

Spirituality in a Modern Chinese Metropolis

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The Scene: A Vegetarian Restaurant

It is Saturday in Shenzhen, the bustling free economic zone an hour's train ride from Hong Kong. At noon one of the city's largest vegetarian restaurants is crowded: families gather for a leisurely meal together, and shoppers stop in for a quick snack before returning to their weekend errands.

But there is something different about this restaurant. While waiting for a table, many people browse through the impressive array of books that line the lobby's long bookshelf. Here they find titles on a range of practical, moral, and religious themes—achieving peace of mind in today's complex world, honesty in personal and business relationships, understanding problems in marriage and family life, and life strategies to improve physical and emotional health. Others glance through the posters and notices listing upcoming lectures and workshops offered by Chinese and international figures, many with Buddhist or other religious affiliations.

The steady traffic to and from the buffet area is not the only movement among the gathered diners. People regularly leave their tables and make their way through the kitchen area to another room on the same floor. At the front of the room, a small religious altar has been set up for this occasion; the room holds no other furnishings. The visitors watch as five traditionally robed young Buddhist monks engage in a series of ritual activities while paying homage to several Buddhist images—bowing and burning incense, chanting aloud, and reading the sutras. Restaurant patrons come and go during this time, some joining the monks in ritual gestures, but most simply sitting attentively for a while before returning to the restaurant area and continuing their day's activities.

At one point, a middle-aged monk enters the room, to be greeted respectfully by some members of the seated crowd and by the younger monks. Quickly the room fills to capacity, leaving many disappointed people in the hall outside. Quiet falls as

the older monk begins to speak. After his lengthy lecture the crowd disperses, the ritual objects are packed, and the monks depart.

What is going on here? A religious ritual, to be sure; but of what kind? This location is a restaurant—part of the regular economic life of Shenzhen, not a sacred site registered with the local religious affairs bureau. The ritual forms here are Buddhist, and monks have played important roles in the event. But our interviews reveal that the monks are not the initiators of this gathering, and few of those in attendance identify themselves as Buddhists. The session's host is Mr. Yang, the restaurant's owner. Mr. Yang understands this commercial setting, with its appealing vegetarian menu, its array of morally uplifting books, its up-to-date information about local spiritual resources, and its frequent opportunity for simple ritual participation, as part of his own spiritual practice.

In Shenzhen, on the border between mainland China and Hong Kong, the dynamics of modernization interact with the search for spiritual meaning. To better understand this phenomenon it will help to familiarize ourselves with the city itself.

The City: Shenzhen

Not long ago, the city of Shenzhen was a sleepy fishing village. In 1979 as part of the program of Opening and Reform program, Deng Xiaoping declared this city and a vast tract of surrounding territory a special economic zone, a laboratory for free-market reforms that would later be extended to the rest of socialist China. During the 1980s, a first wave of immigrants, predominantly unskilled laborers and recruits from the People's Liberation Army, arrived to supply needed construction and factory workers as many Western companies rushed to begin production at this inexpensive site.

In the 1990s a second wave of immigrants, including many middle-class Chinese, came to fill the demand for management personnel or to start their own businesses. With generous tax incentives in place for foreign investment, the city exploded from a town of 80,000 into a rough-edged metropolis of twelve million, of whom six million are temporary workers or "floating residents," who labor in various jobs without the benefits of legal residency.

Western observers are often appalled by what they find in Shenzhen: dangerous factory conditions, environmental damage, widespread graft and corruption. In fact, an Industrial Revolution and an Information Revolution are taking place simultaneously in this extraordinary city. What appears to many foreigners as disorder appeals to workers here as opportunity. China watcher Ian Buruma captures these contrasts: "The atmosphere is young and brash. A raw, even primitive, vitality—life reduced to food, sex and money—flows through these new streets like a muddy river." Buruma continues, "But for many young Chinese that is precisely its attraction. To be

relieved of the burdens of home, history, and tradition is a form of liberation. Opportunities await at the frontiers of the wild south—opportunities to make money, but also to carve out a modicum of personal freedom.”¹ In many ways, the city of Shenzhen is unique in China: more than 90% of its inhabitants were born elsewhere; the average age of current residents is less than thirty. Social and psychological forces here differ dramatically from those that still prevail in the interior regions where most Chinese live. The speed of change in Shenzhen has outpaced even the rapidly modernizing urban metropolises along China’s eastern coast.

But while this free economic zone is not typical of China today, it may hold significant clues to this country’s future. With the dynamics of globalization cast here in such sharp relief, Shenzhen presents a compelling site for examining the impact of social change on religious consciousness.²

The Spiritual Search in Shenzhen

The metropolis of Shenzhen boasts new and refurbished worship sites of each of the five religious communities officially recognized by law in the People’s Republic of China—Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, and Protestant and Catholic Christianity. And although accurate numbers are difficult to determine, membership in these registered religious groups is on the rise here as well as elsewhere throughout mainland China. But evidence from Shenzhen reveals another, often overlooked, dynamic of Chinese modernization. One of the most significant—and surprising—developments has been the extent to which the urbanized Chinese in Shenzhen adopt and adapt elements of their common spiritual heritage as part of an intentional spiritual search.

Today, urbanized Chinese in Shenzhen, most of them children of the revolutionary generation, are reclaiming elements of traditional belief and practice as part of a personal spiritual awakening. Confronted by new questions of meaning and purpose, many of these residents did not turn to the now-approved religious institutions of Buddhism or Christianity. Instead they gave very personal expression to their spiritual search in the age-old idiom of China’s common spiritual heritage. Despite determined opposition over the past hundred years—from state Confucianism, from Christian missionary efforts, from the Westernizing efforts of Chinese intellectuals, and from Maoist-Marxist political philosophy—this spiritual sensitivity survives in the mainland today.

The continuing vitality of this common religious heritage in rural areas of mainland China has been convincingly documented in contemporary field studies.³ To date, the influence of traditional beliefs in city settings has received less attention. A look at Shenzhen suggests that the values and practices of China’s common spiritual heritage continue to energize contemporary Chinese caught up in the cultural dynamics of urbanization.

BOX 1.1 Common Spiritual Heritage

By *common*, we refer to the moral and spiritual convictions widely embraced by Chinese across history and still today. Central elements include Heaven (*Tian*) as transcendent source of moral meaning; the energy that animates the universe (*qi*); ancestor veneration; and cosmic recompense (*baoying*). Despite the intensely local character of Chinese religiousness, these beliefs are core values and symbols for most Chinese.

The term *spiritual* moves the conversation away from thorny questions provoked by the term *religion*—with its many Western (institutional, monotheistic) nuances—in the direction of a moral orientation and spiritual worldview that is diffused throughout this culture. This enduring orientation is more than cultural, though it has never been organized into an institutional structure such as Buddhism or Christianity.

The term *heritage* points to the long tradition of belief and practice (which many scholars have designated China’s “indigenous religion”) that endures today as a resource or moral capital for China’s future. Viewed through an anthropological lens, this heritage is often identified as *popular religion*.

Fateful Coincidences

The middle-class Shenzhen residents who participated in this study had all moved to this burgeoning metropolis in the previous decade. Leaving settled lives in other provinces, they were intent on making a new life in a new China. Their relocation brought with it many dislocations.

Ms. Wang, for example, reflected on the disappointments that marked her path to Shenzhen. Her earlier plans—to study abroad, to marry after a long engagement, to find a steady job—had all been dashed. But after these many reversals of fortune, she found herself in Shenzhen with an excellent job that offered quick promotion. In a brief time her life had turned around dramatically; now she was financially comfortable and at peace.

But Ms. Wang wondered how those earlier crises and reversals contributed to her life today. Apparent coincidences marked the winding path of her life’s journey. Despite the pain they had caused at the time, many of the misfortunes suffered along the way seemed to have led to this new and much better life. How to explain this? To help fathom her contemporary mystery, Ms. Wang recruited a theme from China’s past: fateful coincidence (*yuanfen*). The meaning of the term is close to what we might call in English “a lucky break,” but in Chinese tradition a fateful coincidence covers both “good” luck and “bad” luck. And Chinese sensitivity recognizes that apparent coincidences are not luck at all, but part of one’s fortune. This deeply embedded aspect of Chinese culture became fused many centuries ago with the Buddhist notion of karma: in a universe that is thoroughly moral, there

are no mere coincidences. The events of our lives, for better or for worse, are related to past behavior, virtuous or otherwise.

There are psychological advantages to this traditional belief. By assigning causality of negative events to fateful coincidences that are beyond personal control, groups are able to “soothe relationships, reduce conflict, and promote social harmony.”⁴ Similarly, when positive events are seen to result primarily from fateful coincidences, personal credit is not directly assigned, thus reducing pride on one side of the relationship and envy and resentment on the other.

During her years in Shenzhen, Ms. Wang reported, her interpretation of these fateful coincidences had undergone a transformation. Earlier, she had understood the concept as a simple coincidence or a casual chance event. Today she sees fateful coincidences as having shaped her fortune in a favorable way. This insight has made her grateful. Her new appreciation of fateful coincidences also has moral consequences: Ms. Wang reports a heightened sensitivity now to the ethical dimensions of her professional life. She is determined to conduct her life according to high moral principles, so that her favorable fateful coincidences will continue. For Ms. Wang, the term *fateful coincidence* has shifted from cultural cliché to become a meaningful marker of a moral life.

Fathoming Our Destiny

Chinese have always believed that a person’s life is somehow related to the influence of a transcendent force named Heaven. What had once been seen as the ruler’s “divine right” to rule (his “mandate of heaven”) was interpreted by the philosopher Mencius as part of every person’s destiny. The ancient belief in destiny links the givenness of personal fate and the changing circumstances and individual choices that keep life open-ended. For the Chinese, as for other cultures, a person’s destiny was seen as both fixed and flexible.

For many centuries, the “fixed” or fated side of life seemed to dominate. One had to accept one’s lot in life, as peasant, as farmer, as wife. Imagining an alternate destiny was all but impossible. Profound changes in its recent history have attuned China’s younger generation to more choices and new possibilities. In place of state-sponsored guarantees of lifetime employment—the socialist “iron rice bowl”—young people today can and must choose their careers. If this provokes anxiety, it also brings freedom, with a sense that one’s destiny is not only fixed but flexible. In contemporary Shenzhen, residents frequently speak of taking their destinies into their own hands.

Mr. Zhou, for instance, was surprised by the changes that had taken place in his own life. His small printing business, producing mailing envelopes, deposit slips, and receipt books, had grown rapidly, in pace with Shenzhen’s expanding economy. After several early years of struggle, Zhou was suddenly quite successful; he now owned a house and even a private automobile. This financial success triggered

deeper questions about his life. Previously, Mr. Zhou reported, he had never reflected on the direction of his life or its long-term purpose. But his sudden good fortune led him to question: why is this success mine? While others he knew who were equally hardworking were still struggling, his life and career had quite suddenly begun to flourish. To make sense of this turn of events, Mr. Zhou found himself unexpectedly returning to traditional convictions in his culture about personal destiny. But, as Mr. Zhou well knew, to say, “my fate is good,” is not to brag, but to express surprise and even gratitude for the good fortune that has come to a life. While the ancient idea of destiny did not fully explain Mr. Zhou’s recent successes, it did make him more mindful of the good fortune that had been given him, and the responsibility that he now recognized came with it. As with Ms. Wang, this recovery of an ancient theme made Mr. Zhou more attentive to his life. This attentiveness reinserted Mr. Zhou into a conversation that has gone on for millennia in his culture.

Living in a Moral Universe

For other respondents in this fast-changing city, questions of morality were of greatest concern. For people who work in the largely unregulated businesses in Shenzhen, bribery and other forms of corruption are rampant temptations. Ms. Shen recalled her early experience in the city, when she was ready to cheat clients in pursuit of greater profits. As she became wealthier, she also experienced an increasing sense of guilt. During this period of regret, Ms. Shen accompanied a friend to a public lecture offered by a visiting Buddhist monk. One of his statements struck home: “If you are meant to have something, it will be yours.” Puzzling over this cryptic statement, she began to question her own acquisitiveness and greed. Gradually she came to see her business pursuits as part of a larger life design. She determined to end her deceitful practices and adopt a pattern of strict honesty in her dealings with others.

Ms. Shen’s moral musings took her back to the traditional Chinese belief in cosmic recompense.⁵ In *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit*, Cynthia Brokaw describes this notion as a “belief in a supernatural or cosmic retribution, a belief that has been a fundamental, at times *the* fundamental, belief of Chinese religion since the beginning of recorded history.”⁶ This belief, woven deep into the fabric of Chinese culture, is rooted in the conviction that the universe is moral. No action, good or bad, goes unrecompensed. To live a life of dishonesty will lead eventually to troubles that are one’s due, just as virtuous behavior bears its own good fruit. Ms. Shen now recognized that living according to higher moral standards would affect her own future: good would come from this moral discipline. She began to believe that, even financially, she would have “what she was meant to have.” Ms. Shen reported that this belief, alive again for her, motivated a new sense of purpose in her career and brought comfort to her life.

These moral themes—fateful coincidence, personal destiny, and cosmic recompense—are closely related. Apparent chance events, small and great, influence the shape and fortune of each person's destiny. Recognizing this connection has the moral result of making a person more responsible for his or her actions. Belief that the universe is itself moral links the concepts of destiny and cosmic recompense. Virtuous actions bring their own reward, but this reward, often registered in (apparently) chance events, gives shape to a person's destiny. This is how human fate is both fixed and flexible.

Moral and Social Capital in Shenzhen

Every culture possesses a patrimony of moral goodness and spiritual achievements. This storehouse of moral values, accumulated over many centuries, functions as an endowment to be cherished and conserved, as well as a moral asset to be invested in the future. We may see the spiritual resources to which residents of Shenzhen turned in times of change and crisis as a kind of "moral capital" made available to them from their own religious heritage.

China scholar Judith Berling introduced the term *moral capital* in her analysis of a seventeenth-century Chinese novel.⁷ The novel argues that a virtuous life results in the accumulation of moral resources. Through meritorious actions of honesty and compassion, a person accrues virtue much as money (capital) might be saved. These accrued virtues become the spiritual inheritance that funds the next generation. A person who squanders the spiritual resources he has inherited from his family has nothing to hand down to his children. In a typically Chinese fashion, the novel insists that "moral capital (accumulated merit) is just as important a legacy for one's descendents as land or money." Berling concludes, "Religion as the management of moral capital thus involves taking responsibility: Learning to manage one's life and human relationships so as not to exhaust moral collateral."⁸

Moral capital—as a spiritual resource imbedded in a culture's past—funds those contemporary interactions of trust that have been named *social capital*. Sociologist John Coleman defines this term: "Social capital . . . points to features of social life, such as networks of mutuality and norms of trust that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives."⁹

If social capital describes the human resources currently available in a particular society such as mainland China, the question arises: Where do these resources originate? What is their origin or wellspring? Francis Fukuyama has suggested that these valuable resources spring from "certain pre-modern cultural habits."¹⁰ He then attempts to be more precise: the trust at the core of social capital has "its origins in . . . phenomena like religion and traditional ethics."¹¹

Trustworthiness, generally identified as a personal virtue or moral dynamic, can also be understood as an inherited reserve of social cohesion. At the core of social cohesion is the shared recognition of promises made and kept, of reliability that has

 BOX 1.2 Civil Society, Social Capital, and Moral Capital

Civil society names the public sphere that has appeared between government (with its many controls) and the market (with its many demands) where organizations form to act in the public interest. In today's world of "multiple modernities," civil society will display different characteristics in various cultures.

Social capital names the resource of mutual trust and generosity that allows people to act together, over time, to contribute to a society's well-being. This is an observable dynamic and a necessary asset for the flourishing of civil society.

Moral capital names the moral values and spiritual motivations that fuel social capital, giving people reason to cooperate for the common good. This term points to "the moods and motivations" (Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. M. Banton [London: Tavistock, 1985], 176) that energize people to work with other citizens, often unlike themselves, in this new public sphere to build up their society.

Francis Fukuyama (*Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*) and Alan Wolfe (*Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*) both point to the less observable but essential resource of moral capital, locating it in premodern reservoirs of religion and traditional ethics. A lesson of late modernity is that critical reason cannot successfully substitute for the motivating energies of religious symbols and rituals.

been established over many transactions. This communal confidence becomes a moral resource that accrues like other capital: it can be both accumulated and invested in the future; but it can also be squandered until moral bankruptcy looms. The contemporary resource of social capital in any society rests on a cultural inheritance of social virtues that give coherence to a society. The wellsprings of such social capital and the civil society it serves lie in the stories, symbols, and rituals—the moral capital—that provide a culture its identity and motivate its higher purposes.

In the preceding three stories from Shenzhen we have seen Chinese in a thriving urban environment returning to moral memories and religious images that had been considered by many scholars to be premodern, rural, and perhaps bankrupt in today's world. But in the late modern, urban China of Shenzhen these resources of a common spiritual heritage remain motivating resources for Chinese lives.

Adopting and Adapting China's Common Spiritual Heritage

While many of these urban middle-class residents in Shenzhen now enthusiastically embrace elements of China's traditional heritage, their experience of these beliefs and practices does not simply repeat the patterns of China's rural past. Both continuities with China's common spiritual heritage and differences are evident.

Continuities include (a) the practical nature of spiritual concerns; (b) an open or “non-sectarian”¹² attitude, which draws freely from plural sources of spiritual nourishment; and (c) the predominance of lay initiative over formal religious leadership. Differences include (d) the broader range of spiritual options currently available; (e) new settings for communal support and spiritual formation; and (f) the heightened awareness of personal decision in spiritual belief and practice.

Religious Continuities in Shenzhen

PRACTICAL NATURE OF SPIRITUAL CONCERNS

As is characteristic of traditional Chinese spirituality, the beliefs and practices of today’s Shenzhen respondents are located in the midst of everyday life and focused on life’s daily problems: health and healing, hope for good fortune, smoothing troubled relations. Ms. Shi, for example, is a news commentator at a local television station. Growing up during the Cultural Revolution, she had little direct experience of religious practice. Now, in her apartment in one of the modern housing complexes that surround the city of Shenzhen, she has set up a small altar. A statue of Guanyin, the Buddhist figure widely venerated among Chinese, plays a prominent role here. Ms. Shi places fresh fruit on the altar for a time, and then offers this fruit as a gift to friends who are suffering from bad health or family problems. Her sense is that this fruit now carries special power that will bring healing and consolation to these friends. In the midst of her busy professional life, she tries to spend time daily in meditation and in reading morally uplifting books. Although Ms. Shi insists that she is not a Buddhist, she finds the prayerful reading of Buddhist texts to be especially consoling. Ms. Shi acknowledges that her daily practices are part of a search for a calm life and peaceful heart, in the midst of a complex and confusing world. She embraces these activities as significant in her life and necessary for her spiritual well-being.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES DRAWN FROM PLURAL TRADITIONS

Outsiders might also be struck by the eclectic range of Ms. Shi’s devotions; her home altar displays items of ritual significance in Daoism and in Buddhism, as well as some with uniquely personal meanings. On the one hand, this creative assembly of images, with its commitment to personal relevance and individual choice, may be seen as a reflection of modern consciousness. But the openness and selectivity we see here also resonate with deeper cultural dynamics.

Historically, Chinese religiousness has drawn upon plural sources of spiritual nourishment. Resources separately identified with China’s three great traditions—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—have been combined freely in local religious practice, without troubling considerations of denominational distinction or ritual orthodoxy. This characteristic openness, too, reflects the practical bias of China’s common spiritual heritage.

For centuries the common ritual activities of China's peoples have existed symbiotically with the more formalized traditions of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Chinese popular religion developed with no need to create its own distinct rituals, elaborate doctrines, or full-time professional leaders such as monks or priests. Chinese have traditionally borrowed beliefs and ceremonies originally developed within the "great traditions" of Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, adapting these to suit local conditions. Yet the underlying worldview remains that of the common spiritual heritage.

LAY LEADERSHIP PREDOMINATES

China's local religious traditions, as Daniel Overmyer reminds us, "are characterized by their location in the midst of everyday life and their focus on practical aid and results. . . . Though clergy may be involved, for the most part these traditions are led, organized, and continued by the people themselves."¹³ Because the ritual activities were so intimately woven into the patterns of daily life, it was natural that those who carried out ordinary village responsibilities would play the significant roles in village rituals.

In Shenzhen, lay leadership continues to characterize the informal gatherings and larger communal activities. Laypeople call on monks to conduct rituals, but they themselves are in charge. For example, a loose network associated with one of the vegetarian restaurants has adopted a Buddhist ritual as part of a larger social concern. Annually they undertake a symbolic "freeing of animals" to cultivate mercy and compassion in the world.

Notice of the time and place of the freeing of animals ceremony is distributed by flyers, e-mail, and word of mouth. Individuals, many of them previously unknown to the planners, bring cages of small birds and turtles purchased at the local market. A monk from the nearby registered monastery is hired to read the appropriate sutras and to guide the ritual activities releasing the animals from their cages. But the ordinary people are clearly the initiators and the hosts of this gathering.

This discussion of continuities between the rural spiritual heritage and its urban reappropriation has already hinted at some emerging differences. Here we will examine more explicitly three of these differences.

Religious Adaptations in Shenzhen

BROADER RANGE OF SPIRITUAL OPTIONS AVAILABLE

In Shenzhen, some people's religious practice involves simply the regular repetition of prayer formulas. But most respondents reported seeking deeper understanding by reading texts or commentaries on religious classics (Daoist stories, Buddhist sutras, works of Confucius and Mencius), or morally uplifting contemporary books. An extraordinary range of authors and titles is now available, resulting from

both the loosening of editorial restrictions on mainland Chinese publishing houses and the burgeoning interest in new ideas and foreign views that has accompanied this city's globalization. As a result, more sources of spiritual nourishment are available in Shenzhen, and more personal choice is required.

Expanded media sources have played a crucial role in the spiritual revival in Shenzhen. Local bookstores abound with titles providing alternative life perspectives and moral advice. A steady stream of Buddhist and Christian television and Internet programming arrives from Taiwan and North America. Local and international religious entrepreneurs promote programs for health and healing and peace of mind, even as state propaganda urges a return to now largely discredited Communist ideals and values. And images and icons of Western popular culture flood the local media. Confronted by this vast array of possibilities, Shenzhen residents need to, and want to, find for themselves the sources of spiritual nourishment that suit their own situations and temperaments.

BOX 1.3 Buddhist Pop Music

Francesca Tarocco

The contemporary Chinese Buddhist world is inextricably linked with the popularization of a novel type of voice-based compositions pioneered in the 1930s and 1940s by the eminent monk Hongyi (born Li Shutong 1880–1942) and his disciples. Embracing Chinese musical modernity, a heady mixture of Western piano and brass band music, newly composed patriotic songs, Christian hymns, Japanese school songs, jazz and film music, Hongyi and other Buddhist activists incorporated some elements of this new soundscape in their own musical idiom. While marking a departure from traditional liturgical music, the songs are deliberately inscribed in Buddhist language and imagery. The most famous of these songs is *The Song of the Three Jewels (Sanbaoge)* written together with the prominent activist monk Taixu (1890–1947), author of the lyrics (Tarocco, *The Cultural Practices of Modern Chinese Buddhism: Attuning the Dharma*, London: Routledge, 2008). The soundscape of the contemporary Chinese-speaking Buddhist world, and of Taiwan in particular, would not be what it is without them. In today's China, Hongyi's songs are available in digital format through a number of retailers immediately associable with Buddhism, including shops attached to monastic compounds, but are also found in mainstream music and audiovisual stores. Both official and Buddhist China have found a niche market for the songs, and, in time, have variously appropriated them and adapted them to contemporary needs and tastes. In 1990, the Shanghai Music Publishing House produced an elegantly packaged critical anthology entitled *The Collected Songs by Li Shutong-Dharma Master Hongyi*, a work that ushered in several other Hongyi-related cultural products. In his writings and in personal communications, the recordist and editor of one collection has described the clerics involved as audience conscious and aimed to “rival [...] the ever-increasing influence of popular music and *karaoke*.” Buddhist clerics seemed to him “insistent on the importance of not letting

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BOX 1.3 (continued)

Buddhist chant be reduced to some vestige of bygone days or to a means of expression reserved to specialist monks.”

The long tradition of Buddhist adaptability and innovation carries on. European-style symphonic music, karaoke-style chanting, and CDs of pop Buddhist-inspired tunes are only a few of the many faces of the contemporary world of audiovisual Buddhism. Interestingly, the influence of Western musical idioms and theories, and of modern, mass-mediated songs, has determined a number of shifts in the perception of the past musical heritage and in the performance of traditional ritual repertoires. As retailers have invented various labels to identify “ethnic” and “world” music for listeners who seek a more varied, exotic musical fare, a new market is emerging today for “Buddhist music.” Have the shifts in Buddhist discourses on music influenced religious behavior? Is modern technology affecting the way in which monastic chanting is learned, produced, and transmitted? Certainly, the examination of the web of interconnected global and local ideas and practices that contributed to their creation illustrates how new Buddhist songs are both radically new and remarkably traditional. Regardless of the fact that they are the product of Chinese musical modernity, they continue to be meaningful in ways that are unrelated to modernity, as a sort of spiritual emanation of powerful holy men like Hongyi. As in medieval China when the possession of the portrait of an eminent master was proof of a social and/or karmic connection between him and the owner of the portrait, the owners of a CD that displays Hongyi’s portrait and the tunes and lyrics he wrote may feel similarly connected with the master.

NEW COMMUNAL SETTINGS: THE ROLE OF VEGETARIAN RESTAURANTS

Many in Shenzhen sense themselves to be without the supports and constraints that were once provided by extended family or local village life. And most respondents cherish this new psychological freedom. But hunger for a sense of belonging continues, and for some, even intensifies, in this modernizing city. Here, through personally chosen participation in a loosely organized social network, spiritual seekers sustain one another in a new level of consciousness and reinforce an emerging spiritual identity.

Shenzhen brings together people from many different parts of China. This mobility and heterogeneity of population has affected the experience of this common religious heritage. While most Shenzhen respondents resist formal identification with any particular religious institution, the communal dimensions of spiritual practice remain strong. But in this new urban setting, the communal practices of Chinese religiousness are organized differently.

Many respondents assemble regularly with fellow searchers. These gatherings function more as a loosely organized network than as a formally constituted mem-

bership group. Vegetarian restaurants are frequent settings for these gatherings. In addition to the large restaurant depicted earlier, several others serve as important locations for those in the spiritual search.

Another example: a small storefront restaurant nestled in a downtown high-rise building comfortably accommodates perhaps thirty people at its several round tables. Open to the general public, the restaurant welcomes passersby along with more regular customers. A bookshelf stretches along one wall, stocked with a selection of spiritually oriented books that the restaurant owner makes available to patrons for loan or purchase. At one end of the room a video screen continuously displays a series of calming nature scenes, interspersed with brief readings and recitations from spiritual texts. In another corner, a small altar has been set up and many patrons stop on their way in or out of the shop to offer a gesture of respect. A notice board lists activities in which people may be interested: a lecture in the area; a ritual gathering planned for the future; an ecological project inviting volunteers.

The restaurant was not established by a religious organization and exists without any outside investment. The manager, a layman without formal religious training or membership, indicates that operating this restaurant is part of his own spiritual practice. Several respondents gather here regularly to share a vegetarian meal and to discuss their spiritual reading and practices. Sometimes the restaurant owner will invite a local monk or a visiting international author to make a brief presentation. More often the discussion develops informally, as customers linger after their meal to share concerns and speak about their spiritual practices.

HEIGHTENED AWARENESS OF PERSONAL AGENCY IN BELIEF AND PRACTICE

In these self-selected gatherings we may have evidence of a new dynamic in the relationship between individual and group, one that characterizes a shift toward modern consciousness. In China's rural past, entire families or villages lived within a shared spiritual perspective. Commonly held values served as the screen through which personal experience was filtered. The group thus provided and secured the meaning system for its members. When individuals were embedded in this surrounding culture, there was neither need nor opportunity for conscious awareness of spiritual choice.

At this new stage in China's history, middle-class Chinese are consciously endeavoring to interpret their lives for themselves. No longer embedded in the assumptive world of village life, and less subject to the constraints of family network and work unit, these people are insistent that they wish to find the sources of spiritual nourishment that are appropriate for their lives and temperaments. As one respondent asserted, "What I believe is nobody's business but my own."

In Shenzhen, as is typical of rural China, most respondents do not join an established religious group or identify exclusively with a single sect or master. But respondents here gave personal reasons to justify their eclectic approach. Some suspected that the officially registered religions remain too close to the government,

 BOX 1.4 The Spiritual Vacuum

With Mao's victory at mid century and the establishment of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought as official ideology, the ancient heritage of Confucian values, already under severe scrutiny as contributing to China's stagnation, was threatened with bankruptcy. By the onset of Reform and Opening policy in the late 1970s, many Chinese were turning away from now discredited moral ideals of Marxism; thus a second spiritual bankruptcy loomed.

Between these two sobering depletions of moral capital came the cataclysm of the Cultural Revolution. The events of this horrendous decade badly compromised the capacity for mutual trust among Chinese, thus undermining social capital at its core. Moral reciprocity, which long lay at the heart of China's deepest spiritual values, was severely jeopardized.

These events conspired to produce what many critics described as a "spiritual vacuum." Observers both within China and outside asked searching questions: Were China's deep reserves of humane spirit and moral ideals, accumulated and reinvested over millennia, now bankrupt? Would the moral currency needed to build China's future as a modern state have to be borrowed from the West? (See Jiwei Ci, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution: From Utopianism to Hedonism*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994.)

too susceptible to party control. Having only recently escaped the all-encompassing control of the state-sponsored work unit, they resisted affiliating with another institution that seems to depend on government approval.

But most offered another explanation. For people in Shenzhen, a dominant feature of life is the exhilaration of personal choice. In the realm of the spirit, as in much of the rest of their lives, personal choice has become the standard. Respondents wanted to make clear that their new moral convictions and ritual practices, too, represented personal decisions. These decisions are personal because they were not made in deference to social pressures exerted by family and village life. Their religious choices are personal because these were not coerced by government control or political orthodoxy.

For many in Shenzhen today, spiritual practice is a matter of personal decision. And the decision is made with keen awareness that it is both intentional and voluntary. But the selectivity manifested here is not the religious individualism more evident in North America. In Shenzhen, the personalized quality of spirituality is less a private journey of the interior life and more a heightened awareness of personal responsibility.

Conclusion

Indications abound that the moral capital of China's cultural and spiritual heritage is far from bankrupt. Taiwan, where cultural reconstruction has been somewhat

less inhibited, offers striking examples. Buddhist and Daoist organizations in Taiwan have collectively brought traditional values back into play in a rapidly modernized civil society.¹⁴ With the transition to economic prosperity and political democracy, these religious organizations were compelled to reimagine their moral capital and how their spiritual resources might serve society. Thus, after the disastrous earthquake in Taiwan on September 21, 1999, the leader of the Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist temple appeared frequently on television, encouraging the Taiwanese “not to think of the disaster as the result of bad karma for previous sins but as an important opportunity to make Taiwan safer and better for future generations.”¹⁵ Rather than interpret this national tragedy through a negative lens focused on a guilty past, this religious leader offered a positive perspective focused on a hopeful future. The core of his expressed concern was civic compassion rather than punitive personal karma.

Another indication of China’s moral capital being reimagined in modern guise is taking place in discussions about the role of NGOs on the mainland. Though the government has long been suspicious of these organizations, a number of Chinese scholars are encouraging political leaders to recognize how these not-for-profit groups contribute to the nation’s moral well-being and to the “harmonious society” that the government promotes. In a previous work, for example, the senior author of this essay has linked the Chinese tradition of doing good—an aspect of cosmic recompense—with the contributions of NGOs to China’s future.¹⁶

Award-winning author Frances Fitzgerald has discovered a similar return to religious moral capital in an Asian neighbor of China. Returning to Vietnam, about which she had written twenty-five years ago, Fitzgerald was struck by the resurgence of interest in religious practices that an earlier socialist regime had severely curtailed: “There has been an astonishing revival of traditional social and religious practices throughout the country.”¹⁷

The rapid development of a market economy in Vietnam has not signaled the demise of its traditional religiousness. Instead, economic opportunity seems to have quickened the impulse of spiritual renewal. And, Fitzgerald notes, “In Vietnam the revival of rites does not mean a return to the past . . . people may go to pagodas to pray for good health or fortune, but they also go to health clinics and learn business skills.” As is the case with the Chinese in Shenzhen, the return of Vietnamese to the moral capital of their heritage does not represent a regression. These modern citizens are adopting and adapting practices from their past and weaving them into a contemporary spirituality. “The Vietnamese are going back to tradition and forward at the same time. More precisely, they are reclaiming and refashioning their traditions in order to move on.”¹⁸

Important questions remain. Will the heritage of Chinese popular religion—its common spiritual heritage—that has for centuries thrived as an intensely localized and traditional phenomenon, make a successful transition to the cosmopolitan settings of the new China? Will this traditional symbol system survive as a reservoir of personal and communal meaning in modern urban environments?

Shenzhen findings suggest that the images and practices of China's local and common religion, which flourish largely under the radar of government surveillance, provide a vocabulary through which modern urban Chinese are fruitfully exploring issues of life meaning and destiny. This spiritual heritage may well remain as moral capital funding the future of the new China.

Notes

We are grateful for permission granted to draw on our earlier discussion of findings from the Shenzhen research: see "Fate and Fortune: Popular Religion and Moral Capital in Shenzhen," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 32 (2004): 83–100; "Adopting and Adapting China's Common Religious Heritage," *Nova Religio* 9.2 (2005): 50–61.

1. See Ian Buruma, *Bad Elements: Chinese Rebels from Los Angeles to Beijing* (New York: Random House, 2001), 250, 252.

2. For general discussions of the recent changes in Chinese society and culture, see Ian Buruma, *Bad Elements*, and Rob Gifford, *China Road: A Journey into the Future of a Rising Power* (New York: Random House, 2007).

3. See, for example, Robert P. Weller, *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987), as well as the contribution of Kenneth Dean, "Local Community Religion in Contemporary Southeast China" (pp. 338–358), and Lizhu Fan, "The Cult of the Silkworm Mother as a Core of Local Community Religion in a North China Village," *China Quarterly* 174 (2003): 359–372.

4. K. S. Yang and David Ho, "The Role of Yuan in Chinese Social Life: A Conceptual and Empirical Analysis," *Asian Contributions to Psychology*, ed. Anand C. Paranjpe, David Y. F. Ho, and Robert W. Rieber (New York: Praeger, 1988), 270. Sociologist Li Peiliang reports that a survey of 550 persons in Hong Kong in 1974 showed that more than 50% believed in the importance of establishing good *yuanfen* with one's physician. (Here *yuanfen* refers to the "chemistry" or friendly feeling between persons; as such, it is both a "fortunate" relationship and one that people have some responsibility to influence.) Li argues that such an attitude is both positive and rational: having a comfortable relationship with one's doctor will likely lead to better care and a healthier life.

5. Cynthia Brokaw and other scholars prefer to translate *baoying* as "moral retribution" (though Brokaw does occasionally use the word *reciprocity*; see *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press], 28). The term *retribution* carries negative nuances, suggesting that *baoying* functions more characteristically as punishment than as positive reward. In our judgment, the term *recompense* better expresses the distribution of both reward and punishment.

6. Brokaw defines this belief as "the faith that some force—either a supernatural force like heaven or the gods, or an automatic cosmic reaction—inevitably recompensed human behavior in a rational manner: it rewarded certain 'good' deeds, be they religious sacrifices, acts of good government, or upright personal conduct, and punished evil ones" (p. 28).

7. Judith Berling, "Religion and Popular Culture: The Management of Moral Capital in The Romance of The Three Teachings," in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 188–218.

8. Ibid., 208, 218.
9. See John Coleman, "Under the Cross and the Flag: Reflections on Discipleship and Citizenship in America," in *American Catholic Social Teaching*, ed. Thomas Massaro and Thomas Shannon (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2002), 128.
10. Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 11.
11. Ibid., 325.
12. Daniel Overmyer, "God's, Saints, Shamans, and Processions: Comparative Religion from the Bottom Up," *Criterion* 34 (2002): 7.
13. Overmyer, "Gods, Saints, Shamans, and Processions," 4.
14. Madsen, *Democracy's Dharma: Religious Renaissance and Political Development in Taiwan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
15. See the preface to Madsen, *Democracy's Dharma*, xviii.
16. See, for example, the volume *Quanqiuhua xia de shehui bianqian yu fei zhengfu zuzhi* (Social Change and NGOs in a Context of Globalization), ed. Fan Lizhu (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 2003). In this volume Julia Huang describes how the Buddhist Compassion Relief Foundation in Taiwan is creating ways of religious service to civil society in a newly globalized context. See her essay, "Global Engagement and Transnational Practice," 496–515. Also see Robert P. Weller, ed., *Civil Life, Globalization, and Political Change in Asia: Organizing between Family and State* (London: Routledge, 2005).
17. See her essay "Silk Robes, Cell Phones," *Smithsonian Magazine* (January 2002): 90. Also see her book *Vietnam: Spirits of the Earth* (New York: Little, Brown, 2001). For a comparison of China with Vietnam, which has been going through similar social changes, see Frances Fitzgerald, *Vietnam: Spirits of the Earth* (New York: Little, Brown, 2001).
18. Fitzgerald, *Spirits of the Earth*, 92.