
Robert P. Weller

Leisure, Ritual, and Choice in Modern Chinese Societies

Abstract Leisure in China before the twentieth century differed significantly from ritual. By the late twentieth century, however, much Chinese religiosity has increasingly come to resemble leisure—maintaining its separate subjunctive worlds with their different spaces, times, and rules, but approaching leisure much more closely in the new predominance of personal and voluntary motivations. It is not so much that religion has become a kind of leisure in people’s minds, but rather that both frames have been subject to the broad changes of the twentieth century that have caused them to develop in similar directions. Specifically, the increasingly influential trope of modernity, which certainly included the introduction of a globalizing leisure frame, has led to the new convergence between ritual and leisure. Much of the resulting similarity, I will suggest, stems from a reconceptualization of the ritual sphere as something voluntary and thus increasingly like leisure.

Keywords ritual, China, framing, gift-giving, gender, voluntary choice

This essay begins from the fundamental idea, expressed in the “Theoretical Essay” at the end of this volume, that leisure is a general frame rather than a part of any specific activity. My primary concern is with a problem that puzzled me from the very beginning of the joint project on leisure that this book represents. Leisure and ritual defined in the abstract seem very much alike in important ways, at least in Chinese societies, as I will discuss. Nevertheless, few people would accept the idea that they are fundamentally the same. This essay is an attempt to understand just how ritual and leisure are different and similar, and how their relationship has changed over the past century.

I will not be arguing for any underlying identity between the two fields. Instead, I will suggest that the forms of framing of both ritual and leisure themselves have changed and converged over the course of the twentieth century. This has been part of the increasingly influential trope of modernity, which certainly included the introduction of a globalizing leisure frame, and which has led to the new convergence between ritual and leisure. Much of the resulting similarity, I will suggest, stems from a reconceptualization of the ritual sphere as something voluntary and thus increasingly like leisure.

Leisure as a frame

The concept of leisure is not inherent in any specific form of activity—not playing the cello or watching a football game or doing calligraphy.¹ Such things can be framed as jobs (professional musician, sports reporter, scribe) as easily as we can frame them as leisure. Or both frames can seem irrelevant, as for my brother-in-law, who turns beautiful wooden bowls on a lathe in his basement. He does this for fun, but it has also turned into a major source of income for him, to the point where he has quit a more standard job. He sells the bowls at craft fairs, but refuses to advertise or to set up any kind of internet presence. It is not that he opposes advertising or the web. Instead, he fears that success in those media would increase his market and thus force him into a form of production that really would become “work.” For him, the work/leisure distinction is not one he is willing to make. He rejects the frames. And indeed there is no reason why those particular categories should be universal in human space and time. No activities are inherently leisurely, but “leisure” is instead historically and situationally constructed.

What makes certain activities count as leisure is that “leisure” exists as a plausible frame, at least for some people at some times—including us, now—and that we choose to understand an activity within that frame. Leisure is thus one of a large set of what we might call “subjunctive worlds.”² Such worlds work like grammatical subjunctives, which posit a universe

1 This point is also addressed in the “Theoretical Essay.”

2 This concept is developed in Adam B. Seligman et al., *Ritual and its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

that is set apart and temporary—different from the indicative world. The subjunctive describes a world “as if” it were real, even though it is not (yet) real. Subjunctive worlds, the way I will use the term here, exist apart from the ordinary flow of existence, forming alternate but always temporary realities. Examples include children’s imaginary play (as if we were princesses and dragons), ritual (as if the ancestors were actually present, in Confucius’s famous phrase, *Analects* 3.12), and leisure activities.

Here let me draw on (but simplify) part of the theoretical framework offered in this volume’s concluding essay to sketch some of the basic characteristics of framing any subjunctive world.³

- *Heterotopia*. Such worlds take shape in a separate space. These spaces can be dedicated, like a cathedral, a garden, or a football field, or they can be temporary, marked by things like putting up music stands in the living room.
- *Heterochronia*. They also have their own times. The weekend is the most obvious modern example for leisure, but so is the Sabbath or any calendrical observance for ritual, or Sunday afternoon for American football. In a sense, these marked-off periods create our understanding of the regular ticking of time, rather than the other way around.
- *Heteronomia (Alternate rules)*. These alternate space-times typically also have special rules of their own (liturgies, the rules of poker), which may sometimes vary significantly from the rules of other spheres (e.g., it is permitted to ridicule the king at Carnival).
- *Frame-marking*. The moments of entry and exit are usually clearly marked: the bang of the judge’s gavel, the applause at the beginning and end of a classical symphonic performance, putting on and removing uniforms or markedly casual clothing, and so on.

China, probably like every place, has a long tradition of various kinds of subjunctive worlds. Certainly Chinese have distinguished a world of “ritual” and a world of “play” for millennia. Ritual (*li* 禮) has been theorized by Chinese thinkers since ancient times, most famously by Confucius and his followers. Proper performance of ritual by the Emperor and officials kept the cosmos and the empire running properly. Proper performance of ritual between individuals (*limao* 禮貌, courtesy) created social harmony. A true sage could appropriately innovate in new contexts, but the rest of us required the constructed orders of ritual. There were arguments over the centuries about how this ritual frame should be construed and enacted, but the frame itself remained important throughout.

3 Note that the literature on play provides an important precursor to this approach, especially the classic Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Beacon Press, 1980), originally published in 1938 in Dutch.

“Play,” on the other hand, did not have the solemnity, the necessity, or the crucial social consequences of ritual. There is no single word that can translate “play,” but *wan* 玩 indicates a particularly unritualized kind of play, not strongly bound by rules. It includes both childlike play and things like splashing around in the water (*wan shui*). Other things we call play—the ones usually characterized by more strongly rule-bound action—had quite different specific verbs to describe them, like “hitting” in ball games (*da qiu*) or “putting down” board game pieces (*xia qi*).

While the complex history of the concept of leisure in Europe and North America is well beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that the ideas of “leisure” and “work” evolved in tandem. The industrial revolution was particularly important in shaping the tight orchestration of the work day, with its need to coordinate labor through the tyranny of time. By the twentieth century this had led to workers clocking in and out, having their tasks monitored to the second in time-motion studies, and counting the days until the weekend. As work became regimented into its own strict time, non-work also became much more sharply defined. All of these same pressures moved into China as well, so that a flexible and changing agricultural slack period (*xianshi*) eventually evolved into clearly demarcated vacations and weekends, which could then be devoted to a new idea of leisure.⁴ Others in this volume discuss changes in Chinese “leisure” from the late Qing on; here I am especially interested in how those transformations relate to the ritual frame, which evolved just as significantly over the same period.

Does religious activity count as leisure? As the discussion of subjunctive worlds indicates, there is certainly a great deal in common. Both religious ritual and leisure share characteristics of heterotopia, heterochronia, heteronomia, and frame marking. Nevertheless, on the eve of the twentieth century, people in China surely had a clear separation between the frames of ritual and leisure. Quite unlike leisure or idleness, ritual was required and crucial. Failing to do it endangered people both socially and cosmologically. This was a fundamental difference between the two.

Still, for anyone who has seen Chinese temple religion in action, it looks a lot like leisure. What survives today of late imperial Confucian-style ritual is extremely slow, solemn, and orderly. It can be seen reconstructed at some Confucian temples, and sometimes occurs as well in ordinary temples. The basic structure is that a leader slowly intones instructions (“Bow the first time!” “Bow the second time!”) and some uniformly dressed group follows slowly along. Nevertheless, that kind of ritual is certainly the exception in the lives of most people. The great majority of temple rituals are *fun*. An important festival features one or more opera troupes, endless

4 At least for the very particular Shanghai environment, this distinction became marked at the end of the nineteenth century. See Catherine Yeh, “Shanghai Leisure, Print Entertainment, and the Tabloids, Xiaobao 小報,” in *Joining the Global Public. Word, Image and City in Early Chinese Newspapers, 1870–1910*, ed. Rudolf Wagner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 201–205.

stalls selling snacks and items for worship, priests performing colorful rituals, the thunder of firecrackers, and massive crowds of people and clouds of incense smoke. This is the aesthetic people call hot and noisy (*renao*) or red-hot (*honghuo*).⁵ Best is if everything is happening at once—three operas at the same time, each next to the other, as priests intone texts in front of the temple, vendors shout out their wares, and people bustle back and forth with food offerings and incense. And, of course, there is always extensive feasting and drinking. This is the sort of ritual life that seems to overlap so strongly with “leisure” activities like drinking, eating, or listening to music.

On the eve of the twentieth-century changes I will discuss, it was not simply that leisure-like activities took advantage of the ritual event, but remained outside its basic frame, like the ubiquitous food vendors at such an event. When priests at a Chinese funeral escort the soul through the dangers of the underworld by turning somersaults and eating fire, the entertainment value is inseparable from the ritual function. At really large rituals like rites of cosmic renewal (*jiao* 醮), the entire town becomes the ritual sphere, with temporary altars set up in many neighborhoods and food offerings placed in front of each doorway. Perhaps the clearest example is opera performance, which is always said to be for the gods to watch, and which involves its own altars and deities. At some rituals opera actors themselves take over some important ritual roles, for example in purifying the temple area of malevolent spirits after the ghost festival, while dressed as the demon-queller Zhong Kui. None of this, however, prevents the opera from being enormously entertaining for the crowds who gather around to watch it. A hot and noisy event is a sure sign of an efficacious temple deity, just as a powerful deity fosters heat and noise; they are part of a single image of efficacy.

Nevertheless, even this kind of popular ritual was never only entertainment. One crucial difference from leisure is that much village ritual activity was required for everyone. Such a rule seems very unlike leisure, which always has at least a pretense of being voluntary. One of the greatest sources of conflict between Catholics and other villagers in late imperial times, for instance, was the Catholic refusal to pay the household tax that funded local temple rituals.⁶ Ritual needs could not be avoided simply because someone had a different belief system. In the same way, in many villages, households rotated responsibility for burning incense at small Earth God shrines, and one could not easily refuse to do this.

Some ritual participation was thus not voluntary, although much could also be decided individually. For instance, no one was required to go on a pilgrimage, or to offer incense at any temple they passed while traveling,

5 Robert P. Weller, *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987); Adam Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

6 Henrietta Harrison, *The Missionary's Curse and Other Tales from a Chinese Catholic Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

although many people chose to do these things. Nevertheless, total withdrawal from the ritual life of a village was not a real possibility for most people at the end of the nineteenth century. Even though people had a high degree of control over the quantity and quality of their ritual activities, there was always something involuntary about taking part in basic village rituals.

In spite of the similarities, then, much Chinese ritual behavior differs significantly from an intuitive definition of leisure. More importantly, while a fun aesthetic was certainly part of much ritual, I see no evidence that anyone framed these activities as leisure. That is, even if we agree that various elite activities like playing chess or painting bamboo count in some sense as leisure (or at least as cultivation), those activities still left far more space for individual choice than ritual. Much of ritual life—both rural “hot and noisy” worship and slow, solemn Confucian ritual—differed fundamentally from a frame of leisure or cultivation especially in its compulsory nature.

By the early twentieth century “leisure” as a frame had clearly globalized along with the related idea that individuals could make “voluntary” decisions. The work discipline based on factories and clocks, which became so stark during and after the industrial revolution, did much to create a separate world of “work” that could be opposed to leisure. As this separation became increasingly important, along with the seven-day week and what would eventually feature as a two-day weekend, leisure was marked off clearly from a work world that could be temporarily left behind. As others have documented in this volume, the effects of this were already clear in the Republican period in China.

By the 1980s, when I first began attending to such things through work on environmental tourism, Taiwan already had a flourishing leisure industry, easily seen through magazines that called themselves things like *Travel & Leisure*⁷ or *Leisure Life Monthly*,⁸ or through resorts that marketed themselves specifically by appealing to a concept of leisure. The Chinese mainland took a little longer to develop these attitudes, but was not far behind. That is, at least in the last few decades, the frame of leisure undoubtedly exists.⁹

As this frame has developed over the past century, has it altered the way ritual has been thought about in relation to leisure? I will explore this briefly by expanding on three broader ideas about how leisure works, primarily drawn from the “Theoretical Essay” concluding this volume: that leisure functions primarily as a gift economy, that leisure spaces tend to be feminized, and that leisure is never coerced. For the gift economy and

7 *Xiang lü* 鄉旅 [Sunny travel & leisure] (Taipei shi: Qunyou wenhua gongsi, 1992).

8 *Xiuxian shenghuo zazhi* 休閒生活雜誌 (Taipei shi: Xiuxian shenghuo zazhi she, 1989–1995).

9 Leisure has become a matter of government concern on both sides of the Taiwan Straits. Its role in urban planning in the PRC has been explored by Timothy Oakes in this volume. Official surveys of leisure behavior have been conducted in Taiwan and the People’s Republic, see the “Introduction” in this volume, note 6.

feminization ideas, I will suggest that the introduction and consolidation of a leisure frame that contrasted with work, along with other factors over the course of the twentieth century, has fostered a new convergence, at least on the surface, between ritual and leisure. This led to an increase in the gift economy and the feminine sides of ritual. Nevertheless, I do not see this as a direct effect of a merger between ritual and leisure, or even as a flow from the new leisure frame into the older ritual frame. Instead, I will argue that the partial convergence stems from a third factor: the rapid increase in the twentieth century of a new kind of subjectivity that prioritizes an autonomous individual making choices based on personal preference. This “choosing self” is a core aspect of the suggestion that leisure is never coerced, a point also discussed in the “Theoretical Essay.” The rise of leisure as a frame has coincided with the idea that such activities are voluntary chosen. The same forces that led to this have encouraged a great increase in the voluntary aspects of ritual life, leading the fields of ritual and of leisure to resemble each other more now than ever in the past.

A gift economy?

The “Theoretical Essay” has suggested that leisure operates with a gift economy among participants, contrasting it with the market economy that applies elsewhere. That is, as Huizinga said long ago about play, leisure is not done for profit, at least not in the financial sense.¹⁰ This is true even though leisure activities rely on the surplus value of work (as the editors also point out). That is, at least in modern times, leisure needs the resources of the market but maintains a separate subjunctive world in which market rules do not apply, and in which the market origins of the leisure goods and gifts are hidden. In a sense my brother-in-law’s implied rejection of a work/leisure distinction for his bowls reflects a broader refusal to accept the purely utilitarian logic of the market while still profiting from it.

Without trying to defend the general utility of this idea, it seems to me that it is at least roughly true. Because the frame of leisure contrasts with the frame of work, it seems highly likely that their fundamental economic postures would also differ, even though each may depend on the other. This is why even commercialized leisure, like a meal at a restaurant with friends in China, usually involves someone sneaking off to the cashier to pay while no one else is watching. It is not acceptable to split the bill as if this were simply about paying money for food. The meal is a gift, to be reciprocated on other occasions by someone else’s gift.

Assuming that the idea that gift economies characterize leisure is at least roughly true, what might it tell us about ritual? Of course, it is clear that ritual worlds depend on financing generated from other worlds—they require money to orchestrate, just like leisure activities. Does ritual’s

10 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 13.

subjunctive world work through a gift economy? How much does the market economy infiltrate? Are there other economic logics at play? I will suggest that we need to add at least one more economic logic beyond gifts and markets—the logic of the coercive economic power to tax, which again differentiates the ritual and leisure worlds.

The anthropological literature on gift economies is long and argumentative, but maybe it is enough here to note that we have moved significantly away from assuming that gift-giving necessarily implies an egalitarian reciprocity. Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* was particularly important in emphasizing how a sense of timing in the giving of gifts and counter-gifts could completely redefine a social relationship.¹¹ And studies of the gift economy in China make clear that it constantly interacts with and actively constructs systems of hierarchy.¹² Gifts create social ties, but there is nothing egalitarian about the process. Nevertheless, this is not the market hierarchy of who has the most money.

Money and other forms of goods show up in two main forms for Chinese ritual practice. One is the transfer of secular money between participants and ritual practitioners or temple managements, which eventually goes both to pay for ritual goods and performances and to contribute to the incomes of those people. The other is the transfer of “spirit money” between people and gods, ancestors, and ghosts. What kinds of economies are these? Are they gift economies like leisure? The answer is not simple.

Major community rituals and the temples that house their gods were often funded by something like an unofficial household tax, where everyone was expected to give the temple a set amount, and they might receive a “receipt” in the form of a printed charm (*fu* 符). This was certainly not a market transaction, but neither was it a gift economy, because it was required. It was instead the economy of politics, of required payments that are the duty of every resident—the ritual equivalent of taxation. As with politics, people in return expected provision of public goods, in this case community rituals and spiritual protection.

Temples in some cases also owned property (agricultural land or urban buildings) that generated market-based income for them, but of course, this is just the way all ritual and leisure activity relies on money generated elsewhere. More important here is the source of such property—almost always the voluntary donation of a local wealthy family. That is, here we do in fact see a kind of gift economy at work. And we can also see it on much smaller scales when people come to a temple to burn incense and ask the god for a favor. On leaving, such people will very often leave a donation and this too is conceptualized as something like a gift economy since there

11 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

12 See especially Yunxiang Yan, *The Flow of Gifts: Reciprocity and Social Networks in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).



Figure 1: Paper money for sale, Nanjing 2014.

is no set amount, nor is there any sanction (except perhaps from the god) against people who choose to pay nothing.

The second use of money and goods appears in transactions between people and spirits. Any major interaction with a spirit involves “spirit money.” This is usually cheap, coarse paper printed to resemble currency, which will be burned to transfer it to the spirit world.¹³ Its details vary enormously, but in some places it can be just a square of paper with a scrap of gold or silver foil on it, or paper folded into the shape of an ingot and colored to look like gold or silver, or elaborate bills printed to look much like modern currency, like the “Bank of Hell” (in English) notes that are popular in Hong Kong (see Fig. 1). At first glance this may appear to be a market transaction—money in exchange for some kind of supernatural service. Or it could be seen as the dark side of the economy of politics—necessary bribes paid to corrupt officials. It is also worth remembering, however, that money is a perfectly acceptable gift in Chinese society. Most wedding and funeral gifts are cash, for example, and a cash gift to a child bears none of the opprobrium of an American cash gift, which is seen as the most thoughtless possible present.

The use of cash thus does not in itself tell us what kind of economy we have; cash can work in China in the gift, commodity, or taxation economies. Instead, we need to hear from informants, but unfortunately we do not have a lot of information, especially historically. Wagner argues that

13 Hou Ching-Lang, *Monnaies d'offrande et la notion de trésorerie dans la religion chinoise* (Paris: Collège de France, Institut des hautes études chinoises, 1975); Rudolf G. Wagner, “Fate’s Gift Economy: The Chinese Case of Coping with the Asymmetry between Man and Fate,” in *Money as God? The Monetization of the Market and Its Impact on Religion, Politics, Law, and Ethics*, eds. Jürgen von Hagen and Michael Welker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 184–218.

paper money (and the various grave goods that preceded it) were indeed gifts, but only within a highly asymmetrical relationship that is quite different from what we would expect from the gift economy of leisure.¹⁴ This may overestimate the egalitarian reciprocity normally involved in gifts, but the asymmetry is still especially obvious in ritual situations. This is more similar to the gift one gives to a high official in the desperate hope of gaining his help than to buying dinner for an old friend. While it is a gift and not a tax, it still seems to imply some of the same political mechanisms. Both ritual and entertainment may involve reciprocity, but the mechanisms are not entirely the same.

For recent decades, when we can hear from informants directly, people favor the gift economy explanation. This is consistent with the fact that most people do not feel there is a required amount for payment. In addition, the asymmetry may not be as stark as Wagner implies for earlier eras. For example, people sometimes say that gods do not respond because they have been paid; instead, they are more like parents who want to take care of you. They will help even if you cannot afford the gift.¹⁵ This is asymmetry, of course, but of a different sort, with far less political inequality, and something more like what we might see in a leisure economy.

For temple income, the older forms of required tax-like income generation have greatly decreased in both China and Taiwan, and have been replaced by voluntary donations. This again appears consistent with a decline in the compulsory, political side of ritual economy. Why? In part this is because government policies (both Nationalist and Communist) were relatively unfriendly to religion. This made it more difficult to collect something that looked like a tax and it undercut the coercive power of temples. At the same time, land reforms (again under both regimes) removed a very important source of income from large temples, and forced them to seek funds in other ways. Many donations now are anonymous, consisting simply of cash dropped into a donation box, and thus truly voluntary since there is no way of knowing who has contributed. (The god knows, of course.) Others are payments promised for wishes fulfilled. While this too is voluntary, in the sense that the only coercive consequences for failure to pay are divine, it is the closest to a kind of market-based, fee-for-service transaction. Finally, larger donations are made directly to a temple office, and the largest will often be recorded on large sheets of paper hung in front of the temple or even carved on stone steles. These are voluntary gifts, but their public nature also makes them transfer very easily into other forms of social capital. These have been especially vital to temples today as replacements to the lost income from landholding. In general, then, there has been a strong move toward various forms of voluntary payment, rather than taxation or rents. In brief, the decline of political and

14 Wagner, "Fate's Gift Economy," 197–198.

15 Emily Martin Ahern, *Chinese Ritual and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 99–100.

(direct) market sources of funds, and the rise of voluntary donations over the course of the twentieth century and beyond has made the ritual field resemble the leisure field more closely.

One other factor also plays into this change—the weakening of local social communities, especially through migration. This has been very clear for rural villages, which generally relied more on their temples' abilities to tax the entire community than did large urban temples. Such communities are emptying out, or in some cases in eastern China, receiving rapid influxes of new migrants. None of the old social mechanisms are working very well under these new demographic conditions. This also means that temples in many areas are turning away from their earlier concentration on providing community services (like annual *jiao* rituals) and focusing more on providing personal services, because they now rely on individuals rather than depleted communities for funding.

As Robert Hymes has suggested, Chinese religion long had both communal and personal aspects.¹⁶ This basic situation has not changed, but it has been rebalanced so that the personal side increasingly outweighs the communal side. Recent studies thus suggest that the communal and involuntary aspect of local religion is declining in favor of the personal and voluntary aspect in both Taiwan and the mainland.¹⁷ This has been especially true on the mainland, where much of the religious infrastructure (both physical and social) was destroyed. Even though many temples have now been rebuilt, the communal basis of religion has changed in most parts of China. For example, in 2013 I visited Gaochun, which is the area of southern Jiangsu said to have best preserved its communal religious life, known for its hot and noisy celebrations featuring masked performers. Even the central temples of this cult, however, are now padlocked most of the time, opening only on the lunar first and fifteenth of each month. Communal religious structures are even weaker elsewhere in the region. Instead, we have an increase in religion that speaks to people's individual and family needs, like the healing that has made Christianity spread so quickly in much of rural China, or the moral guidance people seek from Buddhist groups, or the miraculous efficacy that makes some temples so popular. That is, the personal and voluntary aspects of religion remain quite important, but the ritual necessities of the communal side of religion are shrinking in broad portions of the country.

While this change relates to a broad set of twentieth-century developments, it also leads ritual to look a lot more like leisure because it is becoming increasingly voluntary and personal. This is not a shift of frame from the market economy of daily life to a gift economy—a gift economy

16 Robert P. Hymes, *Way and Byway: Taoism, Local Religion, and Models of Divinity in Sung and Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

17 Yanfei Sun, "Popular Religion in Zhejiang: Feminization, Bifurcation and Buddhification," *Modern China* 40, no. 5 (2014): 455–487; Lin Wei-ping, *Materializing Magic Power: Chinese Popular Religion in Villages and Cities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015).

had always been relevant for ritual.¹⁸ Instead, it involves a shift from an involuntary economy of politics and communal responsibility to emphasize almost entirely the gift economy of free choice and open options in creating a personal social relationship—features that we might also associate with a leisure economy. At the same time, temples (but not necessarily religious specialists for hire) have also moved even farther away from direct involvement in the cash economy as they usually no longer directly control resources like property rents or required taxes but rely instead on the gift economy, including gifts from wealthy individual donors. Temple ritual activity, in brief, now seems to resemble leisure more clearly than it did before, not necessarily because the nature of the gift is the same in both contexts, but because both have increasingly become expressions of a choosing self. Ritual has lost much of its coercive and political aspect in favor of something more like a gift economy.

A feminized space?

The second major form of change I want to touch on is gender. As the “Theoretical Essay” suggests, leisure’s time and space is often clearly gendered in ways that differ from gender relations framed in other ways. Where both genders take part, women often have more prominent roles than in other spaces and times. If we accept this (and, like the gift economy hypothesis, it deserves much more discussion), does Chinese temple worship look like leisure or not?

As with money, the answer is not straightforward because religion implicates several different kinds of gender relations. Men certainly largely still dominate the large communal rituals sponsored by village and town temples, just as they did at the beginning of the twentieth century. The committees that control temples are usually entirely male, whether they are chosen in the traditional way by divination or by popular election, which often happens now in Taiwan. The major ritual actors are usually also men, including both religious specialists hired for the occasion and the official representatives of the community who usually appear in the rituals holding incense while the priests intone their texts. While I have not been discussing ancestor worship here, the public rituals of China’s large lineages also featured almost exclusively men.

Nevertheless, women played (and play) crucial roles. They almost always conducted the daily rituals of burning incense at family altars to gods and ancestors, although men might take over on important occasions like the lunar New Year. They took part in pilgrimages. They would

18 Certain ritual actions do, however, resemble fee-for-service transactions, like payments made to ghost temples. All of these have some implication of immorality, but this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this essay. See Robert P. Weller, *Resistance, Chaos, and Control in China: Taiping Rebels, Taiwanese Ghosts, and Tiananmen* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994).

often be the ones going to temples for special requests—to give birth to a son, to cure an ill family member, to help a child to do well in school. That is, while women were sidelined from many of the most public and communal rituals, they were often the most important players in the private ritual context of the family and in the more personal aspect of religion.

Once we get to the major changes of the twentieth century, it is not hard to see how gender intersects with the story of the economic changes I have been suggesting. As Sun Yanfei suggests, the general trend of Chinese religion over the last century, and particularly over the past few decades, has been a strengthening of the personal and voluntary side of worship and a weakening of the communal side. Just as this has enhanced the gift economy within temple finances, it has enhanced the role of women in temple activities.¹⁹ That is, ritual activities have begun to resemble leisure in this gendered sense as well.

We can see this most clearly in the People's Republic, where the decades-long hiatus in public ritual performance finally ended in the 1980s, followed by a rapid increase in temple activities. Even though men had dominated nearly all temples in late imperial times, much of the revived activity relied on women. They became active as spirit mediums, raised money for temple construction, and took more public religious roles than ever before.²⁰ In Suzhou, for example, rural connections to Daoist masters are now organized almost entirely by women, in great contrast to the earlier pattern.²¹ While in some cases men were able to reassert control, this has by no means always been true. Furthermore, as Sun Yanfei has documented for a county in Zhejiang, many of the old communal temples are reworking themselves—both ritually and iconographically—to appeal far more to the personal side of religion. At least in this area, that reworking usually takes the form of a move toward Buddhism.

As another example, dragon dance performances in many areas are now performed primarily by women. In earlier times, such performances were almost always the province of young men, very often affiliated with martial arts schools. At a large ritual I saw celebrating the goddess Mazu's birthday in Nanjing in 2014, for instance, there were two dragon dancing groups, each of which had one man, with the other performers all middle-aged women. Later that year, the performers in a competition among village-based dragon dance teams in Suzhou were again all

19 Sun, "Popular Religion in Zhejiang," 456, 469.

20 I discuss this more fully in other work, particularly Robert P. Weller, *Alternate Civilities: Democracy and Culture in China and Taiwan* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999). I have also been inspired by Sun Yanfei's article, "Popular Religion in Zhejiang."

21 See Tao Jin 陶金 and Gao Wanseng 高萬桑 (Vincent Goossaert), "Daojiao yu Suzhou difang shehui 道教與蘇州地方社會 [Daoist religion and Suzhou regional society]," in *Jiangnan diqu de zongjiao yu gonggong shenghuo* 江南地區的宗教與公共生活 [Religion and communal life in the Jiangnan region], ed. Wei Lebo 魏樂博 (Robert P. Weller) and Fan Lizhu 范麗珠 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanche, 2015), 107.



Figure 2: Dragon Dance Team in Suzhou, 2014.

women (see Fig. 2). This now appears to be the pattern, at least in this part of China.

There have still been remarkably few studies of gender and Chinese religion, and not nearly enough on the history of local temple finance. Still, there does appear to be enough evidence to suggest that the weakening of the communal side of religion over the past several decades has had important effects on gender. In particular, the decline of the communal and political function of temples has opened up much more space for women. It has not led to a decline in religiosity, but to a reportioning where the personal side now outweighs the communal side. As a result, religion—even public ritual—has become a more feminized sphere than ever before.

The relative feminization of religious activity, however, does not necessarily make religion into something more like leisure. The tendency to feminize religion is the result of broadly changing gender roles in China in recent decades, and especially of the decline of the communal side of religion, which had been dominated by men. Women had always been more important in the voluntary side, and that has now become relatively more important. Women's leisure, on the other hand, has long been a way for some to enrich their lives. Instead, it is the new predominance of personal and voluntary issues—traditionally the religious realm of women—that is making religion look more like leisure. This closely parallels the economic change, where a political economy of taxation has given way almost entirely to a voluntary economy of the gift.

Voluntary choice, religion, and leisure

We should not think of late imperial village religion as “leisure” even though it has many of the characteristics we would usually use to describe leisure activity—a different time and space, an aesthetic of fun, and so forth. Nevertheless, there was nothing optional about participation, and that is a fundamental difference. Even the idea of voluntary participation, which seems central to the idea of leisure as the non-work world, cannot be taken for granted if applied to China before the twentieth century. The very concept of voluntary choice assumes a subjectivity based around an autonomous individual who makes free choices. This is the individual of modern market consumption, but quite different from the self embedded in layers of social networks that Fei Xiaotong described for China as a “differential mode of association.”²² This self-who-chooses has become far more important since the nineteenth century in China, and especially in the past few decades.²³

Choice lies at the heart of the rise of the leisure frame and of the increase in the voluntary side of religion. A frame of leisure as opposed to work thus now exists in all Chinese societies. And over roughly the same period, religion began to look more like leisure, particularly in the move away from its coercive, political aspect and more toward being an activity of free choice. At the same time, it has taken on even more of the characteristics that may typify leisure, in particular the new predominance of the gift economy and the reworking of gender roles within its space.

Is this because the new frame of leisure somehow affected religion? A better explanation would be to say that both the religious and leisure frames reacted to the many crucial economic and political changes of the twentieth century—the increased valorization of the individual and the idea of choice, the great weakening of the social arrangements that united villages and towns, the increased domination of a market economy, and so on. Yet once religion appears as something voluntary, and once a frame of leisure actually exists to make sense of it, it seems increasingly likely that ritual and leisure might evolve in similar directions. Note that the exact role of the gift economy and of women may not be identical in leisure activities and in religion. Those have grown more similar, but the most important underlying cause is the increase in voluntary choice, combined with the decline in earlier communal constraints on religion.

Do people now in fact think of religion as a kind of leisure activity? This needs study, but the answer probably varies according to the context. Much of the personal side of Chinese religion is strongly votive. That is, it attempts to accomplish some important goal (healing an illness,

22 Xiaotong Fei, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*, trans. Gary G. Hamilton and Wang Zheng (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 60–70. The term he uses in the Chinese edition is *chaxu geju* 差序格局.

23 On the rise of the individual in China, see for example Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949–1999* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

for instance) that extends beyond the ritual frame itself. Many stories of temples and gods, even today, focus on their spiritual efficacy (*ling* 靈), emphasizing the concrete consequences of worship for the rest of life. It seems unlikely that people would think of that as leisure. On the other hand, the more fun sides of religion might easily be taken as leisure once their coercive power has been removed. These include temple festivals with their operas, colorful rituals, dragon dances, and lavish feasts, and they may well include activities like pilgrimage, which is now typically combined with other forms of tourism. Going to listen to a monk preach on the lunar fifteenth of the month is not so different from playing tennis on Saturdays—it is done out of interest, and in these cases because it is good for you.

At the very least, there seems to have been an increased convergence of religion and leisure, especially in the last half-century. Both have always been subjunctive worlds as long as their frames have existed, but not all subjunctive worlds are the same. Whatever leisure may have been in China before the twentieth century, it seems to have differed significantly from ritual. By the late twentieth century, however, much Chinese religiosity has increasingly come to resemble leisure—maintaining its separate subjunctive worlds with their different spaces, times, and rules, but approaching leisure much more closely in the new predominance of personal and voluntary motivations. It is not so much that religion has become a kind of leisure in people's minds, but rather that both frames have been subject to the broad changes of the twentieth century that have caused them to develop in similar directions.

Figures

Fig. 1: Photo by author, Nanjing, China, 2014.

Fig. 2: Photo by author, Suzhou, China, 2014.

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