

Reflections On Violence in Asian Religions¹

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Introduction

The cross-cultural study of religions goes beyond narrow culture-bound perspectives, categories, and methods, and provides scholars with concerns, practices, and special features outside exclusively Western, usually Judeo-Christian, traditions. However, it is still common to find scholars drawing primarily from the European religious heritage in their use of categories of faith, belief, myth, ritual, eschatology, deity, and so forth. These categories can be useful in the study of mainstream Asian religious traditions like Buddhism, Hinduism, and Daoism. But some categories, like violence, do not easily map onto Asian religious traditions. As it is understood in the Asian tradition, violence comprises such a wide range of themes that using Western traditions of scholarship to understand it will simply leave out or distort too much. Of course, while there are many categories that manifest differently in different cultures, there are also aspects of the human condition that are intelligible throughout any number of human civilizations.

In our postmodern academic milieu that favors difference, fragmentation, nuance, and heterogeneity, it would be foolish to make grand claims across the huge expanse of the world that is Asia. Yet in parts of Asia where various religious traditions have enduring effects on cultures, I do see familiar configurations of religious tenets and cultural practices, particularly in premodern times and at the junctures between traditional premodern practices and

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changing modern sensibilities, that can be useful in examining how violence is signified, manipulated, and instituted.

In examining violent practices in Asian religions, the point is not merely to find what is familiar. To render unfamiliar practices into our Western conceptual categories is in a way to domesticate the Other, which may engender a certain recursion that ends up privileging the hegemonic terms of Western discourse by failing to engage—and be engaged by—the unfamiliar, the strange, or the intransigent. The articles in this issue of the *Journal of Religion and Violence* invite readers to immerse themselves in the thick texture of Asian sensibilities and practices in hope of offering opportunities for comparison across religious and cultural traditions in our times.

There is no one “Asian religion,” nor should we try to speculate what a “religion” is supposed to look like, especially as something that is in opposition to “superstition.” Nor, from the start, should we take what we deem to be “violent” as somehow an aberration from a religion that “ought” to have evolved beyond its primitive past. Asian religions in almost all their manifold cultural manifestations and settings are an amalgam in which instituted “great world religions” are inseparable from the “little autochthonous traditions” of animism, shamanism, and cultic practices.² Many of these cultic practices involve what appear to be violent acts, and they are not outside the purview of institutionalized religions. Indeed, the view that bifurcates religion and cultic practices dates back to the emergence of Western, “scientific” fields of anthropology and folklore studies of the nineteenth century, specifically to the ethnographic discourse about the “Other,” in which the primitive civilizations with their so-called backwardness or delusions of superstition, magic, and sorcery were relegated below the institutionalized “religions.” The discourses of anthropology and folklore studies, more than any other scholarly endeavor, were responsible for the interpretation of cultic (i.e., “superstitious”) traditions as the antithesis of modernity.³ Recent scholars who adapt a postmodernist sensibility tend to argue that such a narrow understanding of violence, superstition, and magic would neglect the on-the-ground lived practices of these very institutionalized religions. It is worth reminding ourselves that these divisions of great and little, institutionalized religions and autochthonous traditions, are not intrinsic to the phenomena they depict.

The articles in this special issue offer a sampling of studies of violence in Asia. They show that violence, both direct and symbolic, is intrinsic to the way agents signify some of their religious rituals, narratives, and images.

²Samuel 1993; Spiro 1982; Tambiah 1970; Yu 2012.

³See Meyer and Pels 2003.

They demonstrate some of the violent ways in which personal, religious, and sociopolitical positions in life are negotiated. Many of these negotiations are embedded in societal structures, often among competing groups of agents.

In this introduction, I place the articles of this issue in relation to one another to highlight three interrelated dimensions in which violence is instantiated: efficacy, sovereignty, and power. I hope these dimensions can serve as a salvo to spark further conversations and to provide critical angles for the study of Asian religions and cultural studies in a comparative context that may be useful to scholars in these fields.

Efficacy

Many expressions of violence in Asian religion challenge our contemporary views and interpretations. Yet, violence has been an integral part of Asian religion, past and present, and despite our interpretations of it, the underlying violent symbolism is still very much present. As Richard Payne points out in his article, many of the transgressive elements in earlier tantric rituals such as the *abhicāra*, the destructive rites aimed for killing one's enemy, are sanitized in modern Japan. For example, the *homa* (Japanese: *goma*) ritual, in which offerings are made into a fire, was originally aimed to subjugate one's enemies. In the contemporary Japanese Shingon *goma*, where Yamāntaka, the killer of Yama, is evoked, the ritual appears uncontroversial to its contemporary audience and participants. It is simply a formulaic reworking of the basic five-part structure common to the large corpus of *homa* manuals.

In examining the genesis of this ritual, however, Payne provides entrée into the history of destructive practices, including violent subjugation, that date from very early Vedic and later Buddhist traditions. He challenges the received theological preconception that "religions necessarily move from an original condition of purity into increasing decadence" and shows that there has always been a transgressive violent dimension in different Buddhist genres of literature, especially tantric manuals. Despite the history of destructive ritual practices, the contemporary *homa* examined in the latter part of Payne's article shows very few of the original characteristics found historically. This indicates an ambiguity in the tradition between a historical understanding of such rituals as literally destructive of one's enemies, and the contemporary understanding that the enemies to be destroyed are simply personifications of one's own obscurations. Payne's article serves as a corrective to the modern representation of Buddhism as an exception to the violent character of religions.

Closely examining the destructive practices across Asian religious cultures, we quickly see that many of the violent practices are concerned with

the efficacy of certain highly charged, or enchanted, objects or words. These objects include amulets and talismans, votive tablets, ritual instruments, and consecrated images, figurines or effigies. Imbued with apotropaic efficacy, they are not only able to ward off malevolent forces but also able to cause them. In other words, objects can be turned into weapons of violence. The same is true for incantatory words. Spells, or *mantras* and *dhāraṇīs*, can be used to trigger a curative effect as well as to inflict an assault. These magical words and objects are not only limited to personal use. Rather, as we shall read below, they are often entrenched structurally in society.

David Gray, in this issue, discusses how tantric rituals can be transgressive and violent in nature, enabling the practitioner to subjugate various human and non-human enemies and to cause spirit possession. An important text from the mature phase of esoteric Buddhism recently translated into English, the *Susiddhikara Sūtra*,⁴ for example, describes a variety of magical feats including killing a person, whereby an adept may use an effigy to represent the person against whom the rite is directed. The same can be seen in *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*, where the esoteric adept can kill enemies and kings with a five syllable mantra empowered with one's own personal blood.

As a symbolically potent and multivalent substance, blood uniquely empowers esoteric performers, their actions, and their objects. In premodern Asia, for example, blood was always thought to have a potency to ensure ritual efficacy. Because of this, many ancient Chinese rituals, much like the Tibetan tantric rites Gray discusses, involved spilling human blood as a form of sacrifice.⁵ Smearing human blood on a ritual instrument was a way to sanctify or imbue it with magic efficacy.⁶

This is precisely one of the components of the logic behind the blood writing that I study. My earlier work on self-inflicted violence discusses how blood writings or the copying of texts in one's own blood was a socially recognizable, intelligible ritual practice for not only Buddhist clerics but also Confucians, children, and women.⁷ In this context, the sanctity of blood was unquestioned by all sectors of the society. Ancient initiations and faith-sealing

⁴See *Suxidi jieluo jing* 蘇悉地羯羅經 (Skt. *Susiddhikara-mahātantra-sādhanōpāyika-ṣaṭṭāla*) trans. Śubhakarasiṃha 善無畏 (637–735) in 726 CE; T. no. 893, 18: 603a3–692a28. For the English translation, based on the Koryō edition, see Giebel 2001, 110–324.

⁵Loewe 1982, 21, 128, 130, 133.

⁶In ancient China, talismans were written in blood or smeared with blood (Harper 1998, 63). For how blood is used today, see Tong (2004, 123, 174n43, 44, 45).

⁷Yu 2012, 37–61. Daniel Burton-Rose's contribution in this issue also includes a case of blood writing by Zhou Maolan to memorialize his father's death.

covenant rituals often also required the shedding of one's blood to substantiate one's commitment.⁸ Blood makes abstract ideas concrete.

Sometimes blood is substituted by other elements. Gray also discusses how at some point in South Asia, tantric Buddhist communities began using symbolic substitutes or effigies for animal sacrifice and blood. Instead of actually sacrificing living beings, they would offer cakes made out of grain (Tibetan: *torma*) which were painted red to symbolize blood, and sometimes elaborately decorated to represent sacrificially dismembered body parts. Even though no person is harmed in these rituals, they still simulate a high level of symbolic violence. Even though vermilion ink, cinnabar, or any other red paint was used to symbolize blood—or in some cases, animal blood was substituted for human blood, as seen in the Daoist use of talismans for propitiatory rites—the underlying logic of using the color red for blood, with its strong exorcistic, liminal significance, remains the same.⁹

One way to understand this significance of blood is to place it in its premodern context, wherein the use of blood was believed to have boundary-crossing properties. Bloodletting transgressed the natural bounds of the body, which normally contains the blood, and the breaching of the body's boundaries was a form of social and ritual danger. Bloodletting, if it continues unabated, results in death; it is also often associated with warfare, wounding, sacrifice, and destruction.¹⁰

Sovereignty

Violence is also instantiated at the intersections of local traditions and state initiatives, and expressed on cosmological and socio-institutional levels. Courtney Work analyzes the contest of sovereignty between local traditions and the state apparatus. She details state resource extraction from territories governed by Cambodia's lowland Khmer rice growers and Kuy indigenous peoples—in her words, “the Original Owners of the water and the land.” Their inherited lands have been diminishing in the guise of economic development, which is instituted by state power. She notes how when the villagers failed in their protest against the development's deforestation, villagers resorted to “cursing ceremonies” held at local Buddhist temples—they prayed to the *lok ta*.

⁸While many of these practices persisted into late imperial times, they can be dated to as early as the third century B.C.E. Watson 1989, 185; Benn 1998, 297.

⁹Strickmann 2002, 151–152; Tong 2004, 123. The blood of roosters is still used to consecrate talismans and to make ritual offerings, as shown in a 2003 documentary film of a Daoist ritual in Hunan province, China (Fava 2005).

¹⁰Yu 2012, 56.

The *lok ta*, among other nonhuman invisible subjects, such as those who reside in rice, rocks, termite mounds, snakes, trees, and various megafauna, are the autochthonous sovereigns of the water and the land—perhaps the most powerful of territorial spirits. Humans and other resource users are protected and also punished by these territorial spirits, with whom they establish social relationships grounded in fear, gratitude, and respect. The *lok ta* are, essentially, the powerful owners of life-giving resources who have the power to grant or withhold access and to punish transgressors when respect for the *lok ta* is forgotten.

Thus, when one of the Prime Minister's bodyguards was killed by a tree struck by lightning on the inauguration day of the logging project, when the police chief had a strange accident and broke his neck, when the six officials who helped the deforestation company died within three years, and when numerous loggers of the company got sick, the villagers believed that all these events demonstrated the power of *lok ta's* curse. While these events were not necessarily the direct results of the "cursing ceremonies," they were believed to be the actions of the *lok ta*.

The practice of cursing or injuring by words in these villagers' rituals appears to function in the same way as the mantras in transgressive tantric rituals. However, upon close examination, one recognizes that in this case the agentive power rests not with the cursing words themselves, as in mantras, but in the non-human *lok ta*. The people call out to *lok ta* in a very casual way; their prayers typically go something like this, "*Lok ta*, your children and grandchildren are here. We bring a chicken and wine for you and ask you to help us. There are enemies coming to take this land, they are doing bad things to your children and grandchildren. We curse them. Please, *lok ta*, help us to curse these individuals doing bad things here and destroying our lives." In the lives of the Cambodian villagers, the *lok ta* are the sovereign owners of the land and the arbiters of justice.

Work shows the modern Cambodian state's devastating effects of economic development in contrast to the rhetoric of healthy and bountiful lives under the sovereignty of the spirit. She unmasks one system of sovereignty in light of its long discredited but emergent "other"—the *lok ta*. Through this treatment, she makes visible the cracks in the semiotic illusion of the legitimate sovereign state, revealing its inherent fragility and suggesting other configurations of human history, sovereign legitimacy, and socio-ecological relationality.

As Matthew Robertson demonstrates, the debate of sovereignty is also a key theme in the literary-philosophical work of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, appearing particularly in the self-devouring imagery ascribed to Kṛṣṇa. Such imagery

demonstrates the long-held Brahmanical convictions about the role of violence in politics, and thereby responds to anxieties about the association of sovereignty with violent action. It also shows that violence is at the foundation of the cosmic order.

Robertson traces the textual roots of these convictions beyond the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s imagery of Kṛṣṇa as an autophagous absolute and finds them especially in the autophagous depiction of the knower of brahman in the ānanda and bhṛgu sections of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*. Framed by the early Upaniṣads' sacrificial and digestive paradigms of cosmic transformation and transmiration, and by a Vedic conception of sovereigns as eaters of the world, the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* argues that the knower of brahman blissfully is digested into the totality of the cosmos, is freed from the fear of anxieties about right and wrong courses of action, and thereafter exists as an immortal sovereign who is both the eater of all things and all that which is eaten.

Hence Robertson explores the symbolism of sovereignty through autophagy, which is ironically self-destruction. By discerning the links between the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*'s and *Bhagavad Gītā*'s depictions of autophagy, he argues that the *Bhagavad Gītā* promotes a renewed cosmological justification for the performance of violent acts by *kṣatriyas*, both in war and in the exercise of those political duties aimed at the maintenance of a kingdom. This justification relies especially upon social and religious alliances between priestly and political/martial powers, and seeks to elevate Brahmanical paradigms of sovereignty over paradigms that question the necessity of violence in the exercise of political power. The symbolic representation of sovereignty through autophagy in this way elevates the political violence of war, punishment, and so on, above the status of mere violence, transfiguring it into a necessary action of cosmically supportive significance.

Power

Moving from the cosmological to the sociological, Daniel Burton-Rose explores the mechanism of sovereignty and violence of another kind: the sustained self-victimizing discourse among the late imperial Chinese elite, which itself was a hegemonic vehicle for gaining cultural and ideological power. Power, here, is understood as the ability to affect something (from the Latin *potens*, "powerful" or "able"), which is different from the commonsense definitions of the word that stress its negative aspects of repression, censorship, exclusion, or subjugation.¹¹ Burton-Rose examines how during the Manchu control of China, the local educated elite were able to exercise hegemony

¹¹Reynolds 2005, 211–228.

intergenerationally to produce particular moral, political, and cultural values.¹² He describes the productive ways in which the late imperial Chinese members of the Peng family lineage sustained a collective memory of Zhou Shunchang (1584–1626), a Han Chinese martyr of state violence from the 1620s, and of his son Maolan (1605–1686), who ultimately secured imperial recognition of his father’s hagiography of martyrdom and the prestige of the three subsequent generations of his family lineage. By carefully building a family alliance with the Zhous, the Pengs contributed to and put their own self-serving spin on the apotheosis of the Zhous and nurtured a shared collective sense of victimhood. Doing so instituted their own cultural hegemony of sanctity in Suzhou.

In China, self-consciously exemplary death, a strategic form of self-destruction or self-inflicted violence, was a way for martyrs to calibrate their martyrdom with an eye towards posthumous immortality. The success of the apotheosis rested on the people of later periods who constructed and maintained the shrines dedicated to the martyrs, preserved sacred relics connected to them, ritualized them in their supposed return as celestial officials at spirit-writing altars, and published and circulated their stories. It was the Pengs who in later generations secured the Zhou martyrdom by publishing the Zhous’ collected writings and biographies, placing them among the ranks of local “sages and worthies” for posterity.

Hegemonic power is invariably a product of discourse, which has significant ramifications in cultural and political spheres in China. In the case of the Pengs, such power took on a discursive form of writing that shaped the public reception of the Zhous’ martyrdom.¹³ In her article on the Taiping rebellion, Huan Jin also explores the nature of such discourse, but details the process by which the nineteenth-century followers of the Taiping religion utilized the rhetoric of *yao*, which can be variously rendered “evil spirit,” “demon,” and “devil,” to dehumanize, demonize, and hence justify their hyperbolic and physical violence aimed at overthrowing the Manchus and the Qing supporters. The term *yao* was used in opposition to *ren*, or human. Invoking another person as *yao*, or demon, is to position one’s own humanity and justify the vanquishing of the other.

The Taiping Civil War (1851–1864), which was one of the most destructive civil wars in human history and claimed an estimated 30 million lives, was an ideological contestation between the “Han” adherents of the Taiping

¹²Gramsci 1971, xiv, 245.

¹³For the creation, circulation, and maintenance of the discourse of hegemony, see Said 1994, 339.

religion and the “Manchus” of the Qing government (1644–1911). The Taiping religious leader Hong Xiuquan (1814–1864), a self-proclaimed Chinese Son of Heaven, or God, the younger brother of Jesus Christ, sought to save the Han people from the demonic Manchu rulers by waging war against them. His Taiping religion was one of the most effective and largest millenarian movements in Chinese history. In turn, the Manchus also used the term *yao* to describe members of the Taiping religion. Rendering them *yao* justified the Manchus’ extermination of the Taipings. Jin tracks the multivalent shifts of this term at different stages of the Taiping Civil War by examining the material manifestations of *yao* discourse in the forms of placards, propaganda literature, and popular religious tracts. These material manifestations instantiated unimaginable violence.

Jin shows that the discourse of *yao* assumed multiple levels of ideological coercion and religious and ethnocentric violence. In their rendering of each other as *yao*, the Taipings and the Manchus proclaimed their power to inflict violence. This discursive power, and the Taipings and Manchus who trafficked in it, hinged on associations with efficacy and sovereignty, two of the words explored earlier in this introduction that fall within the penumbra of power. It is with this particular nuance of power that Jin explores the discourse of demon verses human, enemies versus heroes, us versus them.

Conclusion

I hope the contributions in this special issue will open up for readers the histories and thought-worlds in Asia where violence is localized. Readers will learn about the destructive tantric rituals in India and its later manifestations in Tibet and Japan, the sovereignty of the *lok ta* and its people in Cambodia, the autophagous imagery of Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the hegemonic power of the martyrological discourse by local Chinese elites in their lineage construction, and the dehumanizing discourse and propaganda of the Taiping Civil War in the nineteenth century. All of these explorations take us into the manifold ways in which violence is signified, manipulated, and instituted in several Asian cultural and political domains in different regions and periods.

The study of religion and violence has long suffered from a twofold disciplinary isolation. On the one hand, it often regards Western religions and cultural phenomena as normative for the field, which is problematic for Asia. On the other hand, the study is often ignored or given short shrift by scholars working in Asian religious and intellectual history. Part of this latter isolation is surely the fault of scholars of Asian religions, who have not reached out to their colleagues in cultural studies. The array of materials introduced here are offered as a corrective. They are varied, complex, and perhaps more particular

to the Asian context, but their richness enables religious scholars to widen their range of concerns beyond the emphasis on “belief” and “practice.” The Asian sources show violence within specific social, political, and cultural contexts in a way that sheds light on the broader study of religions and human civilizations.

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