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When faith meets enterprise: coordinating meanings for coping with stress among Buddhist entrepreneurs in China

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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurs often face persistent, uncontrollable stressors, yet research has prioritised problem- and emotion-focused coping over meaning-making processes. Drawing on Park and Folkman's global-situational framework, this qualitative study examines how religious (Buddhist) and professional (entrepreneurial) meanings interact in coping among Chinese Buddhist entrepreneurs. Based on semi-structured interviews with 22 interviewees, we identify two families of interaction mechanisms: *overriding* (prioritising Buddhist meanings when entrepreneurial frames fail, e.g. interpreting outcomes through karma or elevating religious goals over profit) and *intertwined* (integrating meanings, e.g. pairing non-attachment with perseverance to sustain effort while reducing outcome fixation). These mechanisms generate situational meanings that render adversity bearable without abandoning entrepreneurial commitments. The study advances meaning-making coping by showing that it involves coordinating multiple components within global meaning, not merely reconstructing situational appraisals. We reconceptualise global meaning as a dynamic, negotiable system where stability and flexibility coexist, illustrating how religious resources support rather than substitute for entrepreneurial logics.

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Meaning-focused coping; meaning making; coping strategies; coping; religious coping; global meaning; situational meaning; stress appraisal; entrepreneurship; Buddhist entrepreneurs; workplace stress; Buddhism; religion

Introduction

Entrepreneurship is widely recognised as one of the most stressful career choices, given the multiple roles and responsibilities entrepreneurs must juggle across different stages of business development (Gunawan & Cahayani, 2022). Entrepreneurs are financially and psychologically tied to their ventures, so their well-being and performance are inevitably affected by entrepreneurial stress (White & Gupta, 2020). Prior studies show that such stress is strongly associated with burnout (Wei et al., 2015) and may even lead to withdrawal from ventures (Andringa et al., 2016). Understanding how entrepreneurs cope with stress is therefore critical for sustaining both individual well-being and business continuity.

While research on entrepreneurial coping has grown, it remains limited in scope. Most studies focus on problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies (Pathak & Goltz, 2021; Uy et al., 2013), overlooking the role of deeper, value-based coping processes. The broader coping literature, however, recognises meaning-focused or meaning-making coping as a distinct and powerful mechanism that helps individuals reinterpret stressful events in a way that restores coherence and significance (Dewe & Cooper, 2017; Song et al., 2025). Meaning-making coping is particularly relevant in the entrepreneurial context, where uncertainty, persistent stressors, and limited control are inherent features of daily work (Folkman, 1997; Schonfeld & Mazzola, 2015; Tisu & Vîrgă, 2021).

According to Park and Folkman's (1997) meaning-making framework, this form of coping depends on an individual's global meaning system, a cognitive-motivational structure comprising beliefs and goals that shape how people interpret and respond to challenges. Global meaning is not fixed; it is shaped by experiences and identities developed across multiple life domains, such as family, work, culture, and religion. As such, different aspects of an individual's global meaning system may be linked to different identities. For

individuals whose religious and professional identities are both salient, these belief systems may converge, conflict, or dynamically interact in the domain of work (Héliot et al., 2020).

This interplay between religious and entrepreneurial identities is especially salient for Buddhist entrepreneurs, for whom the two domains often appear to hold contrasting orientations. Whereas entrepreneurship typically emphasises material success, achievement, and growth, Buddhism values transcendence, compassion, and detachment from desire (Kovács, 2020). Yet, Buddhism continues to exert a profound influence across many Asian economies, where a growing number of entrepreneurs identify as Buddhist (Pew Research Center, 2017; Todd, 2018). In China, it is estimated that 10 to 20 per cent of the adult population follows Buddhism (Ji, 2012).

The dual identity systems of religion and profession may at times pull in opposing directions (Yao et al., 2024). This tension raises an important question: How do Buddhist entrepreneurs reconcile or navigate these seemingly conflicting belief systems when coping with entrepreneurial stress? Addressing this question deepens our understanding of coping as an identity-driven process that integrates, rather than separates, religious and professional meaning systems. It also advances coping theory by illustrating how multiple identity domains interact within the broader global meaning system, and enriches entrepreneurship research by revealing how religious beliefs and goals can serve as psychological resources in managing stress.

Accordingly, this study explores how Chinese Buddhist entrepreneurs engage in meaning-making coping by drawing on both Buddhist and entrepreneurial identities. Specifically, it examines how Buddhist beliefs and goals interact with entrepreneurial beliefs and goals in shaping adaptive responses to entrepreneurial stress.

Literature review

Religion and entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship scholars have called for greater attention to religion, moving beyond earlier research that adopted an overly narrow, financially oriented view of entrepreneurial activities (Emami et al., 2026; Smith et al., 2021). Within this emerging body of work, religion has been conceptualised both as an institution that shapes entrepreneurial behaviour (Henley, 2017; E. Y. Zhao & Lounsbury, 2016) and as an individual characteristic or identity that informs who entrepreneurs are and how they engage in entrepreneurship (Cornwall & Naughton, 2003). Although much of this literature has focused on Western religions, particularly Christianity (Alford & Naughton, 2001; Henley, 2017; Parboteeah et al., 2015), research on Eastern religions, especially Buddhism, has grown rapidly. Existing studies suggest that Buddhism, or Buddhist values, can influence individuals' entrepreneurial intentions and choices (Audretsch et al., 2013; Dissanayake, 2022), as well as how entrepreneurs evaluate and exploit opportunities (Valliere, 2008). Buddhism has also been shown to shape entrepreneurs' value orientations (Kovács, 2017), management practices (Kovács, 2014), access to external resources (Xu et al., 2023), business performance (Liu et al., 2019; Mahadewi et al., 2022), career success (Yao et al., 2024), and contribution to the wider community (Dissanayake et al., 2025). Taken together, these studies generally highlight the positive role of Buddhism in entrepreneurship. Despite these valuable insights, little is known about how Buddhism shapes the ways in which entrepreneurs cope with work-related stress.

Religion in meaning-making coping

Coping encompasses more than problem-solving or emotion regulation; it also involves reappraising stressors in ways that reduce their psychological impact (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Song et al., 2025). From a transactional perspective, stress does not reside solely in an external event, but emerges when individuals appraise a situation as involving harm/loss, threat, or challenge to their well-being, goals, or values (Dewe & Cooper, 2017; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Building on this appraisal-based view, Park and Folkman's (1997) meaning-making framework explains why some stressful experiences are particularly disruptive: they create a discrepancy between global meaning and situational meaning. Global meaning refers to a broad cognitive framework of beliefs and goals that guides interpretation, whereas situational meaning is the meaning assigned to a specific event. When situational meaning conflicts with global meaning, the event is likely to be experienced as stressful because it threatens individuals' sense of coherence. Meaning-making coping restores coherence either by changing the situation or by changing one's global meaning system (Lewis & Hill, 2019).

Religion often plays a central role in this process because it provides a comprehensive system of meaning that helps individuals interpret suffering and maintain purpose (Hall et al., 2025; Pargament, 1997). Religious values and doctrines offer reference points for making sense of adversity and preserving psychological stability (Krok, 2015). Religious coping has been widely observed in contexts such as illness, bereavement, and ageing (Daştan & Kulakaç, 2024; Hassan & Doğan, 2025; Testoni et al., 2022). Pargament (2010) identified multiple religious coping functions, including finding meaning, mastery, comfort, and transformation through connection with the sacred.

However, research examining religious coping in the workplace remains limited, particularly regarding how religious meaning systems are drawn upon to cope (Dik et al., 2024). Existing studies suggest that religion provides a valuable source of meaning-making coping for professionals. For instance, Small (2020) found that African American male leaders often viewed their work as an opportunity to serve a higher power, which strengthened their resilience. Similarly, Nakonz and Shik (2009) reported that Philippine migrant workers in Hong Kong coped with hardship by perceiving adversity as part of God's plan and viewing the physical world as a temporary sojourn.

Yet, much of this literature treats religion as an independent meaning system, focusing mainly on how religious beliefs influence coping in isolation. In reality, people's global meaning rarely consists solely of religious elements. Non-religious experiences and secular goals, such as career aspirations or social expectations, also shape how individuals interpret stressors. This complexity can generate tension between religious and secular meaning systems. For example, Phillips et al. (2009) found that American Buddhists experienced 'Buddhist struggle' when doctrines such as mindfulness and non-attachment clashed with everyday interpersonal challenges. Similarly, Carminati and Héliot (2022) found that doctors and nurses in the English National Health-care Service experienced identity conflict in ethically charged situations when religious values clashed with professional responsibilities. In a subsequent quantitative study, Carminati and Héliot (2023) showed that professional-religious identity conflict among doctors was associated with lower psychological well-being. These studies suggest that religious and professional meaning systems may not always operate harmoniously.

Earlier work suggests that religious and professional identities may relate to each other in different ways. For example, Exline (2002) observed that Christian values of humility and patience may conflict with Western ideals of autonomy and material success, whereas Alford and Naughton (2001) suggest that Christian social principles can be integrated into business and management practices. Building on this line of inquiry, Héliot et al. (2020) proposed a framework in which the relationship between these identities ranges along a continuum from congruence to incongruence, with coexistence in the middle. However, their focus remained on how job demands or professional expectations may clash with religious beliefs and practices, rather than on how religious and professional meaning systems might interact dynamically to facilitate coping and resilience.

Although Park and Folkman (1997) acknowledged that global meaning comprises diverse components, few studies have explored how these components interact during coping (Park, 2013). Traditionally, global meaning has been viewed as a relatively stable framework of beliefs and goals that provides consistency and direction in one's life. Only when this framework fails to offer meaning or coherence, individuals tend to undergo major transformations, such as religious conversion or deconversion (Paloutzian et al., 2013). However, recent perspectives suggest that global meaning can also be both stable and flexible, allowing individuals to draw simultaneously on religious and secular elements without undergoing fundamental change. For example, Yao et al. (2024) found that among Chinese entrepreneurs, religious and professional identities can coexist and integrate to influence decision-making, leadership, and self-perceptions of success. However, their study did not focus on stress and coping, leaving the dynamic interplay between these meaning systems underexplored.

Understanding how religious and professional meaning systems interact in coping processes offers a richer and more nuanced perspective on meaning-making coping. This approach moves beyond examining religion as a separate source of meaning to considering it as one of several interwoven systems that shape how individuals respond to stress.

Chinese Buddhist entrepreneurs as a context

China provides a particularly valuable context for examining how religious and professional meaning systems interact. Although officially secular, the country has seen a notable revival of Buddhism since the late

1970s (Ji, 2012). Entrepreneurs form a substantial segment of contemporary Buddhist adherents, often seeking spiritual grounding amid an unpredictable business environment (Wang, 2011). Rapid regulatory shifts and intense competition heighten uncertainty for Chinese entrepreneurs, amplifying stress and anxiety (Hsiao, 2020; Lew, 2017), thereby making Buddhism an important source of inner peace and meaning.

Buddhist meaning in this study refers to religious beliefs and goals articulated within Buddhist doctrine. The Four Noble Truths posit that life entails suffering; that suffering arises from craving and aversion; that liberation from suffering is possible; and that the Noble Eightfold Path provides the disciplines necessary to achieve that liberation (Chen, 2006). The Noble Eightfold Path encompasses right understanding, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration, providing a practical framework for ethical conduct and mental cultivation (Bodhi, 2010). Buddhist doctrine is also guided by the framework of karma and rebirth, which emphasises the moral consequences of intentions and actions (Harvey, 2000). Importantly, Buddhist thought does not treat karma as strict determinism. While past karma may condition present circumstances, present intentions and actions also shape both current experience and future outcomes. This makes the Noble Eightfold Path central to Buddhist practice, as it provides a practical route through which followers can cultivate ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom to overcome the causes of suffering and progress toward liberation (Bodhi, 2010). Commonly embraced Buddhist principles, such as karma, impermanence, non-harming, compassion, right livelihood, and mindfulness, can therefore be understood as interconnected elements of this broader path (Marques, 2012). Together, these beliefs and goals orient adherents toward acceptance of change, moral restraint, and cultivation of insight and compassion, which can underpin meaning-making coping in the face of persistent or uncontrollable stressors.

By contrast, the entrepreneurial meaning system is constituted by beliefs about what matters in venture creation and growth (e.g. fairness and risk-taking) and by business goals that motivate founding and persistence (e.g. extrinsic rewards such as wealth, intrinsic rewards such as recognition, independence and autonomy, and family security) (Kuratko et al., 1997; Rubin, 2012; Zaleskiewicz et al., 2020). Entrepreneurial practice typically emphasises striving, accumulation, and control under conditions of uncertainty, which can sit uneasily alongside Buddhist emphases on non-attachment, equanimity, and moral discipline.

These systems can both complement and collide. On the one hand, Buddhist concepts such as impermanence and non-attachment can normalise uncertainty and temper overattachment to outcomes, supporting risk tolerance and resilience among entrepreneurs (Jiang et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2019). Compassion and right livelihood can also orient decision-making toward ethical stakeholder care (Yao et al., 2024). On the other hand, the entrepreneurial pursuit of growth, status, and material success may challenge Buddhist commitments to detachment and restraint, creating value tensions that must be negotiated in daily practice (Schuyler, 2007). This inherent tension makes Buddhist entrepreneurs an ideal group for examining how religious and secular components of global meaning coexist, conflict, and interact in coping with stress.

Building on this literature, the present study investigates the dynamic interplay between Buddhist and entrepreneurial beliefs and goals in meaning-making coping among Chinese entrepreneurs. Rather than treating global meaning as a static, unified system, we approach it as a flexible cognitive-motivational structure through which individuals negotiate multiple sources of meaning to reinterpret stress. While prior work shows that religious and professional identities can coexist or integrate to influence work attitudes, well-being, professional performance, decision-making, leadership, and self-perceived success (Hélot et al., 2020; Yao et al., 2024), it has not focused on meaning-making coping, leaving the coping-relevant dynamics between divergent identities and their meaning systems underexplored. Our study addresses this gap by analysing how Buddhist and entrepreneurial meanings are drawn upon to manage entrepreneurial stress.

Methods

Research design

This study adopted a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews to explore how Chinese Buddhist entrepreneurs mobilise Buddhist and entrepreneurial beliefs and goals in meaning-making coping. A qualitative approach was appropriate because it allows for an in-depth understanding of subjective experiences and the contextual complexity of values and beliefs (Bryman, 2008). Anchored in an interpretivist paradigm (Crotty, 1998), the study assumes that meaning is socially constructed and that entrepreneurs' coping processes are embedded within social and religious contexts.

Data collection procedure

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted in Mandarin, the interviewees' native language. The first author conducted all interviews, allowing for consistent communication and rapport building. Interview locations were chosen by interviewees to accommodate their schedules and to ensure a comfortable environment that encouraged open discussion. Each interview began with general questions about interviewees' entrepreneurial background and involvement with Buddhism, before progressing to more specific questions about how they used Buddhist teachings or practices to cope with work stress. Probing questions were used to clarify interpretations and elicit concrete examples of stressful work-related experiences in their entrepreneurial ventures (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interviews lasted between 60 and 90min, were audio-recorded with the participants' oral consent, and transcribed verbatim. Ethical approval from the Human Ethics Committee of the second author's institution was obtained prior to data collection, and pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of all participants when reporting their narratives.

Sampling and interviewees

Given the specificity of the research context, purposive and snowball sampling were used to identify interviewees who could provide rich and relevant insights (Bryman, 2008). The sampling process began in three southern coastal provinces of China, namely Guangdong, Guangxi, and Fujian, where entrepreneurial activity has flourished since China's reform and opening-up policies (S. Zhao, 2024). Using both personal networks, the first author approached Buddhist groups in these regions and invited members who met the inclusion criteria to participate in the study.

Three criteria guided interviewee selection. Interviewees were required to be owners and managers of their own businesses, to have operated their businesses for at least three years, and to self-identify as Buddhist and regularly participate in Buddhist activities. This approach ensured that interviewees had both entrepreneurial experience and an active engagement with Buddhist practice.

Initially, 25 entrepreneurs were interviewed. After analysis, three were excluded because their coping strategies (e.g. chanting or meditation) did not involve meaning-making coping. The final sample comprised 22 Chinese Buddhist entrepreneurs from various industries, including manufacturing, education, retail, property, and services. Interviewees ranged in age from 27 to 60 years ($M = 42.5$, $SD = 8.8$). Thirteen were female, and 19 were married with children. Over half held bachelor's or master's degrees. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved. That is, when no new themes or insights emerged regarding the relationship between Buddhist and entrepreneurial components in global meaning (Merriam, 2009). A summary of demographic characteristics of the interviewees is provided in Table 1.

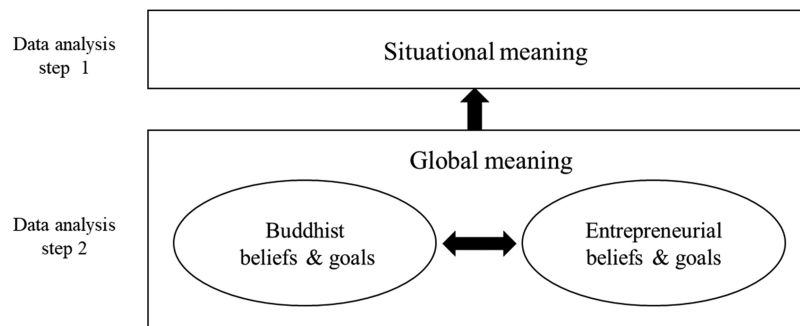
Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), guided by Park and Folkman's (1997) model of global and situational meaning. The analysis proceeded in two main stages (see Figure 1 for an illustrative overview of the data analysis process). In the first stage, interviewees' situational meanings were identified and categorised, focusing on how they reinterpreted stressful events to reduce distress. For example, an interviewee might describe a financial loss as not particularly important. By downplaying the significance of their business goals, the interviewee experienced less distress following a setback. The second stage examined how Buddhist and entrepreneurial beliefs and goals interacted to shape these situational meanings. For instance, an interviewee might emphasise the importance of observing Buddhist values such as non-attachment, which informed their situational meaning that 'the result is not so important'.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, the first author familiarised himself with the data through repeated reading and initial memo-writing to capture early impressions (Saldana, 2013). Initial codes were then generated using NVivo software to manage and organise the data efficiently. A coding template was developed based on three transcripts and refined iteratively across the dataset (King, 2004). Related codes were then collated into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined through continuous

Table 1. Demographic information of interviewees.

Sample demographics	Interviewees <i>N</i>	%
Number of interviews	22	100
Age		
Average; SD	42.5; 8.8	
[Min., Max.]	[27, 60]	
Gender		
Male	9	41
Female	13	59
Marital status		
Married	19	86
Single	3	14
Number of Children		
0	3	14
1	8	36
2	8	36
3	2	9
4	0	0
5	1	5
Educational level		
Diploma	10	45
Bachelor	6	27
Masters	6	27
Length of company establishment (years)		
3–5	6	27
6–8	4	18
9–11	2	9
12–14	5	23
15+	5	23
Industry classification		
Communication	1	5
Education	6	27
Finance	1	5
Production	2	9
Property	1	5
Retail	2	9
Service	8	36
Tourism	1	5
Province		
Guangdong	16	72
Guangxi	3	14
Fujian	3	14
Number of employees		
1–10	8	36
11–50	6	27
51–100	2	9
100+	6	27
Length of practising Buddhism (years)		
1–3	17	77
4–6	2	9
7–9	1	5
10+	1	5

**Figure 1.** Data analysis strategy.

engagement with both data and relevant literature (Nowell et al., 2017). Themes were further defined and clarified to ensure internal coherence and external distinctiveness (Patton, 2002). The second and third authors independently reviewed and discussed the themes to enhance interpretive consistency and ensure analytic rigour. Translations were also reviewed jointly by all authors fluent in both Mandarin and English to preserve linguistic and conceptual fidelity.

Findings

The data analysis identified three types of interaction between Buddhist beliefs and entrepreneurial beliefs, and one type of interaction between Buddhist goals and entrepreneurial goals within global meaning. These mechanisms of interaction generated six situational meanings that directly alleviated entrepreneurial stress (see Figure 2).

Buddhist beliefs reinforce entrepreneurial beliefs (n = 6)¹

Buddhist beliefs can reinforce entrepreneurial beliefs by helping some interviewees construct a situational meaning that ‘there is fairness and justice in the world’. This helps restore coherence in entrepreneurial beliefs during stressful experiences. Karma, a central Buddhist belief referring to the moral law of cause and effect whereby past actions shape present and future outcomes (Marques, 2012), was frequently cited by interviewees to justify adverse events such as financial loss or failed lawsuits, which initially appeared to contradict secular entrepreneurial beliefs such as fairness and justice in the market. In such cases, Buddhist beliefs served to reinterpret and reaffirm those entrepreneurial beliefs. For instance, interviewee-16 described experiencing great difficulty recovering arrears and explained how she came to accept her loss by appealing to karma, which reaffirmed her belief in fairness in business:

He owed us a lot of money. In the past, I kept tracing it back. Now, I think that he will have the retribution ... He will have their karma. Initially, I thought that if I couldn't get the money back, I would sue him. Let them go to jail for several years to make myself feel better. Now, I think it doesn't matter. He will eventually have their karma anyway.

A similar logic was expressed by another interviewee, who extended the temporal horizon of justice and decoupled it from immediate legal sanction:

What they have done will produce bad karma for themselves. They will pay their price but maybe not now.
(interviewee-01)

Together, these accounts show how karmic belief stabilises secular norms of fairness by relocating justice to a longer timeframe (‘eventually’) and a broader moral order (‘retribution’). Rather than undermining entrepreneurial values, Buddhist meanings shore them up: entrepreneurs maintain faith in fairness and

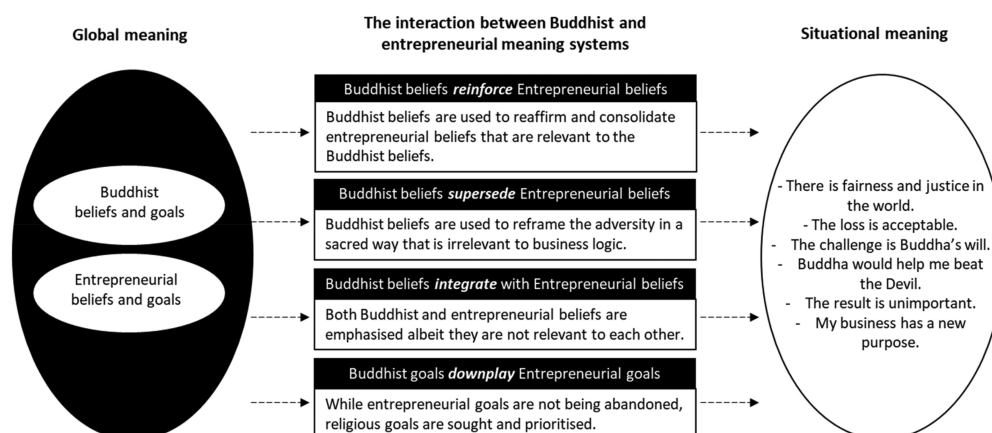


Figure 2. The structure of findings.

reciprocity, while reducing rumination and the impulse for retaliatory action. In this way, Buddhist beliefs operate as a meaning-making resource that reconciles adverse outcomes with secular business ethics, enabling entrepreneurs to preserve their core values amid uncertainty and loss.

Buddhist beliefs supersede entrepreneurial beliefs (n = 13)

Buddhist beliefs may also supersede entrepreneurial beliefs when the latter fail to make sense of stressful events or reduce distress. Three distinct situational meanings emerged from this process. The first is ‘the loss is acceptable’. Interviewee-15, for example, experienced heavy financial loss due to a sudden regulatory change. Despite her efforts, she found that her belief in hard work as a guarantee of success no longer held meaning. Instead, she drew on the Buddhist notion of karma, seeing success and failure as determined by distant causes accumulated over time or even past lives:

It was not just ordinary stress. It was extremely high stress. Many entrepreneurs had to close down their businesses due to industrial regulatory reform ... Some of them experienced great suffering and some even chose to commit suicide ... But I am alright. If it (business success) belongs to you, it must be yours. If you don't have the karmic reward, you would never become successful.

A second situational meaning is ‘the challenge is the Buddha’s will’. Here, interviewees reattributed business difficulties to the Buddha’s deliberate guidance, interpreting them as spiritual tests. Interviewee 07, who struggled to secure clients during his start-up stage, explained:

This situation (lack of clients) is deployed by the Buddha in order to test us. Nothing is easy. The Buddha is watching us to see whether we will persist.

In this view, business hardship becomes a spiritual trial rather than a professional failure.

A third situational meaning is ‘The Buddha will help me beat the Devil’. In this pattern, adversity was reframed through an imaginative moral lens, casting business antagonists as demonic forces. Interviewee-5, for instance, described reframing her experience of harassment as a struggle between righteousness and evil:

We often meet some bad people who want to disrupt your business. Especially as female entrepreneurs, if we meet some scoundrels, it's not unusual that they would threaten us to get what they want ... I represent righteousness, so I don't fear those demons and ghosts ... Now I don't need to bother others. I can just defeat them spiritually.

By recasting adversaries as demons, she found courage and autonomy through her faith in the Buddha’s protection. In these instances, Buddhist beliefs supplanted secular interpretations by transforming adversity into moral or spiritual growth opportunities when entrepreneurial beliefs (i.e. entrepreneurship being especially challenging for women) only deepened distress.

Buddhist beliefs integrate with entrepreneurial beliefs (n = 5)

Some interviewees described integrating Buddhist and entrepreneurial beliefs to form situational meanings that balanced striving with acceptance. The resulting situational meaning is ‘the result is unimportant’, which allowed them to pursue entrepreneurial goals while remaining detached from outcomes. These interviewees continued to value effort and risk-taking as necessary for business success, but paired these secular values with the Buddhist teaching of non-attachment, the Buddhist principle of releasing one’s clinging to desired outcomes in order to reduce suffering (Chen, 2006). Interviewee-18 explained:

When you are facing stress, you know you can't escape. You have to try your very best to deal with it. After you try, then you think in the Buddhist way: whatever the result is, it becomes unimportant, because you have tried very hard. Why do people suffer? Because they are clinging to the result ... Once you become non-attachment, you have no stress.

Another interviewee linked this stance explicitly to yin yuan, a Buddhist teaching holding that all outcomes arise from a network of prior causes extending beyond individual effort and control (Liu et al., 2019), underscoring that outcomes depend on multiple conditions beyond one's control:

Based on the Buddhist perspective of yin yuan, success is determined by a lot of conditions. But no matter of the result, you should try hard. For some goals, although you try very hard, without the right conditions they won't be successful. But at least you have tried. (interviewee-21).

Taken together, entrepreneurial and Buddhist logics coexist: effort and perseverance remain essential for success, while the recognition of non-attachment and yin yuan (predetermined causes and conditions) places outcomes within contingencies beyond one's control. This integration represents a pragmatic balance between achievement orientation and spiritual detachment, sustaining motivation while tempering rumination about results.

Buddhist goals downplay entrepreneurial goals (n = 4)

Buddhist goals can also downplay entrepreneurial goals when the former become more salient sources of meaning. This relationship underpins a situational meaning summarised as 'my business has a new purpose'. In this process, interviewees redefined their entrepreneurial goals, such as profit or career advancement, through higher Buddhist aims like spiritual growth, moral purification, or dissemination of Buddhist teachings.

Interviewee-20, for instance, was an investor. One of her business partners, a private business school principal, fled with tuition fees and left her with major financial and administrative burdens. Rather than closing the school, she reframed it as a platform for spreading Buddhism:

My business background was real estate development, and I never learnt how to manage a school ... I communicated with the students who are also entrepreneurs; we studied Buddhism together; we meditated together ... I took over the management of the school, and I infused some Buddhist knowledge into the curriculum.

Similarly, interviewee-3, who operated a marriage counselling business, found meaning by aligning her work with Buddhist values:

Doing marriage counselling served my intention to explore the counselling market ... But it was very stressful hearing so many awful things in marriages ... I read the Diamond Sutra and tried to understand marriage from a Buddhist perspective ... What I had been doing was purifying people's minds and then purifying their relationships. After thinking this way, I calmed myself down and was determined to keep my business running.

Through such reframing, business challenges and setbacks became opportunities for spiritual transcendence. Reorienting business purpose from secular to religious goals allowed interviewees to reinterpret financial loss and emotional strain as progress toward moral and spiritual fulfilment. It is worth noting that these interviewees did not regard entrepreneurial goals, such as striving to maintain financial viability, as unimportant; rather, they sought to prioritise their religious goals, which they viewed as sustaining their business endeavours over the long term.

Discussion

This study examined how Buddhist beliefs and goals interact with their entrepreneurial counterparts in meaning-making coping. A central theoretical premise is that interpretations of adversity depend on global meaning, a cognitive-motivational framework comprising enduring beliefs and goals. Although scholars often characterise global meaning as a relatively stable, unified system (Park & Gutierrez, 2013), limited attention has been paid to how diverse meaning systems within the same global meaning interact to generate coherence and alleviate stress. Much existing research portrays religious and secular orientations as distinct or even conflicting (Alford & Naughton, 2001; Kovács, 2020), with major life events prompting conversion or deconversion (Paloutzian et al., 1999; Paloutzian et al., 2013). Yet, as Park (2013) notes, a more nuanced account is needed of how religious and non-religious components coexist and interact within global meaning.

From reconstruction to coordination within global meaning

Our findings show that, when coping with entrepreneurial stress, Chinese Buddhist entrepreneurs mobilise their Buddhist and entrepreneurial beliefs and goals in two main ways: *overriding* and *intertwined* (see Figure 3). This indicates that global meaning is not a fixed, homogeneous structure but a flexible, multi-layered system capable of internal negotiation.

In doing so, we extend meaning-making coping theory beyond its conventional emphasis on reconstructing situational meaning (for example, accentuating positives or making downward comparisons; Park & Folkman, 1997; Park, 2010; Gerber et al., 2018). Prior work has offered comparatively little detail on how global meaning itself may be reshaped (Park, 2022; Sherman et al., 2024). Our analysis highlights coordination and integration among multiple global-meaning components as a distinct coping process. Park and Folkman (1997) proposed that people may revise beliefs and goals when their global meaning fails to provide coherence, often illustrated with dramatic examples such as religious conversion or abandoning prior goals. However, empirical work suggests that shifts in global meaning are typically modest even after significant events (Park, 2010) and may reflect reconfiguration rather than wholesale replacement (Park, 2017). Our findings support this view and advance the literature by detailing specific mechanisms of reconfiguration facilitated jointly by religious and entrepreneurial meaning systems.

Overriding mechanism: prioritising Buddhist meanings

The overriding mechanism, in which Buddhist components replace or dominate entrepreneurial ones, resembles the belief and goal revision pathway (Park & Folkman, 1997). Some entrepreneurs reinterpreted success as determined primarily by karmic reward rather than by personal effort. Others downplayed secular goals, such as profit maximisation, by prioritising Buddhist aims, such as disseminating teachings. These findings align with Park's (2013) suggestion that religious systems can become dominant when non-religious frameworks fail to provide satisfactory meaning. Notably, none of the interviewees reported giving up their entrepreneurial commitments. Instead, entrepreneurial beliefs and goals gave way to Buddhist counterparts. This pattern resonates with Hood et al.'s (2005) view that religion often possesses a superior capacity to foster meaning because of its comprehensiveness, accessibility, and transcendence. In moments of uncontrollable stress, Buddhism functioned as an enduring interpretive resource that could supersede instrumental reasoning.

Intertwined mechanism: reinforcement and integration

More importantly, we identify an intertwined mechanism, largely overlooked in meaning-making theory (Park, 2017, 2022), in which religious and secular components coexist synergistically through reinforcement or integration. Although emerging work suggests that synchronising religious and professional identities benefits career outcomes (Yao et al., 2024), coping with work-related stress has not been the focus of that literature. Likewise, while coexistence is theorised (Héliot et al., 2020), empirical demonstrations are sparse.

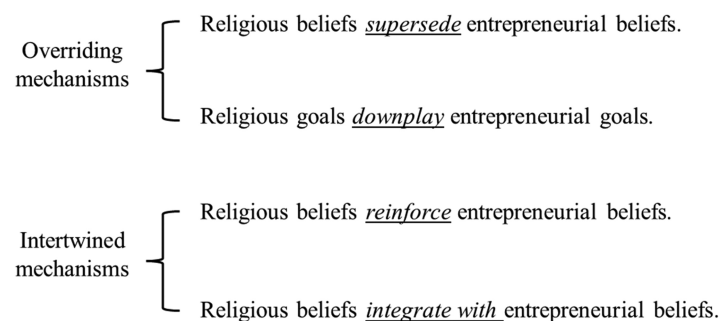


Figure 3. Mechanisms of interplay between religious and entrepreneurial meaning systems.

Our data show two specific pathways. First, reinforcement: entrepreneurs used karma to reaffirm secular norms of fairness, relocating justice to a longer moral time-horizon and stabilising market-based expectations after adverse events. Second, integration: entrepreneurs paired non-attachment with perseverance, sustaining effort while tempering anxiety about uncontrollable outcomes. These patterns challenge binary assumptions that religious and secular schemas are inherently incompatible (Ahmadi & Ahmadi, 2017). Instead, individuals draw on multiple meaning systems to construct coherent interpretations of adversity, which echoes Exline's (2002) notion of 'do-it-yourself spirituality' and supports Saad and Medeiros' (2021) argument that both religious and secular coping can restore threatened core values.

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest that global meaning is best understood as a dynamic ecological system, rather than a static hierarchy of beliefs and goals. Within this system, religious and secular domains are not separate or competing spheres, but interact continuously to generate coherence and restore equilibrium under stress. This ecological perspective moves beyond static or dichotomous models and highlights global meaning's adaptive capacity to integrate diverse cognitive and moral resources in response to situational demands. By revealing how individuals coordinate, rather than simply reconstruct, their multiple sources of meaning, this study reframes coping as an ongoing negotiation across belief systems.

Practical implications

This study offers several practical implications for entrepreneurs, business educators, and policymakers seeking to support psychological resilience among business owners. First, the findings suggest that encouraging entrepreneurs to explore and articulate their core beliefs and values can strengthen their coping capacity. Meaning-oriented reflection has been shown to enhance adaptive resilience and psychological well-being in challenging contexts (Park, 2010). By recognising the diverse sources of meaning, including spiritual and secular aspects, entrepreneurs can better navigate uncertainty and stress. Training programmes, mentorship initiatives, and counselling approaches could therefore integrate reflective exercises that help entrepreneurs identify how their personal philosophies, moral principles, or faith traditions shape their responses to adversity (Pargament, 2011).

Second, the results highlight the value of integrating spiritual perspectives into entrepreneurship education and support systems. While entrepreneurial education traditionally emphasises performance, innovation, and profit, it often neglects the moral and existential dimensions of entrepreneurial life (Hoppe & Namdar, 2023; Lackéus, 2015). Embedding discussions of purpose, compassion, and integrity into entrepreneurship curricula can help individuals balance achievement-oriented goals with broader humanistic concerns. Such integration not only promotes well-being but also encourages socially responsible and sustainable business practices (Fernando & Jackson, 2006).

Third, this study points to the importance of organisational and policy-level recognition of spiritual dimensions of work (Héliot et al., 2020). Creating supportive networks, such as peer groups or community forums that allow entrepreneurs to express their religious identities and discuss ethical dilemmas, stress, and purpose, may help them cope more effectively. By acknowledging the role of religious meaning in coping, business support institutions can promote not only economically sustainable but also psychologically and ethically grounded entrepreneurship.

Limitations and future research

This study illuminates how Buddhist and entrepreneurial meaning systems combine to reappraise entrepreneurial stress among Chinese Buddhist entrepreneurs, yet several limitations warrant caution. First, the study is qualitative, cross-sectional, and retrospective. Accounts of stressful episodes were reconstructed after the fact, which raises the possibility of recall bias and post hoc rationalisation; we also did not capture within-person change over time. To address these issues, future research could employ longitudinal or diary approaches to trace how meaning interactions unfold across stress episodes. Second, the sample is context-specific: interviewees were Buddhist entrepreneurs operating their businesses in China, where cultural and

institutional factors may limit the transferability of our findings to other national or religious contexts. Third, our analysis relies on interviewees' narratives to infer how religious values and their integration with secular meanings help them cope. Although these accounts illuminate mechanisms, they do not establish whether, or to what extent, such reconfiguration of global meaning systems improves well-being. Future research could employ quantitative methods to examine the effects of these mechanisms on well-being.

Conclusion

This study advances meaning-making coping by showing that coping involves not only the reconstruction of situational appraisals but also the coordination of multiple components within global meaning. Analysing Chinese Buddhist entrepreneurs' narratives, we identify patterned ways in which religious and secular meanings interact to restore coherence under stress without requiring wholesale replacement of prior beliefs or goals. This reframes global meaning from a static, unified hierarchy to a dynamic ecological system capable of internal negotiation and selective reconfiguration. In doing so, the study extends Park's global-situational framework by specifying how broader belief and goal structures work together during coping, not merely what changes at the situational level. Our research clarifies that stability and flexibility are not opposing states but coexisting properties of global meaning. As such, meaning-making coping is best understood as an ongoing, intra-system process of coordination across belief systems.

Note

1. *n* refers to the number of interviewees who described this pattern.

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