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Both Like and Unlike: Rebirth, Olfaction, and the Transspecies Imagination in Modern Chinese Buddhism

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Abstract: This essay considers the importance of the transspecies imagination for moral cultivation in contemporary Chinese Buddhism. Drawing on scriptural, theoretical, and fieldwork-based ethnographic data, it argues that olfaction—often considered the most “animalistic” of the human senses—is uniquely efficacious for inspiring imaginative processes whereby Buddhists train themselves to inhabit the perspectives of non-human beings. In light of Buddhist theories of rebirth, this means extending human-like status to animals and recognizing the “animal” within the human as well. Responding to recent trends in the Humanities calling for an expanded notion of ontological continuity between the human and non-human—notably inspired by critical animal studies, post-humanism, the new materialism, and the “ontological turn”—this essay contends that Buddhist cosmological ideas, like those that demand the cultivation of the transspecies imagination, present resources for moral reflection that can challenge and enrich current mainstream thinking about humanity’s relation to the nonhuman world.

Keywords: Buddhism; animals; Buddhist ethics; anthropology of the senses; olfaction; cosmology; rebirth; vegetarianism

Animals are born, are sentient and are mortal. In these things they resemble man. In their superficial anatomy—less in their deep anatomy—in their habits, in their time, in their physical capacities, they differ from man. They are both like and unlike.

—John Berger, *Why Look At Animals?* (Berger 2009)

1. Introduction

In lieu of a traditional introduction, I should like to begin with an anecdote drawn from my ethnographic fieldwork in Taiwan, where I was researching the transnational Buddhist monastic organization, *Fajie Fojiang Zonghui* (法界佛教總會, henceforth *Fajie*), founded in 1959 by the Chinese Chan monk, Hsuan Hua (宣化上人, 1918–1995). This story was related to me by Wanglei¹, a middle-aged temple regular, during an informal group celebration to mark our successful completion of the weeklong Emperor Liang’s Jeweled Repentance (*liang huang bao chan* 梁皇寶懺), a major Dharma Assembly (*fa hui* 法會) hosted annually by *Fajie* during the week of Chinese New Year. We gathered with other temple members at a small Buddhist vegetarian restaurant in Taipei, along with Wanglei’s wife and two teenage sons. Over the course of the meal, I asked Wanglei why he and his family chose to frequent *Fajie*, which for them required nearly an hour’s journey across the city on the subway, rather than

¹ Although the man I am calling Wanglei explicitly requested that I share his story, following standard ethnographic writing practice, I have changed his name in this piece.

Tzu Chi (慈濟基金會) or Fo Guang Shan (佛光山)—both of which, he said, had branch temples on the same block as his home. They chose *Fajie*, he explained, because of specific karmic conditions (*yuan* 緣): the monastics at *Fajie* had helped his family through the hardest time of their lives. Gesturing to his two teenage sons across the table, he told me, “they used to be three.”

Wanglei went on to recount the story of his middle son, who died suddenly and without warning in infancy. “One day he was a very happy baby,” he explained, “and then very suddenly, he was gone.” In the weeks and months following their infant son’s death, Wanglei and his wife were awash in their grief. At first they refused an autopsy, but because this was a case of infant death from unknown causes, an autopsy was legally mandated. Wanglei attended the procedure but was unable to watch. “I was in the room,” he said, “but turned my back. At one point, though, I glanced over.” As he spoke, Wanglei covered his eyes with his hands, leaving a thin sliver of space open between his fingers through which he gazed at me. “And out of the corner of my eye, I saw my son cut open like this.” Recreating the path of the surgical blade, he traced his fingers down his own body, as though vertically slicing himself in half, starting between his eyes through the middle of his chest, down to his waist. The sight of his son cut in half clearly shook him, but it was what came next that was most harrowing. Shifting his tone to a grave whisper, he continued, “You know, there is a kind of smell.” He paused. “The moment I smelled that smell, I became vegetarian.”

What might this story of personal tragedy have to do with the topic of Buddhism and animals? In this essay, I argue that—in ways that will become clear shortly—this story is a powerful instance of what I call the transspecies imagination. I use this term to describe a phenomenon I observed throughout my fieldwork: namely, imaginative practices—reinforced by a variety of doctrinal, scriptural, and commentarial sources—whereby *Fajie* members imagine the permeability of the human–animal divide and, by extension, the permeability of all six of the Buddhist walks of life (*liu dao* 六道). In contrast to standard depictions of Buddhist cosmology—such as the layout of the famous *bhavacakra*, where the six realms are clearly defined and differentiated—*Fajie* Buddhists posit a degree of ontological continuity between the inhabitants of the six realms, subverting those boundaries through the creative deployment of the transspecies imagination.

This kind of imaginative practice occurs constantly in everyday *Fajie* monastic life. For example, for weeks after a few nuns visited an animal sanctuary in nearby Hualien city (*Hualian shi* 花蓮市), all temple residents would formally assemble to study the photographs they had taken of the monkeys, attempting to see in each monkey’s face intimations of what or who they had been in a past life. Or consider Xiaohe, a rabbit who had been saved from local poachers and had been living at the monastery since well before my first research visit in 2014. It was concluded that Xiaohe had been a Buddhist abbot in a past life, based on three pieces of evidence. First, the simple fact that Xiaohe had not only been saved from hunters but had the good fortune to live at a Buddhist monastery was evidence of exceptional karmic merit from a past life. Second, Xiaohe was white with an uncanny brown marking that ran diagonally down his body, beginning at his left shoulder and leaving his right shoulder exposed, just like a monastic precept sash.² Third, and most significantly, every evening during the final merit transfer of the day (*hui xiang* 回向), Xiaohe was allowed into the Buddha Hall to run around and get some exercise. After doing a few laps of the room, he would invariably run straight to the abbot’s bowing cushion in the middle of the assembly and nonchalantly lie there for the duration of the ceremony. It was concluded that Xiaohe was consistently drawn to the abbot’s cushion because he recalled the behavior from a past life. While an exhaustive list of how the transspecies

² The “precept sash” or outer robe (僧伽胝, Skt. *saṃghāṭī*) holds special significance for the *Fajie* organization. Unlike Chinese monastics of other organizations, *Fajie* monastics wear the precept sash at all times, rather than only for ceremonial occasions as is now generally the custom in Chinese Buddhism. This practice has become a heated point of critique, real or perceived, of *Fajie* by other Buddhist organizations, in response to which *Fajie* has insisted even more uncompromisingly on its adherence to “tradition”. Given that robes are such an overdetermined symbol and conspicuous marker of identity, as Kieschnick (1999) notes, this practice has become central to the identity politics involved in *Fajie*’s self-understanding as a conservative organization concerned with safeguarding “authentic” monastic standards against the influence of change.

imagination shapes daily encounters with animals would exceed the scope of this short essay, these two examples highlight an important point: through the transspecies imagination, *Fajie* members strive to imaginatively discern the human past of non-human beings, such as animals.

Let us now return to further unpack Wanglei's story. On the surface, one might understand his account to be simply reflecting a standard idea about the virtuous nature of vegetarianism. As is well known, in Chinese Buddhism the practice of vegetarianism is thought to generate karmic merit.³ Indeed, in the *Fajie* organization, vegetarianism is not only a prerequisite for officially becoming "Buddhist"—it is generally expected that one practice vegetarianism before one can take refuge—but is, in fact, the most central element of *Fajie* identity and practice.⁴ In the wake of a tragedy like that which befell Wanglei, it might thus be logical to adopt vegetarianism in order to stop creating the kind of "killing karma" (*sha ye* 殺業) that causes such tragic events. I suggest, however, that this standard karmic interpretation of Wanglei's account misses its most salient feature, the fulcrum of which is the role of smell. Most striking in Wanglei's story is the fact that his decisive moment of moral transformation—that is, the instant he decided he would never again eat meat—was not occasioned by the sight, horrific as it must have been, of his son's disfigured body; rather, it was its *smell*. That evening at dinner, Wanglei added, "Years later, I worked across the street from a food stall where they barbecued meat. And every day that smell would waft into my workplace. And I always thought of my son." Wanglei's transformative moment, in other words, was occasioned by a glimpse of human–animal continuity: it was when he recognized the smell of his own son's corpse to be the same smell as animal meat.

This story sets the stage for the three goals of this essay. The first is to use Wanglei's story as a springboard to consider the unique potency of olfaction for the transspecies imagination in Buddhism. We shall see that smell is a frequent topic in the *sūtra* commentaries of Hsuan Hua, the founder of *Fajie*, where olfaction regularly mediates, and can even render permeable, the boundaries separating all six of the Buddhist realms, including those between humans and animals. While smell is by no means the only method of mediating between the different realms, drawing on both *Abhidharmic* taxonomies of the senses as well as on theories of sensory perception from evolutionary biology and anthropology, I argue that olfaction has particular characteristics that make it one of the most efficacious sensory motifs for bridging the different realms of the Buddhist cosmos.

This, in turn, supports the second aim of this essay. By exploring the salience of olfaction for the transspecies imagination, this essay seeks to approach the question of animals in Buddhism from a slightly new angle. While many excellent studies have highlighted how the category of the "animal" functions as a foil against which Buddhists define the "human,"⁵ here I approach the question from

³ As many have noted, the centrality of vegetarianism in Chinese Buddhism is not uniformly shared throughout the Buddhist world. Kieschnick (2005) discusses the particularities of the historical development of Buddhist vegetarianism in China, which he argues was popularized in the fifth and sixth centuries, citing textual accounts appearing in the *Gaoseng zhuan* (高僧傳). More recent work by Greene (2016), however, suggests Buddhist vegetarianism may have been adopted in China as early as the third century. Both Kieschnick and Greene note the salient connections between Chinese Buddhist ideas about the virtuousness of vegetarianism and antecedents in pre-Buddhist Chinese culture, including Confucian mourning rites in which the foregoing of meat was considered a filial act of self-restraint (Kieschnick 2005, p. 193).

⁴ The centrality of vegetarianism in *Fajie* cannot be overstated. *Fajie* unequivocally condemns as heretical (*wai dao* 外道 or *e dao* 惡道) other Buddhist orders who do not forbid the eating of meat or who adopt lax positions with regard to the precept against killing, for instance by tolerating eggs, dairy, honey, or other animal-based products. Indeed, many *Fajie* members adopt a vegan diet that excludes dairy since calves are often hurt or killed when separated from their mothers in the course of dairy production. They also follow the Buddhist injunction against wearing or using products made from animals (silk, wool, down, leather, etc.). The concern for animal welfare as a motivating factor for vegetarianism, as in the case of dairy calves or honey, is a relatively modern innovation. As Kieschnick notes, the early Buddhist proscriptions against meat-eating were primarily concerned about the impacts of "killing karma" (*sha ye* 殺業) on humans, rather than about the animal's loss of life *per se*. Issues of animal welfare and quality of life, he notes, were "for the most part absent from discussion of vegetarianism in Indian Buddhism" (Kieschnick 2005, p. 192).

⁵ A recent example is Reiko Ohnuma's *Unfortunate Destiny*, in the preface to which she writes, "human beings can only define themselves . . . in opposition to that which is nonhuman. Thus, in Buddhist literature from India, the vision of the human is constantly shaped and expressed through comparison and contrast with a variety of nonhuman beings" (Ohnuma 2017, p. xiv), chief among whom are animals.

the reverse angle: that of continuity rather than difference. I argue that *Fajie* members recognize a high degree of fluidity between the six realms and their inhabitants, a conclusion that follows naturally from their literalist interpretation of Buddhist cosmology. For *Fajie* members, the six realms are ontological realities, not merely metaphors or psychological states. Because all beings constantly circulate through these realms, humans and animals are thought to share an ontological continuity that transcends their temporary differences in form. Although there has been much scholarly discussion of “demythologized” interpretations of Buddhism, often under the umbrella of so-called “Buddhist modernism,” there is far less acknowledgment of the impact of neo-conservative Buddhist movements like *Fajie* on the landscape of global modern Buddhism. While the implications of this lacuna for the study of modern Buddhism in general are beyond the scope of this essay, I will highlight one consequence that is immediately relevant for the topic at hand. As I argue in my conclusion, when we overlook literalist interpretations of Buddhist cosmology in favor of more modernist “demythologized” interpretations, we lose the very foundation of the transspecies imagination. In so doing, we not only perpetuate certain modernist biases that erase the diversity of perspectives that make up Buddhism today, but we also risk overlooking a major site of Buddhist ethical reflection. As various movements in the Humanities—notably in critical animal studies, post-humanism, the new materialism, and the “ontological turn”—propose models of greater ontological continuity between different forms of life⁶, conservative Buddhist cosmological ideas may present resources for moral reflection that challenge and enrich current thinking about humanity’s relation to the nonhuman world.

A final implication of this discussion is that the very notion of the “animal” is not a self-evident category. To identify a being as an “animal” in *Fajie* still tells us very little about what that being is. By asking what—or *who*—Buddhists see when they look at animals, this essay endeavors to explore how *Fajie* Buddhists grapple with this question in their daily lives. Ultimately, I suggest that *Fajie* members see animals with a kind of double-vision: both like and unlike. Echoing the foregoing quote by John Berger, for *Fajie* Buddhists, animals are simultaneously different from and fundamentally like themselves. While the issue of *what* or *who* an animal is remains an open question, *Fajie* members consistently draw upon the transspecies imagination in an effort to discern clues that might lead toward an answer. This imaginative work, I suggest, is moral work insofar as it trains one to imaginatively take up the perspective of another. This requires not only extending human-like status to animals but sometimes imagining the “animal” within the human as well.

2. The “Dorsal Turn” and Modern Hierarchies of Sense

David Howes, an anthropologist who studies the cultural history of the senses, has noted that smell is uniquely situated at the intersection of biology, psychology, and culture. Thus, by its very nature, olfaction is a boundary-crosser. It is perhaps more than a mere coincidence, then, that at least in the modern episteme⁷, olfaction is considered the most “animalistic” of the human senses. This may be due, as we shall see, to its unique capacity to mediate between spheres conventionally classified as “human” and “non-human”. Indeed, as many scholars have noted, the “human” is often defined with appeal to the *via negativa*—not in terms of what the human *is*, but in contrast to what it *is not*—hence

⁶ Although the limited scope of this essay does not allow for a comprehensive overview of these emerging trends, a few notable examples include Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *The Climate of History: Four Theses* (Chakrabarty 2009), Eduardo Kohn’s *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Kohn 2013), Rosi Braidotti’s *The Posthuman* (Braidotti 2013), Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Bennett 2010), and the work of Donna Haraway. All of these works—which have had far-reaching impacts beyond their immediate areas of specialization—argue in their own ways for a philosophically-grounded ethics rooted in an expanded ontological continuity between the human and non-human. The latter includes not only animals, but also plants, matter, and technology. All resolutely post-modern in flavor, the theoretical approaches in many of these works can be seen, ironically, to recapitulate many very old Buddhist ideas.

⁷ See Classen et al., *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (Classen et al. 1994), for a discussion of the historical shifts in sensory epistemes.

the importance of the conceptual category of the “animal” for human self-understanding. But when and how did the “human” cease to be “animal”?

Evolutionary science argues that this parting, both ideological and biological in nature, was precipitated by what is called the “dorsal turn,” a moment in human evolution that also radically shifted the nature of human olfaction. The “dorsal turn” refers to when our primate ancestors first stood on two legs instead of four, and the subsequent adaptations of the human skeletal structure to support this upright posture. In his book, *Dorsality: Thinking Back Through Technology and Politics* (Wills 2008), David Wills explains how this moment—the decisive shift from quadrupedal “animality” to bipedal “humanity”—brought about a reorganization of the sensorium:

Accounts of the emergence of anthropoid species understandably have consistent recourse to that event [the dorsal turn], to a bending of the spine by straightening it, as a defining factor of the human It abandons the animal, refines the senses by downgrading smell and hearing, and reconfigures the knowable other within a frontal visual perspective. (Wills 2008, p. 8)

The evolutionary transition from quadrupedalism to bipedalism is thought to have also occasioned a shift in sensory organization: away from dependence on olfaction to trace scent trails close to the ground, to instead privilege the newly expanded visual field, making sight the “human” sense *par excellence*. This shift was quite famously theorized by Freud—whose writings were themselves influenced by the contemporaneous work of Charles Darwin⁸—who argued that humans differentiate themselves from animals precisely through the unconscious repression of their “primitive” sense of smell. This, according to Freud, explains the “sanitized” sexual practices of civilized family life, in which it is the visual rather than the olfactory that is eroticized, the latter being the driving force of animal sexuality.⁹

Many have traced the supposed human tendency to privilege sight, known as occularcentrism, through the subsequent history of Western thought. It begins, some suggest, with Plato and the ancient Greeks, for whom knowledge (*eidenai*) was defined, quite literally, as the “state of having seen” (Jay 1993, p. 24). It continues through the European enlightenment, where technological innovations centering on optics—notably, advances in the development of the telescope, the microscope, and the *camera obscura*—allowed visual data to be brought into the realm of reproducibility and, by extension, scientific inquiry, making sight the “most objective” of the senses. Continental philosophy also reflects this occularcentric perspective¹⁰, as Cary Wolfe notes:

Freud’s valorization of the human who sees at the expense of the animal who smells is sustained (even if transvalued) in the figure of vision that runs from Sartre’s discourse on the look in *Being and Nothingness* through Foucault’s anatomy of panopticism in *Discipline and Punish*. This critical genealogy tells us that the figure of vision is indeed ineluctably tied to the specifically human. (Wolfe 2003, p. 3)

⁸ For Freud’s interest in biology and the work of Charles Darwin, see Judith Roof, “From Protista to DNA (and Back Again): Freud’s Psychoanalysis of the Single-Celled Organism” in *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Roof 2003).

⁹ As Cary Wolfe discusses at length, “There is no better known and more powerful embodiment of that discourse [of human superiority to animals], perhaps, than Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*. There the origin of humans is located in an act of ‘organic repression’ whereby they begin to walk upright and rise above life on the ground among blood and feces. These formerly exercised a sexually exciting effect but now, with ‘the diminution of the olfactory stimuli,’ they seem disgusting, leading in turn to what Freud calls a ‘cultural trend toward cleanliness’ and creating the ‘sexual repression’ that results in ‘the founding of the family and so to the threshold of human civilization.’ All of this is accompanied by a shift of privilege in the sensorium from smell to sight, the nose to the eye, whose relative separation from the physical environment thus paves the way for the ascendancy of sight as the sense associated with the aesthetic and with contemplative distance and sensibility” (Wolfe 2003, p. 2).

¹⁰ Indeed, this connection between visibility and epistemology continues today, exemplified by the many everyday idioms that implicitly connect sight to understanding. As in the above sentence, in which I describe occularcentrism as a “*perspective*,” we frequently appeal to visual metaphors to describe abstract mental processes: *I see what you mean*, *I looked into the issue*, etc. Even the etymology of the verb *to speculate*, as in “to think”, comes from the latin *specere*, “to look”.

Although anthropologists in recent decades have begun to study alternate sensory hierarchies found in small-scale societies and certain urban subcultures¹¹, this Western hierarchy of the senses—with its denigration of olfaction and privileging of sight—has, for better or worse, reached far beyond the West to shape the global sensory episteme of modernity itself.¹²

Many scholars who bemoan the dearth of scholarly attention to olfaction attribute this lacuna to both the occularcentric bias in modern thought, as well as to broader social taboos surrounding the phenomenon of olfaction itself. In addition to the obvious practical challenges posed by systematic study of smell—especially difficulties of recording and reproduction which make smell, unlike sight and sound, fleeting by its very nature¹³—many have echoed Freud in suggesting that our reluctance to study smell has to do with its inherent tendency to defy classification. If, as Mary Douglas famously argued in *Purity and Danger*, dirt is “matter out of place” (Douglas 1984, p. 50), then smell—in its stubborn resistance to categorization—is, indeed, dangerous. Consider, for instance, that smell is the most amorphous of the senses, hovering—as we shall see shortly—at the very threshold of the material and immaterial. This makes smell spatially transgressive and difficult to control, as Constance Classen notes in her book *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (Classen et al. 1994). “Odors,” she writes, “cannot be readily contained, they escape and cross boundaries, blending different entities into olfactory wholes” (Classen et al. 1994, p. 4). Indeed, the inherently transgressive nature of smell, as anthropologist Michael Herzfeld has noted, has historically made it a favored motif for the expression of xenophobic, racist, and anti-Semitic anxieties (Herzfeld 2001, p. 252). These anxieties tend to center on the fear that the dangerous “other,” like a rank odor, will enter and defile a previously pure space, like how “exotic cooking smells can prompt strong reactions in neighborhoods trying to remain ethnically exclusive” (ibid.).

I argue, however, that it is the very characteristics that make smell taboo that also render it so evocative for the Buddhist transspecies imagination. Because of its inherently transgressive properties, olfaction does not only subvert the boundaries of polite social order but can also subvert the boundaries of the human and non-human. Turning to Buddhist materials, we shall now take a closer look at how olfaction blurs the boundaries between the material and the immaterial, distance and proximity, inside and outside, and even between past and present. It is by virtue of its ability to breach these bounded categories that olfaction is such an effective mediator between the six realms of the Buddhist cosmos and their inhabitants.

3. Transgressive Olfaction: Boundaries of Matter, Space, and Body

As anyone who has spent time in a Buddhist temple knows, smells play a major role in everyday ritual practice, in everything from the constant use of incense throughout the day—both as a method of keeping time¹⁴ and of making offerings to the Buddha—to the ways that daily chanting and recitations encourage olfactory “visualizations”.¹⁵ Much of the importance of olfaction in everyday practice, I suggest, may be related to the capacity of smell to mediate between realms. McHugh (2012) discusses this property of olfaction in his study of smell in premodern Vedic, Jain, and Buddhist thought.¹⁶

¹¹ See, for instance, Feld ([1982] 2012); Stoller (1989, 1997); Hirschkind (2006); Desjarlais (2003); Howes (1991, 2003, 2005); Howes and Classen (2014); Diaconu (2011), among others.

¹² See Classen et al. (1994).

¹³ As Michael Herzfeld notes, there has been a “reluctance on the part of scholars to engage with what their recording equipment cannot fix in time and space” (Herzfeld 2001, p. 248).

¹⁴ See Silvio A. Bedini, *The Trail of Time: Time Measurement with Incense in East Asia* (Bedini 1994).

¹⁵ The word “visualization” itself is problematic here, because its narrow focus on vision excludes the multi-sensory nature of supernatural revelations, often described as miraculous “responses” (*gan ying* 感應) in Chinese. Throughout my fieldwork, nuns described what we might call “olfactory visualizations,” especially during the daily recitation of the “Incense Praise” (*lu xiang zan* 爐香讚), during which devotees imagine an infinitude of Buddhas throughout the Dharma Realm inhaling a fragrant incense offering. Devotees also frequently report that *gan ying* (supernatural revelations or “responses”) are olfactory in nature, manifesting as sudden and inexplicable aromas.

¹⁶ Although beyond the scope of the present essay, which centers on the mediatory role of olfaction in Buddhist cosmologies of rebirth, conceptions and practices of olfaction are also richly theorized throughout the wider context of Chinese religious

Following McHugh, I suggest the mediatory capacity of smell may be connected to its many ambivalent characteristics. First, as McHugh points out, smell is of ambivalent *materiality*. Though in pre-modern India it was classified as decidedly material and “non-aetherial” (McHugh 2012, p. 8), smell is situated precisely at the cusp of the material and immaterial. Smell was understood to be a physical particle, but one so minute as to be invisibly transported on the wind. This means that smell, like wind, spreads invisibly and unpredictably, generally beyond the reach of human control.

It is perhaps due to this material ambivalence that the *Abhidharmic* literature classifies smell in between the so-called “contact” and “distance” senses. Like Jains¹⁷, Buddhists organized their taxonomies of sense according to the distance required between the object and the perceiver for perception to occur. For example, since taste and touch require physical contact with their object, they were classified as contact senses. Sight and hearing, on the other hand, do not require physical proximity and were therefore classified as distance senses. As Vasubandhu explains in the *Abhidharmakośa*,

The eye and hearing have a distant field . . . and of those two, the operation of the eye is at a greater distance: though you can see a river from a distance, you cannot hear it. Thus that one is mentioned first Because of a more rapid operation, the sense of smell is mentioned [before taste]: because you can perceive the odor of food that has not yet reached the tongue. (Vasubandhu 1998, 1.23)

In other words, as McHugh explains, “one can (supposedly) see farther than one can hear. One can smell an object, such as a flower, at a distance, but not to the same extent that one can see and hear it; in order to taste an object it has to be placed in the mouth; and, finally, one is capable of feeling sensations throughout one’s whole body” (McHugh 2012, p. 230). Worth noting for our purposes is that this Buddhist taxonomy of sense places smell at the boundary of distance and contact: although it belongs to the category of contact senses like taste and touch, and thus has a decidedly material basis, olfaction can operate at a distance, like vision and hearing. In this respect, smell bridges the two modes of sensory perception, distance and contact. As McHugh notes, one of smell’s most unique properties arises from this liminality: it is the “only sense that allows one to partake of an object’s particles at a distance” (ibid.), a significant point to which we will return shortly.

We should note that, due to its material and spatial ambivalence, smell is also a liminal category with respect to the body. As McHugh notes, fragrance-producing products—like perfume, incense, soaps, kohl, and mouth fresheners—were traditionally classified as “internal-external” (ibid., p. 4) because despite being “applied to the actual surface of the body . . . they were thought to affect it internally and physiologically in a variety of ways” (ibid.).¹⁸ Indeed, even if the source of an odor, known as the *odorant*, is located outside the body, the odorant particles are thought to have to actually *enter* the body in order for perception to occur. This is why smelling impure substances, such as corpses, produces ritual pollution (ibid., p. 6). On this point, saliently, the Indian materials echo the aforementioned anxieties related to the transgressive nature of olfaction. Beyond the mere fact that smells are hard to control, they were considered dangerous because they transgress boundaries. They pose a constant threat of defilement and compromise to bodily integrity since smelling a substance, even unintentionally, causes the penetration of that substance into one’s own body.

culture. As Sterckx (2011) discusses, for instance, olfaction played a key role in early Chinese conceptions of sagehood and the performance of sacrificial rites. There is also an abundance of fascinating olfactory motifs in Daoism and so-called “popular religion,” ranging from the fragrances produced by the bodily manipulations of inner alchemy (*nei dan* 内丹) to the sweet smells said to emanate from grotto-heavens (*dong tian* 洞天) and to portend the appearance of Daoist Immortals (*xian* 仙). For more, refer to Livia Kohn, *The Taoist Experience: An Anthology* (Kohn 1993) and Shawn Arthur, “Waiting Incense and Heavenly Foods: The Importance of Smell in Chinese Religion” in *Body and Religion* (Arthur 2018), among other sources.

¹⁷ For a salient comparative perspective of Jain and Buddhist taxonomies of smell, see Phyllis Granoff’s “The Stench of Sin: Reflections from Jain and Buddhist texts” (Granoff 2011).

¹⁸ This, incidentally, mirrors Western taxonomies of smell as well, where prior to the modern period perfumes were classified as pharmacopeia since they were thought to have therapeutic rather than merely cosmetic properties. See Classen et al. (1994).

This points, I suggest, to another characteristic ambivalence of olfaction: namely, its *moral* ambivalence. As we shall see presently, the linchpin of smell's salience for the transspecies imagination lies precisely in its transgressive capacity. So far, we have seen how olfaction can breach boundaries of materiality, distance, and the body. Now we consider the moral valence of smell, which is related to its ambivalent agential capacity.

4. The Agency of Olfaction: Moral Worlds of Smell

The many ambivalent properties of olfaction, as discussed above, also imbue it with a powerful moral valence. Smell is neither passive nor neutral; smells *do* things. Most immediately apparent is that olfaction, like all senses, has the ability to create karma, both positive and negative. In his commentary on the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*—which, alongside the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, is the most authoritative scripture for the *Fajie* community¹⁹—Hsuan Hua warns, “Don't mistakenly think, 'the nose simply smells, what karma can it possibly create?' Smelling does create a kind of karma. Because there is greed involved in smelling . . . it attracts all sorts of nefarious karmic retributions” (my translation, [Hua and Buddhist Text Translation Society 2008](#)). Indeed, I myself regretfully accrued some of this bad karma one day early in my fieldwork at a *Fajie* branch temple in Hong Kong, when I made an amateurish mistake. A laywoman had just arrived with an extravagant array of fresh flowers she had purchased for the Buddha Hall altar. Exclaiming at their beauty, without thinking I excitedly took a deep whiff of the bouquet, after which I was sternly reprimanded for “stealing” the fragrance that was intended for the Buddha!

The karmic potency of olfaction is not, of course, limited to the creation of negative karma. In his commentaries, Hsuan Hua highlights several scriptural instances in which smells are agents of salvific transformation. For example, the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* includes an account of the “Pure Youth Adorned with Fragrance” who becomes certified to *arhatship* after realizing emptiness through the contemplation of smell ([Hua and Buddhist Text Translation Society 1980a](#))²⁰. Another example occurs in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* chapter of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, where we encounter the twenty-first of Sudhana's fifty-two teachers, Utpalabhuti, a vendor of incense. Utpalabhuti lists a variety of incenses whose aromas produce salvific effects. These include,

curing the myriad illnesses . . . cutting off all evil . . . producing happiness . . . destroying afflictions . . . caus[ing] one to produce disgust and the wish to separate from that which is conditioned . . . renouncing all arrogance and self-indulgences . . . bringing forth the resolve to be mindful of all buddhas [and] the incenses of certification. ([Hua and Buddhist Text Translation Society 1980b](#), p. 7)

The *sūtra* continues to list various types of incense and their salvific aromas which, to name but a few, include the “Elephant Treasury” incense. If a tiny piece of this incense is lit, it creates a great cloud that can cover an entire city and turn everything it touches the color of gold. Living beings who smell it are filled with bliss, and all of their illnesses are cured. There is also the “Oxhead Chandana” incense, the fragrance of which can make a person impervious to fire. Or consider the incense called “Invincible”

¹⁹ It is unsurprising but worth noting that a community like *Fajie*—with its neo-traditionalist rhetoric, tendency toward asceticism, and strong emphasis on conservative notions of orthodoxy (*zheng fa* 正法)—would be so drawn to the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*, a text James Benn has described as representing a brand of “Mahāyāna asceticism that one might be tempted to characterize as at least militant and perhaps even fundamentalist” ([Benn 2008](#), p. 62).

²⁰ The *Sūtra* passage reads, “After I heard the Buddha's instruction, I sat in repose in the quiet of a pure dwelling. When I saw the *bhikṣus* light sinking incense [skt. *agaru*], the fragrant scent quietly entered my nostrils. I contemplated this fragrance: it did not come from the wood; it did not come from emptiness; it did not come from the smoke, and it did not come from the fire. There was no place it came from and no place it went to. Because of this, my discriminating mind was dispelled, and I attained the absence of outflows. The Thus Come One certified me and called me 'Adorned with Fragrance.' Defiling scent suddenly vanished, and wonderful fragrance was both secret and all pervasive. It was through the adornment of fragrance that I became an *arhat*” ([Hua and Buddhist Text Translation Society 1980a](#), p. 31). Note that *agaru* incense (*a qie lu* 阿伽嚩) is a rare incense produced from the heartwood or resin of aloe wood trees. Because it sinks in water, it is also known as “sinking incense” (*shen xiang* 沉香 or 沈香).

which, when smeared on a conch shell and then sounded, will cause enemy armies to disperse of themselves (ibid.).

Beyond the fact that smell can create karma, both positive and negative, olfaction also operates on another, even more significant level: namely, as a moral diagnostic. As Suzanne Mrozik notes in her study of Śāntideva's *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (2007), beings can literally "stink with sin" or be "perfumed . . . with virtues" (Mrozik 2007, p. 1). This may be because, as both Classen and McHugh agree, smells tend to be associated with otherwise invisible inner essences. "Through smell," Classen writes, "one interacts with interiors, rather than with surfaces, as one does through sight" (Classen et al. 1994, p. 4). McHugh makes a similar point about smell in Buddhism, where according to the early Indian sources, "one's smell indicates one's karmic past and innate nature," (McHugh 2012, p. 7) thus making odor a "good litmus test for one's standing in the universe" (ibid.). This idea is echoed throughout Hsuan Hua's commentaries, where he repeatedly states that if one is morally upright, one will smell good, whereas those who break precepts tend to stink.²¹ I also regularly observed smell functioning as a moral diagnostic during my fieldwork. For instance, one day when I was on the train with a group of *Fajie* nuns in Taiwan, a devout passenger claimed that, just before we embarked, she noticed an inexplicable sweet fragrance suddenly permeate the train car. Similarly, one day while giving a lunchtime Dharma talk (*jiang fa* 講法), the abbess recalled a time when Hsuan Hua was visiting the temple and fell very ill. When he threw up, she noted, his vomit smelled sweet—a remark that drew an audible gasp of awe from the rapt audience.

I suggest the capacity of smell to act as a moral diagnostic is related to its propensity for crossing boundaries, including those that ordinarily separate humans and animals. This, in turn, has to do with the material properties of olfaction. To illustrate this point, let us consider another passage from Hsuan Hua's commentaries that deals with smell and the issue of animals.

People smell like the food they eat. If they eat onions, they smell like onions. If they eat garlic, they reek of garlic. If they eat fish, they smell fishy. If they eat pork, they smell like pork. If they eat mutton, they smell like mutton. Whatever type of food you eat, *you'll become incorporated with that food*". (emphasis added, Hua and Buddhist Text Translation Society 1980c, p. 127)

Here we have a Buddhist variant of the familiar maxim that *you are what you eat*, namely, that you *smell* like what you eat!²² We should note that in this case, smell is operating on more than a merely descriptive or symbolic level. Instead, smell is physically and *materially* related to the moral infraction itself. Here the logic goes deeper than the abstract notion that eating an animal causes one to become karmically entangled with it; rather, one actually becomes *physically* entangled—literally "incorporated"—with it.²³

²¹ To cite but one representative passage, in his commentary on the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, Hsuan Hua writes, "The bodies of those who uphold the precepts always emit the fragrance of precepts. No matter how many days they go without bathing, they still do not stink. Why? Because they uphold the pure precepts. [They] don't need 'Nighttime in Paris' perfume, their bodies naturally emit a pleasant odor. This is the fragrance of precepts" (my translation, Hua and Buddhist Text Translation Society 1979).

²² We might note that many of the early Buddhist justifications for vegetarianism refer specifically to smell. Several such arguments occur in the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, which warns that the smell of meat inspires fear in all manner of beings: "Those who do partake of meat, whether they are walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, will produce an odor of meat that all living beings will smell and this inevitably creates a sense of fear in them Any living being who smells the scent of meat will become afraid and will be filled with the fear of death. All forms of life, whether they live out their lives in water, on land, or in the air, flee from [this smell]. They will all say, 'This person is our enemy.' For this reason, bodhisattvas do not customarily eat meat" (Blum 2013, p. 112). Smell also works metaphorically as a justification for vegetarianism, as when the Buddha notes that "just as people despise men who smell like garlic, so too do [creatures] despise and fear the 'smell of murder'" (Kieschnick 2005, p. 190). A common reason for the prohibition against consuming the five pungent plants (*wu xin* 五辛), moreover, is their foul and impure odor (ibid., p. 191).

²³ On connections between materiality, the body, and notions of virtue in early China, see Mark Csikszentmihalyi, *Material Virtue: Ethics and the Body in Early China* (Csikszentmihalyi 2004).

On this point, let us recall that unlike hearing and vision, which do not require physical contact with the object of perception, in Buddhism smell is considered a contact sense. In other words, when one smells something—or smells *like* something—it signals that physical molecules of the odorant have entered one's body. Thus, smell is not a second-order representation of the odorant. It materially consists of the odorant itself. If one smells like mutton after having eaten sheep, it is because molecules of the sheep's body have merged with one's own body. Strictly speaking, therefore, a person does not smell *like* an animal; rather, they smell *of* the animal. The odor signals that the animal itself has become materially incorporated into the body of the eater. The boundary that typically separates the human and the animal has been breached.

The way in which olfaction deconstructs the boundary ordinarily separating humans and animals extends more generally to all six realms of the Buddhist cosmos as well. To highlight a few examples, we might turn to a passage of Hsuan Hua's commentary on the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*, where we find a description of how the material dimensions of smell can act a bridge between humans and ghosts. Describing a class of ghosts called the "stink ghosts" (*fudana* 富單那, Skt. *pūtana*), Hsuan Hua pauses to offer a vivid description of the *kaṭapūtana*, which has,

a stench that is extremely strange, unlike anything you've ever smelled before. It reeks! This is what is described by the phrase, "a smell so strange one cannot bear to breathe"! If you smell this odor, you instantly throw up everything in your stomach—that is how badly it stinks. It connects with the foul-smelling stuff inside your body and makes you regurgitate everything. That is how strong it is. But the fevers it causes are even worse. They burn throughout your entire body—with fevers up to 200 degrees—until your bones turn to ash. (my translation, [Hua and Buddhist Text Translation Society 1968](#))

Note that in this description, the bad odor of the *kaṭapūtana* ghost "connects with" (*gou chu lai* 勾出來) the bad odors within the human body. This follows a principle Hsuan Hua often brings up, "*shan yi huo, e jiu yi qun* (善一夥, 惡就一群)", which roughly means, "the good form a group and the bad gather together," or as we might render in colloquial English, *like attracts like*. The physicality of the connection between similar smells is further emphasized by the intense somatic reaction caused by their coming together: it causes one to vomit. In other words, through smell the ghost actually enters the human body, another example of how smells in Buddhism are indeed both "internal" and "external". Once again, we see how olfaction deconstructs boundaries, not only bodily boundaries between self and other, or between internal and external, but also between two very different kinds of beings hailing from different realms of the Buddhist cosmos.

Another example of smell's ability to mediate between realms is the deceptively routine practice of offering food to the Buddha (*gong fo* 供佛). As is well-known, all food consumed in a monastery must be ritually offered to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas before it can be consumed by humans. Indeed, during my fieldwork, one of my frequent duties was to do the rounds of the monastic grounds every day before lunch, carrying portions of every dish to be served as an offering to each Buddha statue.²⁴ Of note for our purposes is that it is precisely the *material* properties of olfaction that enable the food to travel from the human realm to that of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. As McHugh notes, this feature of olfaction is not unique to Buddhism but draws on the logic of Vedic sacrifice, "an important early

²⁴ Incidentally, this task most likely became my assignment because it is among the least desirable of the daily chores, and thus usually the responsibility of the lowest-ranking novice in the monastic hierarchy. It not only requires hiking on an empty stomach to each of the different shrines that dot the mountainside, but is also very time consuming: one has to give each statue enough time to eat before moving on to the next location. Since the Buddhas and bodhisattvas eat through smell, it is impossible to *see* when they have finished their meal. I was therefore instructed to set a timer to give each statue five to seven minutes to enjoy their food. After that, I could retrieve the offerings from the altar and bring them back to the refectory where they would be reincorporated into that day's lunch. On broader Buddhist notions of beings who eat through smell, see *gandharvas* ([Buswell and Lopez 2014](#))—literally, those who subsist on fragrance (*gandha*)—sometimes translated into Chinese as "fragrance eaters" (*shi xiang* 食香) or "fragrance seekers" (*xun xiang xing* 尋香行). In the wider context of Chinese religions, see also [Campany \(2004\)](#) discussion of spirits who eat through smell in the *Lunheng jiaoshi* (論衡校釋).

South Asian model for divine consumption, [in which] food is cooked, burned, and transformed into smoke . . . which the gods seem to consume via the sense of smell” (McHugh 2012, p. 230). As we have seen, smell is the only sense that allows one to partake of an object’s particles at a distance, thus enabling it to function as a vehicle for offerings, transporting matter from one realm into another. It should come as no surprise, then, that the items typically selected for religious offerings—food, incense, and flowers—are all noted for their fragrant qualities.

5. Karmic Continuities: Smell as Temporal Mediator

The way olfaction can mediate between different realms of the Buddhist cosmos and their respective inhabitants also has a temporal dimension. Given the Buddhist theory of rebirth, according to which beings circulate between each of the six realms from lifetime to lifetime, it naturally follows that there is a degree of fluidity between the living beings of different realms. Here also smell can act as a bridge between a present lifetime and a past or future one. As Hsuan Hua once cautioned: “If as a person you are unbearably stinky, in the future you will go where there is nothing to smell but stench. Since you are unbearably stinky, all you smell will be foul odors in the latrine” (Hua and Buddhist Text Translation Society 2004, p. 257). Once again, we find the principle of *like attracts like* at work. If in this lifetime you have karma that makes you smell a certain way, then in the future you will be reborn where everything smells just like you.

Of course, the temporal dimensions of rebirth, karma, and olfaction are highly theorized in Buddhism, particularly in Yogācāra where the unfolding of karmic predispositions through time (*vāsanā*) is likened to the diffusion of a scent or perfume (*vāsana*, short *a*, which McHugh translates with the French term, “enfleurage”). Hsuan Hua draws on this connection between smell and *vāsanā* (*xi qi ji* 習氣集, “habit patterns” or “habit energies”) when he explains,

incenses are symbolic of the fragrance of Dharma. The fragrance of precepts, samadhi, wisdom, kindness and compassion saturates the cultivator so that he gives rise to good and gets rid of evil habit energies accumulated from beginningless time The saturation of incenses is another name for the saturation of habit patterns or habit “energies”. (Hua and Buddhist Text Translation Society 1980b, p. 9)

Hsuan Hua goes on to explain the connection between *vāsanā* and smell, stating, “just as incense permeates with fragrance so too wholesome habit energies permeate with goodness, whereas bad habit energies permeate with an evil air” (Hua and Buddhist Text Translation Society 1981, p. 101). Thus, smell—which propagates precisely because of its ambivalent materiality—is an apt metaphor for how karmic habits can persist through time while resisting reification. On this point, McHugh comments on the close association between Yogācāra theories of karmic predispositions (*vāsanā*) and the olfactory metaphor of *vāsana*:

in philosophical contexts, such as the Buddhist Yogācāra philosophy and the Sāṃkhya philosophy, *vāsanā* refers to the phenomenon—sometimes translated as “perfuming”—of the production of certain characteristic, latent dispositions in a person (or apparent person) by which future states are generated for that person. If we understand the essential process of *vāsana* in perfumery to consist of the diffusion of a particular *quality* from one independent entity to another, contiguous, independent entity to be experienced at a later time, this would explain why it would make a good model for the transfer of dispositions across time in various more metaphysical contexts. (McHugh 2012, p. 141)²⁵

Because of smell’s ambivalent materiality—which in perfumery enables odorant molecules to invisibly pass from one medium to another, from a flower to an oil, for example—smell is an apt metaphor for

²⁵ For further discussion of the connection between *vāsana*, “enfleurage,” and *vāsanā* (Ch. *xi qi ji* 習氣集, “habit patterns,” see (McHugh 2012, p. 141).

how karma can propagate over time without having to posit a reified or unchanging self. The metaphor, in other words, allows for the coexistence of continuity and difference in how karma transfers from one medium—a being, person, or “apparent person”—to another being, lifetime after lifetime.

Hsuan Hua relates a story of this kind of karmic continuity between beings—here specifically between a human and an animal—when he recounts a *gong an* (公安, Jpn. *koan*) in his commentary to the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*. This is the story of a layman who memorized the first three and a half scrolls of the *Lotus Sūtra* with remarkable ease. Try as he might, however, he could not memorize the last three and a half scrolls. An illustrious monk then revealed the reason for the layman’s mysterious difficulty. In a past life, the layman had been an ox who helped plow the fields of a Buddhist temple. The sixth day of the sixth lunar month was the customary day for “sunning the scriptures,” as is still the case in some temples today (see Jones 1999, p. 229). On this day, all the *sūtra* texts were brought outside into the sunshine to prevent mildew. While the *sūtras* were airing out, the ox happened to approach a copy of the *Lotus Sūtra* and sniffed the first volume (that is, the first three and a half scrolls). The monk explained, “But you only sniffed the first volume, not the second! That’s why you are so familiar with the first three and a half scrolls of the *sūtra* in this life” (Hua and Buddhist Text Translation Society 1980a, p. 50).

In this story, smell functions as a mediator between the human and animal realms on at least two levels. First, the ox learns the *sūtra* by smelling it. This in itself is an example of crossing a boundary. As a written document, the *sūtra* belongs to the textual world of human language. Yet, via the mediation of smell, the ox was able to “inhale” its contents. Olfaction, in a sense, made the ox literate, bridging the boundary between human forms of discourse and animal capacities for comprehension. Second, olfaction bridges the divide between the human and the animal on a temporal dimension as well, an example of how *vāsanā*—which likens the propagation of karmic predispositions over time to the diffusion of a perfume—highlights the potency of smell as a temporal mediator. That is, the portion of the *Lotus Sūtra* the ox absorbed through smell carried from one lifetime into the next. When the ox was reborn as a human, he could still recall the scriptural content he absorbed while an ox. It was smell that first enabled the ox to acquire knowledge from the human realm. Later, when reborn as a human, it enabled him to remember what he knew as an ox.²⁶

If we pause here to further consider the nature of the connection between the ox and the layman, however, we come to an impasse. Yogācāra Buddhism explains the propagation of karma over time with appeal to the *ālayavijñāna* (*a lai ye shi/zang shi*, 阿賴耶識/藏識), the eighth consciousness that stores karmic seeds (*bīja*, Chi. *zhong zi* 種子) and carries them from lifetime to lifetime. This throws into question the very categories of the “human” and the “animal” themselves. That is, rather than posit that it was the ox who acquired understanding of the *Lotus Sūtra*—understanding that was carried over into his subsequent birth as a human—we might more accurately say that that which acquired and maintained understanding of the *sūtra* (or, even more precisely, acquired and maintained the meritorious karmic seeds born from such understanding) was neither the “ox” nor the “layman” but simply their karmic continuum, the *ālayavijñāna*. This raises the perennial problem to which I want to turn in the final part of this essay. Given the Buddhist cosmology of rebirth, to what extent can we ultimately speak of “humans” or “animals” at all? This, I suggest, turns our attention back to the question with which this essay began: *What*—or perhaps more accurately, *who*—do *Fajie* Buddhists see when they look at animals? In these final remarks, I explore this by returning to my fieldwork observations of how *Fajie* members themselves grapple with this question through the deployment of the transspecies imagination.

²⁶ For salient comparative perspectives on the connection of scent and memory, see David Shulman’s “The Scent of Memory in Hindu South India” (Shulman 1987) and Wendy Doniger’s *The Woman Who Pretended to Be Who She Was: Myths of Self-Imitation* (Doniger 2005).

6. Cosmological Conclusions: Who Are Animals?

So far, we have discussed many ways in which smell is thought to bridge different realms of the Buddhist cosmos, including the realms of the human and the animal. We now move to a discussion of how *Fajie* members dynamically engage these cosmological ideas by creatively adapting them in the imaginative work of daily life. As stated in the introduction, one of the goals of this essay has been to highlight that, in the *Fajie* imaginaire, the six realms are understood as surprisingly fluid and permeable. Far from neatly segregated—as one finds, for instance, in the schematic and highly organized representations of the *bhavacakra*—beings of the different realms are thought to share a high degree of ontological continuity. Indeed, even in the ostensibly segregated depiction of the *bhavacakra*, this idea is subtly at play. As Stephen Teiser remarks,

it is no accident that a circle is used to lay out the Six Paths of rebirth. Arranging the six forms of life within a wheel *relativizes the distinctions between them*. The circular design suggests that gods and other inhabitants of the top part of the wheel are no different from those who suffer at the bottom: to the extent that their status is impermanent, they suffer, and after death they will be reborn in another body. (emphasis added, [Teiser 2006](#), p. 8)

Adopting even stronger language, in his comparative study of rebirth cosmologies, *Imagining Karma* ([Obeyesekere 2002](#)), Gananath Obeyesekere argues that a structural consequence of both Buddhist and non-Buddhist rebirth cosmologies is the homology of human and animal life. He describes this “homology of species sentience” as a “homology of a physical and spiritual nature between humans and animals . . . manifest in the constant transformations, the boundary crossings, and the blurring of categorial distinctions between the two” ([Obeyesekere 2002](#), p. 44). Because all beings are constantly circulating through the cycle of *samsara*—being born and reborn as creatures from all the different walks of life—it follows that humans are not *really* humans in any ultimate or enduring sense, they simply happen to be humans *now*. In the same vein, we must conclude, nor are animals *really* animals in any ultimate or enduring sense, they simply happen to be animals *now*. I suggest, therefore, that when *Fajie* Buddhists interact with animals—like Xiaohe the rabbit or the monkeys at the animal sanctuary—they imagine them as double-beings. On one level they are animals, but on another level, inhabiting the animal is an amorphous *being* who, like us, is subject to rebirth and who simply happens to be in a particular body due to the same karmic vicissitudes to which we ourselves are also subject.

Thus, one conclusion of this essay is that, in Buddhism, the “animal” is not a self-evident category. Although smell is not the only means whereby we see the fluidity between beings of different realms, it remains perhaps the best example of the porousness and permeability of those categorical boundaries. Rather than define the “animal” as that which is “non-human,” the *Fajie* case forces us to adopt a more nuanced view. Although animals and humans differ in significant ways, *Fajie* members dedicate a great deal of attention to the issue of human–animal continuity, as the foregoing explorations of smell and the transspecies imagination illustrate. This calls us to rethink and expand our own working definitions of the “animal”. In the *Fajie* context, for instance, we might find it more accurate to think of the “animal” in temporal rather than ontological terms. Perhaps to be an animal is not to be a *thing* or a *being*, but to move through a provisional role or phase which, like childhood or adolescence, is defined by its transience.

The ways that *Fajie* Buddhists attend to the question of human–animal continuity—which, rather than erase difference, conceive of it as a matter of degree rather than kind—depend on a literalist understanding of rebirth. This brings us to another major conclusion of this essay, which is to consider what is *lost* when literalist interpretations of Buddhist cosmology are sacrificed for more modernist understandings, in which the six realms are psychologized or “demythologized” to varying degrees. This is not to say that demythologized readings are not legitimately “Buddhist”. Indeed, secularized interpretations of Buddhist doctrine have played a major role in shaping the landscape of modern Buddhism—both in China and beyond—including the development and popularization of

humanistic Buddhism (*ren jian fo jiao* 人間佛教) and so-called socially engaged Buddhism²⁷. Thus, while attention to the demythologization of Buddhist cosmology is certainly warranted, it has so dominated recent scholarship on modern Buddhism as to all but imply that such modernist interpretations are synonymous with “modern Buddhism” itself. One of my aims in this essay is to challenge this assumption by highlighting other ways in which modern Buddhists understand Buddhist cosmology.

As one of my *Fajie* informants, a Chinese nun in Malaysia, told me, “if you don’t believe in rebirth, all of Buddhism falls apart”. That is, without the continuity between beings established by rebirth, the basis for transspecies homology is lost. This demonstrates why, at least for the conservative *Fajie* organization, vegetarianism is *the* most foundational Buddhist practice, eclipsing meditation, scriptural study, and ritual. In the *Fajie* interpretation of Buddhist cosmology—and, indeed, for many other conservative Buddhists as well—the “homology of species sentience” is the linchpin of the entire moral order. As we have seen, this moral order hinges on the fact that, in a very literal sense, animals are just like humans. This implies not only an imaginative extension of human qualities to animals but a recognition of the “animal” within the human as well. The transspecies imagination allows *Fajie* members to look at Xiaohu the rabbit, for example, and see a former monk. It is the same imaginative expansion, but in reverse, that precipitated Wanglei’s sudden moral transformation. That is, during his son’s autopsy, Wanglei realized the homology of species sentience: he saw—or, more accurately, he *smelled*—the multiplicity of his own son’s being, realizing him to be not only a human but, in a sense, an animal as well.

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²⁷ For a critique of the notion of “socially engaged Buddhism,” see Jessica L. Main and Rongdao Lai’s, “Reformulating ‘Socially Engaged Buddhism’ as an Analytical Category” (Main and Lai 2013), as well as John Nelson’s *Experimental Buddhism* (Nelson 2013).

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