



**Religious Authority in East Asia  
Materiality, Media, and Aesthetics**

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## Guest Editors' Introduction

### Religious Authority in East Asia Materiality, Media, and Aesthetics

This special issue brings together interdisciplinary and inter-regional contributions that examine a wide range of forms and modes of religious authority in East Asia, with a particular focus on their materiality and aesthetic and sensory dimensions. In this introductory article, we highlight and discuss major themes emerging from the articles and discussions among contributors and point to some future research directions. Examining the relational nature of authority (re)production across a broad range of cases, we argue that attention to emotional bonds and aesthetic standards might move us beyond classical definitions of authority types. Going on to discuss the negotiation of authority through the lens of aesthetic sensibility, we argue that material and sensorial dimensions not only play an important role in defining and legitimizing authority but also in its contingency and instability over time. Finally, the article focuses on the possibilities and limits of mediated authority, an issue we argue is relevant to both contemporary and historical practices, even if recent technological developments present specific opportunities and challenges.

KEYWORDS: authority—aesthetics—mediation—materiality—senses—emotion—Asian religion

How is religious authority produced, maintained, and, in some cases, lost?<sup>1</sup> How is charismatic authority defined, negotiated, and challenged? How is religious authority different from other forms of power relationship? Such questions, central to the institutionalization of sociology as a discipline over a century ago, have received renewed attention through the recent “material turn” in the study of religion. Analyzing religion as an activity rather than a state of mind (Keane 2008), scholars in anthropology, sociology, and religious studies have started to pay more attention to the material and sensorial phenomena that make religion “concrete and palpable” (Meyer 2012) as well as “recognizable” and “communicable” (Keane 2008). This material turn has prompted a new set of questions about religious authority. What role do emotion and the senses play in the (re)production of religious authority? What role have the mass media and technological transformations played in shaping new forms of religious authority? What is specifically affected by these changes? How are forms of materiality and mediation creating and transforming authority in different historical contexts?

The aim of this issue is to locate East Asia in the debate about the materiality and aesthetics of religious authority. Working against the notion of East Asian exceptionalism, we see the articles as a series of sites upon which to explore the role of media, sensation, emotion, and feeling in the production, recognition, instantiation, maintenance, and contestation of religious authority in particular cultural, social, and political milieus. Recent studies of religious authority in East Asia that address mediation, emotion, or aesthetics have largely focused on charismatic individuals and movements or the impact of the mass media in shaping new modes of religious authority (see Baffelli 2016; Baffelli, Reader, and Staemmler 2011; Chilson 2014; Dorman 2012; Huang 2009; Ji 2008; Ownby, Goossaert, and Ji 2017; Smyer Yü 2012; Travagnin 2016; and Turek 2017).<sup>2</sup> In this special issue we broaden the discussion by bringing together a selection of articles that discuss the (re)production of a wide variety of forms and modes of religious authority, including those that do not fit “classical definitions” of charisma and those that cut across spheres defined as “religious” and “secular.” The contributors also consider the impact of media beyond mass media, including spaces and objects (relics, images, artefacts, photographs); their aesthetic qualities and uses; bodies, bodily decorum, and conduct; passions; “feeling”; and sound.

As evident from this range of cases, we take “religion” in a broad sense to refer to “ways in which people link up with, or even feel touched by” the transcendental (Meyer 2008a, 705), that which “remains beyond—hidden, untouched, unseen, unheard or unfulfilled” (Reinhardt 2016, 76). Taken in this broad sense, religion *is* mediation; its rituals and practices, objects (books, ritual objects, clothes), spaces (churches, temples, mosques), founders, prophets, and religious specialists are channels through which people can connect with or touch the transcendental (see also de Vries 2001; Stolow 2005; and Meyer 2008b). If religion is mediation, then religious authority is the authority to act *as* media, making sense-able and cognizable that which remains beyond the senses. Thus, we can speak of the “authority” of objects, rituals, organizations, and non-human agents, as well as that of leaders and religious specialists—such as the celebrities, preachers, congregations, religiously inspired charitable organizations, living ascetics, mummified corpses, photographs, aura readers, sacred groves, deities, and spirit mediums that feature in this issue. In each of the contexts examined by the contributors, authority is (re)produced *through* media: symbols, sights, sounds, and bodily techniques or dispositions that make religious authority recognizable and felt as such, as well as the “sensational forms” (Meyer 2010) that create and sustain affective bonds between religious authorities and their constituencies.

As we will discuss further in this article, if we start by considering all religious authority as relational and grounded in material and sensorial forms, this opens up a set of key questions. Who produces religious authority and has the power to define and shape its performance? Who or what defines the boundaries of proper/improper materiality and sensation—what is and is not aesthetically persuasive? What are the wider constellations of authority within which religious actors operate and how do they shape aesthetic sensibilities? What happens to authority when a religious leader, organization, object, or space has relationships with different constituencies, each laying claim to her/him/it based on different expectations and sensibilities? What are the possibilities and limitations of mediated authority?

The articles presented in this issue highlight the relational dynamics of religious authority across a broad range of contexts. As we elaborate below, taken together they show that affective and aesthetic dimensions of authority—and therefore an “aesthetics of persuasion” (Meyer 2010)—are *generally* relevant to the study of religious authority. This might seem a rather obvious point, but the recent emphasis on emotion and the senses has largely centered on or been developed with reference to contemporary charismatic leaders and movements. Dorothea Schulz has even identified an “appeal that is mediated through aesthetic forms” as definitional to charisma (2015, 125). Taken to its logical conclusion, this would suggest that such an appeal is not central to other forms of authority. By interrogating a wider range of religious authorities, human and non-human, in a variety of contexts, this issue highlights the importance of aesthetic sensibility to not only the production but also the contingency and—to varying degrees—instability of religious authority through time and across space. Although five of the articles focus on the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, we were keen to avoid assumptions about the exceptionalism of our time, particularly as conceived of

as a media or “mediatized” age (see, for example, Hjarvard 2008). The contributors are careful to contextualize and historicize their cases. Ioannis Gaitanidis, for example, who directly addresses the interaction between technology and religious authority, traces the antecedents of twenty-first-century Japanese aura photography sessions back to the eighteenth-century “animal magnetism” séances of Franz Anton Mesmer. We add a further trans-historical element to this collection through inclusion of Andrea Castiglioni’s study of the mummified corpses of eminent ascetics in Edo-period Japan (1600–1868). As we will discuss further, this case helps to show continuities across time, thus further contextualizing recent transformations brought about by technological change and processes of globalization. Materiality, mediation, and aesthetics might be relatively novel concepts in the academic study of religion and religious authority, but—as Castiglioni shows—they can be just as usefully applied to historical as to contemporary contexts.

In this introduction, we examine these questions and issues in more depth. In the spirit of the issue, we draw on two very different areas of expertise and ethnographic experience. Erica Baffelli brings in insights from her work on Japanese “new religions,” specifically *Kōfuku no Kagaku* or Happy Science, founded in 1986 by Ōkawa Ryūhō, a self-proclaimed reincarnation of Buddha. The popularity and continuity of the religion has depended upon Ōkawa’s charismatic leadership and authority, combined with a savvy use of media and marketing techniques. Viewed through the lens of Weberian ideal types, *Kōfuku no Kagaku* is a charismatic movement with a degree of institutionalization. By contrast, Jane Caple’s expertise lies in Tibetan Buddhism in post-Mao China, specifically monastic Buddhism of the Geluk tradition. Although not without charismatic elements, the Geluk is the most clerical of the main Tibetan Buddhist traditions and exercised political as well as religious authority in many parts of Tibet prior to the 1950s, including the editor’s field areas on the northeastern edge of the Tibetan plateau in Amdo/Qinghai.

By way of introducing some of the key questions raised in this issue, we start with the case of *Kōfuku no Kagaku*, describing material and sensorial dimensions of authority construction and cultivation as the relationship between its leader and members shifted over time. We then go on to discuss these issues and their broader relevance to questions of religious authority, tracing emergent themes running through the articles presented in the special issue, before finally going on to briefly introduce the individual contributions.

#### CONSTRUCTING AUTHORITY IN *KŌFUKU NO KAGAKU*

When Ōkawa Ryūhō established *Kōfuku no Kagaku* in the 1980s he presented himself as a teacher who could explain how to achieve happiness. This was paired with his supposed ability to communicate with spirits, who used his body to convey their messages. Similar to other Japanese “new” religions (*shinshūkyō*), the body of the leader became the medium between supernatural entities, spirits (in particular, of illustrious figures), deities, and human beings. Ōkawa’s spiritual messages (*reigen*) were recorded by his father and printed and studied by his early followers. In the early 1990s, his authority was consolidated through a large media

campaign, leading to a ceremony in July 1991 in which his rebirth as the Buddha was announced and celebrated in front of a large audience. During this period, direct contact with the leader was emphasized through spectacular events during which members were emotionally integrated into the group's mission as chosen "angels of light" (*bikari no tenshi*). This resonates with other studies of charismatic authority as an "emotional form of communal relationship" (Weber 1968, 243), which stress the importance of direct contact between leaders and members.

However, as new religious groups expand and become more institutionalized, direct contact tends to decrease because of the leader's withdrawal from the public scene, or geographical distance, particularly in the case of transnational religious organizations. Leaders often travel, but few members have direct access to them, especially those who live overseas or who are elderly and unable to attend ceremonies and rituals in person. The gradual withdrawal of the leader from the public scene is becoming an increasing issue in some Japanese new religions. Aging leaders are unable to maintain the high levels of public visibility central to their movements' successes in earlier decades (Baffelli 2016; Baffelli and Reader 2019). What happens when a leader is physically distant or even absent and therefore it is more difficult for members to merge with his or her senses and emotions? What happens, as Castiglioni (this issue) discusses, when a leader or a charismatic figure passes away (see also Baffelli and Reader 2019)? The adoption of various media to respond to the proximity gap created by the lack of direct contact with a leader or master leads us to reconsider the importance placed by earlier studies on direct contact—and to pay attention to the question of mediation. Can media help to make a religious authority "present" and to recreate perceived proximity to her or him? Or can this "mediation" weaken religious authority?

In the case of *Kōfuku no Kagaku*, from the mid-1990s until 2008 Ōkawa Ryūhō rarely appeared in public. There were several reasons for his withdrawal. Defamatory articles about Ōkawa, published during the height of the organization's expansion in the early 1990s, led to a long legal dispute with the publisher *Kōdansha* and further negative media exposure. This negative image was accentuated by general public criticism and mistrust of new religious leaders following the sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway, committed by the religious organization *Aum Shinrikyō* in 1995 (Baffelli and Reader 2012). During those years, Ōkawa mainly communicated via video, his image carefully protected by the organization and his body becoming "virtualized." This undermined the charismatic authority that had emerged from his direct contact with followers. Yet, it also enabled Ōkawa to control criticism and maintain his authority and legitimacy as a spiritual guide. The physical manifestation of his figure became an extraordinary rather than ordinary occurrence, rendering it "immaterial, semi-divine" (Baffelli 2016, 112). His "aura" could therefore be attributed to his physical distance from members, similar to the aura of a piece of art as described by Walter Benjamin (1970).

Despite this physical distance, a connection between the leader and members of *Kōfuku no Kagaku* was cultivated through the material form of the organization's religious centers located around Japan and overseas, where daily prayers and rituals, as well as larger events, are performed. Generally easily identifiable, characterized

by white columns at the entrance and the name of the group on the facade, Kōfuku no Kagaku centers are not just spaces where members can meet or where rituals are performed. They are also spaces where Ōkawa is made omnipresent, his figure materialized through images, objects, and texts, as well as new media. The main prayer hall or the entrance hall usually has a statue of him; photos of him visiting the centers or performing rituals appear on the walls; and several small altars are located in the buildings, all displaying his photo with a list of the names of his previous reincarnations (including Buddha). His books, videos, and CDs are available in every room, including bedrooms used by members for overnight stays. Ceremonies held at the centers always include videos from the leader, and the group has started using satellite and Internet broadcasting to transmit major events and his public talks.

The sacred centers are not only filled with media. Like churches, mosques, shrines, or religious sites, such as the sacred grove that Aike Rots discusses in this issue, they *are* media. Seen as an embodiment of the leader, the centers are channels through which members can connect with the leader as a living embodiment of the transcendent. During the morning service, the priest in charge will “distribute the light” from a statue of the leader, representing the object of worship to the followers in attendance. In an interview with members living in an area of Japan quite remote from Tokyo, one stated that they believe that the leader is “always with them” (*tomo ni iru*). This was followed by comments by others who said that being inside the center is like being “inside the Buddha” (*budda no naka ni iru*), that is, inside the leader, and that praying at the center is a way to feel more connected with him. The serene atmosphere in the centers, created by soft colors, suffused lights, and smiling members, produces a sensorial experience that makes members feel part of the surroundings and amplifies their perceived spiritual connection with the (albeit distant) leader—reconstructing a direct connection that could be lost in the process of virtualization. At the same time, religious centers are the material expression of the wealth and power of the organization, as well as a physical representation of its brand—some are located in central areas of major Japanese cities or are large buildings that cannot pass unnoticed. Finally, they are the locus where new rituals related to the cultivation of charisma are created, such as, for example, new forms of pilgrimage to Ōkawa’s birthplace on the island of Shikoku.

Are there limits? Can an object (such as a painting, photograph, or video) or a building fully substitute the leader? Testimonies are extensively used by religious organizations to reinforce the “charismatic source,” for example testimonies of “miracles” credited to the leader or testimonies about how meeting the leader or reading his or her book changed someone’s life. However, they cannot necessarily completely replace the leader, especially if he or she is still alive. Furthermore, as Gaitanidis (this issue) shows, the transfer of authority to objects can be challenged by technological developments and new media. Despite the use of various media to reproduce and reinforce the connection between Ōkawa and his followers, recent interviews with Kōfuku no Kagaku members living distant from Tokyo suggest that a mediated form of interaction may not always be sufficient to sustain the connection. They pointed out that it remains harder for them to meet the



leader in person than during the 1990s. Many will travel to attend his live events. The head of one of the organization's centers in South Japan also mentioned that Ōkawa has recently restarted organizing more informal meetings with members, especially new followers. This indicates that direct contact might still be crucial. As Castiglioni's article shows, devotees can even seek to maintain and cultivate a form of direct contact—and through this, authority and charisma—even after death.

The example of Kōfuku no Kagaku illustrates how authority is constructed and cultivated through a process of mediation, embodiment, and community creation in which sensorial involvement and materiality play a central role. Although Kōfuku no Kagaku is a new religious movement, we consider these themes to be generally relevant to questions of religious authority. In the remainder of the introduction, we discuss their applicability to a broad range of religious authorities in East Asia, past and present, and suggest some possible directions for future research.

#### (RE)PRODUCING RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY: EMOTION AND SENSES

Castiglioni's contribution to this issue raises some provocative questions about the production and ownership of religious authority. Examining the relationship between the ascetics of Japan's Mount Yudono and their lay devotees and patrons during the Edo period (1600–1868), he points to the “pivotal role” played by the latter. Making sometimes extreme “devotional and monetary investments” in the ascetics during life, they mummified the bodies of the most eminent after death, transforming them into a “flesh-body icon.” The performance of charismatic authority continued after death with the devotees' exhibition of the body as well as through re-clothing ceremonies that reaffirmed the ascetic's religious power and renewed his relationship with his devotees. Who then, Castiglioni asks, produced the ascetic's charisma and who “owned” his body in both life and after death? Who had the authority and power to define and shape its performance?

Sociologist Max Weber understood pure or “primary” charisma to be a “certain quality of an individual personality” (1968, 48), which causes him to be “set apart from ordinary men [*sic*] and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.” While continuing to draw on Weber's ideas, scholars now generally recognize charismatic authority as mutually constructed through and dependent on the dynamics between leaders and followers (as we saw in the case of Kōfuku no Kagaku). This relational dynamic and the agency of followers in the (re)production of charismatic authority is foregrounded in Stephan Feuchtwang and Wang Mingming's (2001, 172) definition of charisma as an “expectation of the extraordinary.” The leader is important not so much for any innate or inherent quality of the individual “as for the sheer importance of bringing into one person, a living body, a source of expectations of the extraordinary” (Feuchtwang 2008, 94). Charismatic authority thus rests on the ability of a leader to “embody the collective consciousness,” which “may result in the continuous justification and even mystification of the leader's superiority” (Ji 2008, 49)—and thus the reproduction of charisma.



Charles Lindholm's (2013) rethinking of charisma as an ideal type further emphasizes the "*emotional* attraction derived from followers' felt recognition of a leader's divine or superhuman powers." Recent studies of charismatic religious movements in Japan and China (e.g., Ji 2008; Feuchtwang 2010; Huang 2008, 2009; Huang-Lemmon 2013; Chilson 2014; and Baffelli and Reader 2019) have placed similar emphasis on the importance of personal ties, emotional bonds, and affection between leaders and followers. As we have seen in the case of Kōfuku no Kagaku, sensory recognition can be direct, emerging from direct contact with the source of authority (in this case, the leader), but it can also be the product of a process of mediated identification. In his analysis of the Japanese (neo-)Buddhist organization Sōka Gakkai, Clark Chilson (2014) draws on James MacGregor Burns's idea of the "transformational leader," analyzing how the use of personal accounts in the diary of Ikeda Daisaku (the group's leader) creates a sense of intimacy. He claims that "the leaders often use symbols of success and power to emotionally engage people with their visions" (2014, 70). Paul Farrelly (this issue) presents us with an example of a "transformational leader"—Taiwanese New Age authority Terry Hu—whose authority seems to have been constructed entirely through media. A movie star with a ready-made audience, Hu used "spiritual auto-hagiography" as a medium through which to narrate her own "performative emotional transformation" as a model for readers initially attracted to her because of her celebrity. This process of mediation raises questions related to proximity and distance, to which we will later return.

It is perhaps not surprising that it has generally been in studies of charismatic leaders and communities like Kōfuku no Kagaku that scholars have started to pay attention to the affective and sensory dimensions of religious authority. According to Weber's (1968) schema, which remains the starting point for many studies of religious authority, "rational-legal" and "traditional" types of authority map on to cognitive and habitual modes of action, while charisma is associated with the affectual. The affectual is perhaps more obvious and pronounced in the dynamics of charismatic leadership—and in the sensorially rich and experiential forms of worship such as those discussed by Mark McLeister and Castiglioni in this issue (see also Meyer 2010). However, emotional attraction and sensory recognition of authority go beyond "classical" definitions of charismatic authority. Articles in this issue, in particular Gaitanidis and Rots, discuss the centrality of sensation and feeling in the construction of authority by presenting case studies that will not fit the charismatic ideal type. Moreover, McLeister provides us with a case in which religious authority "is collectively produced and reproduced" by a congregation, with no single leader commanding a personal following.

The articles in this issue show that an appeal to the senses and invocation of feeling and emotion—what Birgit Meyer (2010) has termed an "aesthetics of persuasion"—is *generally* relevant to the (re)production of authority. This includes that of organizations occupying newly broken, liminal ground between spheres defined as "religious" and "secular," such as the religiously inspired charitable organizations (RICOs) Caroline Fielder discusses in her contribution to this issue. Although inserting and establishing themselves as authorities within an

arena defined as secular, they are deeply concerned with maintaining their identities and authority as religious actors. She shows, for example, how members draw on religious imagery, semantics, and testimony from their clients both to create emotional bonds in the communities in which they work and to persuade other members of their faith community that their work in HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention constitutes religious work. Even routinized, firmly institutionalized, and relatively conservative forms of authority are relational, and although more stable than charismatic authority, they are not static. The clerical authority of Geluk monastic Buddhism, for example, is dependent on interactions between monastics and the patron communities upon which they depend for recruitment as well as financial support. Maintaining the faith and confidence of the laity, historically a concern of the Tibetan monastic establishment even at the height of its power (see, for example, Jansen 2014), continues to shape institutional decisions about reforms to, for example, monastic financing (Caple 2019). This relationship might not have the emotional intensity of that between a reincarnate lama or adept recognized as possessing extraordinary qualities and their followers. However, as Jeffrey Samuels has argued, lay-monastic relationships are negotiated and shaped through “affective bonds” that are “deepened by common histories, similar values, shared sentiments and *collectively held aesthetic standards*” (2010, xxiv, emphasis ours). In Tibet, these affective bonds are to some extent grounded in institutionalized relationships between particular communities, monasteries, and reincarnation lineages (Caple 2019) but are also based on personal knowledge and interactions.

We suggest that focusing on such emotional bonds and aesthetic standards might move us beyond typologies of authority in order to focus on processes of construction and (de)construction of emotional attachment. This brings us to the question of aesthetic sensibility in the negotiation of religious authority. What, for example, makes a “good” monk or monastery and how does one recognize him or it as such?

#### NEGOTIATING RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY:

##### COMMUNICABILITY AND AESTHETIC SENSIBILITY

Tracing the transformation of Taiwanese movie-star Terry Hu into a leading Sinophone New Age authority through her oeuvre, Farrelly (this issue) argues that she wrote herself “into the New Age” through spiritual auto-hagiographies. These established her connection to foreign New Age authorities (often male) as well as narrating her spiritual transformation. However, she also drew on a repertoire of tropes, semantics, imagery, and symbols from Chinese religious biography and Buddhism in her writing and visual self-representations. As Feuchtwang (2010, 108) argues, charismatic religious authority, although based on a new vision shared with followers, is necessarily “derivative from that which is already authoritative.” For the “extraordinary” to be recognized as such, it must be communicable through its materiality and sense-ability: through symbols, sights, sounds, bodily dispositions, and bodily disciplines. Furthermore, these material and sensorial

forms must be legible by the other side. That is, they must be communicated through a common “language” of shared aesthetic sensibility.

If charismatic authority “is necessary new-old” and “innovation-with-authority” (Feuchtwang 2010, 109), then institutionalized, routinized authority is necessary old-new. Although grounded in “tradition,” it requires renewal and adaptation to ensure its reproduction—and in some cases expansion—in changing political, social, and economic contexts. As Lindholm (2013) points out, charismatic, traditional, and legal-rational modes of authority are ideal types and, in practice, usually exist in some kind of combination. The “symbiotic relation” between charisma and tradition or institution (Smyer Yü 2012, 11) can work both ways. Maria Turek (2017), for example, argues that Tsültrim Tarchin, a charismatic Tibetan adept from Eastern Tibet, harnessed “the charismatic potential” of a repertoire of past exemplars, symbols, and stories from within his tradition, the Barom Kagyü lineage. The Barom tradition, by endorsing Tsültrim Tarchin, was in turn able to appropriate his personal charisma as it adapted and reinvented itself in contemporary contexts (*ibid.*).

However, despite the emphasis on charisma as “the type of authority that brings about renewal of religious traditions or simply religious innovation” (e.g., Feuchtwang 2008, 92), renewal and adaptation is not necessarily dependent on the emergence of a visionary leader. Gaitanidis (this issue), for example, demonstrates the role that technology can play. Moreover, in many religious contexts, personal charisma and an “expectation of the extraordinary” are not central to the production and maintenance of religious authority and might even be eschewed or avoided (see Goossaert 2008, 18–19). Renewal and adaptation can emerge in other ways, including institutional reform, (re-)branding, and the adoption of new forms of media. However, central to each is the *communicability* of authority through, to borrow from Pierre Bourdieu (1998, 112), the “categories of perception and appreciation at play in the field.” Just as Hu drew on Buddhist semantics, symbols, and imagery in establishing herself as a New Age authority in Taiwan (Farrelly, this issue), Fielder (this issue) shows how a Catholic RICO operating in China engaged in a similar process of appropriation. For example, it drew respectively on global Catholic and Confucian semantics in the English and Chinese versions of its name—just one of the many ways in which this organization worked to brand itself and establish its identity and authority.

Negotiation of religious authority involves the negotiation of the boundaries of proper/improper materiality and sensation, requiring us to pay attention to the processes through which emic evaluations as to the authenticity and appropriateness of modes and forms of materiality and sensation are produced, defined, contested, and felt—what Bruno Reinhardt (2016, 78) refers to as “emic forms of boundary-making.” That which provokes joy, devotion, or affection among some might provoke discomfort, amusement, or disgust among others. For example, Castiglioni shows that the mummification and exhibition of the bodies of Mount Yudono’s eminent ascetics prompted disgust rather than devotion among some commentators during the Edo period, citing one samurai who viewed the practice as economic exploitation of the ascetics’ corpses. Forms and modes of materiality and

sensation are subject to reflection and critique from within groups and traditions, as well as from without—even those forms that might appear most firmly grounded in “tradition.” John Kieschnick, for example, notes that the “robes of Buddhist monks and Catholic priests have been the subject of intense debate and heated criticism” (2007, 229). The blurry line between religious materiality and commodification, and the impact that this can have on religious authority, is perhaps of particular relevance in contemporary society—although as Castiglioni shows, it is certainly not without precedent. Why, for example, has Caple (2019, 72–75) found considerable ambivalence toward the dynamics of monastic tourism and Sino-Tibetan patronage relations in northeast Tibet but not the manufacture of religious products by monasteries?

As Reinhardt shows in his discussion of Ghanaian bible school teachings (2016, 85–89), we need to look beyond authoritative religious discourse to address such questions. They require attention to the specific contexts and participation frameworks within which problems and strategies of religious authority play out. These shape practices of boundary making through the (re)interpretation of rules, guidelines, and “tradition,” but also sensibilities about and dispositional awareness of proper/improper materiality. Thus, Castiglioni (this issue) shows that responses to the mummified bodies of Mount Yudono’s eminent ascetics not only diverged among different actors but also shifted with the changing socio-political climate. During the rapid transformations of the Meiji period in the late nineteenth century, “any type of artificial transformation of the cadaver . . . [was seen as] a disturbing threat to the unity of the political and social body” (46). Thus the way in which particular sensorial forms are received, perceived, and interpreted is dependent on cultural, social, economic, and political contexts. The aesthetics of persuasion is situated and contingent—and shaped by a constellation of different forms of authority.

McLeister’s contribution to this issue clearly demonstrates that the negotiation of religious authority and its aesthetics of persuasion involves more than a bi-directional relationship between the (potential) religious authority and her/his/its followers, clients, or supporters. It is also situated within a wider constellation of sometimes competing authorities, including other religious and (non-governmental) secular authorities as well as those of the state. The Protestant congregations he studies are affiliated to what has previously been read as a conservative and clerical form of Protestantism in China: the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, representing institutionalized, state-sponsored Protestantism. Yet, a strong experiential and emotional dimension, centered on the idea of being “filled with” or “moved by” the Holy Spirit, is central to their idea of authentic Christian practice and determines their evaluations of and support for religious leaders. Within these congregations, however, a “sensorially rich atmosphere,” involving open weeping and glossolalia, was only produced in certain contexts. Even then, it was kept within certain limits, distanced from the categories of “charismatic” practice and “*renao* (hot and noisy/raucous).” This was partly because the state associates these categories with “superstition,” which it fears and prohibits. However, it was also because the congregations understood there to be a fine line between genuine experiential practices and “sinister spiritual activity” and therefore themselves

feared “excess or even pandemonium.” His informants, McLeister emphasizes, “do not self-identify as ‘Charismatic.’”

Material and sensorial dimensions of religion can therefore play an important role in marking out territory and identity and in collective assertions of moral distinction and authority by certain groups. This can sometimes challenge other forms of authority and their structural underpinnings, notably in relation to gender. Charismatic female leaders such as Hu (Farrelly, this issue) and Cheng Yen, founder and leader of the international Buddhist relief organization Tzu Chi (Huang 2008), embody the transformative potential of the female body, resulting in what Huang has referred to as a “breakthrough in female gender roles” (2008, 42). As with the Protestant congregations studied by McLeister, Maria Jaschok found a disassociation with *renao* in her study of women’s mosques in China. These spaces, like other female religious sites, provided both an alternative to gendered spatial segregation and an escape from male-dominated environments (Jaschok and Shui 2011). In this case, *renao* was problematic because it was “too akin to a male-gendered soundscape, associated by women with the worldly conduct and morality of men’s mosques,” counterposed against the stillness, purity of faith, and composure of women’s mosques (Jaschok 2014, 68).

Finally, the articles in this issue show that the aesthetics of persuasion cuts across domains defined or understood as religious, secular, or superstitious, or as sacred and mundane. What counts as “religious” or “secular,” who defines it as such, and how? Medicine, for example, is a field of practice crossing the religious-secular divide. Practices defined as “spiritual healing” have entered into mainstream clinical medicine, while faith-based or religiously inspired organizations are active in the “modern” (secular) healthcare sector. The establishment of authority in these contexts can be complex, involving negotiation with religious and state authorities as well as patients, members, and the wider public. Fielder (this issue) shows how religious authority, signs, and symbols have been drawn upon by religiously inspired charitable organizations in an aesthetics of persuasion oriented toward changing public attitudes toward HIV/AIDS and PLWHA (People Living with HIV/AIDS) in China. For example, to “facilitate reception” of their messages about HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention in the community, a Buddhist RICO used Buddhist images and folk music permeated with Buddhist values. These organizations are operating in a charitable/philanthropic field that, in modern China, has been divorced from religion. They must therefore negotiate a delicate position straddling religious-secular boundaries, employing different strategies to establish their identity and authority in relation to their members and supporters, state authorities, and society. The above mentioned politics of naming in which a Catholic RICO engaged is a good example.

Other key areas where categories of “religious” and “secular” are blurred, negotiated, and contested by different actors are the tourism and heritage industries. In Asia, as elsewhere, these industries draw on religious sites and traditions as resources in developing local or national economies as well as in processes of nation building and place making. The South Korean state, for example, has funded a Templestay program in Korea, offering an “authentic” Korean Buddhist

experience for tourists, including worship, chanting, the practice of 108 bows, and manual labor. In the process, it has defined a particular Buddhist order as the authoritative version of Buddhism as part of its national branding as well as economic development (Koo 2014). However, Koo (*ibid.*) argues that overseas tourists seem to take this experience more seriously than do the (mainly young) domestic visitors. The latter are more interested in these overseas tourists than the Buddhist experience they are being sold.

The process of touristification or “heritization” of certain cultural forms can provoke tension between different actors over the meaning, scripting, and use of particular sites and spaces. Such tensions often play out between institutionalized religious authorities, state actors, and big business—although these are not always clearly differentiated. However, as Rots shows in his article on the sacred grove of Sēfa Utaki in Okinawa (this issue), tensions can also play out between actors who have different ideas about what makes a place sacred (is it a “powerspot” or inhabited by deities?), what it means to feel this sacredness, and how to interact with it. His case is particularly interesting since, with no clerical authority present, there are no authoritative rules or guidelines over what constitutes the “proper” use of the sacred grove. The expectations and imagination of Japanese visitors to Sēfa Utaki jar with Okinawan sensibilities and understandings. We find similar dynamics in northeastern Tibet in the context of monastic tourism, as well as Sino-Tibetan patronage. This is partly a question of ownership: both cases involve identity politics, with the Japanese and Chinese states having laid claim to Okinawan and Tibetan histories, cultures, and traditions, as well as territories. However, both cases also show that the material and sensorial dynamics of new relationships, extending beyond local participation frameworks, can have an impact on the authority of religious leaders, institutions, and spaces “back home.” This authority might be heightened (e.g., Kolås 2008; Zhang 2012) or eroded (e.g., Smyer Yü 2012; Caple 2015; and Rots in this issue). These cases also raise questions about proximity and distance—and the issue of presence—to which we will now turn.

#### MEDIATED AUTHORITY: ITS POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS

In Tibet, some of the central institutionalized religious authorities are marked by their absence. This includes the Dalai Lama and Karmapa, both of whom are in exile and have a global charismatic presence, and the Panchen Lama, whose whereabouts are unknown.<sup>3</sup> Historically, the average Tibetan would have had little opportunity for direct contact with these figures, although in the exile context the Dalai Lama has become more accessible. However, the idea of them simply “being there” in Tibet has strong emotional force. The Dalai Lama’s absence seems particularly keenly felt, yet his presence and authority continue to permeate daily life in the part of northeast Tibet where Caple works. Although officially banned, his image is displayed in many homes and monasteries, and metaphorical allusions are made to him in songs, literature, and art. Despite attempted state censorship, his presence is also mediated by daily talk of his travels, activities, and teachings, avidly followed through the Internet, social media, and pirate TV and radio broadcasts.



Although mass media technologies render the Dalai Lama visible and audible on a daily basis, they have not replaced other forms of mediation. Longevity pills and thin red cords worn around the neck, blessed by the Dalai Lama, find their way across the Himalayas. His presence is also felt through signs and wonders. In summer 2015, Caple entered the courtyard of a village house to find the extended family gazing up at the sky in a mixture of awe and excitement. The simultaneous appearance of the sun, moon, and a star (corresponding to the Dalai Lama, Panchen Lama, and Karmapa) was experienced as an auspicious and miraculous occurrence, both symbol and manifestation, connected to the coming birthday of the Dalai Lama. In each of these contexts, the Dalai Lama is “felt” as simultaneously present and absent. His mediated presence reinforces the affective bonds between this “leader” and his “followers,” but it cannot substitute the blessing understood to be received should one be lucky enough to come into his physical presence.

As we saw in the *Kōfuku no Kagaku* case, the adoption of media and the impacts of mediated practices raise important questions concerning the maintenance of religious authority and the transformation of relationships between religious authorities and their followers, clients, and supporters. Some scholars view “modern” institutions and society, including religion, as being shaped by and dependent on media technologies and organizations, a process that has been defined as “mediatization” (Hjarvard 2008). As other scholars have noted, the use of media is not something new to modernity (De Vries 2001; Meyer and Moors 2005; Plate 2003; and Stolow 2005). For example, the desire expressed by *Kōfuku no Kagaku*’s members to meet the leader and their nostalgic accounts of access to him in the past not only resonate with Caple’s experiences among Tibetans. They also resonate with Castiglioni’s discussion of the preservation, display, and re-clothing of the bodies of prominent ascetics after death several hundred years ago. The importance of balancing between direct and meditated encounters—when this is possible—as well as the relevance of creating a sensorial connection cannot be limited to contemporary contexts. It could, we argue, provide a useful framework for cross-historical analysis.

Although the use of media is not new, new forms of media and technology can create new forms of mediation (and new forms of authority) or have an impact on existing ones (Baffelli 2016). With the advent of mass media technologies, from printing through digitalization, it has been possible to disseminate words and images more widely—and now, globally and potentially instantaneously through social media. Although this can be a challenge to the authority of some leaders and groups, particularly when unable to control the exposure and visibility of their leaders (Dorman 2012; Baffelli 2016), it can also serve to enhance their authority and extend their influence (Stalker 2008, 110). This is even in cases when representations in the mainstream media have been highly critical of particular leaders (see, e.g., Dorman 2012). Farrelly (this issue) presents us with a case in which the religious authority of a film-star-turned-New-Age-authority seems to have been constructed entirely through media: translations, auto-hagiographical publications, films, TV and radio appearances, and CDs, enabling her to engage in a process of constant reinvention. The “hybrid spiritual identity” that Hu has constructed



for herself, Farrelly argues, is adaptable and “constantly open to innovation.” Gaitanidis’s contribution, by contrast, shows how development of photographic technology created a new form of authority and then destroyed it. Aura reading became a sub-specialism within Japan’s “spiritual business” field with the advent of Polaroid photography and development of “special cameras” able to reproduce a person’s aura. This required a human intermediary (the aura reader) with the ability to operate the camera and interpret the images it produced. Their authority was based on their monopolization of the production of knowledge and the sensorial ritual through which this unfolded. However, through the development of standardized readings and a process of what Gaitanidis refers to as “democratization” through digitalization, people can now access these images and explanations directly through their smart phones. Both the special camera and the aura reader as an “extension of this medium” have lost their authority. This case clearly demonstrates the centrality of both media and sensorial form to the reproduction of human authority. Without the ritual of operating the special camera and interpreting the photographs it produced, the aura reader is no longer in control of the production of knowledge.

One of the implications of the expansion of translocal and transnational networks, often through mass media, but also through word of mouth, has been the recruitment of followers or devotees who might never have had direct contact with their master or leader. Perhaps one of the biggest shifts to come with the advent of the Internet and social media has been the emergence of virtual religious communities (see, for example, Dawson and Cowan 2004). This leads us to another set of key questions regarding mediated authority. What happens when virtual relationships between an authority and followers or devotees become concrete and “real”? What is the role of imagination in the production and construction of religious authority? Does the sensory experience of being in the presence of a leader or visiting a sacred site live up to expectations? Caple recalls a conversation with a Chinese devotee who had moved to the northeastern edge of the Tibetan plateau from China’s eastern seaboard to be close to her “master” (*C. shifu*), a monk at a Geluk scholastic center who she had met in Lhasa. The devotee claimed to have no interest in learning Tibetan. Her master could speak Chinese and the texts and teachings were available in translation. Moreover, she did not *want* to understand Tibetan because this might disrupt the pleasing and spiritually conducive environment in which she had situated herself. When she saw red-robed monks in the street, she could be pleased by the sight of them and the sound of their voices, without having to confront the reality that they might be discussing mundane affairs—or even worse, using foul language! Rots (this issue) writes of the disappointment felt by some visitors who arrive at the sacred grove of Sēfa Utaki expecting to find something “special,” only to find that there is “nothing there.” For Okinawan residents, this simply means they have failed to “‘feel’ the sacredness of the place.” Again, there is a strong sensory and aesthetic dimension to such experiences: an encounter with a religious leader or a visit to a sacred place might or might not look, feel, or sound as one had expected.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have focused in this discussion on relationships between various forms of religious authority and their constituencies, as well as the wider constellations within which these unfold. Across these cases, we have seen how shifting authority relations shape and are shaped by material and sensorial forms—themselves dynamic—and how these forms are perceived, embodied, and received. There are challenges to the comparative study of religious authority and its material and sensorial dimensions, not least in historicizing contemporary phenomena, essential if we are to avoid exceptionalism. The articles in this issue also point to the need for a reframing and problematizing of critical terms such as charisma and for a more nuanced approach to the idea of mediated religion. The cases they discuss, as well as others we have referred to in this introduction, demonstrate the relevance of East Asian religions to wider debates about sensation, aesthetics, and mediation in authority (re)production and negotiation. This is not in terms of their “exceptionality” but as significant examples that we hope will foster analysis of religious authority and its generation, (re)production, negotiation, instabilities and, in some cases, destruction.

The articles also highlight some issues deserving of further exploration and more focused attention in future work. In particular, the economic dimension of relationships between authorities and their constituencies is central to questions of materiality and aesthetic-affective dimensions of religious authority. Castiglioni explicitly points to the economics of authority production, but it is also evident in other articles. The RICOs Fielder studies, for example, rely to varying degrees on funds from international religious organizations; this is one reason they are keen to maintain and assert their identities as religious organizations. At stake for the aura readers Gaitanidis discusses is not only their authority but also their livelihoods, which are based on this authority. Hu’s success as a spiritual leader is interrelated with her media persona, upon which she has capitalized in economic terms through book sales, as well as in her self-reinvention as a religious authority. The discussion about contested spaces presented by Rots raises questions about tourism and commercialization of sacred places and routes. East Asian cases are clearly relevant to global scholarly debates on religion and economy. Despite the persistence of representations of “Eastern” religions as anti-materialistic (not least as a legacy of Weber’s work), the construction and negotiation of religious authority in Asia has always been strongly embedded within the economic sphere, both in historical and contemporary practices.

Finally, we come to the individual contributions. Our aim in assembling and introducing this special issue has been to highlight themes and questions cutting across ideal types of authority, geographical and cultural boundaries, and historical periods. However, when it came to determining the order of the articles, our attempts to find a logical sequence involved replication of these categories: making a neat split between sinophone and Japanese authorities; attempting a rather messier typology of authority on a scale of charismatic to non-charismatic; or presenting the cases in chronological order. In the end, we decided to order the articles alphabetically, by the author’s surname. They can be read in any order. We hope

that this introduction has served to demonstrate the connections between them, and to show how, as a body of work, they might contribute to broader debates about and understandings of religious authority in East Asia and beyond.

Andrea Castiglioni's article offers a detailed historical analysis of the mummified bodies of eminent ascetics of Mount Yudono in Japan, examining the cultivation of these ascetics' charisma during their lives and after death. He traces the role of lay devotees in supporting an eminent ascetic's practices during life, going on to describe the processes through which these devotees transformed him into a "flesh-body icon" after death to meet their devotional needs, reifying the esoteric Buddhist concept of becoming a buddha in this life.

Paul Farrelly takes a textual approach to his study of how Terry Hu, a movie star turned translator and author, leveraged her existing celebrity and her gender to emerge as a pioneering sinophone New Age authority in 1980s Taiwan. Through his analysis of her oeuvre, he shows how writing can be used as a form of both spiritual practice and self-(re)invention to lay claim to a new domain of authority. He argues that the production of authority through the translation and appropriation of other authorities has allowed Hu to continually reinvent herself.

Caroline Fielder uses the concept of "opportunity spaces" to examine authority construction in religiously inspired charitable organizations operating in a liminal space between the "religious" and "secular." Her focus is on two organizations working in the field of HIV/AIDS in China, one Buddhist and one Catholic. This brings a welcome comparative dimension to her discussion of their use of objects, imagery, space, and the senses as they negotiate their identities and authority in relation to multiple constituencies.

Ioannis Gaitanidis discusses issues of reproduction, technology, and authority by tracing the development of "aura photography" in twentieth-century Japan. He shows how the development of photographic technology as a spiritual medium has inevitably led to the de-sacralization of aura photographs—and the loss of the authority of spiritual counsellors specializing in this field. Is it possible to generate and maintain authority over spiritual practice through the "magic" of technology, when technology is accessible to everybody?

Mark McLeister examines the production and performance of a form of authority based on sensorially rich encounters with the Holy Spirit. Using the lens of aesthetics, he reveals its centrality to the religion of state-sponsored Protestant congregations in northeastern China, as well as to their negotiation of authority in relation to the wider Protestant community and the Chinese state. His analysis of authority production in these congregations also shows that it does not necessarily center on the relationship between a leader and her or his followers.

Finally, Aike Rots explores the contestation of authority in the sacred grove of Sēfa Utaki in Okinawa, designated a UNESCO world heritage site. With no institutionalized authority present, the performances of those using the space are contingent upon divergent ideas about its spiritual significance and proper ritual behavior. Examining how authority is claimed not on a historical or legal basis but on the ability to "feel" the sacred, he points to the politics of identity and authorship at play in this contested space.

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 NOTES

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2. This reflects the broader field, not least the seminal work of Meyer, based on her research on Pentecostal Christianity in Ghana (2010, 2015; see also Campbell 2007, 2010; Dawson and Cowan 2004; De Abreu 2015; De Witte, Koning, and Sunier 2015; Lindholm 2013; and Meyer 2009). In the literature on religion in Asia, the works of Jeffrey Samuels (2010) and Maria Jaschok (2014) are notable exceptions, to which we will return.

3. The boy recognized as the Panchen Lama’s most recent reincarnation disappeared following Chinese state intervention in his recognition in the 1990s; another boy was enthroned in his place.

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