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Blood writing as extraordinary artifact and agent for socioreligious change

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This paper explores blood written texts, particularly Buddhist scriptures, as unique artifacts of sanctity. It also examines the extraordinary uses of blood in premodern times and how people have negotiated socioreligious relationships in their production of blood writings, which were seen as a product of meticulous, controlled ritual practice, an act of asceticism par excellence. We typically think of written text as a means to an end, an expression of ideas and knowledge that privilege the written word as the carrier of message, something to be read and understood. However, Buddhist “blood writing” challenges these received notions of how meaning is communicated; blood writings are far more than carriers of a message. When we view these documents, when we experience their material presence and, at the same time, understand their extraordinary mode of production, we have a unique opportunity to appreciate the socioreligious significance of such texts in the premodern world of East Asia.

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Introduction

In an age when audio-visual information is produced and consumed on a mass basis, the hand-copied manuscript is a thing of the distant past. While various materials have been used in the production of manuscripts, the unique artifact of “blood writing”, an East Asian practice of both Buddhist and secular circles, stands out as truly extraordinary.

Nowhere else in the world, except in East Asia, can we find manuscripts written in blood. The extraordinary visual impact of blood writings, their almost living, physical presence, offers us a vastly different experience of textual material than does other writing. We typically think of written text as a means to an end, an expression of ideas and knowledge that privilege the written word as the carrier of message, something to be read and understood. However, Buddhist blood writing challenges these received notions of how meaning is communicated; blood writings are far more than carriers of a message. This paper explores, from a historical and anthropological perspective, blood written texts, particularly Buddhist scriptures, as artifacts of sanctity. It also examines the extraordinary uses of blood in premodern times and how people have negotiated socioreligious relationships in their production of blood writings. They were seen as a product of meticulous, controlled ritual practice, an act of asceticism par excellence. Much of the hagiographical literature in premodern history attests to such a perception (Yu, 2012, pp. 37–61).

In the summer of 2007, while researching blood writing in China and Japan, I not only viewed several hundred copies of Buddhist scriptures in private monastic libraries, public research libraries, and national museums, but also interviewed practitioners/performers who engaged in blood writing¹. When we experience the material presence of blood writing and, at the same time, understand their extraordinary mode of production, we have a unique opportunity to appreciate the socioreligious significance of such texts in the premodern world of East Asia. Before I discuss my findings, a discussion of the historical significance and symbolic valence of blood and blood writing is important.

The blood in blood writing

In East Asian Buddhism, a blood writing is a text produced from the blood drained from the performer's own body². The blood is collected as ink and the person uses a calligraphy brush to hand-copy Buddhist scriptures or sometimes to illustrate an image of a Buddha or bodhisattva. Most texts are very long, consisting of thousands, sometimes hundreds of thousands, of Chinese characters. Thus, the draining of blood and the copying of the scripture is a prolonged ritual practice that is associated with intense self-sacrifice. The blood-written words were thought to sanctify and animate the words of the scripture that simple ink is unable to do. In this sense, blood scriptures were not meant to be “read” or studied as a container of knowledge. The medium of blood itself is the message of sanctity that lies in Buddhist teachings.

The extraordinariness of blood writings lies in the use of blood, with all its social and religious associations, as the medium. In ancient China, blood was considered a vital fluid that had the power to give life. Red, in the correlative taxonomy of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽, symbolizes the *yang* aspect, the light, the male, and the celestial—blood was considered to be ultra-*yang*. It represented the source of life. The *yin* came to be associated with the dark, the female, and the demonic (Kohn, 2008, pp. 81–95) and, in ritual contexts, blood was associated with the exorcistic and apotropaic powers that could keep the negative *yin* forces at bay (Riley, 1997, pp. 181–186).

As with all ancient civilizations, many ancient Chinese rituals involved blood to ensure ritual efficacy. For example, spilling human blood as a form of sacrifice to heaven (*jitian* 祭天), an action considered to be *yang*, played a significant role in the Han dynasty (Loewe, 1982, pp. 21, 128, 130, 133). Initiations and faith-sealing covenant rituals often required the shedding of one's blood to substantiate one's commitment³. Sometimes a ritual instrument was smeared with human blood in order to sanctify or imbue it with magic powers (Harper, 1998, p. 63; Tong, 2004, pp. 123, 174, fn. 43, 44, 45). These association continued into the medieval period (Pregadio, 2005, pp. 70–71), during which time even though vermilion ink, cinnabar (*zhusha* 朱砂), and animal blood were used to substitute for human blood—for example, in the Daoist and Buddhist production of talismans (*fu* 符) for propitiatory rites (Strickmann, 2002, pp. 151–152; Tong, 2004, p. 123)—the underlying logic of using blood remained the same. This practice of drawing blood by spirit mediums and the use of vermilion ink to replace blood in exorcistic rituals still continues today (Dean, 1993, pp. 181–182; Shahar, 2013, p. 193)⁴.

These contemporary examples of Daoist talisman in Fig. 1 were written with vermilion ink, mixed with cinnabar, which is considered to have supernatural properties. Words written with vermilion ink made from cinnabar were considered particularly efficacious in exorcistic rituals and demonological therapy. Medieval Daoists, for example, believed that certain precious metals contained the materialized principle of immortality. In its pure form—due to its insolubility—cinnabar as the sole mercury compound was one of such ingredients used (Waley, 1930, pp. 1–34; Schipper, 1978, pp. 355–386; O'Connor, 1985, pp. 53–80). Thus, talismans written with cinnabar powder mixed into vermilion ink were often used to summon various divinities

Fig. 1 Talismans produced by a Daoist in Le'an county 樂安縣 in north-central Hunan, 2010. Photo by David Mozina with permission to publish.

to pacify demons or calamities or pestilence. These particular talismans above, according to David Mozina, a Daoist specialist, were produced for apotropaic purposes in order to protect a woman in the sixth month of pregnancy along with her household. The talisman on the left has the woman's name Li Tingting 李婷婷 written on it. After the ritual in which the talismans were produced, the one designated for her was burned and the ashes mixed with tea, which she then consumed. The other talismans were pasted above doors and windows around the house⁵. The red color of the vermilion ink suggests self-sacrifice as a means of averting any *yin* forces that may harm her.

Premodern East Asian notions of a “sympathetically responsive” (*ganying* 感應) cosmos persist to this day (Feng, 1983, p. 30; Lau, 1994, p. 13.2; Sharf, 2002, pp. 77–133; Robbins, 1998, pp. 289–290; Lévy-Bruhl, 1966)⁶. According to this view, everything operates in resonance with numerous planes of existence. Engaging in a certain act on one plane of existence will have an effect on another plane of existence. This kind of correlative thinking dominated Chinese medical literature in premodern times and is still part of the common mindset. By ingesting the burnt ashes of the talisman, then, one literally embodies its magical power. The potency of the talisman cements the person's alliance with the summoned divinity.

Daoists used vermilion ink or blood to write on talismans for patients to ingest so as to destroy the demons in the body (Unschuld, 1985, pp. 40–43). Talismans written with vermilion ink also mimicked imperial decrees, much like the command given by a high “official” in premodern dynastic times. The officials, in this case, are the Daoist priests who are able to summon divine beings within the celestial hierarchy to banish the lower evil spirits responsible for illness in humans.

From this perspective, the blood scripture can be understood essentially as a longer version of the talisman, with the same exorcistic and propitiatory powers to destroy demons and avert potential illnesses, all of which would perpetuate the survival of the scripture or ensure its “immortality”. As I propose below, this mode of thinking may explain why Buddhist clerics considered that blood writing could ensure the survival of the Buddha's teaching in the world.

Bloodletting is usually associated with warfare, wounding, sacrifice, and depletion and, if it continues unabated, will lead to death (Bagley, 1990, p. 61; Cheng, 1960, pp. 73–74). It breaches the natural boundaries of the body and thus can be seen as a form of social and ritual danger. Mary Douglas, for example, argued that when boundaries are transgressed in the case of an individual, it is also considered a transgression of boundaries deemed important to society (Douglas, 1966, pp. 94–128). Symbolically, the potency of blood writing rests in its power to cross these natural boundaries in a manner that defies the danger inherent in the process. The blood does not originate randomly or accidentally, as it does from acts of warfare or accidental wounds. It is drawn purposefully and from a specific source, usually the fingertips, the sublingual part of the tongue, or even a place near the heart signifying, respectively, the import of the written word, the spoken word and the sincerity of one's self-sacrifice.

The sanctity of buddhist blood writing

The textual evidence of several Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures has directly inspired Buddhist practitioners to advocate this practice. The forty-fascicle version of the *Flower Ornament Scripture* (i.e., the *Avataṃsaka sūtra*), which advocates the importance of embodying the Buddhist scripture, states the following:

Since the inception of his career as a bodhisattva, Vairocana Buddha has been extremely diligent in practice and has offered his own bodies [lifetime after lifetime] in

inconceivable ways. He peeled off his skin and used it as paper, broke off his bone and used it as a pen, and pricked himself to draw blood as ink; the scriptures he copied in this manner accumulated as high as Mount Sumeru. He did so out of great reverence for the Dharma⁷.

To copy enough blood scriptures to stack up as high as Mount Sumeru (Mochizuki, 1954–1963, for Sumeru, 2513a, 4437b; for *yojanas* or *youxun* 由旬, 737b, 4926a)⁸ is to offer millions and millions of lifetimes of bodies and blood. Passages such as this have inspired Buddhist ascetics to emulate great bodhisattvas who literally embody the scriptures—where scriptures are produced by body parts. The message is that to sacrifice oneself for the dharma is to venerate the dharma; copying the scriptures with one's blood literally embodies the holy teachings. While ordinary people hold dear their own bodies, Vairocana sacrificed his for the continuance of the dharma, implying that those who aspire to be true bodhisattvas should emulate him. The *Flower Ornament Scripture* was also one of the favorite scriptures chosen to be copied in blood by Buddhists, clerical or lay, in the history of Chinese Buddhism, particularly in late imperial times. It is not the only scripture that promotes this level of self-sacrifice⁹. The *Sūtra of Brahma's Net*, for example, enjoins all those who seek to receive the bodhisattva precepts to perform the same level of self-sacrifice¹⁰.

By eliciting all of these complex ritual, cultural, and textual associations, blood writing becomes intelligible, meaningful, and socially recognizable as an extraordinary act of sanctity for both the performers and their audience. The blood written scripture is thus charged with the potency of self-sacrifice, power, sanctity and, as such, has been the epitome of a Chinese Buddhist ascetic act. For these reasons, blood written artifacts have always been revered and worshiped, not read or studied like other texts. In the form of scriptures, the medium of blood trumps any doctrinal message of Buddhist scriptures, just as its form outweighs its contents.

Artifacts of blood writing and its production

The extraordinariness of blood writing as an artifact clearly comes from the method of its production. Blood scriptures appear in a variety of forms. Some characters are upright and square, while others are more cursive. Some appear to be mixed with vermilion ink, gold powder, or cinnabar; others appear to be unadulterated blood. Below I would like to discuss my findings from my research field work from the summer of 2007.

The *Diamond Sūtra* is one of the most frequently copied sutras using blood as the medium. In Fig. 2, we can see the quality of the characters and the pristine condition of the document. The characters are written in regular script (*kaishu* 楷書) and appear to have been produced by a practiced hand. Each character, measuring ~3/4 inches. The lightly folded square grid on the paper appears to have served as a guide for writing the characters and it is likely that the performer wrote on separate sheets before binding the paper into the present accordion style. The fact that sheets may have been measured and folded suggests that this blood writing was a well-planned project by a skilled performer. It differs, therefore, from other blood scriptures whose characters were written by people less proficient in the art of calligraphy.

The color of the characters in Figs. 2 and 3 indicates that the blood used for copying this scripture was not mixed with other elements, as was commonly the case. Unfortunately, none of the temple libraries I visited in China and Japan permitted me to do a spectroscopy on the characters to detect the physical and chemical properties of the blood scriptures. Thus, my assessment is based on a visual analysis of several hundred copies of the blood scriptures from different collections. Those scriptures in which blood alone was used tend to dry into a light brown hue

over time, whereas those mixed with other elements assume an artificially rusty red color when viewed today.

In Fig. 4, the fragment of the *Scripture of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva* found in Dunhuang cave 17 has apparently been copied with blood and cinnabar¹¹. We see that the strokes were done much faster and less carefully than the *Diamond Sūtra* blood scripture shown in Figs. 2 and 3. The color of the characters

here has faded to a rusty maroon, instead of a light brown hue, indicating that cinnabar powder has been added. My sources at Yongquan Monastery also confirm the common practice of mixing blood with cinnabar. As such, the colors of faded characters usually can reveal whether or not the blood was mixed with cinnabar to make the blood scripture.

Cinnabar as a mineral consists of red mercury (II) sulfide (HgS), an ore, and is vermilion in color. According to the principles of traditional Chinese medicine, cinnabar is associated with the heart meridian. The main function of cinnabar used in its powered form is to cure poison with poison, since cinnabar is highly toxic (Chen and Chen, 2004, 755–756). Interestingly, because of its toxicity, Buddhist clerics may have used it to mix with blood to prevent insects from eating away at the paper, thus ensuring the preservation of the blood scripture¹². For example, in the manuscript illustrated in Fig. 5 there is extensive damage to the upper area which is devoid of blood characters. A close examination of this document and typical meandering pattern of missing “trails” of paper suggests that the damage was most likely done by insects such as the silverfish (*Lepisma saccharin*). On the other hand, that part of the document containing the blood characters is relatively untouched by insect damage. From this observation, and from the color of the characters, I have concluded that cinnabar was probably added to the blood used for the production of this fascicle of the scripture.

Instructions for blood writing are given in the oral tradition and there is a clear set of protocols for the performer regarding the ritual production of the blood scripture. The body of the writer must be cleansed before engaging in the work because it is a sacred text. The upper body of the performer must be upright, similar to the posture in seated meditation. This posture helps the performer to be concentrated and relaxed so as not to make any mistakes. It also ensures that the energy of the body will flow smoothly so that the performer is able to follow the rhythm of each stroke. Sometimes other forms of preparatory religious practice are used, such as ritual ablution, prostration, the chanting of the scripture to be copied and contemplative practice¹³. One of my monastic informants assured me that often a performer will practice copying the chosen scripture several times in regular ink

Fig. 2 Two-page spread of the *Diamond Sūtra* by a Qing Dynasty monk. The spread measures 8 × 14 inches. Currently, it is housed in the monastic library of Yongquan Monastery on Mount Gu in Fujian province. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 3 Last page of *Foming jing* 佛名經 or *Scripture of the Names of the Buddhas*, a confessional ritual text. This blood scripture is dated to 1638 CE and the spread measures 8 × 26 inches. Currently, it is housed in the monastic library of Yongquan Monastery on Mount Gu in Fujian province. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 4 Fragment of the *Guanyin jing* 觀音經 (scripture of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva), which is chapter 25 “The universal Gateway of the Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World’s Sounds” of the *Lotus Sūtra* that circulated as an independent scripture. This text was done by a certain Chan master who resided near Mt. Sanwei 三峴 in the southeast part of Dunhuang caves in Gansu Province in 902. In the postscript he is referred to as Chan Master Sanwei 三峴禪師. The size of the whole fragment measures 4.74 x 10.2 inches. Currently, it is housed in Beijing National Library. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 5 A four-page spread of the *Da bore poluomi jing* 大般若波羅蜜經 (skt. *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra*) in 600 fascicles in 700 accordion bound books written by three generations of monks in the Japanese Sōtō School. This spread measures 10 x 17 inches. The project started with Gekkan Gikō 月潤義光 (1653–1697) and was finished in 1737 by Kigai Reijō 規外靈長. Currently, it is housed in Fuzai-in in Noto Peninsula, Japan. Photograph by the author.

in order to condition the body to the action of the strokes before actually making the final copy in blood.

My informants also tell me that the performer of blood writing must abstain from eating salt several months before they start the project and they must maintain this diet to ensure that their blood will be thinner and less likely to congeal. If a monk does not refrain from eating salt, then at the least his diet must be light. A vegetarian diet for Chinese lay Buddhists who wish to engage in blood writing is also considered mandatory¹⁴. Buddhist performers generally prick their own fingertips or incise the vessels under the tongue in order to draw the blood which is then collected in a bowl during the course of their writing. They generally have to cut their bodies every few days in order to finish a long scripture. Otherwise, the blood congeals. Since many Buddhist scriptures are long, involving thousands of Chinese characters, it could take several years to copy a single Buddhist scripture. There

are also external conditions that prevent performers from drawing blood, such as during the cold winter months when blood congeals quickly.

In the early 1990s, I was acquainted with an elderly Jiangsu Buddhist monk named Dafang Shouye 大方壽冶 (1910–2001). Shouye had copied the entire eighty-volume *Flower Ornament Scripture* in over six-hundred thousand characters with the blood from his ten fingers and tongue during a solitary retreat on Mt. Wutai (Bo, 1992, pp. 24–27)¹⁵. He began writing in 1936 and completed it in 1940. He did not mix his blood with cinnabar. Blood was methodically drawn by using a small pair of scissors to cut open the tips of his fingers and a razor blade to slice open the underside of his tongue. He took blood from the tips of his ten fingers and his tongue, one finger per day, so that his fingers (or tongue) could “rest” while the other was pricked. The blood was then drained out into a small bowl. The locations he used for

drawing blood follow common practice. According to the Buddhist scriptures, blood from fingers symbolized the written aspect of the scripture. Blood from pricking the tongue symbolized the spoken aspect¹⁶.

Shouye also used a shaved piece of sandalwood to grind the blood in order to get rid of the thin strings of fiber that usually drained out of his fingers or tongue. He was able to use the same blood over several days. Each day he would write ~1000 words. In the summer he had to place the bowl of blood in a larger bowl filled with cold water, so that the blood would not go bad. In the winter, because of the harsh cold weather at Mt. Wutai, his blood would congeal as soon as it left his body, so he had to discontinue the writing during the months of October through February. His diet supposedly consisted mainly of rice gruel, pickles, and unsalted vegetables.

Producing a blood scripture requires time and sometimes even involves risking one's life. The rapidity with which blood congeals can be problematic and writers can typically produce no more than several pages per day dependent upon the size of the characters. For example, in Shouye's case, each of his characters was approximately an inch and a half square and it took him 4 years to complete the manuscript. In the winter of 1939, he actually "ran out of blood", perhaps because of the cold. Despite his efforts to squeeze the blood from the tips of his fingers, very little blood came out and, soon after, a local physician diagnosed him with a severe case of anemia. In fact, he was told that he was on the brink of death and no medicine would heal him. He prayed to Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva and, the following spring, had a vision of the Bodhisattva and miraculously regained his health. Subsequently he was able to finish copying the blood scripture.

Shouye's blood scripture was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and was never recovered, but he is famous throughout contemporary mainland China as one of the last ascetics who copied the whole *Flower Ornament Scripture* in his own blood. His production earned him the position of abbotship to several of the monasteries on Mt. Wutai and his name is inscribed on one of the mountain's temple stele.

The miraculous agency and efficacy of blood writing

In premodern East Asia, the self-sacrificial act of producing blood written texts was believed to amass so much religious merit that it was able to generate miracles and change social relations.

Not only were blood scriptures a visceral and concrete testament to the altruism of self-sacrificing bodhisattvas (just like Vairocana) portrayed in Mahāyāna scriptures—they were essential the building blocks of material sanctity—their materiality also enabled an agency that accomplished a whole range of goals. In the following three cases, we see the potential of "blood scriptures" (*xiejing* 血經) to shape the lives of those who engaged in making them when they were written in the potent and ideologically charged element of blood.

Buddhist hagiographic literature bear witness to the numerous clerics and lay people who produced blood scriptures. Consider the case of Wu Junping 吳君平 (fl. Wanli era), a scholar-official who resided in Tongxiang 桐鄉 County in Zhejiang province. He was orphaned in his youth. Every time he thought about his parents, he was moved to tears. One day a monk told him that he could copy a Buddhist scripture in his own blood to repay his gratitude to his deceased parents. Upon hearing this, Wu took up a light vegetarian diet for 49 days and, at the end of the fast, sliced his own chest—at the point closest to his heart—eleven times to draw enough blood to copy the *Diamond Sūtra* (*Jingang jing* 金剛經). On the night he finished copying the scripture, he dreamed that his father and mother were standing on celestial clouds announcing that, because of his act of piety, they had been reborn

in the Pure Land of Amitābha Buddha¹⁷. This story is included in a Buddhist collection of miracle tales associated with the *Diamond Sūtra*¹⁸.

Wu Junping's blood scripture was concrete, visible, and public. Upon its completion, monastics and lay people who lived in the vicinity flocked to see his blood scripture and verify his scars. After seeing the marks on his chest, they all reverently praised him for the sincerity of his austere, painful act (*chengxin kuxing* 誠心苦行)¹⁹. They were awed at the sight of his scars and by the difficult process he had undertaken to produce the scripture. The medium of blood sanctified and animated Wu's message in a powerful and visceral way. His blood scripture was not meant for publication or mass production. It was not a passive artifact and its material existence or *thingness* was an active interchange between him as its producer and his spectators as witnesses. As such, it was received with great respect.

Many high-profile Buddhist clerics during the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries engaged in blood writing (Yu, 2012, pp. 168–169). In the case of Ouyi Zhixu 藕益智旭 (1599–1655), a regular blood writer throughout his monastic career, produced the following votive testimonial (*yuanwen* 願文) in his own blood on receiving the bodhisattva precepts in 1629:

I, a follower of the bodhisattva precepts, Zhixu, vow to prick my tongue to copy Mahāyāna scriptures and vinaya in my blood... May my deceased father [of this lifetime], and my loving fathers of countless lifetimes, sever self-attachment from time without beginning, ascend to the Land of Bliss, and receive the prediction [of buddhahood] by the Buddha. May my deceased mother, and my compassionate mothers of countless lifetimes, sever the fundamental afflictions, be reborn in lotuses, and receive the prediction [of buddhahood] by the Buddha. May my fellow practitioners of this lifetime, and all the past true virtuous friends, perfect and fulfill Bodhi before me. May sentient beings of the dharma realms universally destroy the two attachments, sever the various sufferings, attain the adamant body, purify the three collective precepts, complete all the correct samādhis, realize genuine wisdom, give rise to Bodhi-mind, acquire non-retrogression, and return to the unsurpassable awakening [of a buddha]. I dedicate the causes and conditions of the benevolent power from the vows and bestow them universally on the dharma realms, [so that sentient beings therein may] together attain the nonduality of the unborn, the nonattainment of the uncreated, and permanently separate themselves from delusion and realize permanent happiness²⁰.

Here, we see again the same motif of acquiring moral meritorious power through blood writing to benefit one's parents. Ouyi specifies the kinds of benefit he would like to bring to his parents: the severance of attachments and afflictions, rebirth in the Land of Bliss, and attainment of buddhahood.

Elsewhere, Ouyi also used blood writing to demarcate the boundaries between what he perceived as orthodoxy and heterodoxy:

Those followers of "wild-wisdom" (*kuanghui* 狂慧) belittle it [blood-writing] as [involving] "corporeality". But among the root causes of beginningless birth and death, none is deeper than the attachment to the perception of the body. Among [the practices of] wondrous world-transcending Dharma, none precedes destroying the spurious mountain of *satkāya* [i.e., attachment to the view of the body]. When this perverse perception of *satkāya* is destroyed, the wheel of birth and death is forever stilled. This [practice of blood-

writing] is called paying reverence to the correct Dharma; it is also called using the Dharma of making offerings to Buddha. The *Lotus* and *Śūraṅgama* [sūtras] have profound praise for incinerating one's limbs and fingers, as well as the merits from burning incense [into one's body]. The practice... is situated precisely in this very flesh and blood (Ouyi, 2004, p. 791).

This passage describes the way in which he engaged in a bodily practice to defend against charlatan Buddhist teachers who merely talk of nonduality and wisdom.

Blood writing was also practiced outside of Buddhist circles. It was intended to cure illness, challenge the existing political order, change the course of natural disasters, and even exonerate crimes and negotiate amnesty from the emperor. Consider the case of Feng Xingke 馮行可 (1521–ca. 1609) who used his blood writing as a vehicle to establish his claim to moral power and intercede with the Emperor on behalf of his father, Feng En 馮恩 (1491–1571) (Goodrich and Fang, 1976, pp. 445–448). His father was a virtuous censor of note and one of the last disciples of Wang Yangming (Chen, 2001, pp. 161–200.) but his position was threatened in September, 1532 when the imperial court observed a comet appearing in the sky. The comet apparently lingered for 115 days, just a year after the one, which later came to be known as Halley's Comet. Emperor Shizong interpreted this as a bad omen signifying the disloyalty of his ministers at court. The heavens were understood to operate in symbiotic resonance with earthly phenomena, so if the imperial court were immoral or the court ministers corrupt, then heaven would mimic that imbalance and rain down disasters on humankind.

Emperor Shizong solicited criticism from his ministers in an effort to dispel this bad omen by rooting out any internal corruption. In compliance with the imperial order, Feng En submitted a review of 20 high officials, ten of which he criticized for their flaws. Unfortunately, these were among the Emperor's favorites and so, for his efforts, Feng En was himself jailed, tortured, and sentenced to death.

His elder son, Feng Xingke, was only 12-years-old at the time but he wrote a memorial with his own blood and offered his own life to save that of his father (*daifu si* 代父死). He stated that if his father were to die, his grandmother, who was already >80-years-old, would surely die of grief, and this would inevitably make his father impious. Begging for mercy, Feng Xingke submitted his memorial to the emperor through sympathetic officials, who recommended that the sentence be reduced. The son then wrote the following:

Ever since my official father [Feng En] lost his own father in his youth, my grandmother Madame Wu remained chaste to educate him until he reached adulthood and became a censor. Our whole family receives his emolument.... Now that he has fallen under the emperor, and my grandmother is over eighty, the pain of her sadness is deep, and she has only a few breaths left. If my official father were to die today, grandmother Wu would also surely die today.... I beg your majesty to have pity, revoke the sentence placed [on my father], release him, and extend the lives of the mother and son [i.e., my grandmother and father].... I sincerely extend my neck and wait for your naked sword²¹.

Feng En's sentence was indeed reduced as a result of his son's filial act. The father was banished to Leizhou, in Guangzhou province, but later in 1567, when Emperor Muzong 穆宗 (re. 1567–1572) ascended the throne he recalled to service many officials who had been exiled. As a result, Feng En was given the

title of vice minister of the Grand Court of Revision and, because of his age, was granted the right to live in retirement. Furthermore, his son, Feng Xingke, was given an imperial citation for his filial piety and was then made head of a bureau in the Court of Imperial Entertainment (Goodrich and Fang, 1976, p. 447).

Feng Xingke's blood memorial evoked the power of morality, honor, and self-sacrifice to negotiate for his father's release. His actions won not only a pardon from the emperor but also a higher social status for his father and for Feng Xingke himself. The discourse of morality, honor, and self-sacrifice was demonstrated with blood writing. In other words, the message was trumped by the medium of that memorial.

Conclusion

The cases described above attest to the extraordinary efficacy of blood writing, residing in the physical presence of sight and contact. Its extraordinariness comes from its material presence, mode of production, and the efficacy of embodying time-honored cultural values in premodern China.

Imbued with an agency to negotiate socioreligious and political change, blood writing drew on the symbolism of blood, its talismanic associations, and the performance of self-sacrifice to concretize the cultural values of filial piety, religious sanctity, and moral virtue in visceral and extraordinary ways that no other materials or discourse could. The extraordinary feat involved in producing a blood scripture, as seen in the cases cited, was recognized by both performers and those who witnessed it.

Ironically, the ritual of blood writing, after centuries of its long history in East Asia, could also be considered ordinary. It was precisely because blood writing was understood to be one of the best means for demonstrating sanctity and moral virtue that by the late imperial times it became common place—not because many people performed it necessarily, but because it was socially recognized and intelligible to so many people, from upper echelons of the society to villagers and children. For example, in the case of Wu Junping, blood writing appeared to be a legitimate practice and shared knowledge for anyone who wished to transfer merit to deceased parents for their better rebirth. In the case of Feng Xingke, it was through his blood writing that the emperor moved to issue an amnesty for his father. The expected response of the emperor testifies the accepted sanctity of blood writing.

Whether blood writing was extraordinary or ordinary, at least in the imagination of the premodern Chinese, it was able to negotiate rebirth into the pure land, attainment of buddhahood, defend the borders of religious orthodoxy, and even persuade the emperor to issue political amnesty. Such agency to accomplish all these things rested in its materiality. Blood writing as an agent for change illuminates the various human and socioreligious, and political, contexts as it moved and re-shaped the performers' world around it, and their subject-object relations that made those worlds.

Our examination of blood writings has allowed us to not only gain a glimpse into the world of hand-copied manuscript culture in East Asia, particularly China, but also given us an opportunity to appreciate how the artifact of blood writing produced a distinctive sanctity and agency that affected the socioreligious landscape of people's lives and their relationships.

Data availability

The datasets analyzed during the current study, the blood writings, are not publicly available because they belong to private Buddhist monastic library collections, but photo reproductions of them may be available from the author on reasonable request.

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Notes

- 1 The places where I conducted this research are: Yongquan Monastery 湧泉寺 on Mt. Gu 鼓山 in Fujian province; the Beijing National Library; and a Sōtō temple, Fuzai-in 豐財院, in Noto Peninsula in Ishikawa Province, Japan. My monk informants are Huikong 慧空, who is one of the senior priors (*jianyuan* 監院) at Yongquan Monastery, and Weihui 惟慧, who was in charge of the temple collection of blood writings at Yongquan Monastery. I also interviewed Ms. Cao Zhengqun 曹正群, an elderly lay woman who lived and worked at the monastery and who offered blood for a resident monk named Renyi 仁一 to copy the *Diamond Sūtra* in the 2004. The “informants” that I mention in this article are either Huikong or Weihui, unless otherwise named. Yongquan Monastery houses over 700 copies of blood scriptures. According to the Weihui, the monastery had begun its collection of blood scriptures since at least the eleventh-century but lost all of its collection in the early Ming due to fire. Thus, the earliest blood scripture it has dates only to the late Ming in 1638. The text in question is the *Scripture on the Names of the Buddha as Expounded by the Buddha* (*Foshuofoming jing* 佛說佛名經) in twelve fascicles (T. no. 440, 14). Fuzai-in 豐財院 houses the complete *Prajñāparamita Sūtra* in 600 fascicles in 700 accordion books.
- 2 I deliberately avoided the use of amanuensis or scribe and chose the word “performer” to highlight the fact that the activity was not simply the copying of texts but it was a ritual, sacrificial act.
- 3 For blood covenants see *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan zhengyi* 春秋左傳正義, Duke Ding year five, in *Shisan jing zhushu* 十三經註疏, 54, 435; see also Watson, 1989, p. 185. For blood rituals see Raz, 2012; and Benn, 1998, p. 297. While many of these practices persisted into late imperial times, they can be dated to as early as the third century B.C.E.
- 4 The blood of roosters is still used to consecrate talismans and to make ritual offerings, as shown in a 2003 documentary film of a Daoist ritual in Hunan province, China directed by Patrice Fava.
- 5 This information comes from David Mozina, who shared this photo with me. He took the photo as part of his research on Daoist practices in Hunan in 2010. There is more information on how a talisman is made in his forthcoming manuscript, *Knotting the Banner*, University of Hawaii Press 2020.
- 6 The Chinese premodern, “sympathetic” conception of the world may be compared to what Lucien Lévy-Bruhl in 1923 called “participation”. This idea also assumes the interpenetration of the unseen and the seen worlds, the presence of the supernatural in the natural. According to Lévy-Bruhl, who held an evolutionary bias against “primitive religions”, the conception confuses the distinctions between persons and between the one and the many and appears not to operate according to the principle of identity or the logic of noncontradiction. According to him, it was at variance with “modern” mentality and ways of conceptualizing. While such a comparison between “participation” and “sympathetic resonance” is possible, I would caution against the evolutionary assumptions in his reading. What is needed is to theorize these ideas, to the best of our abilities, while being attentive to their native usage.
- 7 See *Da fangguang fo huayan jing* 大方廣佛華嚴經 (Skt., *Buddhāvataṃsaka-mahāvaiṣṭhīya-sūtra*), T. no. 293, 10: 845c.
- 8 “Sumeru” is a Sanskrit word; it translates into Chinese as “wondrously tall mountain” (*miaogao shan* 妙高山). In Buddhist cosmology, it is a towering mountain in the center of a great ocean, on a golden wheel, in the center of the universe. The mountain rises eighty thousand *yojanas* (an ancient Indian measurement of distance, approximately either four or nine miles; the issue is disputed) above sea level. It is surrounded by nine mountains and eight seas. The sun and moon circle it, and the six destinies and various heavens are around and above it. On its peak is *Trāyastriṃśa*, heaven, where Indra lives.
- 9 Among the two dozen or so contemporary performers who engaged in blood writing mentioned by the late Ming Buddhist monks Deqing and Ouyi, the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Flower Ornament Scripture* were the most popular texts to copy.
- 10 The Chinese text, *Fanwang jing* 梵網經 (*Sūtra of Brahma's Net*), attributed to Kumārajīva (350–409) in 406, appears in T. no. 1484, 24: 1009a. For translations of this work in Western languages, see Hui Seng, 1982; JJM de Groot, 2018. For a study and discussion of this work see Paul Groner, 1990: 251–289.
- 11 Dunhuang is located at the Western edge of the Hexi Corridor in modern Gansu Province. In the past, it has been the entry point to China from Central Asia and India. The overland Silk Road that connected Eastern and Western cultures passed through here. The Dunhuang cave 17, sealed sometime during the early eleventh-century, is considered by modern scholar to be the “Dunhuang cave library” because it contained a wealth of manuscripts, Buddhist and otherwise; for more information about Dunhuang caves, see Rong, 2013 and Huntington, 1986.
- 12 Also, vermilion ink made from cinnabar powder in medieval times was commonly used to flag error corrections, other collation notes, punctuation, and diacritic and tone marks by writers; see Cherniack, 1994, pp. 89–90.

- 13 Copying scriptures was a shared ritual practice in East Asia. While there is, to date, only one monograph study of ritualized writing in medieval Japanese Buddhism by Lowe (2017), the repertoire of knowledge detailed in that volume comes from Chinese Buddhism, and can be applied to other parts of East Asia as well.
- 14 The lay woman who “commissioned” a blood scripture (i.e., she supplied her own blood for a monk to copy a Buddhist scripture) adopted a vegetarian dietary for 49 days prior to the project begun and maintained it for the duration of the project.
- 15 Master Dafang Shouye 大方壽冶 (1910–2001) immigrated to New York City in the seventies. From 1987 to 1991, I lived in New York City and my studio was located above his temple, Guangming si 光明寺, bordering Little Italy and Chinatown on 214 Center Street. My information comes from my conversation with him in during this time. The citation here refers to a privately published biography of Shouye, which contains some of this information above.
- 16 The “broad long tongue” (Skt. *prabhūta-tanu-jihva*; C. *guangchangshe xiang* 廣長舌相), one of the 32 marks of the Buddha, symbolizes the Buddha’s ability to expound the teachings perfectly in accordance with the needs of sentient beings. The *Lotus Sūtra* explicitly mentions this in chapter 21, where the Buddha demonstrates his supernatural power; see Hurvitz (1976), 286. In East Asian Buddhism, the symbiosis between the tongue and eloquence in expounding the Dharma is made clear in hagiographies and miracle tales, where the tongues of practitioners known for their eloquence in expounding the Dharma remain “incorruptible” even after cremation; see Stevenson (1995); Benn (2007). For definitions of the “broad long tongue”, see Mochizuki (1954–1963), 1072a. I have never found cases where blood was drawn from the lower part of the body.
- 17 See *Jingang chiyuan ji* 金剛經持驗紀 (Miracle tales of the *Diamond Sūtra*) by Zhou Kefu 周克復 (date unknown), X. no. 1635, 87: 548b; *Jushi zhuan* 居士傳 (Biography of Lay Buddhists) by Peng Shaosheng 彭紹升 (1740–1796), X. no. 1646, 88: 204c. For Pure Land Buddhism and scholarship on this form of Buddhism, Yu (2014).
- 18 For related scriptural miracle tales, or the *yanji* 驗記 genre of Buddhist literature, see, for example, *Dafangguang fo huayanjing ganying zhuan* 大方廣佛華嚴經感應傳 by the layman Wusheng 無生居士 (d.u.), T. no. 2074, 51: 173b3–178b10, esp. 177a14. Many popular Buddhist scriptures in East Asia had miracle tales associated with them. Most of these tales are not necessarily commensurate with the particular scripture’s doctrinal position. That is, there is no explicit connection between the message and the medium of Buddhist scripture, which strengthens my claim that blood scriptures were not meant to be read, but worshipped.
- 19 See *Jushi zhuan* 居士傳 (Biography of Lay Buddhists), X. no. 1646, 88: 204c22.
- 20 See “Cixie shujing yuanwen” 刺血書經願文 (“A Votive Text on Drawing Blood to Write Scriptures”) in *Lingfeng zonglun*, 26.
- 21 See *Gujin tushu jicheng* 古今圖書集成 by Chen Menglei 陳夢雷 (b. 1651) et al. (Taipei: Dingwen shuju, 1977), category: “human relationships” (*Minglun huibian* 明倫彙編), section: “government service” (*Guanchang dian* 官常典), under “Biographies of Eminent Officials” (*Mingchen liezhuan* 名臣列傳), *juan* 357, *ce* 284, 37.2.

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The author declares no competing interests.

Additional information

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