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Popular Buddhist Ritual in Contemporary Hong Kong: *Shuilu Fahui*, a Buddhist Rite for Saving All Sentient Beings of Water and Land[1]

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ABSTRACT: *Shuilu fahui* (水陸法會) is a Buddhist rite for saving all sentient beings (*pudu*, 普度) with a complex layer of ritual activities incorporating elements of all schools of Chinese Buddhism, such as Tantric *mantra*s, Tian Tai rituals of asking for forgiveness (*chanfa,* 懺法), and Pure Land reciting of Amitābha's name. The ritual can be dated to the Northern Song Dynasty (*c.* 995 CE) and has been one of the most spectacular and popular rituals in Chinese Buddhism. *Shuilu fahui* is still performed in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, and continues to be very popular amongst such Chinese communities. This study is an aid to understanding how Chinese Buddhism is practised by monks and nuns in Hong Kong, and how they interact with lay Buddhists through *Shuilu fahui*. This rite constructs and represents a unified religious world that contains many important and profound religious meanings, and it continuous to develop in order to accommodate the various demands of people in Hong Kong.

INTRODUCTION

Shuilu fahui (水陸法會) 'Ceremony for (Beings of) Land and Water', the Chinese Buddhist rite for saving (*pudu*, 普度) all sentient beings from *saṃsāra*, is one of the most spectacular and popular rituals in Chinese Buddhism. Dating from as far back as the Northern Song Dynasty (around 995 CE), it is still performed in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, where it continues to be very popular amongst Chinese communities. The full name of *shuilu fahui* is *Fajie Shengfan Shuilu Dazhai Pudu Shenghui* (法界聖凡水陸大齋普度勝會), 'The Most Excellent Ceremony in Which All Enlightened (and Unenlightened) Beings of Land and Water (are Invited to Attend to) Share a Great Meal to Aid Liberation (from *Saṃsāra* Without Restrictions or Discrimination)'. As defined in the *shuilu* ritual text edited by

1. Based on a paper given at the July 2006 'Buddhism and Popular Culture' conference of the UK Association for Buddhist Studies, at Lancaster University.

Master Fayu (法裕法師) in 1924,[2] it is a ritual that invites all enlightened and unenlightened beings to attend a ceremony and share a great meal, focusing not only on food bestowal but also on the reciting of many *sūtra*s and *mantra*s, and the preaching of a sermon to all sentient beings attending the ceremony, in the hope of saving all sentient beings and helping them finally escape from *saṃsāra*. *Shuilu fahui* is intended to prevent the suffering of all sentient beings, not only the hungry ghosts[3] or Buddhists' deceased relatives; in short, the ritual is a conglomeration of many different rituals in the Chinese Buddhist tradition with the ultimate aim of saving all sentient beings from *saṃsāra.*

In contemporary Hong Kong, *shuilu fahui* is performed on a very large scale every year in many monasteries, with more than seventy monks invited to perform the ritual. Some monasteries also occasionally organize the ritual to raise funds or celebrate an opening or the completion of reconstruction work. The Hong Kong *shuilu* typically lasts at least seven days and nights, and vegetarian food must be supplied to the deities, the ghosts and all the participants during the ritual period. The *shuilu fahui* includes a complex layer of ritual activities that take place at two different sites, the inner altar (*neitan,* 內壇), which is divided into the upper hall (*shangtang,* 上堂) and the lower hall (*xiatang,* 下堂), and the outer altar, which consists of nine different altars where many different rituals are performed, such as the confessional ritual, offerings made to the deities and the Three Jewels (*gongyang,* 供養), food bestowal (*shishi,* 施食) to the hungry ghosts, and the reciting of different *sūtra*s for both the spirits and the participants. By performing all these rites it is hoped that merit will be cultivated by the ritual masters and the participants for all suffering beings, to assist them to become free from *saṃsāra*. *Shuilu fahui* is believed to contribute significantly to the quelling of physical, mental and emotional unrest, and to offer healing to both the individual and the wider community. Understanding the interaction between the monastic members, the lay Buddhists and society at large offers an explanation of why holding this ritual not only provides a mechanism for Buddhists to offer salvation to their deceased family members, but also a means whereby the monasteries have a greater involvement in Hong Kong society. This article will explore in greater depth the diverse functions of the *shuilu fahui* including the religious, social, cultural, economic and political functions it serves.

I would like first to examine its current popularity and why performances of the ritual have become more frequent. Rising numbers of participants indicate that the popularity of the ritual has grown in Hong Kong in recent years. Between 1920 and 1975, performances were rare because there were too few monks who knew its special chanting techniques, which differ from those of mainstream Chinese Buddhist ritual. Moreover, economic conditions after the Second World

2. Fa Yu (1970, first fascicle, 15–16).
3. The term 'hungry ghosts' refers to a state of being characterized by the suffering of discontentment, emotional and spiritual hunger, and a yearning for peace and rest ('*Preta*' in Fo Guang Shan 2002, 341).

War were unstable in Hong Kong, so *shuilu* performances lacked sponsorship and support. Finally, most Hong Kong monastery halls were too small for its performance. The lack of ritual masters, resources, support and suitable venues meant that until the 1980s only a few performances took place. The liberalization of China and Hong Kong's increasingly prosperous economic climate made it possible for more performances to be organized from 1980 onwards, and since 1991 three monasteries have organized an annual *shuilu*, with some seven monasteries organizing the ritual every year since 2004. When I investigated the *shuilu* performance at Chi Lin Nunnery, the nuns informed me that 81 new inner altar participants had joined the ritual for the first time, and the number of outer altar participants and spirit tablets also increases every year, numbers that all indicate the increasing popularity of this large-scale ritual.

Shuilu fahui is an efficient way for monasteries to raise money from the participants' donations when they install a spirit tablet for their deceased relatives at the altars. *Shuilu fahui* at Baolian Chan Monastery (寶蓮禪寺) in 2005 illustrates this: participants installing a spirit tablet at the inner altar paid at least $HK8,000 (around £500).[4] The total profit from the spirit tablets of the inner altar was around $HK 8.95 million (around £630,000). The profits from all spirit tablets of the outer altar was $HK 1.9 million (around £137,000), while the total profits raised by spirit tablet payments was around $HK 19.8 million (around £1.4 million). A volunteer hinted that the *shuilu* has raised several million Hong Kong dollars net profit for Baolian Chan Monastery since 1992. Some participants also donate money to provide a meal for participants and monks during the ritual. The *shuilu fahui* is the only ritual that enables the monasteries to raise so much money. (See below, p. 99, on the charitable use of such funds.)

SHUILU FAHUI AS AN AID TO ATTAINING THE WESTERN PURE LAND AND *NIRVĀṆA*

The ritual is seen to save all kinds of sentient beings from *saṃsāra* and its sufferings, not only hungry ghosts and deceased family members of Buddhists. The ritual focuses on all ten categories of suffering beings: (1) the deceased spirits of all emperors, all government civil servants and of both Buddhist and Taoist priests; (2) the spirits of all humans; (3) the semi-heavenly beings (*asura,* 阿修羅); (4) the deceased founders of all the schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism; (5) *Yama* and the ten kings of the purgatorial court of the netherworld; (6) all hell beings; (7) all animals; (8) all spirits in the intermediate state of existence between death and reincarnation (*antarā-bhava*, 中陰身); (9) all deceased spirits of the relatives of *shuilu* participants in this life and previous lives; and (10) all deceased monastic members of the local monastery. All these beings are accommodated in the lower

4. The exchange rate in December 2005 was about 1GBP = 15 HK dollar.

hall of the inner altar during the ritual.[5] *Shuilu fahui* does not, however, neglect other beings in *saṃsāra,* including: (1) gods of the celestial bureaucracy[6] (including the heavenly beings from the 'four meditation heavens' [*sichan tian,* 四禪天], 'six heavens of desire' [*liuyu tian,* 六欲天] and the chief Taoist deity Cheung Tao Ling [張道陵]); (2) gods of the terrestrial bureaucracy (including the gods of Tai Mountain, rains, wind, and sea and city gods [*chenghuang*, 城隍]). It is believed that all these beings can have better lives by gaining merit by assisting the *buddha*s and *bodhisattva*s to save the suffering beings, although they are still living in *saṃsāra*. According to Chinese Buddhism, suffering is caused by negative karma, and sentient beings can avoid continuance in *saṃsāra* and achieve rebirth in the Western Pure Land through confession and merit cultivation. In this ceremony, the first step must be asking for forgiveness (*chanhui,* 懺悔). In the ritual of asking for forgiveness, the negative karma of all sentient beings is eliminated, including those of the participants and other sentient beings in *saṃsāra*. The second stage is the cultivation of merit by releasing animals, reciting *sūtra*s, ceaselessly reciting the name of Amita Buddha, presenting offerings to the Three Jewels, and bestowing food on all spirits. Finally, the monks dedicate and transfer merit to all sentient beings to help them gain rebirth in the Western Pure Land. *Shuilu fahui* is thus seen to achieve its goal of saving all sentient beings by helping them to eliminate their negative karma and accumulate immense merit during the seven-day ritual period.

Nevertheless, the ritual repeatedly mentions achieving buddhahood as well as rebirth in the Western Pure Land as ways in which beings are saved. Both are mentioned in the ritual text and coexist simultaneously within *shuilu fahui*. At the end of the ritual, the ritual masters lead all the participants to transfer merit in the 'ritual for presenting offerings to the beings of the lower hall' (*fenggong xiatang*, 奉供下堂), with the aspiration: 'we hope this merit [the merit cultivated at the *shuilu fahui*] can benefit all sentient beings and pray that we can achieve buddhahood together with them'. It is held that, for the enlightened beings (*Arhat*s and advanced *Bodhisattva*s), joining *shuilu* and assisting suffering beings to escape from *saṃsāra* is a way to cultivate more merit for achieving buddhahood while also practising compassion. *Shuilu fahui* thus contributes to the achievement of buddhahood by the enlightened beings who are already free from *saṃsāra* rather than for the unenlightened beings still suffering in *saṃsāra,* for whom the goal of achieving buddhahood is still too far off.

The main goal of the ritual is thus assisting suffering beings to achieve rebirth in the Western Pure Land: a stepping stone on the path that offers shelter to

5. There are in total twenty-four offering 'seats' at the inner altar, each in the form of a paper tablet on which the title of the kind of being is written, with food and incense offerings placed in front of the tablet: ten for enlightened beings in the upper hall and fourteen for the unenlightened beings in the lower hall. The ritual masters recite hymns and the title of each kind of being, symbolically inviting them to occupy the seats and receive the offerings.
6. This translation and 'gods of the terrestrial bureaucracy' are adopted from Stephenson (2001, 50).

suffering beings who cannot escape *saṃsāra* by themselves. The *Sūtra of Amita Buddha* (佛說阿彌陀經) states, 'after achieving rebirth in the Western Pure Land, they have no pains, but receive pleasures only in that pure land. It is therefore called the Blissful Pure Land' (T 12, 346c). Moreover, 'when the sentient beings achieve rebirth in the Western Pure Land, they do not backslide and will not go back into *saṃsāra* because of their bad karma' (T 12 348a).

The benefits of achieving rebirth in the Western Pure Land are frequently referred to in the ritual actions usually carried out during *shuilu fahui*, as for instance at the end of the ritual of purification and sanctification of the outer altar, when a string of nine small lanterns are hung horizontally in the centre of the ritual site, symbolizing the nine different levels of beings of the Western Pure Land. Three times a day, all the monks and participants of the outer altar go to the pure land altar to present food offerings to the unenlightened spirits and dedicate merit to them. During these rituals, the *Mantra of rebirth in the Pure Land* (*wangsheng zhou,* 往生咒) is recited and the *Lotus-Pool Praise Hymn* (*lianchi zan,* 蓮池讚) is sung, praising the beauty of the Western Pure Land: rituals which are seen to dedicate merit for the unenlightened spirits to achieve rebirth in the Western Pure Land. When the ritual of 'presenting offerings to the beings of the lower hall' is almost completed, the ritual masters lead all the participants in the chanting of the *Sūtra of Amita Buddha,* followed by the reciting the name of Amita Buddha, after which ritual masters again dedicate merit to all the unenlightened beings for their rebirth in the Western Pure Land. The most significant ritual, performed by the ritual masters at the end of *shuilu fahui*, is the burning of a big paper boat in which all the spirit tablets are placed, symbolizing that all the unenlightened spirits will be carried to the Western Pure Land and will never have to be reborn in *saṃsāra.*

SHUILU FAHUI AS A WAY TO FULFIL FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES

Kenneth Ch'en points out that, 'The traditional Chinese social system was based on the family, not the individual', and the preservation of the family (1973, 14). In contemporary Hong Kong, filial piety is still highly valued by all Chinese people, including Buddhists. *Shuilu fahui* helps ordinary Buddhists fulfil their family responsibilities by expressing care for deceased relatives by helping them, along with other beings, confess negative karma and cultivate merit, even when the deceased relatives have passed away more than forty-nine days ago, that is, have left the intermediate state. According to the Chinese Buddhist concept of the afterlife, descendants have to ask the ritual masters to perform a Buddhist service for their deceased relative immediately after death to help him or her achieve rebirth in the best part of *saṃsāra* forty-nine days after death. However, as Holmes Welch says, 'suppose these rites were unsuccessful; suppose that despite them the deceased relative had been reborn as a hungry ghost or in hell?' (1967, 183–4). In case this had happened, the family duty of the descendants is to request

that more Buddhist rites be performed to secure a second and better rebirth for their deceased relatives as soon as possible to relieve their sufferings. It would be seen as a neglect of filial duty to fail to take the appropriate measures to save the deceased senior relatives (pp. 183-84). *Shuilu fahui* is seen to provide an efficient channel for Buddhists to transfer much merit to their deceased relatives to relieve suffering or regularly improve the lives of deceased relatives every year by joining *shuilu fahui* for the dead. Descendants influenced by Chinese popular religion also burn paper money and paper offerings for their deceased relatives: they may not understand the Buddhist concept of *saṃsāra* but know about the traditional Chinese concept of the afterlife in which the souls of deceased relatives take up residence and feed on the descendants' offerings and receive news of their family (pp. 181–2). The burning paper offerings to deceased relatives may be done during the *shuilu fahui* ritual period.

Shuilu fahui is seen as the most efficient ritual for cultivating the largest amount of merit through its ultimate aim of saving as many sentient beings as possible through the virtuous power of the chanting and dedications of at least sixty monks. 'The larger the number of monks participating in Buddhist services, the greater the amount of merit available for transfer, assuming, of course, that they have lived by the rules and kept up their religious practice' (Welch 1967, 190). No other Buddhist ritual contains so many altars as to require as many as seventy monks to perform the ritual, and none of the other Buddhist rituals allows such a huge number of tablets to be installed on the altars. Only this ceremony allows Buddhists to cultivate this much merit for their deceased family members and themselves. Asked how the ritual benefits her deceased relatives, my informant at Baolian Chan Monastery in December 2005, Miss Yeung, said:

> During the ritual of 'inviting all unenlightened beings into the inner altar', my deceased relatives can come to the altar to listen to the *sūtras* and enjoy food offerings with the help of the deities and all the enlightened beings. This helps deceased relatives inhabiting hell or suffering rebirth as hungry ghosts to become free from suffering for at least seven days when they are invited to *shuilu fahui*. Also, merit is cultivated from this ritual not only by presenting offerings to the enlightened beings, but also by saving all suffering beings and letting them be reborn as celestials or humans, or by ferrying them to the Western Pure Land. Therefore, merit is great when we support this ritual to help all the other beings through our compassion. This allows our deceased relatives to get more merit through the virtuous act of our supporting and joining this ritual.

Miss Yeung's account indicates that her motivation for joining the ritual is to benefit her deceased relatives, implying that the ceremony provides a way for the participants to express their care for their deceased relatives.

MULTI-TRADITION ASPECTS OF *SHUILU FAHUI*

The *shuilu fahui* rituals require the recitation of almost all the most important *sūtras* of the eight schools (*zong*, 宗) of Chinese Buddhism, such as the *Lotus Sūtra* of the Tiantai School (天台宗), the *Huayan Sūtra* (*Huayan Jing,* 華嚴經) of the Huayan School (華嚴宗), the *Sūtra of Amita Buddha* of the Pure Land School, and the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* (*Dafangguang yuanjue xiuduluo liaoyi jing*, 大方廣圓覺修多羅了義經) of the Chan school. Participants can also join the confessional ritual of the Tiantai School, the ritual of 'Saving and Feeding the Burning-mouth Hungry Ghosts' of the Tantric Buddhist tradition and the Pure Land School ritual of reciting the name of Amita Buddha. *Shuilu fahui* can thus meet the varying needs of Chinese Buddhists from many different lineages. Entering the ritual site of *shuilu fahui* is analogous to entering a big superstore where all the rituals are available under the same roof within the seven-day ritual period. This is found only in the *shuilu fahui* and helps to account for its current popularity in many Chinese societies.

SPIRITUALLY EDUCATIVE ASPECTS OF *SHUILU FAHUI*

When the participants join the various rituals of the *shuilu fahui* they are receiving many Buddhist ideas from the rituals, such as the importance of a compassionate mind and the concepts of *saṃsāra* and karma. During the ritual of 'inviting the unenlightened beings to the lower hall' (*fengqing xiatang*, 奉請下堂), ritual masters sing the invitation hymn for each offering seat in the lower hall. The hymn describes the causes of pain of all the suffering beings, especially those beings in hell and the hungry ghosts. As a participant observer I noted that these descriptions were very moving for most of the participants, reducing some to tears. This part of the ritual has two effects: (i) invoking the compassion of all ritual masters and participants, to help them learn how to follow the example of the *bodhisattvas* whose minds are filled with compassion and take responsibility for the saving of all suffering beings; and (ii) as an educational function, helping the participants, hearing the ritual masters reading the accounts of the causes of suffering due to negative karma acquired in previous lives, to realize that bad karma will cause them suffering in different realms of *saṃsāra*, thus reminding them of the need to curb their bad behaviour once the ritual is over. One participant, Mrs Lo, when asked in a December 2005 interview why she was taking part in *shuilu fahui*, answered:

> At first, I joined this ritual only to cultivate merit for my son who died three years ago of brain cancer, when he was only thirteen. To get me through this terrible time, I sought religious help and began to get in touch with Buddhism. I knew my son's early death was caused by negative karma from his previous lives. So, I continued to do this ritual for

> him, to cultivate more merit for his rebirth as a human or a celestial being. In the last *shuilu fahui* I joined, I just installed a spirit tablet at the inner altar for my son. However, I started to change my mind after the Chi Lin *shuilu* last year. During the ritual inside the inner altar, I felt I had understood something new from the ritual text: that the ultimate goal of this ritual was to help all sentient beings escape *saṃsāra* by ferrying them to rebirth in the Western Pure Land of Amita Buddha. So, I think I should not only set spirit tablets for my deceased family members. Next time, I should also set a spirit tablet for all spirits of *saṃsāra* in the ten different directions (*shifang fajie liudao aunling*, 十方法界六道群靈). So this time I set a spirit tablet for all sentient beings in the inner altar. I think this is the best way for me to participate in the ritual. This can cultivate more merit for my son and I hope I can also help more sentient beings through my pious participation in the *shuilu fahui*.

This shows an increased understanding of the concept of 'cause and effect', *saṃsāra* and compassion, and the benefits of rebirth in the Western Pure Land.

SHUILU FAHUI AS OFFERING THIS-WORLDLY HELP

Most participants want not only to free deceased relatives from suffering but also to meet some of their own this-worldly needs. At the end of the ritual, the ritual masters represent all participants in dedicating the merits from *shuilu fahui* to all the unenlightened beings, urging them to escape *saṃsāra*, to take refuge in the Three Jewels, to ask forgiveness, to be reborn in the Western Pure Land, and achieve perfect wisdom and *nirvāṇa*. They also transfer merit for all human beings, praying for their health, wisdom and peace, and that they will avoid disasters and so on.

Some ordinary Buddhists, however, who have a basic knowledge of Buddhism, look for even more this-worldly benefits. Ann was asked if she had other reasons for joining the ritual apart from being invited by her friends. She answered:

> Actually, at first I did not know what *shuilu fahui* was. My husband, a businessman, had some business problems five years ago. So my friends told me that joining this ritual was a good way of performing virtuous deeds and that I could transfer merit for him. Finally, it worked! My husband overcame his problems and the business started picking up again, eighteen months later. So, I believe that this ritual not only benefits my ancestors but it can also benefit my whole family. Now I join in every year and I think I will go on doing it for many years to come.

In fact, Ann had already taken refuge in the Three Jewels and received the *Bodhisattva* vows some years earlier. She has a basic Buddhist knowledge and

intended to ask for merit to fulfil her this-worldly needs. She is not the only example of this group of participants and I met other similar cases in my field-work.

However, some ordinary Buddhists with little knowledge of Buddhism believe that their success and luck are closely related to the conditions of their deceased relatives, who they believe will bless living family members once they are made peaceful again, having benefited from the ritual. This group of participants has no clear idea of how to help their deceased relatives escape *saṃsāra*, believing that their deceased family members in the nether world will become peaceful and rich through their descendants' participation in the ritual and by their burning paper money for them, indicating the perceived practical benefits of this ritual for the participants. In an interview conducted in December 2005 with Miss Lo and her mother, I asked why they had joined the ceremony every year for the last five years:

> It is because my mother and her friends believe this ritual is good for my father, our ancestors and all my family members who are still alive. This is because my father and our deceased relatives will be peaceful and happy if we join the ritual for them because this ceremony not only helps them escape from suffering and gain rebirth in heaven, but also helps us – both family members and deceased relatives – to cultivate merit. Then, my father and our ancestors will bless us. If we do not continue to join this ceremony every year, my father and our ancestors cannot be peaceful and happy and will not bless us and we will get misfortune, to remind us that we should join this ritual for them.

We can thus see that both Buddhists with considerable Buddhist knowledge and ordinary people more influenced by popular Chinese religion feel that they can benefit from participating in the *shuilu fahui* by asking for the fulfilment of their this-worldly requirements.

SHUILU FAHUI AS PROVIDING FUNDS FOR WELFARE ACTIVITIES

Stephen Teiser points out that, socially, 'in China Buddhist monks rarely stood completely outside of society, but only outside of one particular social group, the family' (1988, 212). In the *shuilu fahui* we see monastic members responding to the community, placing them at the very centre of this-worldly life where they can communicate with and contribute to society through the ritual. During the SARS scare in 2003, the abbot of Baolian Chan Monastery used the *shuilu fahui* to dedicate merit for the health of all the people of Hong Kong, hoping that Hong Kong would be spared from the epidemic. The day after the South Asia tsunami of 26 December 2004, the same abbot placed a tablet in the inner altar of the *shuilu fahui* that had started on 23 December, to save all the souls of those who died in the tsunami. He also donated to the Red Cross HK$3m (about £200,000)

raised by *shuilu fahui,* to help survivors of the Tsunami.[7] These examples show how this rite offers a direct channel for the monastery to work in society, integrating Buddhist monks and nuns into the very centre of the community where they have an opportunity to show their caring. The rite thereby offers an opening for monastic Buddhists to show that they do not simply turn their backs on the community, and that their compassionate behaviour is effective both in this world and in other realms.

Moreover, *shuilu fahui* also helps monasteries demonstrate their social engagement with ordinary people. During fieldwork in Baolian Chan Monastery, it became clear that lay Buddhists saw that the aim of holding this ritual was not only to provide a mechanism for Buddhists to save their deceased relatives, but also to provide a way for the monastery to contribute charity provision for both Hong Kong and mainland China. Both the propaganda materials of the *shuilu fahui* of Baolian Chan Monastery and the abbot's speech on the last day indicated that any funds raised would all be allotted to the social welfare foundation, the education foundation, the foundation caring for the elderly, the environmental protection foundation and the Big Buddha maintenance foundation. These foundations provide a variety of forms of social welfare in Hong Kong, for example, alleviating the problems of an ageing population and, since 1996, building primary schools in the poverty-stricken hill areas in China. The first of these was the Sixth Patriarch School in Guangdong Province, and by early 2004 more than 200 schools had been built with subsidies from Baolian Chan Monastery's education foundation. Contributions from the foundations, raised by *shuilu fahui,* demonstrate the commitment of Baolian Chan Monastery to social engagement through regular performances of *shuilu fahui*, which provide excellent fundraising opportunities.

The abbots and abbesses are keen to organize the *shuilu fahui* because it is such a reliable source of income, many of them regarding it as a very efficient fundraising tool. Chi Lin Nunnery started to organize the *shuilu fahui* in 1991 to raise funds for the reconstruction of the nunnery. The abbot of Bliss Monastery (極樂寺), Master Beiyao (悲曜法師), organized the first fundraising *shuilu fahui* in 2003 to build the Yaoshi Buddha Hall (藥師殿) inside the monastery. There is no indication, however, that any Hong Kong performances of *shuilu fahui* are becoming commercialized, rather, the main reason for holding the ritual is fundraising for the monasteries and the provision of more social welfare, with less emphasis on providing a Buddhist service for the dead. The welfare initiatives are supported by funds from the *shuilu fahui*, indicating that the monks holding the ritual do not want it thought that they earn money for their own enjoyment (which would be a commercialization of the rite), and that *shuilu fahui* in Hong Kong is not merely a Buddhist ritual for helping Buddhists' deceased relatives. The ritual has enabled Hong Kong Buddhism to make a greater social contribution and interact with lay people more proactively. The ritual is a highly effective way for the monasteries

7. www.buddhismcity.net/newsall/general/details/15613 (subscriber only).

to raise money, much of which is then redistributed for the benefit of the wider community.

ADAPTION TO COMMUNITY NEEDS

When I asked the abbess of Zhilian Nunnery (*Zhilian Jingyuan*, 志蓮淨苑) about choosing the ritual date, she told me that while the late summer period is auspicious for the performing of the *shuilu fahui,* she prefers the period 22–29 December for the annual *shuilu fahui*, because she wanted to fit in with the lay participants' holiday times. By holding the ritual during the Christmas holiday period, most ordinary participants are free and do not need to take time off work for the ritual. Hence the date the abbot or abbess chooses for a ritual depends not only on the monastery's internal timetable but also takes into account local needs, accommodating the lay Buddhists' holiday schedule rather than choosing the time of another Chinese traditional festival for showing respect to the ancestors, such as the Qingming Festival (*Qingming Jie*, 清明節), or any other Buddhist festival.

The cost of installing spirit tablets at the altars of *shuilu fahui* also shows an interaction between the monasteries and the local community. According to the same abbess, the price of placing spirit tablets and long life tablets at the altars at the Zhilian *shuilu* had not been increased for a number of years because Hong Kong was still recovering from the economic recession of autumn 1997. The abbess reasoned that increasing the fees would not raise any more money from ordinary people attending the ritual and that she should have compassion for the way they had been affected by the economic recession. This is another way in which sensitivity is shown to the social situation of contemporary Hong Kong.

SHUILU FAHUI AS ENCOURAGING LAY INVOLVEMENT WITH THE MONASTERIES

The organization of the *shuilu fahui* allows many volunteers to become involved with the core work of the monastic institutions, sharing in the important work of the *shuilu fahui*, other rituals and of charitable works (including being helpers at the home for the elderly and charity school), which in turn leads to a greater commitment. Because of the shortage of monks in Hong Kong, ordinary Buddhists also become part of the monasteries when the performers of the *shuilu fahui* are invited over from Mainland China. Jobs have to be shared out among ordinary volunteers during the ritual period, including decorating the altars, arranging food offerings and assisting ritual masters during the ritual performance. The volunteers become involved for a variety of reasons: some by first becoming a volunteer in the homes for the elderly; others through contact with the monasteries when someone in their family dies and they seek help in saving their deceased relatives. Some participants were introduced to the *shuilu fahui* by a friend, which led them to become a member of the monastery and gradually

become involved in volunteer work. My informant Lillian, a volunteer at Zhilian Nunnery, was responsible for the decoration of the inner altar of the *shuilu fahui* and was also one of the major sponsors (*zhuyuan*, 主緣). She started as a volunteer in April 2004, with responsibility for decorating the ritual hall, especially the inner altar of the *shuilu fahui,* because she had a degree in design and a flair for interior decoration. In December 2004, she was invited by the Zhilian nuns to join the *shuilu fahui* and became one of the major sponsors as well as a volunteer in the ritual. She told me she was moved by the atmosphere and content of the ritual text, which indicated that all beings, even insects, could be saved through her participation in the inner altar ritual. She also told me she wanted to go on volunteering for the rest of her life:

> I studied fashion design at university. My strength is in embroidery and design, so I can contribute a lot to the decoration of the inner altar. It is such a happy coincidence that I vowed to contribute to Buddhism after I reached 40, and I became a volunteer here with responsibility for decorating the inner altar. I feel so amazed that this has happened to me, so I plan to spend my rest of life contributing to this ritual by dedicating my knowledge and skills in embroidery and design.

Lillian's dedication is not unique: many volunteers were willing to contribute their lives to monasteries after joining the *shuilu fahui*. Others first became *shuilu* participants and then went on to become volunteers in the monasteries. Vincent is typical of this group: he told me that his mother had passed away three years earlier and he had joined the *shuilu fahui* for her every year since her death. After his first *shuilu fahui*, he became a volunteer and now works at the monastery three days a week. Even those Buddhists who were already volunteers find the *shuilu fahui* brings them greater involvement with the monasteries and many commit themselves fully as a result of their involvement in the *shuilu fahui*.

The ritual clearly provides many opportunities for ordinary Buddhists to become active in the monastic community while also attracting more participants to become volunteers in the monasteries after serving in the *shuilu* performance. In other words, *shuilu fahui* increases the number of participants in the ceremony and recruits lay members and volunteers for the monasteries.

SHUILU FAHUI AS STRENGTHENING FAMILY BONDS

Monastic members also regard *shuilu fahui* as a mechanism for Buddhists to express filial piety to their deceased relatives and to develop a compassionate mind, which is so highly valued in the Chinese Buddhist tradition. The abbess of Zhilian Nunnery, Hongxun, offers evidence of this:

> All Buddhist rituals contain a very important meaning, which is to help participants to seek their roots, from their parents to their grandparents

> to their ancestors and even to the starting point of the *dharma*-realm. However, the *shuilu fahui* differs from other rituals in that it provides a platform for Buddhists to seek their roots. The *shuilu fahui* also offers an opportunity for Buddhists to express their immense gratitude and concern for their parents. Through the context of the *shuilu fahui* text, Buddhists can widen their concern for their family members to include all sentient beings. They widen their respect for and love of their deceased family members by expressing compassion for all sentient beings. From this compassionate mind comes the aspiration for enlightenment. I believe the *shuilu fahui* can help Buddhists show filial piety and concern for all sentient beings in the *dharma*-realm, and even help them in their aspiration for enlightenment.

Her words also imply that *shuilu fahui* is a way for Buddhists to reconstruct and consolidate the relationship between living descendants who are responsible for presenting offerings and respect to the deceased relatives. Through the dedication of spirit tablets and the burning of paper offerings to the deceased relatives at the *shuilu fahui*, kinship relations are reinforced and reaffirmed. Of the forty participants I conducted interviews with, thirty-three had joined the rite for their deceased family members, with the primary intention of saving or providing a better second rebirth for them.

SHUILU FAHUI AS STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN AND BEYOND HONG KONG

Fieldwork conducted at Baolian Chan Monastery indicated that the *shuilu fahui* strengthens relations between the monastery and other institutions in Hong Kong, for example by providing an opportunity for communication between the Baolian Chan Monastery and local administration committees, other monasteries and the Hong Kong Buddhist Association (*Xianggang Fojiao Lianhe Hui*, 香港佛教聯合會). I discovered that baskets of flowers wishing the congregation a successful ceremony were sent by the Hong Kong Buddhist Association, South Lantau Island Rural Committee (*Nan Dayushan Xiangshe Weiyuanhui*, 南大嶼山鄉事委員會) and Tai O Rural Committee (*Daao Xiangshe Weiyuanhui*, 大澳鄉事委員會), and that Guan Yin Monastery (*Guanyin Si*, 觀音寺) sent flowers to congratulate Baolian Chan Monastery on organizing a *shuilu fahui*. South Lantau Island Rural Committee and Tai O Rural Committee are the local administrative organizations of that area, and Guan Yin Monastery is situated nearby. The sending of flowers to celebrate the holding of the *shuilu fahui* at Baolian Chan Monastery indicates that Baolian's large-scale ritual offers an opportunity for local associations to establish and consolidate friendly connections.

Politically, the rite becomes a channel for communication between the monasteries and other institutions in mainland China. In the post-colonial period,

Hong Kong became the Special Administration Region of the People's Republic of China and although it has had its own administration and economic independence since 1997, a close relationship with mainland China has been considered desirable, and even the monastic Buddhists want to maintain good relations with the institutions of mainland China. *Shuilu fahui* enhances communications between the monasteries and some mainland institutions, as when monks from there are invited to Hong Kong to perform *shuilu fahui* and use donations to support the construction of charity schools in their own regions. Every year since 1992, Baolian Chan Monastery has invited over the monks of a major Shanghai monastery, Longhau Monastery (*Longhau Si*, 龍華寺) with the assistance of the Shanghai local government and the Shanghai Buddhist Association. Organizing this ritual has improved Baolian Chan Monastery's relations with the local government in mainland China and the Shanghai Buddhist Association.

SHUILU FAHUI AND THE TRANSMISSION OF CULTURAL TRADITIONS

Culturally, *shuilu* performances also play a part in the handing down of cultural traditions to the next generation, including the skills of making paper offerings and paper handicrafts, making *shuilu* paintings and learning special chanting skills. Each performance of the ritual calls for the production of three thousand to four thousand handmade paper placards, writings and petitions and paper offerings, most of which are destroyed in the course of the rite itself. Here follows part of an interview conducted in December 2005 with a *shuilu* ritual master, who explains how regular performances help cultural traditions to be handed down to the next generation. Master Chonglin (崇林法師) is a member of the ritual masters group at Longhua Monastery, which was responsible for the performance of the Baolian *shuilu*. He is responsible for the ritual at the big altar. I asked him how long it takes to train a major ritual master:

> Mostly, it takes three to four years to train a ritual master selected by the elders to be main cantor (*zhenbiao*, 正表) or assistant cantor (*zhubiao*, 助表). Basically, the major ritual master candidates need a year to learn all the music of the chanting during the inner altar ritual. Then they need one or two years to improve their chanting skills. At the same time, they join the *shuilu fahui* as assistant monks to learn the ritual procedure of the inner altar. In the third or fourth year, some elders take some potential major ritual masters with them into the inner altar when the elders perform this ritual, so that they learn more about the performances of the main cantor and the assistant cantor. After many years, the veteran main cantor or the assistant cantor assumes the post of presiding ritual master, the most important leader of the *shuilu fahui,* responsible for all the meditations in the inner altar ritual. So a wide experience of Buddhist practice is required by whoever holds this post.

Master Chonglin makes it very clear that the tradition of *shuilu* performances provides opportunities for the candidates to become ritual masters to act as trainee ritual masters to advance their skills in the performance of this spectacular ritual. Meanwhile, the skills of chanting, decorating the altars and running the ceremony are handed down from the elders who are ritual masters to the trainees at each performance.

Furthermore, many documents and paintings are required at *shuilu fahui,* including seventy-two *shuilu* paintings, more than two hundred tablets for both the enlightened and unenlightened beings in the upper and lower halls, a poster some four metres long and a metre high with all the details of the *shuilu fahui* and the names of the sponsors and many verification documents (*zhengming shu*, 證明疏). The performances enable the next generation of monks to learn the skills of making the *shuilu* paintings, the correct format for the writing and how to make all the documents.

CONCLUSIONS

We can thus see that *shuilu fahui* places Buddhist monastic members at the very centre of the this-worldly life by responding to the popular demands of the Chinese people, as most Chinese Buddhists have developed a preference for saving suffering beings through ritual rather than through self-renunciation. The social, political and economic functions of the *shuilu fahui* have clearly placed the monastic institutions at the centre of the community since the early stages of the development of Hong Kong Buddhism. *Shuilu fahui* has acted as a way to calm people's anxiety during transitional periods of Hong Kong's history while also providing an effective way for monasteries to raise funds for greater community activities and a wide range of social services. *Shuilu fahui* also becomes the bridge between Buddhists (both monastic and lay) and the community. Traditionally monastic members were believed to practice renunciation from the world, but *shuilu fahui* has strengthened respect in them now that they play a full part in the community in their role as contributors to contemporary Hong Kong society. Monks and nuns are happy to contribute through *shuilu* performances, valuing their contribution both locally and in the wider world through financial donations and the provision of social services. Understanding the interaction between monastics and ordinary Buddhists can help us understand why this ritual is held not only to provide a mechanism for Buddhists to offer salvation to their deceased family members, but also to provide an effective channel of communication between the monasteries and Hong Kong society. This discussion of the various functions of the *shuilu fahui* has hopefully gone some way towards explaining why the ritual is still so popular in contemporary Hong Kong.

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