



**Beverley Foulks McGuire.** *Living Karma: The Religious Practices of Ouyi Zhixu.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. 240 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-16802-1.

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*Living Karma* is the first Western-language monograph (and a welcome one) on Ouyi Zhixu (1599-1655), one of the most influential Buddhist figures of Ming dynasty China. Beverly Foulks McGuire draws on Ouyi's ritual texts and personal writings to show how this master's understanding of karma shaped his religious practices and aspirations. By taking into consideration both the ritual and textual aspects of Ouyi's corpus, the author is able to demonstrate that thought and action were indissoluble in Ouyi's karmic worldview. Besides providing an important study on a largely disregarded figure in Chinese Buddhism, McGuire calls attention to the danger of separating these two complementary aspects of Buddhist doctrine and practice when studying the history of this religious tradition, an insight that could be extended to the study of other traditions as well. This is the third book in the Sheng Yen Series in Chinese Buddhist Studies at Columbia University Press.

Building on karma as a "bridge concept" (p. 3), McGuire's *Living Karma* is an original study that dissociates itself from a uniquely conceptual/theoretical approach to Buddhist notions, and considers instead how these notions were lived by practitioners on a day-to-day basis. Besides adding a valuable contribution to the relatively meager

body of scholarship on Ming-dynasty Buddhism, McGuire also provides an original characterization of Ouyi Zhixu through his understanding of karma and connected religious practices. Known in the West as a learned scholastic and prolific writer, as we discover through this study he was also a fervent Buddhist practitioner, a practitioner with uncertainties and fears. McGuire invites us to consider a fundamental problem: just as ordinary living beings fear parting from life, Buddhist practitioners can apprehend karmic retribution and the prospect of an evil rebirth--and this concern can shed an entirely new light on their action and practice.

The first chapter, devoted to Ouyi's autobiographical account, constitutes a starting point for the thesis at the core of the book by presenting Ouyi's writing as a ritual and a vehicle for karmic transformation. The three following chapters draw on different Buddhist texts composed by the master and focus on the ritual practices associated with them: divination practices to determine past karma; repentance rituals to redress karma in the present; and vows to take on the karma of others as a future possibility. These chapters work together to form a diachronic outline and virtual representation of Ouyi's own soteriological path. Build-

ing upon Ouyi's view that writing is a vehicle for karmic transformation, the fifth and last chapter identifies the master's body as the very site of this transformation.

In chapter 1, "Karma as a Narrative Device in Ouyi's Autobiography," McGuire outlines Ouyi's nonsectarian stance as it appears in his autobiography (an English translation of this text is provided in the appendix). Despite having been appropriated by later biographers—and portrayed by scholars—as a master within specific Buddhist traditions, Ouyi's account of his own life is both an affirmation of his own inclusive religiosity and a message of nonsectarianism to his future readers. In the very beginning of his autobiography, Ouyi declares himself to be "a recluse from China" and dissociates himself from any specific institution of his day. Advocacy of a broader religiosity further emerges from his recounting of a religious education and enlightenment experiences in both Confucian and Buddhist traditions, and from prominent autobiographical themes identified by McGuire as death, dreams, and divination. A list of works read and composed by Ouyi that appears at the end of his autobiography, reinforces the argument that he was interested and versed in many different Buddhist traditions. As McGuire shows, Ouyi saw himself as part of an inclusive, imagined community that spanned in time from to Sakya-muni to Dizang 地藏, and in meaning from Confucianism to diverse Buddhist traditions (Tiantai 天台, Chan 禪, Vinaya 律, Pure Land 淨土). Instead of positioning himself within one religious institution of his time, this master envisioned a "vertical" intertextual tradition where reading, and particularly writing, were means of spiritual cultivation. Although McGuire's interpretation of Ouyi's autobiography as a nonsectarian stance is very convincing, this is in my opinion the only chapter where the thematic nexus with karma appears a bit unclear. Reading and writing are certainly envisioned by Ouyi as rituals and vehicles for karmic transformation, as the author suggests, and this master is likely not unique in that. Nevertheless,

the reading of karma as a "narrative device" in his autobiography, and the notion that "in Ouyi's autobiography, his karmic activity largely consists of an engagements with texts" (p. 35) seems to me to be too much of an imposition, perhaps intended to help integrate this chapter into the overall structure of the book.

In chapter 2, "Divination as a Karmic Diagnostic," McGuire explores Ouyi's conception of divination practices, especially drawing lots (*jiu* 鬮), as a diagnostic tool for determining his past evil karma. The sources considered in this chapter are Ouyi's commentaries on both the *Zhouyi* 周易 and the Chinese apocryphal work *The Divination Sutra* 占察善惡業報經, as well as the ritual that he designed in response to the latter. Three key notions that will be further developed in the following chapters make their appearance here in McGuire's analysis of Ouyi's divination texts and practices: his "organic" (that is, malleable), rather than mechanistic, understanding of karma; the importance of regret (*hui* 悔) as a means of instilling humility in the practitioner and breaking attachments to the self; and the role played by "sympathetic resonance" (*ganying* 感應) in soliciting the salvific mercy of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. At this point in the book, the rationale underlying Ouyi's manifold religious practices is made apparent: the eminent Buddhist master is especially concerned by the uncertainty of his own karma. Nevertheless, the reasons leading to such an obsessive preoccupation—that is, the transgressions committed by Ouyi—are not stated or developed by the author in this section; rather, they are dispersed throughout the book, and their complexity will only become apparent as one works through the chapters. Such transgressions include: Ouyi is responsible for having abandoned his mother and having become a cleric; he is concerned about the validity of his precepts, which he received in front of the image of a monk (Zhuhong 祿宏) rather than of the Buddha; he is guilty of one the gravest violations of the Vinaya for having slandered the Three

Jewels in his youth as a follower of the Neo-Confucian Cheng-Zhu school; he admits inability to uphold the monastic precepts for drinking, eating meat, having wet dreams, and lying. This last set of transgressions is not developed at all, and might have deserved further attention. In any case, these are only minor imperfections of a fascinating book.

In chapter 3, “Repentance Rituals for Eliminating Karma,” McGuire describes protocols for repentance rituals (*chanhui* 懺悔) outlined in three different texts composed by Ouyi: one text centered on the bodhisattva Dizang, and two based on brief passages from the *Divination Sutra* and from another Chinese apocryphal text, the *Sutra of the Brahma’s net* 梵網經. McGuire highlights the way in which Ouyi adapted repentance rituals to his own concern of eliminating fixed karma, through elaborating on the structure and features of Tiantai repentance. The master deemed repentance necessary to any spiritual achievement, and particularly to redress present karma; at the same time, he was convinced of the impossibility to fully overcome one’s karma without external help. Ouyi attributed his inability to progress on the Buddhist path to ineluctable (or fixed) karma created by having disparaged the Three Jewels in his youth, and suggested that karmic effects deriving from major violations of the precepts cannot be undone by the practitioner alone. Thus, he designed repentance rituals intended to solicit a decisive intervention on the part of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. The practitioner is to perform these rituals alone or in small groups; he must cultivate a deep sense of shame, regret, and devotion in order to stimulate a merciful response (*ganying* 感應) especially from Dizang, the bodhisattva capable of erasing karma in the most exceptional cases. Guided by McGuire’s skillful analysis, it is in this chapter especially that we see Ouyi’s creative approach to the functioning of karma, his confidence in the efficacy of religious practice, and his faith in salvific bodhisattva figures such as Dizang.

Chapter 4, “Vowing to Assume the Karma of Others,” focuses on the way Ouyi engages with future possibilities of becoming a bodhisattva through his votive texts (*yuanwen* 願文). McGuire draws an interesting parallel between votive texts and Chinese (Buddhist) poems, two genres sharing a few common features: they were both composed to celebrate different social occasions, and they both carried a strong autobiographical dimension. Moreover, since they were meant to be circulated and read, votive texts and Chinese poems also both represented a means for poets and clerics to make themselves known to society. Ouyi made formal pronouncements of his commitment to the bodhisattva path throughout his life. McGuire convincingly shows how the master used votive texts to promote two visions of himself as a future bodhisattva: as a karmic savior, and as a karmic substitute. Building on the public acknowledgement of his moral transgressions and impending punishment, Ouyi vowed to save beings guilty (like him) of the most heinous sins and thus normally excluded from Pure Land Paradise. He envisioned his future potential as a bodhisattva who can either eliminate fixed karma like Dizang, or substitute himself for sentient beings by taking on their evil karma and shouldering the retribution that they were due.

In chapter 5, “Slicing, Burning, and Blood Writing,” McGuire takes into consideration another strategy put forth by Ouyi in order to publicly present himself as a future bodhisattva: bodily practices. Drawing again on Ouyi’s votive texts, McGuire examines the role played by the master’s body as a site of karmic transformation. This rich chapter considers bodily practices which Ouyi reports to have undertaken (filial slicing, burning incense on one’s head and arms, and blood writing), as well as their manifold meanings and transformative potential. In Ouyi’s view, the body is a site for revealing and redressing karma, and it can accordingly be used as “living karma”: if illness is evidence of moral degeneration, bodhisattva practices demonstrate ethical cultivation and pave the

way for future goodness. Bodily practices participate in the destruction of one's former self and in the creation of a bodhisattva by removing past karmic effects and purging one's self of evil. Therefore, the body represents for Ouyi not only a product of previous karma and a source of suffering, but also a vehicle for karmic transformation. Directed by Ouyi to various ends, all bodhisattva practices thus have the potential to transform other living beings and the self. In this last chapter, McGuire shows that, besides making known his desire to become a bodhisattva through votive texts, Ouyi also displayed it through his own body.

McGuire concludes with some considerations on Ouyi's karmic worldview and its normative implications. She helps reveal the extent to which the Buddhist notion of karma can infuse every event in the life of practitioners of great significance, with each experience being seen as the result of past actions and, in turn, as having karmic repercussions. At the same time, McGuire emphasizes that in Ouyi's understanding of karma there is no place for fatalism based on strict mechanistic causality, nor for eschewing of responsibilities based on the doctrine of emptiness. Caught between the awareness of his grave transgressions and the inscrutability of their karmic effects, this master responded with the confidence that religious practice can help practitioners change their fate. In addition, when religious practice proves to be insufficient, practitioners can always rely on the grace of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and they can further aspire to become bodhisattvas themselves in order to ease other living beings of their karmic burden. McGuire analysis succeeds in revealing the richness and the complexity of Ouyi's "organic" view of karma as something real, as something that though inscrutable can be ascertained, as malleable, and as having transformative potential. She stresses how Ouyi's understanding of karma strongly motivates his religious practice: for the master, karmic obstacles have the po-

tential to be transformed into karmic opportunities.

McGuire's study brings out some important themes that call our attention to the continuity of Buddhist traditions, as a number of Ouyi's attitudes and concerns were still relevant in the twentieth century. In an autobiographical document (*Zixing lu* 自行錄), Chan Master Laiguo 來果禪師 (1881-1952) also reports having engaged in filial slicing to help heal his father,[1] and I have personally observed bodily practices such as blood writing, and burning incense on head and arms, in contemporary Chinese monasteries. Xuyun's 虛雲 (ca. 1864-1959) advocacy of the validity of all Buddhist methods of practice, as well as his firm condemnation of parochial divisions,[2] suggest that nonsectarian approaches can be found throughout Chinese Buddhist history and might deserve more attention alongside divisions and conflicts within this religious tradition. Hongyi 宏一 (1880-1942), who was one of Ouyi's later biographers, was also concerned by the validity of his precept reception,[3] and also like Ouyi he apparently engaged in divination practices based on the *Divination Sutra*. [4]

McGuire's "internal" approach provides the most advantageous point of view for exploring the frame of mind of a Buddhist practitioner. By conducting her study from Ouyi's inner perspective, McGuire is able to explain how this eminent master tried to resolve contradictions inherent in Buddhist doctrine and practice: for example, how he reconciled the tension between the practice of divination and its condemnation in the Buddhist tradition, or between practices such as filial slicing and the notion of the insubstantiality of the body. Nevertheless, McGuire's fascinating journey into Ouyi's inner world as seen through the prism of karma also has the limitation of leaving out his outer world altogether, both in space and in time. Only textual sources produced by Ouyi are considered; therefore we only see what Ouyi saw about himself, and we only know what Ouyi wanted us to

know. Other sources could have provided, on one side, the historical context in which his thought took shape and his action took place, and, on the other side, a set of external points of view on this religious figure. In the first chapter, we do learn how this master was perceived by his later biographers; but Ouyi is never really put into dialogue with his contemporaries, nor he is inserted into or evaluated within a wider Buddhist perspective. This is especially regretful given the scarcity of scholarly works on Ming-dynasty Buddhism in general, and on this religious figure in particular. We only hear Ouyi's voice, but we do not perceive the background in which this voice is situated, nor the choir from which it emerges and differentiates itself. We hear him complaining of his undeserved fame, but we actually do not even know when and how he acquired it. This is in my opinion the only significant shortcoming of this otherwise well-researched book.

Overall, *Living Karma* is an invaluable study that not only rescues from scholarly oblivion one of the most influential Buddhist figures of Ming-dynasty China, but also sheds light on the complexity and coherence of his inner world and ritual practices by showing how they were shaped by his understanding of karma.

#### Notes

[1]. Laiguo 来果, *Laiguo chanshi guanglu* 来果禅师广录 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2006), 513.

[2]. Daniela Campo, *La construction de la sainteté dans la Chine moderne: la vie du maître bouddhiste Xuyun* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2013).

[3]. Raoul Birnbaum, "Glimpses of an Inner Life: Master Hongyi (1880-1942), the Healing Buddha, and the Power of Vows," in *The Cult of the Healing Buddha in East Asia*, ed. Bernard Faure (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, forthcoming).

[4]. According to his disciple Mengcan: Esther Maria Guggenmos, "The Buddhists' Fascination

with Divination: Tracing the Tentative Formation Process of a Believers' Community," paper presented at the international conference "Buddhism after Mao: Exploring Chinese Models of Religious Production," organized by Ji Zhe, October 17-18, 2014, Inalco, Paris.

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