



BUDDHIST CAUSALITY AND THE FORTUNE-TELLING PRACTICES IN URBAN CHINA: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY OF KARMA–VIPĀKA INTEGRATION IN DIVINATORY DISCOURSE

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Abstract:

This article examines how Mahāyāna Buddhist causality—specifically, the triadic concepts of karma, vipāka, and pratīyasamutpāda—is operationalized within the symbolic and discursive systems of contemporary Chinese fortune-telling. Drawing on textual analysis, semi-structured interviews with fifteen diviners, a quantitative survey of 278 clients, and longitudinal case studies, this study proposes a five-layer "divination–causality integration model." Findings demonstrate that Buddhist karmic logic, especially the "cause–condition–result" schema, is embedded in both interpretive frameworks and ritual interventions. Clients' endorsement of karmic beliefs correlates with improved emotional adjustment, more transparent decision-making, and more ethical conduct. This research contributes to the sociology of religion, psychological anthropology, and contemporary Buddhist studies by revealing how doctrinal teachings are reframed as therapeutic tools in late-modern Chinese society. The study further recommends incorporating Buddhist causal reasoning into culturally grounded mental health interventions and digital divinatory technologies.

Keywords: *Mahāyāna Buddhism; Karma–vipāka; Divination; Therapeutic Culture; Cognitive Reframing; Religious Modernization; Chinese Urban Religiosity*

INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly transforming sociocultural milieu of contemporary China, fortune-telling—long regarded as part of the country's intangible heritage—is experiencing a remarkable resurgence. Urban professionals, migrants, entrepreneurs, and students alike increasingly consult practitioners of Bāzì (Eight Trigrams), Zi-wēi Dou Shu (Purple Star Astrology), and Qí Mén Dùn Jiǎ to seek guidance on matters ranging from employment to emotional turmoil. Once labeled "superstitious" under state secularism, these practices have been re-legitimized through their therapeutic utility and cultural symbolism, particularly among populations facing complex life decisions and socio-emotional precarity (Yang, 2011; Tian, 2016).

Amid this revival, Mahāyāna Buddhist causality—anchored in the doctrines of karma (intentional action), vipāka (resultant fruition), and pratīyasamutpāda (dependent origination)—has come to occupy a striking discursive and ritual role within fortune-telling encounters. Clients are routinely

advised not only to time their decisions "auspiciously," but also to engage in karmic remediation through sutra recitation, merit dedication, and life-release practices. Diviners increasingly frame misfortune as the result of unwholesome past actions (yèzhàng), and offer Buddhist-inflected pathways for "fate alteration" (gǎi yùn) rooted in the transformation of mind and behavior. This fusion is neither doctrinally orthodox nor entirely folkloric; rather, it constitutes a new hybrid religiosity in which Buddhist moral psychology is recontextualized through esoteric cosmology and consumer spirituality (Albustomi, 2025).

Despite growing scholarly attention to the therapeutic turn in contemporary Chinese religiosity (Chandler, 2021; Luhrmann, 2012), systematic studies of how Mahāyāna karmic doctrine is adapted within the divinatory economy remain rare. Existing literature tends to compartmentalize either the doctrinal structure of Buddhist causality (Harvey, 2013; Williams, 2009) or the symbolic logic of divinatory arts (Wang & Liang, 2009; Liu, 2015). Meanwhile, the increasing role of diviners as "moral consultants" and "folk psychologists" who translate Buddhist ethics into pragmatic advice for managing career, relationships, and health has yet to be thoroughly theorized or empirically grounded.

This study seeks to fill that gap by asking: how is Mahāyāna Buddhist causality—particularly the "cause–condition–result" schema—refracted through the ritual, discursive, and symbolic systems of contemporary Chinese fortune-telling? In what ways do practitioners and clients co-construct meaning through karmic narratives? Moreover, how does belief in karma–vipāka affect clients' psychological adjustment and ethical self-regulation?

To answer these questions, we conducted a mixed-methods study that integrates textual analysis of canonical Buddhist and astrological materials, semi-structured interviews with fifteen professional diviners, a survey of 278 clients using a causal belief scale, and longitudinal case studies of ten individuals who demonstrated significant engagement with karmic reasoning. The findings reveal a five-stage "divination–causality integration model" in which Buddhist concepts are ritualized, symbolized, and internalized in ways that blur the boundaries between religion, psychology, and folk cosmology.

By analyzing the empirical appropriation of karma in contemporary divination, this study contributes to three interlinked domains: (1) it advances Buddhist studies by illuminating how core Mahāyāna concepts are pragmatically adapted in lived religion; (2) it contributes to the sociology of religion by demonstrating how sacred logics are mobilized in secular contexts to address uncertainty and stress; and (3) it extends the psychological anthropology of belief by analyzing how causal narratives enable cognitive reframing and therapeutic benefit.

In short, the study argues that the reinterpretation of Buddhist causality within urban Chinese fortune-telling functions not merely as a survival of religious tradition but as a dynamic system of cultural cognition, moral narration, and emotional resilience. These hybrid practices, while often overlooked or dismissed as marginal, offer a valuable lens through which to understand the evolving role of religion in contemporary Chinese society—and the enduring relevance of karmic reasoning in the global therapeutic era.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a triangulated theoretical framework that synthesizes doctrinal, performative, and psychological perspectives to understand how

Mahāyāna Buddhist causality is embedded, reframed, and operationalized within the symbolic and ritual systems of contemporary Chinese fortune-telling. The three interlinked pillars are (1) Buddhist Causal Doctrine as Moral Ontology, (2) Ritual and Symbolic Mediation in Divinatory Practice, and (3) Karma as Therapeutic Logic in the Age of Psychologized Religion.

Mahāyāna Causality as Moral Ontology and Doctrinal Infrastructure

At the core of Mahāyāna Buddhist thought lies a robust ethical cosmology built upon the triadic logic of karma (intentional action), its result (*vipāka*), and *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination). This triad articulates the moral structure of reality: actions driven by volition produce corresponding effects, not merely in this lifetime but across past and future existences. Importantly, Mahāyāna traditions emphasize the malleability of karmic outcomes—through confession, merit-making, and bodhicitta-driven transformation, individuals can remediate past deeds and actively shape future conditions (Harvey, 2013; Azhongrong, 2010).

In Chinese Mahāyāna contexts, this framework has long interacted with Confucian and Daoist cosmologies, resulting in a hybridized karmic logic that is both ethical and cosmographic. Scholars such as Zhang (2016) and Cui (2020) argue that karma is no longer viewed solely as a metaphysical postulate but as a practical, psychological, and pedagogical tool. In the urban divinatory setting, this doctrinal infrastructure is not discarded but tactically simplified and selectively applied to interpret astrological patterns, behavioral tendencies, and emotional afflictions.

The present study builds on this doctrinal pillar by examining how karmic principles are translated into the interpretive lexicons of diviners. It also explores how diviners selectively invoke Buddhist causal terms—such as "karmic obstacles" (*yè zhàng*), "past-life debts," and "merit transfer"—to frame client dilemmas and propose actionable remediation strategies. These concepts are not deployed in abstract theological terms but are embodied in ritual scripts and symbolically encoded through astrological diagnoses.

Ritual and Symbolic Mediation: Divination as Performative Theology

Building on symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1959) and ritual theory (Bell, 1992; Knott, 2005), the second pillar views fortune-telling as a performative and symbolic process in which religious ideas are ritualized, translated, and co-constructed in interactional settings. Rather than treating divination as a static body of knowledge, this approach emphasizes its ritual efficacy, semiotic density, and relational dramaturgy.

In these consultations, Buddhist causality is enacted through multiple channels: the manipulation of charts and symbols, the vocalization of karmic diagnoses, and the prescription of ritual acts (e.g., merit dedication, sutra recitation, or vegetarian vows). These ritualized enactments serve to frame clients' experiences within a moral-theological narrative while simultaneously producing affective and cognitive shifts.

Crucially, the performative aspect of divination enables the embodied transmission of doctrinal teachings. When a diviner explains that "the clash of Fire and Metal in your chart signifies past-life violence," they are not merely offering abstract advice—they are initiating a symbolic dramatization of karma. This dramatization creates a liminal space wherein the client reinterprets life events as meaningful, ethically grounded, and transformable. Such ritualized meaning-making underscores Catherine Bell's (1992) insight that rituals do not

merely represent beliefs; they produce them through practice.

This pillar also facilitates our methodological emphasis on participant observation and discourse analysis, enabling us to examine how meaning is constructed through gesture, space, semiotic choice, and ritual interaction—particularly in consultations where karmic reasoning plays a central role.

Karma as Therapeutic Logic: Cognitive Reframing and Spiritualized Coping

The third pillar situates the application of Buddhist causality within the growing scholarly discourse on therapeutic religion and religious coping. As Luhrmann (2012) and Pargament (1997) have demonstrated, religious beliefs often serve not merely as doctrines to be accepted, but as affective and interpretive frameworks for managing psychological challenges. In this context, karma-vipāka serves as a vernacular theory of mind that supports explanatory control, cognitive reframing, and behavioral activation.

In contemporary China, where rapid urbanization and moral dislocation have led to what some scholars term "emotional precarity" (Kleinman & Zhang, 2006), belief in karmic causality allows individuals to reinterpret suffering not as arbitrary injustice but as the result of past causes, thereby transforming passive anxiety into purposeful action. This enables a shift from fatalism to agency: instead of resigning to misfortune, clients are encouraged to accumulate merit, purify karma, and proactively re-align with cosmic and ethical order.

Empirical studies support this psychological efficacy. Rong (2023) finds that high endorsement of Buddhist causal beliefs correlates with reduced symptoms of depression and increased post-traumatic growth among urban clients. Likewise, our findings suggest that karmic logic helps clients reframe existential crises, such as illness or career setbacks, as ethically interpretable and remediable, thereby offering both moral meaning and emotional relief.

This third pillar also intersects with contemporary research on spiritual but not religious practices, the commercialization of wellness, and digital religion. Many diviners in our study have adapted their karmic advice into "micro-practices" such as app-guided chanting, e-donations for animal release, and QR code-enabled merit transfers. These innovations show how Buddhist karmic logic is being embedded into emerging regimes of self-care, digital therapy, and moral entrepreneurship.

Together, these three theoretical pillars provide a comprehensive interpretive frame that connects Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine, ritual-symbolic practice, and therapeutic function. They allow us to analyze not only what karma means in contemporary Chinese divination, but also how it is performed, why it resonates, and what sociopsychological work it does in an era marked by uncertainty, pluralism, and self-cultivation.

To systematically investigate how Mahāyāna Buddhist causality is embedded in and operationalized through contemporary Chinese fortune-telling practices, this study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative components. The research was guided by the interpretive logic of doctrinal translation, ritual-symbolic interaction, and therapeutic belief performance, as outlined in our tripartite theoretical framework.

The methodological approach unfolded across four interrelated phases:

1) Textual Analysis of Buddhist scriptures and Chinese divinatory manuals to trace conceptual overlaps and terminological migration.

- 2) Semi-structured interviews with professional diviners to examine how karmic concepts are embedded in consultation discourse.
 - 3) Survey of Clients to quantitatively measure belief in karma–vipāka and its correlation with decision-making and psychological outcomes.
 - 4) Longitudinal Case Studies to document how clients internalize karmic teachings and apply them across time in response to life crises.
- Together, these components formed a cumulative research spiral, where each layer informed the next, and theoretical insights were iteratively tested against lived realities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Phase I: Doctrinal and Textual Analysis

This phase addressed the first theoretical pillar—Mahāyāna causality as moral ontology—by examining how Buddhist causal doctrines are conceptually translated into divinatory discourse.

- 1) Sources: Mahāyāna scriptures (*Lotus Sūtra*, *Awakening of Faith*, *Abhidharma-samgraha*), along with popular Chinese astrological texts (*Zi-wēi Dou Shu Lecture Manual*, *Compendium of Qí Mén Dùn Jiǎ*).
- 2) Method: Intertextual analysis and semantic mapping were employed to trace how doctrinal concepts, such as "karmic obstacle" (yè zhàng), "merit transfer" (huì xiàng), and "dependent origination," were adapted into esoteric terminology and ritual prescriptions.
- 3) Outcome: Established a lexicon of high-frequency doctrinal terms and their modified meanings in the divinatory field (e.g., "evil stars" as karmic residues; "remediation" as ritual karma modification).

Phase II: Semi-Structured Interviews with Diviners

This phase explored the second pillar—ritual and symbolic mediation—by analyzing how karmic concepts were performed, narrated, and enacted during fortune-telling consultations.

- 1) Sample: 15 professional diviners across Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, selected via snowball sampling to ensure diversity in lineage (secular, Daoist-Buddhist, temple-affiliated).
- 2) Interview Duration: Each session lasted 60–90 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent.
- 3) Core Questions:
 - a. How do you understand and use the concept of karma in your readings?
 - b. What Buddhist teachings, if any, do you incorporate?
 - c. Can you recall a case where karmic logic significantly impacted a client's choice?
- 4) Analytical Techniques:
 - a. Thematic coding via NVivo 12.
 - b. Discourse function analysis to categorize utterances as Explanatory, Ethical, Ritual, Prescriptive, or Emotional Supportive.
 - c. Frame analysis to identify dominant interpretive schemas (e.g., karma as "debt," "stain," "energy").
- 5) Findings: The interview data revealed that Buddhist causality is often embedded in symbolic narratives and ritual instructions. Practitioners employed doctrinal references both to establish authority and to facilitate ethical and emotional transformation.

Phase III: Quantitative Survey of Clients

To operationalize the **third pillar**—karma as therapeutic logic—we conducted a quantitative survey with clients of diviners to measure how belief in karmic causality influenced behavior and psychological outcomes.

- 1) Participants: 278 clients (aged 21–55), each of whom had engaged in at least three consultations with professional diviners.
- 2) Instrument: A two-part questionnaire composed of:
 - a. Causal Belief Scale (15 items): Adapted from Rong (2023), measuring agreement with propositions such as "My misfortunes are the result of past karma" and "Good deeds can transform future destiny" ($\alpha = 0.82$).
 - b. Life Decision and Coping Inventory (30 items): Including behavioral practices (e.g., chanting, ritual acts), decision confidence, anxiety levels (GAD-7), and emotional resilience (CD-RISC-10).
- 3) Data Analysis:
 - a. Correlation and regression models using SPSS.
 - b. Group comparison (high vs. low belief) using t-tests.
 - c. Mediation analysis exploring the role of karmic belief in anxiety reduction through ritual engagement.
- 4) Key Results:
 - a. Higher causal belief scores positively correlated with higher decision clarity ($r = 0.44$, $p < .01$) and lower anxiety ($r = -0.39$, $p < .01$).
 - b. Regression analysis showed belief in karmic malleability predicted ritual engagement and self-reported post-crisis growth ($\beta = 0.51$, $p < .001$).

Phase IV: Longitudinal Case Studies

To capture the dynamic process of doctrinal internalization and behavioral transformation, we tracked 10 clients over three months following their consultations.

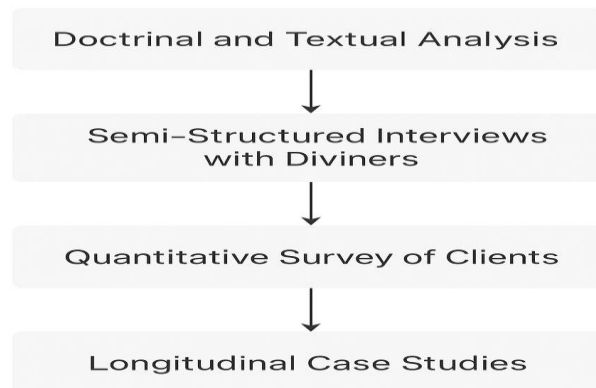
- 1) Data Collection:
 - a. Initial in-depth interview.
 - b. Monthly follow-up interviews (or reflective diaries).
 - c. Observations of participation in rituals, Buddhist classes, or digital karma-related platforms.
- 2) Analytical Framework:
 - a. Tracked progression through a five-step model:
 - Symbolic diagnosis of karmic issue
 - Ritual or ethical prescription
 - Emotional relief and meaning reconstruction
 - Internalization of causal logic
 - Behavioral modification (e.g., regular chanting, donation, vow-keeping)
- 3) Illustrative Case: A 24-year-old client initially consulted for job anxiety. After undergoing karmic framing and daily chanting of the Prajñāpāramitā, she reported reduced anxiety and a reframing of career setbacks as opportunities for merit-building, which ultimately led to her securing a publishing role.

Ethical Considerations and Validity

- 1) Ethics:

- a. Informed consent was obtained for all interviews and surveys.
 - b. Sensitive content (e.g., trauma, death prognoses) was anonymized and cross-validated with participants.
- 2) Reliability and Validity:
- a. Triangulation across four data streams ensured internal coherence.
 - b. Member checking was employed during case-study write-ups.
 - c. The causal belief instrument was pilot-tested and demonstrated internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.80$).

Methodology



By integrating textual, ethnographic, survey, and longitudinal methods, this study offers a robust empirical scaffold for understanding how Mahāyāna Buddhist causality is adapted in modern divination. Each methodological phase aligns with a specific theoretical pillar, enabling an analysis that is both doctrinally grounded and psychologically salient.

FINDINGS

This section presents the core findings derived from the four-phase mixed-methods design, structured around the three theoretical pillars: Buddhist causality as doctrinal ontology, ritual-symbolic interaction, and therapeutic logic. The data are interpreted across four thematic dimensions: doctrinal embedding, ritual translation, therapeutic benefit, and longitudinal transformation.

Doctrinal Embedding in Divinatory Lexicons

Qualitative analysis of divinatory manuals and interviews revealed a recurring integration of Mahāyāna Buddhist terminology and cosmology within the interpretive language of contemporary Chinese fortune-telling. The following key doctrinal terms appeared consistently across practitioner discourse:

- 1) 業障 (yè zhàng) – karmic obstacle
- 2) 福報藏 (fú bào cáng) – karmic merit store
- 3) 回向 (huì xiàng) – merit dedication
- 4) 緣起 (yuán qǐ) – dependent origination

Diviners mapped these Buddhist concepts onto technical elements of Chinese astrology. For instance, the presence of *Po-jun* (破軍) in a client's *Zi-wēi Dou Shu* chart was routinely interpreted as a karmic residue from transgressions in past lives, necessitating ritual correction. A typical interpretive pattern emerged: symbolic indicators in charts were re-coded as evidence of karmic

burdens, allowing practitioners to morally reframe the client's life circumstances through Buddhist ethical discourse.

"When the Robbery Star clashes with the Wealth Line, I read it as karma from past-life exploitation—you must make offerings to rebalance it." —Diviner from Guangzhou

This strategy reflects the doctrinal scaffolding through which cosmological diagnostics are aligned with moral causality, offering both interpretive coherence and ritual motivation.

Ritual-Symbolic Translation in Practice

Fieldwork observations and interviews confirmed that the use of karmic logic extended beyond explanatory discourse into structured ritual practice. Buddhist causal reasoning was translated into symbolic ritual actions through three primary modalities:

- 1) Symbolic Codification
 - a. *Wife Wealth Line in Void* → "Relationship karma delayed due to past betrayal"
 - b. *Three Harm Stars* → "Indicative of karmic residues from violating precepts"
- 2) Ritual Prescription
 - a. Scriptural recitation: Clients were advised to chant the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Prajñāpāramitā*, or *Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva Sūtra*.
 - b. Merit-making: Acts included releasing captive animals, lighting butter lamps, and making temple donations.
 - c. Technologized karma transfer: QR-code-linked donations to monastic foundations were encouraged as a modern form of karmic purification.
- 3) Ceremonial Integration

Some diviners offered bundled services, including a chart reading followed by a karmic diagnosis and co-ritual participation (e.g., attending a 7-day repentance retreat at a nearby temple). Such hybrid performances blurred the line between popular religion and formalized Buddhist ritual, reinforcing the embodied transmission of doctrinal values.

Karma as Therapeutic Logic: Statistical Evidence

Quantitative survey data from 278 clients confirmed the psychological and behavioral significance of karmic belief in the fortune-telling context. Two primary relationships emerged: (1) between karmic belief and decision-making confidence, and (2) between karmic belief and emotional adjustment.

Causal Belief and Decision-Making Confidence

Clients who scored high on the Causal Belief Scale (≥ 4.0 on a 5-point Likert scale) reported significantly greater clarity and confidence in making life decisions. Their choices—ranging from career moves to relationship decisions—were often shaped by ritual timing and karmic remediation strategies.

Table 1 below summarizes the comparative results:

Table 1: Decision Confidence by Belief Group

Group		Mean Confidence	Decision Sample Size	p-value
High (≥ 4.0)	Belief	4.33	163	< 0.01
Low (< 4.0)	Belief	3.21	115	< 0.01

The statistical difference supports the proposition that karmic logic

provides a moral-psychological framework for decision-making under uncertainty.

Karma and Emotional Adjustment

Belief in the modifiability of karma also correlated with key psychological outcomes. Clients with stronger karmic beliefs demonstrated lower levels of anxiety and higher emotional resilience.

Table 4.3.2 illustrates the correlation coefficients between karmic belief and two psychological indices:

Table 2: Correlation between Karmic Belief and Psychological Indicators

Psychological Variable	Correlation (r)	p-value
Anxiety (GAD-7)	−0.39	< 0.01
Emotional Resilience (CD-RISC)	+0.42	< 0.01

Regression analysis controlling for demographic variables found that belief in karma's transformability (e.g., through good deeds) was a significant predictor of emotional well-being ($\beta = 0.51, p < 0.001$).

These findings suggest that karmic reasoning operates as an indigenous mode of psychological reframing, enabling individuals to recontextualize suffering while also prompting ethically oriented action.

Longitudinal Transformation: Case Studies

A three-month longitudinal study of ten clients further validated the adaptive effects of karmic belief. All participants entered the study with acute life stress (e.g., job loss, illness, divorce) and engaged with karmic reframing through both discursive consultation and ritual practice.

Stages of Karmic Reframing

- A patterned five-stage transformation emerged:
- 1) Crisis: Initial distress (existential, economic, or emotional)
 - 2) Karmic Diagnosis: Interpretation of misfortune through past deeds
 - 3) Ritual Prescription: Merit-making or repentance practices
 - 4) Narrative Reframing: Acceptance of suffering as "purification"
 - 5) Behavioral Shift: Pro-social, precept-aligned actions (e.g., vegetarianism, volunteerism)

Illustrative Case: Mr. Zhou

Mr. Zhou, a retired businessman diagnosed with stage-three lung cancer, consulted a diviner who diagnosed "killing karma" from unethical business practices. He was instructed to recite the *88-Buddhas Repentance Sutra*, become a vegetarian, and donate to animal sanctuaries.

Three months later, Mr. Zhou reported:
"Even if I die, I have settled my karma. My fear is gone."

His GAD-7 anxiety score dropped from 15 to 8. He continued his daily chanting and donation routine beyond the study period. The case illustrates how karmic belief—when ritualized and narrativized—can lead to both cognitive and affective resolution.

Table 3: Summary of Findings

Dimension	Empirical Insight
Doctrinal Embedding	Mahāyāna causal concepts are semantically integrated into astrological interpretation.

Dimension	Empirical Insight
Ritual Translation	Karmic framing is enacted through chanting, merit-making, and the fusion of technology and ritual.
Therapeutic Benefit	High karmic belief predicts greater decision confidence and emotional stability.
Narrative Transformation	Clients adopt karmic narratives to reframe crises and guide ethical behavioral change.

These findings collectively affirm the study's central thesis: Mahāyāna Buddhist causality is neither obsolete nor merely canonical—it is actively translated, performed, and internalized in contemporary Chinese divinatory practice as a tool for moral reasoning, symbolic action, and emotional resilience. Karma, in this context, becomes a psychospiritual technology embedded in the lived negotiation of fate and selfhood in a rapidly modernizing society.

The empirical findings presented in this study demonstrate that Mahāyāna Buddhist causality is neither an abstract doctrine nor obsolete metaphysics—it is a living interpretive framework, symbolically integrated and pragmatically enacted in the domain of contemporary Chinese fortune-telling. This section discusses the theoretical implications of this integration across three disciplinary dimensions: (1) Buddhist Studies and lived doctrine, (2) Religious Sociology and ritual hybridity, and (3) Psychological Anthropology and therapeutic religiosity.

Implications for Buddhist Studies: Lived Karma and Doctrinal Adaptation

Within the field of Buddhist Studies, the question of how classical doctrines are reframed and redeployed in contemporary settings has gained growing importance. While Mahāyāna teachings on karma, vipāka, and pratīyasamutpāda have long been studied as theological concepts (Williams, 2009; Harvey, 2013), this study shows how they are actively lived, negotiated, and reinterpreted in the moral economy of everyday life.

The finding that Buddhist causal terms are integrated into the lexicons of *Bāzì* and *Zi-wēi Dou Shu* charts illustrates what Berkwitz (2006) calls the vernacularization of doctrine—the localization of canonical teachings through cultural and linguistic adaptation. Rather than treating karma as an abstract, metaphysical concept, diviners reframe it as a practical tool for ethical diagnosis and life management (Samsul, 2025). This resonates with Peter Harvey's (2013) insight that karma in the Mahāyāna is often pedagogical, serving as a means to direct attention to intention, volition, and ethical reform.

More importantly, the study challenges rigid dichotomies between "orthodox Buddhism" and "folk religion." The diviners in this study draw from Mahāyāna scriptures, ritual manuals, and temple affiliations, indicating that karmic discourse functions as a doctrinally anchored yet ritually fluid system. In this sense, the findings contribute to an emerging body of work that treats Buddhist doctrinal principles as performative resources in modern religious economies (Gleig & Winton, 2018).

Implications for Religious Sociology: Hybrid Ritual Forms and Moral Symbolism

In the sociology of religion, our findings support the turn toward lived religion (Ammerman, 2014) and the symbolic interactionist view of ritual as a space of co-constructed meaning (Goffman, 1959; Bell, 1992). The use of karmic explanations in Chinese fortune-telling is not merely a throwback to superstition,

but a complex interactional performance wherein the diviner and client jointly construct narratives of causality, responsibility, and redemptive action.

This ritual-symbolic translation functions on several levels:

- 1) Cosmological: Karma bridges Buddhist metaphysics and Chinese astrology.
- 2) Semiotic: Symbolic elements like stars and elements are re-coded through moral language.
- 3) Ritual: Prescriptive actions, such as chanting and merit-making, fuse doctrinal and folk practices.

These findings align with Knott's (2005) spatial theory of religion, where the divination room becomes a sacralized space in which fate is not only predicted but also ethically negotiated. It also extends Orsi's (2011) notion of *abundant religion*, in which religious practices spill beyond institutional borders and become embedded in the routines of ordinary life.

Notably, the ceremonial integration of QR-code merit-making and digital karma apps speaks to the technologization of religion, aligning with Campbell's (2017) analysis of "networked religion." Such developments mark a new phase in ritual hybridity, where Buddhist ethics are both commodified and sacralized through mobile interfaces.

Implications for Psychological Anthropology: Karma as Cognitive and Affective Technology

From the vantage point of psychological anthropology, the data reveal that karma functions as both a cognitive schema and an affective regulator. Clients who internalize karmic narratives tend to exhibit enhanced emotional regulation, resilience, and decision-making capacity. These patterns align with Pargament's (1997) theory of religious coping, which posits that belief systems provide interpretive frames to manage stress, assign meaning, and guide behavioral adaptation (Adhinugraha et al., 2024).

Our five-stage model of karmic internalization closely mirrors what Luhmann (2012) describes as interpretive drift—the process by which repeated exposure to ritual and narrative gradually reshapes perception and emotional response. Clients in this study reframed personal crisis (e.g., illness, divorce) as karmic purification, often reporting increased peace, moral clarity, and agency.

In contrast to Western therapeutic models that emphasize individual autonomy, karmic logic promotes a relational ethics grounded in moral cause and interdependence. This distinction is crucial: karma provides not only self-explanation, but also ethical accountability to others and to one's own past and future selves.

The therapeutic efficacy of karmic belief suggests that Buddhist causality may serve as an indigenous psychological resource that is culturally congruent and emotionally resonant. As such, this study adds to growing calls for culturally sensitive mental health frameworks that integrate local cosmologies and spiritual practices (Kleinman, 2006; Kohrt & Hruschka, 2010).

Toward an Integrative Perspective: Karma as a Psychosocial Technology

Taken together, the findings suggest that karma is not merely a religious concept, but a psychosocial technology. This symbolic system helps individuals make sense of adversity, enact ethical repair, and transform uncertainty into actionable guidance. This integrative role of karma blurs disciplinary boundaries, calling for a new analytical vocabulary.

Function of Karma	Theoretical Frame	Empirical Expression
Doctrinal	Buddhist Studies	Karma as causality, merit, purification
Ritual-symbolic	Religious Sociology	Astrological mapping, ritual prescriptions
Therapeutic-cognitive	Psychological Anthropology	Reframing crises, reducing anxiety, improving agency

In this light, the karma–divination nexus exemplifies the adaptive plasticity of religious traditions in modernity, where ancient teachings are recomposed to meet the emotional, existential, and ethical demands of contemporary life.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Main Arguments

This study has investigated how Mahāyāna Buddhist causality—particularly the triadic principles of karma, vipāka, and pratīyasamutpāda—is reinterpreted, ritualized, and therapeutically enacted within the symbolic world of contemporary Chinese fortune-telling. By applying a triangulated theoretical framework that integrates Buddhist doctrinal analysis, ritual-symbolic interactionism, and psychological anthropology, the study demonstrated the following key findings:

- 1) Doctrinal Embedding: Buddhist causal concepts are actively incorporated into divinatory discourse, functioning as both interpretive and ethical anchors.
- 2) Ritual Translation: Karma-vipāka is transformed into ritual scripts that guide clients toward merit-making, repentance, and self-regulation.
- 3) Therapeutic Impact: Belief in karmic logic is associated with increased emotional resilience, enhanced decision-making confidence, and improved behavioral adaptation.
- 4) Transformational Trajectories: Clients undergoing divination engage in cognitive reframing and moral recalibration through immersion in narrative and ritual.

Together, these insights affirm the central thesis that Mahāyāna causality, far from being confined to temples or canonical study, functions as a living, vernacularized, and psychospiritually adaptive framework in the Chinese cultural-religious landscape.

Scholarly Contributions

This study makes substantive contributions to three intersecting academic fields:

- 1) Buddhist Studies

By documenting how canonical concepts are pragmatically adapted in contemporary life, this study advances the field's engagement with *lived Buddhism*. It provides empirical evidence for the fluidity of doctrinal meanings in modern urban settings and illustrates how Buddhist causality operates outside the monastery, within hybrid, non-monastic ritual economies.

- 2) Religious Sociology

The study expands the analytical lens on ritual hybridity, showing how divination practices are embedded in networks of popular religion, institutional Buddhism,

digital technology, and moral discourse. It confirms and extends theories of *lived religion*, *ritual performance*, and *networked sacrality* by illustrating how karma becomes a shared symbolic currency among practitioners and clients.

3) Psychological Anthropology

This research demonstrates that karmic belief serves as a culturally specific cognitive-emotional tool, enabling individuals to process suffering, make sense of adversity, and pursue ethical self-cultivation. By identifying karma as a form of *indigenous psychological technology*, the study contributes to the comparative understanding of culturally embedded mental health resources.

Practical and Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study carry several broader implications:

1) For Religious and Cultural Policy

The integration of Mahāyāna causality into folk divinatory systems challenges rigid classifications between "superstition" and "religion." Policymakers and cultural heritage organizations should acknowledge the role of these practices in offering psychosocial support and ethical guidance, particularly in settings where access to formal mental health care is limited.

2) For Psychospiritual Care and Counseling

Therapists, spiritual counselors, and social workers operating in Chinese or East Asian contexts should consider the therapeutic function of karmic belief systems. Rather than pathologizing religious causality, it may be leveraged in culturally congruent ways to enhance resilience, behavioral insight, and emotional well-being.

3) For Theorizing Religion and Modernity

This study advocates for a shift beyond binary models of tradition versus modernity. The karma–divination nexus exemplifies how ancient religious epistemologies are not simply surviving but are being re-coded, ritualized, and digitized in ways that respond to contemporary existential needs.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study is methodologically robust and theoretically grounded, it remains bounded by certain limitations:

- 1) **Geographical Scope:** The data are drawn from urban centers (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou); rural practices or diaspora contexts may reveal distinct dynamics.
- 2) **Gendered Dynamics:** While both male and female clients were included, further analysis of how karmic framing differs by gender, age, and socio-economic status would be beneficial.
- 3) **Comparative Frameworks:** The study focuses on Chinese Mahāyāna contexts. Comparative work could investigate whether similar processes occur in Theravāda or Vajrayāna contexts (e.g., in Thailand, Tibet, or Japan).

Future research might explore:

- 1) The digital transformation of karmic practice via astrology apps and social media merit campaigns.
- 2) How Buddhist causal logics intersect with other moral systems (e.g., Confucian filial ethics, Daoist cosmology).
- 3) Longitudinal studies linking karmic belief to therapeutic outcomes in clinical or pastoral counseling settings.

In an era marked by psychological precarity, social fragmentation, and existential uncertainty, Mahāyāna Buddhist causality has found renewed vitality—not solely in temple halls, but in the hands of diviners, on smartphone

apps, and in the hearts of clients seeking meaning. This study has demonstrated that karma remains a vital and evolving technology of self-understanding and moral navigation, offering insight not only into fate but also into the human condition.

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