Preface

This Element reflects the limitations of my knowledge and the extent of my hubris in tackling the huge topic of violence and religious culture in traditional China. Since there is not really a systematic field of study in many of the topics discussed in what follows, oftentimes my conclusions can only be tentative. The annotations are indicative and not exhaustive, leaving out most of the empirical evidence and much scholarly evaluation. I have generally given only Western language references, since this Element is intended for a relatively broad audience that does not necessarily read Chinese or Japanese. I want to thank Yves Menheere, Mark Meulenbeld and Margot Kitts for reading earlier versions. I am especially grateful to the editors of this series for the opportunity to develop my ideas further, in more detail and more systematically than in earlier articles or book fragments.

A Selective Historical Periodization

Shang 商	ca. 1550–ca. 1045 BCE
Zhou 周	ca. 1045–256 BCE
Qin 秦	221–206 BCE
Han 漢	202 BCE–9 CE and 25–220
Xin 新	9–23
Period of Disunion	221–589
Sui 隋	589–618
Tang 唐	618–907
Period of Five Dynasties	907–960
Northern Song 宋	960–1127
Southern Song	1127–1276
Jin (Jurchen; northern China) 金	1115–1234
Yuan (Mongols) 元	1272–1368
Ming 明	1368–1644
Qing (Manchus) 清	1644–1911
Republic of China 中華民國	1912–present (since 1949 on Taiwan)
People's Republic of China 中華人民共和國	1949–present

Setting the Stage

This Element deals with very sensitive issues, so it is important to begin with several caveats. The term 'violence' is very much a normative term for forms of physical force that we disapprove of. Therefore not every reader will agree with the broad use of the term in the cultural analysis that follows. I certainly do not wish to claim that traditional China was more, or less, violent than other cultures, including Western European ones. Since the term is so difficult to quantify without making all kinds of normative assumptions and Chinese historical sources are often spotty on this topic, I also do not see how this kind of comparison would be possible. What I do wish to claim is that different forms of violence played an important role in Chinese religious culture. In this Element I provide a summary discussion of the contexts within which we find such violence, which can hopefully serve as a basis for further discussion and polemics.

Like any other culture, we talk about China in terms and categories derived from the dominant elite discourse, and more specifically the written and normative variant of this discourse. It is surprisingly difficult to escape this discourse and create an independent way of looking at various aspects of Chinese culture (see also Murphy, 2011; Soboslai, 2015). The history of violence is not fundamentally different in this respect, as we see in what follows. We therefore need to pay special attention to the question what is included or excluded within this history: an example is the exclusion of blood vengeance. Early writers believed that it was sanctioned by Confucius himself, hence not to be considered violence. When such vengeance was gradually seen as deviance from the eleventh century onwards, the text which quoted Confucius' permission was largely forgotten in the process. Or take the general exclusion from Chinese history writing of the genocidal repression of local ethnic groups ('minorities'), even when thousands of people were killed, for instance in the campaigns in the early sixteenth century by the famous neo-Confucian philosopher Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529). Instead, China is preferably seen by Western historians as a place in which *wen* 文 or 'pattern' dominates and in which society strives for harmony in human relationships. The Chinese term is then further analysed as written culture, civilization or otherwise.

That these 'patterns' are based on violence, without which political order and social hierarchy cannot be enforced, is generally overlooked (ter Haar, 2000). The notion of *wen* forms part of a conceptual pair, together with *wu* 武 or martial (i.e. good) violence, which still excludes many forms of what could well be considered violence such as domestic abuse, torture and the death penalty.

What people see as violence therefore varies considerably among different cultures, as well as different periods of time, social groups, educational levels, gender, and age groups – to mention only a few possibilities. Even when I limit myself to the different societies in which I have grown up and subsequently spent much of my working life, our understanding of 'violence' has evolved considerably, meaning that we now think some forms of behaviour are 'obviously' violent and others are legitimate. And this is quite apart from the fact that as an individual I might have (and have had) different views from the rest of this large group, and from myself in the past and who knows in the future. A simple example of recent change is the conscious and 'reasoned' use of physical force in raising children, such as a slap on the buttocks, hands or face, which was once considered acceptable and is now essentially forbidden. An example of biased perspective is that of terror and counterterror. While terrorists are considered by us to be 'obviously' violent, we tend to use euphemisms or less pejorative terms for the fight against terror and rarely label our efforts as violent as well. To us, almost any form of counteraction using physical force is defined as war ('the war on terror') and the thousands of victims who fall in this war (far more than through terrorist attacks) are defined as war deaths (if they are combatants) or even executions (if they are defined as terrorists), and the huge number of civilian victims as collateral damage.

This Element is devoted to the role of violence in traditional Chinese religious culture, with violence in the sense of real or imagined physical force, with words like 'real' and 'imagined' as our modern labels for what people at the time often did not separate in the same way. The most obvious equivalent for 'violence' in Chinese would be the term *bao* 暴. If we limited ourselves to those instances in which something is pejoratively labelled as such, we would have a very different discussion. Here I make the choice of vocabulary an important part of our discussion, but otherwise adopt a very

broad view of what could be included under the label of violence as a general analytical concept, rather than as the translation of the normative concept of *bao* or 'violence'. This creates a certain tension, since it means imposing my view, my categorizations and my connections between phenomena in ways that people from the regions and periods that I am studying would not have agreed with. Although this is true of most research, the discrepancy between my categories and those of the past feels more jarring with sensitive topics such as violence. For this reason I retain parts of the original Chinese language discourse, even though this is meant to be an introductory work for a broad readership. This should allow readers with some knowledge of Chinese to test my judgement against their own.

Another problem term is 'religion'. As the reader may have noticed, I use the term 'religious culture', rather than religion. I do so because traditional China did not have a separate sphere of religion, but large parts of political, legal, social, cultural and sometimes even economic life did entail activities that we would today call religious (Goossaert and Palmer, 2011). Thus, to investigate religion in traditional China is to single out the religious dimension of that period, which extends from the imperial institution to the formation of local institutions such as the family (through ancestor worship) and the village (through local cults). In order to understand this dimension, one cannot avoid touching upon the non-religious dimensions as well. Since this is just an introduction I do not provide further discussion of this and similar problem words here, such as the term 'politics' (Lagerwey, 2010), but pretend that there is some common ground between the author and the readers.

In my analysis, traditional China was a place filled with violence, not much less than for instance Western society for most of its history (compare however Pinker, 2011). Whether Chinese at the time would have described it with the same terminology is another matter. There was the death penalty in its various guises, usually including the display of the corpse or at least the head of the executed person. Torture was used on witnesses and suspects during legal procedures, in order to obtain what was seen as reliable evidence in a time and age without forensic science. Physical punishment and maltreatment happened regularly within any hierarchical relationship,

such as education at home and in school, within a marriage and in the household or between a landowner and his labourers. Some of this would have been seen as appropriate, although there was also a discourse that criticized the unjust use of violence in exploitation. The deity Lord Guan (or Guan Yu 關羽) was famously known for his killing of a local bully who was kidnapping local women. Whether people actually did use violence in such situations is another matter, but clearly there was some measure of support for Lord Guan's violence in the service of local justice on a narrative level. After all, he was one of the most popular deities in late imperial China and versions of this story were told in the north for many centuries (ter Haar, 2017).

Physical force was an essential element of local religious culture. Indeed, Lord Guan himself as a deity was well known for threatening with, and sometimes using, violence to protect local communities and individual people. Nonetheless, this was never labelled as *bao* ('violence') but as punishment. We might even label it as symbolic, and therefore less threatening to our own cultural values. The following case took place in the early twelfth century, when a county in northern China was plagued by a white snake (Hong, 1981: *zhixu* 9: 1119–20). The situation escalated to the point that the Song emperor sent one of his leading Daoist priests to address the problem. This was the Heavenly Master Zhang Jixian 張濟先 (1092–1127), a major figure in Daoist ritual tradition. He summoned the local deities to tell him where the creature was, but not even the City God dared to reveal its whereabouts. Zhang became angry and sharply rebuked him. 'He commanded spirit soldiers to wield sticks and whips, causing extreme pain.' Under this punitive violence, the City God revealed that the white snake was well connected with Heaven and therefore beyond his control. The Heavenly Master threatened him that he would be executed (*lu* 戮) if he did not reveal the location of the snake. Thereupon the Master had a huge platform built near the nest, making the complete population of the city stand on it and having his assistants carry out rituals.

First, the Heavenly Master made the creature appear with the help of coloured amulets. A fierce white vapour (*baiqi* 白氣) manifested itself from the sky and everybody on the platform was afraid of being swallowed alive. The Master instructed them to take some of the earth of the platform in their

mouths for protection. Thereupon he had the seal of the prefecture placed before him as a sign of authority and challenged the vapour to show itself in its full form. A huge white snake appeared, but the Master was able to control it with his seal and killed it (*sha* 殺) with a flying sword. Small snakes appeared continuously, so he had to think of a more practical solution. Using his ritual powers he tied down the creatures and with the knives and swords of the local leaders he executed (*zhu* 誅) the biggest by beheading (*zhan* 斬). The rest were handed over to divine generals (*shen-jiang* 神將) to be driven out (*quchu* 驅出) of the territory. When they inspected the nest of the snakes, it was filled with the pale bones of their victims.

It would be too easy to dismiss this account as fictional, since for people at the time, on all levels of society, it was entirely plausible. There are many similar accounts in which a ritual specialist uses physical force of some kind to expel a demonic and often violent threat. This force is described with the same words that one finds in real-life legal practice or military campaigns. None of the Chinese verbs for killing or punishment in this account refers to 'violence' or *bao* 暴 as a random occurrence of physical force. The brutal behaviour of the exorcist against the City God as well as the demonic snakes was no different from that of the local magistrate towards his usual suspects in a murder trial or local revolt. Killing (*sha*), executing (*lu*, *zhu*) and beheading (*zhan*) were commonly accepted ways of dealing with real-life rebels and murderers. This elaborate exorcism was directly modelled on real-life events, although people witnessed such ritual executions much more often than real-life ones. Especially after these events had been turned into narratives for further transmission, they became as real as ordinary executions of living human beings. Quite possibly, they helped shape people's perceptions of real-life executions as much as the other way around.

There is much that is not discussed in this Element, not so much because it is not important, but mostly because of a lack of space. One such topic is the use of religious practices surrounding war and other forms of collective fighting, such as banditry or rebellions (Waley-Cohen, 2006; Katz, 2009b; McMullen, 1989). Sometimes religious practices were used to cover up very real human violence, for instance the many stories of deities who rape women which mostly likely reflected rapes by close kin or neighbours that

could only be given therapeutic narrative form as divine or demonic rapes (Von Glahn, 2004b). Excluded are also various martial arts traditions, which we know best in their Buddhist form of the Shaolin tradition, but which also had Daoist forms (Shahar, 2008). I also leave out Confucian-inspired forms of violence, although the early advocacy of blood vengeance ascribed to Confucius or the ideologically motivated protest suicides of the late imperial period would certainly qualify (Wyatt, 2011; Burton-Rose, 2018).

What Is Violence?

Perceptions of what counted as good or bad violence changed over time (ter Haar, 2000). The most common term for transgressive violence in Chinese is *bao* 暴. The relevant entry for this term in the encyclopaedic *Great Dictionary of the Chinese Language* provides a wealth of examples, ranging from its explicit denotations of excessive cruelty, coercing people in inferior positions, harming and damaging, or violent rebellion, to derivative meanings such as abrupt, sudden or fierce. Pronounced as *pu*, the same character means to expose oneself to the scorching sun as a sacrifice in exchange for rain (Luo, 1986: vol. V, 827–31). This range of meanings remains fairly standard from the oldest transmitted texts onwards until the present, both in formal prose and poetry and in vernacular literature. To my knowledge one of the few people who have analysed the term in any depth is Virgil Ho. He argues that the term 'violence' in its Anglo-Saxon usage does not map well onto Chinese conceptions. According to him, the term *bao* in traditional China cannot be simply equated with the modern term *baoli* 暴力 that roughly translates the term 'violence' (Ho, 2000: 141–5). In my view it does mean inappropriate violence, in traditional China as well as today. The real problem is that what was thought of as inappropriate changed considerably over time.

The term *bao* was foundational to notions of good and bad government. Thus, an early history from around 100 BCE already tells us that:

> [W]hen the age of the Divine Farmer (*shennong* 神農) went into decline, the feudal lords started to fight each other. They were violent and cruel (*baonüe* 暴虐) towards the hundred family names. The Divine Farmer was unable to

> punish them. Thereupon the Yellow Emperor practised the use of weapons in order to punish those who would not submit. The feudal lords all came to subordinate themselves and follow him. Chiyou was the most violent (*bao*) of them all, but none could subjugate him.
> (Sima, 1959: 1: 3)

The Yellow Emperor would succeed in smiting Chiyou, dispersing his body parts across the northern plains, with his inner organs forming the red salt ponds of Xie. The precise nature of Chiyou's 'violence' is not specified, but there can be little doubt that he received the most gruesome fate of all. Because the destruction of his body was perpetrated by the Yellow Emperor in the service of the forces of order, it was not seen as 'violence' or *bao*, but as subjugation (*fa* 伐 or *ping* 平) (ter Haar, 2017: 70–1). All later human rulers would maintain the same distinction between bad or random violence (*bao*) and sanctioned violence, for which a whole range of euphemisms existed.

In 221 BCE the Qin dynasty created the first unified empire that we now see as the territorial ancestor of China today. It was the end result of centuries of warfare. Violence was an important part of its rule, through harsh (but consistent) punishment and military repression. During his reign, the First Emperor made several long trips to important mountain sites all over his empire. Here he worshipped Heaven and Earth, but the whole enterprise of these large-scale trips also served to make his imperial rule visible over the All-under-Heaven as Chinese called the civilized world that they knew. On the mountains he had stones erected with inscriptions in an archaic form of the classical written language (Kern, 2000). The texts emphasized the order brought by the Qin unification. Whereas traditional historiography has stereotyped his reign as violent and cruel, the inscriptions claim the reverse.

> 'The feudal lords each guarded their own territories . . . They invaded each other and engaged in violence and chaos.' 'The August Thearch had pity on the masses and thereupon he dispatched his punitive army and wielded his martial virtue . . . He boiled and destroyed those who were strong and violent, and he rescued the ordinary people.'

> 'With martial means he exterminated the violent and rebellious.' 'Internal forces dressed up with deceitful plotting and external forces came to invade the borders, thereby causing disasters and catastrophes. With righteous might we executed them, to eliminate the violent and rebellious'
> (Sima, 1959: 6: 246, 249–50, 252, 261).

The Qin dynasty used righteous might and martial means, in other words a devastating war, to remove the random violence (*bao*) of the feudal lords.

Whether we agree with the view presented by the Qin inscriptions is beyond the point. The term 'violence' (*bao*) is clearly used in the same normative way as by us today. As the language of the inscriptions shows, suppressing 'violence' required 'pacification and settling down' (*pingding* 平定), by means of execution, elimination, destruction and extermination. Later rulers and their generals would act no differently. When the neo-Confucian philosopher Wang Yangming (1472–1529) served as an official to repress a rebellion (as he saw it) by the Yao ethnicity in southern Jiangxi, he had no qualms in using what we would now see as genocidal violence. He is also one of the most important philosophers of later imperial history, basing his philosophical thought on the notion that everybody possesses an innate consciousness of what it entails to do good. This should then translate into the proper form of action in any given situation. During the suppression of the Yao people, he executed many thousands of people in addition to the usual victims during battle itself (Israel, 2014: 279–313). At no point was this seen as 'violence' (*bao*) by him or later writers but merely as the legitimate application of force.

It seems to me that the use of violence was not just a matter of establishing control and order, if necessary by the extermination of the perceived causes of disorder, but also a powerful means of communication. Put very simply, violence speaks strongly and for this reason the reality of violence was central to its appearance in all dimensions of life, including religious culture. Ritual practice, exorcist theatre and festival processions gave concrete form to the punitive violence with which demons could be exorcised and punished. People who received a supernatural punishment often died very visibly, such as by lightning, or they suffered debilitating illnesses

which showed them in excessive pain and uncontrolled trembling, with disfigured skin and body.[1] Violence was also a public and easy-to-understand display of power.

The presentation of a living being to supernatural forces, in early days also humans and until today a variety of animals, was not symbolic, but a real sacrifice due to the violence of killing. By sharing the meat with the deities in the case of animal sacrifice, a potent bond was created between the supernatural forces and all those who participated in the offering. Therefore good or sanctioned violence was not seen as 'violence (*bao*)' (Lewis, 1990). Historically, the principal counter-discourse came not so much from the intellectual traditions we nowadays classify as Confucianism or Classicism, which because of their reliance on classical texts were somehow associated with the figure of Confucius (551–479 BCE). These traditions were by no means averse to violence, sacrificial, punitive or otherwise. Instead, the main challenge came from Buddhism with its injunction against killing, although this did not mean a complete abstention from violence as a language or even the practice of self-sacrifice.

Since what happens in the supernatural world in its various forms is less obviously visible, it is perhaps only natural that the violence in these other worlds is more extreme. Claims about that world needed to be made more strongly to have the requisite effect. The world of the living is used as a source of inspiration, and the supernatural world can be used to reflect on the former, but is still considered just as real. The extreme nature of the violence maybe makes it even more real and more tangible, thanks to such human abilities as empathy and imagination. Jérôme Bourgon has argued for instance that real-life executions were very different from those in the religious world, and this is true to a certain extent (Bourgon, 2003). Nonetheless, Virgil Ho has provided considerable evidence suggesting that the two were still intimately connected. Before their execution the convicts were dehumanized by bad treatment and neglect, making them look more akin to hungry ghosts than humans, and this process continued

[1] The term 'supernatural' is not ideal here, since in the eyes of most Chinese at the time the supernatural was only too real. In this Element I use the term as a shortcut for other realms of being than the conventional human world.