

back.²⁹ Kenneth Dean (1993) has argued that in southern Fujian the Daoist liturgical framework helped spread and secure the influence of local popular religious cults. A similar symbiotic relationship between Daoist ritual specialists and popular religious cults is absent in Shaanbei. The reason might be that the Daoist priests in Shaanbei belong to the True Perfection tradition, which is more monastic and less well integrated into their surrounding communities as compared to the Zhengyi Daoist tradition in southeastern China.

Beliefs and Practices

Shaanbei People's Religiosity and Religious Habitus

The Problem of Religious Belief

Looking at the rate at which temples and religious practices have been revived in Shaanbei, the impression one gets is that Shaanbei people are very religious. But what is the nature of Shaanbei people's religious beliefs? Perhaps we should question the very concept of "belief" in the Chinese popular religious context, as the concept carries with it enormous Judeo-Christian theological baggage.

It is always extremely difficult to determine people's beliefs. Inference from behavior ignores possible discrepancy between belief and practice. Direct interrogation may elicit falsehood. Concurring with R. F. Johnston's skepticism about Chinese religiosity, Arthur P. Wolf warned that it "should never be thought that people believe everything they tell the visiting anthropologist. Some do; others do not" (Wolf 1974c: vii). An additional vexing problem arises in the discrepancy between *actually experienced* beliefs and beliefs *constructed* by the anthropologist from *statements solicited from the informants about their beliefs*. Even more radically, Rodney Needham has famously asserted that unless a culture has a set of vocabulary to express and talk about religious belief we cannot assume that this culture has such thing as belief or the people actually "experience belief" (Needham 1972). To all of these I would add that even if the natives have a language for belief and really believe what they say they believe, we might still have the problem of explicating the nature of that belief.

It is not difficult to imagine that the tenor of belief in a monotheistic

God would be qualitatively different from a religiosity based on a variety of deities and spirits, as is the case in Chinese popular religion. But that is still assuming a phenomenological equivalence between “believing in God” and “believing in gods, goddesses, and spirits.” This is the kind of functionalist fallacy the early anthropologist Franz Boas fought against when he opposed the tendency in ethnological museums to display the “same category” of artifacts from different cultures side by side because of their functional equivalence and evolutionary progression (Boas 1974: 61–67).¹ For Boas, it would not do to put a New Guinea stick hoe next to a Chinese flat-blade hoe just because both are agricultural instruments. He argued that the significance and meaning of one category of artifacts cannot be understood without putting them within the total context of the culture from which they come, so he advocated displaying all of each particular culture’s artifacts together organically and in relation to one another. Therefore in his view, Kwakiutl religious beliefs and practices could only be understood in the context of the whole repertoire of Kwakiutl culture and not when mechanically juxtaposed and compared with religious beliefs and practices of other cultures. While comparative studies have tremendous value when done properly, I think we should take Boas’s advice seriously and not extract facile “categories” of seemingly similar phenomena out of context from very different cultural settings. In our case I suggest that we investigate the nature of belief in the context of Shaanbei society and culture. In an important sense this book is about how embedded religious ideas and practices are in their cultural and sociopolitical milieu.

But first let us look at the concept of belief in a classic Biblical passage: “Go out all over the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. *He who believes* and is baptized will be saved; *he who refuses belief* will be condemned” (Mark 16:15–16; quoted in the *Catholic Encyclopaedic Dictionary* 1951: 187; emphasis added). As is evident in this key passage in the New Testament, one’s belief in the gospel (there is God and Jesus Christ is the savior, etc.) is central to Christian religiosity and to one’s ontological status, i.e., saved or condemned.

During the course of my fieldwork in Shaanbei, however, I seldom encountered any explicit talk of “belief in deities.” Shaanbei people do have the word for the verb “believe” (*xiangxin*) as used in “I believe what you are saying,” but they do not say “I believe in the Black Dragon King” or “I believe in gods and goddesses.” Most important, they do not have the noun “belief” (as in “you have the right to hold your religious beliefs”)

or “faith” to refer to the totality of their “beliefs.” In contemporary elite discourse in China there is the word “belief” or “conviction” (*xinyang*), but I have never heard Shaanbei people use it. So was Rodney Needham right, that because Shaanbei people do not have a language for religious belief they therefore do not think it is important and they do not experience belief as a psychological state? Needham might have given too much weight to linguistic representations as signs or proof of mental states, for there are many things in life that are too elusive to be captured by linguistic conventions (especially affective states). But we should heed his skepticism regarding an overly facile identification of a familiar psychological state (i.e., “belief”) in otherwise unfamiliar places (a lesson similar to the one we draw from Boas). It goes without saying that when I use words in this book such as “believe,” “believer,” “worship,” “worshiper,” or “pray” the reader needs to be aware of the considerable linguistic compromise necessary in describing Chinese popular religious practices in the English language; these are merely linguistic shorthand.

Religiosity

Deities, temples, temple associations, and ritual specialists are all integral elements of the Shaanbei popular religious landscape, yet one cannot fully understand how these elements are mobilized without a careful understanding of Shaanbei people’s religiosity and religious habitus.

By religiosity I mean the *manner and extent of religiousness* of the people under consideration. When we describe some people as being “very religious,” we usually mean that these people’s lives are infused with a heightened level of religiosity, and religious beliefs and practices suffuse their consciousness and daily activities. In the history of Christianity, a broad distinction has been made between two modalities of religiosity. The first modality, *ritualism*, is characterized by formalistic, behavioral displays of faith (e.g., elaborate church service with complicated manipulation of religious symbolism). The second modality, *piety*, emphasizes the internal state of devotional feelings but not conspicuous, ritualized expressions of such feelings (Quietism being one extreme form of such religiosity). The “piety believers,” who chastise the “ritualism believers” for their “empty ritualism” seem to have gained the upper hand in the battle to define whose religiosity is a “higher,” “better,” and “truer” religiosity, and subsequently, who are better Christians (despite protests from the other camp).

One legacy of the victory of piety over ritualism in the Christian West is the modern craze for spirituality. "Being spiritual" transcends the rigidities of organized religion and even the required central tenet of belief in the one Christian God. Spiritualism thus helps establish a deep respect in the West for other religious traditions that are perceived to be spiritual (e.g., yoga in Hinduism, Japanese Zen Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism). Spiritualism easily accommodates religious pluralism because it is believed that the different gods in different religious traditions are different manifestations of the same Higher Truth and that the paths might differ but they all lead to the same ultimate destination. For a contemporary, Western (Christian) spiritualist, the biggest threat to his or her sensibility therefore is not other religious traditions but atheism. This same sensibility thus to some extent explains the enthusiasm in the West that has greeted the religious revival in heretofore "Godless" Communist China.

But ritualism and piety are only two modalities of Christian religiosity. This admittedly oversimplified contrast serves to highlight the internal diversity of Christian religiosity. Other factors contribute as well to the often astonishing diversity found within Christian religiosity: national history, region and locale, historical period, political climate, socioeconomic condition, race, ethnicity, class, gender, and so forth. Just as it is difficult, if not impossible, to talk about an "average Christian," it is equally difficult to speak of an "average Shaanbei popular religious believer." I will discuss the problem of variation of the character and level of belief between individuals when I introduce the concept of religious habitus below, but first we need to explicate the nature of Shaanbei people's religiosity.

Shaanbei Peasant Religiosity and Religious Practices

Even though Shaanbei people do not speak of "belief" explicitly, they engage in activities that imply belief in the existence of supernatural forces and the magical power of the deities to bless them and to aid them when they are in distress. Their religiosity is largely based on a practical dependence on these deities. Unlike the average Christian who reads the Bible, goes to church, and prays to God regularly, the average Shaanbei popular religious "believer" does not own any religious text to read, does not form a congregation to meet at regular intervals, and does not pray to any particular deity with any frequency. His or her religiosity is nor-

mally diffused but is intensified by some personal or familial crisis.

Shaanbei people go to the deities or consult mediums when they encounter specific problems or crises. However, they employ a host of family ritual procedures to deal with a variety of simple problems. One may call these home magical remedies. One of the most common problems in Shaanbei peasant homes is soul loss of a child; the family ritual procedure involved is known as soul-calling (*jiaohun*). When a baby or young child cannot stop crying, especially at night, or acts listless, or refuses to eat, and the condition persists, some Shaanbei people would think that the soul of the child has gone astray. One family remedy is to draw on a sheet of paper an upside-down hanging donkey (*daodiaoliu*) and write a rhyme next to the picture. This sheet is then pasted on a tree or lamppost on a main village road for passersby to read, so that the child's soul may be called back (this apparently being a very widespread practice; see Gates 1993: 251). The content of the rhyme is some variation on the following:

The heaven is bright and the earth is bright;
There is a child in my home that cries at night.
If a passing gentleman reads this once;
He [the child] will sleep all night till broad daylight.

Another simple remedy to call back the soul is employed if the first one does not work. This method works for both adult and child patients. The father and a sibling of the patient circle the village in the evening calling the soul. During their entire round the father cries out the name of the patient and the sibling replies in the voice of the patient: "I'm back." During my fieldwork I encountered unexpectedly this kind of soul-calling duo a number of times, each time being quite an eerie moment.

When simple family ritual procedures fail to effect recovery of the patient, most Shaanbei people go to a temple, consult a medium, bring the patient to see a doctor, or do a combination of all these, not unlike the Taiwanese in similar situations (see Gould-Martin 1975; Harrell 1974a). When visiting a deity or consulting a medium, Shaanbei people normally donate some incense money and make a vow to contribute more incense money, bring gifts, or sponsor opera performances if the deity or the deity possessing the medium helps the patient recover. Of course, illness is far from being the only problem Shaanbei people bring to the deities. Other problems include marriage prospects, changing jobs, promotion, travel or business plans, lawsuits, interpersonal problems, missing persons or goods, or any other troubles. Many Shaanbei people attend temple festivals specifically to honor their vows by bringing the promised

amount of incense money donation. Occasionally personal troubles are diagnosed by mediums or deities to be caused by a former dishonored vow, sometimes even from past generations.

When Shaanbei people are not troubled by any specific problems, they go to the deities to give thanks and to pray for their continual blessing. The most commonly used phrases in the prayers are "[We or I] implore Your Venerability to bless/protect us so that we will have good fortune, every endeavor will go smoothly, and we will be free from trouble (*qiu ni laorenjia baoyou zanmen dajidali pingpinganan*). The "we" (*zanmen*) in this prayer generally refers to the immediate family of the person praying, and that is why the expression "our whole family" (*zanmen quanjia*) is often used instead. This "we" almost never refers to the larger descent group, the village, let alone even large collectivities such as province or nation. Even when the prayer (as in a rain prayer) refers specifically to "the myriad masses" (*wanmin*), the implied object of blessing is still the numerous families and their members.

Shaanbei people usually make the above-mentioned generalized requests on two different occasions: during the first lunar month and on a particular deity's birthday. The first thing many Shaanbei villagers do in the morning of the first lunar month is to pay respect to the local deity (usually at the village temple). On First Month Fifteenth yangge troupes of different villages and towns (and nowadays also schools) visit the temples and pray for blessing for the year, but this particular celebration is generally considered part of the New Year's festivities. And then there are the temple festivals celebrating the deities' birthdays. Shaanbei people say they go to a temple to "pay respect to the deity" (*jingshen*) instead of "worship" (*bai*).

Magical Efficacy and Religious Habitus

The single most important concept in understanding the Shaanbei deity-worshiper relationship is *ling* (magical efficacy). It refers to the ability of the deity to respond (*ying*) to the worshipers' problems, for example, curing an ill family member, pointing to the right direction for conducting business, enlightening one on a knotty personal dilemma, bringing down ample rain after a bad drought, and so forth.² Therefore, we can characterize Shaanbei popular religion as essentially a religion of efficacious response (*lingying*). Most thanksgiving plaques or banners at the Black Dragon King Temple, as in other popular religious temples in

Shaanbei, have the following stock expressions: *youqiu biying* (whatever you beg for, there will be a response), *shenling xianying* (the divine efficacy has been manifested), and *baoda shen'en* or *dabao shen'en* (in gratitude for divine benevolence).

If we reject the possibility of real divine power, we have to examine how *ling* is socioculturally constructed. Even though *ling* is constructed by people, people's experience of *ling* is real and is a social fact. A deity is *ling* because people experience his power and therefore say that he is *ling*. One deity is more popular and "powerful" than another because more people say the first one is more *ling*. A perceptive Taiwanese informant told the anthropologist Emily Ahern:

When we say a god is *lieng* [*ling*] we mean the god really does help us. Word is then spread from person to person, each telling the other that the god helped. So it is really a matter of relations among men. . . . A change in the popularity of temples is not a result of change in gods' abilities. The abilities of gods don't change. People's attitudes toward them do, however. (Ahern 1981a, quoted in Sangren 1987: 202)

This understanding of deities' power would apply in Shaanbei as well. In other words, the more people experience a deity's *ling*, the more *ling* is attributed to the deity, which in turn contributes to the intensity of people's experience of the deity's *ling*, and so on. One deity's decline in popularity is usually caused by the rise in people's *ling* claims for another deity and the subsequent defection of incense money to the other deity.

On the one hand, *ling* is a deity's power in the abstract. On the other hand, *ling* inheres in concrete relationships, between the deity and an individual worshiper or between the deity and a community. It is meaningful to worshipers mostly in the second sense because *ling* in the abstract is only latent power, not manifest power, and the only meaningful way a deity manifests his or her power is through aiding a worshiper who is in trouble or who needs the blessing to weather life's many trials and tribulations. An allegedly powerful deity whom a person has nonetheless never consulted is without significance to this particular person. Like social relationships, the relationships people have with deities also need maintenance and frequent renewal, hence the visits to the temple in the first lunar month and on the deity's birthday.

Despite the great variety of deities worshiped in Shaanbei, there seem to be some very basic principles or postulates that inform Shaanbei people's religious beliefs and practices and form the core of their religiosity. These basic postulates are:

1. That there are gods (or that it does not hurt to assume that there are gods);
2. That people should respect the gods and do whatever pleases the gods (e.g., building them beautiful temples, celebrating their birthdays) and should not do anything that displeases the gods (e.g., blasphemy);
3. That the gods can bless people and help them solve their problems;
4. That people should show their gratitude for the gods' blessing and divine assistance by donating incense money, burning spirit paper, presenting laudatory thanksgiving plaques or flags, spreading the gods' names, and so forth;
5. That some gods possess more efficacy than others (or have specialized areas of efficacious expertise); and
6. That one is allowed or even encouraged to seek help from a number of different gods provided that one does not forget to give thanks to all of them once the problem is solved.

These six basic postulates underlie most of Shaanbei people's religious beliefs and practices, even though they are not systematically laid out as I have done here. For example, all temple festivals are expressly to celebrate the gods' birthdays, to show gratitude for a year's peace and prosperity or a good harvest, or simply to make the gods happy. Scholars of Chinese popular religion have attempted to categorize temples and their cults using criteria such as the deities' functional specialties (C. K. Yang 1961) or the temple-cult's membership spread, i.e., local or translocal (Baity 1975; Duara 1988a; Faure 1987; Sangren 1987). Yet despite these differences most Chinese people, or at least most Shaanbei people, seem to practice popular religion according to the above-mentioned postulates or principles.

Different people must have different degrees of faith in the power of different deities depending on their personalities and personal experience with these deities. In their comparative study of a Chinese person's and a Hindu Indian person's religiosity, Roberts, Chiao, and Pandey (1975) put forward the concepts of "personal pantheon" and "meaningful god set." According to them, a personal pantheon is "the aggregate of gods known to a single believer" (ibid.: 122), whereas this same person's meaningful god set refers to the most important subset and core of his personal pantheon, which comprises "gods who are particularly meaningful for the believer in the sense that they have personal significance and salience for him, but not necessarily in the sense that he loves or treasures them"

(123). The same approach was also applied to the determination of a personally meaningful set of sacred places (Roberts, Morita, and Brown 1986).

This person-centered approach is immensely useful to the proper understanding of Shaanbei people's religiosity. Even though the popular religious landscape in Shaanbei consists of a large number of deities, sacred sites, and religious specialists, each Shaanbei person's set of meaningful deities, sacred sites, and religious specialists is a limited one. The makeup of each person's "religious habitus" (concept inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "habitus"; see Bourdieu 1977)—that is, his attitudes toward, and behaviors concerning deities, sacred sites, religious specialists, religious rituals, and supernatural forces in general—is determined by whether or not, in what way, and to what degree the events in his personal life have brought him, in a meaningful way, to which of the deities, sacred sites, and religious specialists. It also goes without saying that each person's religious habitus changes over time. Because of their lack of life's many responsibilities and experience with deities' assistance, children and young people tend to treat deities with less respect, and they also know much less about different deities' legends and magical exploits.³

In his study of individual variations of religious belief and unbelief among Taiwanese villagers, Harrell also provided a useful, person-centered perspective on Chinese religiosity (1974a). Among the villagers he interviewed, Harrell found four basic types of believers (or what I would call believers with four basic kinds of religious habitus): intellectual believers, true believers, nonbelievers, and practical believers. Intellectual believers base their beliefs on intellectual coherence and systematic relatedness of religious ideas and practices and are extremely rare; true believers are characterized by their total credulity toward all religious ideas and are rare; nonbelievers are those who completely disregard or ignore the possible truth or usefulness of any religious tenets and are rare as well; and practical believers base their belief on the principle of practical utility and constitute the great majority of Harrell's interviewees. The religious attitude of the practical believers is one of "half trust and half doubt" (ibid.: 86, in Mandarin *banxin banyi*) or "better believe than not." Even though I did not conduct a similar, systematic study of individual variations of Shaanbei people's degree of belief and unbelief, my impression is that in Shaanbei too a great proportion of people are practical believers and many fewer are true believers or nonbelievers. Some Shaanbei urbanites I talked to also expressed the sentiment of practical

and selective belief, as some of them told me that insofar as supernatural powers and stories of efficacious responses are concerned, "one should not not believe [what others say about the power of deities and other supernatural occurrences], nor should one believe everything [they say]" (*buke buxin, buke quanxin*). Another saying also testifies to the flexible attitude Shaanbei people hold toward deities and worship: "If you worship (literally 'honor' or 'respect') him, the deity will be there; if you don't worship him, he won't mind" (*jingshen shenzai, bujing buguai*).

Popular Religion and the Village Community

I have so far characterized Shaanbei people's religiosity as mostly based on private desires (individual or familial). Sometimes community concerns come to the fore and communal solidarity is the goal. At Chinese New Year, when a village *yangge* troupe visits the village deities and prays for their blessing, the villagers expressly petition on behalf of the entire village collectivity. At the annual temple festivals many villages also have a "sharing the sacrifice (sacrificed animal offering)" (*fensheng*) ceremony in recognition of each household's membership in the village community. In this ceremony or ritual, a pig is first brought to the village temple and ritually sacrificed to the deities (*lingsheng*), then brought back to the village, slaughtered, cut into small pieces, and divided into shares according to the number of households in the village. Representatives of each household pay for their share and bring the meat home. Most importantly, participation in sharing the sacrifice confirms all the households' membership in a moral community overseen by the patron deity.

Another occasion for the confirmation of community is the collective responsibility of staging and paying for the annual temple festivals honoring the deities' birthdays. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, both Catholic and Protestant missionaries in many parts of rural China were engaged in aggressive proselytizing. Villagers who became converts invariably came into conflict with those who did not, especially over temple festival dues. The converts were instructed by the missionaries to perceive the village deities as pagan idols and to refuse to pay their share of the dues. The rest of the village argued that as long as these converts were still part of the village they were still responsible for their dues, especially because the entire community, including the Christian converts, benefited from, say, the rain brought by the village dragon god (Litzinger 1996). The same kind of conflicts also happened in Shaanbei.

However, it would be erroneous to conclude, based on the above-mentioned examples, that community solidarity is the primary concern of Shaanbei popular religion. The resurgence of popular religion in rural China, especially the reconstruction of village temples and the staging of temple festivals, persuades some China scholars that the rural communities are reasserting their autonomy vis-à-vis the state. In these accounts there is an emphasis on the collective, community-based, if not egalitarian, dimensions of popular religion (Anagnost 1994; Dean 1997, 1998a; Jing 1996; see also Judd 1994). Other scholars, however, have pointed out the selfish, familial-individualistic, and amoral dimensions of these resurgent popular religious activities (Bruun 1996; Chen 1995; Gates 1987; Siu 1989b; R. Watson 1988; Weller 1994a, 1994b). China scholars have recognized for some time now that Chinese people tend to evaluate and attend to human relationships according to degrees of social distance, with the family being the core of a person's concern and devotion (what the Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiaotong has famously called *chaxu geju*, i.e., patterns of differential relations). My Shaanbei data suggest that both personal-familial and communal dimensions are present, and it is important to distinguish between the two. Put simply, we can say that while collective popular religious activities (e.g., temple-building, temple festivals) are sporadic manifestations of assertions of community and the organizational capacity inherent in popular religion, *the familial-individualistic dimension is the perennial force motivating people to engage in popular religious activities*, be they collectivity-based or household/individual-based.

Popular Religion as an Idiom of Communal Hegemony

Insofar as the village temple belongs to the village community, the village as a whole worships the village deities as a community of believers. Membership in this community is assumed but also reaffirmed through personal worship, donation of incense money, participation in temple festivals, the sharing of the sacrifice, and other activities related to the deities. When it seems that everyone in the village is a member of the community of believers (disregarding the level of commitment and involvement), the worship of the village deities has achieved what can be called *communal hegemony*.⁴

A community of believers does not prohibit its members from seeking help from deities outside or participating in other such communities, but it would sanction against the absence of its members from its own communal worship. The above-mentioned conflicts among Christian converts and other villagers over temple festival fees are a good example of such sanctions. When there are explicit nonbelievers or blasphemers who challenge the power or even the existence of the deities and the validity of others' beliefs, the community of believers often employs coercive measures to attempt to bring these people back in line. They will recount stories of divine retribution and warn of bad death and suffering for the nonbelievers and their families. This kind of communal coercion is a very common practice among believers of Chinese popular religion and seems to be effective in at least subduing dissenting voices within the community if not actually stamping out unbelief.

As in many other Shaanbei temple revivals in the early 1980s, the initial period of the rebuilding and reviving of the Heilongdawang Temple also relied on the power of communal coercion. Here I give only one story relating to what had happened to a man who played an active role in destroying the Black Dragon King Temple during the Cultural Revolution.

Before Liberation, the Heilongdawang Temple was run by three neighboring villages. During collectivization these three villages became three brigades, and when the directive to "destroy the four olds" came from the commune in 1966, the brigades decided to take down the temple and use the much-needed building materials for civic purposes. They divided up the job; one brigade was to take down the main temple building, the other the entrance hallway, and the third the opera stage.

A young man from one of the brigades, a small-team leader, was in charge of the operation on the main building, where the Heilongdawang statue stood. In a flare of revolutionary zeal, he led the charge on Heilongdawang by hitting the large clay statue on the neck with his hoe, knocking off the statue's head. The operation on the whole was very smooth; there was no drama of Red Guards' storming the temple, clashing with protective peasants, as had happened in some parts of Shaanbei. No one sensed any ominous happenings looming ahead and indeed nothing bad happened after the temple was taken down, that is, not until quite a few years later.

Sometime in the mid-70s villagers were called to help build the runway of the nearby military airport. The same man, now in his late thirties and

still a small-team leader, was in charge of leading a group of men to blast rocks on the riverbank. Three holes full of dynamite were ignited but only two went off. They waited for a long while for the third to explode but it didn't. The women came with lunch so the men stopped working. Lunch in hand, the team leader was finally overcome by curiosity and went over to the third hole to check what had gone wrong—only to have his head blasted off.

Some time after this tragedy, people began to comment on the causal link between this man's rash attack on Heilongdawang and his subsequent bloody and sudden death. The story of divine retribution quickly became a household tale in the area. Some even added the details: the head was blown from the neck at exactly the spot where he had struck Heilongdawang's neck with his hoe.⁵ Today, the man's three sons and their families still live in the shadow of this incident and the village's communal discourse of divine retribution. The villagers all think that it was because of the father's bad deeds that the third son is a half-witted village idiot and the other two married sons have only daughters but no sons. The blasphemer's descendants have essentially become semi-outcasts in their own village.

Belief in deities is as much a personal psychological state as a public discourse. When the majority of a close-knit village community believe in the village deity, it is extremely difficult to publicly present dissenting views, much less knocking down the deity's statue. Members of the community who believe in the deity thus form a discourse community as well, enforcing a more or less uniform view on the efficacy of the deity, even if allowing different individual experience with the deity. If a person states that he doesn't believe in the deity and something terrible happens to him or his family, the believers will say that the person suffers because the deity is punishing him for his blasphemy and impropriety. Normally, very few people have the nerve or resolve to counter such a strong communal hegemonic force.

This communal coercion dimension of popular religion also partially explains the reluctance of local cadres to crack down on temples and temple activities. Theoretically, because all cadres are Communist Party members and presumably atheists, they should not be afraid of gods and divine retribution. In reality, however, as members of local communities and under the influence of the communal hegemony of believers (who are more often than not their close kin), local cadres are often believers themselves, which makes them unwilling to interfere with popular religious

activities. In fact, many village temple bosses are current or ex-village Party secretaries, some devout servants of the village deities making up for having wronged the deities during the Maoist era.

It is widely known that the Communist government resorted to physical violence during campaigns against "feudal superstitions"; but too often scholars overlook the element of communal coercion inherent in the maintenance of popular religious communities. Community-based popular religious activities might have the potential to counter the state's penetration and serve as the locus of folk civil society, but we also need to recognize the implications of the communal hegemony dimension of Chinese popular religion.

The Bureaucratic Model and the Personal Model

Both natives and scholars alike have often characterized Chinese gods as the supernatural equivalents of official bureaucrats (Wolf 1974a). Historically, this symbolic bureaucratization of Chinese gods has been the result of the interaction of many forces. Religious Daoism found in the imperial bureaucracy a convenient model for organizing a hierarchical pantheon headed by the Jade Emperor. The imperial court realized that it could co-opt popular religious deities by bestowing on them imperial titles and bureaucratic ranks. And local cults welcomed these imperial favors and sometimes even invented them as markers of distinction and legitimacy. Feuchtwang (1993) has argued that the bureaucratic metaphor should best be seen in light of power pretensions predicated on the authority of history. The process of the bureaucratization of deities was so thorough that few deities in late imperial China were not touched by this bureaucratic metaphor. Even those deities known for their free-spirited personae (e.g., the Monkey King and the patricidal enfant terrible Nezha) are often depicted as engaging in battles with the divine bureaucracy and, in the case of the Monkey King, enthroning himself to be "the Great Emperor that Parallels Heaven."⁶ And the Black Dragon King in our story evolved from a powerful local rain god to an imperially recognized, titled "King" (his title was actually Marquis of Efficacious Response).

Do Shaanbei peasants see their deities as supernatural equivalents of bureaucrats? Most Shaanbei deities are decorated with bureaucratic garb, especially City Gods and all the deities with bureaucratic or imperial titles (e.g., the Great Emperor of the Eastern Peak and the Marquis of Efficacious Response). But how do Shaanbei peasants perceive real bureau-

crats? The relationship between local state agents and ordinary peasants in Shaanbei is strained, to put it mildly. Indeed, the image of the local bureaucrats in the minds of Shaanbei peasants is mostly negative: they take things away from you but rarely give anything back; the local officials are good-for-nothing and corrupt, spending all their time eating, drinking, singing karaoke songs, and dancing with prostitutes (see Gates 1991); the traffic police are too rapacious; the birth control work teams are so brutal with their fines and punishments that they are worse than the Nationalists before Liberation; doctors at the county hospital are asking for too much gift-money; and no one can hope to win a lawsuit unless he knows someone in the county or prefectural court (*youren*). In peasant eyes, the local bureaucrats are better at squeezing the people, not serving the people.

Because real bureaucrats in Shaanbei couldn't care less about serving the people, it is hard to imagine that worshipers perceive Heilongdawang or other deities as the celestial equivalent of bureaucrats, even though it is possible to speculate that they see in deities an image of *ideal* bureaucrats. But most important, the way Shaanbei people interact with the deities suggests that they operate on what Robert Hymes has called a "personal model" of divinity rather than the "bureaucratic model" (Hymes 2002). The bureaucratic model operates as pretensions of the Daoist priests who symbolically subjugate local cult deities and local communities by assuming a mediating role between the Daoist high gods and low-ranking local gods and humble earthlings. On the other hand, most popular religious worshipers establish dyadic personal relationships with deities and directly call on them for blessings and magical assistance. My Shaanbei findings support this "personal model" of divinity.

Modalities of "Doing Religion" in Chinese Culture

One of the best-known debates in the anthropological study of Chinese religion was on the question of whether there is one unified Chinese religion or many religions⁷ (Freedman 1974; Wolf 1974b; Sangren 1984b, 1987; Weller 1987a; Feuchtwang 1991). The debate originated in an exchange between Maurice Freedman and Arthur Wolf. Freedman suggested that because of China's long history of political and cultural unity, its religious life ought to have been unified into a system as well, and that the apparent gaps between elite and commoner ideas and practices are merely differences in expressions of the same underlying principles. He

posited as a working hypothesis that "all religious argument and ritual differentiation [in premodern China] were conducted within a common language of basic conceptions, symbols, and ritual forms" (Freedman 1974: 40). So the task of the anthropologist of Chinese religion is to identify these ruling conceptions, symbols, and ritual forms.

Arthur Wolf countered by arguing first that because in China priests were not preachers, there cannot be such a thing as a Chinese religion (Wolf 1974b: 17). For Wolf, the esotericism of elite religious specialists and peasant practices cannot be reconciled into a unified system, implying that these two realms of ideas and practices are not merely "idiomatic translations of one another," as Freedman would have it (Freedman 1974: 21). The second reason Wolf objected was almost one of aesthetics: "Where belief systems are uniform, there is little to interest the anthropologist beyond the historical origin of the uniformity. Where belief systems vary, there is the endlessly fascinating question of why" (Wolf 1974b: 18).

Intuitively I am more sympathetic to Wolf's position, but on the other hand I also sympathize with the impulse behind Freedman's desire to find order in the confused mess of diverse Chinese religious ideas and practices. In a way my attempt to identify the nature of Shaanbei peasant religiosity and religious habitus can be seen as trying to determine elementary structures of popular religious practices, though not on a macro, systemic level. There are two ways to look at the "one or many Chinese religions" debate in a new light. First, instead of seeing premodern Chinese religious life as either unified or divided, it would be more useful to say that there were unifying and diversifying forces and tendencies at the same time (i.e., adopting a perspective that emphasizes process over structure) (see Sangren 1984b). So the task is not to find the common denominators or a generative core of Chinese religious ideas and practices (Freedman's proposition) or to identify differences in social structure and organization in explaining differences in religious beliefs (Wolf's proposition); rather, the task is to identify and analyze the forces that pull or push Chinese religious ideas and practices centripetally or centrifugally and see how these forces contest and negotiate with one another.

Another way to resolve the debate is to circumvent it. One important limitation of this "one or many" debate about the unity and diversity of Chinese religious life is its emphasis on religious conceptions rather than on practices. When religious practices are discussed, they are assumed to reflect similarities or differences in religious conceptions instead of them-

selves constituting the defining components of the debate (Weller 1994b; Shahar and Weller 1996). I suggest that we put aside religious conceptions for a moment and see how considering religious practices would help clarify the debate. I argue that in the long history of religious development in China, different ways of "doing religion" evolved and cohered into relatively easy-to-identify modalities. These are relatively well-defined forms that different people can adopt and combine to deal with different concerns in life; however, the contents within these forms can vary widely. These modalities of "doing religion" are:

1. Discursive/scriptural. People are attracted to this modality because of the allure of Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist Great Texts (classics, sutras, etc.). This modality obviously requires a high level of literacy and a penchant for philosophical and "theological" thinking.
2. Personal-cultivational. Practices such as meditation, qigong, alchemy, personal sutra chanting, and keeping a merit/demerit ledger belong to this modality. This modality presupposes a long-term interest in cultivating and transforming oneself (whether Buddhist, Daoist, or Confucian). Sometimes sectarian movements might precipitate out of these personal-cultivational pursuits (e.g. Falungong).
3. Liturgical/ritual. Practices such as exorcism, sutra chanting rites, *fengshui* maneuvers, and feeding the hungry ghosts belong to this modality. Practices in this modality aim at more immediate transformations of reality done in highly symbolic forms. This is the modality of the religious specialists (monks, Daoist priests, yinyang masters, Confucian ritual masters, spirit mediums, exorcist-dancers, etc.) and often involves esoteric knowledge and elaborate ritual procedures.
4. Immediate-practical. Practices in this modality also aim at immediate results but compared to those in the liturgical modality they are more direct and simple. There are minimal ritual elaborations. Examples include divination, getting divine medicine from a deity, charms, and consulting a spirit medium.
5. Relational. This modality emphasizes the relationship between humans and deities (or ancestors). Examples are building temples, making offerings, taking vows, spreading miracle stories, celebrating deities' birthdays at temple festivals, and pilgrimage.

These are frameworks for religious practice and action. At any one time in any corner of the vast late imperial Chinese empire, all of these modalities were available to be adopted by individuals or social groups,

though factors such as class, gender, literacy level, accidents of birth and residence, position within different social networks, and temperament might channel some people toward certain modalities and not others. Most peasants in China, like those in Shaanbei, have traditionally adopted a combination of the relational and the immediate-practical modalities into their religiosity; sometimes they adopt the liturgical modality and hire religious specialists when the occasion requires (e.g., funeral, communal exorcism). Illiteracy and lack of leisure would largely preclude them from the discursive and personal-cultivational modalities. The traditional educated elite tended to adopt a combination of the discursive and the personal-cultivational modalities, but they too often needed the service of the liturgical specialists.

The most significant merit of this framework of modalities would be that it focuses on the ways in which people "do religion" rather than their religious conceptions, which can vary widely and in ways that defy any explanation; there are many flukes and accidents in the history of the evolution and interaction of religious ideas, and people's social experience and social structure do not always determine the contours of their religious imagination. Studying people's religious conceptions is important, but it will only yield a bewildering diversity; on the other hand, there are only a limited number of forms (modalities) that permeate the Chinese religious landscape. The varieties of Chinese religious life have resulted from the elaboration of differences within these forms as well as the different configurations of various forms; I suggest that the great variety in the symbolic contents of the Chinese religious world as well as the relatively small number of forms (modalities) and their lasting stability and versatility are both great achievements in the history of world religions. This framework of modalities of doing religion suggests a possible compromise between Freedman's position and that of Wolf: it can help explain the diversity as well as provide a unifying framework (admittedly not a system) for the understanding of Chinese religious life.

Legends and Histories

Heilongdawang and the Heilongdawang Temple

Sharp rocks, like ten thousand tablets, are pointing towards the sky;
 Dark clouds black as ink are shrouding the body of the dragon.
 Indistinctly, three pearl trees emerge at the beachhead;
 Hidden behind the mouth of the lair are bushels of treasures.
 As the dragon dips its head shimmering droplets hang from its jaw;
 And when it summersaults in the deep pool the waves sparkle.
 We prayed for rain at the Yulin Pass and the next day it rained all over;
 It was only then that I believed there is god in the magical spring.

—*The Black Dragon Lair* by Zhao Ke (Qing Dynasty) (YLFZ: 1650)

The Longwanggou Temple Festival of 1938 (a Historical Reconstruction)¹

The year is 1938, or the 27th year of the Republic. The date is Sixth Month Thirteenth. The time is noon. Today is the big day for Longwanggou: the fourth and most festive day of the five-day temple festival, the official birthday of the Black Dragon King. From the mouth of the long, narrow valley up to the temple, throngs of worshipers, peddlers, and fun-seekers push their way forward and backward along the small dirt path. Unlike at temple festivals for other dragon kings, where women are strictly forbidden, at the Black Dragon King temple festival in recent years women have been allowed to come and watch the opera, though they are still excluded from the temple. A few years ago Longwanggou broke the no-female taboo by allowing women opera singers to perform onstage; it was a famous Shanxi troupe with women performers! To request the service of that opera troupe the temple association had to compromise its age-old gender principle. Through the temple oracle rod, the Black Dragon King agreed to let women come to the temple festival. So women, young and old, riding on donkeys or pushcarts, brighten the crowd with their colorful outfits.