

Imagination, Originality, and Diversity

A Free Mind and his Academic Pursuits

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On August 12–14, 2022, we organised the international conference ‘Religions and Local Society in the Historical, Comparative, and Theoretical Perspectives’ to honour Professor Timothy Brook for his retirement from the University of British Columbia (UBC) that summer. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, forty-two scholars from all the world participated in the conference and now, based on their contributions, a festschrift is ready to publish in two volumes, one in English and the other in Chinese.

Choosing ‘religions and local society’ as the main theme of this conference reflects Professor Brook’s landmark contribution to the study of Buddhism in late imperial China, which has since become an ever-expanding trend with growing momentum. Over the past two thousand years, Buddhism has spread first from South Asia, to East Asia, and then to the West. Its reception has proven mostly voluntary rather than by force, which constitutes a sharp contrast with the history of other world religions. This unique success has significant religious, cultural, socio-political, and real-life ramifications, and has attracted much scholarly attention, not only to Buddhism itself but also to its complicated interactions with local societies in which it has existed and evolved. This is especially the case with the field of Buddhism in late imperial China, which was comparatively short of doctrinal creativity but rich in social activities and religious practices. In the early 1980s, Professor Chün-fang Yü successfully redefined late-Ming Buddhism as a major renewal in her monograph on Yunqi Zhuhong 雲棲祿宏 (1535–1615), *The Renewal of Buddhism in China: Zhuhong and the Late Ming Synthesis* (Columbia

University Press, 1981). Following this line, with his *Praying for Power: Buddhism and the Formation of Gentry Society in Late-Ming China* (Harvard University Press, 1993) that examines gentry patronage of Buddhism in the Jiangnan region against the background of the state-society division, Professor Brook has created a most influential and lasting mode that approaches the field from sociological and regional perspectives. Contextualising Buddhism in a concrete, manageable local society has the advantages of preciseness and clarity, which have otherwise been unavailable and, more importantly, it establishes a new framework in which scholars could raise quite a few significant new questions. Since then, in the field of late imperial Chinese Buddhism, other scholars have broadened this approach both to include such groups as eunuchs and women, and also to include more types of Buddhist practices, like pilgrimage, Buddhist sacred sites, and bodily practices—especially self-inflicted violence.

Our emphasis on multiple perspectives, as explicitly revealed in the title, is aimed at magnifying the advantage of the main theme while reducing its potential for negative consequences. Despite its unique values, dealing with religions in a localised context faces the danger of limiting our visions and thus prevents us from fully recognising their significance. The historical view brings in time as a crucial factor to remind us of the importance of historicising issues and understanding them in a longer *durée*. The comparative view helps to extend our attention beyond our expertise to the time and space with which we may not be that familiar, and thus enables us to better appreciate similarities and differences in the relationship of local society and other religions, like Christianity, Islam, Daoism, and popular religion. With these perspectives combined, we hope to strike a balance between the clear view deriving from a close look in the regional context and a broader vision that may be reasonably expected from the extended time and space. Based on these perspectives, we encourage scholars to raise theoretical questions on a higher level, including but not limited to: How did a given religion interact with local societies in the first place? Which side—religion or the local society—took the lead in shaping the relationship and how? How did the central government, if applicable, help to shape

the relationship? How, if at all, has the interplay between the two been reshaped or even reformulated, either over time, across the region, or both? How and to what extent can we explain differences in this relationship in connection with a given regional environment? What are the advantages and disadvantages of different types of this relationship, both for the religion and for the society? How has the relationship joined to shape—positively or negatively—the evolution of the religion? Is it possible for us to conceptualise the complicated interactions of the two on a higher level by crossing the boundary between different religious traditions?

Thanks to contributions from the invited scholars, we have fulfilled our intended goals very well. Given how rich and solid all the forty-two papers presented in the conference are,¹ the conference was a success by any standards. Based on these contributions, we now have thirty revised papers evenly split between the Chinese and the English volumes. Buddhism, as expected, is the main focus of attention but other religions are examined as well, including Judaism, Christianity, and semi-religious institutions like the Taigu School 太谷學派. Among the papers on Buddhism, two third of them are associated with China, covering the period from the Northern dynasty (439–581) to the contemporary (with a focus on the Ming-Qing period), and the rest deal with other East Asian countries, with one paper about Japan and one about Vietnam. Additionally, we are excited to see four papers devoting themselves to folk religions. Some papers, though hard to place into any of the above categories, are no less excellent, as evidenced by Shoufu Yin's 殷守甫 paper on margins of political thought in late Ming China through novels. As far as the topics are concerned, their richness and diversity are strikingly impressive. It suffices to mention a few: the ups and downs of a religion primarily through the lens of local society, the interplay between religions and local society, the state-society tension and its impact on religions, the function of religions as a binding force in local society,

¹ See <https://glorisunglobalnetwork.org/religions-and-local-society-conference-report-by-xiangjun-feng-english/>.

the internal operation and the external administration of religions, the encounter of different religious traditions, and so on. Thus, it seems safe to say that these two volumes will not disappoint any of their readers.

Instead of summarising the papers piece by piece, I would like to highlight a few features that I find particularly attractive in the volumes. ‘Local’ is a key term for the festschrift but Professor Brook, seemingly paradoxically, warned in his keynote speech against the essentialisation of the ‘local’ and called for a more flexible framework in which we may shift perspectives freely between the local, the trans-local (the national), and the transnational (the global). His contribution to this volume, aptly entitled ‘What is Local Buddhism?’, exemplifies this reflection and insight. Other papers in this category include Xiangjun Feng’s discussion about the publication activity of the Taigu School in the Philippines, Anna Sokolova’s study of the spread of the Dharmaguptakavinaya Tradition in mid-Tang China, and my own discussion about Hanshan Deqing’s 憨山德清 (1546–1623) reforms at Nanhua 南華 temple. Second, some scholars explore the interplay between different religious traditions in the transcultural and cross-border context. In addition to Lianbin Dai’s amazing analysis of Kaifeng Jewry’s acculturation in mid-Ming China, we can also see in this respect Thierry Meynard’s discussion about a Buddhist Christian encounter in Sichuan, Ziyong You’s 游自勇 examination of the transfer of Buddhist funerary temple in Song China, and Keping Wu’s 吳科萍 study of ‘Buddhification’ and ‘Daoification’ of local religions in Suzhou 蘇州. Third, the use of ethnographic fieldwork is very worthwhile, as evidenced by Mónica Kiss’s discussion about the decline of Buddhist believers in Japan, Jing Le’s 樂晶 exploration into the material medium of folk belief and its meanings in contemporary Wenzhou 温州, and Qingping Deng’s 鄧慶平 study on Willem Grootaers’ (1911–1999) survey of rural society in North China. Last but not the least, most, if not all, papers collected in this festschrift are extremely solid in research.

The diversity and originality in themes of these volumes echo Professor Brook’s lifelong academic pursuits and suggest some topics for future research. In a recent lecture delivered at Fudan University,

Professor Brook listed eleven turns (or extensions, if you like) in his research to date. This is not something new, however. While still studying at UBC, I once asked him: ‘How can you cover so vast a scope in your research, all with extremely high standards? Is there something in common behind your works and, if yes, what it is?’ His response was simple but powerful: ‘They are all about people under influence’. Evidently, his research is focused on people. Without confining himself to any particular kind of people or influences, notably, Professor Brook has enjoyed the freedom necessary to explore new academic fields by breaking any boundaries of knowledge. Therefore, in addition to his talent and diligence, his extraordinarily diverse, creative, and prolific contributions to the understanding of Chinese history reflects, on a deeper level, the ultimate freedom of his mind. In the spirit of that, despite what the festschrift accomplishes, there are more things we might consider doing in the future. First, both Professors Brook and ter Haar demonstrated in their papers a valuable inclination for methodological-theoretical reflections on the basis of local experiences, and that should be the direction for more scholars of younger generations to follow. Second, despite Jing Li’s fascinating paper, the religions and economy deserve more attention. In fact, Professor Brook himself once considered approaching Chinese Buddhism from an economic perspective, and his consistent stress on economic analysis as a powerful explanatory tool can be seen vividly in his newest book, *The Price of Collapse: The Little Ice Age and the Fall of Ming China* (Princeton University Press, 2023).

Professor Jinhua Chen and I would like to express our wholehearted gratitude to Professor Brook and all other contributors. When Professor Chen called me to propose the conference in the spring of 2022, the pandemic had me stuck in my hometown, a village in Guizhou province where even the accessibility of the internet was not stable. I was far from the only person facing such a hard situation. After initiating our plan, however, we were pleasantly surprised by how active scholars were in responding to our invitation. More importantly, the remarkably high quality of their papers reveals how seriously they took the event. The reasons may be two-fold: first, we have all greatly benefited either from Professor Brook’s friendship

or his lifelong academic contributions (or both) in one way or another. So, just as I agreed to Professor Chen's proposal despite the fact that I may not be the ideal person to do so, all of us took this conference as the best way to express our gratitude to Professor Brook. Secondly, consciously or not, with the extraordinary professional spirit manifesting itself in the papers, we sought to display unchained freedom and solidarity to resist the pressure from the pandemic.

This conference was held in a hybrid format of online and in-person gatherings, and obtained administrative support from the From the Ground Up: Buddhism and East Asian Religions (FROGBEAR) Project at the University of British Columbia and the International Center for Studies of Chinese Civilization and Department of Religious Studies at Fudan University. As these two monumental tribute volumes are about to be published, we would like to express our respect and deep gratitude to the patrons of the conference and the publishing project: Dr. Charles Yeung of the Glorison Charitable Foundation and the Glorison Global Network for Buddhist Studies he has sponsored.

Professor Chen and I would also express our gratitude to Mr. Gary Ho and the HCS Chinese Calligraphy Art Online Museum in Taiwan. They have granted us the right to design the book covers with the *Xingshu liuyan jieyu tiaofu* 行書六言偈語條幅 [A Scroll of Six-Character Verses in Semi-Cursive Script], with calligraphy by Hanshan Deqing.

Finally, I have to express my personal gratitude to Professor Chen and his team at UBC. They have taken the major responsibility for editing these volumes. Without their efforts, both the conference and the volumes would never have become what they are now.