychological factor, and the other is an economic.

With regard to the psychological factor, the Taoist believers' act of offering arises from a complex emotional experience involving different beings in different realms, including a fear of and compassion towards ghosts, a respect for their ancestors, and an effort to please gods through giving to the poor in the human world.

The fear of ghosts merits particular attention. Even though Hong Kong society promotes the scientific values of Western modernization, certain traditional Chinese religious beliefs survive and are far from being banished to the sidelines. Belief in the existence of ghosts is the typical example. Traditionally, the symbol of ghosts represents disharmonies and anomalies, or provides explanations for tragedies, including cosmic, societal and physical, anything beyond human control. Thus, the appearance of natural calamities, unstable society and illness, the presence of ghosts — these are all regarded as equivalent phenomena. When Chinese face something that is regarded as an anomaly, their “unsettled heart” will be projected towards something that is understood as a “ghost,”⁵⁰ which then asserts some imaginary control over them. Once disharmonies and anomalies exist, some modern Hong Kong Chinese are haunted by disorder, and, unconsciously, switch codes from modern rationality to traditional Chinese mystical thinking. To express their deep anxieties concerning unreasonable disorder, they use the symbol of “ghost,” the group of supernaturals unpredictably causing harm and beyond human control.

With regard to the economic factor, the festival becomes a site where an exchange occurs between humans and the invisible deceased. James L. Watson has observed that the giving of gifts is the tie between the living and the dead; and more importantly, that such activity is carried out on a reciprocal basis. As he states:

... some might say the most important feature of the Chinese ideological domain: the idea of exchange between the living and the dead. Death does not terminate relationships of reciprocity among Chinese, it simply transforms these ties and often makes them stronger. A central feature of Chinese ... postburial mortuary practices is the transfer of food, money and goods to the deceased. ... In return the living expect to receive certain material benefits, including luck, wealth, and progeny.⁵¹

⁵⁰ It is observed by Grant Evans, “Ghost and the New Governor,” eds., Grant Evans & Maria Tam, *Hong Kong: The Anthropological of a Chinese Metropolis* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1977), 291.

⁵¹ James L. Watson, “The Structure of Chinese Funerary Rites: Elementary Forms, Ritual Sequence, and the Primacy of Performance,” eds., James L. Watson & Evelyn

The Taoist believers' offerings, in part, are intended to prevent ghosts from sufferings in Hell, the ancestors from changing into hungry and poor ghosts, and the gods from being discredited. Their offering, in another part, is made to sustain the fortunes of their own families, their villages, and also the district where they live.

It is easy to understand why the Taoist believers care for both personal and communal interests. Taoism, as one may know, arose in an agricultural society in which Chinese people lived based on the social structure of a clan, or at least a large family. One of the characteristics of such a society was a de-emphasis on the personal. Chinese people perceived themselves as a member of family, clan, society and cosmos. They found they had obligations to look after both personal and collective interests. They did not perceive individual good as an ultimate, but pursued the good of all. It is because they understood that the sufferings of others would, in turn, be harmful to their personal interests. Therefore, it was easy for them to develop concern for others.

The return of fortune is expected in the form of material and tangible things, including health, luck, wealth and progeny. The more blessings the Taoist believers receive, the more offerings they give. Some even believe that the more offerings the deceased gain, the higher the celestial status they enjoy.⁵² Offerings to the deceased and returning blessings to humans basically serve the purpose of exchanging peace and harmony between them both.

The Understanding of Material Things and Care in the Practice of Giving

The practice of offering reflects the Taoist believers' understanding of the nature of material things and the relationship between supernaturals and human. Firstly, material things do not merely exist on earth. By burning, they can transcend the time and space of this world and reach the deceased in the underworld. The Taoist believers hold that there is no loss in the quantity and the quality of materials things in the process of burning. The deceased receive all that the faithful offer. In the end, the offered material things are believed to be transformed as various kinds of blessing. By offering material things, the continuity between the dead and the living is maintained.

S. Rawski, *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 9.

⁵² See Tong Chee Kiong, "The Inheritance of the Dead: Mortuary Rituals among the Chinese in Singapore." *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Sciences* 21 (1993): 130-158.

Secondly, it is clear that material things have their own possessor. Such a possessor is not understood on an individual basis, but on a familial basis. Though the material things are given out, they are not lost. They will return to the giver's family in this life in various forms. Food given out will return to the giver's family; it may be food, wealth or health. If the giver regards the returned blessings as of higher value than he/she gives, he/she will start another cycle of offerings. In the new cycle of offering, the giver repays the supernaturals much more than the amount previously offered.⁵³

Thirdly, material things bring life satisfaction. As observed by R. Lee, Cheung T.S and Cheung Y.W, life satisfaction for Chinese is positively associated with the level of material well-being enjoyed by them.⁵⁴ This understanding is extended to the underworld. Thus, the practice of offering not only seeks to obtain benefits from the deceased, but also satisfies the obligation to provide a satisfactory life for the deceased. The Taoist believers think that they have a responsibility to care for the deceased and make them comfortable so they have a better life in the other world. Such kinds of thoughts originated from ancestral worship. Traditionally, Chinese believe that by providing for the ancestors through various offerings as though they were alive, they are satisfying the demands of filial piety. Thus, the practice of offering primarily is motivated by family obligation. The Taoist believers then extend their obligation from caring for their family members to other beings in need, including the non-kin deceased in the supernatural world and the poor and the hungry in human society. For the Taoist believers, to supply the deceased with the various articles necessary for a comfortable life is the most appropriate way to show their care for the deceased.

It is worth mentioning that some of Taoist believers respond that they give offerings to the deceased and the living not because of obligation. Their motivation is to bring themselves psychological comfort or to ease

⁵³ Exchange activity is not only unique to Chinese religions, but also appears in Chinese social life. For instance, when people show "courtesies," the receipt automatically return. Or, in the case of Chinese Lunar New Year, the receipt returns "red pocket" to the giver when he/she receives the gift. Sometime the receipt returns back more than he/she received.

⁵⁴ Rance Lee, Cheung Tak-sing and Cheung Yuet-wah, "Material and Non-Material Conditions and Life Satisfaction of Urban Residents in Hong Kong," eds., Tzong-bian Lin, Rance P.L. Lee and Udo-Ernest Simoris, *Hong Kong: Economics, Social and Political Studies in Development* (White Plains: M.L. Sharpe, 1979).

their fear. Thus some of the Taoist believers see no direct relationship between offerings to the deceased and the living and obtaining any benefits. Though these Taoist believers do not hope for the return of blessings, expectation of exchange do exists. This group of Taoist believers holds that when they provide a comfortable life for the deceased and the living, they themselves will be comforted. For this group of Taoist believers, the achievement of a peaceful mind is as important as the return of material blessings.

The Moral Dimension of the Practice of Giving

As is clearly shown in the above, the practice of giving is the major act in the Ghost Festival. In seeking an exchange of blessings and fortunes, this act is not merely an act of economic exchange between human and supernatural beings; it is tied in with moral reasoning. Basically, the act of giving in a religious festival is not the same as a market exchange. It is not simply voluntarily, but obligatory.⁵⁵ The first groups that the Taoist believers give to above all are the spirits and the ancestors. Indeed, these groups are believed to possess something desirable, namely the supernatural power of terminating destruction and bringing fortune. In order to gain or receive something from the supernatural beings, the believers think that they *have to* give first rather than to receive first.

The second group that motivates the Taoist believers to give are hungry strangers. Giving alms to hungry strangers is regarded as one of the ways to please gods, and correspondingly, to receive good fortune from the same gods. The moral reasoning underlying the practice of giving alms is that generosity is an obligation of the affluent. They have to get rid of self-care and self-interest and to give to those who are in a materially difficult situation. They regard themselves as having the obligation to act as material guardians of their fellow humans.

Thus, we can say that in the practice of giving during the Ghost Festival, obligation and self-interest are intermingled. In addition, in the world of the Taoist Ghost Festival, the relationship between the giver and the receiver is not impersonal. On the contrary, the act of giving aims at building a harmonic relationship between supernatural beings and human beings, and between human beings and human beings, especially between the ancestors and the believers, and between the believers and the hungry

⁵⁵ Marcel Mauss finds that there is no pure “gift.” Gift is a system of reciprocity. The transfer of things is operated within a cycle of obligation to give, to receive, and to return. See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, trans. W.D. Halls (London: W.W. Norton, 1990).

strangers. In the first party, a kinship bond is established. With regard to the second party, the believers' giving, made out of compassion or pity, that links the believers and the hungry. Thus, a moral bond between the believers and the hungry is created.⁵⁶ More importantly, such a moral bond creates a social order to prevent the hungry from dying of hunger, or committing crimes. The believers, to a certain extent, can be regarded as acting as morally social agents to maintain social order.

The moral dimensions of the practice of giving in Ghost Festival allow us to reflect on the daily exchange activities in different social institutions of Hong Kong, namely in companies, schools, and even families. Hong Kong people, like people in other highly developed cities are often described as "economic animals" who are concerned with self-interest more than other-interest or public interest. People in our city are expected to give less and have a good return. Thus, the act of giving is basically ruled by utilitarianism and materialism. However, the practice of giving during the Ghost Festival reminds us that the act of giving is not totally disinterested, it is an attempt to find a balance between self-interest and other-interest. In addition, such an act is not simply a calculation according to different parties' interests, but is also concerned with the accumulation and distribution of [valuable] things.

Clearly, the wisdom contained in traditional religions could be an important resource for overly self-interested Hong Kong people, teaching them the importance of mutual concern and solidarity between different groups in a society where fierce, unrelenting, and oppressive competition has come to be the norm.

⁵⁶ Mauss discovers that a gift in most cases can enhance solidarity between exchange groups. See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, trans. W.D. Halls (London: W.W. Norton, 1990).