




Symposium: Lived Karma

## Collective-Karma-Cluster-Concepts in Chinese Canonical Sources: A Note

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This is a preliminary research note on the cluster concepts of collective karma in Chinese Canonical sources. The goal is to draw scholarly attention to this vast, understudied area of research and to invite more scholars to join this collective effort.

**Keywords:** karma; sociokarma; Chinese canonical Buddhism

Twenty years ago, Jonathan S. Walters, in his seminal essay “Communal Karma and Karmic Community in Theravāda Buddhist History,” called on scholars to revise the entrenched Western scholarly understanding of karma as a purely individual affair. After an extensive survey of both Pāli sources and secondary literature on this issue, he coined the term “sociokarma” and sketched out a sevenfold typology of the social dimensions of karma (Walters 2003). Since then, quite a few exciting works were published on sociokarma, especially concerning Pāli Buddhist literature. Nevertheless, much more work is needed to explore related issues in Buddhist literature in other languages, noncanonical literature, and non-Buddhist traditions. As the first step, a symposium, “Lived Karma: Situating Interbeing in Society,” was held in October 2022.<sup>1</sup>

This note is a very preliminary and incomplete survey of Chinese canonical sources on issues related to sociokarma. The cluster concepts explored here are as follows: *gongye* 共業, *gongzuoye* 共作業, *gongzuoyinyuan* 共作因緣, *tongye* 同業, *tongzuoye* 同作業, *qunye* 群業, *qunzuoye* 群作業, and *qizuoye* 齊作業. Interested readers can find their generic English translations in the glossary at the end of this essay. This limited list represents a tiny fraction of a much more extensive, unstudied constellation of karma-related concepts in canonical sources, not to mention the wealth of adjacent concepts in vernacular sources. Thus far, scholars of Chinese Buddhism have not heeded Walters’s call to study sociokarma in any systematic manner. To the best of my knowledge, other than a few essays and books that touched upon this issue in passing, only two significant works have discussed in depth the social dimension of karma in medieval China. The first is Bokenkamp’s monograph *Ancestors and Anxiety*, which analyzed a Buddho-Daoist debate on whether both karmic merits and karmic retribution could be transferred among family members (2007). The second is Kieschnick’s (2022) monograph *Buddhist Historiography in China*, which maps out diverse ways in which the concept of individual karma was integrated into historiographical writing about the rise and fall of a leader or a dynasty. Given the current state of affairs, this note aims to call attention to this vast underexplored area and to call on more scholars to conduct related research to bring more clarity on this issue.

<sup>1</sup> Jessica Zu, “Lived Karma: Situating Interbeing in Society Held at Dartmouth College,” <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/news/lived-karma-situating-interbeing-in-society-conference-held-at-dartmouth-college/>, accessed January 2020.

### New Philosophical Inquiries Opened up by Walters' Sociokarma

As has been summarized in the "Introduction," Walter's seven-fold sociokarma marks an initial call to broaden earlier myopic focus on the aspects of Buddhist karmic theories that conform to Western individualist worldviews. Heeding this call, the current essay further points out some philosophical inquiries made possible by Walters' foray into sociokarma. As shown in the "Introduction," Walters' typology is organized by an agent-centered theory of action, i.e., it takes it to be a self-evident truth that every action must have a doer. Furthermore, under this agent-doer paradigm of understanding karmic actions, Walters' typology assumes only two types of agent-doers, the individual and the group (like a state or a saṅgha). It further highlights the possibility that the bearers of karmic consequences do not need to be the doers, as seen in type two "overflow karma," type six "politicokarma," and type seven "the karma of social institutions."

Extending Walters' observation into the realm of philosophy, scholars need to investigate further whether karma is self-made or other-made, whether karma and its continual effects require a unitary agent, and even within the agent-based paradigm of karma, whether there are other types of agents outside the binary of the individual doer and the institutional doer.

More concretely, I identify three broad philosophical investigations that need to be conducted. First, how does the agent-doer paradigm of karma square with the well-known teaching of no-self, which denies a unitary agent? Would it be possible to rethink Buddhist karmic theories as nondual philosophy that diffracts the agent-doer into aggregated, recurring patterns of actions without a unitary agent? Second, given the lack of clear boundaries between sentient and insentient beings in some Asian cultures, like the Chinese and Japanese cases where even mountains and rivers can exert agency, what are the possibilities of new forms of nondual karmic theories in which insentient beings or inanimate objects could have agency or the power to influence the karmic actions and their outcomes? Thirdly and relatedly, given the popularity of relation-centered worldviews in Asian cultures, what are the possibilities of new forms of relational karmic theories where the "agency of relations" such as empathetic responses take center stage in accruing karmic merits (Adamek 2021: 123–24)?

### Nondualistic Karma and *Yuanqi* (Dependent Origination)

I consider nondualistic karma a vital philosophical innovation of Buddhist karmic theory. In contrast to the pan-Indic commonsensical presumption of individual bearer/doer of karma, early Buddhist discourses consistently diffract the entrenched notion of an individual bearer/doer of karma into recurring patterns and consequences of actions. In this nondual paradigm, the relations between the individual and the collective are neither one nor two but causally connected through karmic processes.

Indeed, in the earliest strata of translated Chinese sūtras, there exists a consistent Buddhist strategy of reinterpreting the ancient Indian doctrine of karma in terms of dependent origination (Pali: *paticca-samuppada*; Ch: *yuanqi* 緣起). For example, *Aññatitthiyasutta* (*Wanders of Other Sects*, SN 12.24) and its Chinese parallel *Fumi* 浮彌 (SA 343) recount a debate about the makers of karma and the bearers of suffering caused by karma.<sup>2</sup> This text explicitly states that suffering is a result of karmic actions and that it is neither self-made (Pali: *sayankata*; Ch: *zizuo* 自作) nor other-made (Pali: *paraṅkata*; Ch: *tazuo* 他作) but dependently arising from contact (Pali: *phassa*; Ch: *chu* 觸). Similarly, in another early Sanskrit sūtra, *Śālistambasūtra* (*Rice Seedling Sūtra*; Ch: *Daoganjing* 稻稈經),<sup>3</sup> the worldly phenomenon of suffering is explained in terms of karmic consequences. But again,

<sup>2</sup> It is common knowledge that mainstream ancient Indian thought considers the cause of suffering to be karma. The Buddhist teachings differs from this mainstream in that the cause of suffering is attributed to a chain of actions called dependent origination, such as three-link, five-link, or twelve-link formulations, but where desire (Pāli: *taṇhā*) plays a key role. For Pali original, English translation, and Chinese parallels of this sutta, see <https://suttacentral.net/sn12.24/en/bodhi>, accessed January 2022.

<sup>3</sup> For a scholarly edition and translation of this sūtra as well as its Chinese and Tibetan parallels, see N. Ross Reat (1998).

instead of being interpreted as made by an individual, karma is interpreted in terms of *paticca-samuppada*. This argument of suffering as dependently arising from chains of actions and consequences of actions has been repeated in many more early texts in both Pāli literature and Chinese translations.<sup>4</sup>

This characteristically Buddhist nondualistic reinterpretation of the pan-Indic concept of karma is noted by J. G. Jennings and termed “Collective Karma” (1948: xxv, xxxvii, 573). Despite Jennings’ romanticization of early Buddhism, his use of “collective karma” accurately captures this early Buddhist effort to diffract the pan-Indic concept of the individual-maker and individual-bearer of karmic consequences into dependently arising causes and conditions. For example, in his appendix “The Dhamma and its Basis,” he explains collective karma as follows:

every action, word, and thought of man has its immediate consequences, here and now, on all who are brought into relationship with it, and that these consequences have no end, but proceed relentlessly onward from life to life, from generation to generation. The force of Karma thus is real, ever-present and eternal. But it is not one single individual who suffers or who gains by any action whether in this life or in another; nor is it one soul who passes on a load, heavy or light, or an advantage, great or small, to one other should be brought into some close and mystical relationship with the former; but it is all the world, in each transience generation, that suffers or gains by the deeds, words, and thoughts of every fleeting individuality that manifests for a brief lifetime the phenomenon of separate being. (Jennings 1948: 573)

Though largely dismissed by later scholars, Jennings’ scholarship gained purchase among many modern Buddhist reformers and revolutionaries, such as Dharmananda Kosambi and Nalin Swaris, who extended this nondualistic interpretation of karma into theories of just society (Kosambi 2017; Swaris 1997).

### A Long-durée View of the Debate of Individual vs. Collective Karma

The debate of karma as either individual or collective is not a modern phenomenon. It seems to have developed in stages, of which the contemporary debate is only a ripple. Here, I offer a preliminary outline traced purely based on the Chinese canon. A more thorough investigation of the historical contour of this debate must wait for a future collaborative effort.

#### *Cosmo-Karma in Non-Yogācāra Texts*

In at least one pre-Yogācāra text dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> century,<sup>5</sup> *gongye* 共業 is used to explain the rise and fall of the shared natural environment (Ch: *qishijie* 器世界 / *qishijan* 器世間; Skt: *bhājana-loka*). For example, it is clearly stated that the natural world arose because of the *gongye* of all sentient beings (T.1545.27.10c26–27) and that the natural world will decay if *gongye* is exhausted (T. 1545.27.692c17–18).<sup>6</sup> This sense of collective karma differs from sociokarma because it seems to be an effort to explain the natural, mind-independent world, following the Abhidharmic distinction of mind-dependent illusions and mind-independent dharmas. For this reason, I translate *gongye* here as cosmo-karma. Following the Abhidharmic ontology, sociokarma would be classified as mind-dependent, unlike the rise and fall of the natural world.

<sup>4</sup> A cursory search on SAT shows that this narrative of karma or suffering is neither self-made nor other-made but dependently arising appears in T99.2.45, T99.2.81, T99.2.93, T99.2.117.

<sup>5</sup> Due to the limitation of space, from now on, I only list the Taisho number of the texts without providing the titles in Chinese or English. Interested readers could easily access the texts based on their Taisho number.

<sup>6</sup> T. is the abbreviation for *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經 (Takakusu, Watanabe, Ono, and Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai 1924–1932). The citation includes a text sequence number and, when necessary, a page number and a line number.

### *Cosmo-socio-karma in Yogācāra Texts*

With the rise of Yogācāra or the school of mind-only, because it rejects the Abhidharmic notion of mind-independence, in Yogācāra texts, *gongye* and *tongye* are used interchangeably to explain a much broader phenomenon of intersubjectivity, of which the seemingly objective natural world and the seemingly subjective social world are both a part of a karmic mycelium. For this reason, I characterize the Yogācāra use of collective karma as cosmo-socio-karma. Because the concepts related to collective karma have proliferated in all sorts of Yogācāra-related texts, it is impossible to summarize them adequately in this note. Instead, I would like to point out that Yogācāra cosmo-socio-karma is more than “karmic confluences” that describe how parallel karmic tracks converge to give rise to certain types of social groups (Walters 2003: 20). I refer readers interested in how collective/similar karmic seeds were used by Yogācārins to explain intersubjectivity (which includes both seemingly objective existence and mind-dependent categories) to a special issue on this topic in *Sophia* (Tzohar 2017, 2019; Garfield 2019). More research is needed to see 1) to what extent does the teachings of nonduality also manifest in Yogācāra causal theory, 2) whether Yogācāra nondual perspective can offer another, more effective analytic lens to understand the typologies of karma, and 3) what kind of socio-environmental relations that Yogācāra karmic theories imagine or actualize.

### *The Debate of Individual vs. Collective Karma in Vimuttimaggā*

Notably, the explicit rejection of cosmo-karma or cosmo-socio-karma appeared in *Vimuttimaggā* (T. 1648), a text widely recognized as a Chinese counterpart of the Pāli Abhidhamma *Visuddhimaggā* (*The Path of Purification*) penned by Buddhaghosa in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. This text explicitly announces that there is no *gongye* and that natural environments such as snow, mountains, oceans, sun, and moon arise from *shijie* 時節 (T. 1648.32.451c11–13), where *shijie* (lit. seasons and solar terms) resembles a type of Pāli concept of *niyama* (constraint) that describes a broad range of natural causal patterns (Crosby 2008, 59–62). It also explicitly affirms that one is rewarded by one’s own action, and the karmic merits are not shareable and cannot be stolen (T. 1648.32.451c14–15). Overall, in *Vimuttimaggā*, the only type of sociokarma acknowledged is karmic confluence, the parallel tracks of similar karma of each individual.

In texts translated after the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the debate of individual vs. collective karma continued, as shown by Bokenkamp (2007). However, I do not know of any investigation of later relevant disputes. This preliminary outline, though very incomplete, illustrates two key points. First, the debate of individual vs. collective karma is neither modern nor straightforward. Second, the contemporary mainstream scholarly characterization of individual karma as an orthodox Buddhist teaching is partial.

### **The Institutional Karma of a Saṅgha**

Interestingly, in my preliminary investigation of karma in the Vinaya, the most frequently used sociokarma is the seventh type, i.e., the karma of social institutions, which entails that “the institution, whatever it may be, takes on a life of its own quite apart from the individuals who participate in it” (Walters 2003: 25). “The karma of social institutions” is a mouthful. Therefore, I will abbreviate it to “institutional karma.” My focus on institutional karma is not to dismiss other types of sociokarma in the Vinaya. Rather, like Walters’ observation that the karma of the Buddhas’ intimate communities takes on a life of its own with similar institutional structures reproduced generation after generation, in the Vinaya the sociokarma cluster concepts are frequently evoked to describe or explain the structures of the Saṅgha as an institution, whose karma gains a degree of independence regardless of the karmas of its individual members. For example, *gongye* 共業, *gongzuoye* 共作業, *gongzuoyinyuan* 共作因緣, *tongye* 同業, *tongzuoye* 同作業, *tonggongzuoye* 同共作業, *qunye* 群業, *qungongzuoye* 群共作業, *qizuoye* 齊作業 in T. 1428 and T. 1463 are frequently used to

refer to the saṅgha itself or some subgroups of a saṅgha. Although a thorough examination of all the uses must wait for another occasion, my preliminary investigation reveals that institutional karma primarily indicates that the saṅgha becomes a bounded, functioning unit because of the specific, motivated, repeated collective actions undertaken by all relevant parties (e.g., taken the ordination, continual participation in the ritual of karman, following the monastic precepts, etc.). Note that this understanding of social institution as motivated, repeated co-actions differs significantly from the mainstream academic theories of social institution, in that, this conception of saṅgha needs neither to presume an ontologically atomic individual nor to posit the collective as the sum of its individual members. Rather, the meaningful unit of analysis seems to be patterns and processes of co-actions.

### Sociokarma in Non-Vinaya and Non-Yogācāra Texts

All the previously mentioned types of cosmo-socio-karma frequently appear in non-Vinaya and non-Yogācāra texts. For example, institutional karma can be found to describe bodhisattva groups in T. 397 as *tongye zhupusa* 同業諸菩薩 (bodhisattvas with similar/common karma; T. 397.13.41a1). The term *gongzuo yinyuan* 共作因緣 (jointly make karmic connections), other than appearing in Vinaya and Yogācāra texts, is frequently used in Chinese translations of Jataka and Apadana such as T. 190, T. 205, and Prajnaparamita literature such as T. 221, T. 1509. In all the incidences that I examined, *gongzuo yinyuan* is primarily evoked to refer to co-transmigration of social units or ongoing karmic nexuses (the fourth type of sociokarma in Walters' classification) or the seventh type, the karma of social institutions. Other terms that are used similarly include *gongzuo feifa* 共作非法 (jointly perform unwholesome actions) and *gongzuo pengshu* 共作朋屬 (perform joint actions [so to become] friends and relatives). There are probably more related terms waiting to be investigated in depth. Notably, *gongzuo yinyuan* is also used to describe what Walters termed the karma of a political unit or politico-karma (which, in my reading, overlaps significantly with institutional karma), explaining why and how the people of a country experience calamities or prosperity.

All of the previously mentioned terms, such as *gongye* and *tongye*, also frequently appear in Pure Land literature, Huayan literature, Jataka and Apadana literature, and collected sutras to describe natural calamities (cosmo-karma), socio-karmic aspiration (especially those who wish to be reborn in the Western Pure Land), co-transmigration units, overflow karma, and karmic confluences. For example, T. 721 (classified as *Jingji* 經集, *Collected Sutras*, in Taisho) frequently uses *tongye*, *gongye*, and sometimes *gongzuoye* to classify social groups such as the poor, the dark-skinned, the uncivilized, the disabled people, the rich, the beautiful, and so on. My preliminary reading of T. 721 is that *gongye* and *tongye* are used as karmic confluences to make sense of structural violence, such as poverty, disability, and other forms of unjust social hierarchy.

### Conclusion

This note is a very partial survey based on my own incomplete investigation of Chinese canonical sources in preparation to co-organize the workshop “Lived Karma” and the newly launched Five-year AAR Seminar “**Collective Karma and Karmic Collectives: Conversations without Borders.**” In Chinese literature, there are a vast array of noncanonical sources where the cluster concepts related to collective karma appear and are used in diverse ways to explain natural and social dynamics, broadly framed in terms of relation-centered moral reasoning and moral actions (Wong 2023: 3–22). For example, as Justin Ritzinger points out in his critical note in this issue, “interpersonal karma” is frequently evoked to forge or cut social relations. There are many more similar themes waiting to be investigated further. Similarly, my use of secondary literature is incomplete, limited primarily to the studies of Yogācāra and Chinese Buddhism. However, karma has been globalized in the past century. Karma cluster concepts are neither limited to a particular tradition like Chinese Buddhism nor a specific region like Southeast Asia.

Thus, I conclude this note with a plea: As Ritzinger provocatively observes in his conclusion that various use of interpersonal karma hint toward the hypothesis that “karma is society,” scholars of religious studies have a lot to gain if we turn our focus away from the question of “karma and rebirth” that privileges individual karma. It is time to turn the spotlight on “karma and society” and ask a more provocative question of how “karma makes society”?

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### Glossary<sup>7</sup>

*gongye* 共業: collective/shared/common karma

*gongzuoye* 共作業: karma generated together/jointly

*gongzuo feifa* 共作非法: jointly perform unwholesome actions

*gongzuo pengshu* 共作朋屬: perform joint actions [so to become] friends and relatives

*gongzuoyinyuan* 共作因緣: jointly make karmic connections

*qizuoye* 齊作業: karma done jointly

*qunye* 群業: group karma

*qunzuoye* 群作業: karma done by a group

*tongye* 同業: similar/common karma

*tongye zhupusa* 同業諸菩薩: bodhisattvas with similar/common karma

*tongzuoye* 同作業: karma done together/jointly

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<sup>7</sup> These translations should be taken with a grain of salt. Their philosophical underpinning and precise meaning must be determined within a given context.

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