

# The attraction of numbers

## Accounting for ritual expenditures in Fuzhou, China

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### Abstract

This article examines different ways of accounting for the numbers on display as monetary contributions to temples in an emigrant village in Fuzhou, China. My aim is to locate the various calculative principles required to bring these lists of discrete sums and partial quantities into felicitous relationships and interaction. Particularly, I outline two different ways of reading ritual numbers from public displays of temple donations: one premised on number's aggregation as a single monetary sum and the other on number's amplification as an unfolding topos of cosmic resonance and intensities. Ultimately, I suggest that the numbers inscribed into temple walls can best be seen as boundary objects which provide a common point of departure for engaging various styles of enumeration.

### Key Words

accounting • China • cosmology • debt • Fuzhou • money • numbers • overseas remittance • popular religion • ritual expenditure

Money, whose importance as value rests on its quantity, appears as many single quantities standing side by side, so that every sum, in order to operate as a unity, requires an extraneous principle which forces the partial quantities into a relationship and interaction, that is into a unit. (Simmel, 1978: 271)

Georg Simmel might very well have been intrigued by the monetary sums 'standing side by side' on the walls of almost every newly renovated temple in rural Fuzhou. Since the Fuzhounese began to leave China en masse via illicit smuggling networks in the mid-1980s,<sup>1</sup> signs of overseas prosperity have commonly manifested first through lists of temple donations publicly displayed on large red poster boards on the walls of temples (see Figure 1) or more elaborately commemorated through gigantic stone steles built into the very sides of these buildings (see Figures 2 and 3). Some say one can read the wealth of a village like Longyan, where I did my fieldwork, from the figures on such



Figure 1. Temple poster listing donors and their monetary contributions in Chinese and foreign denominations. Photograph by the author.

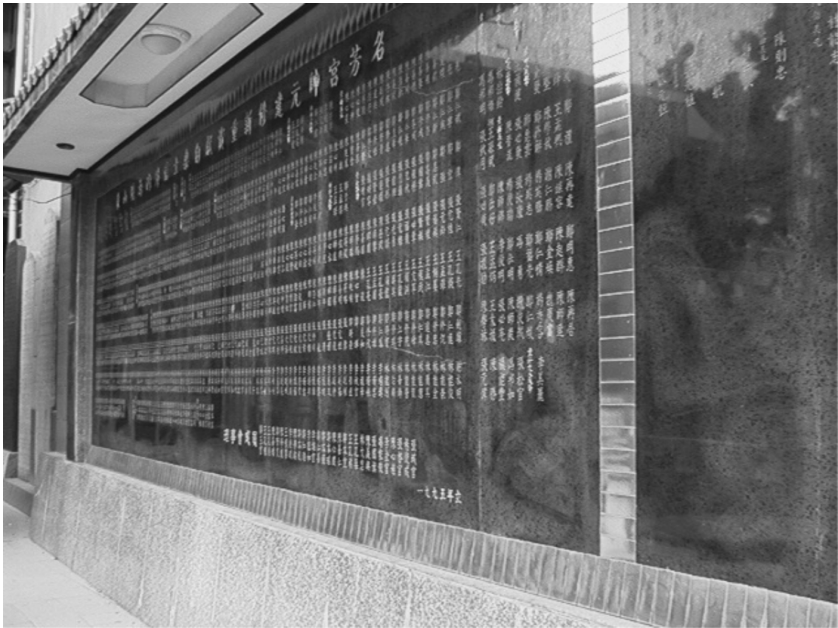
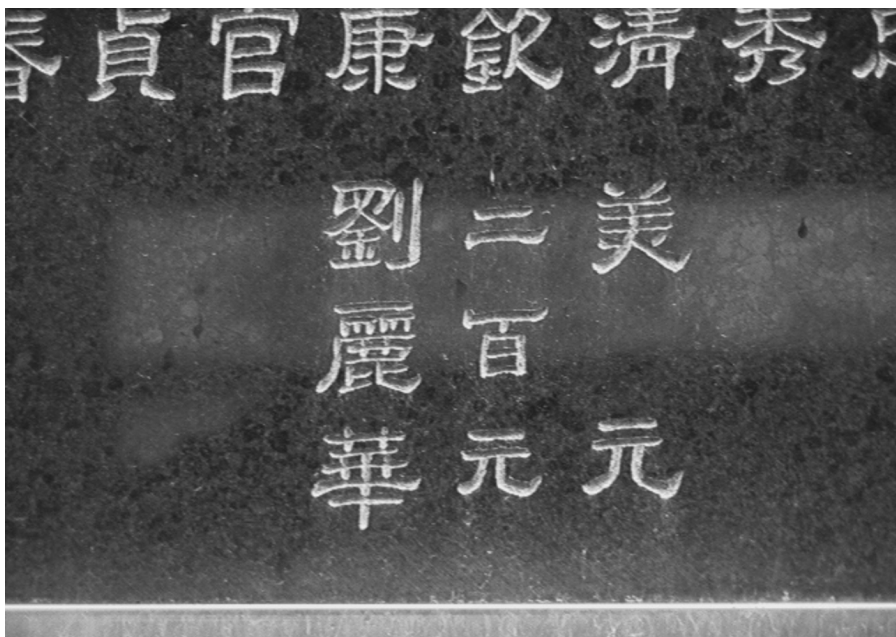


Figure 2. A temple stele listing monetary contributions in Chinese and foreign denominations. Photograph by the author.



**Figure 3. Close-up of the temple stele (in Figure 2) engraved with a US dollar donation. Reading from top to bottom, the left column offers the name of the donor. The center column reads *er bai yuan* (200 dollars). The two characters farthest to the right read *mei yuan* (US dollar). Photograph by the author.**

temple posters and steles. In fact, one local historian had assembled the bulk of his data for a report on the impact of overseas remittances in Fuzhou by literally walking from temple to temple in Longyan while jotting down all the numbers made visible on the walls and in the hallways of each site. 'From the stone tablets containing the donors' surnames in front of the temple', he noted in his report, 'you can see how much temple renovation is dependent on the power and strength of large numbers of overseas Chinese'.<sup>2</sup>

This article examines the evidentiary claims and contests over what 'you can see' through the numbers exhibited on temple steles and posters throughout Longyan village. To follow Simmel's lead, one task here is to try to locate 'the extraneous principle[s]' required to bring these lists of discrete sums and 'partial quantities' into felicitous 'relationships and interaction'. What kinds of calculations and readings enabled these numbers to commingle and to conjure some larger unit or encompassing whole? What underwrites money's legibility and coherence as so many numerical figures inscribed literally on the ritual landscape?

Public displays of ritual expenditure in China have commonly been analyzed by scholars as a means for worshippers to gain status or 'face' (*mianzi*) in their social world (Basu, 1991; Oxfeld, 1992; Wong, 2004; Yang, 2000). Local elites and officials have also explained temple contributions to me in similar terms, albeit with a pejorative emphasis on *mianzi* as 'a kind of vanity' rather than on its functionalist implications as social capital. Either way, as meticulous lists of donor names ordered by particular monetary

sums and denominations (e.g. Chinese RMB, US Dollar, Japanese Yen, etc.), temple steles and posters certainly lend themselves to readings of the social status of donors, particularly in terms of 'the power and strength of . . . the overseas Chinese', as the local historian suggested above. Given the prevalence of foreign contributions, particularly in USD, on temple steles and posters all throughout Longyan, it was also not difficult to read these lists as signs par excellence of the dollarization (and transnationalization) of the village's economy and social life in the era of mass emigration overseas. As the historian argued, steles enabled one to see just how central overseas Chinese and their remittances have been in 'vigorously pushing forward the [post-Mao] renewal and development of Fujian's folk religion . . . well beyond ordinary people's imagination'. The extra-ordinary here was perhaps even easier to 'see' when the various numbers listed discretely in foreign denominations were all converted into Chinese RMB and summed up as single total figures – 300,000 RMB for a temple renovation here, 500,000 for another – as the historian did in his final report. Not unlike other local officials and observers of popular religion at the time, this historian personally went on to lament how these displays of monetary numbers, particularly when translated into huge aggregate figures, revealed only so much 'vanity' (*xurongxin*) and 'superstition' (*mixin*) among the newly wealthy and overseas-connected Fuzhounese. For him, temple steles and posters were no more than accounts of squandered surplus, of money's promise diverted and lost from more worthy and rational investments in things like public schools and public works.<sup>3</sup>

Longyan worshippers themselves were not without their suspicions of the vanity of *some* of the donors inscribed on temple steles and posters. *Mixin* (supersition), too, was a term commonly deployed by villagers to describe the logic of ritual expenditure, though unlike their critics, this was rarely cast as a 'problem' of some extra-ordinary belief or faith to be evaluated on the grounds of 'rational' knowledge. Typically used in compound form as *zuo mixin* or *gao mixin* – meaning 'to do' or 'to make superstition' – *mixin* was embraced by villagers instead as a kind of practical activity better judged in terms of its efficacy.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to their critics, however, temple worshippers and caretakers did not read efficacy from temple steles and posters through zero-sum calculations of aggregate gains or losses. For these practitioners of *mixin*, the effects of 'doing superstition' could not be made legible simply through arithmetic operations on the numbers of donors and donations from overseas. Instead, these contributions were subjected to a different kind of accounting premised less on number's aggregation as a single sum than on its amplification as a topos of reverberating figures and intensities.

It was true that whether inscribed as RMB or USD quantities, most temple donations were understood by local villagers as the fruits of transnational migration to the US. Temple caretakers, for instance, regularly guided me through their ritual spaces by enumerating the specific USD price of every new architectural feature and religious object in their space as well as the transnational status of the contributor responsible for the respective improvement. Pointing to an intricately sculpted altar, an elaborate floral vase and so forth, one elderly overseer repeatedly asked me, 'guess how much is this?' during my first visit to the Temple of the Jade Emperor (*Yuhuang Dadi*) in Longyan. His answer in each case inevitably began with an amount in US dollars: '500 US dollars' or '800 US dollars', followed by a short description of its source, 'an old overseas Chinese (*lao huaqiao*), lives in New York', or 'an "American guest", owns a restaurant there.' At the Temple of the Monkey King (*Qitian Dasheng*) on the other side of the village, the

overseer once took out a large red poster listing the names of all contributors for a Lunar New Year ritual and proceeded to sketch the transnational connections and emigration history of each person listed *and* of that person's family members. Given the prevalence of illicit human smuggling and its known dangers in Longyan, it went without saying how extraordinary overseas ties were in these accounts of temple donations. To connect a particular number to a transnational source implicitly gestured to the miraculous in each case. Despite specificity in the temple caretakers' account, however, their litany of monetary figures, names and overseas location also never failed to overwhelm and render the extra-ordinary mundane after a while, the ever-cascading details and hypnotic rhythms of their descriptions conveying not so much the distinction of particular numbers as the scale of their resonance and depth as a concatenation of sums.

In the temple caretakers' account of monetary donations, numbers harmonized as a series of like units, each figure linking to and amplifying the next more through ellipsis ( $X \dots Y \dots Z$ ) than through addition ( $X + Y + Z$ ). This is not to suggest that temple caretakers were incapable of performing mathematical operations on their lists of contributions. When prompted, no one had trouble summoning ballpark figures of total donations given to this or that temple project. What stuck me, however, was how often I had to ask specifically for such information by interrupting the temple caretaker's ongoing litany of donor names and their specific contributions. Issuing totals was just not part of the preferred style of enumeration. Yet not unlike the local historian reading temple steles, it was still hard to 'see' the unity of partial quantities strung together on steles without some ultimate summation on the part of the temple overseers. This often came not as some bottom-line pronouncement of monies gained or lost but rather as a general statement of the *ling* or divine efficacy of the gods. As one of the temple caretakers above concluded after guiding me through a list of recent renovations and donations, 'You see, the Monkey King is really so *ling*.'

Historian Valerie Hansen (1990) has argued for the importance of temple steles as material manifestations of the particular *ling* of gods in Chinese popular religion. Writing of commemorative stone inscriptions at temples in medieval Song China, Hansen noted how the very presence of steles was crucial for both substantiating and extending the efficacy of various local gods and their temple cults. 'Deities were thought to respond to prayers only to the extent that they were publicly honored', she observed (p. 52). Moreover, 'what the gods wanted – rather, what they were thought to want – were beautiful images, new temples, spectacular plays, and adulatory inscriptions' (p. 161). The very upkeep and material prosperity of temples, Hansen suggested, 'shaped the devotees' perception of the deity at the same time as they affected the deity himself' (p. 53). There was a 'curious circularity', she concluded, between enactments of *ling* and displays of temple contributions:

The gods who performed the most miracles were those most deserving recompense, so they had the most opulent images and the most lavish temples. According to this same logic, those deities with the most opulent images and the most lavish temples must perform the most miracles. (p. 61)

Similarly, anthropologist Steven Sangren (2000) described this circular logic of *ling* as such:

Wealthy people must be worshipping the most efficacious deity, otherwise they would not be wealthy; wealthy temples must be wealthy because thankful people are repaying the goddess for making them wealthy, hence wealthy temples must be more *ling*. (p. 57)

In Longyan, the *ling* of specific deities could be discerned not only by the visible displays of temple contributions but also by the frequency of religious festivities financed through these very contributions and staged for a god in the form of processions, banquets, opera performances and movie screenings.<sup>5</sup> One did not have to believe in divine efficacy to appreciate the displays of wealth at such events, though it was also clear that these choices of ritual expenditure aimed to index more than the economic functionality of *ling*. Ritual expenditures, after all, never just involved transfers of money per se but, rather, specific conversions of cash into this-worldly luxuries for gods: spectacular performances and parades, sumptuous banquets, dazzling temple renovations.

When it came to steles in particular, one did not need to read the actual monetary figures inscribed on temple walls to sense the *ling* underwriting the prosperity of that temple's followers. Stretched as they were often across an entire wall of the temple's exterior, stone steles were meant to substantiate the efficacy of gods through the sheer scale and beauty of their physical presence. As Adam Chau (2006) also observed for temple steles in contemporary northern China, very few people outside of educated visitors paid close attention to the textual content of stone inscriptions. Rather, what made steles 'an awe-inspiring part of the temple structure' was 'the force of their presence' which could 'act upon their audience and produce effects (awe, submission, recognition, etc.)' (pp. 96–7).

Moreover, like other temple spectacles and visual displays, public commemorations of donations were orchestrated primarily for the god's edification rather than the interest of human spectators (Hansen, 1990: 14). If anything, drawing large numbers of onlookers only bolstered a temple's claim to *ling* by demonstrating the magnetic pull of the resident god's powers. As elsewhere in China, ritual celebrations of *ling* were deemed successful in Longyan only insofar as they generated the festive quality of 'heat and noise' (*renao*) – a quality best embodied by the very exuberance of crowds mobilized for the occasion (Chau, 2006; Hatfield, 2009; Weller, 1994). Crowds became part of the visual awe of *ling* itself. They, in turn, could sway others to become worshippers and thereby further enhance the god's efficacy for bringing prosperity to all its followers. More than simple tautology, the circularity of *ling* might be better described here as a kind of centripetal force drawing devotees, divine power and prosperity together through an ever broadening and reinforcing cycle of opulent displays and miraculous manifestations. Numbers attracted more numbers. Large donors drew large crowds to temples. Crowds enhanced the public staging of *ling*. *Ling* brought in more temple devotees and donations. More donations meant more lists of sums crowding temple steles and posters.

Accordingly, one did not need to extrapolate number's mathematical meaning from steles to appreciate the *ling* of the gods. Instead, *ling* could be gleaned simply from number's aesthetics and materiality as so many elaborate and well-crafted engravings spanning a visible stretch of the temple's wall. Numbers did not have to add up to some elegant figure here. Instead, they needed to overflow as public spectacle, unfolding one



after another in a recursive and resonating pattern to convey the vast scale and magnetism of divine power.

No doubt my description of resonance here will strike a familiar chord for those conversant with a Chinese correlative cosmology and its attendant numerological practices for grasping the efficacy of things through their underlying cosmic correspondences (cf. Granet, 1968; Needham, 1954). I do not want to suggest, however, that this was the only way to account for the numbers on display on temple steles and posters in contemporary Longyan. Temple caretakers, after all, could easily tick off estimates of total donations when prompted to do so. Math was not anathema to their style of enumeration. It was just that making aggregates out of monetary sums did not seem to matter very much to the kind of cosmic accounting being elaborated here. In fact, arithmetic operations did figure somewhere in the reckoning of temple donations; only it was among underworld officials well beyond the purview of humans that the most crucial adding and subtracting of numbers actually took place.

For temple donors in Longyan, the key calculation at stake here was not about monetary sums *per se* but about how one's net balance of otherworldly credit and debt was shaping life spans and life's fortune in this world. As in other Chinese communities engaged with popular religion, a concept of ongoing karmic debt informed Longyan residents in their ritual uses of money (Brokaw, 1991; Cole, 1998; Eberhard, 1967; Hou, 1975). This debt was understood both as a result of demerits or wrongdoing against other people accumulated through past and present lives, and also as indebtedness to gods for giving the dead new chances to settle their karmic accounts through reincarnation. While spirits also incurred debt to the parents who conceived them and who must suffer to give birth and raise them, they relied even more on gods who provided them with new bodies and fates in rebirth. In this sense, gods could be seen as the fundamental creditors of debt-ridden spirits, giving them literally a new lease on life and another chance to escape the mortal coil of death and rebirth perpetuated by deep cosmic debt.

This initial line of divine credit made all other accumulations of wealth – money, karmic merit and otherwise – possible for the living and, in this way, anchored the entire mortal sphere of value-production to the more basic and generative logic of an encompassing spiritual economy. So that debt relations with gods not only structured the conditions for life itself but also one's possibilities for living 'the good life'. New money wealth then could not be taken as merely surplus at the disposal of the living. Rather, it was better understood as the material manifestation of divine credit, as an extended line of good credit, if you will, from gods who could never truly be paid back.

Ultimately, the centrality of cosmic debt was evident in the way worshippers described their temple contributions as repayment rather than as a gift to the resident god. Just as temples produced steles and posters for the god's edification, worshippers also ritually burned temple receipts of their donations so that, as one villager put it, 'the gods know how much money you gave'. Within a bureaucratically imagined cosmic order, it was underworld deities who regulated life spans and destinies by keeping track of the shifting balance of people's individualized karmic accounts.<sup>6</sup> This was the ultimate sum that mattered and it was only the gods who had the capacity to calculate such numbers. For humans themselves, it was impossible to pinpoint the bottom line of one's cosmic account and, by extension, one's prospects in this world.

Since every human action inherently produced karmic merit or demerit, the balance of cosmic debt was always in flux, its bottom line impossibly obscured through a process of accumulation spread across not only one lifetime of action but, moreover, across the blinders of multiple lives through which one had no recourse of memory. To scramble the equation of debt and repayment further, every cosmic account was also subject to unknown and unpredictable transfers of demerit from particularly wicked ancestors and/or living kin over the many cycles of one's life and rebirth. This is not to say that quantity and enumeration were unimportant in ritual calculations of cosmic fortunes. After all, the precise amounts of this-worldly money given to gods were always meticulously recorded in temple ledgers, publicly displayed in steles and ritually remitted as receipts to the gods. However, it was also generally acknowledged that for humans themselves, only the vague contour of one's cosmic account (e.g. as either on the upswing or downswing) could ever be gleaned from this-worldly numbers like monetary sums. In contrast, by sending receipts of their ritual expenditures to the spirit world, worshippers hoped that the gods would perform the crucial math to keep their karmic accounts solvent and, by extension, their life's fortune in check.

To riff on the spatial metaphor of the 'number frontier' offered in the introduction to this issue, one could say that the numerical figures inscribed into temple walls, posters and receipts offered a common point of departure, a shared staging ground and gateway, to different genres of accounting and ways of reading – one based on number's aggregation as total surplus 'wasted' on personal vanity and superstition, the other on number's amplification as a serialized unfolding of miraculous gains, each sum reverberating with all the others as testament to the joint efficacy of gods and the 'doing of superstition'. In fact, numbers on temple steles and posters might best be described in Star and Griesemer's terms as 'boundary objects' which have the capacity to enact 'different meanings in different social worlds' while maintaining a structure that is 'common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable' as a shared means of translation (1989: 393) (cf. Mathews, 2008).

The cascade of numbers on steles shared a basic threshold of account-ability. For one thing, both the local historian and the village worshippers could agree that the figures listed on temple walls largely indexed remittances from overseas and, moreover, that such numbers testified, whether for good or for ill, to something extra-ordinary in villagers' fortunes. Beyond that, however, they certainly diverged in their methods of accounting for remittance's means and ends, its generative sources and enabling effects, as so many monetary sums gathered and translated into elaborate public inscriptions on stone and on paper.

## Notes

- 1 Peter Kwong (1997, 2001) suggests that this distinct wave of illegal immigration from rural Fuzhou in Fujian province began in the early 1970s, though it really picked up only after 1986 with the passage of the US Immigration Reform and Control Act which offered a blanket, one-time amnesty to all previously undocumented migrants and enabled subsequent and widespread chain migration among the Fuzhounese (cf. Chin, 1999, 2001; Guest, 2003; Kyle and Koslowski, 2001). The extent of this new massive wave of emigration from Fuzhou has been documented by a number of researchers. For instance, Liang and Ye (2001) noted how, by 1995, Fujian province



ranked first in emigration flows out of China, sending 66,2000 people or 28% of China's total emigrant population.

- 2 From unpublished conference report by Lin Guoping, October 2000.
- 3 These critiques come from several personal communications with the author around the time of his report (15 July 2000; 24 October 2000; 28 September 2001). I should note that the report itself privileges the less charged notion of 'folk belief' (*minjian xinyang*) in describing ritual expenditures and, in general, refrains from critical commentary in favor of a more objectivist style of exposition. While I do not have the space to elaborate on this tension between the author's official description and his personal critiques, it's important to note how official and scholarly discourse about popular religion has shifted gradually over this past decade (i.e. since the time of this report) from an emphasis on the problem of 'superstition' to more variegated and even celebratory discussions of ritual life as 'folk belief', 'custom', 'tradition' and, most recently, 'immaterial culture' (see Chu, forthcoming).
- 4 This emphasis on 'the doing' of *mixin* is not unique among the Fuzhounese in China. My argument here also draws from a number of key works on praxis in Chinese popular religion; chief among them are James Watson's insights on orthopraxy in funeral rites and temple cults (1985, 1988, 1993), Sangren's emphasis on ritual as productive action (2000) and Marcel Granet's observations of agnostic calculation as 'superstitious positivism' among worshippers (1975[1922]). See also Feuchtwang (2007) on ritual as communicative performance and Chau (2006) on the modes of producing or 'doing' Chinese popular religion.
- 5 Typically, the specific details of these events such as the kind of entertainment, the names of the god and the sponsor and the cause for celebration would be publicly announced in large red posters displayed in the main commercial hubs of the village. In this way, these events were even more explicit as celebrations of divine efficacy since they directly linked gratitude to gods with news of some particular success of the worshipper. All villagers would be invited to enjoy the entertainment as witnesses of divine success and also as beneficiaries of the god's *ling*, which made the event possible in the first place.
- 6 Two classic ethnographic accounts of the bureaucratic nature of the afterlife in Chinese communities are Wolf (1978) and Ahern (1982). Also see Doré (1967), Eberhard (1967), Feuchtwang (1977, 1993), Gates (1987), Rawski and Watson (1988), Teiser (1988, 1993) and Weller (1987).

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