

“Wenn es nur einmal so ganz stille wäre...”

On Doing History of Religions, China, and Buddhism Today

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Introduction

Wenn es nur einmal so ganz stille wäre.
Wenn das Zufällige und Ungefähre
verstummt und das nachbarliche Lachen,
wenn das Geräusch, das meine Sinne machen,
mich nicht so sehr verhinderte am Wachen –

Dann könnte ich in einem tausendfachen
Gedanken bis an deinen Rand dich denken

und dich besitzen (nur ein Lächeln lang),
um dich an alles Leben zu verschenken
wie einen Dank.¹

These lines, written more than 120 years ago by Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) and widely disseminated thereafter, resonate with the longing for a “new way of seeing”, a “Neues Sehen” – the longing to understand, to perceive the world as it is, to ponder what it means “to be”.²

1. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Das Stunden-Buch*, Leipzig 1927, 9–10.

2. The concept of “Neues Sehen” is reflected in works such as Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge”, in which the main figure states: “Ich lerne

Can one fathom who is addressed in these lines? The context of the surrounding poems reveals Rilke's search for a God beyond established metaphors, that echoes but goes beyond a Christian mindset. Because of its haziness, it feels more apt. The most desired clarity remains concealed, ambiguity seems to be part of the *conditio humana*, a "must".³

Coming from Chinese Buddhism, Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄 (d. 866 CE), the founder of the *Linji* 臨濟 lineage of Zen- or Chan 禪-Buddhism, comes to my mind. Zen-Buddhism has a track record in Europe as one of the major forms of Buddhism, along with Tibetan and early Theravāda traditions. A thought from the records of Master Linji found its way into the English-speaking world as a popular saying: "If you meet the Buddha, kill him." The passage goes as follows:

If you want to see and understand the Dharma as it is, do not be confused by others. Inwardly and outwardly, kill whatever comes your way: kill Buddhas, kill ancestors, kill Arhats, kill parents, kill relatives, and then you will start to be liberated from the constraints of things, having penetrated through it be naturally free.⁴

What a vigour and aggression. It is hard to kill any form of conceptualization. Mental habits are most persistent to change. Liberation, *mokṣa*, needs determination. This is, what the Linji school is known for – radical means.

sehen. Ich weiß nicht, woran es liegt, es geht alles tiefer in mich ein und bleibt nicht an der Stelle stehen, wo es sonst immer zu Ende war." Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 6, Frankfurt 1966, 710.

3. In contemporary academia, we are cautious to abstain from essentializations and recently studied extensively the notion of ambiguity, and the question of how much ambiguity societies can tolerate. Does one tend to label culturally unfamiliar and differently structured preferences in decision-making as ambiguous? Or do some cultures hold a larger psychological tolerance for ambiguity than others? Is it a sign of a high tolerance of ambiguity if in Chinese art history, the aesthetic ideal of estimating white spaces prevails that makes important spots being painted in detail while large spaces remain untouched by ink and colour? See for example Adam B. Seligman & Robert P. Weller, *Rethinking Pluralism: Ritual, Experience, and Ambiguity*, Oxford 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199915262.001.0001>; Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islam*, Berlin 2011; Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*, New York 2021, <https://doi.org/10.7312/bauer17064>; DFG-Forschungsgruppe 2600: Ambiguität und Unterscheidung. Historisch-kulturelle Dynamiken, 2018, Universität Duisburg-Essen, https://www.uni-due.de/forschungsgruppe_2600/, accessed 10 September 2024. See also the report by Wolfgang Streitböcker, "Lernen, mit Mehrdeutigkeit zu leben", *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, 30 December 2019, <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/ambiguitaetstoleranz-lernen-mit-mehrdeutigkeit-zu-leben-100.html>.

4. Original: 欲得如法見解，但莫受人惑。向里向外，逢著便殺：逢佛殺佛，逢祖殺祖，逢羅漢殺羅漢，逢父母殺父母，逢親眷殺親眷，始得解脫，不與物拘，透脫自在。Records of Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄 (d. 866 AD): *Zhenzhou Linji Huizhao Chanshi yulu* 鎮州臨濟慧照禪師語錄, T. 1985, XLIX: 500b22–26.

The Buddhism it advocates opts for not being attached but at peace with the outer world and its conceptions.

Waning romanticism at the beginning of the last century has much to offer for the history of religions. The wisdom and light of the East shall be uncovered, presuppositional hermeneutical assumptions are taken for granted that culminate in phenomenological approaches. There is a sacred grid that gives shape to all phenomena. The sacred “shows itself” (*med.*, φαίνομαι). With an anthropological constant at hand, comparison becomes easy. Scholars like Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) were able to compose fascinating works weaving distant civilizations together in a meta-narration which represented the accomplishments of the discipline by that time.

Over the past century, distances have shrunk and time contracted. The world seemed increasingly manifold, and hesitance grew together with the awareness to be part of a diversity structured by “European” thought. Eurocentrism became traceable, postcolonial attempts were the order of the day. “What are the hidden secret structures behind the world?” as a question receded into the background. “Wherever analysis leads, we gnaw through it step by step”, became the new agenda.⁵

Comparisons like the one between Rilke and Linji in my introduction have become anachronistic. The humanities are increasingly losing their voice in the orchestra of the sciences. How to tune after somebody who does not produce a “la”, but a whole rainbow of tones on different scales? And what can be expected from the history of religions, from the focus on China and Buddhism today? I would like to reflect on this in the following.

Biographical Notes

No research topic unfolds independently of the researcher’s personal experiences. For all our striving for interpersonally communicable results and a certain ideal of objectivity, the topics we engage in, especially in the humanities, are designed to respond to how we experience the world around us on a large and small scale. Convincing hermeneutics today are aware of the need for the author to reflect on his or her own role in the field. And while there is often little space left in articles to reflect on biographical matters, I

5. The general shift in the self-definition of religious studies as it became part of cultural studies and the various “turns” associated with it led in German *Religionswissenschaft* to a series of introductions that try to line out the new identity of the subject against its historical background: Burkhard Gladigow, *Religionswissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft*, ed. by Christoph Auffarth & Jörg Rüpke, Stuttgart 2005; Udo Tworuschka, *Einführung in die Geschichte der Religionswissenschaft*, Darmstadt 2015; earlier ones: Fritz Stolz, *Grundzüge der Religionswissenschaft*, Göttingen 1988, with a second edition in 1997; Klaus Hock, *Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft*, Darmstadt 2002; Hans G. Kippenberg & Kocku von Stuckrad, *Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft*, Munich 2003.

would like to take this opportunity to introduce some biographical reflections before the following thematic discussion.

I am grateful to my parents and all my immediate and extended family who nourished and accompanied me all these years. When I was about to graduate from school, the world seemed quite well-composed. I had set out to study theology, as I thought: it might wise to think about life, its meaning and purpose, before tackling it. At the same time, I also was concerned that abstract thought might not be satisfying in the long run. One should have gained some practical knowledge after finishing one's studies. As it was not possible to study subjects with fixed schedules such as mathematics or physics at the same time, I chose Sinology. It held the fragrance of work, and one could do a "Sinicum" – ancient Chinese was offered. After Latinum, Graecum, Hebraicum, this was in line with my appreciation of the ancient. We started with about 2000-year-old turtle shells with divination cracks – it took serious effort, but I experienced it also as fascinating, challenging my detective skills as well as mnemonic abilities.

Theology in Münster provided me with a comprehensive *tour d'horizon européen*: What does one do to texts – biblical and beyond – when interpreting them? What were the big philosophical questions across centuries, and how do they link to morality and ethics? We went for a walk through European history with a focus on Christianity – in its early phase including the Middle East – and we included practical matters, the history of pedagogy, group interactions, and rhetoric. Theology meant going through an education that brought the holistic ideals of humanism to perfection. It included other religions – a natural overlap with my Chinese studies as it occurred to me. I became curious about this world out there. As a student assistant at the seminar of religious studies with Annette Wilke, I assisted in shaping the then emerging bachelor's programme in religious studies.

After three years of studying, a scholarship for a one-year-stay in Taiwan gave me the opportunity to explore temples and monasteries. I was curious: How does a monastery function in East Asia? Talking to religious specialists, Buddhists were most open to my questions. Whether during interviews, in the Buddhist youth club, or while potato peeling in the monastery's kitchen – it was fascinating for me to learn about Buddhist life. And I started to wonder: What does an average Buddhist believe in? Do believers hold a certain pride in distancing themselves from their tradition as in Europe? With which movements do they identify? How far is their daily life affected by Buddhist resources? My enthusiasm may have been contagious: With students of religious studies in Münster we travelled to Taiwan in 2005 and

together wrote a little book concentrating on the sensual dimensions – the aesthetics – of religions in the Museum of World Religions in Taipei.⁶

The question of what such urban dwellers believe in when calling themselves Buddhists remained with me as I moved to Belgium. A generous four-year PhD-scholarship had enabled me to study with Ann Heirman at one of the very few Sinological institutes in Europe that focus on Chinese Buddhism. I explored questions like: How is “Buddhism” situated in people’s lives? What is its *Sitz im Leben*, to stay with Gunkel?⁷ What does “Buddhism” bring to modern, urban lives – not in an ideal world, not on the countryside, but here – in modern society? This fascination with the common man and its relation to religion, especially Buddhism and Christianity is what accompanies me until today.

In Erlangen, I was honoured to help building up the IKGf, a research consortium focusing on divination and conceptualizations of the future between Asia and Europe.⁸ Intense years of exquisite international research exchange followed. Michael Lackner gave my research wings and made me understand what it means to build and live an intellectual *fluidum* in which thoughts can flourish and innovation happens. Dinners, travels, tea-times, research groups, and lots of conferences – numerous scholars met in and through Erlangen for the first time and discovered new approaches to their own research.⁹ Topics of divination have thus become more visible in academia, we integrated new words, ideas, and practices into our intellectual worlds and have come a little closer to a less Eurocentric self-understanding. This is, I would say, post-colonial in its best sense.

What made Erlangen a great place seems also to be a characteristic of Lund – for which I am truly delighted to be with you. Coming here entails an encounter with the humanities, with theologians and scholars of

6. Annette Wilke & Esther-Maria Guggenmos, *Im Netz des Indra: Das Museum of World Religions, sein buddhistisches Dialogkonzept und die neue Disziplin Religionsästhetik*, Münster 2008.

7. In how far this concept is still influential in current exegesis has been traced in Samuel Byrskog, “A Century with the *Sitz im Leben*: From Form-Critical Setting to Gospel Community and Beyond”, *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 98 (2007), 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ZNTW.2007.001>.

8. Internationales Kolleg für Geisteswissenschaftliche Forschung (IKGF): “Schicksal, Freiheit und Prognose: Bewältigungsstrategien in Ostasien und Europa”, funded by the BMBF, Friedrich-Alexander Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, 2009–2023.

9. Scholars of this project are to date connected via the *International Society for the Critical Study of Divination*, the *International Journal of Divination and Prognostication*, and the series *Prognostication in History*. A recent issue of the journal contains reflections on the impact of the IKGf such as my own “When the Fox Meets the Hedgehog, Scholars Meet Practitioners, a New Language for Shaping the Future Emerges, and the Humanities Show Genuine Relevancy: the IKGf Erlangen”, *International Journal of Divination and Prognostication* 5 (2024), 19–26, <https://doi.org/10.1163/25899201-bj10008>.

Religious Studies, and across faculties. The History of Religions has an inspiring research seminar. At the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies and beyond, you can meet fantastic colleagues from all over the world – an international atmosphere without which I hardly can imagine any good research happening today. I experience support for research ideas, often competent and efficient organization and flexibility. And I am curious and still discovering what being in Lund might entail. With the intent of inspiring our exchange, I, therefore, line out in the following the topics that motivate my research today.

"Das Zufällige und Ungefähre" – Politics of Religion in East Asia

While I hold great respect for the history of my subject and the personalities connected to it, and while I love to ponder the aesthetics of religion and other fields of discourse, I am convinced this can be no excuse to shy away from our world as it is. I consider the politics of religion in China and East Asia important. Understanding historical connections and rationalities is essential for a balanced perception of the present, and it is also important to perceive the current situation of people in China, of intellectuals, young people, Buddhists and Daoists, ethnic groups like Uighurs and Tibetans, and monotheistic communities like Muslims and Christians. As we live a comfortable life, it is our responsibility, I feel, to be informed, to recognize connections and argumentations, while standing with our convictions. Researching religions today cannot equal privatisation. The reflection about resilience in this context is on the agenda in East Asian Studies here in Lund – and that is a precious reflection also in my view. Religion has a public dimension, internationally, in Europe, and here in Sweden.

Given the current political situation in East Asia, historical knowledge seems to be of growing importance for contemporary research. Resorting to “traditional Chinese culture” (*zhongguo chuantong wenhua* 中國傳統文化) in order to legitimize itself as a world-power is one of the characteristics of China today that shapes the increasing control of religious life on the Mainland. I follow and teach topics related to the politics of religion. Recently, it is especially established terms of Western research like the “Silk Road” or the “Sinicization” of religions that surface in contemporary politics.¹⁰ It seems that the nostalgic vibes of these terms – well rooted in traditional Western scholarship – are taken up to serve political and economic interests. At the same time, religious, especially Christian, life and thought are part of a vivid intellectual sphere in China and a public Chinese theology is

10. The current developments that go along with the sinicization of Chinese religions are well documented in Richard Madsen (ed.), *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below*, Leiden 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004465183>.

emerging. I enjoy the exchange with Sino-Christian Studies and the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies at Tao Feng Shan in Hongkong.

Two Subjects

Political developments come and go with the tide of time. They might come with sharp regulations regarding religious life, but they are not necessarily the driving force behind its development. Therefore, I will introduce two topics of my current research in the following that I consider to be indicative of current religious change in Greater China. These are the topics of Life Education and recent changes in the history of emotions.

Longing for Silence? Life Education as a New School Subject in Greater China
“Life Education” – mostly referred to as *shengming jiaoyu* 生命教育 in Chinese – is a school subject that over the past twenty years has been rising simultaneously all over Greater China in order to cope with a comparatively high rate of juvenile suicides in an educational system geared towards success and career. It intends to provide children with orientation in life and includes moral, philosophical, and practical elements like health education. Depending on the region, it can integrate religious thought and practice or be part of religious education as in the case of Hongkong, but also be conceptualized without any explicit religious notions as in the case of Mainland China.¹¹ Following John Lee, Life Education in China is meant to “provide a non-cognitive aspect of student development and adopts a humanistic,

11. The case of Mainland China is different from Taiwan as well as Hong Kong. In Taiwan, religious education was in the past decades and is to this date officially not integrated into the curriculum since school education is regarded as secular. In Mainland China, atheism is part of its communist heritage. A state-driven secularization process emphasizes moral, civil, and ethnic elements instead of religious education. See Zhenzhou Zhao & Nazim Aman Hunzai, “Religious Education in China: Religious Diversity and Citizenship Building”, in Kerry J. Kennedy & John Chi-Kin Lee (eds.), *Religious Education in Asia: Spiritual Diversity in Globalized Times*, Abingdon 2022, 12–27. When in the first decade of the twenty-first century a revival of religious life was witnessed, calls for opening public education to broader teaching about religious diversity arose. See Hirotaka Nanbu, “Religion in Chinese Education: From Denial to Cooperation”, *British Journal of Religious Education* 30 (2008), 223–234, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200802170151>; Zhiyan Teng 滕志妍, *Shisu shidai de zongjiao yu xuexiao jiaoyu guanxi wenti yanjiu – zhengce jiedu yu anli toushi* 世俗时代的宗教与学校教育关系问题研究—政策解读与案例透视 [A Study on the Relation between Religion and School Education in the Secular Age. Interpreting Policies and Analyzing Cases], doctoral dissertation, Northwest Normal University, 2009. Since 2012, religions are again under close state supervision and the promotion of Life Education has been described by scholars as a “state-controlled substitute for religious education”. See Satoko Fujiwara, “Religion and Education in East Asia”, in Liam Francis Gearon & Arniika Kuusisto (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Education*, Oxford forthcoming. A first overview about current practices of Life Education and historical traces can be found in Esther-Maria Guggenmos, “Life Education in Contemporary Greater China – Are Religions Back as Players in Public Education?”, *Religions and Christianity in Today's China* 14 (2024), 38–41.

developmental, and caring approach that values subjectivity, individuality, and spirituality”.¹² In Taiwan, five elements of Life Education have been defined over time that comprise religious, health, career, ethical, as well as “life-and-death” education.

The rise of the subject is interesting in a double perspective: On the one hand, for the first time in decades, public education and religion meet in Taiwan. After the Second World War, both nationalists as well as communists saw education as public and set it apart from knowledge about religion as well as the influence of religious players. Is this relation about to change in Taiwan? On the other hand, European societies are transforming through flows of migration. In contemporary Europe, secular spaces increase, organized Christian belief fades away, and faith-based communities and spiritual practices diversify. Compared to other countries, Sweden introduced knowledge about different religions into the school curriculum early, already in the 1960s. Other parts of Europe still offer confessional religious education that is diversifying. In Sweden, there is an ongoing reflection on how to present different cultures and religions adequately and how the presentation of non-Christian religions is structured on ideas once established by Christians for understanding non-Christians.¹³ In other parts of Europe, recently growing religious communities develop their agendas in new confessionally bound curricula. In this context, it might be enriching to see how in East Asia a new subject evolves that with a similar intent aims at providing students with orientation and tools of meaning-making in their lives.

Let us have a short look at a current Life Education coursebook from Taiwan. It is one of the possible textbooks for Life Education in secondary high schools in Taiwan. If one flips through the pages, one discovers a reflection-centred approach where “Western” and East Asian elements intermingle. The book closes with a chapter on spirituality and self-cultivation. At the beginning, one finds categorizations such as the one shown in Figure 1 – a page describing four ways of “Western intellectuals” to describe the value of people, namely scientific, moral, artistic, and religious ones.

One will also find stories of people benefitting society and finding joy in this. Just by looking at the illustrations, it is obvious that these actions reflect religious motifs – the elderly man shown in this reprinted newspaper article of the textbook (see Figure 2) has put a sticker on his vehicle that

12. John Chi-Kin Lee, Stephen Yam-Wing Yip & Raymond Ho-Man Kong, “Introduction: Life and Moral Education in the Greater China Region”, in John Chi-Kin Lee, Stephen Yam-Wing Yip & Raymond Ho-Man Kong (eds.), *Life and Moral Education in Greater China*, London 2021, 4.

13. Jenny Berglund, “Swedish Religion Education in Public Schools – Objective and Neutral or a Marination into Lutheran Protestantism?”, *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 11 (2022), 109–121, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ojlr/rwaco18>.



Figure 1. Illustration of different views by Western intellectuals “on the central values of humans” (dui 「ren」 de hexin jiazhi 對「人」的核心價值), Pan Xiaohui 潘小慧 (ed.), Shengming jiaoyu 生命教育 [Life Education], Taipei: Ouxin 謳馨 2021, 38.



Figure 2. Newspaper article for student inspiration with Pure Land Buddhist background. Pan Xiaohui (ed.): Shengming jiaoyu, Taipei: Ouxin 2021, 63.



Figure 3. Religiously explicit passages towards the end of the book. Pan Xiaohui (ed.), Shengming jiaoyu, Taipei: Ouxin 2021, 112–113.

reads “*Namo Amitufo* 南無阿彌陀佛” – “Praise be to Buddha Amitabha”, which is common for Pure Land Buddhists.

Only on the final pages of the textbook (see Figure 3), there are more religiously explicit wisdom quotes from historical and public religious figures. Besides a quotation of Zhuangzi (BCE, historicity and dates uncertain), referred to as one of the founders of Daoism, we find in our example a Roman Catholic cardinal, a quotation from a Buddhist sūtra and from an Engaged Buddhist leader. Again, the Engaged Buddhist is not denoted as such, but background information is largely omitted – probably with the aim in mind to inspire more than to inform.

This short excursion shows that the entanglement between religion and culture is complex and has to be seen against its historical background. With the advent of Chinese modernity around 1900, major shifts in mental maps occurred across East Asia. Probably through the translatory efforts of Japanese *literati*, the term “*zongjiao* 宗教” was introduced into East Asian languages as a neologism for the hitherto unknown word “religion” and “a self-consciously ‘religious’ field was opened in China, [driven] both by Christian missionaries and by secularizing political reformers and revolutionaries”.¹⁴ In Imperial China, the emperor was considered Son of Heaven, and the legitimacy of the state was based on a shared cosmic framework. Untouched by this, local religious life unfolded in so far as it did not interfere with state and rulership legitimacy. A social movement had to be considered “orthodox”, otherwise its “heretical” nature could be seen as potentially endangering the state. With the rise of the nation state in the first half of the twentieth century, we see a new dichotomy arising that replaces the orthodox-heretic binary: The new term “religion” came in contrast with “superstition” (*mixin* 迷信).¹⁵ Being officially recognised as a “religion” leads to the general protection of religious activities until today, while forms of “superstition” go along with persecution in Mainland China. “Religion” in

14. Vincent Goossaert & David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, Chicago 2010, 10. On the emergence of *zongjiao*, see also Vincent Goossaert, “1898: The Beginning of the End for Chinese Religion?”, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 65 (2006), 307–336, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911806000003>; Vincent Goossaert, “L’invention des ‘religions’ en Chine moderne”, in Anne Cheng (ed.), *La pensée en Chine aujourd’hui*, Paris 2007, 185–213; Tim H. Barrett & Francesca Tarocco, “Terminology and Religious Identity: Buddhism and the Genealogy of the Term *Zongjiao*”, in Volkhard Krech & Marion Steinecke (eds.), *Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe: Encounters, Notions, and Comparative Perspectives*, Leiden 2012, 307–319, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004225350_022; Mitsutoshi Horii, *The Category of “Religion” in Contemporary Japan: Shūkyō and Temple Buddhism*, Cham 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73570-2>; Christian Meyer, “*Zongjiao* als chinesischer Religionsbegriff? Genealogische Anmerkungen zu seiner Entwicklung seit der späten Qing-Zeit”, *China heute* 39 (2020), 206–217.

15. See Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity*, Cambridge, MA 2010.

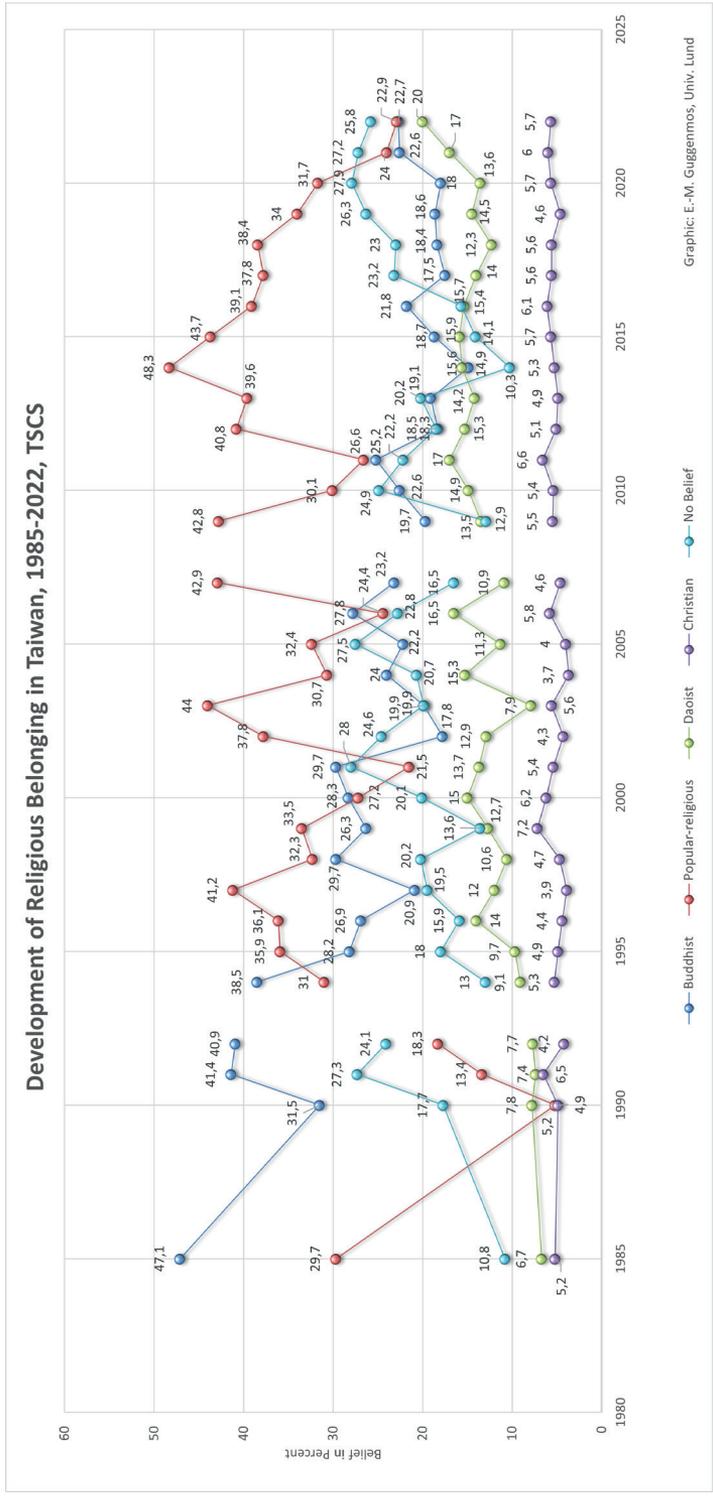


Figure 4. Development of religious affiliation in Taiwan 1985–2022 according to the Taiwan Social Change Survey conducted by Academia Sinica.

this frame served a concrete function and did not reflect socially grown categories of distinction. Whether it was nationalists or communists, “religion” was something seen with caution and suspicion, of colonial flavour, and certainly nothing that would be directly associated with moral and value orientation – an orientation, “Confucianism” in its variations and the connected civil service examinations had secured over centuries. With different results, both sides aimed at the renewal of morality among citizens and regulating religion was a necessity, a “political civilizing project” that replaced the established mode of local social organization known as popular religion.¹⁶ Whether in Taiwan or in Mainland China today, moral education and classes about citizenship are therefore part of regular public education. That “religions” could be of essential importance for the moral orientation of citizens is an idea that is less familiar to the intellectual history of Imperial China that has reverberated in subsequent times.

This cultural history is of direct impact on religious affiliation in Taiwan today, as shown in Figure 4. It shows the answer to the question “What religion do you believe in?” in Taiwan over the last thirty years according to the *Taiwan Social Change Survey*. It is characterized by its volatility – belonging is not something constant and this has to do with the fact that “religion” is not linked to a strong identity marker in Taiwan. Traditionally, “religious practices” are chosen in concrete situations by lay people in connection with the expected efficacy (*ling* 靈) and exclusive religious belonging is something for experts, like priests, but not for commoners.¹⁷

While the concept of religion took its time to become rooted in East Asia, in the course of the twentieth century Christians and Buddhists became more present in society. Protestants and also Catholics engaged in their missionary activities in public education.¹⁸ They fostered social change through the transformation of the educational landscape, enabled the education of women, and offered physical education and sports up to Western medicine. With the May Fourth Movement in 1919, Chinese intellectuals called for reform, critically evaluating traditional sources as well as colonial influences.

16. See Goossaert & Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, 167–198.

17. The graph stabilizes over the past ten years. During this process, the option to distance oneself from “religion” seems to grow, while the popular religious option is obviously waning. To what degree this reflects a recent secularization process lies beyond the scope of this article.

18. For a first overview of this development, see for example Kathleen L. Lodwick, *How Christianity Came to China: A Brief History*, Minneapolis, MN 2016, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt19qgfm7>. For the case of Swedish missionaries, see research in Chinese by Wang Jianping 王建平 and the English monograph by Erik Sidenvall, *The Making of Manhood among Swedish Missionaries in China and Mongolia, c. 1890–c. 1914*, Leiden 2009, <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004174085.i-192>.

The victory of the forces of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 led to the expulsion of missionary societies from China.

Likewise, Buddhism in the first half of the twentieth century saw a reform period in which monks such as Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947) engaged in the reorganization of the monastic community and in reflecting Buddhist doctrine under the premises of Asian modernity. The reformation of the monastic community went along with a new orientation towards society. Engagement in social service and educational activities was now seen as crucial. Lay people started to be taken seriously as practitioners and meditation practices were introduced to a broader public. This major movement in East Asian Buddhism is today often labelled as the start of “Engaged Buddhism”¹⁹ – and I am delighted that the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies in Lund will be able to provide a course on this subject in the coming year together with the University of Denver.

It is against this background that research on Life Education in relation to religious agency wins its topicality.²⁰ On the one hand, East Asian moral education has a long-standing tradition broadly independent from religious players but rich in Confucian heritage. On the other hand, religions in the past and present – Christian missionaries, Buddhist organizations and contemporary organizations active in Life Education – help to realize educational goals and shape the worldview and mindset of pupils. Political trust in religious organizations seems to increase in the case of Taiwan, religious agents are more confident in shaping the future of Hong Kong due to their colonial heritage, while on the mainland social and educational engagement is not formally affiliated with religious players. This amalgam leads to oscillations and notions of ambiguity across Greater China with Life Education proving to be a lens through which we can trace the transformation and reformulation of the religious field in contemporary East Asian societies.

19. On the concept of Engaged Buddhism and its practice, see Esther-Maria Guggenmos, “Engaged Buddhism in Taiwan? On the Profile of Contemporary Buddhism in Taiwan”, in Anita Sharma (ed.), *Buddhism in East Asia: Aspects of History’s First Universal Religion Presented in Modern Context*, Delhi 2012, 226–251. A more recent overview with a focus on American movements is also available in Ann Gleig, “Engaged Buddhism”, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, 28 June 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.755>.

20. We approached the relation between religion and education in a first, small symposium in 2023. See Esther-Maria Guggenmos, “Report: Symposium ‘Shaping the Outlook on Life – Education and Religion in Chinese Contexts’”, *Religions and Christianity in Today’s China* 13 (2023), 23–26.

"Das Geräusch, das meine Sinne machen" – Consumerism and the History of Emotions

The second topic I would like to present in this context concerns the history of emotions. Globally, the transformation of the religious field during the twentieth century has seen a general shift. After religious life expressed itself through the options of nation-state models, we see that the global markets offer new opportunities from around the 1980s onwards. Religion is no longer shaped institutionally through the state. Consumption-driven capitalism and neoliberalism lead to the emergence of new forms of a rising "spirituality". François Gauthier recently embarked on the endeavour to describe this transformation and sees in it an "axial shift" reminding us of fundamental changes once elaborated by Karl Jaspers.²¹ Within this spectrum of social change where "consumerism and neoliberalism are the background against which to think religious change",²² the private self becomes, with Eva Illouz, "publicly performed and harnessed to the discourses and values of the economic and political spheres".²³ Global capitalism in the religious field manifests itself as a distinct emotional culture.

I first came across these changes in the history of emotions when I traced a Chinese Buddhist divinatory ritual across dynasties. Written in China in the late sixth century, the *Sūtra on the Divination of the Effect of Good and Evil Actions* (*Zhancha shan'e yebao jing* 占察善惡業報經, T. 839) delivers an instruction to ritually throw dice in order to determine one's karmic debt with the intent to find out about the degree of repentance needed to attain liberation. Inspired by Indian sources but moulding the procedure into a Chinese mindset, the apocryphal scripture was designed as an individual practice – which makes it hard to trace it historically. It has been practised, forbidden, and later been reintegrated into the Buddhist canon. For about a decade, I worked on and off on different aspects of this ritual, the text and its cultural history. Doing so, I became aware that this ritual and the development of its practice reflect major changes in the history of emotions. The ritual's characteristic is that it statistically produces incoherent throws that are interpreted as consequences of an impure mind in need of purification. During its practice, one must overcome the repulsion that inevitably unfolds when obtaining answers through the throw of dice that do not match the question one has in mind. By sticking to the ritual, a mindset is fostered that helps advance further in Buddhist practice.

21. See François Gauthier, *Religion, Modernity, Globalisation: Nation-State to Market*, Abingdon 2021, 288. The term "Achszeit" was coined by Karl Jaspers in 1950 in his *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*.

22. Gauthier, *Religion, Modernity, Globalisation*, 287.

23. Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, Cambridge 2007, 4.

The text starts by settling itself in the age of the *semblance dharma*, an apocalyptic time when the world enters its final stage. This time is emotionally challenging, a time of suffering that easily leads to the rise of negative emotions, namely covetousness, anger, jealousy, and arrogance (*tan* 貪, *chen* 瞋, *jidu* 嫉妬, *woman* 我慢). People seek their personal advantage, worry about daily needs, and are described as fearful and weak (*qieruo* 怯弱) about the course of the world. According to the text, these negative emotions result in being caught in regret and a *web of doubts* (*yiwang* 疑網), both of which hinder spiritual progress and cause the disappearance of the Buddhist teaching in the world. In this situation, the sūtra suggests that through ritual practice the unstable emotions be countered by establishing new mental attitudes of sincerity and respect (*zhixin jingli* 至心敬禮).

The process of gradually gaining conscious control over emotions is accompanied by a framing that crosses sensual spheres. Acoustically, it shall be quiet. Visually, it shall be beautifully decorated. On an olfactory level, one shall “seek to collect fragrance and flowers.” One shall purify one’s own body by bathing and actively build up a new acoustic realm through chanting. In that way, “single-minded, respectful worship” (*yixin jingli* 一心敬禮) is about to start.

In the first half of the seventeenth century, the late Ming dynasty, we know about a scholar-monk, Ouyi Zhixu 藕益智旭 (1599–1655), considered one of the four eminent monks of his time as well as the ninth patriarch of the Pure Land school. Characteristic of his writings is the way he creatively embraces different Buddhist and other Chinese traditions when engaging with schools – ranging from Pure Land, over Tiantai, to Chan traditions – and commenting on Confucian or Daoist classics while refuting Jesuit writings.

Ouyi Zhixu’s disciples kept records in which he is described as performing the above-described divinatory dice ritual. As a monk, he is committed to its practice, throws its dice, takes the results seriously, answers through desperation and tears, and draws practical consequences: After casting the lot of a Śrāmaṇera, a novice monk, he returns his monastic precepts at the age of 34. He would not be mature enough to hold his monastic obligations as he failed in following them in the past, is his interpretation of the throw of dice. Consistently, he returns the precepts until he receives the result of purity of body, speech, and mind – this is twelve years later, in 1645. Meanwhile, he keeps up his practice of the *Zhancha*. Emotional struggles and practical consequences that he subscribes to for years – this ritual is shaping Ouyi Zhixu’s outlook on life and that entails a deep emotional involvement in its practice.

Especially in the *Lingfeng zonglun* 靈峰宗論, which compiles various personal writings of Ouyi Zhixu, the significance of dealing with and overcoming emotions by throwing dice becomes obvious. The ritual is intended to encourage sincerity (*cheng* 誠, *zhixin*) and self-recognition including shame (*cankui* 慚愧) about one's past and present actions. Ouyi experiences the practice of this ritual as something that helps him gain stability in his faith and overcome doubts and worries. He describes his decision to give up his precepts in a letter to a group of monks:

At Xihu, I performed the ritual four times [for] seven [days each], but did not receive the mark of purity. Last year, I performed the ritual two times [for] seven [days each], but did not receive it. This year, I entered the mountains, performed the ritual once [for] seven [days], and even one day I did not receive it [i.e. the mark of purity]. While performing repentance, afflictions and habitual energies appeared, and I felt abnormal. Therefore, I decided to settle my mind. I completely abandoned the pure precepts of a novice monk and became a disciple only who has taken the three refuges.²⁴

If we look at contemporary practices, such an intensive dedication of a single person is rarely a socially shared experience. Monastics at Pushou Temple of Wutai Mountain where the dice ritual was included in the regular curriculum neither report on similar intensive practices nor do they talk about any practitioners that can report anything comparable to Ouyi Zhixu. In contrast, a new social form of organization seems to prevail: the dice ritual is practised individually but learned and discussed in groups. In addition, the emotionally challenging element of constant rejection by non-matching results leads to ritual redesign and reinterpretation.

In contemporary Taiwan, urban dwellers gather under the guidance of a diviner who offers this method among others. Familiar with and flexible in handling numbers and interpreting divination results, he cherishes this ritual as a way of communication with the Bodhisattva addressed and sees himself as helping this communication by unfolding the interpretation of results. For him, one thing is certain: The annoyance of the ritual stems from a problematic translation of the assumed Indian original.

24. Original: 乃西湖禮四七。不得清淨輪相。去年禮二七不得。今入山禮一七。又一日仍不得。禮懺時煩惱習氣現起。更覺異常。故發決定心。盡捨菩薩沙彌所有淨戒。作一但三歸弟子。In: *Lingfeng zonglun* 靈峰宗論, T.17:10974–10975. The translation partly follows Beverley McGuire, “Seeing Suchness: Emotional and Material Means of Perceiving Reality in Chinese Buddhist Divination Rituals”, in Barbara Schuler (ed.), *Historicizing Emotions: Practices and Objects in India, China, and Japan*, Leiden 2018, 265, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004352964_010.

“A bodhisattva, the personified expression of compassion, would never have tortured you like this”, he is sure. Consistently, he changes the interpretation into more open formats, including past lives and the unexpected. He assembles a group that undergoes training sessions and enjoys dicing. The ritual is playfully practised, and the exchange among group members is socially entertaining. One-to-one consultations are possible. Far from the emotional journey that Ouyi describes in his writings, the followers of this group engage in a relaxed and vivid exchange, train the interpretation of results, and rather abstain from becoming too emotionally involved. Should I sign this lease? Should I open that business? And if it gets more serious maybe: Is my private relationship the right one for me? The group practice has emotional in-depth moments, but these normally do not last long. The attractivity of the practice connects to the refreshing experience of jointly exploring new patterns of thought and action.

Above, I started with the hypothesis that global capitalism in the religious field shapes a distinct emotional culture. What we witness here through the repeated reinvention of a dicing ritual might reflect this general shift, I dare say.

The practice of the dice oracle illustrates how emotions surface ritually in the form of consumable units, of a saleable size, able to be exposed and discussed in the public. The pressure of decision-making becomes negotiable in the procedure, contradictory emotions processable, and moral responsibilities alleviated and integrated into karmic argumentations. In these discourses, the boundaries of the private erode and the emotions shared unfold in the context of a capitalist setting. “The sound of the senses”, as Rilke called it, changes, and the longing for “silence” can turn into a threat to the one addicted to the playful immersion in the rolling of dice. The participants in this ritual become used to emotions as evoked on purpose, as played with. The consumer is engaged in various, not necessarily coherent affective acts – and one recognizes that the social media addict might delight in this activity hanging out in a fragmented world of interactions driven by what Eva Illouz calls “emodities” – marketable, well-proportioned units of emotions.

The shift from “emotion” to “emodity” in the context of consumer capitalism is a change that I consider of significant impact on religious life and the attractivity of established religious rituals. This is by no means restricted to East Asia but affects religious life on a global scale. I would love to explore this topic jointly in a comparative perspective. François Gauthier expands his research to Indonesia, a Muslim-majority country of the so-called Global South, for testing new models in the sociology of religion. But how would his ideas sound in the Chinese-speaking world? In her essay on

“Cold Intimacies”, Eva Illouz mainly remains within the American context of a therapeutic culture that evolved from the impact of C.G. Jung (1875–1961). Could a Taiwanese diviner serve a similar function as Oprah Winfrey, whom Eva Illouz reflects upon? What is the impact of consumer capitalism upon religious life in Greater China and under mainland conditions, how can it be understood in democratic and merchandizing-oriented Taiwan? The major shift in the history of emotions that comes along with forms of consumer cultures will to a large extent shape the global future. Through my research on the aesthetics of religion – the sensory dimensions of religion – and the history of emotions, I therefore intend to enrich through a global perspective our current reflections in the sociology of religion. Ritual contexts such as the one above that can be traced in the *longue durée* are promising candidates for such an endeavour. At the same time, this kind of research needs what one might call a “Resonanzboden” (Hartmut Rosa) – the inspiring intellectual life here in Lund is a great prerequisite for this.

"Wachen" – An Existential Awareness

Reflecting on the necessity and the possibility of an agenda for the coming years has been a pleasure. Not being forgetful about the current politics of religion including the realities of fellow humans while trying to fathom religious life under the conditions and maybe auspices of Chinese intellectual and social history, is a task that hopefully will lead to a slightly better understanding and a more equal representation of world cultures in the international discourse. At the same time, this is meaningless without the exchange across borders as we explore new vocabulary in the study of religions and more comprehensive approaches to religious life that I connect to the study of the aesthetics of religion.

In that sense, I would hope that together with Rilke we are able to nourish our longing for silence, do not retreat to the soothing comfort of the capitalist production of unwanted knowledge, but have the courage to tackle the topics that knock on our doors. Doing religious studies, one enters in my experience a precious forum of thought and might undergo an analytical turn in thinking. I look forward to genuine conversations and joint endeavours. And I look forward to exchanges with students, who are often even closer to this sense of what drives us all, the fragrance of life. May the study of the history of religions be something that broadens horizons and leads into the plains of intellectual wit. ▲

SUMMARY

This article is a revised version of the inaugural lecture delivered on 5 October 2023, on the occasion of the author's appointment as Professor of History of Religions at Lund University. It opens by depicting fundamental changes in the study of the history of religions in the twentieth century, followed by biographical notes, including her research on lay Buddhism in urban Taiwan, the emphasis on sensual dimensions of religious practice and the aesthetics of religion, and international academic networking in the analysis of practices of prognostication between Asia and Europe. Three areas are outlined that are central to the author's current research. It is pointed out that a focus on religion in contemporary society certainly includes a healthy awareness of current developments in the politics of religion, particularly in East Asia. In addition, the article addresses two fields of research that the author is currently engaged in: (1) The emergence of "Life Education" as a school subject in Greater China and the pedagogical shift that goes along with it. Particularly in Taiwan, this new subject is tailored to create a space for juveniles to develop self-reflection and life orientation in a success-oriented society while a new trust in religious organizations leads to the organizations' active engagement in these developments. The author is especially interested in how the transforming relationship between religion and public education gains special relevance in a comparative perspective between Asia and Europe. (2) Religious change in East Asia is evident in Buddhist ritual practices that are impacted by a consumer society that moulds emotionally profound experiences into marketable and distinct units that Eva Illouz has termed "emodities". Religious practices are subject to change in our contemporary world as they are reshaped by a growing global digitalized consumer culture. Tracing these changes leads to a deeper understanding of the underlying forces that distinctly reshape contemporary religious life.