

Ritual Labour and Maintenance of Tradition in a Village Temple: An Occupational Folklore Approach to Chinese Religion

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Abstract: This paper is a study of ritual and profession at a temple in a demolished village in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, South China. The study focuses on two ritual service providers (RSPs) who 1) offer services within fortune-telling, divination and *feng shui* (geomancy) and 2) serve as intermediaries between worshippers and the deities from Daoism and folk religion who are enshrined in the temple. We take an occupational folklore approach to ask how these RSPs' work, lives and religious practices have been affected by the massive social, economic, political and spatial changes that China has undergone over the past five decades. Bearing in mind the various roles accorded to money, the economy and the market in studies of Chinese religion, we use

semi-structured interviews and participant observation to understand the RSPs' own perceptions of and practices within their profession. We conclude that the RSPs' professional status is important for continuity of ritual culture and religious life.

Keywords: China, folk religion, occupational folklore, religious folklore, ritual labour, ritual service providers (RSPs), tradition, village temple

INTRODUCTION

This is a study of ritual and profession at a village temple in the South China megacity of Guangzhou. This temple is dedicated to a local deity worshipped in scattered villages around Guangdong Province and Hong Kong.

The temple is nothing out of the ordinary. It is of a type that can be found throughout the region. The village, however, is hardly anything at all: The villagers have mostly moved away, the village's buildings have been demolished, and the long-awaited village reconstruction stretches further and further out into the future.

The temple is staffed and maintained by two individuals who assist visitors with religious activities and offer them an array of ritual services. Following Adam Yuet Chau (2019: 45), we term these individuals 'ritual service providers' (RSPs), a group ranging "from *feng shui* masters (geomancers) to Daoist priests, Buddhist monks to sectarian ritualists, fortune-tellers to spirit mediums, and their works deal with funerals, burials, memorial offerings, divination, healing, exorcism, and communal offerings" (Ibid.: 99). This paper takes an occupational folklore approach and uses material from semi-structured interviews and participant observation to ask how these RSPs' work, lives and religious practices have been affected by the massive social, economic, political and spatial changes that China has undergone since the start of the Reform and Opening Up era in the second half of the 1970s. How is it that they are RSPs in a village temple without a village, and how have they adapted their traditions to the realities of today's China?

This paper considers the provision of ritual services as a profession. Professions give rise to a range of traditional behaviours, customs, beliefs and ways of perceiving the world—in short, folklore. Work is a key element of culture, "the central domain in or by which participation in society is made possible" (Koch 2012: 155). Studies of occupational folklore have evolved over time, in keeping with the widening focus and changing ideologies of the discipline of folklore studies itself, a process that is especially evident in the movement of scholarship from agrarian to urban communities (Koch 2012). Both material artefacts and verbal lore are relevant to the ways in which people enculture work space (Neumann 1999). As Thurston (2024) notes, however, folklore studies frequently privileges the notion of a natural maintenance of tradition over the

reality that such maintenance is often very hard ‘work’. Not all work is paid, and even less work is paid well. Yet people find reasons to keep doing it. By perceiving ritual service provision as a profession, we connect with and contribute to wider efforts within folklore studies to understand how socioeconomic factors influence the maintenance, communication and development of tradition.

Below, we set forth our methods and then introduce theoretical approaches to the Chinese religious economy. We then present the spatial and economic context of this village temple before presenting material from our interviews concerning how the RSPs came to the temple, how the village and society have changed in recent years, and how one becomes an RSP and undertakes the work. This is followed by an analysis of the social, economic and political forces influencing the RSPs’ work and then a discussion of the importance of considering money and professionalism within studies of RSPs, both in China and more generally. Our study uses the case of these two RSPs to comment on wider changes within Chinese society, but it must be borne in mind that the experiences discussed here are (like all experiences) personal, individual and subjective.

METHODS

This paper is based on our interactions with the RSPs and others at the selected village temple in 2023–2025. We are a foreign professor (Adam Grydehøj, 43years old) and a Chinese master’s student (Qi Pan, 24years old) and. This study is part of a wider mixed-methods ethnographic project concerning deities as social actors in South China. The project combines participant observation, autoethnography, semi-structured interviews, ethnographic drawing and analysis of historical texts in and regarding a large number of temples, particularly in Guangdong. Although this project involves engagement with numerous RSPs, deities and religious settings, we focus in this paper on RSPs at one particular temple in order to more fully explore the motivations and forces affecting individual tradition bearers.

This temple has two RSPs, Master Zhang (55) and the junior master (33). We encountered them first as visitors to the temple, with Grydehøj making occasional visits to the temple beginning in October 2022. We then got to know them within an explicit research context: In April 2024, Pan received a horoscope reading from the junior master, whom we then formally interviewed on our research topic. In August 2024, Grydehøj received a horoscope reading from Master Zhang, which we likewise followed with a formal interview. In both cases, Pan carried out the formal interview in Mandarin, with further questions being asked by and clarifications being sought by Grydehøj. On subsequent visits to the temple for prayer, fortune-telling, and other ritual services, we gradually became more familiar with the RSPs. In 2024, Grydehøj and Master Zhang began communicating via machine translation of voice and text

messages in the WeChat app. Our understandings of the RSPs' work and lives were acquired gradually, as we participated in temple activities and observed and spoke with the RSPs, with Master Zhang in particular becoming a long-term research partner (see Karlach 2023a).

In the results section below, we alternate between the interviews with the two RSPs in order to highlight their divergent and convergent perspectives and means of communicating knowledge. We follow this with an analysis of the interviews, with reference to our subsequent observations at the temple, including close observation of Master Zhang's provision of religious services to other individuals who Grydehøj brought to the temple in 2024 and 2025.

The semi-structured interviews covered a range of related topics, including how the contributor came to be an RSP at the temple, what kind of work the contributor does as an RSP at the temple, the nature of the deities enshrined in the temple, and legends connected with the temple. The two RSPs provided informed consent. Master Zhang gave permission for his name to be used, but the junior master requested anonymity. As such, it has been necessary to identify Master Zhang by surname alone so as not to expose the name of the junior master. These are among a wider sample of interviews our research team has undertaken with RSPs in South China.

Studies such as the present one raise complex questions of positionality, reflexivity and dual insider-outsider status (Nadarajah 2007). When the researchers first visited the temple and engaged with these RSPs, they were met with a degree of wariness. As Grydehøj in particular has become a frequent visitor to the temple, his identity as a researcher has been supplemented by identities as a worshipper and a ritual services client. In early 2025, Master Zhang ceased referring to Grydehøj in distant terms as *laoshi* (the teacher) or *laowai* (the foreigner) and began referring to him in more affectionate and intimate terms as *Lao Ge* (literally 'Old Ge'; derived from Grydehøj's Chinese name, *Ge Luhai*). The service provider-client relationship is also relevant, as Grydehøj both purchases services himself and brings new clients to the RSPs. While the researchers seek to avoid prompting in interview contexts, they do not seek to situate themselves as external, objective observers of the studied places and phenomena, something which is in any case neither possible nor desirable (Hufford 1995; Nay 2025).

Although the RSPs are performing kinds of rituals that are widely and openly carried out in China, vernacular religious practices are on occasion subjected to official scrutiny. As such, it is necessary to approach interviews with and research concerning Chinese RSPs with a degree of delicacy in order to encourage mutual trust and understanding.

RITUAL SERVICE PROVIDERS AND THE CHINESE RELIGIOUS ECONOMY

The ritual services undertaken by the RSPs considered in this article are a kind of knowledge work or information work. However, although these are services are carried out in specific urban settings, most prominently the temple itself, these settings differ from the kinds of office environments present in much of the earlier occupational folklore studies of knowledge workers (e.g., Neumann 1999; Bell & Forbes 1994; Dundes & Pagter 1975; Roemer 1994). Such office environments – widely perceived in the scholarship as stratified and depersonalised and thereby encouraging acts of humour and resistance – are themselves not the end state of urban capitalist society, with the COVID pandemic illustrating how rapidly spatialisations of work can be disrupted.

It is useful to consider the two RSPs as knowledge workers rather than simply as tradition bearers because they themselves perceive their provision of ritual services as a professional activity for which they are exceptionally well qualified. The RSPs do indeed maintain and communicate traditional knowledge that is of cultural importance within their society, but they can only do so consistently and effectively because this is their job. Their ability to perform this work furthermore depends on a range of other cultural, economic, spatial, political and technological conditions (Karlach 2023b).

This has not always been recognised in scholarship concerning religion, given that money is often regarded as essentially profane, as the enemy of the sacred (Eisenstein 2011). In Western culture, this idea finds expression in Jesus' cleansing of the Temple and in Martin Luther's rebellion against the Catholic Church's sale of indulgences. The role of money has nevertheless received considerable attention within studies of Chinese religion in particular, with an extensive scholarship for example on the burning of paper money and valuables (Gates 1987; Scott 2007; Blake 2011) and on temple donations (Liang 2014; Chang 2020; Jia & Xiang & Zhang 2019).

Palmer (2011: 1) criticises the Chinese adoption of the USA-derived 'religious market theory', which "treats religious organizations as firms competing for market share among potential adherents within a religious economy", contending that many religious activities do not involve market exchanges. Palmer (2011) advocates instead for perceiving Chinese religion as primarily a 'gift economy', yet he at the same time emphasises that Chinese culture has long struggled with a tension between commercial magic practitioners and "the otherworldly hermit ideal ... The critique of profiteering by Daoist priests and Buddhist monks is an age-old theme in Chinese literature, often taken up by literati advocates of a pure spirituality" (Ibid.: 23).

RSPs of the kind considered here differ from temple-based monks or sectarian masters. Chau (2010) argues that, in today's socioeconomic and political context, China's folk religious RSPs may be classed among the 'petty capitalists', with operational models resembling those of household artisans and

family-run shopkeepers, a development related to the Reform and Opening Up era's identification of the household as the basic unit of production. Faced with social marginalisation (Wang 2015), RSPs may engage in active professionalisation strategies in order to establish their place in today's Chinese society (Li 2014).

When considering Chinese religion, it is necessary to be wary of overly 'god-centric' approaches. Many of the ritual services undertaken by RSPs on the streetside, at relatively informal village temples, in people's homes and in highly institutionalised monastic settings have little to do with deities. Practices such as fortune-telling, feng shui and *Bazi* readings are related to systems of metaphysical principles, such as those set forth in the *I Ching*. Although these principles presuppose a universe in which gods exist and exert influence, deities are not at the core of the services themselves.

For instance, among the services provided by the RSPs considered in this paper are readings based on *kau cim*, a Cantonese term for divination using bamboo sticks. In the typical *kau cim* divination process at the temple, the customer first purchases incense from the RSP, makes an incense offering to the deities and then asks the deities for guidance through the (magical) selection of a bamboo stick. The RSP is subsequently paid to interpret the meaning of the bamboo stick in accordance with metaphysical principles. Three economic exchanges occur here: 1) The customer takes incense from a shelf and pays the RSP; 2) the customer gives incense to the gods, and the gods give the customer sacred knowledge; and 3) the RSP interprets the sacred knowledge for the customer, and the customer pays the RSP. This accords with what Ahern (1981) terms 'interpersonal divination', in which an RSP assists a customer in interacting with deities, relative to 'non-interpersonal divination' (such as geomancy and *Bazi* readings), in which the RSP's services do not involve the gods at all. By the same token, the exchange that occurs when an individual makes an offering (incense, fruit, money, etc.) to a deity in hopes of receiving blessings or other intangible goods need not involve RSPs.

Beyond the scholarly literature, we frequently encounter people who decry the commercialisation of religion and ritual services. It is a widely held sentiment that many famous temples are overly commercialised, and aggressive marketing of ritual services is common in various contexts. There is an ideal that religion and ritual ought to be treated differently from other kinds of services, which seems present in the popular notion that RSPs should feel a sense of calling and should not provide ritual services solely as a means of making money (unlike, say, a shopkeeper or restaurateur). In this regard, we may note the official state designation of folk religious RSPs as *mixin zhuanyehu* ('household films specialising in superstition'), as individuals who take money but give nothing in return (Chau 2010). When the benefits one receives from a service provider are wholly intangible and are subject to official condemnation, it is especially easy to delegitimise payment for them.

These are complex topics, and there is no clear East–West division in sentiment and approach. As Chau (2019: 129) argues:

We need to guard against any prejudice toward religious commodification ... due to our own sensibilities toward the connection between money and religion. It might seem that religion in China was somehow not as commoditized in the past as it is today. A brief look at religious practices in dynastic China will quickly disabuse anyone of such a mistaken view. ... The view that religion should somehow be a pure, spiritual pursuit freed from such worldly 'ugliness' as monetary transactions and 'vile' desires is a fundamentalist, elitist, and/or modernist-reformist position that itself needs critical deconstruction.

We follow Chau (2019: 130) in countering the scholarly 'anti-commodification bias' by being upfront about and noting where possible the prices for ritual services in our case study. We likewise seek to counter this bias by explicitly approaching RSP work as work.

There is a longstanding Orientalist and elite tradition of showing respect for Asian religion in the abstract or as practiced by social elites while deploring the ways in which religion is practiced by ordinary people (Grydehøj & Su 2025). However, elite and vernacular traditions have always interacted with and influenced one another (Yü 2001). The RSPs in this study position themselves as performing highly practical work and are distant from the abstracted methods of more doctrinal and rigidly organised Daoists, but they provide their services on the basis of (inherently exclusive) inherited knowledge and intensive scholarship of religious texts and practices.

A focus on customers, worshippers and those who seek out the gods is valuable for shedding light on the ideas and practices of the mass of people who engage with deities and practice Chinese religion (Grydehøj 2024). Our analytical focus here is on the provision of ritual services as a profession in its own right. The particular RSPs we consider do indeed function as middlemen between worshippers and the sacred: by mediating messages from the gods, by mediating customers' offerings to the gods, and by helping customers navigate a universe infused with sacred principles. Yet they are also professionals engaged in skilled labour who give considerable thought to the technical, social, cultural, political, economic and spatial conditions that make their work with the sacred possible.

Finally, we most note the impossibility of unambiguously identifying the religion practiced at the temple in question. The deities enthroned in the temple derive from Daoism and folk religion (in a broad, non-doctrinal sense), the senior master explicitly states that he is a Confucian and has no interest in Buddhism, and the junior master speaks of providing ritual services that would usually be associated with Buddhism. Daoism, folk religion, Confucianism and

Buddhism have mixed with and influenced one another throughout China's history (Yü 2001). Those who visit the temple to worship or to hire the RSPs for ritual services do not necessarily or even usually associate themselves with any one religion, and the ways in which the RSPs speak reflect the historical development of Chinese religion as a mixed tradition.

SPATIAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

The temple at the centre of this study sits past the end of the road. When Grydehøj arrived at the village for the first time in October 2022, the temple was bordered to the north and east by rubble and to the west by a locked-up ancestral hall. To the south was a courtyard fronted by a space of relatively level construction debris, then a small area of flagged stone, and finally the road itself, leading out of the village.

Was it even a village? Or was it just an idle construction site? All that was left of the village in late 2022 was the temple; an ancestral hall; a convenience store (later shut); the village government office; and (we later learned) the Academy, a derelict past-and-possibly-future heritage site off to the east, wedged between desultory agricultural plots and a newly built primary school. Temporary housing had been erected nearby for those of the village's elderly population who wished to remain onsite during the redevelopment process, but most of the villagers now lived elsewhere in the city. Once redevelopment is complete, some of the villagers will move back, into modern flats, but there will not be enough new flats for everyone, and many villagers are surely gone for good. They will take their redevelopment compensation money and make new lives in new places.

The village is one of many that underwent various stages of redevelopment in the final decades of the 1900s, as Guangzhou's rapid expansion swallowed up agricultural communities far beyond the city's historic (formerly walled) heart. Such redeveloped villages came to provide homes for both villagers and internal migrants from elsewhere in China who came to work in Guangzhou's factories and service sector. The more recent wave of village redevelopments has aimed at constructing housing for China's middle class. In 2017, the village was listed as a redevelopment target in city government plans. The following year, a large majority of villagers voted to accept an offer from a developer, which in keeping with similar projects, would provide villagers with temporary accommodation during the construction phase, economic compensation, and (in some cases) new and modernised housing on the site of the old village. The village was demolished in 2020, unfortunately coinciding with the collapse of China's housing market. Although construction work has not completely ceased and seems to be picking up again, progress is slow. A cluster of residential skyscrapers remains part-built and unoccupied in the northeast corner of

the village. Buildings that, in the boom times, would have been completed in months now take years. Most of the village is a wasteland of rubble.

At the time of writing, in early summer 2025, metal sheets have been erected to block off the temple and its courtyard from the village land to the east and west. Yet the temple remains open. Indeed, now that nearly everything else has been demolished, the temple more than ever seems to be the spiritual and cultural heart of the village.

This context would prove significant in our interviews with the temple's two RSPs, which are quoted from in the Results section.

RESULTS

Coming to Work at the Village Temple

We began our interview with the junior master by asking how it was that he had first come to the village temple. He explained that he had been born and raised in the small city of Yangjiang in southwest Guangdong Province. After attending university, he had worked at a state-owned enterprise dealing with wastewater treatment, a job that was totally disconnected from his university education in human resources management. He had hoped to find work as a civil servant, but as he puts it, his destiny as part of a family of RSPs intervened:

Junior Master: Fate has its own plans. After graduating, I originally intended to work around Guangzhou and Foshan. But when I interned, the salary was low, so I went to [the adjacent, lower-cost city of] Dongguan. I never thought about going to Dongguan. I spent two years there. Then I went back to Yangjiang to prepare for the civil service exam, but it didn't go smoothly. Actually, my family had told me that, according to my fate, I couldn't become an official, so it's better to set myself to doing what my family does. So, I came here to do this. ...

Pan: You mentioned earlier that your grandfather also worked in this field.

Junior Master: Yes, he brought me into this. ... The temple was built in the Qing Dynasty, but there was a special period later (1966–1976), in which a lot of temples across the country suffered damage. Later, the temple was rebuilt [in 1995], and my grandfather was here at that time. He was here before the pandemic in 2019. After 2019, my cousin invited him to Shenzhen because business would be better there. He went there. He told me, "You can do it, and if you don't want to take the civil service exam, you can come here to take my place." That's what he told me. Before he left, I took the civil service exam in 2021. Since I couldn't pass, I decided to come here.



Figure 1. Sketch of the junior master, giving Pan a Bazi reading, 7 April 2024.

Photograph: Adam Grydehøj.

It was the junior master's invitation from his grandfather that brought him to the temple. He reflected, that, like the human resources management in which he had majored at university, being an RSP also involved "dealing with people".

When we subsequently asked about the rest of his family, the extent of the junior master's familial entanglement with religious work became clearer:

Junior Master: My father also works in this field. My mother takes care of the household more because my father earns enough to support the family, so my mother doesn't need to work outside the home. She does what she likes or takes care of the household. Our family is quite traditional, with the man working outside and the woman taking care of the inside. ... [My sister] prefers to do hands-on things, like arts and crafts. She doesn't like what we do. She finds it a bit mystical. She prefers art. Although everyone grows up in the same family, their interests are different. Girls like beautiful things, which are different from what we do.

Pan: Were you interested in this since you were young?

Junior Master: When I was young, I was influenced by watching the family elders, my father and grandfather, helping others with this, communicating with customers, so I became interested. I would flip through his books and read. When I was a bit older, he told me that, according to my fate, this profession suits me well, so I didn't feel averse to it. I learned it. From junior high school to university

graduation, about a decade. When he told me to change careers, I immediately did. I was able to start doing this immediately.

At no point during the interview does the junior master mention that the other RSP at the temple, Master Zhang, is in fact his father, something that we learned only later. He instead discusses his RSP work in a professional manner:

Pan: When you came here in 2022, were you immediately on your own because your grandfather had already gone [to Shenzhen], or did you have an apprenticeship? Did you start working here alone?

Junior Master: Yes, there's a senior master [who works] across from me [in the temple]. He would introduce me sometimes. When he's too busy, he would tell other customers they don't have to wait for him, they can find the handsome guy over there, which is me. That's okay too, because he was also taught by the previous master.

Pan: When did he come here? ...

Junior Master: I believe he came in 2017. ... He's been here since then. There are usually two masters. For when one goes out to help others with feng shui or mountain graves. We Chinese have two big events: buying a house and burying ancestors. Sometimes he's called out, and I can take care of the temple here because people come to worship every day. You open the door in the morning and keep it open until you leave work in the evening. That's usually how it goes. If there's only one master here, and he's out, he has to close the door, which might be a bit awkward sometimes, so it's convenient to have two people.

Pan: Besides these matters, do you also handle daily affairs here?

Junior Master: We just take care of things, like sweeping the floor, wiping the tables when there's nothing else to do, minor issues.

When we later interview Master Zhang, we also ask him how he came to the village temple. He explains that he came to replace two fellow villagers of his who had been working at the temple but are now over 80 years old. Prior to that, he had had other work back in Yangjiang:

Master Zhang: Before I turned 40, I was farming back home, doing all kinds of work. ... And using the knowledge related to this field [of ritual services].

Pan: *But it wasn't your main occupation?*

Master Zhang: *That's right, because back then, the children back home still needed to go to school, and there was a lot of pressure. Doing this [RSP work] wasn't really that profitable. Now that I'm older, and the children have grown up and entered society, I just earn a little bit for living expenses, that's all. ...*

Pan: *Was it your fellow villager who directly introduced you to come here?*

Master Zhang: *Yes, my fellow villager recommended me. Otherwise, we wouldn't have come. The locals here don't like outsiders coming in, partly because they worry you won't do the job right, and partly because they fear you'll overcharge.*

Not all RSPs believe that skills in ritual services need to be passed down through families, but Master Zhang feels strongly on this point, to which he returns on a number of occasions in our interview and our subsequent encounters. Master Zhang learned about feng shui from his grandfather, who had learned it from his own father. It is in this context that Master Zhang first mentions that the junior master is his son, which shifts our line of questioning:

Pan: *So before, it was your father working here?*

Master Zhang: *My father-in-law.*

Pan: *[The junior master's] grandfather? So you, Master, learned from your father, but it was just a coincidence that your wife's father also knew this? ...*

Master Zhang: *That's right. After we got to know each other, because you see, a lot of this knowledge can't be passed outside the family, so I learned a lot from him as well.*

Master Zhang confirms that his son has learned the ritual skills of both his father's and his mother's families. He emphasises the difficult and time-consuming nature of learning to be an RSP: "In our line of work, you have to be attentive. If you like to go out and have fun, it won't work." Master Zhang himself began training under his great-grandfather at the age of 13 and would occasionally do casual readings for classmates, friends and relatives. One's reputation as an RSP is built up over time.

Master Zhang: *If you're good at [providing ritual services], they'll call you to do it. If you're not good, you can't do it sloppily. You have to be able to do it well. For example, his (the junior master's) mother called him to come to Guangzhou to find a job. He submitted several applications, but the jobs were all in other cities, and he didn't want to go, so now he's doing this. His grandfather doesn't come back here often, so he handles his grandfather's customers. ...*

Pan: *Did he quit his previous job because of the travel, or what?*

Master Zhang: *Constant travel. The company sent him on business trips, so he had to move around a lot. He didn't like it, so he quit. Now he earns a little living expense here. The most urgent thing now is to find a girlfriend. He came to Guangzhou because all the girls in our hometown have left to find jobs. Our hometown is poor and backward. ... He came out here, one, to find a job, and two, to find a girlfriend because the family already has a house and a car. ... He was born during the strictest period of the family planning policy, in the '90s. Back then, people back home didn't want girls; everyone wanted boys. So now there are more men than women, and it's difficult to find a girlfriend in our hometown. It's hard, very hard, especially as he's getting older, and our generation is different.*

A Changing Village and Official Environment

This is very much a village temple, but its lack of a village has a strong effect on the RSPs' lives. In return for maintaining the temple and officiating at festivals, the temple's RSPs were formerly provided with free housing in dormitories beside the temple, but these were demolished as part of the village redevelopment, so they now live in rented housing in the adjacent village.

The loss of free housing occurred alongside the dwindling of the RSPs' customer base. Master Zhang explains how village redevelopment and wider economic trends have affected work in the temple:

Master Zhang: *It's very different from now. Now the economy is declining somewhat, and with houses being so expensive, you can't build your own home anymore. So our business is very slow, much less than before.*

Pan: *Back then, many people were building houses, so they often needed feng shui consultations?*

Master Zhang: *Yes, feng shui consultations and choosing auspicious dates were more common. Now there isn't as much work because the government doesn't allow self-built houses anymore; everything has to be fully furnished and decorated. ... Some villagers were building, but after the village was marked for demolition, no one built anymore. ... The villagers had to rent houses outside because the entire village was slated for demolition. So they had to move out and rent houses, including us. We rent outside now too. We used to have rooms here.*

Pan: *So because they moved far away, they don't come here as often?*

Master Zhang: *They still come. On the first and fifteenth of the lunar month, they come. If there's a family celebration, people will return to the temple to pray. Villagers always come back to pray. It's a local tradition. If there's a big celebration, they'll come back here to pray to the gods and ask for blessings.*

Pan: *So the feng shui business has decreased, but other services are still in demand?*

Master Zhang: *Everything has decreased. How to put it – fewer people are getting married these days, so fewer children are being born, right? And you can't just build houses. For ordinary people, it's difficult to afford a house. How can we afford it when it's so expensive, tens of thousands [of yuan] per square meter?*

Pan: *What about funerals? The elderly are still healthy. Do you prefer how things were before, or how they are now – maybe it's quieter now?*

Master Zhang: *It doesn't matter if it's quieter. The most important thing is that we came here from hundreds of kilometres away just to earn a bit more for our living expenses. To be honest, that's the truth, right?*

Pan: *So you preferred it when it was busier, with more people?*

Master Zhang: *Of course, there was more work back then.*

Pan: *Now it seems like there's hardly anyone?*

Master Zhang: *That's why we used to charge less, but now we have to charge more. There isn't as much work now. If you don't raise your*

prices a bit, you won't be able to make a living here. Soon, you won't even be able to pay the rent. How could I continue being a master here, right? Some villagers say it's more expensive now. I don't want to raise prices, but if there were a free place for me to live, I wouldn't need to raise prices. I'd charge the old rates without any problem. But there's no choice because you have to rent a place, pay for water and electricity and everything. Now I have to pay for it myself, unlike before when I didn't have to pay.

We have indeed heard villagers and others complain that the RSPs' prices are too high, but perceptions of appropriate prices are relative, and many other RSPs (for instance, those living in more expensive neighbourhoods) routinely charge much more. In our observations, as of early summer 2025, the typical price for a full Bazi reading (30–60 minutes) is 100 yuan, with the less time-consuming follow-up Bazi readings and kau cim oracle interpretations costing less. Some (but not all) individuals are offered paper talismans (which can be placed in one's phone case and thus carried around everywhere) for good luck, to ward off ill fortune, or for other purposes, at a price of 50 yuan. Customers who purchase incense are told to pay *suiyi* ('what you want'). Consecration of deity statues costs 260 yuan, and consecration of a zodiac animal statue costs 100 yuan.

When we speak with the junior master about these topics, his perceptions differ somewhat, partly because he first came to the temple after the village had already been demolished. We ask how it feels to work in such a desolate place, surrounded by ruins and construction:

Junior Master: It doesn't feel like anything, just quieter. If you're not used to it, you might feel a bit nervous being alone at night, but we don't feel that. Before I came here, another master told me that sometimes villagers would sleep here, so we're not afraid.

Pan: *Do villagers still come here regularly?*

Junior Master: Not as much, because everyone has moved out. Before, there were a lot of people here, many came to sit and play. It will get better after resettlement. More people will come. ... I prefer the quiet atmosphere. You have to endure loneliness in this profession because once you open the door, you can't leave. You sit here all day, and when it gets dark, and you confirm that no one's coming, you lock up and go to sleep. Actually, in this profession, you wait patiently for people to come.

The junior master has thought deeply about how and why people develop a need to use the services of RSPs. When we ask what kinds of people come to the temple for help, he replies:

People won't believe in these things when they're young, and they rarely go to worship. But at some point, they suddenly start believing in fate. ... Some people, after going through a rough patch, they hear from friends that a certain temple is very effective, so they come to pray for blessings and hope for smoother days. When they feel troubled, they come here to pray. Sometimes, when they have major decisions to make, like switching jobs, which is very important for young people, sometimes they're unsure whether it's good or bad. They come here to seek advice, ask for divination, or have their fortune told, just to get some suggestions so it will be easier to make a decision. ... Of course, we also charge a certain fee. There's no need to talk about it so nobly because it's mutually beneficial for us too. ... When an elderly person passes away, we help write huangbang (the funeral announcement scrolls), specifying the time of death, auspicious and inauspicious dates, age, etc. I've done all of that. We cover the full cycle of life: birth, aging, illness, and death, but we don't engage in anything illegal.

The junior master's emphasis on only engaging in legal activities is important, for temples and religious rituals are alternately promoted, tolerated and condemned by the state, which is in some circumstances inclined to treat religious traditions as intangible cultural heritage but in other circumstances sees it as a vulgar custom or threat to social stability. The line between what is and is not permissible is often unclear, and temple-based RSPs try to avoid drawing unwanted attention. During a visit to the temple in mid-May 2025, we noted that the RSPs' QR codes, which are used to receive digital payments, had been moved from their places beneath the glass on the tabletops to a desk drawer. This renders payment more difficult, or impossible in cases in which a worshipper stops by to burn incense or give an offering while the RSP is out and cannot find a means of paying. When we asked Master Zhang why they had moved the QR codes, he replied that it is because their work "cannot be commercialised" – a notion that runs counter to the very idea of professional ritual services.

Crucially, the laws surrounding ritual services in temples are (perhaps intentionally) ambiguous. The State Administration of Religious Affairs (2023) specifies that no organisation or individual may conduct commercial promotion or seek illegal profits in the name of, or using the influence of, a place of religious activities, including *minjian xinyang huodong changsuo* ('places of folk belief activity'), a category that encompasses village temples that are not

registered with the Chinese Daoist Association. For its part, the Guangdong Provincial Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission (2021) notes the need for stronger administrative measures to guard against “the commercialization of folk beliefs and lawless elements using folk beliefs to defraud money” at sites of folk religious worship. Although fortune-telling, oracle reading, feng shui, and the other common activities undertaken by the RSPs in this study are not mentioned among the banned or worrisome activities, village temple-based RSPs seem to operate in a stricter regulatory environment than do RSPs who provide similar services outside of temples, for instance online or from a stall on the street.

The RSPs in this study express flexibility concerning how to undertake rituals and give and receive offerings in today’s China. For example, Master Zhang discusses the care that customers and RSPs must take to adhere to state guidelines, even when officially encouraged concerning religious traditions, such as those connected with the sea goddess Mazu:

Master Zhang: *In the past, people used to do things carelessly, but not anymore. The state doesn’t allow them to do that anymore. ...*

Pan: *But now they’re saying we should promote traditional culture, aren’t they?*

Master Zhang: *Yes, traditional culture. But the state promotes Marxism-Leninism, doesn’t it? It doesn’t promote figures like [the Daoist master] Zhang Daoling or the Buddha, does it? The state has regulations now. Civil servants aren’t allowed to come to temples to pray.*

Pan: *But isn’t Mazu still very popular?*

Master Zhang: *Mazu is popular among the common people, but in official circles, it’s not allowed. ... Civil servants aren’t allowed to go to temples to worship gods. I think I saw a video on Douyin (the Chinese TikTok) the other day saying that civil servants can’t go to temples to pray.*

Pan: *What if they want to pray for blessings for their children?*

Master Zhang: *Their wives or children, who aren’t civil servants, might go instead, indirectly on their behalf. The civil servant himself doesn’t go, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t understand or respect the practice, right?*

Pan: *Will the god understand that?*

Master Zhang: *Yes. As long as the god receives incense offerings, it doesn't matter who brings them. What matters is the sincerity of the person praying.*

This discussion illustrates not just how both RSPs and customers adapt to changing rules and guidelines but also how they deal with uncertainty surrounding these rules and guidelines. Because it is not always clear what is and is not permissible, and because people rely on social media and other informal sources of information, the activities of providing ritual services and worshipping inevitably involve gently testing boundaries to determine their limits. The gods, too, exhibit this flexibility, receiving incense from civil servants who have made the offering indirectly.

Learning and Areas of Professional Practice

The masters tell us that customers come to the temple for feng shui; Bazi readings; writing memorial scrolls when people have died; consecrations; praying to and asking advice from the gods; and choosing auspicious dates (for marriage, constructing a house, giving birth, etc). Feng shui work involves going out and visiting houses, both *yang* residences (homes for the living) and *yin* residences (homes for the dead, tombs), including mountain tombs.

The junior master describes different kinds of ritual services that can be undertaken when someone dies and notes the division of labour and specialisms among RSPs:

Junior Master: *We make it very clear. We do this, but we don't do that. This we can do, but that we don't do, mainly because we don't have time to do that. We'd be away from home all year round; it's extremely busy. ... [Master Zhang does feng shui work.] If people want him to provide a service at their home, he'll help them pick an auspicious location. Like which cemetery to bury their family member, which spot would be better. We do that, and we can also choose an auspicious date for the burial, so you know when it's better to bury them. That's our scope of work. However, we don't chant scriptures for them—our specialisations are more finely divided, so it's different. Of course, we could do that, but personally, I feel if we took on that work, we wouldn't have time to stay here and focus on what we do now.*

Pan: *What about age groups? Are there more people of a certain age group coming here? Or is it irregular?*

Junior Master: *There's a bit of a pattern. In our Chinese tradition, men tend to be more laid-back about life – whether things go well or poorly, they often just go with the flow. Women, however, have keener perceptual acuity. When they feel life isn't going smoothly, they're more likely to seek us out for guidance. That's why most of our customers are aunts or older. They've seen and experienced more in life, so they tend to believe more in concepts like fate. Having witnessed various ups and downs, they inherently trust that there's some predestined order to things.*

Pan: *Is it usually around 40? Or 35?*

Junior Master: *A bit over 40. Also, there might be an influence from the internet because our profession is also promoted on the internet. Although we don't advertise, the profession is promoted online, and many young people know about it. They come to inquire, suddenly wanting to calculate something. They come to see about their marriage because young people mainly care about three things: wealth, career, and marriage. It's basically these three things.*

We also ask the junior master about the process of becoming an RSP, at this point unaware that his father also works as an RSP in the temple. He describes years of learning and practice, as well as oversight from a master, but he does not describe a set framework of apprenticeship. The junior master's grandfather began by teaching him the basics, instructing him on “which books to read, what to memorise. Then he comes to check on you, and when you're proficient enough, he'll give you some customers to practice with, ones he's already read for”. It takes around ten years of practice to become good enough to begin working independently.

In the junior master's pragmatic account, one becomes an RSP through learning and practice: different RSPs take different approaches and focus on different methods and techniques, developing their own specialties. Although Master Zhang also approaches the different specialties pragmatically, he continually emphasises familial inheritance of knowledge. Over the course of many discussions, we ask Master Zhang about different techniques, some of which he treats with respect but claims to have no expertise in, some of which he believes are ethically dubious but might possibly be effective, and others of which he is mildly or strongly dismissive in terms of their efficacy.

Master Zhang started learning ritual skills at the age of 13 and began providing services on his own six or seven years later.

Master Zhang: *You can't expect to learn everything quickly. There are many aspects to this field, and the knowledge used in different*

areas is different. It's not a one-size-fits-all approach, right? For Bazi readings, you need knowledge about destiny; for feng shui, you need feng shui knowledge; for physiognomy, you need knowledge of face reading. ... In our area, most families deal with feng shui. [The junior master's] grandfather's side also does physiognomy and feng shui. ... In our family, we only learned feng shui. After I married my wife, I learned about fortune-telling and other knowledge from her family.

In keeping with his conviction that RSP skills must be inherited, Master Zhang emphasises oral communication of tradition. When we ask whether he learned from books as well as from his great-grandfather's own words, he replies:

Most of it was taught orally, but some basic knowledge is similar to what you can find in books today. But it's not the same. A lot of books on feng shui and geomancy are available now, but they're just theoretical and not very practical. ... That's why few people can really learn it.



Figure 2. Master Zhang's geomantic compass, 14 August 2024.

Photograph: Adam Grydehøj.

We have seen the RSPs refer to printed, mass-produced books when performing Bazi readings and divination, and Master Zhang says that some handwritten books, copied out from other sources, are passed down within families. For feng shui, Master Zhang uses a special geomantic compass, the *luopan* (a traditional Chinese tool used in *feng shui* practice), which takes at least five years to learn, “like studying at university”. Although Master Zhang feels that learning only gains meaning through practice, he also stresses the need to keep learning and keep studying. These RSPs seem to occupy a middle category between Li Geng’s (2019) division of diviners into those who possess ‘social wisdom’ and those who rely on ‘book knowledge’.

ANALYSING SOCIOECONOMIC FORCES IN RITUAL SERVICE WORK

It is common for temple RSPs to come from other cities. Although RSPs play crucial roles in the ritual life of the community, none of the Guangdong village temple RSPs we have interviewed in our wider study originated in or hold particularly high social status in the community they serve.

The village in which the temple in the current study is located has undergone rapid and physically devastating change in the past years. China’s urbanisation and transition into a developed economy following the start of the Reform and Opening Up era in the late 1970s prompted waves of development and redevelopment on the outskirts of Guangzhou. Incomes, education, quality of life, health, environmental conditions and many other factors have vastly improved throughout much of Guangdong. The demolition and housing market collapse in the early 2020s has, however, left the village in a state of deconstruction, with the community of villagers scattered and mainly living elsewhere. This has profoundly affected the RSP business.

Once a temple at the centre of a thriving, densely populated village, the temple has lost its local community of worshippers. This makes the post-demolition drop in business reported by the RSPs concerning in terms of the continuity of village tradition and the maintenance of faith in the temple’s highly localised deity. In a study from Zhejiang, Zhao (2019) finds that village demolition helped transform a temple into a centre of community identity. This seems not to have occurred in the village in the present study, perhaps partly because the nearby temporary housing area for elderly villagers has become the new post-demolition site for community continuity.

Master Zhang is earnest about the religious and ritual aspects of his work, but he is nevertheless upfront about it being *work*. If such work becomes unviable in this temple, he and his son will presumably relocate to somewhere with more customers. Yet the same national economic difficulties that caused delays to the village’s redevelopment and thereby the stark reduction in ritual service customers are also gradually contributing to an increase in customers from outside the village. In conversations in the first half of 2025, Master

Zhang noted that the slowing Chinese economy was prompting more financial concerns among the public and that more people were coming to receive Bazi readings and seek advice as a result. This aligns with the junior master's sense that people – especially young women – seek help from RSPs when they are confronted with challenges in life. Other scholars have likewise shown how socioeconomic and spatial change can alter the ways and spaces in which religious traditions are practiced, as well as the people who practice them (Law 2025; Johnson 2024; Hayward 2024; Karlach 2023a).

These demand-side factors in the temple economy are complemented by supply-side factors. Master Zhang gave up his work as a yam farmer in Yangjiang and moved to Guangzhou to work at the temple only once his children had started earning incomes of their own, and the lower-paid but more enjoyable or intellectually rewarding knowledge work became feasible within the family finances. The increasingly competitive Chinese labour market for university graduates prevented the junior master from achieving his own career goals. At the same time, the urban-rural divide in China's demographic, educational and economic outcomes (a general predominance of men over women, particularly in rural areas, and an exodus of educated women to the larger cities) meant there was a lack of suitable marriage partners for the junior master back in Yangjiang.

In Master Zhang's telling, the (now-married) junior master came to work at the temple in Guangzhou because of a deficit of both job opportunities and women in his hometown, with the junior master's mother having been instrumental in sending him to the temple in Guangzhou to find a wife. The junior master's own narrative excludes the marriage motivation, but it does dwell upon the role of the economy in determining his movement through space: He had felt compelled to live in the lower-cost city of Dongguan due to poor earning power. The junior master emphasises his grandfather's message that it is his fate to work as a temple RSP. Migration and homemaking processes, as well as the motivations behind them and emotions imbued within them, have a major influence on the possibility for traditions to be transmitted across space and generations (Podgorelec & Grydehøj & Klempić Bogadi 2024; Lindsay-Latimer et al. 2024).

The Chinese state is not opposed to the existence of village temples and the maintenance of religious traditions. RSPs and their clients strive to stay within boundaries set by the officially atheist political system, but Chinese governments at all levels (national, provincial, city, district, town and village) at times construct policies that actively encourage certain religious traditions that can, through heritagisation processes, be seen to embody the Chinese nation or simply to offer the potential for making money (Thurston 2024; Chan 2005; Zhu 2025, 2024).

Professionalisation exists in difficult relation with regulatory and market pressures. The RSPs in our study occupy a role of semi-marketisation. On the

one hand, their need to cover living expenses has prompted them to raise the prices of knowledge-based ritual services as the customer flow has decreased. On the other hand, the RSPs still maintain a kind of low-profit spiritual economy model, especially for ritual services directly related to the temple's operations, such as the sale of incense at a 'pay what you want' rate.

Li (2019) stresses the importance of specialisation in the marketisation of ritual services and the professionalisation of the RSP role. The two RSPs in our study inhabit an in-between space. They have entered the religious market, and they emphasise their professional character, but they do not engage in aggressive marketing or open competition with other RSPs. Among the Guangdong RSPs we have encountered in our wider study, they are nearly unique in not actively advertising or posting about their services on social media (for instance, WeChat Moments, RedNote, or Douyin). When they speak disparagingly about their peers, they do so only in the sense that they criticise what they see as some individuals' unprofessional practice; they do not claim more general superiority. Our observations and conversations suggest that their business remains reliant on word-of-mouth marketing, on attracting customers through the 'efficacy' (*ling li*) of their services. The RSPs may be motivated to keep prices low because of the perception that a balance must be maintained between emotional sincerity, material donations/payments and the efficacy of the sacred (Yang & Wu 2019).

PROFESSIONALISM, PRACTICE, AND THE MAINTENANCE OF TRADITION

Beyond the difficult and time-consuming activity of learning religious traditions and keeping up-to-date with new knowledge on the subject, RSPs navigate these diverse social, economic and political currents. All this is effortful. As Thurston (2024) writes, "Treating transmission as work recognizes that this interaction and the traditions that develop from it takes effort. Traditions take work to perform, transmit, and preserve. ... None of it reaches the present without the dedicated efforts of individuals and communities."

The effortful and inventive maintenance of tradition across rural and urban space requires considerable work from tradition bearers (Hu 2024). The RSPs' locally situated ritual services, so essential to the continuance of the village as a community, fit with the notion that places and cultures are laboriously constructed in tandem, as people take locations and work them into something new and meaningful (Lange 2024; Basso 1996). Yet this single village temple is a site of multiple, interacting meanings (Nadarajah & Grydehøj 2024), holding a different significance and encompassing different sets of traditional behaviour, formed through practice, for villagers who worship there, for outsiders who come for Bazi readings, and for the RSPs themselves.

In many villages, the professionalisation of RSP work (the receiving and servicing of customers, the taking of payments) is what makes communal

religious life possible. People can (and do) turn to AI for Bazi readings, but AI will not clean the temple, keep its doors open, keep it stocked with incense, and officiate at festivals. Nor can village volunteers necessarily be relied upon for this. The adjacent village to our study site also has a temple, but being reliant on volunteers, it is open only a few hours each day, and even then, unreliably. This matches our experiences visiting village temples elsewhere in Guangzhou and Guangdong, where we find that temples without RSPs or other professional caretakers are much more likely to be in poor condition and to be fully or partly inaccessible. If maintenance of tradition is hard work, it should not be surprising for this work to be paid. The ability of the RSPs to work is closely linked to the ability of the temple to function.

Yet as noted earlier, it is common for both scholars and others to regard money and payment as existing in tension with religion and the sacred. In his excellent study of artisans who create ritual whips in Taiwan, Reich (2024: 220–221) notes on numerous occasions that his contributors regard their ritual services “as a calling, a service to the gods, not as a primary source of income”. All of Reich’s contributors perform other, non-ritual labour as their main profession, but the academic discussion of the ritual labour glides (perhaps unintentionally) toward the sense that RSP work is more spiritually valuable when money is not an important motivator.

RSPs may be especially susceptible to being regarded as inappropriately materialistic because they are responsible for setting their own prices and negotiating directly with customers. The increasing institutionalisation of economic processes in much of society more broadly makes such RSPs stand out. The RSPs at this village temple are the only individuals with whom the authors of this paper regularly have informal economic interactions: paying for services for which there is no price list, never quite knowing where sociality ends and ritual service work begins.

Crucially, although the two RSPs in this study are at pains to point out that being an RSP is a job, their narratives also make clear that it is a job they have chosen because they enjoy doing it, it is relaxing, they feel especially capable of doing it because of their familial inheritance, and (in the case of the junior master) they are fated to do it. Master Zhang was formerly a yam farmer, while the junior master had a tiring job in wastewater management that required constant travel. Both had casually undertaken occasional RSP work in the past, but by becoming full-time professionals, they have been able to improve their quality of life even though they earn less money than they did in the past.

Master Zhang, who emphasises the importance of inherited knowledge and hard work, is critical of those who act as professional RSPs while practicing their work in an *xueyi bujing* (“incompetent” or poorly trained) manner, who have attended classes but have failed to learn *zhen benshi* (“authentic skills”). For him, there is a difference between being a professional RSP and

acting professionally, between providing services and maintaining tradition and sacred knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The scholarly and to some extent popular desire to separate culture, heritage, tradition, religion and the sacred from money and from wider socioeconomic processes does not always reflect the lived realities of either customers or ritual service providers (RSPs). Community religious life depends on individuals who work to maintain traditions as well as to maintain material culture. Professional RSPs are able to commit more time, energy and resources to such maintenance than are most nonprofessional RSPs.

However, even such professionals are impacted by wider social, economic and political forces. As this study has shown, national, provincial and local economies can impact RSPs' customer base and the spatial context for their work in complex ways. The context for Chinese RSP work and religious life is changing, and so too are Chinese religious traditions. RSPs play an important role in maintaining tradition and in innovating it in response to these changes. At the same time, political and regulatory environments set boundaries for what kinds of religious activities are possible or advisable – in a distinctive way in the Chinese context, in which the regulatory system maintains a space of ambiguity in which RSPs and their customers must manoeuvre with care.

Our occupational folklore approach has illustrated the importance of considering work, money and profession when studying religious culture. Although it is possible to undertake a study of Chinese village temple RSPs' ritual practices and sacred knowledges without attending to or acknowledging their professional status and livelihoods, the resultant understanding of local religion and tradition would be incomplete. RSPs' repertoires of ritual services are determined in part by the wider religious market, by what customers are willing to pay for and by the efficacy with which they can provide certain services relative to that of other providers. This is the case even for those such as the RSPs in this study who are only semi-marketised. Equally, this paper has shown how the study of religious folklore can shed light on the ways in which local culture is influenced by wider political, economic and spatial trends and practices.

These findings are relevant outside China as well, for ritual service provision (broadly defined) is critical to the maintenance, communication and development of tradition in many different settings, even beyond straightforwardly religious contexts. For example, in Europe, contestations over the professionalisation of traditional storytelling and the abiding tensions between tradition and innovation within 'folk music' may be areas in which an occupational folklore approach and attentiveness to the multifaceted nature of ritual in the construction of community can shed light on how tradition is and is not performed.

With its focus on a single village temple and two particular individuals, this paper can only illustrate some of the ways in which work, money and religion interact in today's China; it cannot provide a full account of professional practices among RSPs. More research is needed into religious occupations in China (including more detailed accounts of the working lives of individual RSPs) and the ways in which customers perceive the professional roles of those who provide ritual services.

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