

Fall 2019 Arts of Asia Lecture Series  
Seeking the Divine: The Lesser-Known Religious Traditions of Asia  
*Sponsored by the Society for Asian Art*

**The Great Unnamed Religions of East Asia:  
Divine Presence, Numinous Power, and Magical Efficacy**

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It has become common for most general introductions to East Asian Religions to classify the religious landscape into distinct categories: Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and Shinto. This lecture will explore one of the lesser-known—but most significant—religious traditions of East Asia. That religion does not have a name, though it is sometimes referred to generally as “popular religion.” It is comprised of the religious practices found in homes and rural villages throughout East Asia. It is a hybrid form of religion that is not bound by exclusive affiliation with any one of the well-known religions but mixes them in the pursuit of that which is considered most efficacious (*ling*).

Prior to the arrival of the Western conceptions of religion in East Asia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century there was no term in any East Asian language for “religion.” This does not mean that there was no religion in East Asia, but once the term was introduced by the Jesuits it began to carry with it all the characteristics and elements of Western religions. One of the consequences of that characterization is that it profoundly impacted the ways that East Asian religions were initially described and studied by scholars. One of the divisions that was introduced was that between orthodox “religions” and heterodox “superstitions.” Religions were treated as separate entities—Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism—while everything else was considered to be the confused beliefs and practices of the benighted masses. The former made their way into history books and studies of religion, while the latter were either the focus of critique or merely ignored.

Well-known religions have their canonical texts preserved in printed canons that have survived to the present day, whereas information on the unnamed popular religions was largely preserved in handwritten manuscripts that did not circulate beyond a village, family, or religious lineage. There are many possible approaches to the study of the lesser-known unnamed religious traditions of East Asia, but this talk will focus on some new information that conjoins the study of art (primarily small wooden statues) and manuscripts. Such an approach has been made possible thanks to recent discoveries of handwritten manuscripts in the most unlikely of places: inside of popular religious statues. This talk will explore the ways that those manuscripts shine light on lesser-known religious practices that are not discussed in the texts of the well-known religions and how they also give voice to the people and traditions that were silenced or passed over in silence.

**Suggested Readings:**

- Alain Arrault, *A History of Cultic Images in China: The Domestic Statuary of Hunan*, trans. by Lina Verchery (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2019).
- Alain Arrault, “Analytic Essay on the Domestic Statuary of Central Hunan: The Cult to Divinities, Parents and Masters,” in *Journal of Chinese Religions* (2008): pp. 1-53.
- Catherine Bell, “Religion and Chinese Culture: Toward an Assessment of ‘Popular Religion,’” *History of Religions* 29, no. 1 (August 1989): 35–57.
- Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2006).
- Kenneth Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).
- Thomas David DuBois, *The Sacred Village: Social Change and Religious Life in Rural North China* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2005).
- Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2011).
- David Johnson, *Spectacle and Sacrifice: The Ritual Foundations of Village Life in North China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Asia Center, 2009).

- Jordan, David K., *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village* (Berkeley: Univ. Calif. Press, 1972).
- Lin Wei-Ping, *Materializing Magic Power: Chinese Popular Religion in Villages and Cities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015).
- James Robson, “How Important Is Religion in China?” in *The China Questions: Critical Insights into a Rising Power*, ed. Jennifer Rudolph and Michael Szonyi (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).
- James Robson, “Hidden in Plain View: Concealed Contents, Secluded Statues, and Revealed Religion,” in Paula Varsano, ed., *The Rhetoric of Hiddenness in Traditional Chinese Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), pp. 117-205.
- James Robson, “Brushes With Some ‘Dirty Truths’: Handwritten Manuscripts and Religion in China,” *History of Religions* 51:4, 317-343.
- Keith G. Stevens, “Altar Images from Hunan and Kiangsi” in *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 18 (1978): 41-48.
- Keith G. Stevens, *Chinese Gods: The Unseen World of Spirits and Demons* (London: Collins and Brown, 1997).
- Stephen F. Teiser, “Popular Religion,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 2 (May 1995): 378–95.

### Key Words:

[When two words are given and separated by a “/” the first is Chinese and the second is Japanese]

*zongjiao/shūkyō* 宗教: The terms in Chinese and Japanese used to render the term “religion”

*mixin* 迷信: superstition

*minjian xinyang* 民間信仰: popular religion (folk religion)

*ling* 靈: The notion that something is efficacious or numinous (imbued with spiritual potency)

Hunan 湖南: The province in south-central China where most of the statues I will discuss originated

*shenxiang* 神像: Images of divinities or divine images

*pratiṣṭhā*: Consecration ceremony done for monasteries, temples, and especially buddha-images in India

*kai Guang* 開光: “Opening the light [of the eyes]” or *dianyan* 點眼 “dotting the eyes”; the painting of the pupils of the statue’s eyes to “enliven” it as part of a consecration ritual.

*zōnai nōnyūhin* 像內納入品: The Japanese term for objects placed inside of statues

*pokchang* 腹藏: The Korean term for the practice of enshrining things inside of statues

*sheli/shari* 舍利: relics

*yuanwen/gammon* 願文: A vow text. Often found inside of Buddhist statues

*wuzang* 五臟: “five viscera” (heart, liver, spleen, lungs, kidneys). Symbolic versions are inserted in statues.

*yizhi* 意旨: A “consecration certificate”

*yao* 藥: *materia medica* placed inside of a statue

*fu* 符: talisman

Cultural Revolution: The period from 1966-1976 when religion in China was attacked as being a feudal superstition and many cultural relics (including Buddhist images) were destroyed