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James Robson

BRUSHES WITH SOME
“DIRTY TRUTHS”:
HANDWRITTEN
MANUSCRIPTS AND
RELIGION IN CHINA

Catherine Bell is best known to scholars outside of the study of Chinese religions as a perceptive reader and interpreter of ritual theory, for her studies of the category of “belief,” and for her innovative approaches to religious studies as a discipline.¹ Yet, in her *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* she claimed that it all began with her doctoral work in Daoist studies and that the “problems and issues engaged” in that book “were first formulated for a dissertation chapter.”² Among Sinologists and scholars of Asian religions she is appreciated for the service she provided by reviewing—often in the pages of this journal—influential new works on Chinese Daoism and “popular religion,” although those essays were more ambitious than mere “reviews,” since they raised key methodological issues that helped move the field forward.³ Her focused and

¹ See, e.g., Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), “Performance,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 205–24, “Modernism and Postmodernism in the Study of Religion,” *Religious Studies Review* 22, no. 3 (July 1996): 179–90, and “Paradigms Behind (and Before) the Modern Concept of Religion,” *History and Theory* 45 (December 2006): 27–46.

² Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, vii, and Catherine Bell, “Medieval Taoist Ritual Mastery: A Study in Practice, Text, and Rite” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1983).

³ Catherine Bell, “In Search of the Tao in Taoism: New Questions of Unity and Multiplicity,” *History of Religions* 33, no. 2 (November 1993): 187–201, and “Religion and Chinese Culture: Toward an Assessment of ‘Popular Religion,’” *History of Religions* 29, no. 1 (August 1989): 35–57.

detailed historical and textual work on the various editions of and commentaries on the *Tract of the Most Exalted on Action and Retribution* (Taishang ganying pian 太上感應篇), a "morality book" dating from the twelfth century that she spent much of her truncated career translating and studying, also garnered attention among scholars of Chinese history and religion.⁴ Catherine Bell's work on Daoist ritual (especially Lingbao liturgy), and Chinese religions more generally, opened up new lines of inquiry, and the field anxiously anticipated the day when she would bring together in a more systematic way her work as a theorist and her work as a scholar of Chinese religions.⁵

Given the amount of attention that has been directed at Bell's work on ritual and ritual theory, in the space allotted to me here I would like to bracket those topics and draw inspiration instead from a different facet of her work. One of the topics that surfaced again and again in a number of her essays, such as her "Printing and Religion in China," which inspired the title of the present essay, was the relationship between the development of printing technology in China and Chinese religions. Bell noted the obvious ways printing could foster the spread of religious ideas, but she also pointed out how that new medium could ossify the development of a religious tradition. Bell's work on religion and print is a topic sure to be less familiar to those outside the inner circles of Sinology, but it is also work that has not yet attracted the attention it deserves among scholars of Chinese religions, and it invites reflection on other larger questions in the study of religion.⁶

⁴ Catherine Bell, "Printing and Religion in China: Some Evidence from the *Taishang ganying pian*," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 20 (Fall 1992): 173–86, "A Precious Raft to Save the World": The Interaction of Scriptural Traditions and Printing in a Chinese Morality Book," *Late Imperial China* 17, no. 1 (1996): 158–200, and "Stories from the Illustrated Explanation of the *Tract of the Most Exalted on Action and Response*," in *Religions of China in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 437–70. In her first two published writings on the text she translates the title of the *Taishang ganying pian* 太上感應篇 as *Treatise of the Most High on Action and Retribution*.

⁵ Glimpses of work in that direction can be found in Catherine Bell, "Ritualization of Texts and Textualization of Ritual in the Codification of Taoist Liturgy," *History of Religions* 27, no. 4 (May 1988): 366–92, "Performance," 205–24, and "'The Chinese Believe in Spirits': Belief and Believing in the Study of Religion," in *Radical Interpretation in Religion*, ed. Nancy K. Frankenberry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 100–116.

⁶ This is not to say, however, that Bell's work on Daoist ritual and "popular religion" has not had an impact in the field. Her work on Daoism, especially her "Ritualization of Texts and Textualization of Ritual in the Codification of Taoist Liturgy," has been, and still is, regularly cited by scholars of Daoism. See, for instance, Anna Seidel, "Chronicle of Taoist Studies in the West, 1950–1990," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 5 (1990): 267; Kenneth Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 177; Stephen Bokenkamp, "Lu Xiuqing, Buddhism and the First Daoist Canon," in *Culture and Power in the Reconstitution of the Chinese Realm, 200–600*, ed. Scott Pearce, Audrey Spiro, and Patricia Ebrey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 189–90 and 316 n. 34; Edward L. Davis, *Society and the Supernatural in Song China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 307; Lü Pengzhi, "Daoist Rituals," in *Early Chinese Religions Part Two: The Period of Division*

It is not plausible in the confines of this essay to fully contextualize this discussion within the now voluminous body of material on the history of the development of printing and the history of the book in East Asia.⁷ Given the important place of China in the history of printing—with the oldest extant printed book in the world being an edition of the *Diamond Sūtra* dated to 868 CE—it is natural that the focus of most scholarship has heretofore been on printing, book culture, publishing, and distribution. Yet, other important questions remain to be addressed. Was there, for instance, a print revolution in China that brought an end to manuscript production? Clearly the British historian of science Joseph Needham's claim that following the invention and spread of printing "practically everything in Chinese is either printed or lost" is an untenable historical assessment.⁸ The surviving collections of Chinese

(220–589), ed. John Lagerwey and Lü Pengzhi (Leiden: Brill Academic, 2010), 1246–47. Her work on Chinese "popular religion" has been engaged, for example, by Stephen F. Teiser, "Popular Religion," *Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 2 (May 1995): 378–95; Bernard Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 299–301 and 311–14; and Kenneth Dean, *Lord of the Three in One: The Spread of a Cult in Southeast China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 10–11. For the most recent, and perhaps most explicit, engagement with her work, see David John Mozina, "Quelling the Divine: The Performance of a Talisman in Contemporary Thunder Ritual" (ThD dissertation, Harvard University, 2009).

⁷ For a more complete discussion of some of these issues, see James Robson, "The Archive Inside: Manuscripts Found within Chinese Religious Statues," in *Manuscript Culture in Asia*, ed. Jörg Quencer, Michael Friedrich, Matthew Driscoll, and Jan-Ulrich Sobisch (Berlin: de Gruyter, forthcoming), on which some of the sections of this essay are based. On the history of printing and publishing in China, see, among others, T. H. Barrett, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Cynthia Brokaw and Kai-Wing Chow, eds., *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Michela Bussotti, *Gravures de l'école de Hui: Etude du livre illustré chinois de la fin du XVIIe siècle au milieu du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: EFEO, 2001); Thomas Francis Carter, *The Invention of Printing in China and Its Spread Westward*, ed. L. Carrington Goodrich, rev. ed. (1925; repr., New York: Ronald Press, 1955); Susan Cherniack, "Book Culture and Textual Transmission in Sung China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 54, no. 1 (1994): 5–125; Lucille Chia, *Printing for Profit: The Commercial Publishers of Jianyang, Fujian (11th–17th Centuries)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002); Jean-Pierre Drège, *Les bibliothèques en Chine au temps des manuscrits* (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1991); J. S. Edgren, "China," in *A Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 97–110; M. R. Guignard, "The Chinese Precedent," in *The Coming of the Book*, ed. Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin (London: Verso, 1976), 71–76; Berthold Laufer, *Paper and Printing in Ancient China* (New York: Franklin, 1973); Joseph P. McDermott, *A Social History of the Chinese Book: Books and Literati Culture in Late Imperial China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006); Frederick W. Mote and Hung-lam Chu, *Calligraphy and the East Asian Book* (Boston: Shambhala, 1989); Tsuen-hsui Tsien, *Written on Bamboo and Silk: The Beginnings of Chinese Books and Inscriptions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), and *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 5, *Chemistry and Chemical Technology*, pt. 1, *Paper and Printing*, ed. Joseph Needham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Denis Twitchett, *Printing and Publishing in Medieval China* (London: De Worde Society, 1983). See also the special issue of *Late Imperial China* 17, no. 1 (June 1996) devoted to "Publishing and the Print Culture in Late Imperial China," which includes Roger Chartier's introduction "Gutenberg Revisited from the East," 1–9.

⁸ Joseph Needham, "The Unity of Science: Asia's Indispensable Contribution," in *Clerks and Craftsmen in China and the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 24.

handwritten manuscripts that include, among other forms, literary, political, religious, ritual, and dramatic writing suggest otherwise. Manuscripts remained in production and use long after the advent of print. Writing about the persistence and importance of manuscript culture in the context of medieval Chinese literature, Xiaofei Tian has claimed that "hand copying a book may be a practice quite alien to us now, but it was the single most important means of transmission of knowledge and information in the age of manuscript culture" and that "copying texts by hand was, moreover, practiced throughout imperial China, despite the spread of printing."⁹ The rise of printing technology certainly had a major impact on textual practices by making books less expensive and more readily available, but that should not lead us to conclude that there were no practical reasons for the continuation of manuscript production. Certain historical and cultural factors ensured that handwritten manuscripts remained in production and even that some books only circulated in manuscript form. J. S. Edgren, commenting on the status of manuscripts following the acceleration of printing technology during the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1125), has noted that "collections of manuscripts were not suddenly eclipsed by printed books. For one thing, conservative scholars were skeptical of the textual quality of the impersonal printed products; for another, good-quality books were rather expensive. No matter the rapid growth of printing, many desirable titles were not in print and could only be obtained by making manuscript copies."¹⁰

Utilitarian explanations for the persistence of manuscript production in the age of print should not be taken lightly, though we would do well to recognize that other cultural and aesthetic factors may have been involved. Frederick Mote has pointed out that "the aesthetics of calligraphy, which flourished greatly in the Tang period, not only influenced the design of printed books, but also found still more direct expression in the creation of manuscript books

⁹ Xiaofei Tian, *Tao Yuanming and Manuscript Culture: The Record of the Dusty Table* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 4 and 221. See also Chia (*Printing for Profit*, 11–12 and 40–42), who notes that there was "an enduring interaction of manuscript and print in China," and Cherniack ("Book Culture," 10), who argues for the increasing importance of imprints during the Song but also remarks that "although Song printers were prolific, the majority of books in Song imperial and private libraries were still manuscripts."

¹⁰ Edgren, "China," 102. See also Frederick W. Mote, "Handwritten Books after the Invention of Printing," in Mote and Chu, *Calligraphy and the East Asian Book*, 76–77. Joseph McDermott has questioned the speed with which manuscripts were surpassed by imprints and makes the important observation that before general conclusions are drawn about the nature of that transition more research is necessary on the relative numbers of manuscripts, since as yet "very little systematic research has been undertaken on the history of manuscripts in the Song or any later dynasty" ("The Ascendance of the Imprint in China," in Brokaw and Chow, *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China*, 60). On the persistence of manuscripts following the rise of printing see also Inoue Susumu 井上進, "Shuppan bunka to gakujitsu" [The culture of publishing and scholarship], in *Min Shin jidai no kihon mondai* 明清時代の基本問題 [Basic questions in the history of the Ming and Qing periods], ed. Mori Masao 森正夫 et al. (Tokyo: Kyūko shoin, 1997), 531–55.

... superior calligraphers seem to have been all the more drawn to creating handwritten books as works of art."¹¹ In addition to the practical, utilitarian, and aesthetic explanations for the persistence of secular manuscript culture, we will see below that certain religious factors—particularly the sacred powers inherent in handwritten script and devotional practices related to merit making—played an important role in keeping the tradition of producing handwritten manuscripts alive and well.

Some types of handwritten texts were never destined to be printed, nor were they merely produced as copies of unobtainable printed works or for readers to enjoy the aesthetic quality of the copyist's calligraphy. When we limit our purview to that of local village life, new evidence of handwritten manuscripts comes into view. In a study of handwritten materials in villages in the New Territories of Hong Kong—based on fieldwork undertaken in the late 1970s, James Hayes begins by discussing how the ravages of historical and climatic conditions had taken their toll on the survival of manuscripts. He expresses surprise that manuscripts survived at all and concludes that "their endurance can only be attributed to the great store their owners set by them."¹² Hayes goes on to note how these types of materials "represent a new body of research material that has much to add to our conception of traditional Chinese society in the countryside and its social and political organization."¹³ The types of handwritten texts in use in the context of local daily life can be sorted into three main categories:¹⁴ (1) books and handbooks (including genealogical records, handbooks of family and social practice, almanacs, educational texts, letter writing guides, guides to contracts, poetry, novels, and morality books); (2) books provided for and by specialists (including those that deal with human fate, geomancy, charms, and divination); and (3) written materials providing the cultural and social context of daily life (including signs, notices, ephemera, and placards). We are now also aware of the fact that even up through the modern period handwritten manuscripts of short stories

¹¹ Mote, "Handwritten Books," 76–77.

¹² James Hayes, "Specialists and Written Materials in the Village World," in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn Rawski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 76–77.

¹³ Hayes, "Specialists and Written Materials," 77. Hayes's optimism was certainly justified, as attested by the work of (among others) Rubie S. Watson, *Inequality among Brothers: Class and Kinship in South China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); David Faure, *The Structure of Chinese Rural Society: Lineage and Village in the Eastern New Territories, Hong Kong* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); David Faure and Helen F. Siu, eds., *Down to Earth: The Territorial Bond in South China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995); Zheng Zhenman, *Family Lineage Organization and Social Change in Ming and Qing Fujian*, trans. Michael Szonyi, with Kenneth Dean and David Wakefield (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001); and Michael Szonyi, *Practicing Kinship: Lineage and Descent in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

¹⁴ This list is adapted from Hayes, "Specialists and Written Materials," 78–110.

and other types of literature remained in circulation, despite their proscription during the Cultural Revolution.¹⁵ This wealth of evidence forces us, therefore, to revise Joseph Needham’s problematic claim about the hegemony of print following its development and spread in the ninth century.

It is possible to track the technological developments from handwritten texts, to woodblock printing, to printing with moveable type—and yet there is an alternative history of handwritten manuscripts that remains to be composed. As was the case with the history of handwritten texts after the Gutenberg revolution in the West, the practice of producing handwritten versions of texts persisted alongside the new technology of printing and has endured until today, much like the important handwritten signature in our digital age.¹⁶ The field of Sinology is, however, only slowly approaching a state where we might be able to one day claim, in the words of Bernard Cerquiglini, that “the manuscript, which has long been pushed to the margins of legitimate reflection and sometimes even obliterated—the abominable trace of some positivist concern—is now the latest object of analysis.”¹⁷ We await foundational studies that will help synthesize some of the different strands of research that have been completed to date.

One blind spot in the study of printing and book culture in China is its relationship to religious history and religious practices. As Cynthia Brokaw has noted, “surprisingly little work has been done on the impact of printing on religious reading practices and beliefs, though Catherine Bell has begun to mine this potentially rich field with a few suggestive articles on the ways in which printing, while expanding the possibilities for proselytization, might also operate to fix and thus limit the flexibility of religious doctrines.”¹⁸ This mention of Bell’s work on the critical analysis of the impact of printing on Chinese religions demonstrates her engagement with an important topic and how she was ahead of her time in asking such questions. Her work prefigured a movement within the field that recognizes the limitations of working solely with incunabula. Some scholars have begun to pay more attention to handwritten manuscripts in use after the invention and spread of printing. This new

¹⁵ On the circulation of handwritten literature during the Cultural Revolution see Perry Link, “Hand-Copied Entertainment Fiction from the Cultural Revolution,” in *Unofficial China: Popular Culture and Thought in the People’s Republic*, ed. Perry Link, Richard Madsen, and Paul G. Pickowicz (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1989), 17–36.

¹⁶ See Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Brian Richardson, *Manuscript Culture in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). On the “signature,” see Béatrice Frenkel, *La signature: Genèse d’un signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).

¹⁷ Bernard Cerquiglini, *In Praise of the Variant: A Critical History of Philology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), i.

¹⁸ Cynthia Brokaw, “On the History of the Book in China,” in Brokaw and Chow, *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China*, 42.

emphasis does not deny the profound impact that printing had in China, but the shift in focus to handwritten texts allowed access to less-studied domains of Chinese religious practice. Those materials also force us to grapple with some intractable issues regarding category formation in the study of Chinese religions, a topic that was of fundamental importance to Bell.¹⁹

Bell seems to have been drawn to the topic of printing and religion through her work on the *Taishang ganying pian* (Tract of the most exalted on action and retribution). In contextualizing that text with a critical discussion of the relationship between printing and religion in Europe, Bell raised three main questions that she posited as being equally applicable to the Chinese context: (1) Did printing constitute a revolution in European culture? (2) How did religion, as a major consumer and supporter of printing, change through its use of this new medium? (3) Was printing ultimately a force for sociocultural unity or division?²⁰ What Bell discovered in pursuing these questions was that although printing technology certainly did have an impact in China, including in the domain of religion—especially in regard to the mass distribution of morality books—“printing in China never displaced hand copying the way it did in Europe. At the very least, hand copying persisted as an important first step for woodblock printing or stone engraving.”²¹ The *Taishang ganying pian*, in her interpretation, was therefore not an example of the success of a “printing revolution” but was distinctive due to its innovative claim about the religious efficacy and merit-making potential of its own dissemination.²²

Although Bell relegated the handwritten manuscript to the status of being a mere preparatory aide in the printing process, it is now clear that—just as in the case of secular manuscript culture—religious manuscripts retained a special status and continued to be produced even when not destined to be printed. Handwritten religious manuscripts have, however, received less attention than they deserve due to a primary focus among scholars on the history of the relationship between Buddhism and the invention and development of printing technology in China from about the seventh century onward.²³ The printing of individual

¹⁹ See, e.g., Bell, “The Chinese Believe in Spirits,” and “Paradigms Behind (and Before).”

²⁰ Bell, “Printing and Religion in China,” 173.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 176.

²² Of course, as Bell herself concedes (“Precious Raft,” 170, 175), “a Buddhist ‘cult of the book’ long predated the earliest copy of the Treatise,” but she argues that the Treatise “pushed the significance of distribution much further.” On the Buddhist cult of the book, see, among others, Gregory Schopen, “The Phrase ‘*sa prthivīpradeśaś caityabhūto bhavet*’ in the *Vajracchedikā*: Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahāyāna,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 17 (1975): 147–81.

²³ See, however, the comments on the importance of handwritten manuscripts by Barrett, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing*, especially chap. 3; and the important earlier articles by Kristofer M. Schipper, “The Written Memorial in Taoist Ceremonies,” in *Religions and Ritual in Chinese Society*, ed. Arthur P. Wolf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), 309–24, which discuss the importance of “manuscript” versions of Daoist ritual documents, and “Vernacular and

religious texts and complete canons accelerated rapidly from the tenth century to the present, but that trend did not result in the eradication of manuscript culture either.²⁴ Indeed, one could mount a persuasive argument that the most significant developments in the contemporary study of Chinese religions have been ignited by the discovery and study of surviving manuscript collections.

The most influential discovery of the past century was, of course, that of the rich cache of manuscripts found at Dunhuang 敦煌, an important Silk Road outpost in far western China.²⁵ Although the discovery of a printed edition of the *Diamond Sūtra* in those caves has attracted an inordinate amount of attention, since it is dated to 868 and therefore considered to be the oldest dated printed book in the world (though other printed materials already existed and are also attested in Korea and Japan), the printed materials found in that cache are in fact far outnumbered by handwritten manuscripts.²⁶ The Dunhuang discoveries, and other discoveries of manuscripts at Turfan and other locales in western China, invigorated the study of Chinese manuscripts, especially in the fields of Buddhist and Daoist studies, apocryphal texts, philology, astronomy, divination, calendrics, social history, politics, and legal history.²⁷

Classical Ritual in Taoism," *Journal of Asian Studies* 45, no. 1 (1985): 21–57. I will have more to say on this topic below.

²⁴ Fang Guangchang 方廣鎬, *Zhongguo xieben dazangjing yanjiu* 中國寫本大藏經研究 [Research on handwritten manuscripts of the Buddhist canon] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2006).

²⁵ For an engaging tale of their discovery, see Peter Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road: The Search for the Lost Cities and Treasures of Chinese Central Asia* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980). For detailed studies on the general characteristics of the find, see Fujieda Akira, "The Tun-huang Manuscripts: A General Description," *Zinbun: Memoirs of the Research Institute for Humanistic Studies, Kyōtō University* 9 (1966): 1–32, and 10 (1969): 17–39; Rong Xinjiang, "The Nature of the Dunhuang Library Cave and the Reason for Its Sealing," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 11 (1999–2000): 247–75; and most recently Yoshiro Imaeda, "The Provenance and Character of Dunhuang Documents," *Memoirs of the Toyo Bunko* 66 (2008): 81–102.

²⁶ On the printed books found at Dunhuang and the existence of the oldest printed document in Korea, see, for instance, Twitchett, *Printing and Publishing*, 18–26; and Carter, *Invention of Printing in China*, 37–66.

²⁷ The secondary literature on the study of Dunhuang Buddhist manuscripts is too vast to cite completely here, but see, for example, Wendi Leigh Adamek, *The Mystique of Transmission: On Early Chan History and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Jeffrey Broughton, *The Bodhidharma Anthology: The Earliest Records of Zen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Robert E. Buswell Jr., ed., *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990); Paul Demiéville, *Le concile de Lhasa* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale de France, 1952), *Choix d'études bouddhiques, 1929–1970* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishing, 1973); Jean-Pierre Drège, ed., *Images de Dunhuang: Dessins et peintures sur papier des fond Pelliot et Stein* (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1999); Jean-Pierre Drège and Olivier Venture, eds., *Études de Dunhuang et Turfan* (Geneva: Droz, 2007); Bernard Faure, *La volonté d'orthodoxie dans le bouddhisme chinois* (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1988); Antonino Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century* (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1976); Akira, "Tun-huang Manuscripts"; Gao Guofan 高國籙, *Zhongguo minsu tanwei* 中國民俗探微 [An exploration of Chinese popular customs] (Jiangsu: Hehai daxue chubanshe, 1989), and *Dunhuang minsu ziliao daolun* 敦煌民俗資料導論 [Introductory remarks on

More recent manuscript discoveries in Japan during the late 1980s—especially those preserved at Nanatsu-dera 七寺 in downtown Nagoya—again reenergized the study of Chinese religious manuscripts. The Nanatsu-dera cache includes a manuscript set of the Buddhist canon that comprises some

popular material from Dunhuang] (Taipei: Xinwenfeng, 1994); Jacques Gernet, *Les aspects économiques du bouddhisme dans la société chinoise du Ve au Xe siècle* (Saigon-Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1956); Hu Shi 胡適, *Shenhui heshang yiji* 神會和尚遺集 [The surviving works of Shenhui] (Shanghai: Yadong tushuguan, 1930); Jamie Hubbard, *Absolute Delusion, Perfect Buddhahood: The Rise and Fall of a Chinese Heresy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), and “The Teaching of the Three Levels and the Manuscript Texts of the *Sanchieh fofo*,” in Ochiai Toshinori 落合俊典 and Makita Tairyō 牧田諦亮, eds., *Nanatsudera koitsu kyōten kenkyū sōsho* 七寺古逸經典研究叢書, vol. 5 (Tokyo: Daitō Shuppansha, 2000); Ikeda On 池田温, *Chūgoku kodai sekichō kenkyū* 中国古代籍帳研究 [Research on ancient Chinese contracts] (Tokyo: Tōkyō Daigaku Toyō Bunka Kenkyūjo, 1979); Marc Kalinowski, ed., *Divination et société dans la Chine médiévale: Étude des manuscrits de Dunhuang de la Bibliothèque nationale de France et de la British Library* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2003); Kuo Li-ying, *Confession and contrition dans le bouddhisme chinois du ve au xe siècle* (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1994); Victor H. Mair, *T'ang Transformation Texts: A Study of the Buddhist Contribution to the Rise of Vernacular Fiction and Drama in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Makita Tairyō 牧田諦亮, *Gikyō kenkyū* 疑經研究 [Studies on apocryphal sūtras] (Kyoto: Jimbun gagaku kenkyūsho, 1976); Makita Tairyō 牧田諦亮 and Fukui Fumimasa 福井文雅, eds., *Tonkō to chūgoku bukkyō* 敦煌と中国仏教 [Dunhuang and Chinese Buddhism] (Tokyo: Daitō Shuppansha, 1984); John R. McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch'an Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986); Christine Mollier, *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face: Scripture, Ritual, and Iconographic Exchange in Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008); Nishiwaki Tsuneki 西脇常記, *Isutanbiuru daigaku toshokan shozō Torufan shutsudo kango danpen kenkyū* イスタンブール大学図書館所蔵トルファン出土漢語断片研究 [Four fragments of Chinese materials unearthed in Turfan held in the collection of the Istanbul University Library] (Kyoto, 2007); Michel Soymié, ed., *Contributions aux études sur Touen-houang* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1979), *Nouvelles contributions aux études de Touen-houang* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1981), and *Contributions aux études de Touen-houang*, vol. 3 (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1984); Tanaka Ryōshō 田中良昭, *Tonkō zenshū bunken no kenkyū* 敦煌禪宗文獻の研究 [Research on Chan Dunhuang writings] (Tokyo: Daitō Shuppansha, 1983); Stephen F. Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994); Philip Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967); and Yanagida Seizan 柳田聖山, *Shoki zenshū shisho no kenkyū* 初期禪宗史書の研究 [Research on early Chan historical works] (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1967). The study of Daoist Dunhuang manuscripts has also attracted attention; see (again in alphabetic order) Stephen R. Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Kanaoka Shōkō 金岡照光, Ikeda On 池田温, and Fukui Fumimasa 福井文雅, eds., *Tonkō to Chūgoku dōkyō* 敦煌と中国道教 [Dunhuang and Daoism] (Tokyo: Daitō Shuppansha, 1983); Christine Mollier, *Une apocalypse taoïste du début du Ve siècle: Le livre des Incantations Divines des Grottes Abyssales* (Paris: Collège de France, Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1990); Ōfuchi Ninji 大淵忍爾, *Tonkō dōkyō* [Daoist scriptures from Dunhuang], 2 vols. (Tokyo: Fukutake shoten, 1978), Vol. 1: *Mokurokuhen* 敦煌道教目錄編 [A catalogue of Daoist works from Dunhuang] and Vol. 2: *Zuroku hen* 図録篇 [Manuscript reproductions]; Rao Zongyi 饒宗頤, *Laozi Xiang'er zhu jiaojian* [老子想爾注校箋] [Annotated critical edition of the *Xiang'er* commentary to the *Laozi*] (Hong Kong: Tong Nam, 1956); Kristofer M. Schipper, “Taoist Ordination Ranks in the Tunhuang Manuscripts,” in Gert Naundorf, Karl-Heinz Pohl, and Hans-Hermann Schmidt, eds., *Religion und Philosophie in Ostasien: Festschrift für Hans Steininger zum 65. Geburtstag*

1,162 works in nearly 5,000 *juan* (rolls) that were copied between 1175 and 1180.²⁸ Although this set of manuscripts had been known to the academic world since as early as 1900, the full extent of the importance of the collection was not known until after the systematic survey conducted in 1990. At that time scholars discovered that this handwritten canon was not merely a copy of a printed edition of the canon but contained versions of texts that predated the Song dynasty edition of the canon, many apocryphal works (including the earliest extant apocryphon, titled *Piluo sanmei jing* 毗羅三昧經), and editions of texts that were thought to be long lost (including the *Sanjie fofa* 三解佛法, a key text in the Three Stages movement). The initial attention given to the dramatic discoveries at Nanantsu-dera (and subsequent discoveries at Kongōji 金剛寺 and other temples) has not, however, led to an outpouring of new research outside of Japan.²⁹

The discovery of apocryphal manuscripts and manuscripts of texts thought to be lost constitutes a significant development in the study of Chinese religions, but the majority of the texts discovered thus far are the product of elite circles. It has been much more difficult to gain access to premodern manuscripts related to popular forms of religious beliefs and practices.³⁰ One of the reasons for that difficulty is that nonelite forms of manuscripts rarely circulated widely or freely. Over the past three decades, however, scholars doing fieldwork in various regions of China have brought to our attention the surprising survival of a wide range of religious manuscripts, including (among other things) handwritten (*chaoben* 抄本) ritual manuals (*keyi ben* 科儀本)

(Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1985); Anna Seidel, *La divinisation de Lao Tseu dans le taoïsme des Han* (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1969); Wu Chi-yu, *Pen-tsi king (Livre du terme original: Ouvrage taoïste inédit du VIIe siècle; manuscrits retrouvés à Touen-houang reproduits en fac-similé)* (Paris: Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1960); and Yoshioka Yoshitoyo 吉岡義豊, *Dōkyō to bukkyō* 道教と仏教 [Daoism and Buddhism], 3 vols. (Tokyo: Kokusho kankokai, 1959 [vol. 1], 1970 [vol. 2], 1976 [vol. 3]).

²⁸ For a description of this discovery and the nature of the manuscripts found at Nanantsu-dera, see Ochiai Toshinori, *The Manuscripts of Nanantsu-dera* (Kyoto: Italian School of East Asian Studies, 1991), and the essays contained therein by Antonino Forte and Makita Taiyō.

²⁹ Some important exceptions include Hubbard, “Teaching of the Three Levels”; Stefano Zaccchetti, “An Shigao’s Texts Preserved in the Newly Discovered Kongō-ji Manuscript and Their Significance for the Study of Early Chinese Buddhism,” *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies* 52, no. 2 (2004): 898–895 (57–60), and “On the Authenticity of the Kongōji Manuscript of An Shigao’s *Anban shouyi jing* 安般守意經,” *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University for the Academic Year 2002* (2002): 157–158; and Florin Deleanu, “The Newly Found Text of the *An ban Shou yi jing* Translated by An Shigao,” *Journal of the International College for Advanced Buddhist Studies* 6 (2003): 63–100. A recent important study on the various manuscripts of Daoji’s 道紀 *Konzōron* 金藏論 (Jinzanglun) has also been recently published; see Miyai Rika 宮井里佳 and Motoi Makiko 本井牧子, *Konzōron: Honbun to kenkyū* 金藏論: 本文と研究 [The *Jinzang lun*: Original text and research] (Kyoto: Rinsen shoten, 2011).

³⁰ It is possible to access some of this material from texts and fragments found in Dunhuang; see Gao Guofan, *Zhongguo minsu tanwei*, and *Dunhuang minsu ziliao daolun*.

and family genealogies (*jiapu* 家譜), that have forced us to revise our traditional pictures of Chinese religions.³¹

In addition to the handwritten materials that entered into circulation and perhaps made their way into library collections, there existed more diffused bodies of manuscripts that did not circulate widely beyond a village, family, or religious lineage. Some new handwritten manuscript collections have been discovered in the most unlikely of places. Among the many possible topics that could be discussed here, what I would like to introduce are the manuscripts that have been preserved within the dark inner recesses of religious statues. The work of museum conservators and research on early Buddhist textual references has revealed a long history of the placing manuscripts inside Buddhist statues that remains to be fully explored.³² Placing manuscripts inside statues is first attested in connection with Indian Buddhism and was transmitted to China, Korea, and Japan.³³

There is a significant body of textual evidence—including doctrinal works and the written accounts by pilgrims and travelers—concerning the placement of texts and relics inside *stūpas* and statues at the time of consecration. During his travels in India in the seventh century, for instance, Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–64) observed that “there is a practice in India of making incense powder into

³¹ This literature is now quite extensive; see, among others, Wang Ch’iu-kuei 王秋桂, ed., *Min-su ch’ü-i ts’ung-shu* 民俗曲藝叢書, 80 vols. (Taipei: Shih Ho-cheng Folk Culture Foundation, 1993), *Zhongguo chuantong keyiben huibian* 中國傳統科儀本彙編 [Collection of traditional Chinese ritual texts] (Taipei: Xinwenfeng, 1999); and John Lagerwey, *Traditonal Hakka Society Series* (Hong Kong: Traditional Hakka Studies Association and École française d’Extrême-Orient, 1996–2002).

³² The literature on images with interred objects (referred to in Japanese as *zōnai shōgon* [interior adornment] and *zōnai nōnyūhin* [consecrated objects inside statues]) is immense and impossible to review in full here. Although much of the work thus far concerns Japanese images, some of the studies cited here also discuss Chinese examples. See Kurata Bunsaku 倉田文作, “Zōnai nōnyūhin 像内納入品” [Objects deposited inside sculptures], in *Nihon no bijutsu* 日本美術 [Art of Japan], vol. 86 (Tokyo: Shibundō, 1973); Helmut Brinker, “Facing the Unseen: On the Interior Adornment of Eizon’s Iconic Body,” *Archives of Asian Art* 50 (1997–1998): 42–61; Roger Goepfer, “A Early Work of Kōen in Cologne,” *Asiatische Studien* 37, no. 2 (1983): 67–102; Paul Groner, “Icons and Relics in Eison’s Religious Activities,” in *Living Images: Japanese Buddhist Icons in Context*, ed. Robert H. Sharf and Elizabeth Horton Sharf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 114–51; Michel Strickmann, “L’icône animée,” in *Mantras et mandarins: Le bouddhisme tantrique en Chine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 165–211; and the recent work of Wu Pei-jung, “The Mañjuśrī Statues and Buddhist Practice of Saidaiji: A Study of Iconography, Interior Features of Statues, and Rituals Associated with Buddhist Icons” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2002). On the interment of objects inside Korean images (*pokchangmul* 腹藏物), see Choi In Sun 崔仁善, “A Study of the Two Wooden Buddha Statues at Samgyeong Temple in Chunju and Those Contents That Were Found Inside Buddha Statues 全州三暎寺木造佛像 2 軀外 腹藏物” in *文化史學* 21 (2004): 855–73.

³³ On this general phenomenon, see James Robson, “Hidden in Plain View: Concealed Contents, Secluded Statues, and Revealed Religion,” in *The Rhetoric of Hiddenness in Traditional Chinese Culture*, ed. Paula Varsano (Albany: SUNY Press, forthcoming).

paste to make small *stūpas* five to six inches high. People write [pieces of] scripture and place them into the interior [of these small *stūpas*]. They call these *dharmasārīra*.”³⁴ A much later Indian text—the *Vajrāvalī* by Abhayākara Gupta (1064?–1125?)—also explicates that “you should at the time of making an image leave the head or back hollow. When completed you should write a *dharani* on birch bark with saffron or bezoar and wrap them around the relic which has been purified through the bathing ritual and then place them in the hollow space.”³⁵

Evidence for the interring of manuscripts inside statues in East Asia is difficult to compile due to the paucity of surviving wooden statuary in China and the lack of systematic studies on Chinese wooden statuary.³⁶ There are some extant examples, such as the Arhat statues at the Lingyan si in Shandong, and Chinese statues preserved in Japan also provide some important clues.³⁷ One of the best-known examples of this kind of statuary is, of course, the Seiryōji Shaka 清涼寺釈迦, which was found to have a large niche in the back that was filled with numerous texts—and other objects such as symbolic viscera and textiles—by Japanese conservators studying it in 1954. An inscription on the backside of the wooden cover of the cache informs us that the image was made between August 9 and September 5, 985, for Chōnen 喬然 (938–1016), a Japanese pilgrim who went to China and returned to Japan in 986, by two brothers, Zhang Yanjiao 張延交 and Zhang Yanxi 張延襲 from Taizhou 台州 (modern Zhejiang province). The statue contains a handwritten “oath text” by the monk Chōnen and his friend Gizō that was completed in 972 and handwritten copies of the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa Sūtra* and *Lotus Sūtra*. The cache also included a woodblock print of the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāparamitā Sūtra* that is dated to 985, the year the statue was closed. In their study of this image Henderson and Hurvitz surmise that many other images might have similar caches of contents, but unfortunately no further evidence is reported.³⁸ Subsequent research on Chinese wooden statuary over the past fifty or so years has provided some tantalizing glimpses of evidence that suggests the practice of

³⁴ T.51.920a21–23. The translation here from Daniel Boucher, “The *Pratītyasamutpādagāthā* and Its Role in the Medieval Cult of the Relics,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 14, no. 1 (1991): 7.

³⁵ Yael Bentor, “On the Indian Origins of the Tibetan Practice of Depositing Relics and Dhāraṇīs in *Stūpas* and Images,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115, no. 2 (1995): 255. See also Yael Bentor, *Consecration of Images and Stūpas in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

³⁶ See Donald Jenkins, ed., *Masterworks in Wood: China and Japan* (Portland: Portland Art Museum, 1977).

³⁷ Bunsaku, “Zōnai nōnyūhin.”

³⁸ Gregory Henderson and Leon Hurvitz, “The Buddha of Seiryōji: New Finds and New Theory,” *Artibus Asiae* 19, no. 1 (1956): 5–55.

putting manuscripts inside statues was a rather widespread phenomena, and this practice of interring objects inside statues merits further investigation.³⁹

I cannot review all the evidence for extant religious manuscripts found within statues here, so I would like to focus my comments on a new body of materials that has come to light in recent years. Since I also discussed these materials with Catherine Bell in my final correspondence with her, it seemed perfectly appropriate to include them in the present essay in this volume commemorating her work. In 1984, following the interception and confiscation of a shipping container filled with nearly one thousand small wooden religious statuettes bound for the antiquities markets in Hong Kong, Chinese customs officials in Hunan province placed them in the Hunan Provincial Museum in Changsha. Since 1984 many more of these statues have been found to be preserved in four other private collections (two in China, one in the United States, and one in Taiwan), with each collection holding about a thousand statues, though one collection includes about 3,000 statues—bringing the total number to about 8,000—and many can still be found circulating among antiquities dealers in China, Europe, and the United States.⁴⁰ Since nearly all of the statues in those collections originated in Hunan, it seems to indicate that these statues are distinctive to that region of China. The majority of the statues date from the Qing dynasty to the present day, and—as will be discussed further below—they can be of national pantheon gods, local gods, ritual masters, or ancestors.

Beginning with an ambitious project headed by Alain Arrault of the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* to catalogue the three collections in China, the project has now been extended to include cataloging and studying all the extant collections.⁴¹ There is still much to be learned about various aspects of local culture and religious practice in the Hunan region from the detailed study of these statues, but what is most pertinent to the present essay is what is

³⁹ See, for instance, John Larson and Rose Kerr, "A Hero Restored: The Conservation of Guan Di," *Orientalism* 22, no. 7 (1991): 28–34.

⁴⁰ The most comprehensive description and study of the two main collections in China is Alain Arrault, "Analytic Essay on the Domestic Statuary of Central Hunan: The Cult to Divinities, Parents, and Masters," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 36 (2008): 1–53. For a brief discussion of the collection in Milwaukee, see James Robson, *Inside Asian Images: An Exhibition of Religious Statuary from the ArtAsia Gallery Collection* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Institute for Humanities, 2007).

⁴¹ On the collections in China, see "Les statuettes religieuses du Hunan," pt. 1: "La collection Patrice Fava," ed. Alain Arrault, in collaboration with Michela Bussotti et al., http://www.shenxianghunan.com/bdd_web_barbara/fava/collection_Fava.html, and pt. 2: "La collection du musée du Hunan," ed. Alain Arrault, in collaboration with Michela Bussotti et al., http://www.shenxianghunan.com/bdd_web_barbara/index.html. The collections in Milwaukee (Wisconsin) and Taiwan are presently being catalogued under the direction of James Robson and Alain Arrault, thanks to the support provided by the Harvard China Fund.

found inside them.⁴² Indeed, it is the Hunan statues' contents that are one of their most distinctive features and sets them apart from similar statues found in other regions of China, such as those in the famous de Groot collection of deity statues from Fujian.⁴³ The statuettes from Hunan are distinguished by the fact that each contains a small niche carved into its backside that can be filled with a variety of objects, such as herbs, paper money, and desiccated insects (see fig. 1). The primary object in a statue's cache is the "consecration certificate" (*yizhi* 意旨), a handwritten manuscript providing an unprecedented amount of information that is placed inside the statue during an elaborate "eye opening" consecration ritual (*kaiguang* 開光). I therefore treat these documents as constituting an alternative form of a manuscript archive.⁴⁴ The consecration certificates tend to have a standardized form though the certificate can vary dramatically in length (from a few lines to a few pages) and in content.⁴⁵

In general, a consecration certificate begins—sometimes following an opening invocation—with the precise address of the home or shrine where the statue was installed, indicating the district, town, village, and name of temple. Following the address on the *yizhi* are the names of all of the donors who

⁴² For more general studies see Alain Arrault and Michela Bussotti, "Statuettes religieuses et certificats de consécration en Chine du Sud (XVIIe–XXe siècle)," *Arts Asiatiques* 63 (2008): 36–60; Arrault, "Domestic Statuary of Central Hunan"; Fu Juliang 傅聚良, "Hunan minjian mudiao shenxiang 湖南民間木雕神像" [Wood carved folk deity statues from Hunan], in *Zhongguo wenwu shijie* 中國文物世界 150 (1998): 54–68; and Keith Stevens, "Altar images from Hunan and Kiangsi," *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 18 (1978): 41–48 and plates on 217–22. A forthcoming volume of the *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* will present some of the new work on this topic being carried out by Alain Arrault, Michela Bussotti, Fang Ling, Mechtild Mertz, Mark Meulenbeld, David Mozina, James Robson, and Wang Yucheng, and will include an introduction by Georges Favraud of some of the research carried out by local scholars in Hunan.

⁴³ Deirdre Emmons, ed., *Dieux de Chine: Le panthéon populaire du Fujian de J. J. M. de Groot* (Lyon: Muséum d'histoire naturelle, Un, Deux, . . . Quatre Éditions, 2003); and Yang Yanjie 楊彥傑, "Minxi Kejia diqu de zuxian shen chongbai" 閩西客家地區的祖先神崇拜, <http://140.115.170.1/speech/9210/921029-01.pdf>. Compare with Keith Stevens, *Chinese Gods: The Unseen World of Spirits and Demons* (London: Collins & Brown, 1997); Museum of East Asian Art, *Shen: Chinese Icons of Divinity* (Bath: Museum of East Asian Art, 2008); Neal Donnelly, *Gods of Taiwan: A Collector's Account* (Taipei: Artist Publishing, 2006); Joe Papenfuss, *Yilan God Statue Exhibition* (Yilan, 2007); Zhang Yanping 張燕平, *Minjian mudiao yishu jianshang* 民間木雕藝術鑒賞 [An Appreciation of the Art of Folk Carving] (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 2003); Liu Wensan 劉文三, *Taiwan shenxiang yishu* 台灣神像藝術 [Deity statues of Taiwan] (Taipei: Yishu chubanshe, 1981); and Lin Wei-Ping, "Conceptualizing Gods through Statues: A Study of Personification and Localization in Taiwan," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, no. 2 (2008): 454–77.

⁴⁴ In order to highlight this point, I have titled a forthcoming article "The Archive Inside: Manuscripts Found within Chinese Religious Statues," in Jörg Quencer, Michael Friedrich, Matthew Driscoll, and Jan-Ulrich Sobisch, eds., *Manuscript Culture in Asia* (forthcoming).

⁴⁵ The manuscripts are all folded when they are put into the statues, and given that the texts were written by a large number of different hands the style and quality of writing varies dramatically. The texts are written out in black ink, though some contain some red/orange embellishments in the sections that included talismans or images of deities. We are currently analyzing the paper to determine what types of paper were used, though it is clear that a variety of paper of varying quality is found in the documents and that in many cases red or yellow dyed paper was used.



FIG. 1.—Front and back of Hunan statue (showing cavity). Photograph by author.

commissioned the statue. If the names in this section of the consecration certificate are not of disciples of a particular religious master, then they are usually those of members of the same family and tend to include the names of the main patron (usually the father) and his wife, as well as of their sons (and their wives) and daughters. While many of the consecration certificates merely contain lists of names, some of them also contain short biographies. This may seem like a trivial point, but it is actually quite significant for those interested in genealogy, since in other historical documents women are hidden away—either through neglect or because they remain nameless. From one perspective, then, these images and their contents are what Michael Baxandall has termed “deposits of social relationships.”⁴⁶ The consecration certificate usually ends with the date of the consecration, the statue carver’s name, and in some cases a register of talismans (see fig. 2).

The consecration certificate in figure 2 has a clear structure that is generally representative of the types of manuscripts that are found in the Hunan statues. It begins with an invocation stating that this statue is extremely auspicious and that its numinous qualities can bring protection and peace. Next, the precise address where this statue was located is provided: a local village shrine in the Shaoyang district 邵陽縣 of Baoqing prefecture 寶慶府 in Hunan

⁴⁶ Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 1.



FIG. 2.—The consecration certificate (M0094). Photograph by author.

province 湖南省. It also provides the names of all of the patrons who commissioned the carving of this statue, including Zhou Weichang 周維長, his wife, née Hu 胡氏, their eldest son Hehan 和漢 and his wife, née Fan 范氏, and their daughters Hejin 和金 and Helin 和林. It also includes the names of the family members living in their house, including Zhou Weizhi 周維志 and his wife (xieshi 偕室), née Zeng 曾氏, their sons Hexing 和星, Hecai 和財, and Heshu 和束, and their daughters Xingjin 星金 and Dongjin 東金. The statue is identified as being that of their ancestor named Zhou Falong 周法龍, who was born in 1847 and died in 1901. The “intention,” or reason for consecration, is presented in a general formulaic pattern: “So that there will be protection and auspiciousness for all family members, so that the six domestic animals will be peaceful, and that all the family’s affairs will be propitious. May the males enjoy good fortune and the females receive good luck.”⁴⁷ Then follows the date that the statue was consecrated with an “eye opening” ceremony (1914), the name of the sculptor (Zhou Falei 周法雷), and a string of talismans interspersed with legible text.

A second manuscript (fig. 3) further demonstrates the value of these handwritten texts for providing the researcher with a rare glimpse of the domestic level of local Chinese religious practice.⁴⁸ This manuscript from the Anhua 安化 region in present-day north central Hunan reveals how the wife of a certain Liu Xingjie 劉星階, née Li 李氏, was suffering from an eye illness. They attempted to cure her with medicine, but it offered no help. Therefore, the husband appealed to Nanyue shengdi 南嶽聖帝—the principal deity of the Southern Sacred Peak (Nanyue) that enjoys a large cultic following in the Hunan region—with the hope that, by drinking the deity’s divine tea, the wife’s eye illness would be cured, her vision would return, and the eye problems would never arise again. He commissioned the carving of a statue of Nanyue shengdi, and on that very day and auspicious rain fell. The consecration certificate includes the names of their two sons and ends with some general prayers for peace, prosperity, and thriving domestic animals. This manuscript is a good example of how these documents can mix together specific information about a person or family with stock phrases aimed at general welfare.

Now that we have access to a large number of certificates we can begin to use these documents to pursue detailed socialhistorical questions. Based on the data contained on the consecration certificates in the various collections catalogued thus far, it is possible to perform a search, for example, on the particular name of a donor (or of a specific address) in order to gain a sense of

⁴⁷ See Arrault and Bussotti, “Statuettes religieuses.” For a general discussion of statements of “intention” in Daoist rituals, see Schipper, “Written Memorial in Taoist Ceremonies,” 319–20. The “six domestic animals” [“liuchu.” 六畜] include horse, ox, goat, pig, dog, and fowl.

⁴⁸ This manuscript has also been discussed in Arrault, “Domestic Statuary of Central Hunan,” 21.

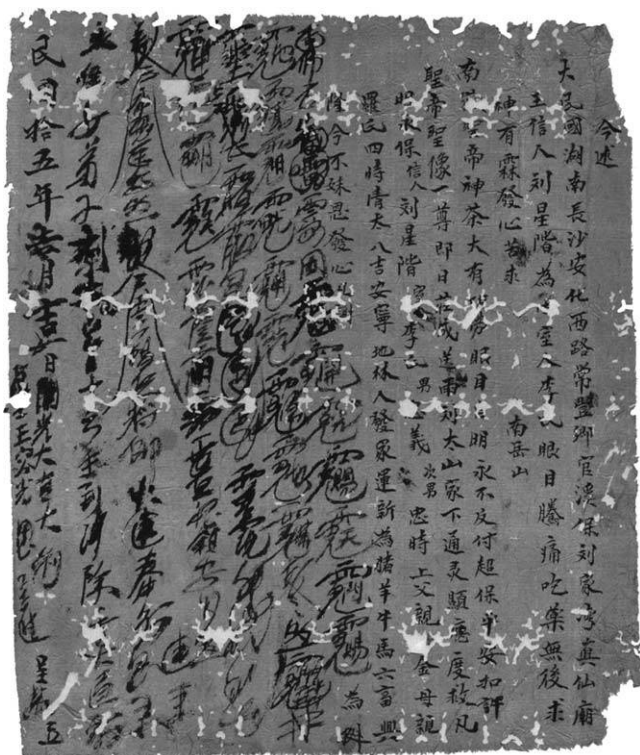


FIG. 3.—Consecration certificate (T0428). Collection of Patrice Fava, ©EFEO.

what types of statues could have been found on a family’s domestic altar. The more detailed manuscripts have the potential of taking us down into the domestic level of what Catherine Bell described as “routine and ubiquitous ritual,” a domain of Chinese religions that has been difficult for historians to gain a handle on due to a paucity of sources. Therefore, the Hunan statues invite us to engage with another topic that parallels material that Bell was interested in, namely, the daily incense offering at the domestic altar.⁴⁹ She described the typical domestic altar as being “divided roughly in half. Its right side (stage right, the subordinate position) accommodates several generations of ancestor tablets in the form of names and dates on a large paper scroll, a wooden board, or smaller individual tablets for each person or couple. Traditionally a red dot next to the name denotes the installation of the soul of the deceased in the tablet. On the left side (stage left, the superior position), there are paper images and often a statue or two of the more popular deities in the

⁴⁹ Bell, “Performance,” 212–13.

region.”⁵⁰ Bell’s description of the altar agrees with most traditional accounts, which also note the presence of ancestral tablets and deity statues. Yet, Bell signaled her own sense of nervousness about this type of general description. She was cognizant of the potential challenges to textual prescriptions and proscriptions that a “performance approach” might bring to the study of this “humble act in terms of a specific ethnographic instance instead of a generalized description in the abstract.” She said that any such general description and “[any attempt] to formulate a system run into counter examples and regional differences very quickly.”⁵¹ Although Bell seems to have never carried out fieldwork herself, she hit the nail on the head with this observation. It is the richness of the material available for studying the specific case of the Hunan statuettes—and the ways that they challenge certain well-entrenched paradigms in the study of Chinese religious practice, and the place of ancestor images within the domestic ancestral cult in particular—that surely would have captivated Bell, given her long-standing interest in the tensions between canonical (printed) textual prescriptions and popular or local forms of practice.⁵²

One striking feature of the Hunan statues is the fact that many of them, as the names on the consecration certificates attest (including M0094 in fig. 2), are for familial ancestors stretching from the distant past up to the recently deceased.⁵³ Statues dedicated to fathers are the most common, but images identified as being of grandparents, brothers, mothers, uncles, and aunts are also well attested. This is a rather surprising phenomenon, since in traditional forms of Chinese ancestor veneration anthropomorphic images of the ancestors were forbidden. During the twelfth century, for example, Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) was outspoken in his disapproval of the use of portraits or statues in ancestor worship, and he carefully refrained from using the term “image halls” (*yingtang* 影堂).⁵⁴ The proper form of veneration was merely

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 215, 218.

⁵² In 2003 Bell had already demonstrated an interest in ancestral portraits and the way that those paintings depicted accurate representations of individual ancestors rather than “generalizable types.” See Catherine Bell, “Review of *Worshipping the Ancestors: Chinese Commemorative Portraits*,” *China Quarterly* 173 (March 2003): 248–50.

⁵³ See Stevens, “Altar Images from Hunan and Kiangsi,” and Keith Stevens, “Portraits and Ancestral Images on Chinese Altars,” *Arts of Asia* 19, no. 1 (1989): 135–45; as well as the more recent work of Arrault, “Domestic Statuary of Central Hunan,” 39–43, and Alain Arrault, “Portraits sculptés d’ancêtres et de maîtres dans le Hunan,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* (forthcoming). See also the section on ancestors in the Bath Museum East Asian Art’s *Shen: Chinese Icons of Divinity*, 61–68.

⁵⁴ Patricia Ebrey, “Education through Ritual: Efforts to Formulate Family Rituals during the Song Period,” in *Neo-Confucian Education: The Formative Stage*, ed. William Theodore de Bary and John W. Chaffee (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 301–2. See also Deborah A. Sommer, “Images into Words: Ming Confucian Iconoclasm,” *National Palace Museum Bulletin* 29, no. 1–2 (1994): 1–24.

to set up an aniconic spirit tablet (*shenwei* 神位). "Confucian ritual experts," Patricia Ebrey states, "generally were given responsibility for designing and directing imperial ancestral rituals, and they modeled those rites on textual traditions that offered no justification for the use of images to represent the ancestors during the ceremonies."⁵⁵ Yet—following on the work of Ebrey—Arrault has noted, "we know that this practice [of making representations of ancestors] seems to have appeared at least by the Song, with the statues of the imperial family, in spite of the constant calls to orthodoxy by the Confucian literati, who recommended using funeral tablets and not images for the cult of ancestors. The proscription against images was visibly loosened during the Qing dynasty, since this period saw the appearance of painted portraits of direct ancestors, the origin of the current custom of placing a photo of the deceased on the altar."⁵⁶ Therefore, while it is rare to find statues representing members of the family in other regions of China—though Keith Stevens has provided evidence for the existence of some images of ancestors on altars in Taiwan and among the Chinese diaspora communities in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Singapore, Manila, and Medan—they are one of the main categories of statues in the central Hunan region. Without the detailed information provided on the consecration certificates, which identifies the statue by name and designates the relationship to the donors, it would have been far more difficult to provide solid evidence that these images on domestic altars were indeed of ancestors.

Why did the documents inside the Hunan statues remain in manuscript form? The short—and clearly inadequate—response to that question would be that it is related to the limitations of the static nature of the print medium and the necessity of having a certain modicum of flexibility to include all the

⁵⁵ Patricia Ebrey, "Portrait Sculptures in Imperial Ancestral Rites in Song China," *T'oung Pao* 83, nos. 1–3 (1997): 47.

⁵⁶ Arrault, "Domestic Statuary of Central Hunan," 39. See also Ebrey, "Portrait Sculptures," Patricia Ebrey, "The Ritual Context of Song Imperial Portraiture," in *The Arts of Sung and Yuan China*, ed. Wen Fong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Art Museum, 1999), 68–93, "The Incorporation of Portraits into Chinese Ancestral Rites," in *The Dynamics of Changing Rituals: The Transformation of Religious Rituals within Their Social and Cultural Context*, ed. Jens Kreinath et al. (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 129–40; Dietrich Seckel, "The Rise of Portraiture in Chinese Art," *Artibus Asiae* 53 (1993): 7–26; Jan Stuart, "Calling Back the Ancestors Shadow: Chinese Ritual and Commemorative Portraits," *Oriental Art* 43, no. 3 (1997): 8–17; Jan Stuart, "The Face in Life and Death: Mimesis and Chinese Ancestor Portraits," in *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture*, ed. Wu Hung and Katherine Tsiang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University East Asia Center, 2005), 197–228; and Ladislav Kesner, "Memory, Likeness and Identity in Chinese Ancestor Portraits," in *Bulletin of the National Gallery in Prague* 3–4 (1993–94): 4–14. On the use of portraits of deceased temple abbots within Chan Buddhism, see T. Griffith Foulk and Robert H. Sharf, "On the Ritual Use of Ch'an Portraiture in Medieval China," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 7 (1993–1994): 149–219. It should be noted, however, that Berthold Laufer proposed that images of ancestors preceded, rather than evolved out of, aniconic ancestral tablets. See Berthold Laufer, "The Development of Ancestral Images in China," *Journal of Religious Psychology* 6, no. 2 (1913): 111–23.

information (including different types of addresses and varying numbers of donor's names) that needed to be recorded. Yet, if we move from the particular back to the general, we can rephrase the question in the following way: how do we explain the persistence of manuscript culture in the age of print? This is, of course, a complicated question that defies easy explanations or generalizations. Some types of texts, as we saw above, may have remained primarily in manuscript form due to the economic fact that they were cheaper to produce and easier to reproduce and disseminate.

I would like to suggest here, however, that there were positive and negative reasons for keeping religious texts like the Hunan statues' certificates in manuscript form rather than utilize the new printing technology. The positive reasons include Chinese conceptions about the spiritually charged nature of handwriting and the religious practice of hand copying texts. Frederick Mote, for instance, suggested that manuscripts remained in widespread use after the development of printing due to "aesthetic and devotional" reasons. By focusing on these two characteristics Mote signaled the importance of calligraphy as well as the merit-making potential of producing handwritten copies of Buddhist and Daoist texts and popular morality books.⁵⁷ There is also a long and intricate history of the religious significance and cosmic associations of writing in China that can only be mentioned in brief here.⁵⁸ Suffice it to say, in the words of Anna Seidel, that "in the Western mind, script is included in the divine curse that divided mankind and separated it from its origins according to the Tower of Babel myth of the confusion of languages. In Chinese mythology, on the other hand, the written sign precedes the spoken word and has always kept its entirely positive cosmogonic power of unfolding and arranging reality."⁵⁹

Indeed, it was precisely this type of power and potential of language itself that drew Bell's scholarly attention to the *Taishang ganying pian*. In a later reflection on her earlier work on that text she stated that she had "tried to explore the shape of a paradigm in a project on the nature of textuality in China. I saw textuality as invoking distinct cosmological structures, although the focus on Chinese texts was due to my own love of their aesthetic material-

⁵⁷ Mote, "Handwritten Books," 77.

⁵⁸ I have cited much of the scholarship on this topic in James Robson, "Signs of Power: Talismanic Writing in Chinese Buddhism," *History of Religions* 48, no. 2 (2008): 130–69. See, for example, Michel Strickmann, *Le Taoïsme du Mao Chan: Chronique d'une Révélation* (Paris: Mémoires de l'Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1981), 15–16, 118–21; John Lagerwey, "The Oral and Written in Chinese and Western Religion," in *Religion und Philosophie in Ostasien: Festschrift für Hans Steininger*, ed. Gert Naundorf, Karl-Heinz Pohl, and Hans-Hermann Schmidt (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1985), 301–21; Jean Francois Billeter, *The Chinese Art of Writing* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990); and Léon Vandermeersch, *Wangdao ou la voie royale: Recherches sur l'esprit des institutions de la Chine archaïque*, vol. 2, *Structures politiques, les rites* (Paris: Publications de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1980).

⁵⁹ Seidel, "Chronicle of Taoist Studies in the West," 251.

ity, as well as the conviction, now commonplace, that the particular form of written language would generate a different text-supporting cosmos than that of the European Bible. . . . In Chinese history, an earlier divinatory cosmos and spoken words of the masters became bound in commentary until new sources of texts were found in new layers of the cosmos."⁶⁰ Bell is here referring to the successive revelations of new texts by Daoist deities (from evermore ethereal domains of the cosmos) to humans who wrote down their pure rarified language in human script. Indeed many scholars, Kristoffer Schipper foremost among them, have proposed that "Chinese writing was invented in the first place in order to communicate with spiritual beings."⁶¹ While human writing is merely an imperfect representation of the pure language of the deities, traces of that rarified language are found in the strange and largely illegible form of script that is included in Daoist texts and used to write talismans that are deployed in ritual and healing regimes.

As I have described before in the pages of this journal,

written talismans, by virtue of their unique position somewhere between the "legible" and "illegible," between the "spirit world" and the "human world," served as mediums for communication with (or control of) the realm of demons and deities. Talismanic script could express or illustrate ineffable meanings and powers that defy transmission by traditional modalities of communication: oral or written. Talismans were sacred images that mirrored the forms of the primordial energies at the inception of the world and were therefore imbued with a spiritual power drawn from an ability to share in the essence of the thing it names or represents.⁶²

Most talismans are handwritten and comprised of imbricated graphs although, as Strickmann has argued, they were connected to printing since they were carved into wooden blocks and printed as seals (yin[F]l) on paper or the body.⁶³ Despite Strickmann's seminal work, Bell is still correct in her assessment that "the mass-production and distribution of printed scriptural talismans for per-

⁶⁰ Bell, "Paradigms Behind (and Before)," 46.

⁶¹ Schipper, "Written Memorial in Taoist Ceremonies," 324.

⁶² Robson, "Signs of Power," 138. For more general studies on Daoist talismans, see Catherine Despeux, "Talismans and Diagrams," in *Daoism Handbook*, ed. Livia Kohn (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 498–540; Christine Mollier, "Talismans," in *Divination et société dans la Chine médiévale: Étude des manuscrits de Dunhuang de la Bibliothèque nationale de France et de la British Library*, ed. Marc Kalinowski (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2003), 405–29; Jonathan Chaves, "The Legacy of Ts'ang Chieh: The Written Word as Magic," *Oriental Art* 23, no. 2 (Summer 1977): 200–215; and Mozina, "Quelling the Divine."

⁶³ Michel Strickmann has two foundational studies, "The Seal of the Law: A Ritual Implement and the Origins of Printing," *Asia Major* 6, no. 2 (1993): 82, and *Chinese Magical Medicine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002). For a recent discussion on the relationship to the writing and printing of spells, see Paul F. Copp, "Voice, Dust, Shadow, Stone: The Makings of Spells in Medieval Chinese Buddhism" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2005).

sonal sagehood, social morality and this-worldly success clearly had a cultural impact that needs to be assessed more fully.”⁶⁴

One body of texts that interested Bell was that of sectarian scriptures—scriptures produced by popular religious sects in the Ming and Qing periods—since they contain a mixture of printed and handwritten texts. While some sectarian groups used printing technology to disseminate their teachings, when they produced talismans and incantations used for healing those remained in handwritten form.⁶⁵ Therefore, as Susan Naquin has observed, there are as many printed sectarian scriptures as there are handwritten ones.⁶⁶ Even texts that were not technical manuals for writing talismans were treated like talismans themselves. Drawing on Naquin’s earlier research on sectarian groups and their relationships to texts, Bell noted that “the *possession* of texts, like Daoist talismans witnessing to a special relationship to Heaven, established the authoritative leadership of the group; production of copies might well have compromised that type of claim. There is evidence that in those groups considered most threatening to the Qing government, important religious scriptures were not widely disseminated among followers.”⁶⁷ Thus, in order to protect their method of conferring authority on sect leaders, texts were not mass produced and did not circulate widely, since they had to remain tokens of power and legitimacy, much like the ritual hand copying of a master’s ritual manuals as part of the initiation of a disciple within the Daoist tradition.

In addition to the positive reasons for keeping some religious texts in manuscript form, in the preceding citation Bell hinted at one possible negative reason for not printing them. The basic idea is that printing, especially for sectarian groups that were problematic for the Ming and Qing governments, came with certain risks. “Printing,” as Bell notes, “could also alert authorities, effectively incriminate sect leaders, and train officials in better policing of such activities, which happened with triad groups. For example, government prohibition of sectarian activity and the routine confiscation of their texts meant that hand-copying had advantages over the dangers of printing, which could quickly lead authorities to a convert group.”⁶⁸ All of this suggests that there were a variety of good reasons why the hand copying of texts persisted in the age of print.

Earlier in this essay I referenced James Hayes’s remarks about how newly discovered handwritten materials found at the village level had the potential to add much to our understanding of traditional Chinese society and its social and political organization. It is now also clear that a focus on handwritten reli-

⁶⁴ Bell, “Printing and Religion in China,” 186.

⁶⁵ Susan Naquin, *Millenarian Rebellion in China: The Eight Trigrams Uprising of 1813* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 20.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 292–93.

⁶⁷ Bell, “Precious Raft,” 183.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 184–85.

gious documents has the same potential of adding much to our understanding of Chinese religions. Solidifying an argument for the ongoing importance of religious manuscripts at a time when so much attention is focused on print technology is perhaps an important step in its own right. But if the discussion did not reflect on larger issues in the study of Chinese religions then it would not be in the spirit of Catherine Bell's work, which always sought to make larger methodological points based on specific cases.

One of the payoffs of directing attention back to handwritten manuscripts has been (and continues to be) the potential they have for allowing access to—and opening up new vantage points onto—the most persistent and common forms of Chinese religious practices. Yet, due to entrenched categorization schemes, which the contemporary Chinese government has reified in the form of its delineation of what constitutes orthodox "religion," the unnamed religions of the masses have been occluded and fallen into the fissures that have formed as a result of the configuration of those categories. One of the important tasks the Chinese state set for itself was the enactment of a clear separation between religion and superstition.⁶⁹ Although the etymologies of the terms *zongjiao* 宗教 and *mixin* 迷信 are contested by modern scholars, it seems that when they first entered the Chinese lexicon as referents of the terms "religion" and "superstition," respectively, during the beginning of the twentieth century they came to be formulated along the lines of Western usages in hierarchic binary relation and have also been at the heart of the Chinese state's posture toward religion and the formation of the categories used for thinking about religion.⁷⁰ There is a long history of these developments, how they set the conceptual categories employed in structuring academic approaches to the study of Chinese religions, and how those decisions have had a very real impact at the level of local society.

We can gain a sense of these developments and their effects, for instance, by reference to the 1997 "White Paper on Freedom of Religious Belief in China." In that report, five religions—Buddhism, Daoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam—were recognized as legitimate and therefore guaranteed religious freedom. The first paragraph of the white paper states that among these religions people "may freely choose and express their religious beliefs and make clear their religious affiliations."⁷¹ The white paper serves as a particularly good example for demonstrating how for the Chinese govern-

⁶⁹ Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009).

⁷⁰ This is a topic that Catherine Bell took up for analysis in her "The Chinese Believe in Spirits." See also Vincent Goossaert, "The Concept of Religion in China and the West," *Diogenes* 52 (2005): 13–20, 14–15; and Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes*, 6–11.

⁷¹ "Freedom of Religious Belief in China," in *White Papers of the Chinese Government, 1996–1999* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2000), 227.

ment legitimate religion is that which is organized into a “church” with an identifiable “canon,” place of worship, priestly organization, and congregation. People’s religious expression is expected to fall in line with one of these five. Vincent Goossaert has summed up well the basic issues that are raised with this new vision of religion.

The most significant consequence of this process of purification that aimed to separate the five approved religions from “superstitions” (that is, the basis of Chinese religion) was that the great majority of communities worshipping local saints in village or neighbourhood temples were deprived of all legal protection, and their temples were confiscated and converted into schools, police stations, garrisons, etc. The religious life of these temples, which was rediscovered by observers from the 1960s on (in Taiwan, Hong Kong and the diaspora, then in China itself from the 1980s), is today the focus of researchers’ attention. A kind of rehabilitation of local cults is taking place under the title “popular religion,” “folk religion” or *minjian xinyang* (literally “popular beliefs”). However, though these labels help us to realize that the Chinese religious environment is not limited to the five approved religions together with the sectarian groups, they nevertheless confirm a process that has been underway for a century with the aim of separating religions from superstitions; by inventing a new, hybrid category of popular religion to replace the mass of ‘superstitions’, we forget the fundamental unity of Chinese religion’s practices and representations, within which local cults and Taoist, Buddhist and Confucian institutions all have a stake.⁷²

As the ongoing work of Wang Qiugui, John Lagerwey, Kenneth Dean, David Johnson, Daniel Overmyer, and others doing fieldwork and documentation of local historical and religious manuscripts attests, it is precisely the different forms of what Dean calls “local communal religion” that characterize the most common types of religious practice.⁷³ Although there is at present some effort to find a place for local communal forms of religion, since those forms of religious practice had historically fallen outside the official definitions of religion articulated by the Chinese government they were ignored or treated with opprobrium.⁷⁴ Most of this new research, which has in large part been made possible through the discovery and study of newly available manuscripts, demonstrates the new possibilities for studying Chinese religion

⁷² Vincent Goossaert, “Concept of Religion,” 16.

⁷³ Kenneth Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 7. On some remarkable collections of manuscripts and their study, see Wang Ch’iu-kuei 王秋桂, ed., *Min-su ch’ü-i ts’ung-shu*, and *Zhongguo chuantong keyiben hui-bian*; and John Lagerwey, *Traditional Hakka Society Series*. For a collection of introductions to some of these materials and reports, see Daniel L. Overmyer, ed., *Ethnography in China Today: A Critical Assessment of Research Methods and Results* (Taipei: Yuan-Liou, 2002); and for studies using other forms of scripture, see David Johnson, ed., *Ritual and Scripture in Chinese Popular Religion: Five Studies* (Berkeley, CA: Publications of the Chinese Popular Culture Project, 1995).

⁷⁴ Kenneth Dean, “Local Communal Religion in Contemporary Southeast China,” in *Religion in China Today*, ed. Daniel L. Overmyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 32–52.

within its local social and cultural context. The study of local Chinese religion as it is embedded in society has finally brought the field to the point—once envisioned by Catherine Bell—where we can “confess our failure to find adequate generalizations” about Chinese religions and the need to attend to (what Arthur Wolf called) the “stubborn facts.”⁷⁵

It is within this interpretive framework, built as it is around work on hand-written documents and their relationship to religion, that I have also tried to situate my discussion of the body of manuscripts found within statues. The Hunan statues, and their manuscripts in particular, provide similar access to the normally impenetrable realm of nonelite religion as it is practiced in local villages and inside the home on the domestic altar. The consecration certificates lead us into the realms of local history, religion, and culture that are not well attested in Chinese printed sources. At the same time, however, these manuscripts force us out into other manuscript archives (such as handwritten ritual manuals, family genealogies, and documents in regional archives that were never destined for print), which are all necessary in order to provide a more robust liturgical, social, and historical context for interpreting their content.⁷⁶ The suggestion that we need to take manuscripts more seriously in the study of Chinese religions should not be understood as an immoderate claim to forswear all printed historical or religious texts. Clearly in the study of such a diverse and problematic topic such as Chinese religions we need to have our hands on as many different types of sources as possible.

Despite the development and spread of printing technology in China—coupled with the trenchant critiques and proscriptions of religion at different junctures in Chinese history—significant manuscript collections survive in unlikely places in contemporary China. The extra effort expended to unearth them promises to be worthwhile, since their contents have already begun to add significant new information not captured in highly edited printed texts.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Bell, “Performance,” 218, drawing on a phrase coined by Arthur Wolf in his “Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors,” in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, ed. Arthur P. Wolf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), 131–82.

⁷⁶ See Chen Zi’ai 陳子艾 and Hua Lan 華瀾 (Alain Arrault), eds., *Xiangzhong zongjiao yu xiangtu shehui diaocha baogao ji* 湘中宗教與鄉土社會調查報告集, 2 vols. For papers from a colloquium of the same name held in Loudi and Shuiche, June 24–29, 2006, and the forthcoming book based on those reports, see Chen Zi’ai 陳子艾 and Hua Lan 華瀾 (Alain Arrault), ed., *Xiangzhong zongjiao yu xiangtu shehui* 湘中宗教與鄉土社會, 3 vols. (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, forthcoming).

⁷⁷ This statement is not merely applicable to the study of Daoism or popular religion but applies equally to the mining of Dunhuang manuscripts and other manuscript collections. On what is possible with Buddhist manuscripts, see, for example, Gao Guofan, *Zhongguo minsu tanwei*, and *Dunhuang minsu ziliao daolun*; and Hao Chunwen 郝春文, *Tanghouqi Wudai Songchu Dunhuang sengni de shehui shenghuo* 唐后期五代宋初敦煌僧尼的社会生活 [The social lives of monks and nuns in Dunhuang during the Late Tang, Five Dynasties, and Early Song] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 1998).

The relationship between handwritten manuscripts and print might be compared to Henry Petroski's remarks about the differences between writing in pencil (manuscript) and ink (print) in the West:

The pencil, the tool of doodlers, stands for thinking and creativity. . . . The pencil's graphite . . . is the ephemeral medium of thinkers, planners, drafters, architects, and engineers, the medium to be erased, revised, smudged, obliterated, lost—inked over. Ink, on the other hand, whether in a book or on plans or on a contract, signifies finality and supersedes the pencil drafts and sketches. If early pencilings interest collectors, it is often because of their association with the permanent success written or drawn in ink. Unlike graphite, to which paper is like sandpaper, ink flows smoothly and fills in the nooks and crannies of creation. Ink is the cosmetic that ideas will wear when they go out in public. Graphite is their dirty truth.⁷⁸

In the study of Chinese religions we still have many “dirty truths” and “stubborn facts” that might yet be revealed through the study of extant manuscripts.

Although Catherine Bell's research on Chinese religions never reached full fruition—making it all the more lamentable that the final chapter of her scholarship will remain unwritten—I hope that this essay has pointed to one of the directions—outside her prolific output on ritual and ritual studies—where her work had a potential impact on the field of Sinology. Since Bell was deeply interested in the study of texts not “simply as expressions or reflections of changing social situations but as dynamic *agents of change*,” it is hoped that a focus on her insights about the nature of Chinese religious texts will invite further discussion about manuscripts in the age of print, even if it is only possible for her to participate in those conversations through the essays and books she left with us.⁷⁹

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⁷⁸ Henry Petroski, *The Pencil: A History of Design and Circumstance* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 6.

⁷⁹ Bell, “Ritualization of Texts,” 369.