Dr. Adam Yuet Chau’s research projects

I have been working on a number of projects, some more substantial than others and some to be published as monographs while others as contributions to conferences, edited volumes and journals. I enjoy being part of a global network of researchers who share similar research interests and who can stimulate one another with new ideas (at conferences, seminars as well as in print).

Most of my work focuses on Chinese religion. As an anthropologist by disciplinary training, I examine the social aspects of Chinese religious life rather than religious thoughts and symbols as they might exist in any abstract system (e.g. Buddhism or Daoism). In other words, I investigate how people do religion rather than what ‘their religions’ are supposed to be like. And of course I need to investigate what kinds of socio-political and cultural factors contribute to the conditions under which people can ‘do religion’ in ways that they do. Ultimately my work is not about Chinese religion per se but about Chinese society, and it is my hope that the analytical strategies I have developed are also applicable in studying religious life in other cultural and historical contexts. Here I have grouped my research under different topics (many interlinked to one another) to familiarise the visitor – colleagues, prospective students, curious passers-by, etc. – with what I have been working on in the past few years and which will continue to engage my interest in the foreseeable future.

Modalities of Doing Religion

One of my scholarly and out-reach ambitions is to stop people from asking the question: How many religions are there in China? I would like them to ask instead: How do people do religion in China? In examining the ways in which Chinese people have been engaged in religious activities historically as well as today I have identified five ‘modalities of doing religion’: . These five modalities of doing religion are: (1) discursive/scriptural, involving mostly the composition and use of texts and engaging in religious discourse; (2) personal-cultivational, involving a long-term interest in cultivating and transforming oneself; (3) liturgical, involving elaborate ritual procedures conducted by ritual specialists; (4) immediate-practical, aiming at quick results using simple ritual or magical techniques; and (5) relational, emphasising the relationship between humans and deities (or ancestors) as well as among humans in religious practices. This new way of looking at religious life can be used, with some modifications of course, in understanding how people ‘do religion’ in other societies as well.

I have published on this particular theme in the following works:


Religious Diversity and Inter-Faith Dialogues

The Western, liberal model of religious pluralism and inter-faith dialogues is premised on the equality between ‘religions’ that are understood to be equivalent/analogous to one another (i.e. Protestantism = Catholicism = Islam = Buddhism = Hinduism, etc.). As soon as we admit that in reality the diversity of religious life in the world is more in the ‘modalities of doing religion’ rather than in the abstract systems of religious ideas constructed by religious elites and religious-studies scholars, such a model of religious pluralism no longer holds. We need to recognise that there is a diversity of religious diversities, and that the conventional inter-faith-dialogues model privileges a particular kind of discursive modality of doing religion, which is merely one of many ways of doing religion. People with religious sensibilities premised on ritual efficacy are not interested in any ‘dialogue’; for them the most important thing is that the ritual ‘works’ (i.e. is efficacious).

I have engaged with these issues in the following articles:


**Chinese Religion under Socialism**

The Chinese religious landscape has undergone tremendous transformations under socialism in the past six decades or so. How do we understand the mechanisms and processes of these transformations? One of the most important things to keep in mind while trying to answer this question is to understand religious traditions as *always changing and transforming*, therefore we should not posit a pre-revolutionary past that was unchanging or can serve as a stable reference point. Another thing to keep in mind is that changes in the religious landscape are more often than not resulting from broader changes in society (e.g. economic reform, urbanisation, transnationalism, etc.) rather than state religious policies. Key themes explored include: the politics of legitimation, the emergence of the temple boss as local elite, local temple activism, the interactions between local state agents and local temple communities, the re-emergence of household-based provision and consumption of ritual services, etc.

I have published on this particular theme in the following works:


2012. ‘La channeling zone : religion populaire, État local et rites de légitimation en Chine rurale à l'ère de la réforme’ (The Channeling Zone: Popular Religion, the Local State, and Rites of Legitimation in Rural China during the Reform Era), Gradhiva: Revue d'anthropologie et d'histoire des arts (special issue on Chines, l'État au musée, edited by Brigitte Baptandier and Anne-Christine Trémon). Published by Musée du Quai Branly, No. 16: 156-177.
Hosting in Chinese Political and Religious Culture

Hosting (zuozhu 做主) is one of the most important idioms through which Chinese people ‘do’ religion (note: hosting is not the same as hospitality). They host deities, ancestors as well as ghosts at fixed times during the annual ritual calendar. The spirits are invited to enjoy a feast of ritual offerings as an expression of gratitude to their blessings and then are sent back. Such ritual practices belong to what I have called ‘relational modality of doing religion’. [In telling contrast, in Christianity God hosts humans while humans cannot host God.] The idiom of hosting is also used extensively in Chinese political life, as it is a crucial expression of sovereignty. I am in the process of completing a monograph, tentative entitled The Sovereign Host: The Idiom of Hosting in Chinese Political and Religious Culture, exploring hosting practices and their implications. Hosting was also the theme of my Wilde Lectures in Natural and Comparative Religion, delivered at the University of Oxford in the spring of 2013.

I have published the following articles relating to hosting:


Religious Subjectification

When looking at a particular religious tradition we can heuristically distinguish two crucial aspects. One aspect is the system of ideas, symbols, and ritual practices that make up this particular religious tradition. The other aspect is the mechanisms through which people mobilise this system of ideas, symbols, and ritual practices and are in turn mobilised by it. This second aspect we can call religious subjectification, i.e., how a certain kind of person (i.e. religious subject) is made through the dynamic interaction
between ‘the system’ and ‘the people’ (this perspective of course owes its inspiration to Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault).

I have published on religious subjectification in the following articles:


Mao’s Mango Fever

Do you know that a basket of mangoes can change the course of history? That’s exactly what happened on the fifth of August 1968, when Chairman Mao gave a basket of mangoes to the Workers’ Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team sent to university campuses to quell the escalating armed Red-Guard factionalism (the mangoes had been given to him by the Pakistani foreign minister). A mango fever ensued that enveloped the whole country, and the mangoes played a crucial role in delegitimating the red guards (the mangoes were not for them!). Tens of thousands mango replicas travelled up and down the country in reliquary-like containers held in parades by reverential revolutionary-committee members. This is a crucial chapter at the height of the Cultural Revolution that has heretofore been neglected even by experts on that period of China’s political history.

I have written about Mao’s mangoes in the following articles:


Text Acts

This project is about forms of powerful writing in Chinese religious and political life. By powerful writing I mean writings and inscriptions that congeal and exude power that are recognised by their audience as far more forceful than ordinary writing. These writings
and inscriptions usually appear in well-defined forms and in well-defined social contexts, where figures or institutions of authority deem it appropriate and necessary to resort to writings and inscriptions to exert power. Even though these writings and inscriptions contain words that carry semantic meanings, I want to argue that they are not merely communicative acts (à la Habermas); rather, their power is more significantly derived from the form and context of their presentation, and they act upon, rather than simply communicate to, their audience. Inspired by John Austin’s concept of speech acts, I call these forms of powerful writing text acts. I use ‘audience’ rather than ‘reader’ to describe the target of text acts because people do not so much read the contents of the text as recognise and feel its performative impact. I am in the process of writing a monograph on text acts tentatively entitled Text Acts: The Textographic Fetish in Chinese Religion and Politics.

I have published the following article on this topic:


**Cherishing Written Characters (xizizhi 慎字紙)**

The practice of cherishing written characters (xizizhi 慎字紙) has a long history in China. Many late imperial morality books (善書) included xizizhi as one of the many merit-generating practices that people should be engaged in. *Xizizhi* often appeared as an item in ledgers of merits and demerits (功過格). It later became attached to the worship of Lord Wenchang (文昌帝君), who was the patron deity of candidates for the imperial civil service examination. In the early 20th century, however, xizizhi acquired a new significance. With the abolition of the imperial civil service examination in 1905 and the introduction of ‘Western Learning’, the traditional literati lost their sense of purpose and superiority and the foundation of their identity. As a response to such sudden transformation, many grassroots literati resorted to advocating practices that emphasised the role of writing and the Chinese language, which allowed them to recreate a sense of purpose and identity and to maintain or regain respectability in local society. Spirit-writing became increasingly popular among local literati groups, often connected to newly-established redemptive societies. On the other hand, xizizhi became an all-purpose devotional practice, as a new generation of advocates fetishised the Chinese written language as the foundation of Chinese civilisation. More interestingly, merchants and commerce featured more prominently in stories of divine retribution relating to xizizhi practices, which more than hinted at the impact of the commercial and consumer revolutions in the early 20th century on popular religiosity. In other words, what seems like a very old traditional practice (xizizhi) was deployed and repackaged strategically to respond to a very modern situation.

I have come to the study of the practice of xizizhi through the introduction by my sinologist colleague Philip Clart to an early-twentieth-century illustrated morality book entitled *Records of Indubitable Responses Relating to Cherishing Characters* (Xizi zhengyanlu 慎字徵驗錄). I am now in the process of translating the eighty illustrated stories in the book and writing a few contextualising chapters, all to be published in a
volume tentatively entitled *Cherishing Written Characters: Magic, Karma and the Crisis of Chinese Civilisation.*

A sample story from *Records of Indubitable Responses Relating to Cherishing Characters* (*Xizi zhengyanlu* 惜字徵驗錄).

The following articles feature my ongoing thoughts on this topic:


Religious Masters (codename shifu)

Thanks to the globally-successful animated film and TV franchise *Kung Fu Panda*, the word *shifu* (master) has entered the English language. But what are real-life masters like? I am a team member of a large-scale international research project on the biographies and daily lives of religious masters in Chinese societies, funded by the French National Research Agency [Agence Nationale de la Recherche] (2012-15). The principal investigator is the anthropologist Dr. Adeline Herrou at the Department of Anthropology, University of Paris, Nanterre. [Project website: http://www.mae.u-paris10.fr/lesc/spip.php?article257]

My contribution to the project is a case study of a particular spirit medium (actually a father-son team) I met during my doctoral fieldwork in the 1990s in Shaanbei (northern Shaanxi Province). This project gives me the opportunity to re-visit my Shaanbei fieldsite after a long absence.

A brief description of the ritual works of this spirit medium can be found in an earlier publication of mine:


A Chinese translation of the article appeared as:

Anthropological Theories

Ethnographic analyses deriving from empirical cases in various Chinese societies have a lot to contribute to anthropological theorising. I have tried to make my own work ‘speak to’ several theoretical currents in anthropology, e.g. the social and the sensorial; actor-network-theory (ANT); the material and the conceptual; etc. I believe in time China (broadly conceived) will serve as a site of anthropological-theory production as fruitful as Africa, South Asia, Oceania and Melanesia.

The following are some of the work that addresses certain key theoretical issues:


Religious Transnationalism

I have occasionally made forays into less familiar territories, such as the transnational spread and construction of Buddhism in the late 19th century and early 20th century:


A Spanish translation of the article can be found online:

**Doctoral Students**

Supervising research students and training future researchers are important aspects of an academic’s life. I am currently supervising the following doctoral students. I learn a lot from my doctoral students, whose work intersects with some of the above-mentioned themes in interesting ways.

**Mr. Jung-Tsung LIN (Bhikṣu Changzhi)**

Changzhi is researching on the process and implications of the reform of the Buddhist grand ‘Shuilu Universal Deliverance Rite’ (*shuilu fahui* 水陸法會) in contemporary Taiwan.

His profile can be found at [http://www.ames.cam.ac.uk/deas/graduates/jung-tsung-lin.html](http://www.ames.cam.ac.uk/deas/graduates/jung-tsung-lin.html)

**Ms. Zi CHEN**

Ms. Zi CHEN is developing her doctoral project on the folk paper craft-making (*zhihuor* 紙活儿) households in rural Shandong Province.

**Mr. H. A. (Bram) Colijn**

Bram is a doctoral student in the Faculty of Theology, Vrije University (VU), Amsterdam, the Netherlands. He is working on how people engage in negotiations between various religious and ritual conceptions and practices in multi-religious households in southern China (particularly in Xiamen, Fujian Province). I am his external co-supervisor on his team of supervisors.