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Five Entry Points of using CRTA as Research Roadmap

Q.J. Zheng

École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE-PSL)

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If the CRTA can be considered the brainchild of an international scholarly collaboration, it is now six years old, having been founded in December 2018. Led by a group of international scholars of Chinese religions¹ and sponsored by projects and institutions including FROGBEAR project², the University of Colorado, École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE-PSL), the University of Strasbourg³, and most recently, ANR⁴ and DFG⁵, CRTA has experienced rapid growth. It evolved from merely an idea among several scholars to an open-access, international, collaborative online database. By May 2024, it contained nearly 4,000 individual entries for Chinese religious texts and continues to grow daily through contributions from regular contributors.

As stated by the steering committee of the CRTA project, “The Chinese Religious Text Authority aims to connect bibliographic information across collections, archives, and private libraries in order to map out detailed webs of relationships among producers, publishers, and distributors of religious texts.”⁶ In the historical context, the CRTA project can be seen as a response to two recent trends in studies of Chinese religions. Firstly, a large number of religious literatures from the late imperial and modern periods have recently become widely accessible

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¹ We are very grateful to Simon Wiles for his help with the technical infrastructure and hosting the wiki for CRTA.

² From the Ground Up: East Asian Religions (FROGBEAR) project (University of British Columbia).

³ ITI HiSAAR : History, Sociology, Archaeology & Anthropology of Religions Interdisciplinary Thematic Institute of the University of Strasbourg.

⁴ Agence nationale de la recherche (ANR), France.

⁵ Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), Germany.

⁶ For more about CRTA, see <https://crtainfo.org>; and Gao Wansang 高萬桑 (Vincent Goossaert), “Zongjiao shuji guifan suoyin - CRTA jihua jianjie <宗教書籍規範索引>(CRTA)計劃簡介.” Goossaert, “Nouvelles Sources Religieuses Pour l’histoire de La Chine : Corpus, Méthodes et Questions.”

to scholars. This accessibility is partly due to extensive efforts to publish reprint collections⁷ and the digitization of many physical rare Chinese books preserved in libraries worldwide. Despite their availability, these texts have so far been studied by only a small number of specialists, with a large proportion remaining understudied and calling for scholarly attention. The second trend is the emergence of various digital tools and the flourishing field of digital humanities, which have demonstrated the fruitful research outcomes of international, collaborative, open-access online databases and tools. The CRTA project serves as one such digital tool for scholars to map out the contents, connections, and circulations of these vast numbers of religious texts. By pooling entries containing the bibliographical information of religious texts from various collections or textual affiliations together in one searchable database, scholars will be able to locate, read, and then find the hidden links between various texts. The collection and presentation of reliable bibliographic information of these texts, such as date, author, publisher, and place of publication, allow scholars to arrange these texts into a genealogical or geographical order so that they can trace the evolution of the creative processes and the geographical transmission of these texts. All data from the CRTA database is accessible and downloadable freely online. From this perspective, CRTA serves to bridge gaps between classical scholarship and digital humanities, decisively oriented toward the future.

Such large-scale, collaborative scholarly projects are not without their precedents. The CRTA project is reminiscent of previous scholarship in systematically indexing and providing bibliographical and research commentaries to Chinese religious texts. Two notable examples can be mentioned here: the Daozang 道藏 project, initiated by the late Kristofer Schipper in the late 1970s. With decades of hard work by an international team of scholars, *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang* (*Daozang Tongkao* 道藏通考) was published in 2004.⁸ The second example is *Chongkan Daozang jiyao tiyao* 重刊道藏輯要•提要, also an international collaborative project initially led by the late Monica Esposito and recently completed by Lai Chi-tim 黎志添, published in 2021.⁹ On one hand, the CRTA project continues such scholarly efforts, following this tradition in the study and organization of

⁷ Much efforts have been put into the collection, compilation, editing and publishing these highly valuable reprint collections, see in particular reprint collections published by Wang Chien-chuan 王見川, Fan Chun-wu 范純武, and their colleagues in Taiwan, many of which are currently being studied within the CRTA project.

⁸ Schipper and Verellen, *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang*.

⁹ Lai Chi Tim 黎志添, *Chongkan Daozang Jiyao Tiyao*.

scholarly knowledge on Chinese religious texts. On the other hand, the ongoing CRTA project expands its coverage beyond what is traditionally considered Daoist texts. The steering committee of the CRTA project innovatively includes collections of texts indifferent to their attributed identities or affiliations, whether they are Buddhist, Daoist, Confucian, sectarian, or otherwise defined in emic terms. It is worth mentioning and congratulating the impressive scale CRTA has already achieved, despite still being in its early stage. For the phase one corpus of texts in major reprint collections of more than 7,700 texts which it aims to create individual entries for, more than half of them have already been created by May 2024.

The objective of the CRTA project is not only to provide bibliographical references and scholarly content online for free. It has also been actively engaging and providing training to young scholars since its foundation in late 2018. Annual workshops have been organized regularly since 2019, either online (due to the restrictions posed during the pandemics) or on-site.¹⁰ A new generation of scholars has been, and will continue to be, trained through their participation in this project by reading, analyzing, and indexing texts. These workshops also encourage sharing, discussing, and collaborating academically among participants, through which previously undiscovered associations are revealed, new knowledge of religions in China is generated, and international friendships among scholars are formed through collaboration during the workshops.

The project has been led by a group of international specialists in the field of Chinese religions, from whom participants have greatly benefited from their individual specialties shared throughout the workshops. The CRTA project thus builds upon an impressive intellectual reservoir from established and emerging scholars in the study of Chinese religions. From my perspective as a student participant, “From the ground” is indeed a justified description of the state of my own understanding about Chinese religions at the beginning. I have been very fortunate and grateful to have participated in the annual workshops organized by the project and involved in data collection tasks. My own research projects have thus benefited a great deal thanks to this experience. This essay is by no means an attempt to replicate this rich experience, which is certainly beyond what words can describe; however, I hope it serves as

¹⁰ We are extremely grateful to Daniela Campo and Vincent Goossaert for their organization of CRTA workshops, and for their wonderful hospitality in Paris in 2023 and 2024.

an overview of my own journey with the CRTA project in the last few years. It is my wish that it could serve as a useful introduction to other scholars in the field of Chinese religions, who are not yet familiar with, but could potentially benefit from participating in the CRTA project.

Through my personal experience, the CRTA database could be accessed through at least five interconnected entry points for research purposes, which I summarize as: Persons, Localities, Gods, Texts, and Press. I will give a brief introduction to each point in turn in this essay, bearing in mind that we will soon discover that the five entry points are in fact intimately related to each other and cannot be discussed in isolation. I will then demonstrate with case studies how I myself utilized the CRTA database through these entry points as a research roadmap.

Persons

By using the “associated Persons 有關人物” search function in the CRTA database, scholars can often uncover lesser-known primary sources linked to figures they are studying. These sources sometimes document aspects of their lives previously overlooked in existing historiography. For example, the plurality of religious identification and affiliation is most evident during the transitional periods from the late imperial to the Republican periods. Studies on the religious culture of these individuals can inform us about how they understood the religious world around them,¹¹ help provide examples of what religious identities and affiliations meant for them, and demonstrate how these labels actually functioned on the ground during this period. Certain individuals also serve as key nodes in the social network of their milieu, crucial in shaping the religious discourse and practices of others around them.

One such figure I have studied is Wang Yiting 王一亭 (Wang Zhen 王震, 1867-1938),¹² an influential industrialist, philanthropist, and artist, who was ordained in both the Daoist Longmen 龍門 lineage and the Buddhist Nanpin lineage 南屏派 of the Jigong 濟公 cult. His example demonstrates the religiosity and impact of charismatic figures during transitional periods in early 20th century China. I found a particular text on CRTA, *Chongjian Jinling Yuxu*

¹¹ Goossaert, “Yu Yue (1821–1906) explore l’au-delà: La culture religieuse des élites chinoises à la veille des révolutions.” English Version see Goossaert, “Yu Yue (1821-1906) Explores the Other World: Religious Culture of the Chinese Elites on the Eve of the Revolutions.”

¹² More on Wang Yiting, See Katz and Goossaert, *The Fifty Years*. Chapter 6.

guan jishi zhengxin lu 重建金陵玉虛觀紀事徵信錄,¹³ a rich historical document detailing the reconstruction of the Yuxu temple 玉虛觀 led by Wang Yiting and his philanthropy group Jishenghui 濟生會 in Nanjing during the 1930s. While the relation between the reconstruction of Buddhist temples and their revival during this period is well documented and studied,¹⁴ the equivalent for the reconstruction and reconfiguration of Daoist temples in the same period is much less studied in detail. Thanks to CRTA's comprehensive listings, not only was this document found in two major reprint collections on CRTA's catalogue, but this source was also identified as a text linked to Wang Yiting. The study on Wang Yiting offered insights into the intricate interactions among industries, philanthropy, and religion in Republican China. Through the digital analytical tool inspired by the work of Marcus Bingenheimer,¹⁵ one of the steering committee members and an instructor of CRTA, I've also applied social network analysis to the contents of this material as an exercise, through which I was able to identify key individuals in this reconstruction project, and the mechanisms of their fundraising activities.

This material could also be examined from the perspective of the press that published it. It was printed by the "Three Friends Industrial Company" (Sanyou shiye she 三友實業社), which is a case study of particular interest concerning the press in early 20th century China. "Three Friends" is, in fact, a textile company, more commonly known for the patriotic actions of its founder, Chen Wanyun 陳萬運 (Chen Manyun 陳曼雲, 1885-1950) during the "Incident of Japanese monks" 日僧事件 which soon led to the January 28th Incident 一二八事變 in 1932 in Shanghai. Further studies have shown that the involvement of "Three Friends" in printing religious texts was not a one-off instance. Their commitment to religious groups is substantiated by their printing of other texts related to Jishenghui's activities, such as the gazetteer *Jishi tayuanzhi* 濟師塔院志.¹⁶ The example of the company-cum-press "Three Friends" reveals an example of atypical involvement of a secular company in religious

¹³ *Chongjian Jinling Yuxu Guan jishi zhengxinlu* 重建金陵玉虛觀紀事徵信錄 [Chronicle of the Reconstruction of the Jinling Jade Void Monastery], Wang Lianyou 王蓮友, ed., 1936, in *Zhongguo daoguanzhi congkan xubian* 中國道觀志叢刊續編, Yangzhou: Guangling shushe, 2004, vol. 15.

¹⁴ Scott, *Building the Buddhist Revival*.

¹⁵ On the recent special issue of articles on Historical Network Analysis edited by Marcus Bingenheimer. See Bingenheimer, "Special Issue 'Historical Network Analysis in the Study of Chinese Religion'—Introduction."

¹⁶ Shanghai Jiyunxuan 上海集雲軒, ed. *Jishi tayuanzhi* 濟師塔院志 (1939). In Bai Huawen 白化文 et al., eds., *Zhongguo Fosizhi congkan xubian* 中國佛寺志叢刊續編, vol. 6. Yangzhou: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 2001.

endeavors, in particular serving as one of the Buddhist and Redemptive society presses in the early 20th century.¹⁷ We will discuss this further in the following section on the press.

Locality

The “Locality” entry point in the CRTA aims to explore the spatial dimensions of Chinese religions. Here, “locality” is defined broadly, encompassing not only local temples and monasteries within provincial administrative boundaries but also sacred sites, mountains, and other natural landmarks in specific regions. Sacred sites are integral to religious practices, serving as centers for pilgrimage and community rituals. These sites reflect the spatial dimension of religiosity, and the physical spaces contribute to the religious experience and identity formation of the pilgrims, making them deserving of in-depth study.

On CRTA, locality can be explored in various ways, one of which is through its collection of Buddhist and Daoist mountain and temple gazetteers, which the CRTA database includes abundantly from recent reprint collections. While seminal studies have so far largely focused on local gazetteers,¹⁸ Buddhist gazetteers,¹⁹ there are no fewer than 120 Daoist gazetteers that remain largely unexplored.²⁰ These gazetteers have long served as repositories of local histories and religious discourses, representing a significant corpus for the study of local religious historiography.²¹ Far from being mere religious texts, they include poetry, essays, historical events, inventories of smaller sacred sites or temples, accounts of flora and fauna, and illustrated maps, making them holistic chronicles of the environments of sacred sites. Thus, these gazetteers also serve as important sources for studying the ecological and economic aspects of local life.

Through our studies of these materials, it has become clear that these gazetteers are not static records, but rather, they are living documents that are often edited, updated, and sometimes

¹⁷ Scott, “Conversion by the Book”; Scott, “Navigating the Sea of Scriptures: The Buddhist Studies Collectanea, 1918–1923.”

¹⁸ Dennis, *Writing, Publishing, and Reading Local Gazetteers in Imperial China, 1100-1700*.

¹⁹ Bingenheimer, *Island of Guanyin*.

²⁰ One recent example of using various editions of mountain gazetteers *Longhushan zhi* 龍虎山志, see Goossaert, *Heavenly Masters*.

²¹ Brook, *Geographical Sources of Ming-Qing History*; Hahn, “Formalisierter Wilder Raum”; Hahn, “Daoist Sacred Sites.”

abridged in response to their times and social contexts. This reflects a dynamic interaction between religious discourse and their respective locales. When we study the persons behind the gazetteers, in connection with the first entry point “Person” mentioned earlier, we will soon realize that the production and circulation of these gazetteers are not abstract concepts. Rather, every step of this process is the result of concerted efforts by religious specialists, locals, and various “intermediaries of religious culture,”²² who often transcend local, cultural, or confessional confines. Beginning in the late imperial period, when these gazetteers were produced in large numbers, the production of gazetteers increasingly attracted broader patronage and readership beyond their immediate locality, with consequential outcomes. The construction of local historiography is thus often of a trans-local nature, contributing to an expanded network of branch sites and pilgrimage associations from afar, thus creating a shared regional religious culture.

The study of the publication and circulation of mountain gazetteers also highlights the importance of roles beyond authors and compilers. Previous scholarship, which often focused on texts with identifiable sole authors, has overlooked the significance of intermediaries such as prefacers, signatories, funders, distributors, intellectuals, critics, publishers, contemporary scholars, and translators, and readers in the broader context of the exchanges of religious cultures. The examples of the genre of mountain gazetteers call for scholarly attention to the collaborative group efforts that contribute to the production and distribution of religious texts.

Prefacers of religious texts, for instance, play crucial roles in framing and contextualizing these texts. Not only do their prefaces give authority and prestige to the texts, but they also provide readers with the necessary background to engage with the texts.²³ They are thus capable of significantly influencing the reception and understanding of religious texts, facilitating the transmission of religious knowledge, and providing social contexts for these publications.

²² My notion of “intermediaries of religious culture”, as a network of actors involved in the production and circulation of religious goods and services, in the context of a shared religious culture and expanding cultural economy in modern China, is inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s work on taste and cultural consumption, especially his definition of “cultural intermediaries”, see Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

²³ Prefaces can be viewed as a mechanism for transferring symbolic capital from the prefacer to the text. French sociologist Gisèle Sapiro has examined the production and dissemination of works translated into French from other languages during the contemporary period (2003-2013). In her study, she identifies three distinct editorial strategies employed in the preface of these works: general (and commercial) logic, academic logic, and political logic. See Sapiro, “L’américanisation des sciences humaines et sociales françaises ?”

Additionally, lists of signatories, often as funders and contributors to collaborative projects, highlight the communal efforts behind publication. These contributors, often simultaneously also distributors and promoters, play an important part in the circulation of such texts. They thus serve as proselytizers and promoters of moral discourse, religious practices, or sacred sites, depending on the nature of the texts. Furthermore, the fact that many texts are the joint efforts of divine authors and human mediums, calling for ethical and moral perfection in their content, suggests a shared message between the celestial and human worlds.

In contemporary religious texts, the roles played by scholars or translators should not be underestimated. Until the early 20th century, many rare editions of Chinese religious texts preserved in overseas libraries were initially collected by missionaries who later became scholars and translators of these texts. The follow-up scholarship on these texts depends significantly on their availability, which is predetermined by the initial selection by these primary acquirers. While many of the rare sources are valuable and certainly worthy to be studied, it is also prudent to situate texts within their original social contexts of production and circulation.

On the other hand, readers are not merely passive recipients of religious texts. They play a proactive role in their interpretation, constructing personal and communal meanings for these texts and sharing these interpretations with other readers. This active engagement contributes to the living tradition of these texts, ensuring their relevance and resonance across different generations and social contexts.

The contemporary production of religious texts in digital formats also illustrates proactive adaptation of classical texts in the digital era. The German team of the CRTA project, led by Philip Clart, is particularly focused on contemporary digital production, aiming to answer central questions about textual continuity and innovation in religious identity formation from the age of print to the digital age.²⁴

²⁴ Clart, “Mediums and the New Media: The Impact of Electronic Publishing on Temple and Moral Economies in Taiwanese Popular Religion”; Clart, “New Technologies and the Production of Religious Texts in China, 19th–21st Century.”

Gods

Exploring the subject of “Gods,” case studies on specific deities can help illustrate the diverse ways deities are consecrated, understood, represented, and venerated in various religious texts and practices. There exist various approaches to studying Chinese gods, including recent monographs focusing on Guan Yu²⁵ and the Gods of Mountain Tai.²⁶ In recent decades, scholars have also increasingly noted the existence of large quantities of texts written through spirit-writing, attributed to the gods themselves as divine authors.²⁷

One of the cases I’ve studied is Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 (181-234 CE), a well-known historical figure from the Three Kingdom period, who has undergone a historical transformation from a mortal historical figure to a deity within Chinese popular religion. My research aims to answer questions about the construction of his Daoist persona, the actors responsible for constructing this persona, and the various ways this persona is manifested and propagated within society.²⁸

Building on previous scholarship on the social networks of spirit-writing gods,²⁹ I was able to locate many primary sources already included in the CRTA corpus online, outside of traditional official historical records related to Zhuge Liang. Indeed, despite the portrayal of Zhuge Liang in Luo Guanzhong³⁰ (羅貫中, fl. 14th century)’s *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*sanguo yanyi* 三國演義), which significantly amplified his persona by introducing supernatural elements, it was through locating spirit-written texts and prophecy texts related to Zhuge Liang on CRTA that I understood his historical achievements and strategic acumen laid the groundwork for his posthumous veneration. In the spirit-written texts, the divine persona of Zhuge Liang was constructed as an authoritative figure whose wisdom transcends his historical context. The

²⁵ Ter Haar, *Guan Yu: The Religious Afterlife of a Failed Hero*.

²⁶ Naquin, *Gods of Mount Tai*.

²⁷ Goossaert, *Making the Gods Speak*; Schumann and Valussi, *Communicating with the Gods*.

²⁸ I am very grateful to Elena Valussi, Stefania Travagnin and Yan Yiqiao for their organization and invitation to participate the first online graduate symposium of “Mapping Religious Diversity in Modern Sichuan” project on 6-7 May 2023, kindly sponsored by the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange. This event provided me with excellent occasions to engage with other scholars on the religious culture in Sichuan. I am grateful to Elena Valussi and Volker Olles for their incisive critiques and suggestions, and to other conference participants for their comments.

²⁹ Goossaert, “The Social Networks of Gods.”

³⁰ Roberts, *Three Kingdoms*.

emphasis on Zhuge Liang's abilities in divination³¹ and strategy in these narratives not only highlights his exceptional skills but also legitimized his status as a deity who possesses insights beyond the human world. The novelist Luo Guanzhong is only one of the major agents in constructing Zhuge Liang's divine persona, other than emperors, literati, Daoists, poets, spirit-writing altars and sectarian members, who have all involved in adding new elements to his divine persona. The multiple facets of this persona are manifested through various venues, such as the Zhuge Liang's tomb, local shrines and temples, folklore, ritual theatre, spirit-writing texts and prognostic methods, which all contributed to the longevity of his legends and the dynamic, evolving yet coherent divine persona.

Texts

CRTA employs a broad definition of religious texts, including genres that are not specifically linked to any particular institutions and possess a non-canonical status, yet have circulated widely across Chinese societies. The database hosts a vast collection encompassing doctrinal texts, hagiographies, morality books, self-cultivation manuals, liturgical manuals such as scriptures, litanies, and precious scrolls (*baojuan* 寶卷), as well as temple and mountain gazetteers, divine revelations (spirit-written texts), divine codes, popular "catechisms," complete book-styled (*quanshu* 全書) canons, periodicals, and new media. This entry point of texts thus offers an overview of the diversity and evolution of religious literature and its impact on societal norms and values.³²

One central tenet of the CRTA project is to systematically study different genres of religious texts that are still understudied, such as morality books, precious scrolls, and sectarian texts. For example, the genre of precious scrolls was the theme of the 2022 CRTA workshop. Participants were taught by specialists on this genre, each sharing specific case studies.³³ We

³¹ Schonebaum, "Fiction and Divination."

³² Clart, Ownby, and Chien-chuan, *Text and Context in the Modern History of Chinese Religions: Redemptive Societies and Their Sacred Texts*.

³³ For example the work by Katherine Alexander, steering committee, instructor and contributor for CRTA project, see Alexander, "Virtues of the Vernacular: Moral Reconstruction in Late Qing Jiangnan and the Revitalization of Baojuan"; Alexander, "Conservative Confucian Values and the Promotion of Oral Performance Literature in Late Qing Jiangnan: Yu Zhi's Influence on Two Appropriations of Liu Xiang Baojuan"; Alexander, "The Precious Scroll of Liu Xiang: Late Ming Roots and Late Qing Proliferation"; Alexander, "An Excerpt from The Precious Scroll of Liu Xiang."

are able to deepen our understanding on authorship, textual characteristics, narrative strategies, and potential readership.

For instance, in my own study, I compared the contents and performances of three types of ritual texts related to the Daoist sacred mountain Maoshan 茅山, involving scriptures (jing 經), litanies of repentance (chan 懺), and precious scrolls (*baojuan* 寶卷).³⁴ These ritual texts demonstrate two textual and ritual strategies based on targeted audiences and objectives. Scriptures and litanies of repentance are shorter and less complex but are formulated in a learned and sometimes esoteric language, requiring literal memorization by their literate audience, including religious specialists. These texts, usually written in Classical Chinese, employ a ritual register with abundant archaic elements, making them opaque even to modern readers. However, comparing these liturgical texts with other genres can often reveal the origins of their vocabularies, always pointing back to earlier sources. We can see that the veneration and conservation of the textual tradition in China is indeed the very source of its textual innovations in response to the societal changes in subsequent periods.

Conversely, the vernacular stories contained in precious scrolls are much longer, more complex, and dramatized, maximizing their appeal to audiences more receptive to oral performances. While scriptures and litanies aim to promote self-cultivation for transcendence and salvation among the literate, precious scrolls aim to proselytize by retelling gods' stories to the local population in a public setting. This objective determines that these scrolls incorporate local elements that resonate with the audience, sometimes even entertaining them. The difference in objectives thus influences the modes of learning, transmission, and ritual performance, with one focusing on memorization and the other on creative content modification to fit local customs and interests.

Press

The final entry point, "Press," relates to the production and circulation of religious books,³⁵ focusing particularly on the roles played by traditional morality presses (*shanshu ju* 善書局),

³⁴ Goossaert and Berezkin, "The Three Mao Lords."

³⁵ Clart and Scott, *Religious Publishing and Print Culture in Modern China : 1800-2012*.

scripture shops (jingfang 經房), and contemporary religious publishing centers. This aspect of the study reveals that despite the interplay between traditional religious practices and new printing technologies, there exists a dual model of circulation for religious texts produced. On one hand, market forces drive the economic incentives, determining the success and circulation of religious books based on commercial success and profitability. On the other hand, religious books also hold intrinsic value as cultural goods for the literate, as messages from gods, as vectors of merits-making.³⁶

Religious books are significant within Chinese religious tradition, valued for their contributions to the cultural, moral, and religious life of individuals or communities, beyond mere commercial value. The reproduction of texts is intimately related to merit-making, acts of religious devotion aimed at accumulating merits, leading to benefits and good fortune in this life or the afterlife. Since the medieval period, hand-copying religious scriptures was considered meritorious and conducive to healing illnesses or blessing the recently deceased.³⁷ This practice of producing and circulating religious books as part of merit-making, repentance, therapeutic healing procedures, or funeral rituals has persisted even with the widespread use of woodblocks or printing machines since the 20th century.

Presses for religious books thus play a crucial role in the study of Chinese religions on multiple levels: they contribute significantly to the formation of religious identities and affiliations, act as mediums for transmitting religious knowledge and values across generations, and aid in constructing regional religious cultures. Through the compilation the press responsible for thousands of religious texts, we are able to map key publishing centers, many are concentrated within the lower Yangtze region, such as Suzhou, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Wuxi, Ningbo and since the early 20th century, Shanghai. Meanwhile, we have also important religious presses in Beijing, Liaoning and Chengdu, each with their own unique characteristics and social contexts for religious publishing. With growing data on CRTA, especially the search function of “Place(s) of Publication 出版地區” of these texts, we will be able to learn more about the identity and their publishing activities of presses for religious books, including their financial resources,

³⁶ Clart, “Merit beyond Measure: Notes on the Moral (and Real) Economy of Religious Publishing in Taiwan.”

³⁷ Barrett, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing*.

distribution networks, and commercial strategies employed which facilitates the printing, publication and dissemination of religious texts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the CRTA database, through its five strategic entry points, offers a dynamic and comprehensive framework for the in-depth analysis of Chinese religious texts. Personally, the inclusivity, breadth, and open-access nature of CRTA have enabled me to engage with research with agility, diversity and creativity, exploring new frontiers and navigating uncharted territories in studies on Chinese religions. Yet, the value of CRTA extends far beyond individual scholarly pursuits; it enriches our collective understanding of religious identities, local societies, and value systems spanning from late imperial to contemporary China. As pointed out by Vincent Goossaert, engaging with the vast corpus of texts within CRTA prompts us to reevaluate our perspectives on “systems of values and visions of society”, since “it would be difficult to find a subject of debate within society that has not been appropriated and extensively argued within religious groups, often through the voice of the gods.”³⁸ I sincerely hope that more scholars and collaborators will join us in this exciting journey to deepen our understanding of premodern and modern Chinese society. Your participation will not only contribute to this rich academic endeavor but also propel it forward, helping to uncover the history of Chinese religious life within, and beyond these texts.

³⁸ Goossaert, “Nouvelles Sources Religieuses Pour l’histoire de La Chine : Corpus, Méthodes et Questions.”

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