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Navigating Ritual Resilience: The Interplay of Change and Continuity in the Shaolin Monastery During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Abstract: The global upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic introduced considerable perturbations to the religious life and ritual observances within most religious communities around the world. This article delves into the resilience and adaptability of ritual practices within the Shaolin Monastery of China during the five-month COVID-19 quarantine spanning from 23 January to 22 June, 2020. Employing ethnographic methods and grounded in anthropological theory, the study examines the interplay between ritual as a static social fact and as a dynamic, adaptable process, within the context of the Shaolin monastic life. It underlines the intricate interplay between static and dynamic elements in ritual practice, casting light on the Shaolin community's response to the pandemic.

The study discerns dichotomies responsible for the critical forces underlying complex dynamics intrinsic to the Shaolin community's religious life, namely: religious–secular, isolation–social engagement, discipline–freedom, tradition–innovation, and individual–collective. Tracking the evolutions and consistencies within these dual relationships enabled casting light on the transformative processes that were set in motion and identifying the elements of the religious life that have undergone change and those that have remained constant. This exploration offers a unique glimpse into the mechanisms through which resilience was enacted with the strategies that enabled the community to maintain, adjust and innovate its ritual practices amidst the tribulations presented by the crisis.

Keywords: ritual resilience, change and continuity, static and dynamic ritual elements, COVID-19 pandemic, Shaolin Monastery, China

Introduction: Aims and Scope

Amidst the ever-changing tapestry of anthropological inquiry, the subject of how daily life practices adapt to an unstable global landscape – intensified by crises like the COVID-19 pandemic – has gained increasing scholarly atten-

tion. Within this broader academic discussion, the adaptability of ritual practices has emerged as a particularly pertinent subject, to which the Ritual Year Working Group of the Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore (SIEF) has made significant contributions in recent years. Their investigations into "Traditions and Transformation" offer valuable insights of how festive cultures are continuously shaped by social, cultural, and technological variables. This dialogue was also a source of inspiration for this article, notably during the 2023 SIEF Congress, where a panel on the subject was organized by the Ritual Year Working Group and moderated by its co-chair, Laurent Fournier. The panel, titled "Uncertainty, Improvisation, and Constancy in the Ritual Year," provided a platform for exploring dynamic theories of ritual. Drawing from Van Gennep's concept that rituals are 'living facts,' Fournier emphasized the need for scholars to consider the entire life cycle of rituals, advocating for further studies into their creative evolution. During the same panel Anastasia V. Shevchenko also presented her work on the secular transformations of the Saint Devota celebration in Monaco. Shevchenko's work offers an insightful case study into how rituals can adapt to societal changes, such as the shift from religious to secular, while maintaining their core meaning and community value. In sum, the panel highlighted the evolving roles of researchers in observing and interpreting changes within traditional communities. This dialogue enriched my own perspective and led me to contemplate more deeply the dynamic and static elements of rituals. Inspired by ongoing scholarly efforts to understand the nature of rituals, this article focuses on the real-time adaptability and resilience of rituals in crisis situations. The recent increase in global crises has heightened the relevance of exploring the nature of ritual practice and the resilience of religious life within contemporary anthropology.

The application of anthropological theories to the religious life of the Shaolin Monastery amidst the COVID-19 pandemic yields valuable insights into the dynamic nature of ritual practice. This research explores the interplay between ritual as a static social fact and as a living, adaptable process. By delving into this tension, this article aims to deepen the understanding of how religious communities, such as the Shaolin Monastery, navigate through periods of profound disruption and change brought on by *critical events* (Giddens 1984). Anthropologists interpret rituals through divergent lenses. Durkheim (1912) delineates ritual as social fact, Turner (1969) posits it as a social drama, Malinowski (1992) depicts ritual as actions emerging in response to physical and psychological human necessities, while Grimes (1992) views it as orchestrated activities that endow human life with meaning. In the work of Houseman and Severi (1994), rituals are defined as structured activities governed by a unitary, relational logic. This logic provides the framework within which the ritual takes place, guiding its structure, elements, and the relationships it forms or enacts. They fulfill

specific functions and generate meaning within a social context, distinct from games and theatrical performances. Houseman and Severi reject hyper-local explanations, which hinder broad theorizing, as well as overly loose generalizations that conflate rituals with other forms of social behavior. While their framework is useful for pinpointing rituals as specialized forms of social action, it falls short in capturing the adaptability and comprehensive nature of rituals, particularly in the Chan Buddhist context of my research.

In contrast to Housman and Severi's work, my research on Chan Buddhist practices at the Shaolin Temple seeks an expansive definition of ritual. This tradition aims not only to blur but also to erase the distinction between specialized ritualistic actions and everyday activities. As a result, daily life itself becomes ritualized, reflecting an inversion in the traditional understanding of ritual. Rather than being governed by a unitary, relational logic, rituals in Chan Buddhism are adaptable, multifaceted practices deeply woven into the sociocultural fabric of the community. For this case study, I put forth a broader conception of ritual practices within the Shaolin community, one that transcends formal religious ceremonies to incorporate elements at the intersection of Chan Buddhism, as the religious tradition of the community, and their unique cultural practices. The elements of Shaolin monastic life encompass ceremonial activities on auspicious dates such as Buddha's Bathing Birthday, Vesak Day, Bodhi Day, and the Water Land Festival, as well as prayers, chanting, meditation, observance of precepts, martial arts and healthcare exercises, ritualized dining, and the tea ceremony. The ritual practice thus emerges as a cyclical, symbolic activity that embodies religious meaning defined through the prism of Shaolin Monastery sociocultural context. Moreover, the execution of these ritualistic actions involves not just learned movements, but also an understanding of their meaning within the context of the social group, as highlighted by Gunter and Wulf (2004).

Rituals are often perceived as the structured components of religious life, which can make conceptualizing their adaptability quite challenging. However, I propose that they are better understood not as fixed elements, but as practical engagements or active participations within a religious context. In recognizing the multifaceted nature of ritual as a sociocultural practice, both shaped and instrumental in forming human identities, relationships, and societal structures, this study elucidates the response of the Shaolin Monastery community to the disruption instigated by the five-month COVID-19 quarantine, which lasted from 23 January to 22 June 2020. The efforts to uphold religious life, as a foundation of the community's identity and cohesion, fostered two tendencies within this community. The first tendency was to maintain and preserve the existing religious life; the second was to evolve and adapt these practices to the new circumstances brought on by the health crisis.

During this time of disruption, the malleability of ritual practice enabled its survival in unprecedented circumstances. Physical isolation led to a dissolution of the once-clear boundaries between religious and secular life, thereby blurring the lines between specialized ritualistic actions and routine daily activities. Importantly, this broadening of the definition of “ritual” to encompass a wide array of everyday practices emerged as a key mechanism of resilience, allowing the community to adapt and sustain its spiritual life. However, the inherent stability of *ritual as a social fact* (Durkheim, 1912) allowed it to revert to its original form and structure once the period of disruption had passed. This tension and its resolution provide a compelling lens through which to explore the resilience and adaptability of religious practices amidst societal upheavals. By illuminating the interplay between change and continuity in the Shaolin Monastery’s religious life, centered around Chan practice, this study enriches the broader anthropological understanding of how ritual practices are both products of and contributors to social continuity and transformation. At the same time, the study builds upon the fundamental studies devoted to the history of Shaolin Monastery, which document how this important religious institution navigated through periods of crisis through its long struggle for survival and advancement (Shahar 2008; Lu 2013)

Methodological Approach

The Shaolin Monastery (少林寺 Shǎolín Sì) is nested at the base of Mount Song, a revered peak among China’s sacred mountains, and falls under the administrative jurisdiction of Dengfeng County in Henan Province. Established in 495 CE during the reign of Emperor Xiaowen of the Northern Wei Dynasty, the temple was originally intended to host the Indian monk Batuo, also recognized as Buddhahadra, positioning it among the earliest Buddhist establishments in China. Over its expansive 1,500-year history, the Monastery has endured through many critical events (such as wars, dynastic struggles and pillages), and has become a custodian of a rich cultural legacy, evolving and flourishing with time (Shahar 2008; Lu 2013). Recognizing its global significance, UNESCO conferred upon it the status of a World Heritage Site in 2010. Furthermore, Shaolin holds the dual distinction of being the cradle of Chan Buddhism and the progenitor of the distinct martial art form, internationally celebrated as Shaolin kung fu (Skowron-Markowska 2019). Currently, the Shaolin Monastery holds a distinctive position in society as one of China’s foremost religious and cultural institutions, deeply rooted in its grassroots and well-aligned with the central government’s policies.

For all the above-mentioned reasons, I chose the Shaolin Monastery as the site of my long-term research project, initiated in April 2018, wherein I focused on the relationship between Chan Buddhism, Shaolin martial arts and health. In the throes of the sudden emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, I found

myself within the Monastery confines and remained with the monastic community throughout the quarantine, which ended on 22 June, 2020. My fieldwork research was based on qualitative anthropological methods (DeWalt and DeWalt 2001; Vučinić Nešković 2013). It included different types of observations, interviews, conversations and discussions in small groups. Living in the Monastery guest area (鍾譜堂 *Chuí pǔ táng*) and attending the kung fu program for foreign students enabled me to fully participate (Vučinić Nešković 2013) in the activities which were the focus of my research as well as those activities which constitute the everyday life of the monastery. I also employed the methodological concept of “thick participation”, which involves the anthropologist first internalizing cultural knowledge through personal experience, and subsequently externalizing it as visual or textual data for analysis (Samudra, 2008). The main fieldwork material for this article was gathered through formal and informal interviews conducted both in-situ (during the quarantine) and online (one year later). As a female and a nonpermanent member of the community, my movement around the Monastery was somewhat restricted by the rules of monastic discipline that apply to all Buddhist monasteries. This also meant that I performed the interviews in the Monastery offices or in the common space in which the monks gathered. The interviews with the monks were conducted in the Chinese language, which required both my proficiency in spoken Putonghua and verification of my translations by Serbian sinologists. I gathered data on the overall epidemic¹ situation in China from existing scientific literature, local news, official Chinese government announcements, and the World Health Organization reports that emerged during and after my fieldwork.

Gathering ethnographic material in this study presented significant challenges in terms of both observation and interviews. With the outbreak of the epidemic, the monks retreated into their residential quarters which were off-limits to me, inhibiting my ability to observe their activities directly. Furthermore, conducting interviews posed an additional hurdle, as the monks’ interpretations of the pandemic were shaped through the prism of Buddhist teachings and the Monastery’s official narrative. When I expressed my frustration to one of the monks about the similarity of responses I received from each interviewee, his reply was illuminating:

Yes, they all say the same. What else do you expect them to tell you? During the quarantine, life was essentially the same for everyone, quite simple. Each individual was preoccupied with their own things; there isn’t much diversity in that. Consider your own quarantine experience – you spent time engaged in personal activities. The situation was no different for anyone else.

¹ In this article I use two terms to designate the health crisis. When I refer particularly to the situation in China, I use the term “epidemic”, while when I refer to the global spread of the virus, I use the term pandemic”.

Despite the uniformity of responses and lack of direct observational access, my engagement with the monks during quarantine through informal conversations and participation in daily activities were instrumental in gaining insights into the community's experiences during this period. These unassuming interactions significantly contributed to my understanding of the monks' lived experiences during quarantine, and the community's response to the disruption caused by the pandemic.

A lack of diversity in respondents' narrative on the health crisis surprisingly facilitated an unambiguous examination of the collective interpretation of the transformation of religious life. The monks' commitment to established ritual practices and their adaptive spirit in evolving their personal spiritual disciplines were indicative of their shared, group habitus. Nonetheless, the limitations imposed by this individual homogeneity were partially circumvented through the implementation of two key methodologies. Firstly, informal interviews conducted during the quarantine allowed me to capture immediate reactions and personal adaptations to the unprecedented situation. Secondly, formal interviews conducted one year later via the WeChat application offered retrospective insights into the monks' individual experiences during the quarantine and the aftermath. This dual-method approach enabled the inclusion of individual variability into my analysis of ritual adaptation. Interestingly, a consistent narrative thread ran through the interviews, suggesting a shared experience or collective story among the monastic community in response to the pandemic. The overwhelming sentiment was one of security amidst global uncertainty during the initial stages of the pandemic. Encased within the confines of the monastery, shielded from the risk of infection and provided with essential daily resources by the Monastery leadership, the monks did not perceive their existence as being under immediate threat. This sense of stability amidst chaos allowed for a more profound dedication to their religious life, unencumbered by the typical distractions of the secular world and even devoid of their usual non-religious engagements. This transition is reflective of a collective adaptability and resilience, reinforcing the relevance of my research focus on the coexistence of static and dynamic elements within ritual practice.

Theoretical Framework

This research investigates the interplay between Shaolin monastic life and Chan practice, with a focus on ritualistic practices. Employing theories from anthropology and sociology, the study applies a structural analysis to ethnographic data, identifying dichotomies that highlight enduring elements of rituals. This analytical approach reveals how these persistent aspects of rituals contribute to the stability of religious life, even in the face of significant disruptions. The study extends beyond identifying foundational elements of Shaolin religious life, also exploring the intricate dynamics governing ritual practices.

To discern the dynamic, flexible, and transformative facets of ritual practice, this study deploys a multidimensional theoretical framework. It provides an exploration of the Shaolin monastic rituals' fortitude and flexibility in weathering the tumult brought about by a global pandemic. Anchored in Van Gennep's concept of ritual liminality (1960), Turner's subsequent elaboration (1969), and contemporary expansions by authors such as Horvath, Thomassen, Wydra, and Szakolczai, this study highlights the inherent plasticity and adaptability of Chan ritual practice. Symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969) complements this exploration, offering a prism through which we understand how the monks' quotidian interactions and experiences weave the fabric of ritual continuity. Further enriching this theoretical mosaic, a phenomenological approach (Csordas 1990; Ingold 2000, 2011) foregrounds the monks' lived experiences and interpretations. It underscores how community members innovatively integrate enduring religious structures into transformed practices, thereby revealing their crucial role in shaping and maintaining the essence of the religious practice. Lastly, the study draws upon Bourdieu's theory of practice (1977), specifically invoking the concept of habitus, to reveal how ingrained dispositions and behaviors serve as an anchor, holding fast the structures and meanings of rituals amidst turbulent disruption. This multidimensional theoretical approach illuminates how individual interpretations, shared lived experiences, and the enduring habitus converge to ensure the resilience and adaptability of the Shaolin Monastic practices in times of profound change and upheaval.

This article underlines the intricate interplay between static and dynamic elements in ritual practice, casting new light on the Shaolin community's pandemic response. It reveals the mechanisms of resilience exhibited within this religious community unearthing the innate capability of deep-rooted ritual practices to adapt, modify, and even reinforce their structure. By synthesizing an array of theoretical perspectives, this research aspires to provide a comprehensive portrayal of the multifaceted reality of ritual practice within the milieu of Shaolin Monastery. In this rendition, rituals emerge in their dual nature – as both steadfast pillars of stability and fertile grounds for transformation. Insights harvested from this study promise to enrich our understanding of the pivotal roles and functionality of rituals within religious communities, spotlighting their resilience and adaptability in negotiating adversity.

Introduction of the Quarantine

On 27 December 2019, the Chinese Government issued an alert to the World Health Organization (WHO) concerning the detection of pneumonia cases of an unknown etiology.² The fight against the ensuing epidemic, caused by the

² <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn>

severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), known as COVID-19, was officially initiated with the implementation of a lockdown in Wuhan, Hubei province. This measure was put into effect on 23 January 2020, a day before the annual Chinese Spring Festival (春节, Chūn Jié). The onset of the epidemic during the Spring Festival, a 40-day period marked by substantial population movement across China, notably compounded the severity of the health crisis. Indeed, it is typical during this festival for travel numbers to approach three billion. In response, the Government enacted the highest level of national emergency, signifying the recognition of an “extremely serious incident”.

From the very start of the official announcement of the epidemic, the Shaolin Monastery entered a state of comprehensive quarantine. For the purpose of this research, Master YW, the head of clinical practice at the Shaolin Pharmacy, provided a detailed account of the monastery’s response to the evolving crisis:

On 23 January 2020, as the Chinese New Year celebration was approaching, the number of unknown virus infections in Wuhan was surging out of control. At 5.30 am, the Venerable Abbot Shi Yongxin, issued a manual on epidemic prevention and control measures tailored specifically for the residential compound of the Shaolin Monastery. By 8 am, permanent resident monks had received reiterated directives to remain within the monastery and refrain from receiving visitors, and that those currently outside the premises should not return for the time being. Wuhan has not yet been officially closed. Aware of the seriousness of the unknown virus, at 1.30 pm the Abbot ordered the cancellation of ‘The 2019 Shaolin Temple Reunion and End of the Year Annual Examination and Merit Award’. All communal gatherings were proscribed, and members of the community were directed to isolate in their residence quarters.

Master YW explained further that under Abbot’s directives, the Shaolin pharmacy’s medical staff promptly set up a task force for prevention and control of the unfolding epidemic, formulated a prevention plan, and implemented it strictly according to official national regulations³. At 6 pm on 23 January, the Shaolin Monastery established management procedures for the whole Monastery under quarantine. All entrance and exit were banned. A select group of around ten monks were designated to conduct prayers for those imperiled by the escalating health crisis. They convened in the Sutra Hall, the most spacious and warmest of all monastery halls, an optimal venue for maintaining the necessary physical distancing without subjecting the monks to harsh winter cold. Individuals who had travelled to Hubei province within the preceding fortnight

³ During the whole quarantine period the monastery’s approach to COVID-19 risk management was systematically aligned with official prevention and protection regulations issued by the central government, tailored to both provincial and local contexts. The practical application of these guidelines within the monastery was overseen by the Abbot, who established a dedicated task force composed of monks from the Department of Medicine and Pharmacology. For more details, see Nešković 2023.

were directed to report to the Shaolin Pharmacy to report on their activities and were subsequently isolated for observation. The Pharmacy medical staff commenced daily temperature screenings of all community members once a day in the Dining Hall. All communal spaces within the Monastery were systematically disinfected on a daily basis using either 75% alcohol or trichloro effervescent tablets. Periodic UV irradiation was used for antivirus sterilization. Each room was equipped with hand sanitizers, and residents were urged to frequently wash hands and ventilate the rooms.

Navigating Ritual Resilience: The Static and Dynamic Aspects of the Shaolin Monastery Ritual Practice

The global upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic introduced considerable perturbations to the religious life and ritual observances within the Shaolin Monastery. In response, this study dives into the theme of ritual resilience, exploring how religious life adapts to significant social and cultural changes triggered by *critical events*. These events represent the unexpected interruptions of the routine, i.e., the radical changes of the embedded stances and ways of acting in the world (Giddens 1984, 41). Despite the pandemic-induced disruption, religious life eventually resumed its pre-crisis form, lending weight to Durkheim's proposition of rituals as enduring social realities (1912). Nevertheless, the tangible transformations unveiled during the quarantine period invite an examination of rituals within the Shaolin community as inherently adaptive and dynamic entities.

In order to grasp the resilience of ritual practices within the Shaolin Monastery, we must perceive the transformational arc traversed by rituals as living, dynamic processes. Echoing Van Gennep's (1960), Turner's (1969), and Horvat's (2013) theoretical contemplations, my study regards ritual practice as an evolving process, perpetually shaped and redefined by the lived experiences and continual reinterpretations of its practitioners. Insights from Turner's theoretical expositions, affords us a lens to investigate how these practices adjust and morph in response to socio-cultural fluctuations. This ethnographic study, while primarily aligned with Turner's views, diverges, by considering an existential threat rather than social conflict. Here, I address a disruption that, like social conflict, exacts a profound impact, necessitating commensurate adaptation and innovation in ritualistic practices.

Further, this study extends beyond the conventional analysis that focus on visible tensions and conflicts arising from such disruptions. It draws upon Turner's seminal ideas, expanding them to reflect contemporary interpretations of

liminality that encompass broader societal and cultural transformations. These transformations are not always marked by overt conflicts but can be seen in the subtle changes in daily practices and roles, offering a more comprehensive view of how communities navigate periods of uncertainty and transition. The works of authors such as Thomassen, Horvath, Wydra, and Szokolczai show the concept's evolving application in modern contexts, highlighting the importance of subtle transformations in daily life and roles rather than overt tensions. Thomassen broadens the scope of liminality beyond its anthropological roots, examining its significance in social and political theory, and its manifestation across historical and revolutionary moments (Thomassen 2014). This perspective is in line with framing the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on community practices and structures as a transformative liminal phase. While not foundational to the development of this study's argument, the work of Horvath, Thomassen, and Wydra (2015) reveals 'relevance of liminality across disciplines, emphasizing its role in examining unstable and transformative periods through various case studies. Similarly, Szokolczai's (2018) insights into the dynamics of the modern world through the lens of liminality, suggest a state of continuous transition influenced by cultural processes and critical events. These discussions underscore the relevance of liminality in understanding the pandemic's impact on communities, suggesting that the Shaolin Monastery's adaptive response can be viewed as a liminal phase characterized by significant but non-confrontational changes,⁴ aligning with a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the concept. I argue that liminality, as a methodological tool, facilitates an understanding of transformative community phases, thereby guiding this study's examination of the Shaolin Temple's experiences during the major health crisis.

This study echoes Horvath's position that the concept of "liminality" can and should be applied to concrete historical events to facilitate historical and sociological understanding of their impact on societies and individuals. Turner attributed an almost unequivocally positive connotation to liminal situations, viewing them as opportunities for renewal. However, as Horvath insightfully contends, liminal situations can also be periods of uncertainty, anguish, and even existential fear: a confrontation with the abyss in the void.

In Turner's seminal works, "liminality" is framed as a transitional phase experienced by individuals within the ritualistic matrix (1969). This study, however, proposes to reimagine the ritual itself in a liminal state during periods of transformation. While this interpretation diverges from Turner's emphasis on individual experiences, it aligns with his perception of rituals as living process-

⁴ The situation at the Shaolin Monastery exemplifies a crisis that did not manifest in overt conflicts or tensions either within the community or between community members and external individuals. This topic is further elaborated in Nešković 2013.

es. It contends that during the Shaolin Monastery quarantine, rituals existed in an ambiguous state that transcended standard social roles and structures. This phase was characterized by a profound introspection, an accelerated learning curve, and a flurry of innovation among the practitioners. In a unique symbiosis, the personal transformations of the practitioners were mirrored by the corresponding adaptations and evolutions within the ritual practices themselves.

Leveraging Van Gennep's and Turner's theoretical prism, this study identifies the outbreak of the pandemic as the pre-liminal phase of ritual life at Shaolin Monastery. This phase, which spanned from 23 January to 24 February was characterized by a departure from the quotidian norm. It saw the cancellation of collective activities and a seeming dissolution of daily life's structure. Only fundamental routines such as fetching food from the Dining Hall (instead of dining together) and undergoing routine temperature checks persisted. The vibrant communication with the outside world was abruptly severed, becoming solely dependent on digital platforms – a phenomenon apparent in other Buddhist monasteries around China as well (Nan 2020). The Monastery, typically bustling with tourists as part of the Songshan Scenic Area, stood in stark contrast during the epidemic's early weeks when it was deserted. The monastery echoed with silence as everyone awaited assurance that the community was infection-free and anticipated the end of the quarantine. Underestimating the severity and scope of the impending pandemic, the community initially believed the quarantine would be short-lived. Master YW, head of the Shaolin Pharmacy's clinical department, delineated the swift actions taken under the Abbot's guidance in response to the novel coronavirus outbreak. The medical staff promptly established a task force dedicated to the prevention and control of the epidemic, meticulously devising and enforcing a prevention plan in line with official regulations. Additionally, the Monastery procured a selection of Chinese medicinal herbs, including Astragalus, Windproof, Honeysuckle, and Forsythia. These herbs were brewed into a medicinal concoction, which was then made available to all community members in the Dining Hall. Master YW explained that this herbal blend served to supplement the body's qi, dispel heat, and detoxify, thus fortifying the body against potential viral invasion. Concurrently, collective activities within the Monastery, were suspended. The monks were instead guided to engage in solitary activities, such as chanting sutras, reading books, and meditating within their individual residences (寮房, liáofáng). Consequently, the Monastery's daily management was primarily focused on internal affairs, practically devoid of collective activities. This significant shift greatly influenced the overall ambience within the community, heralding a period of disruption from regular activities and setting the stage for a transition towards a new reality.

The liminal phase, the transition that came after the first month of the epidemic, when it was confirmed that no Shaolin community members were infect-

ed, was marked by an overwhelming uncertainty. It lasted from 24 February to 8 April. The uncertainty stemmed not only from the indeterminable duration of the health crisis but also the potential long-term repercussions on those infected, as highlighted by unnerving social media videos. With no immediate cure or vaccine in sight, fear and uncertainty pervaded the atmosphere. This phase saw a significant departure from the structured societal norms, as daily tasks and responsibilities were redistributed, adhering to the exigencies of the anti-epidemic measures and the broader needs of the community. While the reassignment of roles still had its basis in pre-existing hierarchies, it was a clear divergence from the pre-pandemic norm. This phase highlighted a surge in *communitas* – a sense of solidarity and unity – reflected in the coordinated efforts around hygiene, food provision, and healthcare. Irrespective of their regular roles or hierarchy within the Monastery, every member actively contributed to the community's safety and well-being. The pivot from group to solitary activities such as meditation, reading, and chanting, facilitated a deeper, more personal engagement with spiritual practices, fostering introspection and self-discovery – hallmarks of the liminal phase.

As the time went by, the transition from liminal to post-liminal phase was gradual. The “post-liminal” stage, or reintegration, encapsulated the community's adjustment to the new normal. After the lockdown of Wuhan was removed on 8 April, a greater sense of relaxation emerged as the monks began to feel safe and secure within their community. Adapting to this new environment, they found novel ways to engage with each other and their surroundings, signaling a reintegration into a new existence with evolved routines and practices. This phase saw the resurgence of ritualized activities, albeit in adapted and innovative forms. A renewed sense of collectivity, materialized in relation to these fresh routines and within the corresponding subgroups. A specific dimension of *communitas*, characterized by enhanced sense of solidarity and shared resilience in face of adversity, emerged from these novel ritual activities. However, this new normal persisted only until the pandemic's end. Upon the cessation of the anti-epidemic measures, ritual practices reverted to their pre-pandemic forms, lending credence to Durkheim's assertion on the static nature of rituals as enduring social constructs.

I contend that the dynamic nature of ritualized practices, specifically their liminality, facilitates the anchoring of fundamental structures of meaning within times of disruption. In essence, the inherent dynamism of rituals functions as a safeguard against the erosion of core religious principles, thus preserving the quintessence of practice amidst change. This observation elucidates a harmonious coexistence of stability within fluidity, as these practices dynamically evolve without relinquishing their foundational essence.

Structural Analysis and Deconstruction of Dichotomies

Formal and informal dialogues with monks revealed no explicit concern within the community about the potential dissolution of religious life's essence or the erosion of Chan practice. Testimonies from the monastic community illustrate those ritual practices, which in the Shaolin context are synonymous with Chan practices, endured, albeit executed in adjusted settings and individualized forms. Additionally, the monks' continued adherence to monastic discipline, despite alterations to routine, were exemplifying the resilience of these ritual codes of conduct. Master YR's assertion that "*a monk's life is always very ordered*" epitomizes their perception of daily routines, including religious rituals, as an enduring and integral part of their lives. Even during isolation, the rhythm of daily activities assumed a ritualistic order. After the initial months of quarantine, when members of the community could interact more freely, interpersonal rituals, as simple as walks or tea ceremonies, were restored in an adapted form. Furthermore, several community members highlighted that isolation provided an opportunity to dedicate more time to spiritual practices. As Master YQ noted, their religious life was never under threat. These observations and testimonies sparked my curiosity and ignited me to reveal the static aspect of ritual practice, thereby identifying the enduring structures that facilitated the continuity of religious life even amidst crises.

By applying structural analysis, I reveal the foundational structures and mechanisms of the Shaolin religious life which stay unchanged during the disruption period. The analysis shows that the stability of these structures relies on their inherent dichotomies. In this study, the dichotomies were delineated based on the contours of daily life within the Shaolin Monastery before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In positing that human cultures fundamentally operate through oppositional thinking, serving as the foundation for myths, social organizations, and other cultural constructs, Lévi-Strauss primarily employed the concept of binary oppositions (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 1958). However, for the purposes of this case study analysis, I opt for the concept of dichotomies. This choice is motivated by my distinct analytical approach, which diverges from Lévi-Strauss's use of binary oppositions; rather than treating these oppositions as static entities, I deconstruct them to reveal the dynamic relationships between the elements within each determined pair. The theoretical deconstruction of these dichotomies (Derrida 1972) invites us to examine the evolving relations within each one, and thus discern their interplay bringing forth the dynamic nature of ritual practice. The evolving relationships within each of these dichotomies were subject to longitudinal analysis throughout the quarantine period. The study reveals that the tensions within the dichotomies are negotiated through

adaptation of the community to novel conditions so as to conserve the pillars of the religious life and thus the community's core identity. In the context of a critical event such as the health crisis, the dynamic nature of ritual practice emerges as an ongoing negotiation within these dichotomies. I was able to discern the following dichotomies responsible for the critical forces underlying complex dynamics intrinsic to the Shaolin community's religious life, namely: religious–secular, isolation–social engagement, discipline–freedom, tradition–innovation, and individual–collective. Tracking the evolutions and consistencies within these dual relationships enabled me to cast light on the transformative processes that were set in motion and identify the elements of the religious life that have undergone change and those that have remained constant. This exploration offers a unique glimpse into the mechanisms through which resilience was enacted with the strategies that enabled the community to maintain, adjust and innovate its ritual practices amidst the tribulations presented by the crisis.

Religious–Secular

The demarcation between religious and secular spheres within the daily life of the Shaolin Monastery is pivotal in defining the Chan Buddhism ritual practice. The delicate interplay between these opposing spheres delineates the intricate journey of spiritual development the monks at Shaolin Monastery undertake. From the moment they join the community, each member embarks on a personal endeavor to internalize religious dispositions inherent to the traditions and practices of the Shaolin Monastery. This internalization process ignites a transformative progression, shifting them from novices to adept Shaolin monks. The transformation reaches beyond their individual perspectives and engagements, fostering a profound immersion in religious life, thereby amplifying the weight of the religious over the secular in the monastery's broader community interactions.

In the daily lives of Shaolin monks, the narrative holds that there is no clear boundary between religious and secular activities; all are considered facets of Chan practice. For them, "Life is Chan", and they endeavor to transform every activity into an act of Chan practice. According to Master YF, consciousness within the monastic community distinctly diverges from that experienced in secular society.

I cherish the life here. Every day you read Buddhist sutras, then you go for a walk, you engage in conversations, you practice martial arts. Your state of consciousness here differs from the one you had when you were outside the monastery. It is about the awareness you cultivate through faith. All that comes with years.

When inquired about their practice of Shaolin kung fu, their understanding of health, their daily life routines, study habits, and dietary practices, the monks

invariably associated these activities as integral parts of their overall Chan practice. They recurrently expounded that Chan should permeate all facets of life, not merely during meditation or participation in specific Buddhist activities or rituals. Chan, they suggest, is omnipresent – while we sleep, walk, work, learn, drink tea, and beyond. Each consulted monk uniquely elucidated how each life activity transforms into a manifestation of Chan practice and how Chan, by permeating every action, shapes their existence. The fundamental goal for Buddhist monks is the discovery of Buddha-nature within themselves (Shi 2013). Consequently, Buddhism signifies the doctrine, whereas Chan constitutes the path to its embodiment (Nešković 2021).

However, in practice, this holistic approach is often challenging to maintain due to the monks' busy schedules and administrative responsibilities. This ideal is more readily achieved by experienced monks or those not engaged in the complexities of temple management and daily affairs. Intriguingly, the COVID-19 quarantine occasioned a communal shift towards this ideal, as enforced isolation attenuated the monks' direct interactions with the secular sphere, allowing for a more thoroughgoing realization of the monastic narrative.

Based on the above explained worldview of the monastic community members, I categorize Chan ritual practice to include all ritualized activities within the monastic community, extending even to those that may not intrinsically harbor religious symbolism. These ritualized practices are characterized by specific codes of conduct, dedicated spaces and times of engagement, and the consistent participation of distinct sub-groups in the life of the monastic community. The rules of conduct are set by the monastic discipline (戒律 *jièlǜ*). The selected spaces correspond to the formality or informality of the practice. Informal practices take place in locations that minimize disturbance to other community members – these could include various courtyards within the monastic complex or specific pathways, like the monastery grounds, the road to the Damo Cave, or the Tizigo area. Although the timing for these activities is typically consistent, it can occasionally be determined on an *ad hoc* basis. Participants usually constitute sub-groups who engage in these practices driven by personal enthusiasm or intrinsic interest in the activity. The formal hierarchy does not apply within these activities, hence invoking Turner's concept of "communitas", a concept to which I will return later.

Isolation–Social Engagement

Prior to the pandemic, the monastery functioned as a nexus of both societal and religious engagement, serving as a lighthouse of Chan Buddhist tradition and martial arts culture. A vital dynamic within this setting was the delicate balance maintained between isolation and social interaction. This balance has

been further challenged due to waves of both domestic and foreign tourists, who swarm in by thousands on a daily basis (Kam et al. 2016; Su 2016). Despite the popularity of the Shaolin Monastery as a scenic tourist destination, the monks' residential chambers remained isolated, with the monastic discipline and behavioral rules offering the monks the necessary seclusion when needed. However, the onset of the pandemic triggered a stark shift towards increased isolation, imposing a profound silence on the otherwise bustling monastery as the regular influx of tourists ceased abruptly. This shift amplified the monastery's isolation, yet it did not entirely sever its connections with the broader community.

While the imposition of physical seclusion was undeniable, the monastery managed to avoid total solitude. The connection with the external world was sustained through the judicious use of digital technologies. Regular communications with family members and friends beyond the monastery were upheld through telephone exchanges and the WeChat application. Further, the Monastery leadership adopted a structured approach to ensure community members were kept abreast of the evolving situation. Primarily, top-down communication within the monastery was managed via notices disseminated through WeChat groups. These notices targeted either the entire community or specific monastery department heads, who would then relay the information to their respective department members. In addition, community members had access to the internet, enabling them to consume updates from various social media platforms on the unfolding situation. Internal dynamics within the community also underwent transformation as time passed. The quarantine's onset saw the implementation of stringent measures that significantly limited interpersonal contact and group assemblies. However, once the community was declared free from infection, these restrictions were moderated, paving the way for a revival of internal social engagement.

The Monastery creatively sought engagement with broader society through acts of philanthropy and the development of cultural initiatives and academic endeavors. The Shaolin leadership-initiated efforts to collect donations for those imperiled by the pandemic, focusing first within China before expanding their outreach globally⁵. By May, the Shaolin community had contributed 13 batches of anti-epidemic materials to hospitals in China, amounting to 11,145,510 Chinese yuan, facilitated through the Henan Charity Association. In addition, Shaolin branch temples and the international disciple community collectively donated over 390,000 yuan to numerous domestic hospitals, including those in Wuhan city and Henan province, using the China Charity Association and local charities as intermediaries. Charity work was presented by the monks as acts of compassion and thus integral to Buddhist self-cultivation practice. Addition-

⁵ For an account of how different Chinese Buddhist Monasteries handled the epidemic at its initial stages, see Nan 2020.

ally, they embarked on the conception of innovative cultural and educational projects. The authorities were consistently informed about the monastery's pandemic response measures, signifying that the relationship between the government and this grassroots religious entity remained intact despite their physical isolation. Although the pandemic imposed significant isolation on the Shaolin Monastery, the monks managed to maintain a certain degree of social engagement, both within their community and with the broader society.

Testimonies from the monks highlight the community's adaptive narrative capabilities, elegantly recasting the imposed isolation as a golden opportunity for profound spiritual practice. The monks described their free-time daily activities to be the following: worshipping Buddha, chanting sutras, reading books, and practicing kung fu. Master YG, the head of the Monastery library said that he used his free time to concentrate on reading and photography. He explained that he got used to the new situation and began to deeply appreciate the quiet and orderly life during the isolation. Master LCH conveyed:

During the quarantine, it's as if you've entered into seclusion. The life in seclusion is about transforming one's subconscious through experiential realization, gained from Chan practice. It is about transforming the ignorant subconscious into present and clear wisdom. At this time, you don't need to confront anyone or anything beyond your own mind-heart. What you are facing is only yourself... Don't cling to the past, the future hasn't come yet, and refrain from dwelling in the present.

Discipline–Freedom

The monastic order was upheld by a careful balance between discipline, embodied by the regulatory structures shaping daily life, and freedom, as represented by each monk's individual engagement with personally meaningful aspects of Shaolin culture. However, the challenges posed by the pandemic led to a critical reevaluation and adjustment of this balance. Through this process, it became evident that the intricate interplay between self-discipline and freedom is fundamental to the affirmation of monastic identity. The balance the monks strike between these two facets, not only shapes their monastic experience and contributes to spiritual growth, but also ascertains their position within the religious community, thereby influencing their communal role and standing.

The regulations governing Chan monastic life, which originate from the Yuan⁶ dynasty, are presently regulated and administered by the Buddhist Association of China (Yifa 2002, 47). Master YY explained:

⁶ “The codex of rules for public monasteries of the Chányuàn qīngguī tradition, from the time of the Song and Yuan dynasties includes Jiàodìng Qīngguī (or Cónglín

Essentially, the rules governing all monastery departments trace their roots back to Baizhang's guidelines. Today, additional rules devised by the Buddhist Association of China supplement these. How does a monk pass these rules on to his students? Through personal example – to do as it is told. Another way is through meetings, where everyone gathers to learn and discuss together... Rules, in essence, serve as a protective measure. Why? In every family there must be rules so that the family is organized better. If there were no rules, the family would be like scattered sand. Let's take this example, if you take a single stick, it will break easily, right? But when you collect them and tie them into a bundle, this bundle will be much harder to break – it will resist. Rules are like this. They provide a shared center, a crucial foundation for the community. This is the best way for a community to be established. They act as a cliff's edge, a protective wall. Crossing it can be perilous, but if you stay within its borders, you will be fine. It offers protection. Every monk shoulders their unique responsibilities.

Monks described their pre-epidemic everyday life as a tapestry of shared activities – such as dawn and dusk recitation of sutras and communal meals – interwoven with department-specific tasks, personal duties, and leisure pursuits. They understand monastic rules as the crucial thread that binds the community in harmony, enables a consistent rhythm of daily life and ensures uniformity in everyone's behavior. Master YRD explained: *“Our every movement, word and deed should be in accordance with the norms of life in a Chan monastery”*. Yet, the pursuit of spiritual growth and the choice of self-cultivation path remain deeply personal endeavors, imbued with individual tendencies and stirred by self-discipline.

Echoing sentiments voiced in pre-pandemic narratives, monks interpreted the liberation from secular obligations and distractions as providing opportunity to explore individual interests within Shaolin cultural heritage. These pursuits encompassed a wide array of disciplines, including scriptural studies, academic work, meditation, martial arts, medicine, and calligraphy, among others. Senior community members understand Chan as the highest wisdom, omni-present in all worldly engagements. Master YZG, skilled in calligraphy, explained how one can experience Chan through diverse practices of self-cultivation (修行 *xiūxíng*):

Drinking tea is a form of self-cultivation. Consuming food is also a kind of self-cultivation. Martial arts as well. Of course, this applies to all of Buddhism, not just the Shaolin Monastery. We value discipline (戒律 *jièlǜ*) in Buddhism. What is this discipline? It is persistence in a certain kind of healthy physical and mental behavior. While practicing calligraphy, we should write in a correct way, following our healthy state of mind (心态 *xīntài*). We must not be careless in our writing. We also strive for a kind of precision and beauty... Most of what calligraphy gives us is a kind of self-cultivation (修行 *xiūxíng*) and a type of Chan

Jiàodìng Qīngguī Zǒngyào), Bèiyòng Qīngguī (или Chánlín Bèiyòng Qīngguī) and Chixiū Bǎizhàng Qīngguī.” (Yifa, 2002, 47).

practice (禪修 Chán xiū). Chan calligraphy primarily expresses a moral artistic conception. We choose good words, good texts, whose content is in the service of advancing the body and mind. There are some characters that we don't write. We don't write things that people will find useless. Everything that we write can inspire (启示 qishi) others, guide them, and even give them a kind of joy. It's not just about the beauty of the calligraphy, it needs a certain content as well.

With the advent of the pandemic, the concept of discipline assumed a heightened significance. Under the leadership of Abbot Shi Yongxin, a specialized task force for virus prevention and control was established, as elaborated by Master YW, head of the Shaolin Pharmacy's clinical department. The rigorous implementation of preventative measures underscored the critical role of discipline in preserving communal health. In this context, disciplined behavior, exemplified by scrupulous adherence to anti-epidemic measures, emerged as a cornerstone of communal resilience. This discipline further enabled a certain degree of freedom of movement within the monastery precincts, along with a potential easing of quarantine restrictions.

Simultaneously, the cessation of communal activities provided monks with an unprecedented abundance of free time. Despite the encouragement to uphold consistent daily study and practice, stringent monitoring mechanisms were notably absent. This newfound freedom, called for an intensified self-discipline to maintain the rigor of monastic life, thereby shifting the understanding of freedom from a choice in the method of Chan practice to an imperative for self-discipline. Following the initial epidemic wave and the easing of strict quarantine measures, glimpses of the pre-epidemic freedom of movement and social interaction began to re-emerge. Monks were observed engaging in communal activities such as tea-drinking, courtyard visits, and socializing. The Monastery leadership advocated studying Shaolin cultural heritage and organized monthly examinations, epitomizing an adaptive, constructive form of discipline. The combination of spatial authority and organizational authority demonstrated a multi-faceted approach to balancing the discipline of the community members. Each Department as well as each residential courtyard, had a designated monk responsible for ensuring the maintenance of anti-epidemic measures and encouraging the other members to make productive use of their time.

Testimonies provided by the likes of Master YQ and Master YR offer unique insight into the ways monks adapted to these altered circumstances, with their inherent self-discipline underpinning the continuity of religious practice. As described by Master YQ, even though the pandemic brought collective activities to a standstill, the impact on their religious practice was minimal because “*the monks are self-disciplined and thus a closed life is not difficult for us*”. Similarly, Master YR noted that, “*due to the highly regimented nature of a monk's life, I personally felt little impact from the isolation or sense of quarantine*”. These monks effectively harnessed their discretionary time for self-cultivation,

immersing themselves in endeavors encompassing worship of Buddha, sutra chanting, reading, kung fu practice, and even honing skills like gardening and photography. Master YG, the head of the Monastery library, articulated his appreciation for the tranquil and orderly life during quarantine, reinforcing the premise that “*discipline can foster a profound sense of peace and freedom*”. He even decided to explore photography as a novel leisure activity. Despite recognizing the challenges and inconveniences imposed by the pandemic, monks also acknowledged the effective response of both the government and the Monastery leadership. They trusted the leadership to ensure their safety and facilitate their pursuit of a meaningful life within isolation’s constraints. Consequently, the dichotomy of discipline and freedom evolved into a symbiosis of self-discipline and self-directed spiritual practice. Self-discipline provided order and commitment required for effective self-directed spiritual practice, while the latter offered purpose and motivation for maintaining self-discipline.

Collective–Individual

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the essence of communal living was deeply embedded in the everyday life of the Shaolin Monastery. Collective activities, ranging from ritual ceremonies including the Bathing of Buddha Ceremony, the Water Land Dharma Assembly, the Ghost Festival, Bodhidharma Memorial Day, to morning and evening chanting, communal dining, and the collective organization of daily affairs, were hallmarks of the monks’ existence. Master YRD shared:

This is a collective life. We eat rice together, but we also live in the monastery, we study and go to morning lessons (早课 zǎokè, sutra recitations). To be more precise, we are together during every activity, we are a collective in our way of life... Modern society is developing towards greater individualism, but our Buddhism is different, we enjoy our collective life.

The Master explained that for particularly busy monks, time for individual self-cultivation activities like meditation and martial arts “*must be squeezed out like water from a sponge*”. He noted that life in the monastery can be demanding, suggesting that the most opportune times for individual practice are in the quiet solitude of early morning and the tranquil reprieve of evening, once all other responsibilities have been attended to. Master YY perceives the monastery as one big family:

Becoming a monk is also a way of life. Just as how people decide to get married and start families, we decide to live a single life within a community. I am already used to it. It became a major part of my life. I don't think it is too different from my old way of life, or that anything changed significantly.

The entanglement of individual and collective engagements within the monastery is characterized by a symbiotic relationship between institutional responsibilities and personal spiritual growth, framed within the meticulously curated environment that facilitates peaceful introspection and contemplation. The Monastery's organizational structure is largely collective, with various offices assigned to manage diverse aspects of daily life, ranging from routine chores to guest reception. The monks' quotidian duties could be divided into two distinct, yet interrelated, spheres. The first sphere encompasses the formal commitments tethered to the monastery as an institution – like safeguarding its maintenance and orchestrating the collective rhythm of monastic life and activities. The second sphere, in contrast, orbits around the guidelines of spiritual practice for Chan Buddhist monks. The monastery's collective rules form the bedrock for individual spiritual growth. As Master YG elucidates, *“our way of life is defined by our collective identity... structure is indispensable... the monastic community stands as a family”*. The monastery environment is meticulously curated to foster an optimal milieu for spiritual growth. In the words of Master JP, *“the monastery is a place where monks can deal with the questions and problems they are trying to solve, in peace”*.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the collective nature of monastic life underwent significant changes. To curb the spread of the virus, communal activities such as group meals and collective chanting were suspended, instigating a substantial shift towards individual practices. Monks were consequently instructed to undertake these activities individually within the confines of their respective residential quarters, signaling a transition from a communal to a more individualistic monastic lifestyle. Similarly, the management of daily affairs within the Monastery pivoted towards individual responsibilities. Monks previously tasked with managing the Monastery's daily operations witnessed considerable change, with their roles and responsibilities now primarily focused on internal affairs devoid of collective activities. Furthermore, individual self-cultivation gained greater emphasis during the quarantine period. They were encouraged to use their time for individual study of the Shaolin traditional heritage, with monthly examinations organized to assess their progress.

The daily activities also turned more individualistic, ranging from Buddha worship and sutra chanting to book reading, kung fu practice, and even the pursuit of individual interests such as archery, the game of Go, photography, gardening and English-learning. Master YH, responsible for maintaining the hygiene within the Chuipu Hall (锤普堂 *Chuí pǔ táng*) conveyed:

*Before the pandemic, we used to plant Hardy Rubber Tree (Eucomia Tree, 杜仲树 *Dùzhòng shù*) along the road leading to the Dharma Cave. Its barks can be used in Traditional Chinese Medicine. During quarantine, however, I planted and tended to flowers and other plants within the Chuipu Hall courtyard. Many monks were arranging small gardens within their courtyards, while others planted flowers in their rooms.*

Despite the shift towards individual practices, the collective ethos within the monastery was not entirely forsaken. Individual commitment to collective goals allowed the community to continue their religious obligations undisturbed amid the isolation. This scenario exemplifies the symbiosis of individual and collective responsibilities, particularly in such challenging circumstances. The Monastery leadership, for instance, took on a shared responsibility for epidemic prevention and control, the procurement of necessary supplies such as food, and for raising donations for the vulnerable population. This sense of collective responsibility was also perceptible at an individual level, with figures like Master YR, the head of the Kitchen and Dining Hall, who had a crucial role in procuring food and maintaining appropriate standards of food hygiene. He depicted:

At the time of closure, the Monastery's supplies of the essential food stock were sufficient for a year, while after the first critical period passed, fresh food, such as fruits and vegetables, were delivered by the local government in regular intervals. The kitchen staff made sure that the food was stored and prepared with due vigilance to food safety.

In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic induced a transformation and renegotiation of the collective–individual dynamic within the Shaolin Monastery. A balance was adeptly struck, preserving the collective spirit and ethos of the community whilst integrating essential individual tasks and practices as protective measures. This transformation furnished the monks with an opportunity to maintain a sense of collective responsibility and community cohesion while concurrently emphasizing individual practices and self-cultivation.

Tradition–Innovation

The discipline of monastic religious practice, deeply rooted in the Vinaya traditions and contemporized by the Buddhist Association of China, orchestrates the daily life and operational dynamics of various departments within the Monastery. However, tradition of Shaolin Chan practice extends beyond the commonalities shared with all Chan Buddhist monasteries, embracing a unique cultural heritage nurtured through its 1,500 years of history (Shahar 2008; Lu 2019). The community's routine is characterized by a range of formalized and highly structured ritual practices. These include ceremonies, meditation, sutra chanting, recitation of classics, along with martial arts training. Moreover, the community delves into various fields of study such as the exploration of Buddhist classics, medicine and calligraphy. Ritualized activities such as tea ceremony, postprandial ambulation, and visits to nearby pilgrimage sites such as the Damo Cave, further expand the community's day-to-day routine.

The advent of the pandemic necessitated a fundamental shift, compelling the introduction of innovation into the established, time-honored practices of the

monastery. The monastery was thrust into a situation of unprecedented exigency, warranting innovations and adaptations that deviated from their accustomed lifestyle. Adherence to official regulations guided the adoption and rigorous enforcement of preventative measures, led by the monastic anti-epidemic task force, marking a significant departure from the monks' traditional daily regimen. Key to understanding this tradition–innovation relationship lies in recognizing that the introduced innovations aimed to preserve the core structure and essence of religious life. Navigating the delicate balance between ensuring community safety and adhering to official policies, all the while maintaining the integrity of ritual practices. The community members felt the essence of tradition must be maintained, even amidst the imperative for innovative adaptations.

Beyond the immediate adaptations, such as transitioning from collective to individual ritual practice, enforcing physical distancing, sanitizing communal spaces, and integrating immunity-boosting medicines into daily routines, the Monastery leadership innovatively upheld the traditional cultural heritage by fostering an in-depth exploration and cultivation of Shaolin culture. The leadership initiated examinations on Shaolin history and culture, organized daily classes for the community's youngest members, developed the Shaolin Kung Fu Level Training Program, and intensified their academic publications. The individual mentorship, which traditionally unfolded in the intimacy of the residential compound, often over tea conversations, intensified and assumed a more visible form during this period as it shifted to the outdoors, taking place in the monastery's courtyards. This adjustment not only allowed for physical distancing measures to be respected but also increased the visibility and significance of one-on-one instruction. The younger community members sought guidance from senior monks to learn specific Shaolin Kung Fu techniques, understand the protocols of ritual services, and elucidate the meanings of particular sutras or specific Chan Buddhist doctrines. All community members were encouraged to practice traditional health-care exercises such as *Baduanjin* (少林八段锦 *Shàolín Bā duàn jīn*) and *Yijinjing* (少林易筋经 *Yì Jīn Jīng*) on daily basis. These were some of the ways in which the Monastery leadership leveraged the seclusion brought about by the pandemic for the community's benefit. The adaptations and innovations aimed at sustaining monastic Chan practice, education and discipline throughout the quarantine period. Consequently, the monks were provided with the time and the support of the leadership to delve into the layers of Shaolin culture and, more importantly, engage more profoundly with Chan practices which they had previously been unable to do owing to their routine obligations.

The relationship between tradition and innovation serves as a compelling framework to explore the transformative dynamics at play within the religious life at the Shaolin Monastery amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. To gain a more

holistic understanding, it is imperative to consider how tensions within other dichotomies are reflected on the interplay within the tradition–innovation relationship. For example, going back to the religious–secular opposition, before the pandemic, the concept that ‘Chan is life’ was predominantly the purview of seasoned monks. However, the enforced isolation of the quarantine facilitated a diffusion of this nuanced perspective on ritual practice, reaching a wider segment of the monastic community. With external social interactions curtailed, an expanded number of monks adopted this philosophy, integrating it more deeply into their daily practices. As a result, even routine daily activities were reconceptualized as forms of Chan practice, thereby becoming integrated into the ritual life of the community.

In this study, dichotomies were delineated based on the contours of daily life within the Shaolin Monastery before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The evolving relationships within each of these dichotomies were subject to longitudinal analysis. Intriguingly, within the dynamics of ritual practice, we can discern a tendency striving towards the restoration of equanimity between these dichotomies. This tendency underlines the adaptability and resilience of ritual practice in confronting critical events, thus emphasizing the inherent dynamism within these practices. The ritual practice was adjusted, renegotiated, or reinterpreted so that the relationships within the dichotomies would find a new state of stability that corresponds to the realities and challenges of the pandemic. At its core, the evolution of ritual practice in face of the critical event such as the COVID-19 epidemic, is manifested in this continuous negotiation transpiring within each dichotomy, which aims to preserve the pillars of religious life. After having examined each one, I proceed to identify the ground and pillars of Shaolin monastic identity, which remain non-negotiable, steadfastly enduring though periods of change and innovation.

Static Nature of the Shaolin Ritual Practice

Using structural analysis and the deconstruction of dichotomies we availed ourselves of a methodological tool that illuminates the enduring, foundational structures of ritualistic activity. Importantly, these central structures retain their inherent significance for the community, even amid potential alterations in the concrete expressions of ritualistic practices. The enduring nature of these structures, which may manifest in a variety of forms as per Bourdieu’s habitus theory, underlines the adaptability of the ritual practice. The analysis of aforementioned dichotomies, and more importantly the reflection of the evolving relationships within the tradition–innovation dichotomy, has led me to identify two tiers of these elements – universal and specific. Both demonstrate resilience

in the face of critical events. The first tier, present across long-standing religious communities, represents the foundational aspects that lend ground to monastic life. This horizontal structure includes tradition, discipline, and doctrine. These foundational elements facilitate the continuity and stability of religious life, forming the bedrock upon which the identity pillars of the monastic community stand. The second tier I refer to as the *tripod of meaning*, or the *identity pillars* – self-cultivation, collective consciousness, and cultural heritage. This tier is infused with meanings cultivated within the historical context of the Shaolin monastic community, informing their distinctive ritual practice. These pillars, forming the vertical structure of religious life, embody the key principles and values that infuse meaning into religious life and shape the monks' interactions and practices. Serving simultaneously as pillars of meaning and identity, they guide the monks in their ongoing evolution of ritual practice within the Shaolin community.

By maintaining Chan self-cultivation practices, fostering a strong sense of collectivity, and preserving the wider traditional cultural heritage which encompasses diverse entries into Chan practice, the Shaolin monastic community indeed ensured the continuity of their religious life. These elements form the crux of their communal identity, provide a sense of shared purpose, and guide the community's interactions and practices. They not only fortify the community against challenges or disruptions but also uphold the enduring core of their religious tradition. Whether ritual practice will transcend the disruptions depends on the resilience of the community to negotiate the tensions within the dichotomies so as to keep the pillars standing.

As the first pillar, *self-cultivation* is central to Shaolin monastic life, consisting in the process of internalization of axiological structures of Chan Buddhist teachings through consistent personal efforts. This process encompasses cultivating virtues such as wisdom (智慧 Zhìhuì), compassion (慈悲 Cíbēi), correct mindfulness 正念 (Zhèngniàn), equanimity (平等心 Píngděng xīn), moral conduct (道德行为 Dàodé xíngwéi), and patience (acceptance and endurance, 忍耐 Rěnnài), among others (McRae 2000). These virtues, deeply embedded within the Shaolin tradition of monastic life, emerge as manifestations of objective structures of the monks' habitus. In this case of collective religious life disruption, individual faith expression becomes crucial for reaffirming the stability of the religious community. Thus, the shift from collective ritual to individual ritual reveals the presence or non-presence of individual attachment to different aspects of ritual practice. Emphasizing the importance of individual contribution to maintenance of collective identity reinforces the sense of belonging.

The second pillar pertains to the communal life of the monastery. Despite the restrictions on collective gatherings, the community's vitality was preserved and manifested in different forms during the quarantine. The shared experience of

the quarantine as a critical event supported the feeling of communality and belonging among the community members. This communal feeling was reinforced by the idea that health of community members is interdependent. In terms of behavior, it was manifested evidently by avoidance of physical contact, care of food safety, and the cautious daily life management, with the whole community involved in hygiene choirs. The strength of the social bonds between community members, despite physical distancing suggests a phenomenon where individuals are united in a shared experience and societal structures – “spontaneous *communitas*” (Turner 1969, 132). The practical vitality of the collective was sustained through the organization of daily life, shared responsibility for maintaining hygiene, collective charity work, and the mutual dependency of each member’s health on the health of others. Walks outside, tea ceremonies, and shared practices of health exercises, martial arts, Chan archery, and gardening further contributed to the interconnectedness of the community.

The preservation of traditional heritage was upheld as the third pillar of religious life. Despite the challenges presented by the pandemic, the Shaolin leadership found innovative ways to encourage the study and understanding of Shaolin culture. This initiative included organizing tests to verify community members’ knowledge, maintaining meditation practices for Chan masters in the secluded Chan Hall, as well as regular martial arts trainings for the warrior monk group. A group of monks from the Shaolin Pharmacy practiced prostrations⁷ daily during the entire quarantine period and chose a week to devote to the traditional practice of fasting (辟谷 *Bìgǔ*)⁸. They also leveraged traditional Chan medicine to prepare immunity-boosting remedies. The Abbot and his assistants devoted efforts to prepare publications on Shaolin culture and history, as well as the standardized Shaolin kung fu program for formal educational institutions called Shaolin Kung fu Level Training (少林功夫段位培训 *Shàolín gōngfū duàn wèi péixùn*). The Shaolin community managed to stay active through what its leadership characterizes as “strong support from the national, provincial and municipal governments to the Shaolin Kungfu Intangible Heritage”. At this time, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China officially proclaimed the Institute for the Study and Promotion of Shaolin Kungfu Intangible Heritage (少林功夫非遗传习所 *Shàolín gōngfū fēi yíchuán xí suǒ*) an integral part of the Shaolin Monastery. This recognition was perceived by the monastic community

⁷ The practice is usually referred to as “three kneelings and nine prostrations” 三跪九叩 *Sān guì jiǔ kòu*, even though the mentioned monks from the Medical Department have done hundreds of prostrations per day during the quarantine in the Shaolin Monastery.

⁸ The term “辟谷” (*Bìgǔ*), typically signifies the abstention from grains. However, in the context of the aforementioned group of monks, their one-week fasting practice entailed solely consuming water.

as a significant affirmation of the unique heritage and ongoing development of Shaolin Kungfu, ensuring its standardization in accordance with government policies and regulations. Such a crucial milestone laid the foundation for the post-quarantine implementation of Shaolin Kungfu learning programs in educational institutions. Furthermore, in collaboration with the Dengfeng Shaolin Friendship School⁹, the Institute jointly established the Shaolin Learning Research Course (少林问学研学课程 Shàolín wèn xué yán xué kè chéng), which, following a thorough review by the Henan Provincial Department of Education, garnered official endorsement as a recommended curriculum for primary and secondary schools in Henan.

In essence, these three foundational categories – self-cultivation, collective consciousness or communal life, and preservation of traditional heritage – remained steadfast amidst the fluctuating circumstances induced by the pandemic. I remark that these identity pillars are anchored in the core structures of most religious communities, which are: tradition, discipline and doctrine.

Dynamic Nature of the Shaolin Ritual Practice

The dynamism of Shaolin community life during the COVID-19 was clearly reflected in the adaptation of their rituals in response to the pandemic. Initially, there was a significant shift from collective to individual Chan practices. Morning and evening chanting sessions were solely performed by the monks tasked with conducting the rituals, and communal dining was replaced with meals in individual quarters. Once the initial waves of the pandemic subsided, leaving the monastery free from infections, religious life adapted to incorporate modified communal rituals. These new routines involved a reduced number of participants, meticulous maintenance of physical distancing, and incorporation of health protocols such as thorough disinfection of the shared spaces.

As the months passed, a clear evolution in the monks' activities became apparent. Certain monks, particularly those fond of calligraphy or musical instruments, found solace in practicing their art in the intimate courtyards adjoining their living quarters. In the quietude of their residential courtyards, a number of monks immersed themselves in the tranquil rhythm of gardening, tending to flowers. An unexpected highlight of this period was the rapid rise in popularity of Chan archery. It was perceived as a discipline that offers an avenue for enhancing mental acuity while promoting the overall well-being. With spontaneous enthusiasm, monks converted one of the lower courtyards into an archery

⁹ Dengfeng Shaolin Friendship School is a martial arts school providing primary and secondary education and is founded on the initiative of the Abbot of Shaolin Temple, Shi Yongxin.

practice area, collectively gathering the necessary equipment. Soon, the courtyard was equipped with a target board, a few beginner-level bows, and arrows with rubber tips designed to stick to the board. Meanwhile, the more experienced practitioners utilized powerful bows and authentic arrows, which they stored in their quarters and brought with them for each practice session. While some practiced intermittently, others established a dedicated routine, practicing both in the mornings and afternoons.

Ceremonial celebrations also underwent necessary modifications, with reduced number of participants. For example, the chanting which was performed before serving breakfast and lunch in the Dining Hall in pre-epidemic times was now performed by a designated monk. Even though traditional communal food serving was cancelled, monks would sometimes gather in small groups in the courtyards and dine together. Martial arts classes were strictly relocated outdoors and the training hall was put in use only for small-group practice as the quarantine was coming to its end. Monks were sometimes seen congregating in small groups within the expansive monastery courtyards, while the advent of spring permitted leisurely walks and intimate conversations outdoors in these same areas.

Deconstruction of dichotomies has illuminated one dimension of how the Shaolin community embraced the liminality of rituals, succeeding in maintaining the same religious significance within their transformed ritual practices. This was achieved through careful adaptation of rituals, safeguarding their inherent essence and significance. To further the inquiry, we must consider another crucial aspect: the power of individual agency and interpretive capacity in maintaining core significance within altered rituals. Symbolic interactionism, a conceptual framework initially conceived by George Herbert Mead (1934) and subsequently expanded by Herbert Blumer (1969), provides an invaluable lens through which to scrutinize this dynamic. This framework emphasizes how, through daily interactions and experiences, monks individually imbue transformed practices with enduring religious meaning. As such, the dynamism of Shaolin monastic life emerges not merely as a communal response, but a collective outcome of individual adaptations and resilience. Therefore, I argue that the monastic community's perception of ritual continuity amidst disruption plays an integral role in preserving these foundational meanings. To substantiate this claim, I draw upon Ingold's phenomenological approach (2000, 2011). This approach underscores the centrality of shared lived experiences in meaning-making and thus highlights how the lived experiences and perceptual orientations of individuals bolster the resilience of ritual practice. In essence, the reciprocal relationship between the individual and their surrounding world, both physical and social, contributes to the endurance and adaptability of ritualistic practice, reinforcing the foundational pillars of meaning within the Shaolin

monastic community. Despite transformations in the form of ritual practice, the objective structures internalized through the communal experience of performing rituals can persistently generate an authentic sense of religious meaning for the practitioners. Drawing upon Bourdieu's concept of habitus – a set of dispositions that engender practices, perceptions, and guide behaviors – I posit that the monastic habitus reproduces internalized religious structures and creates conditions conducive to authentic religious experiences amidst disruptions. The Shaolin monastic habitus is strongly rooted in self-cultivation, fostering a collective consciousness, and preserving traditional cultural heritage. This habitus, a bedrock for action and perception, remains steadfast even during drastic shifts in sociocultural circumstances, perpetually guiding actions and interpretations in harmony with these enduring, embodied structures of meaning. Through the embedding of religious meaning into practices extending beyond what is traditionally considered Chan practice, the community managed to sustain the experience of authentic meaning of religious life and reproduce its pillars of meaning. This is a tangible demonstration of how habitus reproduces objective structures foundational to the sociocultural environment from where it emerged. This case study illuminates the pivotal role of habitus in safeguarding the fundamental aspects of religious life during times of crises, facilitated by the inherent flexibility of ritual practices. Hence, we deduce that the dynamic nature of ritual practice, particularly its liminal phase which allows for adaptation and innovation, is crucial for its resilience. This liminal phase, characterized by transition and transformation, forms the cornerstone of ritual practices' ability to adjust, innovate, and endure disruption. It facilitates both the negotiation of the form of practice while maintaining its core structures of meaning and the insertion of authentic structures of meaning into novel forms of practice. It is through this liminality that we gain insights into the balance between continuity and change, essential to the resilience of the Shaolin community's religious life.

Conclusion

This study illuminates the resilience of religious life amid profound disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, through an examination of ritual practice. It integrates anthropological and sociological theories with ethnographic insights to explore the Shaolin Monastery's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the dynamics within key dichotomies that define its religious life. By analyzing how the monastery navigates the interplay between religious–secular, isolation–social engagement, discipline–freedom, tradition–innovation, and individual–collective aspects, the research reveals the adaptive strategies that underpin the resilience of its ritual practices. This approach sheds light on

the dynamic balance between preserving traditional elements and embracing necessary innovations, ensuring the continuity of the monastery's religious identity amidst crises. The religious–secular dichotomy is addressed through the monks' view that all aspects of life, including martial arts and daily routines, are integral to Chan practice, blurring the lines between spiritual and mundane activities. The isolation–social engagement dichotomy is managed by leveraging digital communication to maintain community connections and by redefining isolation as an opportunity for deeper spiritual practice. Discipline–freedom is balanced by adhering to monastic rules while allowing personal space for individual spiritual pursuits, underscoring the monks' self-discipline as key to their religious practice. Tradition–innovation is navigated by adapting traditional rituals to meet health guidelines while preserving their essence, demonstrating flexibility within the framework of tradition. Lastly, the individual–collective dichotomy is resolved by fostering a sense of communal life that accommodates individual self-cultivation, highlighting the monastery's collective ethos alongside personal spiritual growth.

This study reveals that the survival and endurance of ritual practice is anchored in a delicate balance between the safeguarding of core structures – referred to as the “ground and pillars of meaning” – and their transformation in the face of evolving contexts. This balance mirrors the static and dynamic facets inherent to the nature of ritual practice, thereby contributing to their tenacity through times of disruption. The “ground and pillars of meaning” of Chan practice emerge as static constituents of the ritual practice, imparting stability and continuity to the religious life of Shaolin monks. These foundational aspects represent the core structure of the monastic community. Their stability is indispensable for the sustained performance of ritual practice in face of critical events. This preservation process accentuates their crucial role in perpetuating the community's identity and cohesion. Concurrently, the dynamic transformation of ritual practice, a key aspect of its resilience, is brought to the fore amidst unprecedented circumstances. The ritual practice of the Shaolin monks during the quarantine evolved into a more inclusive form without relinquishing its foundational tenets. While enforcing a deviation from traditional collective practices, the isolation created an arena for innovation and reinterpretation within the monastery confines. The monks' deft adaptation of their Chan practice to accord with new safety guidelines, reinforced the adaptability inherent to these ritualized activities.

Therefore, this dual nature of ritual practice – constant yet adaptable – facilitates its resilience, empowering religious communities to weather significant upheavals without compromising or eroding their identity or cohesion. The process of transformation is critically mediated by the ability of habitus to reconstitute embodied objective structures of meaning that originally formed it. This

capacity ensures the authenticity of the monks' experience of their transformed religious existence and ritual practice, underscoring the significance of cultivating collective habitus for reinforcing the resilience of religious life. In turn, this resilience reflects the foundational and consistent role of the monastic community's habitus in its sociocultural fabric. The resilience of religious practice, facilitated by the transformation of ritual forms, emphasizes the criticality of this dynamic component in preserving the ritual's core structure.

In essence, the resilience of religious life amid major upheavals hinges on a delicate interplay between the steadfast preservation of core structures and the adroit transformations of ritual practices to align with changing contexts and evolving circumstances. This study thus illustrates that the static and dynamic facets of ritual practice are not only integral to the persistence but also vital to the survival of religious life in monastic communities amidst disruptions.

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*Управљање ритуалном отпорношћу:
Међусобна игра промена и континуитета
у манастиру Шаолин током пандемије КОВИД-19*

Глобална криза изазвана пандемијом Ковида-19 довела је до значајних поремећаја у религијском животу и ритуалним праксама унутар већине религијских заједница широм света. Овај чланак истражује отпорност и прилагодљивост ритуалних пракси унутар Манастира Шаолин у Кини током петомесечног карантина, који је трајао од 23. јануара до 22. јуна 2020. године. Користећи етнографске методе и ослањајући се на антрополошку теорију, студија испитује интеракцију између ритуала као статичке друштвене чињенице и као динамичног, прилагодљивост процеса у контексту монашког живота у Шаолину. Рад наглашава сложену интеракцију између статичких и динамичких елемената у обредној пракси, у циљу објашњавања реакције заједнице Шаолина на пандемију.

Истраживање идентификује дихотомије одговорне за тензије које леже у основи сложене динамике инхерентне религијском животу заједнице Шаолина, а то су: религијско–секуларно, изолација–друштвени ангажман, дисциплина–слобода, традиција–иновација, и појединац–колектив. Праћење промена и конзистентности унутар ових дихотомија омогућило је расветљавање трансформацијских процеса који су покренути услед кризе, и идентификовање елемената религијског живота који су доживели промене, као и оних којој су остали константни. Ово истраживање нуди јединствен увид у механизме којима је отпорност остварена, и то уз помоћ стратегија које су омогућиле заједници да одржи, прилагоди и унесе новине у своје ритуалне праксе усред невоља које је криза изазвала.

Кључне речи: отпорност ритуала, промена и континуитет, статички и динамички елементи ритуала, пандемија Ковида-19, Манастир Шаолин, Кина

*Exploration de la résilience rituelle:
Changement et de continuité au Monastère Shaolin
pendant la pandémie de COVID-19*

Le bouleversement mondial provoqué par la pandémie de COVID-19 a introduit d'importantes perturbations dans la vie religieuse et les observances rituelles au sein de la plupart des communautés religieuses à travers le monde. Cet article explore la résilience et l'adaptabilité des pratiques rituelles au sein du monastère Shaolin de Chine pendant la quarantaine de cinq mois du COVID-19, s'étendant du 23 janvier au 22 juin 2020. En utilisant des méthodes ethnographiques et fondé sur la théorie anthropologique, l'étude examine l'interaction entre le rituel comme un fait social statique et comme un processus dynamique et adaptable, dans le contexte de la vie monastique Shaolin. Elle souligne l'interaction complexe entre les éléments statiques et dynamiques dans la pratique rituelle, éclairant la réponse de la communauté Shaolin à la pandémie

L'étude discerne les dichotomies responsables pour des tensions sous-jacentes à la dynamique complexe intrinsèque à la vie religieuse de la communauté Shaolin, à savoir: religieux–séculier, isolement–engagement social, discipline–liberté, tradition–innovation, et individuel–collectif. Le suivi des évolutions et des consistances au sein de ces relations duelles a permis d'éclairer les processus de transformation qui ont été mis en mouvement et d'identifier les éléments de la vie religieuse qui ont subi des changements et ceux qui sont restés constants. Cette exploration offre un aperçu unique des mécanismes par lesquels la résilience a été mise en œuvre avec les stratégies qui ont permis à la communauté de maintenir, d'ajuster et d'innover ses pratiques rituelles au milieu des tribulations présentées par la crise.

Mots-clés: résilience rituelle, changement et continuité, éléments rituels statiques et dynamiques, pandémie de COVID-19, Monastère Shaolin, Chine

Primljeno / Received: 13.09.2023.

Prihvaćeno / Accepted for publication: 18.02.2024.