Article

Individualization of Religious Rituals and Their Healing Functions in a Mobile Society—Empirical Evidence from China

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Abstract: Existing research has often characterized religious rituals as formalized and predetermined actions involving collective participation, emphasizing their structured and communal nature. However, our empirical findings revealed that rituals, shaped by citizens' healing needs, can also be individualized and intentionally constructed behaviors. These individualized rituals were not rooted in religious beliefs, but are closely connected to Chinese citizens' strong healing needs, which have developed in a highly mobile and socially competitive ("involuted") society. These rituals are characterized by their orientation toward life concerns, self-interested motives, and perceived connections to mystical power. These qualities enable rituals to fulfill a broader range of healing functions. Rituals not only had a direct impact on anxiety relief, especially health and class anxiety, but also had a beneficial effect on adjustment of individual goal or behavior and social inclusion.

1. Introduction

Religious rituals have long been a cornerstone of anthropological research, generating a substantial body of interdisciplinary scholarship. Recent literature indicates a growing shift in scholarly focus—from the sociocultural functions of rituals to their psychological and therapeutic effects (Anastasi and Newberg 2008; Lang et al. 2020). However, compared to the dominant theoretical perspectives in cultural anthropology and sociology (Durkheim 1915; Geertz 1973; Collins 2004), the psychological and neural foundations of rituals remain relatively underexplored (Hobson et al. 2018). One of the significant factors contributing to the slow growth of psychological literature is that our conceptual understanding of rituals remains constrained by classical definitions rooted in traditional social theories, which posit that rituals must be predetermined, repetitive, rigid, formal, non-utilitarian, and grounded in shared values or beliefs (Durkheim 1915; Malinowski 1954; Turner 1969; Rossano 2012; Hobson et al. 2018). With this understanding, the functions of rituals are predominantly conceptualized at the macro level, focusing on maintaining social structure, enforcing social control, facilitating cultural transmission, reinforcing ethnic identity, and integrating values, among others. However, the most significant difference between modern and traditional societies is that the former are characterized by high mobility and a tendency toward individualization, accompanied by numerous risks and uncertainties (Beck 1992). One of the most tangible effects of social mobility is the large-scale migration of individuals from traditional villages and communities into urban centers.

In short, the traditional living environment exerts diminishing influence on the moral frameworks of mobile individuals, while the accompanying risks and uncertainties have contributed to a pervasive societal sense of anxiety. The impact of this social context on

ritual practices is felt in two primary ways: First, people still need rituals to deal with failure, anxiety, and trauma. Second, due to geographic separation from their hometowns, many are unable to engage in traditional rituals during culturally significant times. In China, most people return home only once a year for the Spring Festival, and as a result, the focus of their lives has shifted from their hometowns to large cities.

This is why the emergence of numerous individualized religious rituals, in various forms, has been increasingly encouraged. This trend has not led to the disappearance of public rituals. In rural areas and ethnic minority regions of China, many traditional religious rituals still exist. However, large-scale population mobility has indeed had a profound impact on citizens' ritual practices, which merits our focused attention and research. It can be seen that the rituals in modern society are individualized, informal, and non-rigid, but they are still connected with some kind of belief in the worship of deities. Although it is an individualized action, people still sincerely hope to acquire a blessing from their chosen God or deity. We can hardly deny the religious attributes of these particular actions. Based on this understanding, more scholars than ever pay attention to the individualized attributes of rituals, as well as considering that rituals can continuously be created and formulated according to the healing needs of those involved (Daniel 2023). We assert that only by acknowledging the presence of individualized rituals can we fully comprehend the healing functions of rituals in modern society. That is because the rituals consistent with the concept of traditional rituals are declining and possibly disappearing, especially outside of non-ethnic minorities. Taking all of these factors into consideration, this study focuses on religious rituals in urban life and explores the following questions: Can religious rituals be individualized? What are their social roots and characteristics? And what are their specific healing functions?

This paper makes two key contributions: (1) It analyzes the contemporary transformations and social foundations of religious rituals; (2) It proposes a new framework for understanding the healing functions of religious rituals and evaluates it through empirical analysis. Unlike prior research that has primarily emphasized the role of rituals in alleviating anxiety, our study broadens the analytical lens. This new framework argues that the healing function of religious rituals is not limited to alleviating negative emotions, but also encompasses additional dimensions including promotion of positive action and enhancement of social inclusion. However, these broader functions remain underexplored in the existing literature.

2. Theoretical Basis and Research Hypotheses

2.1. Relevant Research and Its Limitations

Rituals are ubiquitous across cultures and play a vital role in shaping human experience, which has made them a longstanding subject of interest in anthropological research. Existing research on rituals can broadly be categorized into two analytical traditions: ritual ontology and ritual functionalism. The former centers on the conceptual foundations, typologies, and structural features of rituals, while the latter is dedicated to exploring the functional significance of rituals for societies, groups, and individuals.

2.1.1. Rituals Redefined: From Collective Involvement to Individualized Practices

The social sciences contain a vast array of perspectives on the definition of religious rituals. Nevertheless, according to some classic definitions, commonalities can be summarized in the understanding of rituals among scholars. The issue of ritual composition has been discussed by several prominent anthropologists, including Durkheim, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Leech, and others. But Turner proposed one of the most widely recognized definitions of religious rituals, described as a prescribed set of formal behaviors uti-

lized on particular occasions. Even though these rituals still follow the established process, it is the belief in mysterious (or non-experiential) beings and forces which is considered to be the primary and ultimate cause of all outcomes (Turner 1982, p. 79). In addition, Turner, in Religious Celebrations and Rituals, refers more specifically and colloquially to the fact that religious activities are called "rituals" by anthropologists. In his opinion, celebrations are formal public rituals, although this "public" can sometimes consist of only members of a particular family (Turner 1993, p. 255). According to this widely utilized definition, religious rituals are generally considered to be formal behaviors held on particular occasions and associated with a belief in mystical power. Scholars have distinguished between magical rituals and religious rituals, arguing that the primary difference lies in their association with instrumental purposes. Magical rituals typically serve a direct and concrete purpose, whereas religious rituals lack a clearly defined goal (Homans 1941). However, in the study of Chinese folk religion, scholars have observed that religious rituals can also serve utilitarian purposes. This challenges the strict distinction between magical and religious rituals and suggests that religious rituals may also have pragmatic dimensions. Building on this perspective, Watson introduced the concept of "orthopraxy" through an analysis of ancestor-focused funeral rites, arguing that standardized ritual forms play a crucial role in constructing and sustaining a unified Chinese culture (Watson 1988). He posited that the funeral rituals of the late Chinese imperial period exemplify a ritual process with a unified structure, where the emphasis on standardization underscores the primacy of orthopraxy (correct practice) over orthodoxy (correct belief) (Watson 1988, p. 10). Some scholars used the concepts of Doing Religion and Efficacy to emphasize that Chinese popular religion is not just a belief system but also a combination of practices, rituals, and social interactions. The *lingying* that fulfills daily life needs serves as an important socio-psychological foundation for the existence and prevalence of religious rituals (Chau 2006, p. 64). These studies provide a theoretical foundation for the individualization and psychological analysis of rituals.

Nowadays, more and more scholars are analyzing the composition of rituals from a psychological perspective, giving them more personal qualities while also recognizing ritual variation and adaptability. Rituals created by individuals can have a powerful healing effect on those experiencing grief. Creative personal rituals represent a new dimension in grief counseling (Daniel 2023). Even a simple ritual of memorization, if given meaning by the actor, can significantly reduce individual anxiety (Anastasi and Newberg 2008). Nevertheless, psychologists also believe that in contrast to habits or routines, which may change each time they are performed, rituals tend to be invariable in their performance (Smith and Stewart 2011). It is also believed that religious rituals tend to be structured in rigid, formal, and repetitive ways (Foster et al. 2006; Rossano 2012; Hobson et al. 2018).

We argue that the prevailing conception of rituals implicitly assumes a static and stable society in which individuals can easily participate in native cultural practices. However, this assumption ignores the phenomenon of high-frequency social mobility in rapidly developing countries. For instance, the urbanization rate of China's registered population increased from 35.9% in 2014 to 48.3% in 2023[1], while approximately 150 million rural migrants relocated to urban areas between 2014 and 2024. These urban residents typically return to their hometowns only once a year, making it difficult for them to engage consistently in traditional religious rituals. But they still need to use rituals to fulfill psychological needs, so many convenient rituals may be created. These rituals are still associated with belief or mystical power, but their functions may become more individualized than conventional rituals. In line with existing scholarship, we contend that rituals remain anchored in a sense of mystical power and are imbued with symbolic significance by their practitioners. However, their form is not necessarily predetermined, repetitive, or rigid; in-

stead, it exhibits considerable flexibility. This may manifest as an act of "lighting incense" during a trip or wearing a "blessed" bracelet. This new interpretation of rituals will help to understand their unique function.

2.1.2. Functions of Religious Rituals

The function of rituals has always been an important topic of anthropological concern. At present, there are two main analytical approaches: the sociocultural approach perspective and the social psychological perspective. Durkheim previously discussed the social function of rituals, which are a collection of means for regularly organizing, reinforcing, producing, and reproducing "religious forces". He regarded these "religious forces", which profoundly influence social life, as a concentrated expression of the collective and moral forces of human society (Durkheim 1915). In other words, the function of rituals is to forge social solidarity and reinforce collective power (Watson 1988). Brown viewed human society as an "organism" with the capacity for self-regulation and believed that the important function of rituals was to maintain social order by regulating social emotions. In contrast, Geertz shifted the analytical focus from ritual behavior and social structure to symbolic meaning and interpretive frameworks. Ritual is a "cultural performance" (Geertz 1973, p. 113), in which the performers, participants, and audience all hold cultural concepts represented in the gestures and movements. Rituals can sustain collective sentiments by performing them frequently, further strengthening shared values and goals. Collins' theory of Interaction Ritual Chains (IRC) examines the micro-foundations of social solidarity, explaining how emotional energy is reinforced and maintained through rituals (Collins 2004). Although Collins' focus remains on the issue of social integration, his observations of interactions have also inspired psychological studies of rituals.

The social psychological perspective, in contrast, focuses on the psychological healing functions of rituals for individuals. One of the most widely studied aspects is the role of rituals in alleviating individuals' anxiety and stress. Malinowski (1954) observed that fishermen on the island of Trobriand in Melanesia would conduct magical rituals as a means of relieving fear and anxiety to reduce the risk and uncertainty associated with going out to sea to fish. Scholars have used a variety of research methods to examine the correlation between rituals and anxiety in later investigations. Based on their observations of residents living in a war zone during the 2006 Lebanon War, Sosis and Handwerker (2011) discovered that chanting rituals were useful in reducing women's anxiety. Anastasi and Newberg (2008) employed an experimental method in which 30 students were divided into two groups, and their anxiety levels were compared before and after the intervention. They found that students who recited the Rosary experienced significantly lower anxiety levels than those who watched a religious video. Lang et al. (2020) discovered that Marathi rituals had significant anti-anxiety effects in an experimental investigation involving 75 women in Mauritius.

The above studies offer valuable insights; however, they equate psychological healing with the reduction of negative emotions, while relatively overlooking the role of rituals in constructing positive life goals and motivating self-striving behaviors. In specific situations, anxiety relief is merely the direct effect of the ritual, while the more profound indirect impact may be an improvement in performance. For example, Brooks et al. (2016) found that subjective anxiety mediated the effect of task framing on math performance, illustrating that anxiety relief may indirectly enhance performance. Indeed, rituals do not have a single function but multiple psychological functions (Boyer and Linard 2006; Watson-Jones and Legare 2016). Thus, reflecting on existing research, some scholars have pointed out that rituals' diverse functions can be categorized into three regulatory categories: emotions, performance goal states, and social connection to others. Unfortunately, fewer stud-

ies have directly investigated whether these functions exist. In particular, it is difficult to understand how these functions occur when our understanding of rituals remains stuck in terms of predefined collective behaviors. This paper argues for a revised conceptualization of ritual—one that better accounts for the diverse psychological and behavioral functions rituals can serve.

2.1.3. Limitations and Expansion of This Research

It can be observed that, although there is considerable research on religious rituals, only a few scholars have addressed the social roots of rituals, and these analyses have not been integrated with functional studies. We believe that understanding rituals and their psychological functions must be contextualized within the backdrop of the era, social structure, and cultural factors. The two primary characteristics of modern East Asian social development—rapid urbanization and substantial social mobility—have been insufficiently addressed in the existing body of research. In this context, urban immigrants have detached from their original cultural background and must embrace a new culture. However, the clash of diverse cultures, combined with life pressures, can diminish a sense of identity and foster feelings of loneliness and anxiety. On the other hand, existing research has focused on examining rituals' function in reducing anxiety, but it has not rigorously evaluated their numerous healing advantages. Understanding the shifts in the features and functions of religious rituals requires taking into account the relationship between social situations and healing needs. Chau (2006) used the concepts of Doing Religion and Efficacy to emphasize that Chinese popular religion is not only a belief system but also closely intertwined with the social environment and the lived needs of communities. In consideration of China's unique social background, this paper will rethink the meaning of rituals and their psychological functions.

2.2. *The Living Field and the Healing Needs of Citizens in a Mobile Society*

Hobson et al. (2018) argue that understanding the functions of rituals must capture "Bottom-Up and Top-Down Processing". "Top-Down" is about understanding individual psychological needs in a socially structured background. Since the 1980s, a series of macro- and meso-level social transformations have contributed to the emergence of a highly mobile Chinese society. This mobile society is defined by three key features: regional population mobility, upward and downward class mobility, and the increasing pressure of involution in daily life. Without considering this social context, it is difficult to understand the tendency of urban residents in China towards the individualization of rituals. Next, we will explain the healing needs of urban residents and their social roots from macro, meso, and micro levels.

At the macro level, there are large-scale urbanization, the expansion of higher education, and the high-quality development of various industries. Firstly, from 2000 to 2015, the mobile population in China increased from 121 million to 247 million, more than doubling in just 15 years. According to the 2024 Government Work Report, China will continue to implement the new urbanization strategy in depth and increase the urbanization rate of the resident population to 66.2%. This means that there will be more mobile population living in cities.

Second, the Action Plan for Revitalizing Education for the 21st Century, introduced by the Ministry of Education in 1999, started the expansion of higher education that has lasted for nearly 25 years. As of July 2024, China's gross enrollment rate in higher education has exceeded 60%, entering the globally recognized stage of universal access.

Third, the era of industrial involution has come. In 2017, the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China announced that China had entered the stage of high-

quality development. This means that the proportion of talent, technological content, and job requirements continue to increase, resulting in escalating competition and pressure. These are key factors contributing to the professional stress and anxiety experienced by urban residents, especially among the younger generation.

There are changes in the living environment at the meso level. The changes and their social consequences are as follows: (1) Changes in the living environment and the resulting absence of functions of the original culture. After the migrant population has moved to a new environment, they are separated from their original familiar environment, forming a brand-new social network and needing to accept a brand-new social culture. At the same time, due to physical and psychological distance, they are alienated from the mechanisms of social participation and social interaction in their native culture. As a result, the identity and values supposedly maintained by early socialization need to be reshaped. (2) Changes in the work environment. In China during the 1980s and 1990s, there were many "iron rice bowl" jobs, and social competition was not intense. However, with the process of high-quality development and talent mobility, these "iron rice bowl" jobs were swept up in the wave of market-oriented reforms, leading to a rise in temporary employment and flexible labor arrangements, making competition extraordinarily fierce. These changes have become a significant social root of widespread anxiety.

Finally, at the micro level, there are emotional conflicts and adjustment needs arising in the mobile population. Macro–medium trends have a profound impact on the psychological level of individuals. On the one hand, life objectives and mobility confidence are impacted by the intense job pressure that comes with a lifestyle of involution. Their sense of cultural identity and social inclusion may also erode, often resulting in emotional isolation. On the other hand, citizens' confidence and ambitions for mobility are boosted by the general upward trend of economic and social development. Conquering the contradictions between the above two emotions induces confusion, anxiety, and various adjustment needs. Therefore, they have a strong need to reshape their sense of life's meaning.

2.3. Individualized Religious Rituals and Their Healing Functions

Even in traditional religious rituals in China, most farmers have traditionally integrated immediate practical and relational modalities into their religious practices (Chau 2006, p. 75). This life-needs-based underlying logic is carried into the lives of urban migrants, forming the psychological foundation of individualized religious rituals. Driven by strong healing needs, Chinese citizens actively seek out various religious rituals that can achieve their desired goals, leading to a tendency toward the individualization of rituals. Unlike traditional definitions of religious rituals, these rituals are, on the one hand, still associated with mystical forces, while on the other hand, they exhibit highly flexible forms, being life-oriented, non-fixed, and non-rigid. The transformation of these forms has also had a profound impact on the functions of rituals.

2.3.1. Characteristics of Individualized Rituals

Individualized rituals represent a shift in focus from the collective structures to personal experience. These ritual forms vary and generally exhibit the following characteristics. First, diversification of scenes and orientation toward life needs. Rituals are no longer preset and their occurrence is no longer tied to a fixed location but depends on life's demands, occurring at random intervals and in an infinite number of places and times. Relevantly, rituals are derived from an individual need to redefine the purpose of life rather than from religious belief. Second, the motivation of rituals has changed from altruistic to self-interested. In other words, rituals' original purpose of focusing on collective identity has given way to the search for personal life meaning. In traditional ritual research,

scholars concentrated on their cultural integration function and strengthening of collective power. However, individualized rituals revolve around their own emotional needs. When individuals have the same rituals, it is mainly because they objectively have similar emotional needs. Third, individual rituals are still associated with magical power and the expectation of being blessed by gods, ancestors, and Buddhas. It is this characteristic that makes it easy to distinguish between religious rituals and ordinary life rituals.

2.3.2. Multiple Healing Functions of Individualized Religious Rituals

The individualization of rituals has impacted their diversity of functions. Based on our observational experience, citizens in China may achieve at least three functions through rituals:

First, the most direct function is anxiety relief. Scholars have paid considerable attention to the anxiety-relief function of rituals (Sosis and Handwerker 2011; Lang et al. 2020). However, existing studies have primarily measured individual anxiety without differentiating its specific types, largely due to a lack of consideration for the broader macro-level context of social development. Given the previously discussed development tendency in Chinese society, we think that while people's general mindset tends toward optimism rather than anxiety, they nevertheless experience anxiety about a few specific issues, primarily anxiety around health and class (Zhou and Xing 2023). People must try harder to obtain respect at work because involution brings about stronger competitive and life pressures on the individual. Greater efforts often involve working extended overtime hours, and even staying up late (Ren and Liu 2021). Thus, in the context of China's mobile society, the most significant unpleasant feelings that citizens must deal with are the anxiety of class maintenance or leapfrogging, and physical health concerns.

Hypothesis 1. *In the context of a mobile society in China, rituals can significantly alleviate citizens' class anxiety and health anxiety but may not have a significant negative correlation with feelings of depression.*

Second, goal and behavioral adjustment functions. Brooks et al. (2016) argued that rituals improve behavioral performance by alleviating anxiety. We believe that this viewpoint also applies to Chinese citizens. They continue to have relatively high mobility confidence in the context of an evolving society. In contrast to the 1% of Chinese youth who lack confidence (anticipating downward mobility), over 70% of Chinese youth are confident in their class status, with over 40% confident in upward mobility and over 70% confident in entering the middle class and above (Lei 2015, p. 1). However, their life context of involution makes them susceptible to unpleasant feelings like perplexity and anxiety. People who experience these emotions typically rely on rituals to give them a secret power which will increase their fighting spirit to ensure that they are lucky enough to overcome difficulties. They will take up constructive habits to better themselves after developing an inner spiritual drive, such as reading books written by experts, picking up computer skills, and aggressively seeking guidance from elders. Therefore, rituals not only alleviate anxiety but also help individuals regain confidence in life and promote their striving behaviors.

Hypothesis 2. *Rituals are positively related to citizens' positive goals and behavioral adjustment.*

Hypothesis 2.1. *Rituals are positively related to citizens' confidence in upward class mobility.*

Hypothesis 2.2. *Rituals are positively related to citizens' enhancement-oriented learning behaviors.*

Hypothesis 2.3. *Rituals are positively related to citizens' leisure behaviors, such as going to the movies.*

Third, the function of social inclusion. In traditional society, religious rituals are collectively participated in, and their functions of cultural integration and value internalization are regarded as important. In the mobile social context, religious rituals express the tendency for individualization. Thus, the function of their social relations is easily ignored. Actually, people are embedded in social networks (Granovetter 1985). After the individualization of life, individuals, on one hand, detach from traditional network structures and cultural constraints. On the other hand, they generate a need to re-embed themselves in search of meaning (Huang 2020). As a result, we believe that effective rituals may help people in forming relationships with others, reduce the antagonistic factors between the individual and society, and promote the pro-social behaviors of individual participation in society. On the contrary, if individuals do not utilize rituals to manage their relationship with society, they may become trapped in their life world with significant anxiety leading to less participation in social activities.

Hypothesis 3. *Religious rituals are positively correlated with citizens' social inclusion perceptions and behaviors.*

Hypothesis 3.1. *Rituals are beneficial in alleviating citizens' sense of grievance; or conversely, they enhance their perception of inclusion.*

Hypothesis 3.2. *Rituals will increase individuals' participation in gatherings with friends.*

3. Design of the Research

3.1. Data Sources and Analysis Sample

The data used in this study are from the 2018 Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS 2018). The CGSS, launched in 2003, is China's first national, comprehensive, and continuous academic survey project. Executed by the China Survey and Data Centre of The Renmin University of China, CGSS is currently the most widely used and authoritative dataset in Chinese academia. The annual survey uses a multi-step stratified probability sampling design and covers more than 30 provinces in China. The CGSS2018 survey data contains 12,787 samples, of which 9104 urban samples are used in this study. Considering that men in China retire at 60 and women at 55, individuals around the age of 55 are either at or nearing retirement age, with limited room for advancement, leading to a noticeable decrease in work-related pressure. Although older people may also have individualized rituals, their aims and aspirations should differ from those of younger groups. Therefore, this study uses samples aged 55 and below for analysis. After removing responses such as "Don't know" and "Refused to answer", as well as handling some missing data, the final sample size for analysis is 1950.

3.2. Variables Measurement

The core independent variable in this paper is individual religious ritual behavior. Based on the previous definition, we believe that there is a tendency of individualization in the religious rituals of Chinese citizens. We measured individual religious rituals in terms of ancestral worship and praying for good luck, with the specific questions "How many times have you visited the graves of deceased family members in the past year?" and "How many times in the past year have you visited a place to pray for good luck (academic and business success, health, etc.)?" Responses coded as "no" were assigned a value of 0, while those indicating "once" or more (including categories such as once, twice, three

times, four times or more times) were coded as 1, thereby creating two binary variables. To ensure the robustness of the results, we incorporated rituals as an ordinal variable in the model analysis when necessary.

The dependent variable is the rituals' healing function, which consists of three specific variables: the emotion management function, the goal and behavioral adjustment function, and the social inclusion function.

Emotion management consists of three anxiety-related variables: class anxiety, health anxiety, and depressive feelings. First, respondents were asked, "At a general level, where does your socio-economic status fall in the current society?" Answers were categorized into five levels: upper, upper-middle, middle, lower-middle, and lower. Class identity was coded in reverse order as a measure of class anxiety. Second, the measurement of health anxiety was titled as an individual's self-evaluation of health status. Similarly, we coded the inverted order score of this indicator to measure the level of health anxiety. In addition, depression was measured using the following question: "During the past four weeks, how often have you felt depressed or down?"

The goal and action adjustment function was measured by confidence in class mobility and enhancement-oriented learning behaviors. The questionnaire included the questions "In general, which stratum of society are you personally in at the present?" and "Which class do you think you will be in 10 years from now?" The class mobility confidence indicator was defined as subtracting the current level of class identification from the individual's expected level of class in 10 years. Meanwhile, continuous learning behavior was assessed using the question: "Over the past year, how often have you studied during your free time?" Answers were divided into five categories: never, seldom, sometimes, often, and very often. Each category received a score of 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating more continuous learning behaviors.

Social inclusion functions were measured in two dimensions: perception of inclusion and behavior of inclusion. The dimension of inclusion perception was measured by the question "in order to have a good relationship with other people, individuals should not show complaints about them". The answers were categorized as strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, indifferent, somewhat disagree, and disagree. The dimension of inclusion behavior was measured by the question "how often do you get together with relatives you don't live with and how often do you get together with friends". Specific frequencies included daily, several times a week, several times a month, several times a year or less, and never. The raw scores were coded in reverse order as a measure of inclusion behavior.

In addition, this study also considered control variables such as gender, age, education level, income, and religious beliefs to more accurately estimate the net effect between the independent and dependent variables. It is important to note that due to the wide range of income values, the regression coefficients may become too large, and a logarithmic transformation is typically applied. However, since there were zero values in the income data, which were not suitable for logarithmic transformation, we included the standardized income values in the model analysis instead.

4. Research Findings

4.1. Chinese Citizens' Life Mindsets, Religious Beliefs and Ritual Behaviors

4.1.1. The Contradictory Mindset of Anxiety and Striving Coexisting

The social mindset in this paper mainly refers to the negative emotions that citizens may have in their lives, including class anxiety, health anxiety and depression. As shown in Table 1, Chinese citizens under the age of 55 generally exhibit low levels of depressive symptoms, with an average score of only 2.01 on a scale of 1 to 5. However, their class anxiety was higher, with a mean of 3.65 on a scale of 1 to 5. In other words, many people

had a relatively low-class identity. Meanwhile, some people had a more pronounced sense of health anxiety, with a mean score of 2.09. Both class anxiety and health anxiety have higher mean scores than depression. This indicates that Chinese citizens had a greater need for emotional management related to class and health anxiety. Citizens generally remained relatively optimistic despite their anxieties. Among them, 60.62% thought that their class would rise in 10 years, 34.56% that it would stay the same, and only 4.82% that it would decline. In other words, the majority of citizens believed that they can achieved the goal of class upward mobility if they work hard. On the other hand, in the context of various industries striving for high-quality development, they also faced intense competition and societal pressures, with widespread occupational stress. As a result, for the citizens in this era of involution, a sense of anxiety coexisted with the mentality of actively participating in competition to improve their status. This contradiction may be one of the important psychological reasons why people need individualized rituals.

Table 1. Descriptive information on key variables (N = 1950).

Dimension	Variable	M/pct	Std.	Min	Max
Control variable	Gender				
	female	49.08%			
	male	50.92%			
	Age	37.86	10.75	17	55
	Education	6.89	3.48	1	13
	Income	62,273.29	93297.3	0	1,200,000
	Religious belief				
	no	90.56%			
	yes	9.44%			
Individual religious rituals	Ancestral worship				
	no	23.64%			
	yes	76.36%			
	Praying for good luck				
	no	70.05%			
	yes	29.95%			
Emotional healing	Class anxiety	3.65	0.84	1	5
	Health anxiety	2.09	0.93	1	5
	Depression	2.01	0.90	1	5
Goal and action adjustment	Mobility Confidence	1.06	1.36	−4	9
	Learning behavior	2.30	1.10	1	5
Social inclusion	Inclusion perception	4.43	1.49	1	7
	Friends' gatherings	2.60	0.83	1	5

4.1.2. Weak Correlation to Religious Beliefs and Demand-Driven for Healing

People may think that religious rituals must be related to religious beliefs. However, both common knowledge and survey data showed that religious beliefs were not widespread among Chinese residents, especially since the nearly 100 million members of the Communist Party of China are not allowed to hold religious beliefs. As shown in Table 1, only 9.44% of citizens reported having religious beliefs, while nearly 90% indicated

they had none. Therefore, most citizens surveyed do not rely on religious beliefs to adjust or alleviate their conflicting life mindsets. As mentioned above, the original environment for most citizens' participation in religious rituals has been reshaped in the mobile society. Driven by life demands, they each sought individualized rituals that suited them. In this study, we focus primarily on two common rituals—ancestral worship and praying for good luck on specific occasions. Survey data showed that 76.36% of people had engaged in worship practices, 29.95% of citizens had prayed for good luck, and 24% have practiced both rituals simultaneously.

4.1.3. Individualization of Rituals and the Mystical Nature of Blessing Power

Interestingly, the individualized rituals that citizens participated in are not fixed, predetermined, or mandatory, but rather exhibited clear individual differences. Some people did them only once a year, while others did it two to three times, and the maximum was more than five times (see Figures 1 and 2). For example, in the case of praying for good luck, Table 2 indicates significant differences in ritual participation across various groups, including urban and rural residents, gender, education, and income levels. The percentage of urban residents who had participated in the prayer for good luck ritual was 11.75% higher than that of rural residents, with a 6% higher proportion of those who had participated more than twice. Moreover, individuals with higher levels of education and income were more likely to have engaged in the ritual of praying for good luck. There are also real-life examples. For instance, one respondent shared their ritual experiences.
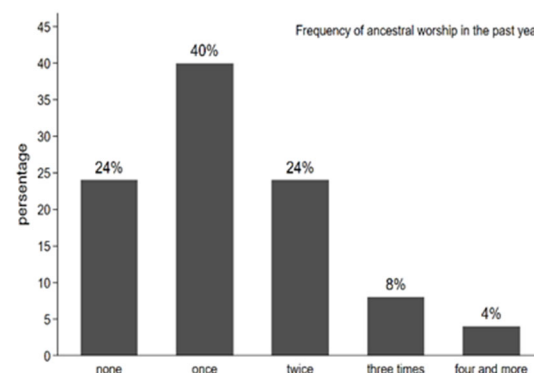

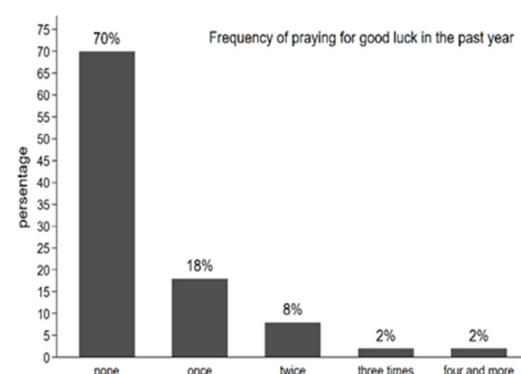**Figure 1.** Frequency distribution of rituals for ancestral worship.

Figure 2. Frequency distribution of praying for good luck rituals.

Table 2. Variance test for individualized differences in citizens' religious rituals and frequency distribution.

		Frequency of Praying for Good Luck (%)				Sig.
		None	**Once**	**Twice**	**Three Times and More**	
Residence	Urban	69.98	17.56	8.34	4.12	***
	Rural	81.73	11.79	3.65	2.82	
Gender	Male	73.10	15.19	7.28	4.43	#
	Female	67.00	19.82	9.36	3.82	
Education	Primary school and below	68.46	15.00	9.62	6.92	***
	Junior high	74.76	13.10	7.71	4.43	
	High school	74.94	16.78	5.75	2.53	
	College and above	64.15	22.12	9.89	3.85	
Income	Low level	73.17	14.88	7.34	4.61	***
	Medium level	75.78	14.03	6.94	3.25	
	High level	61.09	23.31	11.25	4.34	

Note: The data in the table represents the percentage distribution of cross-tab options; 'sig.' indicates the significance level of one-way ANOVA, meaning there are notable differences between the groups; Significance levels: # $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

"My rituals are highly diverse, and I determine them based on my personal needs. During high school, I had a small Buddha pendant, and before exams, I would 'speak' to it, seeking blessings for good results. It also had a fortune-telling feature, where I would draw lots in hopes of receiving 'great luck' to counterbalance my exam abilities. At the end of 2024, I visited Lingyin Temple to pray for my friend's high score in the IELTS exam and for success in the graduate entrance exam, and I also prayed for my family's health. I purchased eighteen-bead prayer bracelets from Lingyin Temple for my friend and mother, having them consecrated through a *kaiguang* (开光) ritual to receive the Buddha's blessing. Occasionally, I also visit the cemetery during the Ghost Festival to pay respects, though the dates are not fixed" (Interviewee YS02, 15 March 2025).

To some extent, this result suggested that our understanding of religious rituals needs to be updated. In a mobile society, religious rituals have indeed become more individualized, with many citizens selecting or creating rituals that suit their own needs.

On the other hand, citizens had diverse specific aspirations, primarily including academic achievement, business success, career advancement, and physical health. In Chinese culture, these aspirations are often expressed as wishes for *shengguanfacai* (升官发财) or *wanshiruyi* (万事如意). The emphasis on one over the other may depend on an individual's life circumstances and emotional needs. Regardless of the type of prayer, the source of their energy was a sacred and mysterious force, for example, ancestors, deities, and other spiritual beings. One research suggested that a trend of "temple tourism" had emerged among Chinese youth this year, with many making special trips to temples to seek blessings from Buddha. Spatial separation, ritual performances, spiritual consumption, and psychological healing constituted the tangible manifestations of this youth-driven "temple tourism" (Mu and Zhang 2024).

4.2. Regression Analysis of Multiple Healing Functions

4.2.1. The Function of Healing Negative Feelings

In our ethnographic interviews, the most common scenario is that individuals adopt rituals that suit them when they experience anxiety or feel unable to control outcomes, in an attempt to alleviate negative emotions. "In 2024, I visited temples six times in Xi'an, Hebei Province, Inner Mongolia, Changzhou, Hangzhou, and Shanghai, primarily for tourism. However, each time I entered a temple, I would kneel and pray. During the Lantern Festival, I also participated in a ritual in an ancient town in Dali, where I hung red plaques to make prayers. I feel that these practices are not particularly effective, yet I still hold some expectations toward them. I tend to pray for specific personal matters, such as hoping for favorable outcomes in important events this year and wishing for good health. Engaging in these rituals provides me with temporary relief from the anxiety caused by uncertainties in my life" (Interviewee YS03, 15 March 2025).

There are also examples of class anxiety: "I experienced class anxiety while preparing for my exams, fearing that failure would hinder my future employment and upward mobility. Although I didn't go to temples to pray, the emoji I used most during that period was *Wofo Ciba* (我佛糍粑). It wasn't a serious expression of faith, but more of a reminder to myself not to be overly anxious about it" (Interviewee YS07, 15 March 2025).

We used data to examine the relationship between rituals and negative emotions. As seen in Table 3, whether we operationalized the variables of ancestor worship and praying for good luck as binary or ordinal variables, they were generally significantly correlated with class anxiety, health anxiety, and feelings of depression. Taking Model 1 in Table 3 as an example, compared to citizens without religious ritual experiences, those who had participated in ancestor worship and praying for good luck rituals showed a decrease in class anxiety by approximately 0.10 and 0.11 units, respectively, with a significance level less than 0.05. As seen in Model 2, when the values of the two independent variables were transformed into ordinal variables, the significant correlation still held. This suggested that the more frequently the rituals are performed, the better the healing effect on class anxiety.

Meanwhile, different rituals had different functions. Comparing the coefficients from Model 1 to Model 6 in Table 3, it was found that ancestor worship rituals can alleviate class anxiety and health anxiety, but had no significant effect on healing depression. Praying for good luck can alleviate class anxiety, but its effect on health anxiety was not significant. These results suggested that citizens adjust the type of rituals based on their own needs. In other words, individualized religious rituals in a mobile society were life-need oriented.

It was particularly important to note that the correlation coefficients for both rituals and depression are positive, which may be due to complex reasons. This paper did not intend to explore the underlying causes in depth, as the data here are sufficient to indicate that the ritual variables did not have a significant healing effect on depressive symptoms. Hypothesis 1 was supported.

In addition, diverse emotional factors were associated with the unique traits of individuals. The data in Table 3 show that gender, education level and income had significant correlations with citizens' class anxiety. For example, men had more class anxiety, while education level and income can reduce class anxiety to some extent. Health anxiety and depression were also affected by gender.

Table 3. Religious rituals and healing of negative emotions among citizens.

	Class Anxiety		Health Anxiety		Depression	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Gender(male = 1)	0.12 ** (0.04)	0.13 ** (0.04)	−0.09 * (0.04)	−0.10 * (0.04)	−0.07 * (0.04)	−0.08 * (0.04)
Age	−0.00 * (0.00)	−0.00 * (0.00)	0.02 *** (0.00)	0.02 *** (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.02)
Education level	−0.05 *** (0.01)	−0.04 *** (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.02 *** (0.01)	−0.02 ** (0.01)
Income	−0.12 *** (0.02)	−0.12 *** (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)
Religious belief (yes = 1)	−0.03 (0.06)	0.02 (0.06)	0.08 (0.07)	0.08 (0.07)	0.00 (0.07)	0.00 (0.07)
Ancestral worship (yes = 1)	−0.10 * (0.04)	—	−0.16 ** (0.05)	—	−0.03 (0.05)	—
Praying for good luck (yes = 1)	−0.11 * (0.04)	—	0.05 (0.05)	—	0.15 ** (0.05)	—
Ancestral worship (ordinal)	—	−0.04 * (0.02)	—	−0.04 * (0.02)	—	0.01 (0.02)
Praying for good luck (ordinal)	—	−0.06 ** (0.02)	—	0.03 (0.03)	—	0.07 ** (0.03)
Intercept	4.13 *** (0.10)	4.11 *** (0.10)	1.54 *** (0.12)	1.49 *** (0.11)	2.15 *** (0.11)	2.13 *** (0.11)
R^2	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.02	0.02
Sample size	1950	1950	1950	1950	1950	1950

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

4.2.2. The Goal and Behavioral Adjustment Function of Rituals

Firstly, as shown in Model 1 of Table 4, ancestor worship rituals did not improve citizens' confidence in social mobility; instead, they were negatively correlated to some extent, though this correlation disappeared in Model 2. On the other hand, praying for good luck rituals had a highly significant positive correlation with social mobility confidence. In Model 1, when the value of the praying for good luck ritual changed from 0 to 1, citizens' confidence in social mobility increased by 0.22 units, with a significance level of 0.001.

Secondly, as shown in Model 3 of Table 4, both ancestor worship and praying for good luck had a certain positive effect on learning behaviors, but the effect was not significant. However, when ancestor worship was treated as an ordinal variable, the correlation between the variables became significant (Model 4). In other words, the more frequently urban residents performed ancestor worship rituals, the higher their average engagement in learning behaviors.

Third, leisure behaviors were also beneficial in relieving stress and anxiety in life. Rituals helped individuals achieve an adjustment function of goals and behaviors by increasing leisure activities. As shown in Models 5 and 6 of Table 4, the rituals of ancestor worship and praying for good luck increased citizens' leisure behaviors, such as movie watching. Compared to citizens who did not engage in ritual behaviors, the mean value of leisure behaviors among ritual participants increased by approximately 9%, with a significance level of 0.05.

Table 4. Religious rituals and citizens' goal and behavior adjustment.

	Confidence in Class Mobility		Continuous Learning Behaviors		Watching Movies Outside	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Gender (male = 1)	0.07 (0.06)	0.05 (0.06)	0.05 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)	−0.04 (0.03)	−0.04 (0.03)
Age	−0.03 *** (0.00)	−0.04 *** (0.00)	−0.01 *** (0.00)	−0.01 *** (0.00)	−0.02 *** (0.00)	−0.02 *** (0.00)
Education	−0.02 * (0.01)	−0.02 * (0.01)	0.16 *** (0.01)	0.16 *** (0.01)	0.08 *** (0.01)	0.08 *** (0.01)
Income	−0.05 (0.03)	−0.04 (0.03)	0.10 *** (0.02)	0.11 *** (0.02)	0.06 *** (0.02)	0.06 *** (0.02)
Religious belief (yes = 1)	−0.04 (0.10)	−0.04 (0.10)	0.01 (0.07)	0.01 (0.07)	−0.09 (0.06)	−0.10 (0.06)
Ancestral worship (yes = 1)	−0.15 ** (0.07)	—	0.07 (0.05)	—	0.09 * (0.04)	—
Praying for good luck (yes = 1)	0.22 *** (0.06)	—	0.07 (0.05)	—	0.09* (0.04)	—
Ancestral worship (ordinal)	—	−0.02 (0.03)	—	0.05 * (0.02)	—	0.01 (0.02)
Praying for good luck (ordinal)	—	0.09 * (0.04)	—	0.04 (0.03)	—	0.05 * (0.02)
Intercept	2.65 *** (0.17)	2.62 *** (0.16)	1.41 *** (0.11)	1.42 *** (0.11)	2.30 *** (0.09)	2.35 *** (0.09)
R^2	0.09	0.09	0.33	0.33	0.28	0.28
Sample size	1950	1950	1950	1950	1950	1950

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

To summarize, religious rituals did have effects of adjustment on citizens' goals and behaviors. But different rituals produced slightly different specific effects. In reality, citizens created a variety of rituals to fulfill their spiritual healing according to their life needs. Some interview cases also support the above findings. For example, one respondent said: "Praying to Buddha requires sincerity for it to be effective, so I try my best to maintain sincerity towards Buddha and my own heart, hoping that Buddha will bless me more. After praying, I feel a sense of inner peace and no longer feel so restless. It feels like the things I hope for have a psychological anchor, a form of mental support. The pressure I feel lightens, and I am able to face the challenges or difficulties I encounter with greater calmness and confidence." (Interviewee YS08, 15 March 2025.) The respondent mentioned the confidence to cope with problems, which not only alleviates negative emotions but also serves the function of adjusting goals and behaviors. Hypothesis 2 was largely supported.

4.2.3. The Social Inclusion Function of Rituals

As shown in Table 5, religious rituals contributed to increasing citizens' social integration cognition and behaviors, but the healing functions of different types of rituals varied slightly. Social integration cognition primarily referred to an individual's perception or belief in maintaining good relationships with others and avoiding conflicts.

Table 5. Religious rituals and social inclusion of citizens.

	Inclusion Perception		Friends' Gathering	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Gender (male = 1)	0.11 (0.07)	0.12 (0.07)	0.06 (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)
Age	0.01 *** (0.00)	0.01 *** (0.00)	−0.01 *** (0.00)	−0.01 *** (0.00)
Education	−0.04 *** (0.01)	−0.04 *** (0.01)	0.04 *** (0.01)	0.04 *** (0.01)
Income	−0.06 (0.04)	−0.06 (0.01)	0.07 *** (0.02)	0.07 *** (0.02)
Religious belief (yes = 1)	0.16 (0.12)	0.14 (0.11)	−0.05 (0.06)	−0.06 (0.06)
Ancestral worship (yes = 1)	0.04 (0.08)	—	0.16 *** (0.04)	—
Praying for good luck (yes = 1)	0.14 * (0.17)	—	0.08 * (0.04)	—
Ancestral worship (ordinal)	—	0.00 (0.03)	—	0.07 *** (0.02)
Praying for good luck (ordinal)	—	0.09 * (0.04)	—	0.06 * (0.02)
Intercept	4.00 *** (0.19)	4.02 (0.18)	2.63 *** (0.10)	2.67 *** (0.10)
R^2	0.04	0.04	0.09	0.09
Sample size	1950	1950	1950	1950

Note: Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Models 1 and 2 showed that ancestral worship had no significant correlation on citizens' social inclusion cognition, but a significant correlation coefficient on praying for good luck. Compared to urban residents who did not use prayer for good luck rituals, those with ritual experience showed an increase in their non-complaining attitude or inclusion perceptions mean value. In the ordinal variable model, for each unit increase in the frequency of the praying for good luck ritual, citizens' social integration cognition increased by approximately 9%. On the other hand, both rituals examined in this study significantly increased the probability of citizens participating in social gatherings with friends. When the value of the ritual variables changed from 0 to 1, the average score for social gathering behaviors increased respectively by 0.16 and 0.08 units (Model 3). The ordinal variable correlation coefficients in Model 4 were also significant. It could be seen that individualized rituals were conducive to promoting residents' social inclusion. Hypotheses 3.1 and 3.2 were supported.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

In a world where traditions continuously evolve and personal needs reshape ancient practices, what changes occur in rituals? This paper uses China as a case study to explore how rituals are reshaped by the living environment and the needs of daily life in a rapidly changing society. By incorporating factors from the macro, meso, and micro levels, this paper thoroughly discussed the phenomenon of individualized religious rituals in a mobile society and their unique healing functions. The findings push the boundaries of existing research in the following areas. First, this study offers valuable insights for a more com-

prehensive understanding of the fundamental concepts and developmental characteristics of religious rituals. Existing research suggested that rituals must be predefined, formal, or repeated. We contend that the assumption of widespread participation in communal rituals, as implied by this definition, is invalid in a context of rapid social mobility. Modern China is undergoing a trend of rapid urbanization, industrial development with involution, and very high individual mobility. These factors create a favorable environment for individuals to develop rituals that cater to their emotional needs. Therefore, rituals can be spontaneous, diversified, and tailored to the needs of individual lives. Second, it helps expand our understanding of the functions of rituals. In the latest socio-psychological paradigm for interpreting the functions of rituals, scholars have generally focused on their psychological healing effects on individuals. However, existing research has primarily equated healing with anxiety relief. Based on the unique social context of China, we argue that the healing function of rituals extends beyond the management of negative emotions. Rituals also foster positive attitudes, facilitate behavioral adjustments among citizens, and enhance individuals' social inclusion. In other words, in the context of increasing individualization, rituals serve to reduce social conflicts and strengthen social cohesion. Third, this paper adopts a quantitative analytical approach. Compared to mainstream ethnographic research, its conclusions may have higher external validity.

We also recognize certain limitations of this study and plan to conduct a more in-depth exploration in future research. For example, due to data limitations, this paper focuses only on two common religious rituals: ancestral worship and praying for good luck. However, ritual practices among Chinese citizens are far more diverse. We argue that these rituals are not strongly linked to religious beliefs but rather stem from citizens' diverse healing needs. As a result, the specific functions and contexts of each ritual vary. As China continues to urbanize and individual mobility accelerates, rituals will likely evolve in even more unexpected ways. This study is just the beginning of understanding how personal traditions shape, and are shaped by, a rapidly shifting world. To provide a more nuanced understanding of the rich and diverse landscape of individualized religious rituals, more in-depth ethnographic research is needed. It is hoped that future scholars will devote greater attention to unique cases like China, contributing to the ongoing innovation in ritual studies.

Note

1   Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China website: '150 million rural migrants have settled in cities since 2014', at: https://www.gov.cn/lianbo/bumen/202408/content_6970852.html, accessed on 21 January 2025.

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