

14 A Theory of Ritual Polyphony in Chinese Religious Performances

Kenneth Dean

Abstract

This chapter articulates a theory of ritual polyphony in Chinese religions. The first and second sections explore the role of sound and embodiment in early Chinese discussions of music and dance and the rhythmic movements of the cosmos. The third section introduces Chinese medieval Daoist discussions of the cosmic whistling of Daoist recluses, and the role of cosmogenic sonic energies embedded within Sanskrit syllables and spells within Daoist scriptures and liturgy. The final section opens up a larger perspective on sonic forces in contemporary local communal ritual events in Southeast China and Southeast Asia, in which both Daoist and earlier conceptions of the role of music and dance play a role.

Keywords: Daoism, music in Chinese religions, Zhuangzi, Xunzi, Lingbao

Introduction

This essay outlines a textual-historical background and a theory of ritual polyphony within contemporary local communal ritual events of Southeast China. The first section introduces the idea of ontogenetic material flows of sound energy found in Daoist discussions of the “pipes of heaven” in the *Zhuangzi* (late 4th century BCE). The second section turns to Confucian thinker Xunzi’s (c. 310–235 BCE) ideas on the role of music as unifying the participants while at the same time key aspects of the ritual differentiate people in terms of rank and power. The third section explores Buddhist ideas of Indian origin on the cosmogenic role of sonic energies embedded within Sanskrit syllables and spells found in the Lingbao (“Supernatural Treasure”) Daoist scriptures and liturgies of the 4th century CE. The final

section explores how Daoist, Confucian, and Buddhist conceptions of the role of sound all enter into forms of ritual polyphony within current ritual events in Southeast China.

Early Daoist theories of the ontogenetic powers of sound

You hear the pipes of men, don't you, but not yet the pipes of Earth; the pipes of Earth, but not yet the pipes of Heaven."

"I venture to ask the secret of it."

"That hugest of clumps of soil [the earth] blows out breath, by name the 'wind'. Better if it were never to start up, for whenever it does ten thousand hollow places burst out howling, and don't tell me you have never heard how the hubbub swells! The recesses in mountain forests, the hollows that pit great trees a hundred spans round, are like nostrils, like mouths, like ears, like sockets, like bowls, like mortars, like pools, like puddles. Hooting, hissing, sniffing, sucking, mumbling, moaning, whistling, wailing, the winds ahead sing out AAAH!, the winds behind answer EEEH!. Breezes strike up a tiny chorus, the whirlwind a mighty chorus. Then the gale has passed, all the hollows empty, and don't tell me you have never seen how the quivering slows and settles!

"The pipes of Earth, these are the various hollows; the pipes of men, these are rows of [bamboo] tubes. Let me ask about the pipes of Heaven?"

"Who is it that puffs out the myriad which are never the same, who in their self-ending is sealing them up, in the self-choosing is impelling the force into them."

Chuang-tzu, The Inner Chapters, Ch. 2: Qiwulun (The sorting which evens things out) (translated in Graham 1982)

Zhuangzi's idea of the pipes of heaven is similar to the concept of sonic flux developed by Cox (2018). Cox builds on theories of sound and musical creativity in Nietzsche and Deleuze, to generate a materialist theory of sound. He defines sonic flux as "a notion of sound as an immemorial material flow to which human expressions contribute but that precedes and exceeds those expressions" (Cox 2018, 2). Deleuze commented that music has the capacity to "render non-sonorous forces sonorous." He also wrote that "one can conceive of a continuous acoustic flow that traverses the world and that even encompasses silence. A musician is someone who samples (*prélève*) something from this flow." (quoted in Cox 2018, 12). Cox (2018, 20) concludes that "sound is immanent, differential, and ever in flux, and the forces and

intensities it presents are themselves the results of contingent historical processes.” The concept of sonic flux underlies the discussion below of ritual rhythm, tempo, and polyphony in the local communal ritual events of Southeast China.

Passages from the chapters on music and ritual in the *Xunzi* (3rd century BCE)

Music is joy, an unavoidable human disposition. So, people cannot be without music; if they feel joy, they must express it in sound and give it shape in movement. The way of human beings is such that changes in the motions of their nature are completely contained in these sounds and movements. So, people cannot be without joy, and their joy cannot be without shape, but if it takes shape and does not accord with the Way, then there will inevitably be chaos.... Sounds and music enter into people deeply and transform people quickly. Therefore, the former kings carefully made for these things a proper pattern.... *Music unites, and ritual differentiates. Together the combination of ritual and music governs the human heart....* To penetrate to the root and encompass all change—this is the essential disposition of music.

Xunzi, Ch. 20 on *Music* (translated in Hutton 2015, 218–21, with modifications and emphasized passages)

Confucian thinker Xunzi (c. 310–235 BCE) suggests that music is an inexorable expression of joyous feelings, but that the expression of these feelings was carefully channeled by the sage kings into ritual forms to prevent chaos and depravity. In his chapter on *Ritual*, Xunzi states:

From what did ritual arise? I say: Humans are born having desires. When they have desires but do not get the objects of their desire, then they cannot but seek some means of satisfaction. If there is no measure or limit to their seeking, then they cannot help but struggle with each other. If they struggle with each other then there will be chaos, and if there is chaos then they will be impoverished. The former kings hated such chaos, and so they established rituals and yi in order to divide things among people, to nurture their desires, and to satisfy their seeking.... Thus, ritual is a means of nurture. The gentleman not only obtains its nurturing, but also loves its differentiations. What is meant by “differentiations”? I say: It is for noble and lowly to

have their proper ranking, for elder and youth to have their proper distance, and for poor and rich, humble and eminent each to have their proper weights.

Xunzi, Ch. 19, *Ritual* (in Hutton 2015, 201)

Here ritual is designed to intervene at a very basic level, regulating needs and desires, and circulating limited goods in a nurturing, controlled process of exchange. This exchange produces value, as seen in hierarchical status, and in the status of the sage:

Ritual takes resources and goods as its implements. It takes noble and lowly as its patterns. It takes abundance and scarcity as its differentiations. It takes elevating some and lowering others as its essentials. When patterning and order are made bountiful, and the dispositions and implements are limited, this is the most elevated state of ritual.... And so, being generous is due to the accumulated richness of ritual. Being great is due to the vastness of ritual. Being lofty is due to the elevated nature of ritual. Being enlightened is due to the exhaustive nature of ritual.

Xunzi, *Ritual* (in Hutton 2015, 202)

One can find here a general theory of ritual that can be analyzed in terms of Gilles Deleuze's three syntheses. Deleuze (1990) outlined three syntheses underlying the formation of the perceiving subject within a pre-existing field of forces, namely the connective, disjunctive, and conjunctive syntheses. This is a reworking of Kantian syntheses without calling for a transcendental principle of apperception to link them all into a subjective unity. Deleuze first applied the syntheses to the process of a child learning a language, first stringing together sounds (mama, dada), then contracting and inventing words, and then linking these words in series—all before learning to speak. In his work with Guattari, Deleuze expanded the application of the three syntheses—applying them to a wide range of processes of becoming and desiring production (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Smith et al. 2018). Thomas Lamarre (2018) interprets the three syntheses broadly as follows: the connective synthesis is the production of production; the disjunctive synthesis is the production of distribution; the conjunctive synthesis is the production of consumption.

This reading enables us to apply the syntheses to the analysis of ritual processes outlined by Xunzi. These processes consist of:

- 1) a connective synthesis—a bringing together of bodies, resources and goods—the implements of ritual—the production of production;

2) a disjunctive synthesis—the selective distribution of scarce or abundant, noble or lowly goods and statuses in a process of differentiating and patterning—the production of distribution; and

3) a conjunctive synthesis in the establishment of value within hierarchical status through the lowering or elevating of individuals within the ritual through the graded consumption of goods and resources, thereby generating prestige and confirming sagely enlightenment—a production of consumption.

Three levels of ritual are outlined, each working these syntheses in different ways. The sage works across all three levels, as the moving center of the gathering and distribution of goods, ranks, and values. His generosity is based in the “accumulated richness of ritual” (its excess of goods, which he distributes). His greatness is due to the vastness of ritual. The elevated and exhaustive nature of ritual is the source of his lofty enlightenment. Ritual is the reworking of individual needs and social ordering in the production of hierarchical value and the elevation of the sage to “a regulating centre (the Dao), abstracted from the ritual function of the Ruler” (Palmer 2019). Xunzi reminds us that music and dance are embodiments of ritual process, and that ritual process is modeled on and actualizes cosmic processes.

The generation of value in the ritual process is a theme explored by David Graeber in his re-analysis of Mauss’s famous essay on the gift (Graeber 2001). However, here one needs to be cautious not to take Xunzi at face value. Insightful as Xunzi’s theories of ritual, music, and dance may be, we need to recall that he is presenting an idealized image of a sage king designing ritual and music that reflects, produces, and imposes cosmic order—“a model of and model for” the cosmos in Geertz’s (1987) terminology, and one that calls for the kind of historical examination of embodied power relations within symbols proposed by Asad (2009). Cosmo-political social order and the centrality of the sage are the key values, and these can only be achieved by the sage situated at the center, redistributing the goods and resources gathered into the ritual event. Xunzi’s writings need to be seen in historical context, and in the context of an evolving political system, where elements of earlier ritual practices tied to local sacred places and seasonal fertility rites were being overwritten with rituals centered on the rising power of feudal lords, regional kings, and emerging hegemonies. The former village-based ritual orders imply different sets of core values—fertility, health, prosperity—generative series that are not necessarily constrained within a system of give and take (or giving away in order to attain value, fame, centrality) leading to hierarchical rankings. The rise of a unified empire

would fundamentally transform ritual forms, and indeed all social relations, by adding in everywhere an overriding principle of political hierarchical relations linked to an imperial power center.

Buddho-Daoist theories of Brahmanic sound energy and cosmogenesis: Elements of sonic theology within Daoist ritual practices

The “Most Excellent and Mysterious Book of the Supernatural Treasure that Saves Innumerable Human Beings” (*Lingbao wuliang duren shangpin miaojing*, c. 400) is the very first scripture included in the Daoist Canon. The *Book of Salvation* (as it is commonly called) is divided into three parts. The first section tells of the manifestation of the key elements of the scripture as the universe was forming. It was bestowed on the Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Commencement (*Yuanshi tianzun*). He then recited the scripture ten times, causing the entire pantheon of the gods and saints of the Ten Directions (the eight points of the compass, the zenith and the nadir), and all living beings, to gather before him. At that moment, the Heavenly Worthy suspended a pearl, the size of a small grain, in the void. All the myriad gods and beings entered into it, and the earth turned flat (symbolizing peace and equality). The recitation of the revelations returns the universe to its original and pure state. All living beings are saved, as are all their ancestors. The universe is started anew, and all evils are eliminated.

What he recited is provided in part two, namely the “secretly rhyming sounds of the hidden names of the great gods of the Thirty-two Heavens and of all other divine beings.” The recitation of these secret names activates this entire pantheon, including the Demon Kings and other celestial guardians. The third part of the scripture reveals that these secret names are formed from the “Innumerable Sounds of the Secret Language of the Great Brahman (energy) of the Heavens.” These Sanskrit sound vibrations generate the cosmos. The scripture then provides stanzas on the creation of the universe, named the Marvelous Writings of the Primordial Beginning.

The scripture provides some instructions on its use: the scripture is transmitted to “me”—that is to the Dao and to the followers of the Dao—and it should be recited in a Daoist oratory after the Daoist ritual master has “Opened the Incense Burner.” This refers to a technique for summoning the gods within the microcosmic body of the Daoist master to ascend into the heavens to contact their counterparts in the macrocosm. This procedure

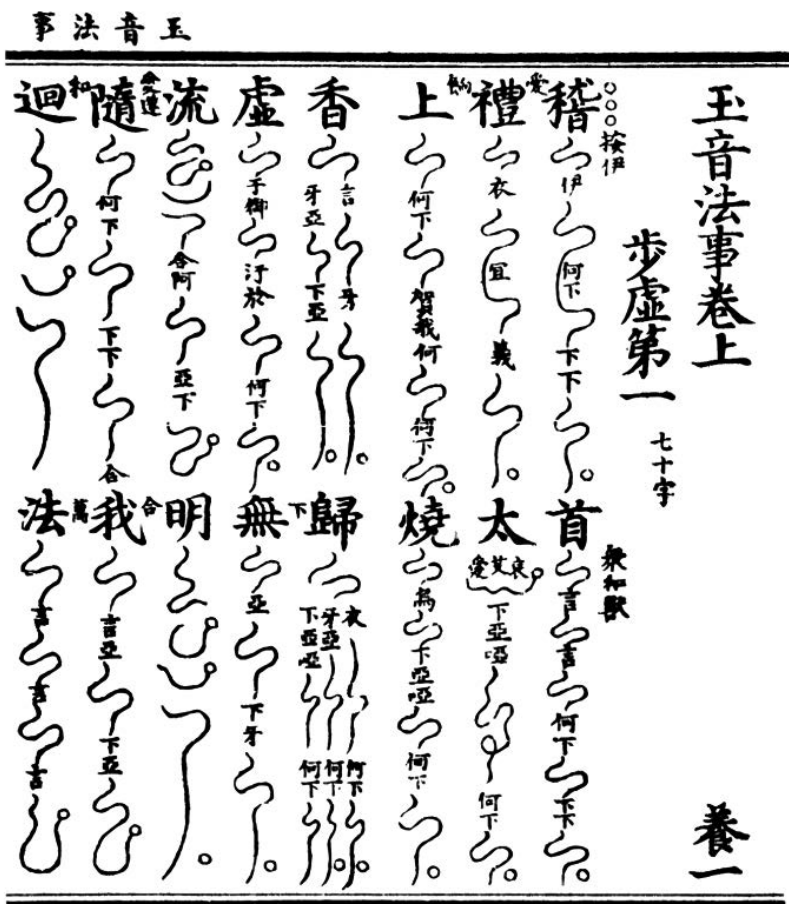


Figure 14.1 Neumatic musical score for Daoist hymns composed by Emperor Song Huizong (1082–1135 CE) from the *Yuyin Fashi* (*Precious Tones of Liturgy*, TT607) by Schipper and Verellen (2004). Source: Digital archive Kanseki Repository (kanripo.org/edition/ZTDZ/KR5b0312/001#txt).

dates back to the early Heavenly Master movement in Sichuan (144–200 CE) that marked the founding of religious Daoism. Thus this scripture combines elements of early Daoism with Indian inspired theories of the origins of the cosmos in Sanskrit Brahman energy vibrations or frequencies. These frequencies are reworked into secret names and cosmogonic hymns, whose recitation restarts the universe.

The Lingbao scriptures developed the fundamental liturgical framework of Daoism by combining this visual tour and dynamic model of the gods within the body with Buddhist chanting, the intoning of mantras and the singing of hymns:

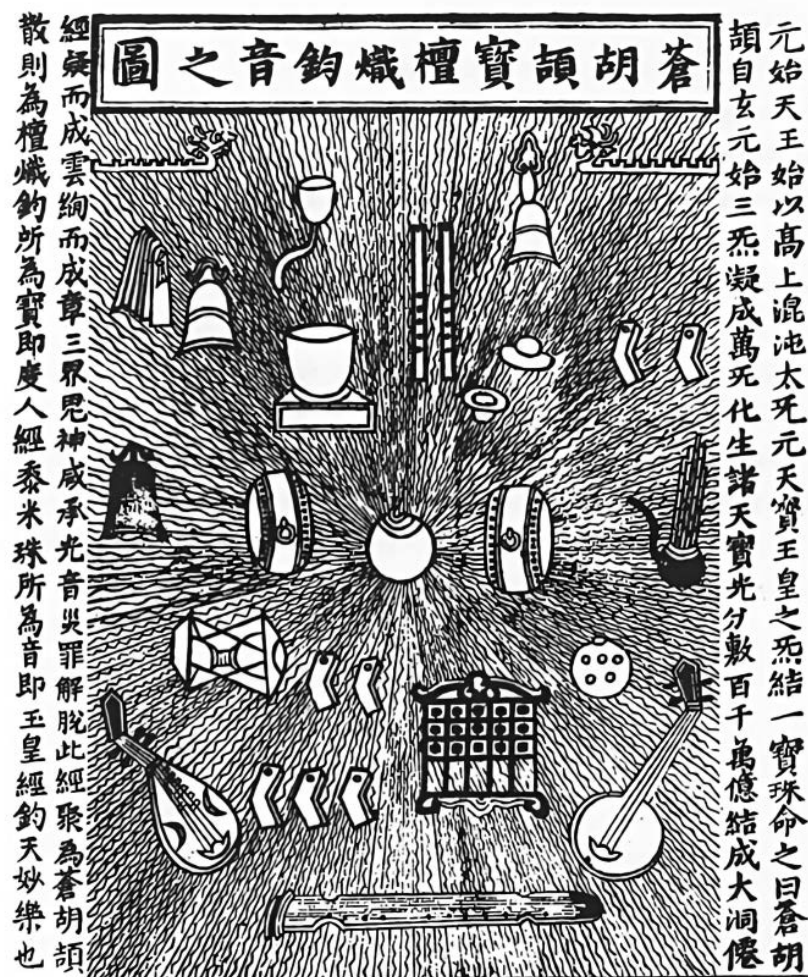


Figure 14.2 Instruments for Heavenly Music, from the *Commentary on the Great Cavern Scripture according to Wenchang*, TT 103, 1.22b, by Wei Qi (1309), reproduced in Schipper and Verellen (2004, 709). Courtesy of Bibliothèque nationale de France.

The *Duren jing* has been immensely important in Taoist liturgy. It borrows from Buddhism not only many elements of form, vocabulary, and style, but also its very function as a text to be recited repeatedly for salvific ends, a function taken from the practice of Indian sutra-reading and mantra-recitation. The prescribed tenfold psalmody has provided the framework for innumerable ritual performances. The esoteric aspect of the “sacred sounds and hidden names” has, moreover, inspired a great many mystical elaborations. (Schipper and Verellen 2004, 79)

The intoning of Sanskrit syllables and the singing of cosmogenic hymns remained a central feature of Daoist liturgy up to the present day. Both medieval Chinese Buddhist and Daoist ritual elaborated procedures involving the incantation of spells (Strickmann 2002; Copp 2014). Spells were recited during the writing of talismans and during the performance of rites of sacrifice and of exorcism. Daoist liturgy continued to evolve over the next 1500 years. Nevertheless, central aspects of Daoist ritual process outlined above remain unchanged up to the current day in many parts of China and in the Chinese diaspora. At its most basic structural level, the Daoist ritual process is a matter of sending out the master's microcosmic body gods to invite their counterparts, the macrocosmic deities, back to the altar: to host them and entertain them with music and operas, to announce the merit achieved, and then to send them off again.

Some of the earliest Chinese musical scores still extant are Emperor Song Huizong's (1082–1135 CE) neumatic scores of Daoist hymns that he composed included in the Daoist Canon. The *Wenchang Datongjing* (*The Great Cavern Scripture of Wenchang*) from 1309 provides a discussion of Daoist music and instrumentation. Other texts from this period return to the theory of Sanskrit frequencies that created the universe in elaborate commentaries to the *Book of Salvation*.

Contemporary Chinese local communal ritual events and the role of Daoist liturgy, complex soundscapes, and processes of embodiment

In the remaining part of this chapter, I would like to elaborate on some themes I have developed elsewhere in my account of local communal religion in Fujian, China. In these earlier essays,¹ I build upon my research in the Putian, Quanzhou and Zhangzhou region from 1984 to 2008 and I describe the ritual events of these communities as a “total social fact,” in the terms of Marcel Mauss.

In light of the dynamic contrasts between centralizing imperial or post-secular state power centers and local village ritual expression, we are clearly dealing with a long-lasting dialectic within Chinese culture. The reach of the state differed tremendously at various points in the imperial past, but it has extended into the villages in the 20th and 21st centuries, in the form of locally elected village leaders who are pre-confirmed by the

1 See Dean (1993; 1998); Dean and Zheng (2010).

CCP. Schools, postal services, clinics, and police forces are much closer to village life than in the past. The current party state is ideologically secular but maintains the imperial mandate of determining the orthodox from the heterodox “evil cults.” Burdened by Western categories of “official religion” (the five official patriotic religious associations are Buddhist, Daoist, Islamic, Catholic, and Protestant), the great majority of village ritual activity falls into a gray zone of unofficial but not necessarily heterodox behavior. As I will show, the central role of spirit mediums within village ritual in many parts of rural China remains highly problematic for this reason to the State. Despite mass campaigns to eradicate “the four olds” including local communal religion and lineage formations, in many parts of China these have survived and in some areas they have undergone a resurgence and a process of reinvention in response to current conditions. I have outlined the ways in which village ritual events negotiate the forces of modernity, the state and capitalism in a series of essays written with Thomas Lamarre (2003, 2007) and in a documentary film, *Bored in Heaven*, about ritual sensation during the Lantern Festival in Putian, Fujian, China (Dean 2010). Together with Zheng Zhenman, I fully documented the extent of village ritual and its religious infrastructure (2500 temples in 720 villages) in a 180 sq mi alluvial irrigated plain just beyond the limits of Putian city (Dean and Zheng 2010).

My research in this region over four decades has led me to see Daoist rites as just one element of a broader ritual sphere of activities, which were structured by multiple liturgical frameworks. For example, in addition to the Daoist liturgical framework, one finds the *Lisheng* (Master of Ritual) framework embodied in the work of temple specialists who instruct villagers on the correct selection of sacrificial objects (primarily different forms and denominations of spirit money) and specific food offerings for different categories of non-human spirits including gods, ghosts and ancestors. This framework is more individualistic (or family-oriented), featuring more direct and contractual relations to the gods (as pointed out by Hymes 2002), but it is nonetheless mediated by the ritual knowledge of the *Lisheng* or *Yanshi* (ritual banquet masters, as they are called in Putian).

In Putian, I have observed several large-scale ritual events in which Daoist ritual masters performed alongside and in parallel with Buddhist monks and/or Three in One Scripture Masters. The latter is a religious movement founded in the late Ming by Lin Zhao'en, combining Confucianism with Daoist inner alchemy and Buddhist meditation techniques, which later developed into a parallel and supplementary ritual tradition, borrowing from the liturgies of both Daoist and Buddhist ritual traditions (Dean 1998). The simultaneous parallel performance of very similar rites (such as the



Figure 14.3 Daoist masters dancing and singing during a ritual in Fujian, 1985. Author's image.

presentation of a memorial to the Heavens) complicates most theories of ritual process and presents a challenge to theories that presume one single overarching liturgical framework underlying an entire ritual event.

Each of these liturgical frameworks comes with its musical accompaniment. The Daoists, Buddhist and Three in One Scripture Masters all engage troupes of musicians, proficient in their distinctive liturgical musical traditions. The masters of ceremony ring bells and beat drums to welcome visiting delegations, or to alert the gods to a personal offering on the altar table. The temple committee hires opera troupes, brass bands, traditional *nanyin* (Southern Ballads) musical troupes, marionettists, puppet troupes, disco-dancing troupes, karaoke singers, and other acts to fill the temple courtyard with a multitude of sounds. This complex density of sound is proudly proclaimed to be very hot and noisy (*renao*). This is a variable soundscape pulling the attention of visitors and participants in many different directions at once. Loudspeaker systems attempt to cut through the noise, which can rise repeatedly to crescendo after crescendo.

Another issue that drew my attention was the role of spirit mediums within the unfolding, and multiple, ritual processes. At any point in the ritual event, a spirit medium may become possessed, and charge into the temple, speaking in the voice of a god, gesticulating and pointing with his sword, and dragging an entourage behind him. The medium may also accompany the gods who have been moved from the altar and placed on a sedan chair to be taken on a tour of every household in the village. This moving of the god's statue performs a phase shift in the virtual energetics contained within the

deity. The gods move from a metastable state into a vector of transformative energy, spreading blessing, prosperity, and progeny through the village. They also move into the body of the medium as an outside that forms a deeper interiority within the medium's body than that of the self itself.

The courtly, controlled movements and visualizations of the Daoist master contrast with the spasmodic jerky movements of the spirit medium. I think of them as being entangled in a magnetic bipolar field of forces, attracting flows of energy toward one or the other. These are also sonic fluxes, as different soundscapes clash and intermingle (Dean and Lamarre 2003; 2007).

I have referred to such ritual events as the in-folding of a virtual and continuously transforming syncretic ritual sphere (Dean 1998). In the case of Fujian, this syncretic ritual sphere has absorbed elements from Buddhist ritual, Daoist liturgy, Confucian sacrificial rituals, and spirit medium possession. The relative centrality and the consistency of the mix between these ritual traditions changes over time as their underlying institutions: Buddhist monasteries, popular god temples, ancestral halls, and local cult temples rise and fall in power. Each ritual event is thus a site in which one can find traces of all these ritual traditions merged into unique actualizations of the broader virtual syncretic ritual sphere.

This idea is based on Gilles Deleuze's account of the actualization of the virtual in his philosophy of becoming (Deleuze 1990; 1994). Kapferer (2005; 2010) takes up elements of Deleuze's account of the powers of the virtual in his essay on ritual dynamics. He points to ritual as a space for the slowing down of temporality that allows for ritual actions to affect the cosmos and re-empower, re-energize the virtual.

The virtual reality of ritual is a slowing down of the tempo of everyday life and a holding in abeyance or suspension some of the vital qualities of lived reality. This is what Deleuze and Guattari point to as the descent into reality of the virtual, as they employ the concept. I suggest that this is a critical quality of the virtuality of rite.... The virtual of rite is a means for engaging immediately with the very ontological ground of being. Indeed, I suggest (it engages) mechanically within the habitus so as to reconstruct, restore, or introduce radical new elements into the dynamic structurings of its possibility. The aesthetics, repetitions, careful detailing, slowing of tempo, shifting position of participants, recontextualizations, etc., are major means for readjusting the processes within life that, among many other things, permit life as it is lived to regain its uninterrupted flow. (Kapferer 2005, 84)

In Daoist ritual, time is slowed down and reversed in the visualization of the return to the undifferentiated by the principal Daoist Master. Then, time is accelerated as the immortal embryo is conceived through visualization, goes

through gestation within the body of the master, and then ascends into the Heavens as a pure realized being who reports on the community's sacrifices and aspirations and prayers for blessings. The entire universe is meanwhile being recreated through the slow rhythmic singing of the hymns of creation and the intoning of the Brahmic sonic energy of the secret names of the Thirty-two Heavens by the chief cantor. Simultaneously, completely different temporalities are realized by the spirit medium, who may jump from one dynasty to another out of historical sequence. The possession of a medium by (for example) the deity Guan Gong, who lived in the 3rd century CE, also shatters temporality and insists on the presence of the god in the here and now. Rituals have a rhythm and a tempo and are always accompanied by music: a drum sets the beat and the music rises to a crescendo in time with the sequence of the rites, embodying the process of carrying out the Dao on behalf of Heaven.

Multitude of sounds, multitude of liturgical frames: Polyphonic rites

These kinds of local communal religious performances can be described as forms of ritual polyphony. These celebrations juxtapose different sonic conceptions, from ontogenetic Daoist sonic flux to Confucian ideas of unity and order to Buddhist conceptions of powerful incantations, into a polyphonic performance. These ritual events draw villagers to the temple to celebrate the birthday of the local god, along with neighboring villagers eager to watch the musical and opera performances presented to the gods and to the villagers. They form complex soundscapes made up of multiple nodes of attraction. The ritual event captures all kinds of energies and powers, from the cosmological and ontogenetic forces described above, to the sonic mingling of brass marching bands, traditional performance troupes, marionette stages with live orchestras, opera stages with even larger orchestras, disco music and groups of women performing aerobic exercises, and stages from which everything from karaoke to Taiwanese ballads are belted out. Massive amounts of fireworks are exploded. The wall of sound (sonic flux) is overpowering and awe-inspiring.



Audiovisual sample 14.1

A procession returns to the courtyard filled with multiple musical troupes before a temple in Jiangkou Putian during Lantern Festival (first full moon of the Chinese calendar). Excerpt from Kenneth Dean, *Bored in Heaven: A Film about Ritual Sensation*, 2010.

The audiovisual sample included with this chapter provides an instance of this kind of sonic overload. The film clip from *Bored in Heaven* (Dean 2010) shows a group of gods, seated on sedan chairs (palanquins) carried by devotees, rushing into a crowded courtyard in front of a temple in Jiangkou, Putian, Fujian. Traditional all-female drum and cymbal ensembles and modern Western marching bands greet the gods who are also welcomed back by Puxian opera singers. Huge strings of firecrackers explode as the gods re-enter their temple.

During the Lantern Festival to mark the first full moon of the Chinese New Year, the gods of all 2500 temples of the irrigated alluvial Putian plain are carried around their neighborhoods. Their progress is marked by explosions of fireworks set off in front of household altars piled high with offerings and incense and placed in front of every home and shop in town. One can follow the progress of the gods around the Putian plain for several weeks by listening for exploding firecrackers and the many sounds of ritual celebratory music. These processions create musical refrains that sonically mark out territory (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987, Ch. 11).

Even larger processions of up to 90 villages converge at the highest order temple of the Jiangkou area, the Dongueguan (Temple of the Eastern Peak). During the procession, there is a grand Assembly of the Daoist Masters in this temple, made up of members of all five troupes of active Daoist ritual masters working in Jiangkou. They perform elaborate oratorios, including singing, instrumental music featuring *sona* (an oboe-like instrument), drumming, and dancing during Daoist Communal Offering rituals inside the temple and at times in the courtyard or on opera stage set facing the temple. Opera is performed night and day during these processions. We need to develop new theoretical tools to respond to the key role of the sonic overload in these complex events that include multiple liturgical frameworks. Polyphonic rituals draw in a diversity of people, food, and money, while redistributing values, statuses, and cosmic powers.

The three Deleuzian syntheses mentioned above can be applied to an analysis of contemporary ritual events as well as to Xun Zi's abstract account of ritual and music:

- 1) The connective synthesis underlies the gathering together of all the people and the gods, and multiple goods and resources, into the space of transformations—this is the production of production of the ritual event.
- 2) The disjunctive synthesis—the production of distribution—is found in the assignment of exclusive roles within the ritual—be they the community households, the temple committee, the visiting delegations, the Daoist master and his entourage, or the spirit mediums. The disjunctive

synthesis works through the distribution of the affective force of the powers unleashed by the Daoist priest, the spirit-medium, and the dephasing of the metastable powers of the gods. The distribution of powers is variable across the entire ritual event space, with some feeling overwhelming force (such as the medium and those he—sometimes she—impact directly) while others attempt to control and channel the flow of forces and transformations (of offerings and aspirations)—such as the Daoist or Buddhist or Three in One ritual masters. The onset of possession is a good place to explore the affective power of drumming and chanting, as discussed by Friedson (1996) and Kapferer (2005). But for most village participants, the distributive force of the event will depend on their specific needs, aspirations and affective states—they are praying for children or grandchildren, for good health or a cure from a mortal disease, for general prosperity and good luck, or seeking a directive about an imminent investment.

3) The conjunctive synthesis—the production of consumption—is the collective consumption of the event as it unfolds by all the participants. This is an idea of ritual for itself, in itself, expressing and consuming itself, even as it continuously differs from itself. This can be understood as generating, as a key value, processes of continuous collective experimentation, and group and individual self-differentiation.²

This interpretation contrasts sharply to Xunzi's vision of a sage at the empty center regulating the flow of goods and honors, creating cosmic order through the elaboration of modes of hierarchical encompassment. The co-existence of multiple liturgical frameworks instead creates a kind of polyphonic generation of multiple centers and values, which do not converge but continuously diverge into different series.³

This approach helps to consider the multiple dimensions of embodied and ensounded rituals. It recognizes that ritual events bring together a large number of participants, listeners, and onlookers, negotiating the forces of the state and the forces of capital. The forces of the ritual event are produced within

2 See the discussion of ritual elaboration and the formation of new ritual communities and individual ethical subjectivities in Dean (1998).

3 On divergent polyphony see *The Fold* (Deleuze 1992) and his comments on Bakhtin. This concept arises from my analysis of the interplay of multiple liturgical frameworks within ritual events of local Chinese communal religion (Dean 1998; Dean and Lamarre 2003, 2007), centering here on the role of sound within the sensorium of ritual experience. See Carrithers (2000) on a related concept of ritual polytropy. "I coined the word from the Greek poly, 'many', and tropos, 'turning', to capture the sense in which people turn toward many sources for their spiritual sustenance, hope, relief, or defence" (834). Chau (2011a; 2011b) argues that in Chinese ritual events the underlying motivation is to enhance efficacy by incorporating multiple ritual traditions.

the multiple liturgical frameworks of the coded acts of the ritual specialists and the spontaneous possession of the spirit medium. Energies and powers of the event are distributed unevenly across the range of participants, and the consumption of the event in its own performance has a transformative effect on the participants. Central to this polyphonic diversity is the sonic excess of these ritual events, generating endlessly divergent worlds.

Especially in China, where the scale and timing of every ritual has to be negotiated with the state, and every successfully completed ritual is a cause for celebration of local communal power, but even in Singapore, where rituals organized by local temples also have to negotiate with state regulatory agencies and respond to forces of capital and commercialization, the success of each ritual can only be determined by the range of affective qualities experienced by the participants. Whether deemed successful or failing to meet expectations, ritual events feed back into the virtual realm from which they unfold, re-energizing and reshaping the virtual. In Daoist thought, this is referred to as the contrast between *Xiantian* (Prior Heaven) and *Houtian* (Latter Heaven)—the primordial metastable virtual realm of pure power, and the endless and varied actualizations of it in reality. Only both realms are real, and inextricably entangled, each generating the other.

References

- Asad, Talal. 2009. "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category." In *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, edited by Talal Asad, 27–54. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Carrithers, Michael. 2000. "On Polytypy: Or the Natural Condition of Spiritual Cosmopolitanism in India: the Digambar Jain Case," *Modern Asian Studies* 34(4): 831–61.
- Chau, Adam Yuet. 2011a. "Efficacy, Not Confessionality: On Ritual Polytypy in China." In *Sharing the Sacra: The Politics and Pragmatics of Intercommunal Relations around Holy Places*, edited by Glenn Bowman, 79–96. New York, NY and Oxford: Berghahn.
- Chau, Adam Yuet. 2011b. Modalities of doing religion and ritual polytypy: evaluating the religious market model from the perspective of Chinese religious history. *Religion* 41(4): 547–568.
- Copp, Paul. 2014. *The Body Incantory: Spells and the Ritual Imagination in Medieval Chinese Buddhism*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Cox, Christoph. 2018. *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

- Csordas, Thomas J. 1994. *The Sacred Self: A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Dean, Kenneth. 2010. *Bored in Heaven: film about ritual sensation* (Inner Alchemy Productions documentary film)
- Dean, Kenneth. 1998. *Lord of the Three in One: The spread of a cult in Southeast China*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Dean, Kenneth and Thomas Lamarre. 2003. "Ritual Matters." In *Impacts of Modernities*, edited by T. Lamarre and Kang Nae-he, 257–84. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press.
- Dean, Kenneth and Thomas Lamarre. 2007. "Micro-sociology of the ritual event." In *Deleuzian Encounters: Studies in Contemporary Social Issues*, edited by Anna Hickey-Moody and Peta Mahlins, 181–97. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dean, Kenneth and Zheng Zhenman. 2010. *Ritual Alliances of the Putian Plains*, 2 vols, Leiden: Brill.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1990. *The Logic of Sense*, translated by Mark Lester with Charles Stivale. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1992. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, translated by Tom Conley. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1994. *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus*, translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Friedson, Steven M. 1996. *Dancing Prophets: Musical Experience in Tumbuka Healing*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1993. "Religion as a Cultural System." In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, edited by Clifford Geertz, 87–125. New York, NY: Fontana Press.
- Graeber, David. 2001. *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*. New York, NY: Palgrave.
- Graham, Angus. 1982. *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters*. London: Unwin.
- Handelman, Don. 2013. "Bruce Kapferer, Deleuzian Virtuality, and the Makings of a Ritual Masterstroke." *Religion & Society* 4(1): 32–40.
- Hutton, Eric L. 2015. *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hymes, Robert. 2002. *Way and Byway: Taoism, Local Religion, and Models of Divinity in Sung and Modern China*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Kapferer, Bruce. 2005. "Ritual, Representation and Virtuality." In *Ritual in Its Own Right*, edited by D. Handelman & G. Lindquist, 35–54. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Kapferer, Bruce. 2010. "Beyond Ritual as Performance: Towards Ritual and Dynamics and Virtuality." *Paragrana* 19(2): 231–49.

- Lamarre, Thomas. 2018. *The Anime Ecology: A Genealogy of Television, Animation and Game Media*. Minnesota, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mauss, Marcel. 1923. "Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques." *Année sociologique*, seconde série, 30–180.
- Palmer, David. 2019. "Cosmology, Gender, Structure, and Rhythm: Marcel Granet and Chinese Religion in the History of Social Theory." *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* 6(2): 160–87.
- Schipper, Kristofer, and Franciscus Verellen. 2004. *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang*, 3 vols. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, Daniel, John Protevi, and Daniela Voss, "Gilles Deleuze." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2022 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/deleuze/>.
- Strickmann, Michel. 2002. *Chinese Magical Medicine*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Tarde, Gabriel. 2012. *Monadology and Sociology*. Melbourne: Re.Press.

About the author

Kenneth Dean is Raffles Professor of Humanities, Head of the Chinese Studies Department, and Research Cluster Leader for Religion and Globalisation at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. His research focuses on Chinese epigraphy, Daoist ritual, spirit mediums, and Chinese local communal religion in Fujian and Southeast Asia.