

THE NOTION OF כָּפַר IN THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS AND CHINESE POPULAR RELIGION

Sonia Wong

Introduction

In the Book of Leviticus, the *pi'el* verb כָּפַר (*kṣr*), often rendered as “to atone, expiate,” occurs only within the sacrificial context of *yôm kippūrîm* “the Day of Atonement” (Lev 16), *ḥattā'at* “purification offering,” and *'āšām* “reparation offering” (Lev 4–6, 14–15). These offerings are prescribed to effect forgiveness in behalf of those who have committed expiable moral faults and physical ritual impurities (Lev 4:20, 26, 31 and passim).

Scholars debate the meaning of the *pi'el* verb כָּפַר. Suggestions for its meaning include “to wipe off, to clean objects, to rub, to purify magically” (University of Chicago. Oriental Institute. and Gelb 1956, 178-179; cf. Milgrom 2007, 180), “to cover,” “to purge, remove,” and “to ransom.” This paper subscribes Jay Sklar’s position (2005, 111-113) that כָּפַר carries a dual meaning of ransoming and purging. This dual meaning of כָּפַר reflects the dual function of offerings intended for atonement. Such an offering functions as a ransom payment presented by a guilty party, namely the offerer, to the offended deity YHWH to avert or mitigate an impending punishment of a higher severity.¹ It also serves to purge or to remove any impediments that

¹ Regarding the punishment of expiable sins, Sklar argues that even though it is not explicitly stated in the prescription of purification and reparation offerings, one can “safely” assume that all sins lead to the death penalty. He also attributes the reason of the non-mention of punishment to the expected efficacy of the rites to avert punishment (Sklar 2005, 11-43). I concur with Sklar that all sins are punishable and the ransoming power of purification and reparation offerings to effect forgiveness implies a mitigation of punishment. However, I disagree that divine punishment is limited to the death penalty. The notion of uniform punishment for sins contradicts the gradation of sins that is explicitly set forth in the prescription of the atoning rituals. I will argue that the non-mention of the punishment indicates that the aversion of punishment, though an anticipated effect of the rituals, should not be the focus of purification and reparation offerings or the motive of the offerer. The non-mention of punishment

hinder the divine-human relationship, including those caused by physical ritual impurities and the indirect defilement of the sanctuary by the Israelites' sins and transgressions (Lev 16:16, 30).

When one accepts the meaning “to ransom,” one also accepts כָּפַר as the denominative of the noun *kōp̄er*.² The biblical text also uses this term to signify an illegitimate payment, namely “bribe” (see 1 Sam 12:3; Amos 5:12; Sklar 2005, 56-61). This raises a question on the legitimacy of the ransoming power of purification and reparation offerings. Is it legitimate for YHWH to have faults and guilty people forgiven through sacrificial rituals? Why must purification and reparation offerings be regarded as legitimate ransoms and not illegitimate bribes? In what ways can the legitimacy of the sacrificial ritual be justified in the Book of Leviticus?

This paper questions the legitimacy of the ransoming power in purification and reparation offerings leading to the forgiveness of sinners from a Chinese popular religious perspective. I will argue not only that a parallel notion of כָּפַר cannot be found in Chinese popular religion, but also that its absence reveals an issue of legitimacy of such a notion under the Chinese three-realm worldview, the imperial bureaucratic structure of the pantheon, and the ambiguous moral nature of deities, ancestors or ghosts.³ It is likely that those who are brought up in a Chinese popular religious worldview, being unfamiliar with the Levitical presuppositions, would find the legitimacy of the Levitical notion of כָּפַר to be incomprehensible and even reprehensible. Nonetheless, the legitimacy of the ransoming power in purification and reparation offerings

suggests that these offerings should not be presented out of fear for punishment. Also, notably, whenever the punishment of sins is stated or executed (whether by YHWH or by the community) in the Book of Leviticus, it serves a purpose of *deterrence*. Deterrence is unnecessary and irrelevant in the prescription of these offerings since the inadvertency of the expiable sins and genuine repentance of the guilty party are already assumed. Moreover, death penalty for the purpose of deterrence is unnecessary because of the lesser gravity and compensability of the faults.

² Milgrom also acknowledges the connection between כָּפַר (*pi 'el*) and *kōp̄er*. He admits that this connotation of ransoming is clearly operative at least partly in the Azazel-ritual where the Israelites, the guilty party, appease the wrath of YHWH, the offended party, and avert the death penalty (Lev 16:7-10). However, Milgrom's interpretation raises a question on why the living goat is designated to Azazel rather than to the offended party, YHWH (Milgrom 2007, 181, 1991, 1082).

³ The Chinese pantheon is an open system and varies among traditions and localities. Theoretically, new deities can emerge and be added into the existing pantheon at any time.

seems to be safeguarded by the presuppositions embedded in the Book of Leviticus. Towards the end of the essay, I will also explore the possible implication of the lack of a parallel notion of כפר in the sacrificial rituals to Chinese popular religion.

In my pursuit, I will limit my scope to purification and reparation offerings (Lev 4:1–6:7 [5:26]) specifically prescribed for atonement to effect forgiveness (Lev 4:20, 26, 31 and passim). The two offerings follow the same ritual principle (Lev 7:7) as a part of the unified system of rituals of atonement in the Book of Leviticus, which includes also the Day of Atonement.

An Overview of Chinese Popular Religion

The term “Chinese popular religion” has been problematized and thus demands further elaboration (see Bell 1989, 35-57).⁴ The term “Chinese popular religion” is a scholarly construct designated for the dynamic, multifarious and widespread religious phenomenon observable among different Chinese socioeconomic strata in both their native and diasporic localities. The collective term is made possible because of the shared beliefs, values and ritual practices that buttressed this phenomenon. Chinese popular religion has integrated many beliefs, values, and rituals of three elite religions, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, whose equal orthodoxy was established in Tang dynasty (618–907 CE).⁵ To a certain extent, Chinese popular religion is a collective term for the local variants, appropriated and amalgamated versions, of these elite

⁴ Bell provides a succinct review on the research history on Chinese popular religion and the problems that have arisen in approaching and naming the phenomenon. She has assessed three main approaches to “Chinese popular religion,” from the first-stage elite-folk dichotomy that contrasts the religious practices of the Chinese populace with the institutionalized religions of the elite, to the second-stage search for unity and commonality between the two, then to a more historical-conscious third-stage approach of depicting the inextricable interpenetration between the religious popular cultures and the three institutionalized religions, namely Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, within the Chinese historical, social, economic, and cultural contexts.

⁵ Interpenetration, commonly called “syncretism,” among these three institutionalized religions is undeniable. The recognition of their equal orthodoxies in Tang dynasty can in no way lead to the conclusion that there existed three independent pristine religious traditions. While there are distinguishable characteristics among these religious systems, they are nonetheless inextricably related to each other. Their intricate relationship also blurs the line between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Furthermore, it has been argued that the humane ideals, ethic principles and moral percepts of Confucianism have permeated all dimensions and all forms of Chinese culture and cultural extraction of Confucian elements is simply impossible. This argument goes well also with the Daoist and Buddhist traditions in Chinese communities (Fowler and Fowler 2008, 254; Goossaert 2005, 1614-1615).

religions. Its relationship to these elite religions is one that characterized by intricacy and complexity. From a sociopolitical perspective, Chinese popular religion has often been manipulated to promote, reinforce, or support the elite beliefs and values (Szonyi 2007; Watson 2004). Although Chinese popular religion does not rely on any textual or institutional authorities, the elite religions have exerted great influence on its development. Chinese popular religion, just as their elite counterparts, emerged from myths, folktales, and legends that have embodied many popular beliefs, social values, and moral percepts. However, due to the eclectic nature of Chinese popular religion, no beliefs or practices can be regarded as absolute and definite. Nonetheless, common beliefs and long-standing traditions are clearly present.

Ghosts, Deities, and Ancestors: Three Relative Concepts

A common belief in the coexistence of three realms—the divine, human, and ghost realms—is upheld. The three realms are interconnected, interdependent, and influence each other. When a person dies, it is believed that s/he will enter from the human realm (*renzian* or *yangzian*) to the ghost realm (*guijie* or *yinzian*) to undergo retributive judgment and purgatory process, and await further “re-assignment.” The duration of purgatory process is subject to the amount of merits or evils that the person has done in his/her previous life and the intensity of his/her remorse. After the purgatory process, s/he is believed to be reincarnated as a human, another form of living being, or an immortal (a state of ultimate personal salvation that escapes the cycle of reincarnation).⁶ In other words, people can become ghosts or deities. Conversely, it is also possible for a deity to be demoted to a lower rank or into human state, if s/he makes serious

⁶ Contrary to Christian Jochim’s view that individual salvation is not important in Chinese popular religion and what matter are “(1) passing from this world into an ancestral realm...(2) the interactions between living persons and their ancestors” (Jochim 2003, 158), I see that ancestral worship is much related to the obtainment of personal salvation. To avoid becoming a hungry ghost assures a successful passing in the Purgatory and this could be regarded as an intermediate salvation. However, it is true that self cultivation towards personal salvation in terms of meditation, nurturing of vitality (*qigong*), or ritual diet (as in Daoist or Buddhist concepts) has little significance in Chinese popular religion.

mistakes during his/her divine office, such as offending a superior deity.

The peaceful coexistence of these realms ensures universal harmony. Both the divine realm and the ghost realm mirror the human realm. Deities and ghosts have needs, such as food and clothes, just as humans have. However, ghosts cannot provide for their own needs and thus they must rely on human provision through ritual offerings. People who died without descendants to attend their needs or people who suffer tragic death will become hungry ghosts (*egui*) or orphan souls (*guhun*). These spirits are believed to have the ability to roam around in the human realm and possibly cause illness, harm, and misfortune (Overmyer 1986, 26-27).

Some people believe that ghosts, particularly the hungry ones, also have the power to grant wishes if they are attended. When a ghost's efficacy (*ling*)—his/her ability to grant wishes, heal disease, and perform miracles—is recognized, people would even build a shrine or a temple for the ghost and treat him/her henceforth as a deity (Harrell 1974, 193-206).⁷ Most deities in Chinese popular religion were originally historical or historicized humans prior to their deification. They are installed as deities because their efficacy was recognized.⁸ Thus, deities and ghosts are not two discrete and unrelated concepts. Both deities and ghosts are capable of benevolence and malevolence and even benevolent deities can at times make mistakes just like humans. There is a lot of grey area regarding the ethical nature of deities and ghosts in Chinese popular religion. For instance, it is widely known among Hong Kong people that *Guandi*, also called *Guangong*, the God of Military and Commerce, has a history of being installed as a patron deity by both the law enforcers and the law-breaking mobsters. The god is renowned for his

⁷ Here I have rendered a unilateral representation of *ling* (efficacy). The concept is actually more multifarious. As P. Steven Sangren (2000, 99-103) points out from an anthropological point of view, the concept of *ling* involves the reputation of the deity, state sanction, and relation to ancestral temple; it is a result of collective and individual cultural production through ritual participation.

⁸ For instance, Mazu, a popular goddess along the South China Sea, was a historical figure in the 10th century CE (Bosco and Ho 1999; Nyitray 2000) and the deified Lü Dongbin was a Daoist priest in the 9th century CE (Lai 2003, 460-463).

justness, loyalty, and trustworthiness. These virtues are typically valued by both the police and the triads.

What are ancestors? Are they deities or ghosts? The question cannot be answered unequivocally, especially when the concept of reincarnation is taken into consideration. They are generally viewed as ghosts that awaiting rebirth and enjoying offerings from their descendants (cf. Scott 2007, 91-96; Wolf 1974, 131-182). Ancestral worship is commonly practiced in Chinese communities, but it is not necessary for ancestral worshippers to uphold a three-realm worldview. Ancestral worship has been practiced in China since the prehistoric Shang period (c. 1500–1040 BCE), when the aforementioned three-realm worldview was not yet formulated. Shang people believed that after the ancestors died, their souls go up to join *Tian* (Heaven) and they become intermediaries between their descendants and *Tian*.⁹ Subsequently, ancestral worship has become primarily an act of filial piety. To quote Confucius: “Thus they served the dead as they would have served them if they had been continued among them:—all this was the perfection of filial duty” (1967, 311). Offering incense, foodstuffs, clothes, spirit moneys, and other daily necessities is considered an act of filial piety, a family obligation in Chinese society, irrespective of one’s view on afterlife. However, this is not to say that the belief in ancestors’ benevolent or potentially malevolent power as family patron deities or ghosts is uncommon in Chinese popular religion. Ancestors are generally considered as protectors of their descendants, albeit they could turn into troublemakers inflicting their descendants if their proper care is neglected (Wolf 1974, 164-169).

⁹ Heaven (*Tian*) is a major motif in Chinese worldview. It is a complicated, dynamic, and evolving concept in Chinese religious history. *Tian* has multiple meanings and its definition has also undergone a series of transformation. Zhang Huaicheng has listed four possible traditional interpretations of *Tian*: (1) the sky, (2) the High/Supreme Lord/Emperor (*Shangdi*), (3) Destiny (an invariable objective necessity), and (4) the nature (Zhang 1998, 48-49).

Bureaucratic and Non-Bureaucratic Deities

The Chinese pantheon is mirrored after the human realm. Deities can be classified as bureaucratic deities and non-bureaucratic deities. Bureaucratic deities can further be divided into universal or local deities. Universal deities include Jade Emperor (*Yuhuangdadi* or *Tiangong*), the head of the pantheons, and imperial ministerial deities, such as *Guandi* and the chthonic deities, whose divine duties concern the welfare of all. Local deities include magistrate deities like the City God (*Chenghuang*) and terrestrial gods like the Locality God (*Tudi Gong*), whose jurisdictions are limited to a particular region. Titles of magistrate deities function more as administrative posts than proper names of deities. In theory, each city has its own City God, who is usually a deceased local magistrate who was well-known for his uprightness and impartiality. Similarly, each village or community has its own Locality God, usually one of their ancestors. A City God is the superior of the Locality Gods and other terrestrial gods in his jurisdiction. Chinese pantheon is structured with an imperial metaphor (Feuchtwang 2001; Goossaert 2005, 1619). Bureaucratic deities are hierarchical officials responsible for different categories of social life. To illustrate the imperial structure of Chinese pantheon, I will use a story told by Stephan Feuchtwang.

Stephan Feuchtwang (2001, 103-105) was informed of a local tale in Mountainstreet, Taiwan about how a cashier named Ng Leto became the Thote Kong (Locality God) of the region. The tale goes like this: Ng Leto was walking home on a hot day to celebrate his birthday with his wife. On the way home, he stopped by a river to swim. He hung his clothes on the Locality God's shrine table and thus offended the deity. After Ng arrived home, he had a stomachache. His wife found out what happened on his way home and suspected that the Locality God might have caused the stomachache. So she went and offered to the Locality God

and asked for forgiveness. Ng was infuriated by the Locality God's act to induce illness on him in order to receive offerings, an act of extortion in his view. Ng burned a yellow dispatch of accusation in order to bring the matter to the City God, who is the Locality God's superior, and then he went into trance to go to court with the Locality God. The Locality God defended his act, he insisted that he did not inflict the stomachache and offerings were made at Ng's wife's own wish, and he healed Ng according to the sign of the divination block. The City God knowing that a person who dares to accuse a god will be a great troublemaker in *Yinzian* after he died, he penalized Ng with 40 strokes on his hips. Nonetheless, Ng persisted and appealed to the Great White and Golden Immortal (*Taibaijinren*), a higher-ranking deity who reports directly to Jade Emperor, and was able to bring the matter to Jade Emperor's attention. Jade Emperor supported Ng and assigned the Day and Night Wandering Spirits (*Riyoushen* and *Yeyoushen*), two secret-agent deities, to follow up the case. Eventually, Ng was vindicated and the Locality God was found guilty of extortion. Unfortunately, Ng, who had made good use of a money-yielding pearl given by Jade Emperor to help the poor, was persecuted by the greedy local magistrate going after his pearl. The story ends with the magistrate's bodyguards chased Ng and his wife to a big rock and he jumped off and died. After his death, Ng was installed as the Locality God in lieu of his corruptive predecessor and his wife was also venerated as the spouse of the Locality God (*Tudi Ma*).

This tale about the replacement of a Locality God not only illustrates the bureaucratic structure of Chinese pantheon, it also demonstrates the potential fallibility and corruptibility of deities who are supposed to be the protectors and benefactors of humankind. Because deities are regarded as officials, the act of inflicting harm in order to receive gains is considered *extortion*. Similarly, offering to deities in order to avert punishment or harm is considered a *bribe*.

Offerings to deities are considered legitimate only if they are *gifts* of obeisance or gratitude presented at the worshipper's own wish.

The Absence of a Parallel Notion of כפר in Chinese Popular Religion

Different Views on the Divine and Sacrificial Rituals

Admittedly, the notions of punitive spirits (deities, ancestors and ghosts), sins and impurities (as offences against spirits), punishment as consequence of offences, and seeking forgiveness/appeasement are not lacking in Chinese popular religion. However, the presence of these notions does not converge to a parallel notion of כפר that carries a dual meaning of ransoming and purging in Chinese popular religion.

The absence of a parallel notion can be partly attributed to the different views on the divine and sacrificial rituals between the Levitical traditions and Chinese popular religion. First, in the polytheistic context of Chinese popular religion, pledged loyalty to a single deity by an individual worshipper is not required, nor is there a covenantal relationship between a particular deity and a community, as in the Levitical traditions. A worshipper is free to worship multiple deities, only in the case of ancestors that ritual attendance is regarded as obligatory.

Second, unlike YHWH, deities in Chinese popular religion do not hold a set of fixed evaluative ethical standards of their own. Thus their adherents have no statutes, rules, or laws by which they must abide. Even though the Chinese pantheon is structured after an imperial metaphor and bureaucratic deities are deemed protectors of "public morality" (Wolf 1974, 168), a breach of public morality does not constitute a direct offense against deities. Only matters of personal insults are regarded as offenses against deities. Failure to observe preparatory rituals, such as ablution, vegetarian diet and sexual abstinence before major rites is considered a personal insult against the deities and is subject to divine punishment. For instance, a man who

suffered a severe burn from fire-walking attributed his burn to his failure to keep the three-day sexual abstinence before the ritual event (Wolf 1974, 162). As for the ancestors, improper care or negligence is a serious offense which, as many people believe, can cause harm and misfortune to descendants. Thus, while the concept of divine and ancestral punishments is present, they are not given on ground of a breach to a set of evaluative standards.

Third, in Chinese popular religion, when a deity rightfully punishes a human, no aversion whatsoever can be made. Because the pantheon is structured into an imperial hierarchy and bureaucratic deities are officials, their verdicts have binding force. In case a deity wrongly punishes, vindication can be sought by appealing to a higher-ranking deity. It is possible for deities to wrongly mete out punishment, because they are potentially fallible and corruptible, as I have illustrated above with the Taiwanese tale. Contrarily, in Levitical traditions, while YHWH is infallible and incorruptible, his punishment does not appear to be absolute. At least in the case of expiable moral faults and ritual impurities, the offenders could avert divine punishment through the ransoming power of purification and reparation offerings.

Fourth, in the case of ancestors, their punitive acts are often interpreted as a way to demand afterlife prerogatives, adequate attention, or proper care from their descendants. In this case, offerings may not be able to solve the problem. Shamans are to be consulted to find out what exactly is demanded by the ancestors. Genuine repentance of the descendants is a non-issue here. The real issue here is setting things right according to the demand of the ancestors. Even if the anger of an offended ancestor can be placated with offerings, the sacrificial ritual does not bear any sense of the biblical notion of *כַּפֵּר*. Unlike purification and reparation offerings, in which the offerers are the beneficiaries of the rituals, ancestors, who rely on human provision, are regarded as the beneficiaries in the ancestral worship.

Fifth, the emphasis on “blood consciousness” (see Abusch 2002, 44), the efficaciousness of blood as an active agent in כפר offerings, is lacking in Chinese sacrificial rituals (Lev 17:11). Blood has no significance in Chinese sacrificial rituals. The ransoming and purging power of blood in offerings is foreign to Chinese popular religion. When meats are offered, usually they are cooked and blood has no ritual significance. Thus, in sacrificial rituals of Chinese popular religion, there is no concept of a ransoming agent.

Finally, there is no ordained priesthood in Chinese popular religion. Ritual practices and shared beliefs are transmitted as family and communal heritage. Worship is often carried out in domestic setting through a family altar that enshrines icons of deities and/or tablets of the ancestors. Temples are founded and maintained by self-governing, self-financed, and voluntary groups. Day to day operation of the temples and ritual practices are carried out mainly by lay people, although Daoist priests and Buddhist monks are hired occasionally for special rites, such as communal sacrifices (*jiao*), death rituals (*zhaiyi*), and birthday processions of deities (*shengdan*). In Chinese popular religion, professional clergy enjoys little centrality. In the Levitical rituals, the officiating priests play a central role in the ritual process. Their ritual misconduct can bring forth divine wrath on the whole community (Lev 10:1-6). They also actively participate in the כפר offerings by bearing the culpability of the offerer (Lev 10:17). Such an important role of professional clergy as a divine agent is impossible in the laity-based sacrificial rituals of Chinese popular religion.

The Imperial Metaphor and the Illegitimacy of Ransoming Offerings

Another factor that attributes to the absence of a parallel notion in Chinese popular religion is the imperial hierarchy of its pantheon. Only volitional gifts are considered proper ritual offerings. Gifts that are paid as ransoms to avert divine punishment would be interpreted as

either *bribe* or *extortion*. The inevitability of this interpretation is primarily caused by the imperial metaphor on which the bureaucratic pantheon is built. The deities are adorned in imperial official garments and their temples are decorated as magistrate courts. Some non-bureaucratic deities that are integrated into the pantheon are often conferred with imperial titles. Matters of different natures, personal, social, or legal, are brought to bureaucratic (and often non-bureaucratic) deities. They are simply regarded as enforcers of public morality and they “punish people for crimes against society at large” (Wolf 1974, 168). Their primary tasks are to maintain social order and look after the welfare of the human community (Goossaert 2005, 1619). While social disputes and legal cases are brought to the bureaucratic deities’ attention, they do not constitute offenses against the deities. Any direct offense against a deity, as I have mentioned, is a matter of personal insult.

In the case of non-bureaucratic deities, although these deities usually embody traditional virtues, their ethical nature remains ambiguous. The morality of non-bureaucratic deities varies from one to another. The kaleidoscopic ethical positions of non-bureaucratic deities create a free market of religious choices in Chinese popular religion. Irrespective of one’s socioeconomic status and moral inclination, there is always a *right* god for everyone. As for bureaucratic deities, their morality is also subject to divine fallibility and corruptibility. The moral ambiguity of non-bureaucratic deities allows no room for the notion of כפר. One of the underlying assumptions behind the notion of כפר is a retributive god with evaluative ethical standards, which is precisely what is lacking in Chinese popular religion.

A Different Notion of Atonement in Chinese Popular Religion

A different notion of atonement can be found in the ritual offerings to ghosts. During the Hungry Ghost Festival, also called Middle Origin Festival (*Zhong Yuan Jie*), in the seventh lunar

month, it is said that the gate of the Purgatory is opened and ghosts are released to the human realm (analogous to having a parole). Many families and religious institutions offer foodstuffs to ghosts, at the same time scriptures are read and operatic plays are performed to foster the remorseful feelings of hungry ghosts, hoping to purge their bad conscience and thus to shorten their purgatory process (Chi-tim 2003, 466; cf. Goossaert 2005, 1618-1629; Fowler and Fowler 2008, 240-247). Remorse is considered a requirement for rebirth. These rituals are parts of a ritual system, called the Universal Purification (*Pudu*).

Generally, offering to hungry ghosts in the Hungry Ghost Festival is carried out in keeping with the longstanding tradition, but offerers are often motivated by compassion and/or fear. Some people believe that hungry ghosts are in general pitiful, unattended, and harmless souls, some believe that if hungry ghosts are neglected, they could “wreak havoc” (Fowler and Fowler 2008, 225), still others believe that hungry ghosts are potentially powerful spirits and they would “support anyone who feeds them without principle” (Feuchtwang 2001, 105). Offering to hungry ghosts is considered a merit; hence, by doing so, the offerers would gain credits toward their own personal salvation. This is in theory a win-win situation for both parties. From a religious-communal point of view, offering to hungry ghosts serves to reduce the number of roaming spirits in the human realm and thus promote the balance and harmony between the two realms.

Daoist funeral rites, also called purification or purgation rites (*dajai*), have the same function (Lai 2005). The obvious difference is that there is only one beneficiary ghost in every funerary performance. It is believed that ghosts could receive merit donations from the ritual participants through the purification rites. Both the universal and individual purification rites reflect a great concern over one’s afterlife. Similarly, the concern over one’s ancestral status after

death also reflects an anxiety towards afterlife. Successful installation as an ancestor means that one's afterlife provision will be taken care of by one's descendants and, thus, the fate of becoming hungry ghosts can be averted. In turn, the purgatory process can be shortened. In Chinese popular religion, a different notion of atonement can clearly be found in the offerings to ghosts. It has the components of averting or mitigating punishment (shortening the purgatory process), transferability of merits (from humans to ghosts), and purging of souls (removing bad conscience from the ghosts). Purging a bad conscience is equivalent to removing an impediment that hinders the path towards personal salvation. Atonement in this sense can be understood as purgation. However, the notion of ransom is still nowhere to be found. In fact, the relationship between the guilty party and the injured party could well be reversed in the ritual offerings to ghosts. The offerers are the injured party who is subject to the havoc of the roaming, troubled ghosts and the ghosts are the guilty party that benefits from the purification rite. The rituals are performed to appease the guilty party, to foster their remorse feelings, and to maintain the state of harmony between the human and ghost realms. While a notion of atonement as purgation is present in Chinese popular religion, it is in many aspects different from the Levitical notion of כפר.

A Chinese Popular Religious Perspective on Purification and Reparation Offerings

The Legitimacy of Purification and Reparation Offerings

Under the bureaucratic metaphor, in which deities are morally fallible and corruptible, offering to deities in order to avert or mitigate punishment is inevitably interpreted as either an act of bribe or extortion. Having come to this point, an interesting question arises: How can the legitimacy of purification and reparation offerings as ransom be justified? Persons who are brought up in the Chinese popular cultures would probably question the legitimacy of these

offerings, because similar practices would have been regarded as a bribe or extortion in their context. As I have pointed out, כַּפֵּר is a denominative of *kōp̄er* “ransom”, which is used to denote an illegal payment rendered to avert a more severe impending consequence. Since the efficacy of purification and reparation offerings lies partly on its ransoming power, its efficacious legitimacy cannot be taken for granted. Hereafter, I will look into several important Levitical presuppositions that undergird purification and reparation offerings and, thus, serve to safeguard the legitimacy of the ransoming notion of כַּפֵּר in within the Levitical ritual system of atonement.

First, according to the Book of Leviticus, punishments are avertable through purification and reparation offerings under the following conditions. (1) Sins or impurities must be expiable. Not all sins are expiable. Roy Gane (2005, 198-213) has aptly observed that a gradation of sins with regard to intentionality and gravity is clearly operative in the Book of Leviticus. Noncalendrical purification and reparation offerings are only prescribed for inadvertent sins, some expiable intentional sins, and physical ritual impurities (Lev 4-6, 14-15). Failure to undergo prescribed purification for ritual impurities and expiable moral faults, irrevocable moral faults, and defiant sins are inexpiable by noncalendrical purification and reparation offerings (Gane 2005, 198-202). (2) The offender must demonstrate genuine repentance (Lev 4:13, 22, 27 and passim). The lexeme *we'āšēm* occurs numerous times as a descriptive of the offerer's psychological state (Lev 4:13, 22, 27 and passim), indicating that genuine repentance is a prerequisite to the efficacy of purification and reparation offerings. (3) Compensation must be made by the guilty party, where an injured human party is involved, prior to the ritual administration (Lev 5:16). This suggests the willingness of the guilty party to set things right and to express his remorse to both the community and the deity through the prescribed offerings. The gradation of sins, the prerequisite of genuine repentance and the need of prior compensation

before ritual administration preclude the guilty party's deliberate premeditation to avoid the consequence or liability of his/her fault through offerings and the possibility of a deceptive motivation of YHWH to extort ritual gifts for his own benefit.

Second, there are clear administrative guidelines for purification and reparation offerings. The prescription has taken the financial situation of the offerer into consideration. The practical concern over the offerer's financial ability even overrides the significance of "blood consciousness" in individual purification offerings. If an offerer cannot afford the minimal slaughtering of two turtledoves or pigeons, grain offering is acceptable as a substitute (Lev 5:11). This concern over the offerer's financial situation and graded requirement are incompatible with an interpretation of purification and reparation offerings as extortions. The clear ritual guidelines ensure the proper administration of these offerings, preventing the corruptibility of the priests on the deity's behalf.

Third, contrary to deities in Chinese popular religion, YHWH does not rely on human provision. In Levitical traditions, YHWH is portrayed as self-sufficient. Hence, he has no reason to extort offerings for his own gratification.

Finally, as I have pointed out, deities' moral ambiguity, fallibility, and corruptibility are the main impediments to a parallel notion of atonement as ransom in Chinese popular religion. In the Levitical traditions, YHWH is portrayed as infallible, incorruptible, and morally superior to humans. In short, the conditions for purification and reparation offerings, their clear administrative guidelines, and YHWH's self sufficiency have precluded purification and reparation offerings from becoming illegal ransoms and, thus, safeguarded the legitimacy of the ransoming power in these offerings.

The Notion of כַּפַּר and Guilt Complex

Guilt complex is a fundamental problem and a universal phenomenon in human psychology. Before the invention of psychotherapy or counseling, religious practices might have already been providing channels for the resolution of guilt. The ritual goal of purification and reparation offerings is to effect forgiveness (Lev 4:20, 26, 31 and passim). Sklar interprets “forgiveness” as an aversion of punishment. However, the lexeme *wēnīslah* “and he is forgiven” can also be interpreted as the subjective experience of the offerer. Through purification and reparation offerings, the offerer experiences the absolution of sin and the resolution of guilt through the ransoming and purging power of purification and reparation offerings. In these offerings, a price, in terms of sacrificial animal(s) or a measure of semolina, has indeed been paid by the offerer. The complex and elaborated rituals can serve to satisfy any psychological need of the offerer to experience a concrete form of divine punishment for and publicly confess his/her fault. In a sense, purification and reparation offerings function as a kind of penance, an importance process for some people who are genuinely remorseful. Moreover, as a public confession, the rituals provide an opportunity for the community to accept and reintegrate those who have committed expiable faults. The ritual logic is that if the fault of the guilty party is forgiven by the deity through purification or reparation offering, the community that has established a covenantal relationship with the deity must then accept the guilty party. In a way, the ritual contributes to social order and communal harmony by providing a channel to those who have committed faults of lesser severity and detrimental to the wellbeing of the community to reenter the community.

In Chinese popular religion, ritual offerings to deities cannot function as a channel for the absolution of sins or the resolution of guilt because of the bureaucratic metaphor and the ambiguous morality of deities, as I have expounded. The question is: what kind of religious

resource do people have to resolve guilt complex in Chinese popular religion? Are there any rituals that can address the need of guilt resolution and sin absolution? Not only does Chinese popular religion provides no channels for the resolution of guilt, contrarily, there seems to be an emphasis on the cultivation of guilty feelings and a fear for the lack of remorse. As I have mentioned, the universal and individual purification rites are aimed at nurturing the remorseful feelings of ghosts in order to shorten their chthonic suffering and expedite their rebirths. As for the living, the focus tends to be on self-cultivation and accumulation of merits (however “merit” is defined). In Chinese popular religion, there is a lack of a tangible and elaborated way for worshippers to experience the absolution of sins, the resolution of guilt, and communal acceptance.

Conclusion

There is no parallel notion of כפר in the sacrificial rituals of Chinese popular religion. In Chinese popular religion, making an offering to an offended deity for the purpose of appeasing the deity and averting or mitigating punishment is regarded as an act of bribe or extortion. The notion of כפר is incompatible to the three-realm worldview, the imperial metaphor of Chinese pantheon, and the ambiguous moral nature of deities in Chinese popular religion. Deities, ancestors, and ghosts, who rely on human provision, are capable of extortion because of their fallibility and corruptibility. They are like humans, each with his/her unique temperament and moral inclination. Although most of them are regarded as protectors of public morality and benefactors to humankind, they guarantee no rightful judgment and they take personal insults seriously. Their “official” status makes offerings that are intended to avert or mitigate rightful punishments illegitimate. The notion of כפר would have been inevitably regarded as illegitimate from the Chinese popular religious perspective.

On the other hand, the legitimacy of the ransoming power of purification and reparation offerings is safeguarded by the gradation of evils, the consideration on the intentionality of the offenders and the gravity, compensability, revocability of their faults, clear guidelines for ritual administration, and YHWH's own self-sufficiency, infallibility and moral supremacy. By putting the notion of כפר into intertextual dialogue with Chinese popular religion, the legitimacy of the notion of כפר in purification and reparation offerings, which has been taken for granted, is elucidated. Due to the incompatibility of the notion of כפר to the Chinese popular religion, purification and reparation offerings are still likely to be regarded as bribes or extortions by those who are brought up in Chinese religious contexts, being unfamiliar with the Levitical presuppositions. To them, the notion of כפר is likely to be highly incomprehensible and even reprehensible. How can a person make an offering in order to avert or mitigate punishment? How can a deity who is just and fair accept such offerings? In Chinese popular religious contexts, these are no easy questions.

As I have pointed out, the cathartic power of purification and reparation offerings is lacking in Chinese popular religion. The complex and elaborated rituals function as a kind of penance and a passage to the reintegration of the guilt party to the community. In contrast, in Chinese popular religion, ritual offerings are not efficacious towards the absolution of sins and the resolution of guilt. Rather, there seems to be a concern over the lack of remorse and an emphasis on self-cultivation and accumulation of personal merits, which can be clearly seen in the purification rites for ghosts. In my opinion, the lack of guilt-resolving rituals for the worshippers constitutes a loophole in Chinese popular religion and invites other social or religious groups to fill the hole. When there is such a great emphasis on personal merits and afterlife retributive judgment, guilt is indeed an issue here.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abusch, Tzvi. 2002. Sacrifice in Mesopotamia. In *Sacrifice in Religious Experience*, edited by A. I. Baumgarten. Boston: Brill.
- Bell, Catherine. 1989. Religion and Chinese Culture: Toward an Assessment of "Popular Religion". *History of Religions* 29:35-57.
- Bosco, Joseph, and Puay-peng Ho. 1999. *Temples of the Empress of Heaven, Images of Asia*. Hong Kong; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Confucius. 1967. *Li Chi: Book of Rites*. 2 vols. Vol. II. New Hyde Park, New York: University Books.
- Feuchtwang, Stephan. 2001. *Popular Religion in China: The Imperial Metaphor*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon.
- Fowler, Jeaneane D., and Merv Fowler. 2008. *Chinese Religions: Beliefs and Practices*. Brighton; Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press.
- Gane, Roy. 2005. *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy*. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns.
- Goossaert, Vincent. 2005. Chinese Religion: Popular Religion. In *Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by L. Jones. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA.
- Harrell, C. Stevan. 1974. When a Ghost Becomes a God. In *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, edited by A. P. Wolf. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Jochim, Christian. 2003. Chinese Beliefs. In *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Death and Dying*, edited by R. Kastenbaum. New York: Macmillan Reference USA.
- Lai, Chi-tim. 2003. Hong Kong Daoism: A Study of Daoist Altars and Lü Dongbin Cults. *Social Compass* 50:459-470.
- . 2005. Cong Dajai Yishi Kan Daojiao Dui Siwang de Chuli (Understanding the Daoist Treatment on Death from the Purification Rites). In *Ningshi Siwang: Siyu Renjian de Duoyuan Shengsi*, edited by M. Liang and C. Zhang. Xianggang: Zhong Wen Da Xue Chu Ban She.
- Milgrom, Jacob. 1991. *Leviticus 1-16 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, The Anchor Bible*. New York: Doubleday.
- . 2007. Kipper. In *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, edited by M. Berenbaum and F. Skolnik. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA.
- Nyitray, Vivian-Lee. 2000. Becoming the Empress of Heaven: The Life and Bureaucratic Career

- of Mazu. In *Goddesses Who Rule*, edited by E. Benard and B. Moon. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Overmyer, Daniel L. 1986. *Religions of China: The World as a Living System, Religious Traditions of the World*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Sangren, P. Steven. 2000. *Chinese Sociologies: An Anthropological Account of the Role of Alienation in Social Reproduction*. London; New Brunswick, N.J.: The Athlone Press.
- Scott, Janet Lee. 2007. *For Gods, Ghosts and Ancestors : The Chinese Tradition of Paper Offerings*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Sklar, Jay. 2005. *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, and Atonement: The Priestly Conceptions*. Edited by D. J. A. Clines, J. C. Exum and K. W. Whitelam, *Hebrew Bible Monographs*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press.
- Szonyi, Michael. 2007. The Virgin and the Chinese State: The Cult of Wang Yulan and the Politics of Local Identity on Jinmen (Quemoy). In *Asian Ritual Systems : Syncretisms and Ruptures*, edited by P. J. Stewart and A. Strathern. Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press.
- University of Chicago. Oriental Institute., and Ignace Jay Gelb. 1956. *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*. Chicago: J. J. Augustin : Oriental Institute.
- Watson, James L. 2004. Standardizing the Gods: The Promotion of Tian Hou ("Empress of Heaven") along the South China Coast, 960-1960. In *Village Life in Hong Kong: Politics, Gender, and Ritual in the New Territories*, edited by J. L. Watson and R. S. Watson. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.
- Wolf, Arthur P. 1974. Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors. In *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, edited by A. P. Wolf. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Zhang, Huaicheng. 1998. *Tian Ren Zhi Bian: Zhongguo Chuantong Lunli Daode de Jindai Zhuaxing (The Change from Heaven to Human Being: Modern Transformation of Traditional Morality and Ethics in China)*. Changsha Shi: Hunan Jiao Yu Chu Ban She.