

Matthias Schumann (Heidelberg University)
**Between Animal Welfare and Human Salvation:
Changing Buddhist Animal Release Practices in
Republican Shanghai**



Abstract The Buddhist practice of animal release (*fangsheng* 放生) refers to the ritual release of animals otherwise intended for slaughter or human consumption into specially designated rivers, ponds, lakes, or parks. Accompanied by ritual offerings and scripture recitation, it serves the dual purpose of saving the animals from suffering and gaining merit for human salvation. During the Republican period, the ritual procedures of animal release practices, which can be quite challenging for the animals involved, became increasingly questioned in light of novel discourses on animal protection and welfare. Against this background, this talk will show how the lay Buddhist community in Republican Shanghai responded to the challenge of reconciling human salvation and animal welfare. It will show how—apart from formulating reform proposals themselves—lay Buddhists set out to establish animal release institutions intended to do justice to both the human and animal interests involved, often with mixed results. The talk thereby also seeks to approach the topic of Buddhist animal release, which has been chiefly studied in terms of its ethical justification, from a more animal-centered perspective

Bio Matthias Schumann is a postdoctoral research fellow at Heidelberg University, where he works on the intersections of religion, society, and politics with a particular focus on human-animal relations. He is co-editor of a recently published volume, *Communicating with the Gods: Spirit-Writing in Chinese History and Society* (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

