Transcending Boundaries: Blood Writing as a Catalyst for Transformation

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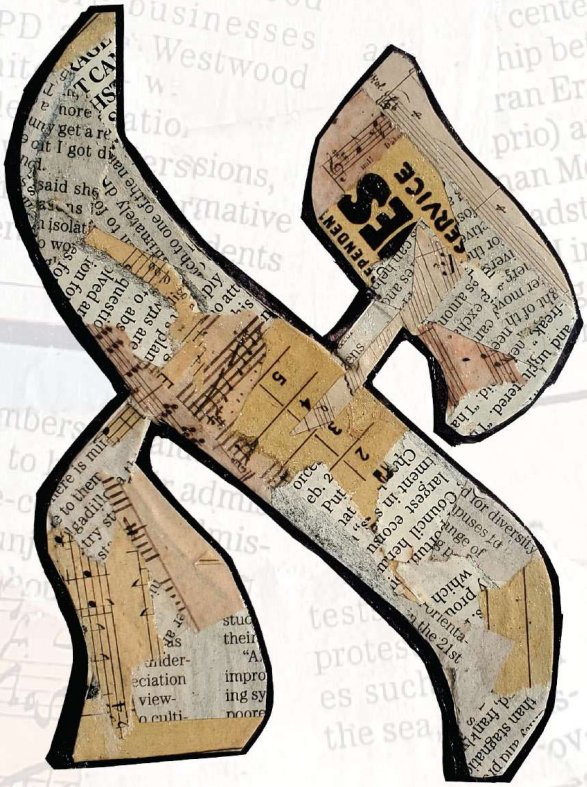

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Abstract: This paper delves into the practice of blood writing in Chinese Buddhism, a unique ascetic ritual dating back to the 6th century CE. Blood writing involves practitioners using their blood to transcribe sacred texts, both embodying sacred Buddhist scriptures and imbuing the practitioner with power. This work traces the origins of blood writing as a reflection of indigenous Chinese beliefs surrounding blood, the body, and morality while drawing attention to the influence of Indian Buddhist ideologies on this practice. Historical and ethnographic accounts of blood writing emphasize its transformative power, not only for individual practitioners but also for broader sociopolitical dynamics. Drawing on multiple embodiment theories, this work analyzes the performative nature of blood writing, highlighting its role in shaping cultural values and ideologies. Blood writing transcends conventional boundaries, embodying spiritual and cultural values, and ultimately serves as a potent force for socioreligious and political change.

Key Words: *Blood Writing, Buddhism, Asceticism, Embodiment, Socioreligious and Political Transformation*

Introduction

Blood writing, a Buddhist ascetic practice unique to China, is a captivating reflection of socio-religious change and political transformation within Chinese society. A mixture of indigenous Chinese beliefs and Buddhist philosophy imported from India, blood writing invokes the sanctity of Buddhist texts and the sacredness of blood in pre-Buddhist China. Practitioners engage in months of preparation, purifying their bodies and blood before the task. Over the course of days or weeks, they continuously leach their own blood, using it as ink to transcribe Buddhist sutras. Its widespread popularity and the diverse range of individuals engaging in this practice challenge the typical structures of Chinese society. This practice transcends the boundaries of the physical body. The body becomes the medium through which individual, societal, and universal change is enacted, holding broader implications for Buddhism and the cosmos. Practitioners immortalize the Buddha's teaching, symbolically provoking universal change, while simultaneously affecting real-life changes. This paper explores how blood writing embodies and influences perceptions of ritual, spiritual, and cultural values among its practitioners and the broader community.

Context and Background

The practice of blood writing can be traced back to the 6th century CE and is still practiced, albeit rarely, in the modern era (Kieschnick 2001). Kieschnick, a professor of Buddhist studies at Stanford University, argues that blood writing is unique to Chinese Buddhism and has no counterpart in the Buddhist traditions of other countries (2001). Its origins possibly came from a literal interpretation of multiple scriptures referencing bodhisattvas utilizing parts of their bodies to transcribe sutras. For example, the *Avatamsaka Sutra* describes how the Buddha Vairocana "peeled off his skin for paper, broke off a bone for a pen, and drew his own blood for ink" to copy scriptures (2001:179). To initiate the process, the practitioner will prick blood from their fingers (reflecting the importance of the written word), tongue

(the spoken word), or chest (close to the heart, the sincerity of their self-sacrifice), and the blood is sometimes mixed with ink or other materials (Yu, 2020). Due to the length of traditionally copied texts, blood writing is regarded as "a prolonged ritual practice… associated with intense self-sacrifice" (2020:2).

Pre-Buddhist China was no stranger to ascetic practice and ideology. For centuries before the introduction of Buddhism, self-denial was considered an essential part of self-cultivation and was extolled in indigenous belief systems. Notably, Confucianism's emphasis on the pursuit of moral perfection hinged on practitioners' willingness to forgo the pursuit of comfort, pleasure, and personal benefit (Eskildsen 2012). Similarly, Daoism enjoins followers to discard their attachments to material desires in order to achieve happiness. Somewhat paradoxically, the self-sacrificial aspect of ascetic practices was thought to bestow cosmic favor upon the practitioner. There are many examples in Chinese folklore and literature wherein, through self-sacrifice or even simply the intention, an individual is met with celestial reward (Eskildsen 2012). The sacrifice of the body symbolized the willingness to give up one's life; blood, which was symbolic of life force in pre-Buddhist China, was a vital ritual artifact (Yu 2020). However, the integration of Buddhist belief systems into indigenous Chinese beliefs promoted asceticism "in a manner and degree previously unknown to China" (Eskildsen 2012:451). With the introduction of blood writing, bodily harm transformed from an idiosyncratic, privately performed practice to a systematic performance conducted within well-defined guidelines (Eskildsen 2012). Thus, the practice of blood writing may seem anomalous, but careful consideration of the integration of indigenous Chinese belief systems with Buddhist ideology reveals that this is not the case.

The convergence of multiple factors of indigenous traditions, as well as cultural adaptations to Buddhist philosophy, resulted in the emergence of blood writing as an ascetic practice as well as an agent of ideological change. As a society that typically valorized the indigenous over the foreign, Buddhism's successful transplantation within Chinese culture relied upon generations of intercultural communications and "the ingenuity of Chinese

and foreign monks in making the doctrine adaptable to Chinese society" (Sen 2012). The combination of merit, self-sacrifice, and filial piety in indigenous Chinese belief systems generated and sustained blood writing as an extent of Buddhist beliefs, reflecting the blending of foreign and indigenous belief systems to create a practice unique to Chinese Buddhism.

Copying sutras to gain merit is common practice in Buddhist tradition, not limited to China. However, in Chinese interpretations, merit was not confined to the practitioner. These notions of merit echo Lobetti's description of the introversive and extroversive power that ascetic bodies provide, as the benefits of blood writing are transferred not only to the individual practitioner but also to the community as a whole (2013). Hanshan Deqing, a 16th-century monk, describes his personal experiences with blood writing:

> *On reading the vow of the great master Huisi of Nanyu, I vowed to make a copy of the Scripture of the Expanse of Buddhas of the Flower Adornment (i.e. the Avatamsaka) by mixing my own blood with gold. Above, this would tie me to the karma of prajna, and below it would repay my parents for their benevolence* (Kieschnick 2001:182).

Pre-Buddhist Chinese culture valued and admired self-sacrifice, especially if that sacrifice involved self-inflicted physical suffering. Confucius embedded the correlation between virtue and self-denial within Chinese culture with his proclamation that "the gentleman seeks neither a full belly nor a comfortable home" (Kieschnick 2001:186). Writing using one's blood requires not only the self-infliction of pain in acquiring the blood, but also symbolizes the leaching of one's life force to support a cause greater than the individual. The idea that copying sutras results in merit for oneself and typically one's parents is deeply entwined with the valorization of filial piety (Kieschnick 2001). This is reflected in myriad stories, which exist in pre-Buddhist and Buddhist traditions, wherein those who commit

some type of self-sacrifice are rewarded for their filial devotion with miracles. For example, one Buddhist story describes a man who copies the *Diamond* sutra in his blood upon the death of his mother. Immediately after completing the sutra, grass began to grow around his mourning hut, symbolizing good fortune (Kieschnick 2001).

Additionally, pre-Buddhist Chinese practices valued bloods having special properties that imbued it with power. Blood was considered a vital substance and associated with *ultra-yang*, the source of life itself (Yu 2020). In ritual contexts, blood was often "associated with the exorcistic and apotropaic powers that could keep the negative *yin* forces at bay," from pacifying demons to warding off disease and natural disaster (Yu 2020:2). Writing with one's blood was practiced in pre-Buddhist contexts to express one's sincerity, loyalty, and determination, especially within political contexts (Lu 2020). Traditional Chinese belief systems held dear the concept of morality, and especially of leading a moral life through constant self-improvement (Peters 2022). By combining their indigenous traditions with Buddhist concepts, Chinese Buddhists "could easily accommodate the idea that drawing one's blood was a noble sign of sincerity and determination", as well as contributing to the accumulation of merit, the demonstration of filial piety, and the adherence to self-sacrifice through physical pain which was already valorized in Chinese society (Kieschnick 2001:192-3).

Historical and Ethnographic Accounts

The account of Buddhist monk Dafang Shouye, recorded by Dr. Jimmy Yu, an ethnographer of Chinese Buddhism at Florida State University, describes a miraculous experience with blood writing. Shouye had copied the 80-volume, 600,000-character *Flower Ornament Scripture* using only the blood from his fingers and tongue (2020). He used scissors to cut open the tips of his fingers, and a razor blade to slice the underside of his tongue. To reduce fibrous blood clots, he shaved the blood with sandalwood. Writing an average of 1000 words per day, he spent four years processing the entire book, from 1936 to 1940. Shouye describes

an incident in the winter of 1939 wherein he was unable to produce more blood. He was diagnosed with severe anemia, told that he was on the verge of death, and warned that no medicine could heal him. For months, he did nothing but pray to Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva. The following spring, Shouye received a vision of the Bodhisattva and immediately experienced a providential recovery, finishing his manuscript within that year. Shouye's account emphasizes the moral power, honor, and self-sacrifice associated with blood writing, highlighting the significant power it holds to transform the self and its surroundings.

Beyond the ability to miraculously heal the body, blood writing is associated with the ability to "negotiate rebirth into the pure land, [attain] Buddhahood, defend the borders of religious orthodoxy, and even persuade the emperor to issue political amnesty" (Yu 2020:7). A famous historical account records how the 12-year-old son of a disgraced official wrote a letter to the emperor in his own blood pleading to reduce his father's sentence of execution (Kieschnick 2001). The sincerity of this act touched the emperor. He therefore decided to lighten the convicted man's sentence to banishment. Following the emperor's death, the father's previous role was reinstated. These stories carry into the modern era, such as the case of Lin Zhao, a university student incarcerated for her rightist views during the Cultural Revolution (Zhong 2004). During her imprisonment, Zhao penned multiple letters in her own blood,directly invoking the blood spilled by Mao's regime: "Our youth, passion, learning, idealism, and joy were all sacrificed to the terrible rule of this wicked tyranny. How can this not be blood?" (Zhong 2004:90). Zhao was later executed for her refusal to recant her rightist views and much of her writing remains censored. In a eulogy delivered by Qingdao University professor Tan Tianrong, Zhao's activism is characterized by blood: "The blood of a fragile woman is raising the consciousness of a nation" (Zhong 2004:91).

Interpretations of Accounts: Embodiment Theories

The embodiment of blood-writing practice is reflective of Buddhist and Chinese understandings of the body. In Buddhist

scriptures, the Buddha "shows obsessive attention to the body," and within various sutras "the manifold parts of the body are analyzed and dissected by the Buddha's surgical gaze" (Divino 2023). The body emerges not only as a physical entity but also "as a combination of processes or events" (Wujastyk 2009:198). In other words, one's experience of the world is dependent upon their cognitive experience of, and interactions with, external stimuli. Eva Kit Wah Man, professor emeritus of Chinese studies at Hong Kong Baptist University, provides a contrasting perspective: Confucian theories of the body, unlike Buddhist conceptions, "imply the inseparable relation of body and mind" (2019:36). There can be no body without the mind to experience it, and vice versa. Pre-Buddhist Chinese conceptions of the body emphasize the body as a combination of the conscious, physical, and sociocultural contexts that surround it (Man 2019). Indigenous Chinese and Buddhist theories conceptualize the body as a combination of embodied experiences, which exist only through the mind's interpretation. This is reflective of Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodiment, wherein perception is "the background against which all acts stand out and is thus presupposed by them" (1982:24). One's perception of the world is therefore not a passive reception of sensation, but an active, embodied engagement with one's surroundings.

The experiences of the body, rooted in the broader cultural context, shape an individual's perception of the world around them. Blood writing reflects this philosophy. By deliberately subjecting oneself to physical suffering, practitioners express their commitment to the Buddhist belief that the body is a vessel through which experience is interpreted and transformed. Deqing's accounts of his practice make clear that his purpose is "to exchange this illusory body for one that is permanent and adamantine" (Kieschnick 2001:188). Dahl echoes this notion with the assertion that ascetic bodies transcend the confines and frailties of humanity, becoming a "social process that outlasts the event of death" (2020). Blood writing, as an extension of all ascetic practices, is an attractive tool to ascend the limitations of the body, such as how Shouye transcended the limitations of his mortal illness by using his body to channel the Bodhisattva's

power. The body is thus not merely a physical entity, but a vehicle for profound spiritual change via the sensations and experiences inflicted upon it.

More than an embodied experience for the practitioner, blood writing is a performance that relies upon the physicality of its practice to effect religious and ideological change. Its materiality is not only present in the manuscript itself, but in the "constant state of interaction between [the practitioner] as its producer and these spectators as… witnesses" (Yu 2012:41). Performance necessitates the "transgression of social and political boundaries," and must also be "culture-bound, always related to the specificity of a particular context, situation, and circumstance" (Man 2019:85). Practitioners relied on blood writing as a means through which they could establish their subjectivity, whether as moral agents, devout Buddhists protecting their faith, or challengers of political authority, "literally [embodying] the holy teachings" (Yu 2020:3).

Mauss describes the body as an instrument: the techniques of the body– how an individual uses it to move and act– are a collection of actions that are constantly adapted toward a certain aim. Writing of bodily practices he observed in both India and China, he argues that "there are necessarily biological means of entering into 'communication with God'" (Mauss 1973:87). The body's ability to be "ontologically 'improved'" allows its transcendence to "something pure and holier" than "ordinary matter" (Lobetti 2013:119). This is only achievable through ascetic practice, which itself is inherently performative. Bodily practices, and the rituals which facilitate this embodiment, are necessary for the creation and maintenance of social, and religious, bonds. Rituals of the body are essential to transmit values, norms, and traditions across generations. Through the performance of blood writing, individuals both maintain pre-existing social orders that value such acts and create new systems of meaning through their bodies.

The Transformative Power of Blood Writing

Blood writing enacted sociopolitical and religious change

through its transgression of physical, social, and liminal boundaries, creating new ideological possibilities within Chinese culture. Blood writing "breaches the natural boundaries of the body," and can therefore be understood "as a form of social and ritual danger" (Yu 2020:3). This danger emanates from the bloodletting process, partly because of the real possibility of death, and partly due to its associations with violence and warfare (Yu 2012). The "pain and suffering associated with blood add insurmountable value to the letter," allowing the transcribed message to "become the testimony of truth" (Lei 2009:116). The medium of blood writing itself, its materiality and visceral, charges practitioners with the ability to approach, and even denounce, previously untouchable subjects.

Furthermore, the makeup of practitioners themselves reflects the transcendence of the strict hierarchical boundaries within Chinese society. Blood writing "crossed boundaries dividing monastic and lay, famous and obscure, man and woman" (Kieschnick 2001:178). This is significant because of the power associated with the practice, which could be generated not only for the individual practitioner but also those associated with them, from family to rulers. While other ritualistic practices were restricted to the religious and political elite, blood writing and its meritorious effects were available to any hopeful practitioner, erasing the worldly boundaries between human and holy. Among premodern Chinese, "it was mainly marginalized social and cultural groups that practiced tattooing, carving, mutilation, and other permanent bodily modifications," including the act of blood writing (Lei 2009:101). Thus, the association of power and prestige with blood writing allowed socially marginalized practitioners, such as women, laypeople, and political dissidents, the ability to align themselves with a higher social position. Lin Zhao and the disgraced official's son provided evidence of blood writing's transformative power within social, religious, and political contexts. In both examples, the act of writing with one's blood is the turning point that allows transformation (the martyrdom of a political dissident on the one hand, and the sparing of a parent's life on the other). The transcendence of social boundaries enacted by blood writing enabled practitioners

to critically engage with taboo ideologies, challenge authority figures, and upend the social order.

The transformative effects of blood writing are not limited to the material world. Blood writing transcends liminal boundaries, invoking the celestial through the infliction of potentially mortal injury. Within indigenous Chinese cosmology, the spiritual and natural dimensions are incorporated into "a comprehensive and integrated vision of the nature and function of humanity in the cosmos" (Peters 2022:1723). Humans, rather than passive objects in the universe, can enact broad changes. Chinese cosmology invokes a "sympathetically responsive cosmos," meaning that an action in one plane of existence (e.g., by the living) can affect multiple (e.g., affecting the dead) (Yu 2020:3). In this way, blood writing can be conceptualized as a sacred practice enacting physical and spiritual change. Its self-sacrificial aspect generates merit, which in turn generates power, affecting miracles and changing social relations. It is the visceral materiality of blood writing and its symbolic association with moral purity, political power, and social prestige within Chinese society that imbues practitioners with the agency to accomplish socioreligious and political change.

Conclusion

The themes explored in this paper are limited by the lack of attention on Buddhist Chinese asceticism in Western scholarship. Thus, this paper can incite further research on the topic of blood writing and its significance in premodern and modern China, with renewed focus on the incorporation of ethnographic accounts of practitioners themselves. While blood writing has waned in popularity in the 21st century, it has not completely died out and therefore merits continued research. Future directions include the interpretation and adaptation of blood writing in contemporary Chinese society. Non-religious applications of blood writing, such as in Zhao's political protest, may inspire further investigation of how the practice has taken on new meaning in response to sociopolitical and religious change. Additionally, in an era that tends to pathologize, rather than valorize, self-inflicted pain,

given the potential harm to blood writing practitioners, such practice provides an avenue to explore the ethical dimensions surrounding issues such as bodily autonomy and consent.

Blood writing transcends conventional boundaries of the self, society, and the universe, underscoring its power to enact transformative change. It embodies spirituality and cultural values, turning the human body into a powerful medium for affecting socioreligious and political change. Its continued practice affects and sustains societal change, transgressing typical boundaries and sustaining indigenous beliefs while incorporating foreign traditions. Blood writing is a form of embodied practice, using the body as a medium through which to enact these changes while also transcending the body itself. Ultimately, blood writing as a form of ascetic practice has profound impacts within and beyond Buddhism. While its primary purpose is to venerate and immortalize the Buddha's teachings, blood writing serves to symbolically provoke universal shifts in the cosmos, promote social changes, and imbue the practitioner and their desired recipients with transformative power. The significance of this work lies in its potential to shed light on the intricate intersections of spirituality, cultural dynamics, and individual agency. Understanding the multifaceted nature of blood writing as a millennia-old practice with deep roots in Chinese culture and immense social, political, and religious significance allows foreign audiences to appreciate, rather than disavow, practices that may otherwise seem fantastical and hard to be understood without the explanation. As an extension of this understanding, similarly stigmatized practices in other cultures may be viewed with more nuance, facilitating a broader comprehension of embodied practices and their enduring impact on societies.

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Author Bio

Ethan Lee is a senior transfer on track to graduate in 2024 with a B.A. in Anthropology. During his time at UCLA, he was involved in a number of research projects in various departments, including World Arts and Cultures, Engineering, and Sociology. Post-graduation, he plans on attending the University of Oxford to study an MSc in medical anthropology. His research interests include public health and bodily autonomy, with specific focus on bodily practices that challenge normative views of health and the body. Ethan envisions a career focused on human-centered research, with an emphasis on highlighting the crucial relationship between health preservation and autonomy.