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Diaries as a Window on the Private Religious Lives of Late Imperial Chinese Literati
Two Nineteenth-Century Case Studies

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Abstract This essay surveys diaries (*riji* 日記) as a source to explore the private, quotidian religious lives of late imperial (1550-1900) Chinese literati. Large numbers of such diaries (some running to several thousand pages) exist, sometimes published, often in manuscript form. Some have been used (to a limited extent) for intellectual or political history, but almost never to study religiosity. They nonetheless contain rich information about their authors' public and private participation in rituals, domestic devotion and various sorts of spiritual exercises. This essay will introduce the genre then focus on two case studies, showing how they document private religious practices and regular spiritual exercises.

Keywords Chinese religion. Buddhism. Daoism. Confucianism. Diaries. Weng Tonghe.

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1 Introduction

Studies of religion in Chinese society before the revolutions of the twentieth century have largely focused on institutions (temples, monasteries), state policies, large-scale cults and pilgrimages, with their attendant literary and artistic productions, and more recently text production and spirit-writing. By contrast, personal religion in everyday lives has attracted less attention and, with the exception of a few articles devoted to one notable figure, we still know very little about the religious life-world of late imperial (1550-1900) individuals.[1] Available sources, however, are abundant and await the curious scholar.

My focus here is the religious practices, in particular in domestic and individual contexts, of the late imperial educated men and women. Women are less documented than men yet deserve a separate study, which I hope to contribute to in a separate piece. I will focus here on two men.[2] Many of these educated people (or literati) belonged to what Chinese historiography calls gentry, that is, people who had prepared for and passed at least the first of the three degrees of the civil service examinations; by the late nineteenth century, these men and their families represented several million persons.

My overarching research question is to identify the most common religious practices engaged in by Chinese educated persons in everyday life, especially in domestic contexts. While large-scale communal events are most frequently discussed – whether commemorated, simply described, or criticized, in historical sources – I aim to shed more light on the less visible realm of personal religiosity. In doing so, I hope to show that regular ritual and devotional practices were not the exclusive province of a small class of highly religious figures but were largely shared.

This essay surveys diaries (*riji* 日記) as one type of sources allowing to explore the private, quotidian religious lives of these literati. I will first introduce the genre of diaries, and provide a rapid survey of their contents as far as religious practices are concerned. I will then focus on two case studies, one of a short diary held by an unknown rural man in the middle of wars, the other of a very high official who recorded his everyday activities over forty-six years. This is a limited and by no means representative sample, but it allows for relatively close reading of their contents. The choice of these two particular diaries is not driven by any intention to compare two diarists

1 For studies of the religious lives of late imperial literati, see Liu 2004; 2016; Goossaert 2023-24.

2 On late imperial female domestic devotion, see among other important recent works Li 2019.

who share certain characteristics (be they social, intellectual, or regional), but rather to look at extremely different cases to offer a sense of the large range of the practices documented in this genre. The contrast between these two sources will allow us, in conclusion, to offer preliminary observations on what diaries have to tell us about the religious lives of their authors.

2 Diaries

Diaries have a long history in Chinese culture, and hundreds of extant diaries from imperial times have been preserved and made available through various reprint collections, allowing historians to mine them for all sorts of questions. One recent major reprint collection, the *Lidai riji congchao* 歷代日記叢鈔 (Anthology of diaries through the ages) comprises 358 diaries found in various Chinese libraries, and the corpus was digitized through OCR in the commercial database Pudieku 譜牒庫 of the Beijing-based Airusheng 愛如生 company; my institutional access to this database allowed me to search the corpus and certain long diaries in particular, and this forms an important part of the data mobilized in the present essay.[3] This database also includes other types of self-narratives, such as autobiographical chronicles (*nianpu* 年譜), which also provide rich evidence of personal religious lives, but I will only focus on diaries as they provide evidence for regular, everyday practice.

Most extant diaries are manuscripts (some in cursive script very demanding for the untrained eye) and were not intended for publication, but a substantial number were published by the author himself (very rarely herself) or their family or disciples, presumably after some editorial work was conducted to sort out what should be made public from what should not. They also cover a wide variety of subgenres, from a diary kept everyday over decades, and in some cases running to four or five thousand pages, to a short one devoted to a particular moment, such as travel (many Chinese officials sent to Western countries in the late nineteenth century published the diaries of their mission abroad) or a particular event; we will see that some Chinese caught in the dramatic events of the Taiping war (1851-64) kept diaries of their traumatic experience.

Historians of late imperial and modern China have long used diaries for various purposes, including climate history (most diaries

3 I hasten to add that while the Pudieku database helps scholars find relevant passages and get a sense of the frequency of certain terms, one needs to check the digital text against the original for OCR mistakes; all passages quoted in this essay have been thus checked.

begin each daily entry with information on weather), political history, and more. Very little effort in this direction has so far been made by religious historians, however. I would like to mention some major notable exceptions here; I will only discuss works that engage thoroughly with the genre of diaries, rather than enumerating works that simply occasionally refer to them. I will also not survey the much larger field of late imperial religion among the elites, but will mention in the following sections works pertaining to specific practices discussed in diaries.

A cluster of important recent works that systematically use diaries to explore private religious lives concerns the late Ming period (1550-1644). In her 2019 monograph on late Ming elite philanthropy, Joanna Handlin Smith makes great use of the published diaries of two very different figures: the noted official Qi Biaojia's 祁彪佳 (1602-1645) *Qi Zhongmin gong riji* 祁忠敏公日記 (Diary of Mr. Qi Zhongmin) and the poor scholar Lu Shiyi's 陸世儀 (1611-1672) *Zhixuelu* 志學錄 (Record of my efforts to learn, 1641) (Smith 2009).[4] The former was an institutional leader, who provides a top-down view of rituals and other private and collective endeavors in and around the groups of religiously devoted men who ran charities. By contrast, the latter was a lower-level participant and executant, also more prone to self-examination and doubt. Another remarkable study of a late Ming diary is Erik Zürcher's introduction and translation of the *Kouduo richao* 口鐸日抄 (Diary of oral admonition), a daily record of the interactions of Jesuit missionary Giulio Aleni (1582-1649) and his local converts in Fujian province (Zürcher 2007). In addition, Wang Fansen has published a more general assessment of diaries as sources for the inner worlds of late Ming and early Qing Confucian scholars.[5]

A second case is Liu Yonghua's recent book about the world of local Huizhou merchants (modern Anhui province) seen from the diary-cum-account book (often called *pairizhang* 排日賬, 'daily account book', in local Huizhou usage) of one man between 1841 and 1899 (with interruptions in the extant manuscript record). While his work is largely a socio-economic history, Liu also accounts for the diarist's involvement with local temples, ritual cycles, and his regular pilgrimages to the local Daoist sacred site of Qiyunshan 齊雲山.[6]

The third work deserving special attention is Henrietta Harrison's study of the diary of Liu Dapeng 劉大鵬 (1857-1942), a poor scholar from Shanxi province who maintained his Confucian values and

4 In her study of late Ming religious networks, Eichman (2016) focuses on letters but occasionally draws on diaries.

5 Wang 2004, chapter "Ripu yu Mingmo Qingchu sixiangjia" 日譜與明末清初思想家. See also Lü 2016.

6 Liu 2024. I am grateful to Zhang Xiaoyu for bringing my attention to this book.

practices throughout the challenging times of the Republican period. Liu's testimony belies the idea of late imperial and modern Confucian scholars as atheists, as he was a deeply pious man, involved in the religious institutions of his hometown, fearing Heaven, and dreaming of Confucius's epiphanies (Harrison 2005).

One of the themes that these various studies illuminate is that, for many scholars who kept a diary, it was not simply one way of recording religious activities among others, but writing the diary was in itself a religious endeavor, or, more precisely, a spiritual exercise. Many late Ming scholars were engaged in daily moral self-cultivation routines; some kept ledgers of merits and demerits, *gongguoge* 功過格, that took the form of account sheets on which they computed every night the good and bad actions of the day. Others, such as moral philosopher Liu Zongzhou 劉宗周 (1579-1645), criticized what they saw as a mechanistic approach. Instead, they encouraged self-examination through a free-form model of composition in a diary. Such an approach continued until the contemporary period. To take only one famous example, the towering statesman Zeng Guofan 曾國藩 (1811-1872), in a letter he wrote to his brothers in 1843, outlined a program of daily self-cultivation regimen (*kechengbiao* 課程表), including meditation, study, and the keeping of a diary.[7] While not all diaries equally reflect this moral dimension, it is important to keep in mind that such a dimension informed what was (or was not) recorded in them.

3 Religious Life in Diaries

The present essay is mostly devoted to two case studies of nineteenth-century diaries of a very different nature. At the same time, it is also informed by a larger exploration of the digital corpus as well as selected readings of passages of other diaries. For that reason, I would like to begin with a general survey of the kinds of information on religious life that is found in this body of literature.

First, most diaries are replete with mentions of collective rituals of various sorts: official, communal, and familial. Officials had to attend and sometimes organize and officiate numerous sacrifices to gods found on the register of state sacrifices, ceremonies at court, or in the local temples and altars. They were also responsible for other tasks such as praying for rain. Local territorial communities and guilds also organized large rituals. Lineages and families (lineages being alliances of families) also had a very dense schedule of regular

7 "Zhi zhudi" 致諸弟 (Letter to my brothers), *Zeng Wenzhenggong quanji*, vol. 21 (*jiashu* 家書), 3:8-11.

(sacrifices to ancestors) and life-cycle rites; gentry members routinely attended the family rituals of their neighbors, friends, and in-laws. Family rituals – in spite of all the Confucian propaganda about not having anything to do with Buddhists and Daoists – typically involved inviting clerics to the home, some of whom were regular visitors and sometimes friends. In general, as far as my readings of various diaries allow me to infer, they do not point to competition between Buddhists and Daoists for access to and patronage of literati, but rather to highly singular networks of familiarity and cooperation with various clerics in each individual case. One finds occasional anticlerical remarks. Nevertheless, more often the extant record reflects regular interactions.

The second type of religious activities noted in diaries were outings and visits to temples, monasteries, and other sacred sites. Such places were venues for social gathering, poetry and calligraphy meetings, retreats, and more. Diaries frequently include descriptions of the sites and the interactions with resident clerics and other visitors. The gentry also visited temples and other religious institutions as part of their involvement in charitable activities, as temples were often the largest public space and a nexus for organizing communal efforts of different kinds.

On a more private level, diaries are an essential source for understanding individual and domestic practices, including cults to ancestors and household gods. Of particular significance in this regard is the stove god (Zaojun 竈君) who was the divine guardian reporting on the household's morality (Chard 1995), as well as life-cycle rituals: births, weddings, funerals, and religious responses to personal crises, primarily illnesses. In addition, many literati also voluntarily chose to engage in various spiritual exercises and noted them in their diary. My research interest is particularly focused on these private spiritual exercises (including devotion, confession, psalmody, fasting, and meditation) and private spaces for such endeavors (such as meditation rooms, *jingshi* 靜室). That said, I will attempt to place them in the larger variety of religious practices documented in diaries.

Literati often commented on their readings, including religious scriptures, and events, such as communal rituals. They also recorded and commented on their dreams, which in some cases involved encounters with dead people and gods.

4 Case Study 1: Pan Jitai

The first case study is a rather short and incomplete manuscript, apparently kept in a unique exemplar, titled *Yangcun caotang riji* 楊村草堂日記 (Diary of my hermitage in Yang village) by Pan Jitai 潘基泰 (1815-?). Its 58 pages cover almost the whole of one year, Tongzhi 1, from New Year (30 January 1862) to the fifteenth day of the twelfth lunar month (2 February 1863). There is no way of knowing whether Pan had kept a diary before and after that date; this part only happened to find its way into a public library. Nothing is known about Pan Jitai other than what he reveals in his diary; there is no published scholarship discussing him and his diary – at least, as far as I am aware.

Pan appears to have been a reasonably wealthy landowner living in Yang village, very close to the township of Bacheng 巴城, within Kunshan 昆山 district (Southern Jiangsu province). He went to town very regularly for business and for visiting friends. He was well educated and writes about his readings, which covered a large array of classical literature and history. He was not an ascetic and was not even particularly pious in his daily habits: he ate meat regularly and enjoyed drinking alcohol with his friends, sometimes in large quantities (alcohol, *jiu* 酒, is mentioned 67 times). And yet, religious practices are found very frequently in his diary.

Pan was writing his 1862 diary and mentioning his religious practices in the very particular context of the Taiping war (1851-64). The Taiping rebels had established a puritan, Christian-inspired regime with its capital in Nanjing, not very far north of Pan's village, and were threatening to topple the Qing dynasty in what is likely, to date, the bloodiest civil war in the history of humanity. From 1860 onward, the Taiping armies turned to the Jiangnan region which they laid to waste, killing civilians and burning down all temples along the way.[8] Pan notes the destruction of temples after Taiping raids near his village in the fourth, fifth, eighth, and ninth months, and he once had to briefly escape. He also notes how he and others heard the souls of the recent dead howl at night. All this goes a long way to explain the intensity of religious practices (including community rituals) to plead the gods for help, and spirit-writing to obtain advance information and guidance from the gods. Indeed, there are other cases of diaries written by local scholars in the same Jiangnan region during the war, recording the dramatic events and the frequent interaction with the gods as humans beseeched their help to survive day after day; one such

8 For detailed studies of the impact of the Taiping war on the Jiangnan literati's lives and their religious reactions, see Meyer-Fong 2013; Alexander 2025.

is the anonymous *Gengshen binan riji* 庚申避難日記 (Diary of surviving disasters in the *gengshen* year [1860]) (Goossaert 2021, 279-8).

Spirit-writing was also part of Pan's experience of the war. Spirit-writing (*fuji* 扶乩, *feiluan* 飛鸞, *jiangbi* 降筆, and many other terms) is a large family of ritual techniques of Daoist origin allowing one or several mediums to invite gods to control a writing implement and reveal didactic messages, either as answers to questions or as direct instructions (Schumann, Valussi 2023; Goossaert 2022). Pan was not himself a regular participant in spirit-writing séances, but he mentions four times spirit-written messages revealed at nearby places and brought to him by friends, and he was obviously an avid reader of them. In one case, he thanks the friend by giving him scriptures revealed by the god Wenchang 文昌 – Pan does not mention a personal devotion to this god, one of the most important ones in spirit-writing milieus, but he has extra copies of such scriptures to give:

> 3/16:[9] Chen Yiying came and showed me a text revealed by spirit-writing at the Sanjian altar in Zhitang: the god who wrote it was the Transcendent Officer Six-One. The text is all Confucian in content. When (Chen) left, I gave him a volume with five Wenchang scriptures.
>
> 陳姨瑛来示直塘三緘壇降乩書一則，其神乃六一真官也。所云皆儒者言。別去，余贈文昌五經一卷。

In two cases, Pan is invited to join a session held at an acquaintance's home. For instance:

> +8/1: Together we went to the house of Chen Xizhi, at Lancao. In the ritual arena, we performed the Daoist liturgy of the Big Dipper litany. On that day, they were doing spirit-writing, and Ma An was noting down (the revelations).[10]
>
> 同至瀾漕陳錫智宅，壇中禮玄科斗懺。是日扶乩，馬安叟書記。

These notes document the ordinariness of interactions with the gods through spirit-writing, as well as the intertwining of spirit-writing with other devotional practices. They also demonstrate the

9 All dates are given, as per the original sources, in the traditional calendar, that is lunar month/day: thus 3/16 means sixteenth day of the third month, falling, depending on the year, between late March and early May.

10 '+8' means that in that year there was an intercalary month between the eighth and ninth months.

circulation (copying, giving) of scriptures in the lives of nineteenth-century gentry, which is also found in many other diaries.

4.1 Pan Jitai's Participation in Collective Rituals

Pan Jitai frequently mentions domestic rituals, primarily to ancestors (but also household gods). Most frequently, he discusses the Stove god and the wealth gods of the Five directions, Wulu (caishen) 五路(財神). He also often notes visits to temples and monasteries, notably several Buddhist monasteries and the City god temple, Yimiao 邑廟 (that is, Chenghuangmiao 城隍廟). These visits are always, in Pan's accounts, about socializing and meeting friends, not about joining rituals.

Pan nonetheless actively joined community rituals, notably the grand Daoist offerings (*jiao* 醮) that were organized in major temples. He recounts three such cases within three months – an impressive number, considering the massive mobilization of labor and resources that went into such large-scale rituals. In the sixth month (6/1 to 6/4), a community offering (*gongjiao* 公醮) took place, and Pan notes the various rites performed on each successive day. He was invited at the beginning to join in the preparation of the ritual documents that will be sent to the gods, and to check the names of the community members on these documents. On the following two days (6/5-6) he joined in a Buddhist ritual in another temple, where the group worshiped the Dipper (*lidou* 禮斗) and performed the Litany of Great compassion (*Dabeichan* 大悲懺). Another Daoist offering took place the following month (on 7/22), and Pan notes that he paid his monetary contribution (*fu gongjiao qian* 付公醮錢) and was present at the altar (*ru gongjiaotan* 入公醮壇). Finally, he joined yet another *jiao* offering on 8/28 and took part in the Litany of the Jade Emperor (*bai Yuhuangchan* 拜玉皇懺). It is likely that this intense schedule of communal Daoist rituals was caused by the anxiety of the war, but in any case, Pan, as a landlord personally more interested in Buddhist practices (as we will shortly see) nonetheless took an active part in all of them.

Rituals are also frequently mentioned in cases in which Pan and his family invite religious specialists to their home for domestic purposes, or attend such rituals in other families' homes. On one occasion (3/26), he goes with his wife and a child to someone's home to join in a session of reciting the Buddha (Amitābha)'s name, *nianfo* 念佛, and brings large amounts of food for the whole assembly. In some cases, a funeral was the occasion for inviting clerics: on 6/21 seven Buddhist monks from a local monastery came to his residence to perform a Water Litany for a dead child (寺僧七人來禮水懺荐亾兒) and on 12/2, Daoists performed the "Breaking the gates of hell" rite (是夜道士法事破獄), a key, and spectacular part of funerals.

In other cases, however, the occasion is not mentioned and it seems that the reason was to pray for the family's general welfare. On the night of 5/17, Pan invited eight Buddhist monks to chant the Buddha's name (夜請八僧來念佛) and the following week, on 5/25, he invited seven Daoists to perform a litany of the *Ganyingpian* (道士七人來懺《感應篇》全卷). This last reference is intriguing since this ritual is otherwise unknown (and I am aware of no related liturgical manual). Nevertheless, the ritual does in fact make sense. Litanies are liturgical texts, performed as solo or collective recitation, alternating lists of sins with expressions of repentance and vows to reform, with additional lists of Buddhas and gods to which the performers bow, asking for their pardon. They are ritual performances of moral values expounded in morality books (*shanshu* 善書), and in late imperial times, the *Taishang ganyingpian* 太上感應篇 (The Supreme Lord's tract on action and retribution) was the most revered morality book. Rituals mentioned in diaries are typically common ones, familiar to present-day scholars. Occasionally, however, we hear of a kind of ritual that we are not aware of (as in this case). This is one of the ways in which diaries can enrich our understanding of the social history of rituals.

4.2 Solo Ritual Practices

The most remarkable religious element in Pan Jitai's diary is his practice of psalmody, *song* 誦. Usually translated as "chanting" or "reciting", *song* refers to a ritualized slow rhythmic and solemn oral performance of a sacred text, either alone or collectively, sometimes with a percussion instrument providing the rhythm without melody; psalmody is the closest technical term in English. Regular solo psalmody was a very common practice among late imperial Chinese, and down to the present day. Many prescriptive and narrative sources mention a large array of scriptures (Confucian, Buddhist, or Daoist) thus performed in solo (Goossaert 2019).

Pan mentions his practicing psalmody 29 times, usually but not always in the morning. The scriptures he performed are varied, with Buddhist standard short sutras in the majority. In a few cases, he is not specific, only mentioning "Buddhist scriptures" (*foke* 佛課 on 10/14, 10/25; *fojing* 佛經 on 6/22, 10/29, 11/2-3-4, and 11/15). Most of the time, however, he specifies the scriptures and sometimes the number of times (incantations and short scriptures that take only a few minutes to perform can be repeated many times). Thus he performed the Diamond sutra (*Jin'gangjing* 金剛經) on 1/1, 4/10, 6/1, and 8/30; the Great Compassion litany of confession (*Dabeichan* 大悲懺) plus the Great Compassion incantation (*Dabeizhou* 大悲咒) (8/21: 21 times; 11/12: both litany and incantation 10 times). On 10/16 at

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dawn, he performed the Great Compassion litany and incantation ten times, and the Diamond sutra, the Heart sutra, the King Gao sutra (a scripture on Guanyin) once each (晨誦大悲懺咒十徧、金經一卷、心經、高王經各一卷); on 10/21 he had a shorter program with Great Compassion litany once, incantation ten times, and Diamond sutra once (誦大悲懺一卷、咒十卷、金剛經一卷). This also confirms the popularity of personal practices of incantations, Buddhist and Daoist, in lay domestic settings, which is now beginning to attract scholarly attention (Lei 2025).

On some dates, Pan provides a much longer and varied list of texts. On 6/25, after dinner, he performed a combination of the Diamond sutra, the Great Compassion litany, the Maitreya sutra, the Heart sutra, the King Gao sutra, the Stove god scripture and litany, the *Ganyingpian*, the *Yinzhiwen* 陰隲文 (Text on hidden rewards, the most revered morality tract revealed by Wenchang), the *Jueshijing* 覺世經 (True scripture on Awakening the World, another short morality tract revealed by Guandi 關帝 in the first decades of the Qing), and the Family instruction by Neoconfucian master Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200); all of these once each (飧後誦大悲懺、《金剛經》、《彌陀經》、《心經》、《高王經》、《竈經》、竈懺、《感應篇》、《陰隲文》、《覺世經》、朱子家訓各一遍). On +8/4, he performed again the same list but some of these texts he performed several times. This list thus combines Buddhist standard sutras with morality books of predominant (but not exclusive) Daoist origin, and Confucian tracts. Both the list of texts he performed on each occasion, and the variations allowed by repeating some of them several times, show the great leeway Pan had in devising his own regimen of psalmody performance, and the way he expressed his personal preference for certain texts.

Finally, Pan also engaged in hand-copying scriptures, although much less frequently (two mentions) than psalmody. On 6/7 he copied the Litany of Great Compassion until night, after which he "studied how to perform it" (抄大悲懺至晚竣，夜學禮大悲懺).

One of the questions Pan's regimen of psalmody raises is their temporality: periods of more intense practice alternate with weeks without a single mention. As a result, the total number of psalmody performances (29) is both great and not great – it is significantly higher than what is found in most diaries; yet, it is also less than once every ten days (in contrast to the frequently attested daily regimen). Also, the dates when Pan engaged in psalmody do not match well with the common religious calendar, beginning with the 1st and 15th day of the month (new and full moon) which are times of more sustained piety. What we see here is not someone following closely the calendar for religious practices, but choosing his own moments for engaging in spiritual exercises. It is likely that the war context is part of the story, and that Pan engaged in more intense psalmody when feeling

particularly anxious or vulnerable – but this must remain speculative, as Pan hardly discloses his feelings.[11]

The brevity of Pan's account leaves many questions unanswered, but we can make a few observations. He seems to have been an average rural landlord with an intense social life who attended major communal rituals in his hometown as a matter of fact. Yet quite frequently, but not on a very regular schedule, he engaged in rather extensive sessions of psalmody alone at home. At the same time, he does not mention any personal devotion to a particular god – which of course does not mean he did not sustain any such devotion. For instance, he quite often performed litanies, incantations, and sutras devoted to bodhisattva Guanyin; however, we do not know whether he had a Guanyin shrine at home and had any personal relationship with her. We also do not learn much about the women in his family, and the division of ritual labor in the household; on one occasion (9/24), he mentions that his wife performed the Stove god litany.

Pan also does not draw a line between personal, family, and communal practices. For instance, on New Year's Day, he notes a combination of domestic worship and spiritual exercises: at dawn, he burnt incense and lit candles for Heaven, Earth, and the Stove god – a standard domestic worship involving the whole family, and then performed the psalmody of the *Diamond sutra* twice (1/1: 晨起於天地家堂竈君杰香然燭樓任，誦《金剛經》二卷). Some of his favorite practices, such as performing the Great Compassion litany, could take place either in a temple or in the domestic space. This invites us to approach our analytical distinctions between personal, familial, and communal, which I have been using here, with a degree of caution.

5 Case Study 2: Weng Tonghe

The second case study is very different in all regards from Pan Jitai's short diary. It is the mammoth diary kept without interruption by Weng Tonghe 翁同龢 (1830-1904) between 1858 and 1904, covering 2,448 pages in the modern, large-format typeset edition I use here.[12] Because of the earlier history of publishing illustrious officials' diaries, Weng may have been aware some part of his diary would one day be made public (in contrast to the clearly entirely private work of Pan). Nevertheless, it was not published before the contemporary period.

In contrast to the obscure Pan, Weng is a very well-known historical figure, one of the highest officials of the last decades of the empire. Weng was born in a family originating from Changshu 常

11 On the calendars, see Goossaert 2024.

12 Another modern punctuated edition was published in Beijing in 1989.

熟 (near Suzhou) but spent his whole life in Beijing in close proximity to the Forbidden City. His father Weng Xincun 翁心存 (1791-1862) had been the teacher of two of the Daoguang emperor's (r. 1820-50) sons. Weng Tonghe rose to fame in 1856 when he not only succeeded the *jinshi* examination (the topmost level in the examination system) but was ranked first (*zhuangyuan* 狀元). He then embarked on a stellar career. In 1865 he was appointed tutor to the young Tongzhi emperor (born 1856, r. 1861-75), and a few years later in the same capacity to the infant Guangxu emperor (born 1871, r. 1875-1908), who had acceded the throne in 1874 after his cousin's premature death. He was minister of various boards and was twice member of the Grand Council (Junjichu 軍機處), the very core of the Qing state, first in 1882-84 and again in 1894-1898. Weng was a highly educated man but did not leave much of a name as an author.[13] His diary, by contrast, has been consistently mined by historians of late Qing politics.

Weng was not by any definition a very religious man; 'religious' contents, even by an extensive definition, are but a tiny part of his diary. His mediocre religiosity, however, is what makes him a very good case study if one wishes to go beyond the minority of highly committed individuals who wrote at length about their intensive self-cultivation regimens, and probe into the quotidian religious activities of the average elite person. I have, in an earlier publication, charted the religious involvements of late imperial elites according to two dimensions: personal commitment and culture (the latter defined as the ability to understand the religious activities of others). On that chart, Weng, with limited commitments but apparent familiarity with religious life in Beijing, would be near the cluster I termed "ethnographers", that is, literati not much personally involved but curious and objective enough to write informed descriptions of religious practices around them (Goossaert 2017, chart on p. 8).

5.1 Weng's Diary as a Source on Public Religious Life in Beijing

Weng's family originated from Jiangnan like Pan, but he spent almost his whole life in the capital, and his notes therefore shed light on northern Chinese religious life; I have not identified any specific Jiangnan religious practices in his entries. In my earlier work on Daoists in pre-1949 Beijing, I have already used Weng Tonghe's diary for passages where he noted visits to major Daoist temples (Goossaert 2007, 147, 152 *passim*). For instance, Weng mentions six visits to the largest Daoist monastery in the capital, the Baiyunguan 白雲觀; and eight visits to the large Eastern Peak temple, Dongyuemiao

13 He has one collection of poetry published, *Pinglu shigao* 瓶廬詩稿.

東岳廟. Such visits to temples had many different reasons, from simple sightseeing to visiting someone (either a cleric or a friend or colleague). In some cases, Weng provides short descriptions and appreciative judgments on the rituals performed, such as this note on the massive Daoist monastic ordination taking place every few years, which was a public event:

> I left the Inner city through the Xibian gate and passed by the Baiyun Monastery. There was an ordination ceremony at the time. The abbot is Mr. Gao, a man from Jining (Shandong province), but I could not see him.[14] There were over five hundreds Daoists in yellow robes; after the meal, they all walked in perfect order to their room; their discipline was impressive.
>
> 1884, 9/2 : 行出西便門，過白雲觀，值其放戒之期。方丈高姓，濟寧人，未見。道流黃衣者五百餘，齋罷魚貫各入住處，頗齊整。

On another visit to the Baiyun Monastery (in 1875, 11/10), Weng also failed to meet a Daoist dignitary he was hoping to visit, but comments on a group of lay people who were doing meditation in the courtyard. More generally, Weng had various interactions with Daoists (the term Daoist priest, *daoshi* 道士, is used 54 times), including a friend who was a Daoist and a painter and who did portraits for his family. One of his most sustained interactions was with a Daoist named Cao Heyi 曹合一 who was the manager of a temple, Yuantong Monastery 圓通觀, where Weng and other elites funded and ran a soup kitchen (*zhouchang* 粥廠) for the urban poor; Weng has only kind words for Cao's work and their collaboration. During an outing in 1901 (1/5), he came across a Daoist engaged in ascetic fundraising, enclosed in a small cage in public view where he stayed for days without eating (*liguan muxiu* 立關募修). Weng was curious enough to enquire about that mendicant cleric and found out that his father was a military official – and, apparently, he was so surprised to see a son of a good family playing that role that he wrote it down.

Most rituals Weng Tonghe mentions as having taken part in (aside from the countless state sacrifices he attended in his official capacity) are salvation rituals for the dead, either within his family or among friends and acquaintances. But such rituals extended beyond the immediate context of relatives passing away. In the following entry, he discloses his personal involvement:

> I went to the Baoguo Buddhist Monastery. Tonight was a ritual for saving the burning mouths (of the souls suffering in hell). My late

14 That abbot, Gao Rentong 高仁峒 (1841-1908), was a major figure of late Qing Beijing.

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> wife, when she was still alive, asked me to organize a ritual for offering food (to suffering souls) each year in the seventh month.
>
> 1866, 7/15：至報國寺。今日晚間放燄口一壇。余亡妻生前為余言年年七月當為施食道場也。

Such rituals, held on the fifteenth day of the seventh month (the "ghost festival") are a major node of the yearly calendar in Beijing as in the whole Chinese world. Indeed, the Buddhist liturgy for saving the hapless "burning mouths", *yankou* 燄口 /焰口, is one of the most frequently mentioned rituals in the whole diary (with 18 occurrences). Yet, it is remarkable that in the private context of his diary – and in spite of all the discourses found among the writings of late imperial Confucians about distancing themselves from Buddhist and Daoist rituals – Weng reveals that he paid for and attended such rituals in Buddhist temples every year, in memory of his late wife.

Such salvation rituals for the dead took place either in temples or at home, and Weng repeatedly mentions inviting Buddhist and Daoist priests to officiate at his residence. For instance, he mentions inviting Daoists to perform a *liandu* 鍊度 ritual (the alchemical salvation of the dead) for a relative on three successive nights (1902, 8/29 to 9/1); this at the very least shows that he knew what specific Daoist ritual was being performed and what was the proper technical term for it. He is also fully cognizant of the ways rituals are customarily done (he frequently mentions these customs, *suli* 俗例) and notes when his own practice somehow deviates from them. Buddhists and Daoists performed in his home. In some cases, Weng mentions them by name, thus evincing interpersonal familiarity. These were clerics he knew and respected personally:

> Today is the birthday of my late mother; I presented offerings to her. It was also the fourth seventh[15] of my late concubine. Monks Sanfeng and Yufeng came to present condolences. […] That night, I presented offerings to the stove god: my wife had been doing this year after year, but now she is unable to (and I did it in her place).
>
> 1904, 12/23：先母誕日，設奠。是日亡妾爲四七日。三峯，玉峯和尚來弔 […] 夜祀竈，年年老婦事之，今不可得矣。

On another occasion (1901, 1/5), he visits a Buddhist monk and they looked at paintings and calligraphy together. But beyond such

15 Chinese funeral rituals are organized in a cycle of ten nodes, with a rite held every seventh day for seven weeks (so Weng mentions the fourth week here), followed by the hundredth, one year, and three years.

cultural companionship, Weng also remains aware of his relationship to clerics as service providers and occasionally mentions the amount he pays to them (1904, 12/24).

5.2 Spirit-Writing

Weng Tonghe mentions spirit-writing thirteen times. Although this is not a high number (and he was clearly not an enthusiastic adept), his mentions still indicate that he was familiar with the practice, and that it had at several points made a significant impact on his personal life. The earliest mention constitutes an untypically long story. In 1860 (1/27) he recounts a visit to a friend, who told him how he had earlier been together with a high official in Zhejiang province who had set up a spirit-writing altar in his residence. A god writing at this altar arranged a marriage – forcing the two families to agree to it – and the daughter born from that union became Weng Tonghe's first wife. In this matter-of-fact account, Weng thus admits that his own intimate life had been preordained by the gods.

More accounts of spirit-writing are related to Weng's visits to temples in Beijing that ran a public spirit-writing altar. In 1887 (4/7), he visited one such temple, the Sanshengguan 三聖觀, where he observed crowds waiting to obtain spirit-written medical prescriptions (*jifang* 乩方); he noted that this popularity explained how the temple had managed to raise funds for a recent renovation. He also found that the writing did not look to him like the brushwork of immortals (觀乩筆, 似非仙人者所為也). Despite his somewhat dismissive attitude, Weng was thus curious enough to look closely at the writing of the gods.

Moreover, his generally negative posture did not prevent his family from making use of such spirit-written medical prescriptions. For instance, he notes in 1895 (9/22) that the wife of his nephew took such a divine prescription, along with a human one, and got much better (大姪婦昨服朱方，并服乩仙所示方，得眠，稍進粥飲). In 1901 (1/5), he visited a Daoist who offered spirit-written cures, which he describes as "highly efficacious" and mentions that one of his relatives was cured there previously (閣奉乩壇仙方甚靈，去年之廉屢禱於此). Most mentions of spirit-writing healing are related to the divine figure of Lüzu 吕祖, i.e. the immortal Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓 (1881, +7/21, 1900, 5/3).

In other cases, his tone becomes truly deferent:

> Mu Du has set up a spirit-writing altar (at his home) and obtained revelations from the gods: he thus learnt that his father has ascended to the Jade Bureau. The Jade Bureau is an office in Heaven, attached to the Wenchang palace. I was moved by this.

1864, 4/12 : 慕杜定乩壇降筆，先公已升玉局，玉局者天上官府，文昌宮內僚屬也，為之感動。

This rare reference to postmortem divinization is intriguing, especially since the father mentioned here may be Weng's colleague Mu Du's (as I have translated above) – though it could also be his own father. Ever since spirit-written revelations about the Jade Bureau in the late seventeenth century, it has been familiar with scholars as the heavenly administration where the god Wenchang welcomes his dead devotees and enlist them as gods in his divine mission to save the world (Burton-Rose 2020). Contrary to many of his contemporaries, Weng did not publicize any personal devotion to Wenchang, but was nonetheless entirely familiar with his cult. He once (1864, 3/17) drew an oracle (於文昌閣占一籤) at a Wenchang temple that predicted future success in the examinations for his brothers. In 1875 (9/15), he also copied in his own calligraphy Wenchang's morality tract *Yinzhiwen* to gift to a friend (為人書《文昌陰騭文》).

5.3 Fasting

Weng Tonghe mentions periods (both single days and longer periods) when he engaged in fasting. By attending to this aspect, we can catch a glimpse of his inner world. The term he uses is *rusu* 茹素 (39 occurrences), literally "eating vegetarian", not the more religiously explicit *chizhai* 持齋 (observing purity rules). Nevertheless, it is likely that the meaning is the same, referring not only to the avoidance of meat, but also of alcohol and sex. Whereas permanent fasting was uncommon and even objectionable among late imperial elites (Weng indeed notes as a remarkable fact a few cases of persons he knew who became permanent vegetarians), observing periodic fasts was almost universal (Goossaert 2024). On a few occasions, he notes that fasting was imposed by the court on all officials in imitation to the emperor's own fasting. Most of the time, however, he mentions fasting as a result of a personal choice. Weng's own fasting practices shed light on his private religiosity and that of his family. One common occasion was New Year's Day:

> I got up at the *yin* hour (before dawn), lighted incense to pray Heaven, and then went to the court audience. […] Leaving the palace, I visited the Shrine to Sage and Virtuous men and bowed to the tablet of my father there. […] I fasted for the whole day, as is the custom in my family.

1867, 1/1 : 同治六年丁卯元日。寅正起，升香告天，卯初入朝。 […] 出詣賢良祠先公位前行禮。 […] 茹素一日，此吾家舊例也。

A second occasion for fasting was when taking part in a Buddhist or Daoist ritual:

> Today, we invited Buddhist monks to perform the Great Compassion incantation for three days; I observed the fast.
>
> 1899, 11/11 : 是日起延僧誦大悲咒三日， 余茹素。

Weng likely notes this because, even though it was customary for all participants in a ritual to purify themselves by fasting, as a high official and head of the household, he could have skipped this rule without being reproached. Yet he still chose to observe it. In other cases, the decision to fast was purely personal and related to his own inner feelings (rather than any collective event). Notably, for seven days (1875, 11/2 to 11/8), he decided to fast to deal with his anxiety:

> Today, I stayed home, feeling tired. Everything I do seems to fail. Since the beginning of the month, I feel sorry about the whole world, so from yesterday I started fasting.
>
> 1875, 11/2 未出門，殊倦，百事都廢，入此月來，覺天地愁慘，從昨日起茹素。

His practice of fasting on the birthdays and deathdays (death anniversaries) of his parents, while still emotional, differ to a degree from the deeply felt need for personal purification (expressed in spiritual, not medical terms); his father is mentioned more often than his mother in this regard. For instance:

> Today is my late father's birthday; I observed the fast and copied scriptures, so as to express my sorrow. Over the last few nights I have dreamt of my being at my father's side, and yesterday he looked angry and reproachful; I know that I am an unworthy son who has somehow failed to be virtuous.
>
> 1874, 5/14 : 是日先公生忌，茹素寫經，以寄其悲。前數夕皆夢在先公旁，昨夕夢有怒容詬責，知不肖子隱有失德矣。

On these special days, fasting is combined with other spiritual practices. For instance :

> Today is my father's deathday: I worshipped the Buddha, observed the fast, and meditated. I have never failed to do so on this day over the last twenty years.
>
> 1886, 11/7 : 先公諱日，禮佛，茹素，默念。廿年來，無此一日也。

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And yet, he sometimes admits – surely with guilt – that he has failed to fast on such a birthday or deathday (竟未能茹素).

Finally, Weng Tonghe also observed fasting for his own birthday. While this may seem surprising for a contemporary Westerner for whom birthday means celebrating with good food and drinks, it makes sense. Birthdays were not celebrated in pre-twentieth century China before the age of sixty. Instead, they were occasion for worshipping the stellar god responsible for that day, and hence one's own destiny (*benming* 本命). On many occasions, Weng simply mentions his pious attitude on that day:

> Today is He's (my) birthday. I observed the fast, kowtowed in the ancestral shrine, and meditated in solitary peace.
>
> 1886, 4/27 : 是日穌生朝, 茹素, 祠堂叩頭, 静念牢落。

Weng also honestly notes when he fails to observe the fast he felt he should have held, showing how such practices were less the result of any social pressure than of personal commitment:

> Today is He's (my) birthday. Getting up at dawn, I kowtowed toward Heaven. In previous years, I observed the fast (on that day) but this year I was unable to; all affairs are accumulating, and this made me uneasy.
>
> 1877, 4/27 : 是日穌生朝也。晨起向上叩頭。往年茹素, 今年獨未然, 盖百事填集, 此中不安耳。

As noted above, on special days when he fasted, Weng also engaged in other practices. He mentions various forms of quiet reflection.[16] Weng frequently uses the term *jingzuo* 靜坐 (sitting in tranquility), which is the most common term for meditative practices in late imperial Confucian contexts.[17] In some instances Weng may refer to meditation, but in other cases, he seems to mean simply quiet reading and thinking.

We have seen that on his father's birthday, Weng engaged in hand-copying scriptures, *xiejing* 寫經: this is mentioned about twenty times across the years. In most cases, Weng does not say anything about which scriptures he is hand-writing; however, on one occasion, we learn that it is a Buddhist sutra. In 1872 (10/30), he writes that he

16 I have translated such instances as "meditation", even though the contents of the practice remains unclear.

17 Gernet 1981; Taylor 1979, both discussing earlier periods.

starts copying the *Lotus sutra* (*Miaofa lianhuajing* 妙法蓮華經) out of grieving:

> This same day last year, I was joyfully together with mother. But now, she has left (this world) and I am alone. Heaven! Heaven! So I vowed to hand-copy the *Lotus sutra* entirely, starting from tomorrow.
>
> 去年今日母與兒嬉。今年此日，母棄兒去久矣。天乎天乎。發願寫《法華經》一部，自明日始。

The *Lotus sutra* is long, and it took five days for Weng to complete his vow; he notes the progress he made each day until its completion on 11/5. Here again, in the solitude of his private space, this prominent Confucian statesman engaged in Buddhist practices moved by his own intimate feelings and relationships to the women closest to him.

The sheer amount of information contained in Weng Tonghe's diary cannot be satisfactorily surveyed here. Nevertheless, I would like to offer a few preliminary remarks. First, most mentions of his practices (outside of his official capacity), either individual or collective, are found in the context of household cults and family life-cycle rituals, especially funerals. These are the contexts when he most readily expressed affects and made vows to copy scriptures or fast. The medical context also emerges as an important site; his prayers and interactions with gods through spirit-writing, direct or indirect, are related to illnesses and healing. Like Pan Jitai discussed in the previous case study, Weng does not disclose a personal cultic relation to any specific god.

Second, Weng's notes evince familiarity with a large array of religious practices. By familiarity, I do not mean active, voluntary, emotionally charged involvement. Instead, it would seem that Weng had seen such practices before, was not surprised when he witnesses them, understood them. Moreover, he mentions them as a matter of fact, using terms that are standard for that practice. Among such familiar practices are the Wenchang cult, spirit-writing, and Buddhist and Daoist salvation rituals. Consequently, if even someone who has spent his whole life in the rarefied atmosphere of the highest levels of officialdom at court was familiar (and seemingly at ease) with the larger religious culture, then it is likely that most Chinese were familiar with it as well.

6 Conclusion

The two case studies discussed above hardly do justice to the variety of information found in late imperial Chinese diaries about

the daily religious life of literati. The differences between the two are notable, even though neither of their authors can be described as a spiritual virtuoso or even as a particularly religious person. Pan Jitai, having more free time on his hands than the high official Weng Tonghe, and also living through exacting and highly stressful times in the middle of a war, spent more time performing rituals, especially solo psalmody of scriptures. Their differences – as it relates to personal, domestic practices – seem to reflect social status and personal engagements rather than regional differences. Despite the differences, however, we also find important commonalities: both men engaged in domestic and communal rituals and used religious methods to deal with grieving or anxiety, such as fasting, psalmody, scripture copying, or meditation. Both accounts also support a fact scholars of modern China know in the abstract but rarely analyze in full: the late imperial gentry spent a considerable part of their time participating in rituals (of all sorts), and many had a keen interest in them. Of course, the specific rituals varied from person to person, as individuals had agency over their ritual lives.

More generally, our two case studies also suggest the contribution and limitations of diaries to our understanding of the personal, quotidian religion and inner worlds of the late imperial Chinese.[18] A first remark is that diaries, counterintuitively at first sight, do not seem to mention truly daily activities, that is, the type of practice that one engages in each and every day. In a sense, this point is logical: one tends to note what is special about each day. In any case, the types of practice often described in other kinds of sources (e.g., biographies and autobiographies, paratexts to religious books that often contain personal testimonies), such as daily psalmody of a short scripture at dawn, and moral self-examination at night, are rarely mentioned in diaries. I also found relatively few mentions of the liturgical calendars and the birthdays of the gods, on which many people observed fasting or visited temples. At least based on our two case studies, therefore, it would seem that, while diaries shed much light on ritual involvement with gods, spirits, and things religious, they are not exhaustive in their descriptions of everyday practices and attitudes. Consequently, they must be combined with other types of narrative, notably biographical testimonies (paratexts, letters, spiritual autobiographies[19]) and accounts of events in collections of anecdotes (*biji* 筆記).[20] More research is certainly required. But, as I hope is clear from this analysis, diaries are useful sources for exploring the variety and richness of lived religion in late imperial China.

18 On inner worlds, see Benn, Brose 2025.

19 Wu Pei-yi 1990; Bauer 1990.

20 For a study of the religious world seen though anecdotal accounts, see Goossaert 2010.

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