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Xingyun's Buddhist Environmentalism in the Context of The Contemporary Discourse on *Fangsheng* 放生

Abstract

This paper aims to explore Xingyun's 星雲 (1927–2023)'perspective within the contemporary discourse of *fangsheng* 放生 (literally 'life release'), a widely practiced Buddhist ritual in Taiwan. A primary focus of the study is to demonstrate Xingyun's Buddhist environmental philosophy in context of the ritual, as well as his ideology of life protection (*husheng* 護生) being superior to *fangsheng* in terms of Buddhist environmentalism.

Fangsheng refers to the popular Buddhist ritual of buying captured animals and releasing them at a designated ritual site with the purpose of earning spiritual merit. While it is a common religious practice in Chinese-speaking Buddhist communities, and in other East Asian countries, in recent decades *fangsheng* has received criticism for the dangers it might impose on ecosystems by the release of potentially non-native, invasive species. In turn, this criticism has created a discourse around its ecological impact as well as its religious legitimacy in Taiwanese Buddhism. To provide a solid foundation for this discussion, this paper first briefly introduces the history and development of the *fangsheng* ritual. After establishing the historical background of *fangsheng* practice, the discussion continues by examining its contemporary discourse, paying particular attention to the reasons why the ritual has been criticised for its ecologically negative impact. As the dialogue surrounding *fangsheng* is contemporary, the primary sources utilised for demonstrating the discourses include modern media and news articles as well as comments and speeches recorded from contemporary Buddhist figures of Taiwan. Analysing how different modern Buddhist leaders in Taiwan respond to criticism contextualised by doctrinal legitimisations, this paper establishes a spectrum of conservative, centrist, and reform narrative responses in the context of *fangsheng* ritual. Finally, Xingyun's own perspective is placed within this spectrum, highlighting his role as a reformist and his nuanced approach to the relationship between *husheng* and *fangsheng*.

Keywords: Xingyun, environmental philosophy, Taiwanese Buddhism, discourse analysis, Buddhist reformism, Buddhist environmentalism, Buddhist animal release ritual (*fangsheng* 放生)

¹ This paper utilises the standard pinyin romanisation system of Chinese names, instead of the Wade-Giles romanisation system (in which Xingyun's name would be Hsing Yun) commonly used in English scholarship regarding the Republic of China. The reason for this is that this paper's focus, rather than the study of Taiwan, is in the fields of sinology and Chinese philology, which utilise the standard Mandarin romanization.

Introduction

Fangsheng 放生, which in international scholarship is often translated as ‘mercy release’, ‘animal release’, or simply ‘life release’, is a popular Mahāyāna Buddhist ritual with Chinese cultural origins. While its roots are Chinese, it is practiced widely across East Asia and Southeast Asia, particularly in Taiwan, Korea, Thailand, and Japan, and has even found its way into some Western Buddhist communities.²

Although it can be performed individually, *fangsheng* is usually a large-scale ritual, typically led by authorised monastics and performed alongside lay community members. The translated ‘animal release’ term comes from the fact that for the occasion of the ritual, participants purchase captive animals, which are ceremonially released into the wild. These animals can be fish, snakes, birds, or any other small-sized species that can scatter after being released. Turtles are especially popular as a choice of *fangsheng* animal since they symbolise longevity in Chinese culture.³

The primary aim of the *fangsheng* ceremony is to cultivate compassion (*cibei* 慈悲), an aspect of the Mahāyāna Buddhist principle of bodhicitta (*putixin* 菩提心).⁴ More importantly, the act of releasing animals destined for slaughter—whether domesticated or captured wildlife—is also believed to accumulate spiritual merit. *Fangsheng* can be practiced at any time and can be ordered as a religious service from a monastery by practitioners, but it can also be coordinated by a monastery on a large scale, similarly to other Buddhist celebrations on the birthday of Siddhārtha Gautama and important bodhisattva figures.⁵ The more extensive rituals also provide substantial income for the temples.⁶

Many of those who participate in the ritual believe that the spiritual merit and positive karma that they accumulate by releasing the animals can actually cure illnesses, ensure longevity, or even result in the occurrence of miracles. Holmes Welch recalls a massive *fangsheng* event in Hong Kong in the year 1963, when 3,000 sparrows accompanied by monkeys, turtles, and deer were released in order to alleviate a long period of drought.⁷ He describes how the more resourceful pet shop keepers trained the birds to come back after being released, so that they can be used again in another mercy release ritual. The aspects of practicing compassion towards animals and the positive religious

² Severinghaus–Chi 1999: 301.

³ Shiu–Stokes 2008: 186.

⁴ Buswell–Gale 2004: 54. Bodhicitta is the aspiration to attain buddhahood to guide all beings toward liberation, cultivated through continuous mental and ethical development.

⁵ Welch 1973: 268.

⁶ Buswell–Gale 2004: 819.

⁷ Welch 1973: 378

achievements of collecting merit however do not contradict themselves in the religious logic of *fangsheng*. Rather they make the practice even more widespread and favourable to believers.

Regardless of how popular the religious practice is, it has also attracted a considerable amount of negative attention over the last few decades. The main object of the *fangsheng* criticism is its significant ecological consequences, which can be seen in a number of studies conducted on the topic.⁸

These studies demonstrate that the main conflict between the *fangsheng* practice and the aspects of ecological well-being are the introduction of certain species to unfitting environments. Most Buddhist communities that perform the ritual are unaware that the animals that they release may be non-native to the environments in which they are placed. If the released animals survive the traumatic process of being transported from a shop or market to where the ritual is taking place, lacking natural predators in their new habitat, they might become invasive, endangering native species and disrupting the equilibrium of the local ecosystems.⁹

Another major concern that arises during the organisation of large-scale *fangsheng* events is animal welfare. In regions where *fangsheng* is practiced frequently and with large amounts of animals, the ritual has become commercialised. An industry has emerged to supply animals specifically for these ceremonies. In some cases, traders recapture the released animals to sell them again, perpetuating a cycle of captivity. These animals often suffer from poor living conditions, and many die due to the stress of repeated release and recapture.

In summary, from an ecological and animals' rights perspective, *fangsheng* practices often produce harmful outcomes rather than positive ones, which strongly contradicts the original intentions of mercy release. This has led to a contemporary debate over whether *fangsheng* can still be considered a legitimate religious practice, whether it tarnishes the image of Buddhists in society, and whether the tradition should be maintained at all. This debate primarily exists in regions where *fangsheng* is widely practiced, but the focus of this research is specifically on Taiwan, where the ritual is quite widespread and where the most material can be found about the discourse surrounding its potential ecological damage.

When examining the arguments made in the critiques of contemporary *fangsheng* practice, the following questions arise: What positions do representatives of Taiwanese Buddhist communities take regarding these criticisms? Do they acknowledge and admit the dangers of the practice, or do they deny its negative impacts? Furthermore, what religious narratives and Buddhist references do

⁸ Yang 2015: 141.

⁹ To learn more about the ecological dangers of alien species being introduced to a new habitat via *fangsheng* activity, see Agoramoorthy–Hsu 2007: 253 and Everard 2019: 139.

they use to support these attitudes? Understanding these narrative can provide valuable insight into the dynamic of the transformation of contemporary Buddhist religious practice and can demonstrate how Buddhist leaders engage with critical issues facing their communities.

This topic is particularly relevant in understanding Xingyun's contribution to the discourse of Buddhism and modern issues involving environmentalism, as his views offer a unique perspective on *fangsheng* that balances tradition with modern concerns. As the founder of the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist organisation and monastic order (Fo Guang Shan 佛光山), and later the Buddha's Light International Association (*Guoji Fo Guang Hui* 國際佛光會), he was arguably one of the most prominent figures in modern Taiwanese Buddhism.¹⁰ Xingyun's interpretation of *fangsheng* reflects a critical, reformist stance that aims to align Buddhist practices with contemporary ethical and ecological values. His arguments are particularly interesting because they do not reject the practice outright but rather emphasise a shift in focus—from releasing life to protecting life as an expression of compassion. By contextualising Xingyun's arguments within the broader *fangsheng* debate, this paper aims to highlight how his stance bridges traditional Buddhist values and modern ecological perspectives while also emphasising his own unique narrative that derives from his views about the 'protection of life' (*hushing* 護生) as the foundation for his environmental ethics.

Emergence and development of animal release practices in Chinese Buddhism

Regarding the origins of *fangsheng*, several contentious threads and questions have emerged through research. Various masters and monks of later schools, as well as the contemporary scholarship of Chinese Buddhism, reference the *The Brahma's Net Sūtra* (*Fanwang Jing* 梵網經, T.245, 8) and the *Benevolent Kings Sūtra* (*Renwang Huguo Jing* 仁王護國經, T.1484, 24) as canonical sources for the practice. According to historical records, these presumed Sanskrit sources were translated by Kumārajīva, who lived between 334 and 413 CE.¹¹

In *The Brahma's Net Sūtra*, the practice of *fangsheng* is established by the notion of the interconnectedness of life by endless birth and death circles within *samsāra* (*lunhui* 輪迴). The text implies that all beings (and even water and earth) in the Six Realms are from the same flesh and have been mothers and fathers of each other, thus releasing the life of any being is the same as liberating the life of one's parent:

¹⁰ Madsen 2008: 51.

¹¹ Shiu–Stokes 2008: 183.

[The reason why] one disciple of the Buddha, out of compassionate kindness engages in the releasing of living beings, [is because he/she believes the following:] 'All men are my fathers, and all women are my mothers. In every lifecycle, I have been born through them; thus, all living beings in the six realms are my parents. To kill and consume them is equivalent to killing my parents, or my own former body. All earth and water are my former bodies, and all fire and wind are my fundamental essence; therefore I frequently practice releasing living beings'.¹²

若佛子以慈心故行放生業，一切男子是我父、一切女人是我母。我生生無不從之受生，故六道眾生皆是我父母。而殺而食者，即殺我父母，亦殺我故身。一切地水是我先身，一切火風是我本體，故常行放生。

It is important to note that both *sūtras* mentioned above are considered as Chinese apocryphal works by many modern scholars.¹³ Aligned with this argument, Henry Shiu and Leah Stokes claim that there are not any literal indications of the origins of animal release practices in Indian Buddhism, as there is no direct reference to it in canonical Sanskrit texts.¹⁴ However, Chinese-language scholarship, on top of the above-mentioned two *sūtras*, trace the original teachings to animal release practice to the *Sūtra of the Sublime Golden Light* (*Jing Guang Ming Jing* 金光明經, T.663, 16), a text with an existing Sanskrit original.¹⁵ One chapter in particular is highlighted to indicate the early existence of animal release ritual: 'The Merchant Son Udakaśrotas' (*Liushui zhangzhe zi pin* 流水長者子品),¹⁶ in which Udakaśrotas deliberately shows compassion to dying fish by putting them in a pond full of water, giving them food, and most importantly, sharing with them the wisdom of the Dharma, and thus when the fish die they are able to reincarnate as *devas* (*tian* 天)¹⁷:

He took the food and scattered it throughout the lake. The fish obtained the food, then he thought: 'I have given the fish food to make them full, in the future, I shall grant the food of the Dharma!¹⁸

¹² Translation by author from: T24, no. 1484, p. 1006b9. Digitally accessed at: <https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/zh/T1484>.

¹³ Linrothe–Buswell 1992: 9.

¹⁴ Chengzhong 2014: 113.

¹⁵ Chen 2008: 121. and Shengkai 2013: 17.

¹⁶ In fact, Xingyun himself also mentioned this chapter when talking about mercy release and natural life release ponds (*haichi* 海池). For example in: Xingyun 2008. Digitally accessed at: <https://books.masterhsingyun.org/ArticleDetail/artcle976>

¹⁷ Buswell–Gale 2004: 333. Deva is a celestial being or god, characterised by greater power, longevity, and happiness compared to humans.

¹⁸ Translation by Peter Alan Roberts. In: Roberts 2023. Digitally accessed at <https://84000.co/translation/toh555/UT22084-089-012-chapter-25>.

從子邊取飲食之物散著池中，與魚食已，即自思惟：『我今已能與此魚食，令其飽滿，未來之世當施法食。』

It is possible, that this passage may have inspired aspects of the *fangsheng* ritual. When the animals are freed, the participants of the ritual usually chant scriptures—thus gifting the animals the privilege of hearing the dharma—or the name of Amitābha Buddha, which can help the animals undergo a more fortunate rebirth after their current lifecycle.¹⁹ However, it is evident that the story of Udakaśrotas is not a literal example of *fangsheng*, and it is not direct evidence to prove that *fangsheng* existed in Buddhism before Chinese Buddhism. Hence, Shiu and Stokes argue that the practice of releasing animals is rather an indigenous Chinese cultural and religious ritual that was only later associated with Buddhism.²⁰ The two researchers base this argument on a literal reference in the *Liezi* 列子, which contains both the word *fangsheng* and the description of the ritual in the chapter of “Explaining Conjunctions” (*Shuofu* 說符) as follows:

The people of Handan offered doves to Zhao Jianzi on the morning of the first day of the first Lunar Month. Jianzi was delighted and rewarded them generously. A guest asked the reason for this. Jianzi replied: ‘On the first morning of the first Lunar Month, we release living beings to show kindness’.²¹

邯鄲之民，以正月之旦獻鳩於子。子大悅，厚賞之。客問其故，子曰：正旦放生，示有恩也。

The first literary references to the *Liezi* appeared during the Han Dynasty (202 BC–220 CE), which predates the timeframe of Kumārajīva’s purported translation.²² While this *Liezi* quote demonstrates that *fangsheng* may have already existed in China as a ritual, whereby living animals such as birds were released on a set date in a display of empathy, apart from this single citation, as of now scholarship has not identified further evidence of *fangsheng*’s existence in pre-Buddhist Chinese classics. Additionally, Pu Zhengzhong claims that the inclusion of the term *fangsheng* in the dove releasing ritual featured in the *Liezi* was the result of Buddhist influence, and mentions that many Chinese scholars regard *Liezi* as a ‘forgery made under Buddhist influence’.²³ Therefore, there is

¹⁹ Powell 2005: 51.

²⁰ Shiu–Stokes 2008: 184.

²¹ Translation by author from DZ 663. Digitally accessed at: <https://simple.taolibrary.com/category/category86/c86037.htm> See translation by Angus C. Graham. In: Graham 1990: 178.

²² Loewe 1993: 293.

²³ Chengzhong 2014: 120.

no universal agreement upon the origins of *fangsheng*, leaving its origins still uncertain.

The development of the life release ritual can be seen in historical records, especially those describing the establishment of *fangshengchi* 放生池 (life release ponds). These ponds—typically natural or semi-natural bodies of water—were specifically designated for the release of captive animals, such as fish, turtles, birds, or other small creatures. The earliest references of the building of life release ponds date back to the Liang dynasty (552–555).²⁴ Records show that emperor Wu (464–549) issued the construction of a life release pond and named it *changmingchi* 長命池 (pond of longevity). Consequently, during the 5th century, a belief that performing *fangsheng* could lengthen one's life was popularised.²⁵ From the 5th century up until the Song dynasty (960–1279), besides their religious function, building life release ponds thus also became an official method to show gratitude and respect towards the emperor and praying for his longevity.²⁶

In the meantime, *fangsheng* was also embraced as a doctrinally legitimised practice by Buddhist monastics. An important figure in this context is Zhiyi 智顗 (538–597), the intellectual founder of the Tiantai Buddhism (*tiantaizong* 天台宗), who aspired to make *fangsheng* more relevant in Chinese Buddhism by integrating it into the broader framework of Buddhist ethical and spiritual practices. Regarding the dynamic between *fangsheng* and Vinaya rules, Zhiyi emphasised that the act of non-killing is a virtuous deed made by observing the rules of Buddhism, while the spontaneous or organised release of animals is a free choice of performing a benevolent act of the believer. While non-killing is non-negotiable, *fangsheng* is a step taken beyond non-killing.²⁷ He was also active in the establishment of a number of *fangshengchi* around the area of Mount Tiantai, for which the above-mentioned story of the merchant's son was taken as inspiration.²⁸ A letter written by Zhiyi titled '*The Legacy of Zhiyi to Commander Jie Baguo of Linhai County: A Statement on the Mercy Release Pond*' (*Zhizhe yishu yu Linhai zhen jiang Jie Baguo: shu fangsheng chi* 智者遺書與臨海鎮將解拔國:述放生池 T.46, 1934) is an example and a written record of the establishment of a *fangsheng* pond:

This mountain stream connects to the river sources and reaches the sea. The fishing traps obstruct the way of the water, leading to countless deaths through capturing, boiling, and roasting. A premature loss of life like such is truly lam-

²⁴ Yü 1981: 72.

²⁵ Chengzhong 2014: 130.

²⁶ Zhang–Guo 2025: 2.

²⁷ Chengzhong 2014: 131.

²⁸ Feng–Xiong 2020: 223.

entable. [...] As a mere humble monk, though I am weak and slight, I express my wish to save lives. Therefore, I have encouraged the monks of the mountain to sell their clothes to collect resources. With the help of local residents, such as Kong Xuanda and others, we purchased the area used for the fishing business. It is now permanently used as a mercy release pond, changing the fish weirs into streams that flow just like the Dharma. By the request of the Prefect of Linhai County, who has great respect for the Dharma, I talked about the Sūtra of the Sublime Golden Light, especially the chapter of ‘The Merchant Son Udakaśrotas’.²⁹

此山溪接江源連巨海際。漁捕滬業交橫塞水，殺戮既多煮炙無算。夭傷物命有足悲者。[...] 貧道不惟虛薄，願言拯濟。仍率勵山僧貨衣資什物。就土民孔玄達等買茲滬業。永作放生之池，變此魚梁翻成法流之水。故臨海內史計尚兒敬法心重，仍請講說《金光明經》，至《流水品》。

During the Tang dynasty (618–907), official records of a 759 decree show that the emperor constructed 81 life release ponds. However, the *fangsheng* ritual as well as the construction of *fangshengchi* only gained significant popularity during the Song dynasty. Chun Fangyu attributes this rise in popularity to ‘outstanding evangelising monks’, the advances to amalgamize Pure Land and Chan teachings, as well as monastics having influence on governmental decisions, especially regarding the construction of life release ponds.³⁰ The ritual also started to gradually gain prominence in lay Buddhism. Chun describes the appeal of the life release ritual the following way:

The act of releasing was a celebration of reunion, during which the selfish human will, which alienates, was momentarily obliterated. The person who released life in fact released himself from human selfishness.³¹

The practicality of the ritual therefore started to attract a massive number of lay believers from all social classes, and it steadily became an asset of the proselytization of Chinese popular Buddhism. After the Song dynasty, the relevance and popularity of life release ponds and life release rituals started to decline. This was due to a lack of governmental funds and support for their construction. Since life release ponds provided no financial benefits, the reason for their establishment was the personal and religious motivations of a particular government official. The importance of building *fangshengchi* as well as larger-scale and official *fangsheng* rituals faded during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), except

²⁹ Translation by author from: T46, no. 1934, p. 822b6. Digitally accessed at: https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/zh/T1934_004

³⁰ Yü 1981: 72.

³¹ *Ibid*: 74.

for an isolated case of Kublai Khan (1215–1294) restoring the West Lake as a life release pond.³²

After a period of decline, *fangsheng* experienced a revival in China during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), primarily thanks to the Pure Land monks that made significant efforts to popularise the practice, as well as the upper classes and the literati supporting the tradition.³³ One notable piece of Pure Land literature in this context is Lianchi's 蓮池 (1535–1615)³⁴ *Treatise on Refraining from Killing and Releasing Living Beings* (*Jiesha Fangsheng Wen* 戒殺放生文 J.32, B277).³⁵ The *Jiesha Fangsheng Wen* serves as a critical reflection on the ethical responsibilities that Buddhists—and humans in general—hold towards animals. It urges practitioners to engage in acts of kindness, such as *fangsheng*, as a means of demonstrating compassion and upholding ethical conduct towards non-human beings.³⁶ Interestingly, Lianchi also highlighted the potential pitfalls of performing *fangsheng* incorrectly. He described such practices in his treatise as follows:

People may buy animals, keep them for one night, and release them the next morning, or they buy in the morning and keep them until the afternoon. Meanwhile the temple must be prepared for the ritual, and men and women must assemble, which causes delays. During this time, half the animals may die. If life release is done this way, it is nothing but empty words.³⁷

若隔宿買而來朝始放，或清晨買而午後猶存，必待陳設道場，會集男女，遷延時久，半致死亡。如是放生，虛文而已。

Lianchi's essay received significant enthusiasm. The mother of the emperor sent an envoy to his temple to receive teachings directly from him. Inspired by his writings, lay believers started organising 'life release societies' (*fangshenghui* 放生會), an organisational concept still extant today. These communities have been working with the help of or independently of monastics, and their main purpose is to raise funds for the construction of life release ponds and meetings for regular life release rituals.³⁸

As a result of Lianchi's work, *fangsheng* became highly associated with Pure Land Buddhism. The 13th Pure Land patriarch, Yinguang 印光 (1861–1940),

³² Zang–Guo 2025: 9.

³³ Smith 1999: 53.

³⁴ Also known as Yunqi Zhuhong 雲棲株宏.

³⁵ Chen 2008: 244.

³⁶ Ryo 2022: 11.

³⁷ Translation by author from: J32, no. B277, p. 760c28. Digitally accessed at: https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/zh/J32nB277_011

³⁸ Yü 1981: 76.

also dedicated significant efforts to either rebuilding these ponds or creating new ones.³⁹ Yinguang devoted his life to teaching the relevance of intensive and persistent cultivation of Pure Land practice, as well as separating Chan and Pure Land ideologies, by which he claimed that only the latter can ensure enlightenment and release from karmic cycles.⁴⁰ He gave his followers an easily understandable concept of the Pure Land as a religious goal and a well-articulated method for reaching it: by relying on the power of Amitābha Buddha and practicing the recitation of his name, a ritual known as *nianfo* 念佛, as well as following Mahāyāna ethics and performing good deeds to purify one's soul, which can be achieved by *fangsheng*. He also emphasised the importance of *fangsheng* as a compassionate and ethical practice that aligns with Buddhist principles, ensuring its survival and continued relevance in modern times.⁴¹

Charles B. Jones points out that the popularity of Pure Land religiosity in Taiwan can be attributed to Yinguang's influence, and his ideology being transported over to the island by his lay disciple, Li Bingnan (1890–1986),⁴² and claims that Yinguang's legacy provides a framework of contemporary Buddhist beliefs in Taiwan.⁴³

Religious narratives in the *fangsheng* debate in Taiwan

1. Criticism of contemporary *fangsheng* practice

Pure Land practices involving *fangsheng*, as well as Amitābha's worship, dominate the Buddhist landscape of Taiwan. Between 1941 and 1960, there were more temples and shrines dedicated to the worship of Amitābha Buddha than to any other divinity.⁴⁴ However, despite Buddhist animal release being a widely popular religious practice in contemporary Taiwan, there are controversies surrounding the potential ecological dangers that might arise from it, as well as the industry built to sustain the animals used in the ritual. There is not only signifi-

³⁹ Yinguang 1921: 5–8.

⁴⁰ Jones 1999: 116.

⁴¹ Jones 1999: 119.

⁴² *Ibid.*: 124: Yinguang's disciple Li was transferred to Taiwan in 1948. He was a practitioner in Chinese medicine as well as an intellectual who worked as a visiting lecturer at the major universities on the island. He was also a key figure in the Buddhist laity of 20th-century Taiwan and spent a fair amount of time and resources to popularise Yinguang's Pure Land thought. Jones points out that Li influenced at least two generations of Taiwan's rising intelligentsia, and his influence on Taiwanese Pure Land Buddhism cannot be overestimated.

⁴³ *Ibid.*: 115.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*: 115.

cant negative attention on *fangsheng* in the media, but students, ecologists, and organisations have also been promoting and campaigning against it frequently, since the mid-2000s.⁴⁵

The disputes happening between the religious and non-religious voices of Taiwan regarding animal release practices has resulted in a discourse within the Buddhist community as well. This discourse mainly deals with how each representing figure of Buddhism responds to these negative views on the ritual, whether it is still an important and legitimate practice that helps Buddhism to remain a living and dominant religious tradition in Taiwan today or whether it already has ceased to maintain religious legitimacy in contemporary society and should not be associated with Buddhism at all. Understandably, this discourse is quite nuanced and can be contextualised more appropriately as a spectrum of approaches and attitudes. Since this research aims to show Xingyun's views and religious rhetoric about *fangsheng*, it is necessary to first establish this spectrum, which is both a theoretical framework and a social context in which one should place his narrative. In the following subchapters, the author shows the most significant nuances in this discourse and how it appears in the textual reinterpretation and reimagination of the Buddhist tradition in each of the narratives that the author has identified. This paper defines these as the conservative, the centrist, and the reformist narratives.

2. Spectrum of religious responses

a. *Conservative narrative*

One specific Buddhist organisation that stands out when it comes to the amount and volume of *fangsheng* activity organisation in Taiwan is the Chinese Life Protection Association (Zhonghua Husheng Xiehui 中華護生協會).⁴⁶ The organisation is linked to a popular Taiwanese monk, Haitao 海濤 (1958–), who is consequently also mostly known and condemned for his propagation and support of large scale *fangsheng* events.⁴⁷ Despite attracting negative attention and having been fined repeatedly in accordance with conservation laws, Haitao

⁴⁵ Crook 2023. Digitally accessed at: <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2023/08/09/2003804454>.

⁴⁶ Xu 1995: 116.

⁴⁷ To learn more about the media coverage of Haitao's *fangsheng* activity and its responses in Taiwan, see Apple Daily 2015 Digitally accessed at: http://www.appledaily.com.tw/real-timenews/article/new/20150619/632212/?utm_source=FB and Mirror Media 2017 Digitally accessed at: <https://www.mirrormedia.mg/story/20170327soc006/>.

shows relentless support for the religious legitimacy of *fangsheng*, responding to the criticism in the following way:

In the future, we will compile more material so that those who criticise animal release and don't understand it can also understand the error in their views because they do not know what they are doing. Since not only human beings are important, how to save more lives is what we, the Life Protection Association, are concerned with, and what we will continue to deal with in the future as well.⁴⁸

未來我們將整理出更多資料，讓那些批評放生、不了解放生的人，也能夠了解牠們見解上的錯誤，因為他們不知道自己在做什麼。因為不是只有人類才重要，要如何才能解救更多的生命是我們護生協會現在和未來都會堅持做下去的事。

Haitao's argument can be contextualised as a representative of the conservative narrative on *fangsheng* that tends to completely disregard the criticism the ritual receives. As demonstrated in the quote above, Haitao represents this point of view and claims that those who criticise the tradition are in the wrong. He does not nuance the stance of *fangsheng* and its legitimacy in modern society at all. He encourages his followers to participate in the ritual mostly by highlighting its positive result in accumulating spiritual merit, performing a role of a religious populist. In the dilemma, arising from the relationship between religiosity and modern science, he chooses to completely disregards the idea of questioning tradition.

b. Centrist narrative

A centrist approach to *fangsheng* agrees with the criticism that it receives to a certain extent while retaining an apologetic attitude towards the tradition. It recognises the negative environmental effects that might arise from animal release practices. However, it contributes them not to the ritual itself but to those who do it incorrectly, and thus it still regards *fangsheng* as a legitimate and important Buddhist tradition, if done right. This *fangsheng*-apologetic narrative tends to agree with the criticism of mass animal release events, the release the non-native animals, and the *fangsheng* industry, built to supply the animals for the ritual. It can also direct the attention away from questioning legitimacy of a Buddhist ritual (and potentially the sangha as well) and divert it to the practitioners. Shengyan 聖嚴 (1931–2009), the founder of one of Taiwan's biggest Buddhist organisations, Dharma Drum Mountain (Fa Gu Shan 法鼓山), is also one example of representing the centrist narrative. While his organisation has

⁴⁸ Translation by author from: ETtoday 2013. Digitally accessed at: <http://www.ettoday.net/news/20130104/148591.htm>.

long ceased organising collective animal release activities, Shengyan's views represent the stance of groups that continue to uphold the legitimacy of the practice, with the correct measures.⁴⁹ When talking about the religious legitimacy of *fangsheng*, Shengyan highlights its importance as a practice of compassion in the light of the Mahāyāna principles:

Animal release is derived from the precept against killing. We can say that the next step after refraining from killing is to practice animal release. While the precept against killing is a passive virtue, animal release is an active good deed. If we only refrain from evil without performing good deeds, this is not in line with the spirit of Mahāyāna Buddhism.⁵⁰

放生是從戒殺而衍生的，也可以說，戒殺的進一步必定是放生。戒殺僅是止惡，是消極的善行，放生救生才是積極的善行；如果僅僅止惡而不行善，不是大乘佛法的精神。

On the other hand, Shengyan highlights the incorrect way that *fangsheng* is practiced today. There is a term coined in this context, which he uses deliberately: 'blind animal release' (*mangmu fangsheng* 盲目放生).⁵¹ This term refers to either those groups who practice *fangsheng* without doing research on the animals and the environment into which they are being released or Buddhist believers who practice the rituals solely for earning merits without the knowledge of the original Buddhist teachings on *fangsheng*. When talking about the dangers of modern *fangsheng* practice, he said:

In the past, when transportation was not as convenient as today, the animals released in mercy release practices, such as birds and fish, were locally sourced or came from nearby areas. Therefore, there were no issues with environmental incompatibility or species differences. However, today many problems have arisen with mercy release practices. Often on the Buddha's birthday or at regular mercy release events, large groups gather, significant funds are raised, and entire batches of fish, birds, and turtles are purchased for release. Some of these animals were raised in captivity and have lost their ability to survive in the wild, making them entirely unsuitable for release. Consequently, releasing them becomes an act of condemning them to death rather than preserving their lives.⁵²

⁴⁹ Chen 2010: 104.

⁵⁰ Translation by author from: Shengyan 2000: 26.

⁵¹ Shengyan 2010. Digitally accessed at: https://fo.ifeng.com/guandian/detail_2010_11/08/3032246_0.shtml.

⁵² Translation by author from: Shengyan 2022. Digitally accessed at: <https://www.ddc.com.tw/ec/epaper/2022/a/20221019.html>.

以前交通不便利，放生的鳥、魚等，都產自本地或附近，放生並沒有水土不服或物種差異的問題。但現在很多放生有問題，常在佛誕日或定期舉辦的放生會，集合很多人、籌募很多錢、買整批魚、鳥、龜來放；有些動物是人工飼養的，已經失去野外求生的能力，根本不適合野放，放生反成放死。

Shegyan expresses his criticism toward large-scale animal release events, pointing out both the immorality of the *fangsheng* industry as well as its dangers to animal welfare. However, he starts his line of thought by justifying the original means and methods of the ritual. Therefore his attitude can truly qualify as *fangsheng*-apologetic.

c. Reformist narrative

Lastly, on the other end of this spectrum of attitudes, there is the reformist narrative, which criticises *fangsheng* openly and does not try to justify its existence in contemporary Buddhist religion. What differentiates the reformist narrative from the centrist one is that it tends not only to condemn the *fangsheng* industry and the incorrect practitioners but also to hold the organising Buddhist groups accountable. The reformist narrative does not necessarily denounce *fangsheng*'s importance in Buddhism from a doctrinal point of view, but it surely does not encourage believers in participating in it, and those who represent a progressive attitude towards *fangsheng* more often than not offer alternatives when it comes to cultivating compassion as a Buddhist percept.

Zhaohui 昭慧 (1957–), for example, in an article released in 2001 for her organisation, Life Solicitude Association (Guanhuai Shengming Xiehui 關懷生命協會) advocates for solving Taiwan's stray dog epidemic instead of performing animal release as a way of practicing compassion. Ordained by Yinshun 印順⁵³ (1906–2005), she is a key figure in progressive Buddhism in Taiwan, as she is outspoken for issues such as women's rights in the sangha and LGBTQ rights.⁵⁴ She is also the first and only monk at the moment in Taiwan to officiate same sex couples at weddings.⁵⁵ On top of her activism for women's right in Buddhism, she is also an environmentalist and animals rights activist.

⁵³ Buswell–Gale 2004: 913. Yinshun was a monk and a Buddhist academic, who is also considered as one of the most important successors of the legacy of Taixu's Humanistic Buddhist ideology, a religious reformist movement that started in the early 19th century, in China. Yinshun escaped the communist regime in the mainland and defected to Taiwan, where he became a central figure of Taiwanese contemporary Buddhist religious life and philosophy.

⁵⁴ Chu 2012: 11.

⁵⁵ Cheng 2013: 4.

Her aforementioned article is an appropriate reflection of her overall attitude towards *fangsheng*, which she sees as a tradition that has outlived its purpose and is completely driven by selfish desires, whether profit or earning spiritual merit:

When releasing life is motivated by the pursuit of merit, the intention is self-serving rather than selfless. This approach prioritises personal gain over the welfare of other beings, exhibiting a strong utilitarian mindset. Moreover, many contemporary life releasing groups do not rescue endangered lives spontaneously but instead organise donations to pre-arrange the purchase of animals. This fosters exploitative practices among merchants who capture birds, animals, and fish solely to sell them for release.⁵⁶

為了功德而放生，動機上是自私而非「無我」的。因為這是從自己的利益（而非眾生的利益）出發，終究帶著強烈的功利心態。在做法上，由於當前許多放生團體不是隨緣搶救瀕死生命，而是張羅善款，預約購買，這就促成了商人為一筆筆「放生生意」而捕獵鳥獸蟲魚的造孽行為。

Her emphasising the selfishness and self-centeredness of *fangsheng* is a way to disillusion *fangsheng* supporters. This is also her theological argument against those who are defending the ritual justifying it as defending freedom of religion:

The ecological consequences of life releasing practices have prompted environmental scholars and conservation organisations to speak out. At this point, those seeking to accumulate merit cannot justify their actions under the guise of 'religious freedom' or 'freedom of behaviour'. Instead, they must humbly revisit the original Buddhist principle of 'protecting life', examining the structural implications of their actions within the broader ecological system. This re-evaluation aligns with the Buddhist law of 'dependent origination', emphasising interdependence and mutual preservation.

「放生」造成的生態問題，已迫使生態學者與保育團體群起撻伐，這時，再好「做功德」的人，也都無權以「宗教自由」或「行為自由」來做搪塞，而要謙卑地回顧佛教「護生」的原始意義，並在整個生態體系中，檢視其「放生」行為所牽連的結構，重新衡量目前「放生」型態的合理性與必要性——這其實也是基於萬有相依相存的「緣起」法則所做的宗教反省。

Zhaohui parallels Buddhist religious philosophical logic with the non-religious, scientific term of ecological balance. This re-contextualisation of the Buddhist

⁵⁶ Translation by author from: Zhaohui 2001. Digitally accessed at: <https://www.lca.org.tw/node/952>.

teaching is not foreign to reformist at all and can be found in Xingyun's rhetoric too, as well as in scholarship concerning Buddhist environmental ethics.

Based on the presented quotations, we can observe the narratives and attitudes that have emerged in the discourse surrounding *fangsheng* in Taiwan. What is common to all of them is that each response in some way legitimises itself by referring to Buddhist teachings, forming various positions within the dynamics of religious worldviews and modern science.

Xingyun in the *fangsheng* discourse

Despite belonging to an older generation of Taiwanese Buddhist masters, Xingyun, similarly to Zhaohui adopts a reformist stance on *fangsheng*, particularly in response to the criticism that it faces in modern Taiwanese society. His views may not be as progressive as the nun's, but he emphasises the negative effects of the ritual more elaborately than his Humanistic Buddhist⁵⁷ contemporary, Shengyan, which indicates that he should be placed around the midpoint between the centrist and reformist positions of the spectrum. In one aspect that he is particularly critical of contemporary animal release practice is the commercialisation and industry that has developed around the ritual. Highlighting the ecological and ethical consequences that may arise from this industry, Xingyun remarked:

We humans have endlessly exploited and destroyed nature for the sake of economic development. However, humans and nature are inseparable and should thrive together. Actually, many people do not understand the true meaning of release; they buy many small fish, birds, and various animals and release them. This not only sacrifices their lives but also destroys the ecology and feeds the greed of businessmen. Therefore, we advocate that protecting lives is more important than releasing lives, and that it is the true expression of respect for life.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Buswell–Gale 2004: 263. Humanistic Buddhism (*renjian fojiao* 人间佛教) is a modern Buddhist movement that emphasises active engagement with contemporary social issues, including education, poverty, environmentalism, and healthcare. It was developed by the Chinese Buddhist reformer Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947) and further advanced by scholars and monastics, such as Yinshun 印順 (1906–2005). Rooted in the idea that Buddhism should not be confined to monastic life, Humanistic Buddhism seeks to make Buddhist teachings relevant and applicable to daily life. It shares similarities with Engaged Buddhism, which also promotes social activism but was more directly shaped by the work of Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022). Humanistic Buddhism has been particularly influential in Taiwan and China, where it has inspired large-scale humanitarian efforts.

⁵⁸ Translation by author from: Xingyun 2018. Digitally accessed at: <https://books.masterhs-yingyun.org/ArticleDetail/article9850>.

我們人類為了經濟發展，無止盡的開發和破壞大自然，然而人與自然之間密不可分，共生共榮。許多人由於不明白放生的真義，買了許多小魚、小鳥、各種動物隨意放生，不只犧牲牠們的生命，也破壞了生態，增長了商人的貪婪。所以我們提倡護生重於放生，甚至以護生來代替放生，才是真正尊重生命的表現。

Here, Xingyun critiques not only modern *fangsheng* practices but also frames these actions within the broader context of humanity's exploitation of nature for profit. This framing underscores how *fangsheng*, when misunderstood or misapplied, may outwardly appear compassionate but ultimately exacerbates ecological harm and animal suffering.

Another pattern of his reformist narrative is providing alternatives for animal release rituals, in the context of showing compassion to non-humans. This attitude manifests in the way that he emphasises that protecting life (*husheng* 護生) is superior to releasing life. This perspective diverges from traditional views that regard *fangsheng* as an integral act of Buddhist compassion. For Xingyun, the protection and non-harming of life—a notion that extends to non-living things as well, such as water, air, and earth in his narrative—aligns much more with Buddhist environmentalism than animal release rituals. He often connects this ethical teaching to the story of Śyāmaka Bodhisattva from the Śyāmakajātaka-sūtra (*Foshuo shanzi jing* 佛說睺子經, T031752) a telling of the former birth of the Buddha, where he is a filial son to his blind, hermit parents. While this particular Jataka tale has been shown as an important example of the Confucian ethic of filial piety appearing in Buddhism, Xingyun emphasises another ethical aspect of the story, which is Śyāma's mindful interaction with nature:

As it is said in the Śyāmakajātaka-sūtra, Śyāmaka Bodhisattva's love and care for nature was truly remarkable. When he spoke, he didn't dare raise his voice, fearing he might disturb the earth as it rested. Not only was his speech gentle, but he also walked lightly and slowly, careful not to hurt the earth with any heavy steps or sudden movements. The earth provides us with sustenance and a place to exist, so why would we cause it pain?⁵⁹

在《佛說睺子經》裡說到，睺子菩薩對大自然愛護的行為，真是了不起。他講話的時候，不敢大聲，怕吵醒熟睡的大地；不但講話不會大聲，走路的時候，腳步也放輕、緩慢，生怕一奔跑跳動，踩痛了大地。土地給我們生長、給我們存在，為什麼要踩痛它呢？

⁵⁹ Translation by author from: Xingyun 2008. Digitally accessed at: <https://books.masterhs-yingyun.org/ArticleDetail/article671>.

This story profoundly influences Xingyun's views on environmentalism and compassion, which he extends to his critique of modern *fangsheng* practices. For example, in 2004 he was aware of the problem of releasing of invasive species, such as piranhas, and the ecological implications of the rituals, which he addressed in a speech in Taipei:

Recently the news have been discussing the issue about animal release. It is because people don't cherish life, and thus the ritual turns from life release to death release. Without understanding ecosystems, people even release dangerous species like piranhas into the waters of Taiwan, creating ecological threats. Although they do it in the name of releasing life, in fact, it is putting [these animals] to death. Hence in our society today, protecting life is superior to releasing it.⁶⁰

最近報紙一再討論放生的問題，由於大家不愛護生命，放生已成了放死。甚至有人到南美洲買了食人魚回到台灣放生，對生態完全不了解，雖名為放生，卻是放死啊！所以今天的社會，放生不如護生。

It is evident how, in the narrative of Xingyun's environmentalism, the whole of the ecosystem and the systematic balance of life carries more importance than the individual lives of the animals that may (or may not) be saved during a *fangsheng* ritual. For Xingyun, environmental ethics manifests as a systematic attitude towards nature as whole, just like in the Jataka story, rather than in the occasional practice of cultivating compassion. On the other hand, it is important to note that Xingyun bases this concept of Buddhist environmentalism within the particular story of Śyāma on a mere six character line: 蹈地常恐地痛 ('treading on the earth, he was often afraid to hurt it'). It is possible that Xingyun's own interpretation of the story is outstretching its original meaning, and he specifically selected it to support his own rhetoric, re-inventing the tradition to fit his progressive views. In this way, Xingyun seeks to relieve the dilemma between Buddhist traditional religiosity and aspects of modern science, by claiming that the scientific (in this case, the ecological) approach already exist in scriptural Buddhism.

Not only does Xingyun condemn contemporary animal release practices from an ecological point of view, but he also expresses criticism towards those who partake in it for self-serving motivations. He describes how people use the practice as a superstitious way to gain merit or longevity, often at the expense of the animals' well-being:

⁶⁰ Translation by author from: *Ibid.*

For instance, some might say, 'To celebrate my 80th birthday tomorrow, please catch some fish for me to release'. These fish waiting to be release end up in water buckets, and since they are crowded into a small space, a good amount of them die before they can even be released.⁶¹

例如有人說：「捕魚的，明天我八十歲大壽要放生，你幫我抓點魚來放生！」[...] 這些等待放生的魚在水桶裡，由於空間太擁擠，還沒放生就死了一大半。

He argues that such acts reflect a misunderstanding of karma and Buddhist teachings. Misguided motivations transform *fangsheng* from an act of compassion into one of harm and futility:

Talking about some incorrect interpretations of Buddhism that have lost their original and true meaning, we must point them out and correct them in order to understand what the Buddha's real intentions were. For example, [there is the] improper mercy release that may turn into the act of killing. People want to release animals with the hope of longevity by having others capture fish or birds, not knowing how many of them die during the process. How will you achieve longevity like this? This is an incorrect understanding of the principle of karma. Using vegetarianism for health or prayer for wealth, all of these violate the principle of karma.⁶²

對於佛教一些錯誤的說法，失去了本來的真義，總要提出來做一些修正，體會佛陀的心懷是什麼。好比，不當的放生，反而成了殺生的愚行；例如求長壽的人要放生，就讓人來捕魚、捉鳥，捉放之間不知死了多少，這樣怎麼會長壽呢？對因果沒有正確的了解，吃素只為了要身體健康，拜佛是為了要發財，這都是違背了因果。

The last two quotes further emphasise the way Xingyun that views the practice as an empty ritual without any reference to the real ethical and moral implications of Buddhist compassion shown to animals. Similarly to Zhaohui, Xingyun shows the unattractive and banal side of animal release, stripping away spiritual implications, such as good karma and merit, that often appear in the narratives of the traditionalists and even in those of the *fangsheng*-apologetics. His views on contemporary *fangsheng* are also consistent of his overall approach to modernising Buddhism and making it more relatable for modern society. However,

⁶¹ Translation by author from: Xingyun 2018. Digitally accessed at: <https://books.masterhs-yingyun.org/ArticleDetail/article9436>.

⁶² Translation by author from: Xingyun 2018. Digitally accessed at: <https://books.masterhs-yingyun.org/ArticleDetail/article9268>.

this attitude is not specific to animal release but rather to the representatives of Humanistic Buddhism, of which Xingyun is an important example.

While Xingyun is critical of contemporary *fangsheng* practices, he acknowledges the historical and cultural significance of *fangsheng* in its traditional context. In his way of paying tribute to the original teachings about animal release rituals, he also frequently quotes and references Lianchi's *Treatise on Refraining from Killing and Releasing Living Being*, which he views as important work in Chinese Buddhist *fangsheng* literature:

In Buddhism, beyond simply refraining from taking life, there is an active focus on protecting life, which reflects profound respect for all the living beings. The Ming Dynasty master Lianchi, in his *Treatise on Refraining from Killing and Releasing Living Being*, writes, 'In the world, to kill and harm others is the cruellest act. Therefore, captured [animals] want to flee; even lice know how to strive to avoid death. That ants move away before a rainfall proves that even they cravenly cling to life. So why do we then set nets in the mountains [...] That makes them utterly terrified, separating mothers from their offspring who may scatter away'. The master also said: 'A person without children feels sorrow; with children, they feel joy. Yet we seldom consider that animals, too, love their young. How can we rejoice in the birth of our children while ending the lives of others' offspring?' Humans and animals may look different, but a parent's love for their offspring is universal.⁶³

佛教除了不殺生，更積極護生，護生是對一切有情生命的尊重。明朝蓮池大師在〈放生文〉中提到：『天下最慘者殺傷。是故逢擒則奔，蟻蟲猶知避死；將雨而徙，螻蟻尚且貪生。何乃網於山 [...] 使其膽落魂飛，母離子散。』又說：『凡人無子則悲，有子則喜，但不思一切禽畜亦各愛其

⁶³ Translation by author from: Xingyun 2018: Digitally accessed at: <https://books.masterhs-yingyun.org/ArticleDetail/article9844>. For more context in how important this specific quote is regarding life-centred environmental ethics, I provide the more detailed segment from *Jiesha Fangsheng Wen*, for which the translation is provided by the author as the following: 'Thus have I heard, in the world, life itself is the most precious, while killing and harming is the cruellest [act]. As for what is the there are two [approaches]. First, ordinary people place equal importance on material goods, status and family, and so on, up until their own physical bodies. However, if one cannot simultaneously obtain all these, then one must choose what he values the most among all these. And this is the reason why one doesn't hesitate [to give up] material goods in order to save one's physical body. One doesn't care about status and rank when it comes to saving one's physical body. One doesn't consider wives and sons when it comes to saving one's physical body. This is the reason why people call these the "most important"'. 蓋聞，世間至重者生命，天下最慘者殺傷。至重有二：一者，世人於金寶、官爵、妻子，以至己身，皆其所重。然不可得兼，則重之中必取其尤重者。是以為救己身，不吝金寶；為救己身，不惜官爵；為救己身，不顧妻子，故云至重。

子，慶我子生，令他子死，於心安乎？』人類和動物雖然形體不一樣，但愛子之心其實都是相同的。

By quoting this particular text, Xingyun also enforces his Buddhist environmental ethical views of which the moral foundation is life itself. Using his narrative about the contemporary *fangsheng* ritual, he also encouraged his followers to shift their focus from releasing life to protecting life.

Conclusions

The ritualistic release of living beings, also known in Chinese as *fangsheng*, has been a significant part of Buddhist religiosity for several centuries. There are numerous key texts in the Chinese Buddhist canon to support the practice including the chapter of *Jalavāhana* The Head Merchant's Son in the *Sūtra of the Sublime Golden Light* as well as potential apocryphal texts, such as *The Brahma's Net Sūtra* and the *Benevolent Kings Sūtra*. These texts played an important role in legitimising the ritual within the religious framework of Buddhist faith, as they are referenced often in the work of later masters, such as Zhiyi, a key figure in putting effort into initiating a more systematic *fangsheng* practice by establishing life release ponds. Between the Tang and the Song dynasties, life release ponds started to gain popularity for both spiritual and official reasons. Releasing wildlife became associated with elongating one's life and showing respect for the emperor. However, due to a lack of government support, life release ponds and life release rituals experienced a decline during the reign of the Yuan dynasty. The life release ritual peaked in popularity in the late Ming dynasty, when the literati and upper classes elevated *fangsheng* to a quasi-status quo practice. The Pure Land patriarch Lianchi was also responsible in spreading the ritual to the masses, after which *fangsheng* became an immensely popular lay Buddhist practice in China, as well as in surrounding Asian countries.

To this day, large-scale *fangsheng* is organised frequently. However, in recent decades, its contemporary practice has received negative attention and criticism. The reasons behind the *fangsheng*-critiques are the dangers that the practice might impose to ecological balance: the mass amount of animals released into the wild are most of the time not native species, and thus they might potentially become invasive and dangerous to local eco-systems. Ever since these dangers have been exposed, the ritual's modern legitimacy has been argued and questioned. In Taiwan, this has materialised as a discourse, where different Buddhist representatives either defend or condemn *fangsheng*. These responses show a spectrum of narratives: a conservative attitude wholly justifying the practice and

disregarding any criticism, a centrist one directing attention from the ritual itself to its incorrect practitioners, and the reformist disapproving of contemporary *fangsheng* and offering alternatives. All three narratives base their arguments on different doctrinal grounds and references to advocate for their own religious followings.

Xingyun represents reformist ideas about *fangsheng*, criticising both the industry that has developed around the practice and the self-centred motivations of some Buddhist believers who engage in it without proper understanding. Karmic and ecological principles are deeply interwoven in Xingyun's narrative, which is also a foundation for his environmental ethical narrative. This narrative emphasises that the ethical support to Buddhist morale towards nature lies in the protection of life itself and interconnected value found in animals, plants, water, and earth. Saving a limited number of lives by disrupting this interconnected value is a misunderstanding of Buddhist principles in Xingyun's point of view. He emphasises that protecting life is superior to releasing life as a demonstration of compassion towards living beings, often connecting this idea to the qualities of Śyāmaka Bodhisattva as portrayed in the Śyāmakajātaka-sūtra. His reinterpretation of this particular story, however, can be considered text-handpicking or a reinvention of the tradition, in order to fit his own Buddhist ideology into the context of religion and science.

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