

## Shaanbei Popular Religious Landscape

Out of the 1.5 million people in the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region, there are still more than one million illiterates and two thousand spirit mediums; superstitious thinking is still affecting all of the masses.

—Mao Zedong, speech at a meeting with cultural and educational workers (1944, Yan'an)

People around here are still very superstitious; [it's all because] the quality of their minds is so low (*sixiang suzhi henchu*).

—A Professor of Political Education (*zhengjiao*) at Yan'an University (1997, Yan'an)

Chinese popular religion has been much studied in the contexts of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas Chinese communities; yet its contemporary expressions in the People's Republic of China are only beginning to be covered in the Western scholarly literature in recent years. Difficulty of field access is sometimes still a problem, the Chinese government being unwilling to let foreign researchers study what it considers to be "backward" and "superstitious" activities. On the other hand, research on the history and the written traditions, i.e., the "Great Traditions," of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism is considered not only harmless but also beneficial to the glorification of Chinese civilization. In contrast to the great interest in popular religion among China scholars in the West, PRC researchers have mostly found popular religion unworthy of their attention<sup>1</sup>, and it is only recently that local folklorists and scholars have begun collecting and describing local religious activities such as temple festivals and ritual dramas, sometimes with foreign financial sponsorship and cooperation.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is not only to provide the background necessary for the story of the Dragon King Valley and the Black Dragon King cult, but also to attempt an overview of the popular religious landscape in Shaanbei so as to contribute to establishing a baseline knowledge for

any future research on popular religion in North and North-central China.<sup>3</sup> This chapter only serves as a general introduction to popular religion in Shaanbei. Many specific issues will be explored in later chapters in conjunction with the ethnography on the Dragon King Valley. I will first outline the history of the shifting fortunes of popular religion in 20th century Shaanbei. Next I will paint a broad-brush portrait of the popular religious landscape of Shaanbei with an emphasis on my area of fieldwork. This is then followed by a discussion on the building of temples and the organization of temple associations. Then I describe the central role two kinds of ritual specialists play in Shaanbei popular religion: spirit mediums and yinyang masters. In this chapter, I wish to address a broad range of important topics pertaining to Shaanbei popular religion, especially the extent to which it is *embedded* in Shaanbei society.

### *The Waning and Waxing of Popular Religion in Shaanbei in the 20th Century*

Much like everywhere else in the PRC, popular religion in Shaanbei has experienced phases of decline and resurgence during the course of the 20th century. As the arch-signifier of antimodernity, popular religion has been labeled as feudal superstition (*fengjian mixin*) and has received bursts of attack nationwide ever since the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 (see Duara 1991).<sup>4</sup> Advocating science and rationalism, new-style students, reformist intellectuals, enlightened magistrates, and elite Republicans of the May Fourth generation were the first to tear down temple statues, turn temples into schools, and condemn spirit mediums and "quack doctors."<sup>5</sup> In the 1920s and 30s the teachers and students of Shaanbei's first new-style secondary schools became the local anti-superstition vanguards. The militarization of parts of Shaanbei during the so-called Warlord Period (1910s to 1920s) also contributed to the demise of temples. During his tenure as commander-in-chief in Yulin City between 1922 and 1924, the Nationalist general Yang Hucheng ordered the destruction of many temples in the Yulin Region. And a number of temples and monasteries were turned into army barracks (Zhang J. 1993: 159). When another Nationalist general, Tang Enbo, was stationed in Suide in 1936, he registered the land and other properties of many temples and monasteries in Yulin and turned many of them (including the famous Yulin City Daixing Monastery) into schools and vocational schools (YLDQZ: 411). However, these efforts against popular religion were pri-



marily confined to the small number of urban centers (i.e., county seats) in Shaanbei. Meanwhile, the unstable social milieu provided a hotbed for the growth of sectarian groups such as Yiguandao ("Unity Sect"), Hunyuanjiao ("Origin Sect"), Yaochidao ("Jasper Pool Sect"), and so forth.

In the 1930s and 40s, when Shaanbei was divided into the "red" and the "white" areas, the "red" areas were subjected to Communist anti-superstition drives whereas the "white" areas faced much milder anti-superstition efforts under the Nationalists. The Communists were particularly keen on eradicating the many spirit mediums in the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region, who were deemed parasites of society and upholders of feudal superstition.<sup>6</sup> However, some parts of Shaanbei that benefited from a bustling wartime economy witnessed unusually active popular religious activities. Gambling and opium dens became a prominent feature at temple festivals.<sup>7</sup> Many Shanxi opera troupes fled Shanxi, which was already under Japanese occupation, and crossed the Yellow River to Shaanbei to perform for temple festivals there. Guanzhong (i.e., area near Xi'an) opera tastes were brought to the Yulin area by Nationalist troops. When civil war broke out between the Communists and the Nationalists, armies and regimes crisscrossed the Shaanbei landscape, sending landlords fleeing to safer places and making travel (e.g., for pilgrims and opera troupes) generally hazardous. Many monasteries and temples were destroyed by the armies, which used the wooden structures as firewood and took out the bricks to build fortifications. Popular religion waned as a result.

Even though the chaos of Land Reform in the early years of the Liberation was not conducive to the recovery of temple activities, the ensuing peace and prosperity and the empowerment of ordinary peasants in the 1950s to a certain extent brought back popular religion to Shaanbei social and cultural life.<sup>8</sup> Rich landlords and merchants, traditionally sponsors of temple festivals, were eliminated, and temple properties were confiscated and redistributed; yet ordinary peasants were enriched and empowered to contribute to popular religious activities. One might say that there had been a democratization of popular religion, thanks to the Communist victory and the Land Reform.<sup>9</sup> Many temples that had been destroyed during the war or had fallen into disrepair were rebuilt or renovated. For example, the Daoist shrines on Yan'an City's Great Serenity Mountain (Taiheshan), which had been blasted out by Japanese bombing, went through two restoration efforts between 1956 and 1960 under the initiative of the Daoist priest Qiao Wenyi (Yan'an *juan* 1994: 534).

Even during a large part of the collectivization era temple activities carried on as usual. In Yulin Prefecture alone, close to twenty thousand temples existed in the early 1960s (Fan 1997: 100).<sup>10</sup> Only sectarian cults such as Yiguandao and Hunyuanjiao faced harsh treatment, as they were outlawed in 1957 and their leaders executed or imprisoned and their members disbanded (YLDQZ: 678-79). The Great Leap Forward years of the late 1950s and early 1960s must have negatively affected religious life, as people struggled to merely survive.<sup>11</sup>

In 1963, the state began to tighten control on popular religion. The impetus came from the Socialist Education campaign (also called the Four Cleanups). Temple festivals were banned and the manufacture of "superstitious merchandise" such as incense and paper money was prohibited. These were considered not only superstitious but also wastefully unproductive. Temple festivals were banned also because markets of all kinds were condemned as "taking the capitalist road." The "coup de grâce" for Shaanbei popular religion came in 1966, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, when temples all over Shaanbei were demolished or turned into granaries or storage. All Buddhist monks and nuns and Daoist priests were forcibly made to become commoners again (*huansu*). For more than ten years temple-based religious activities vanished without a trace. Only a few courageous spirit mediums and yinyang masters practiced their trade clandestinely while the majority of religious practitioners dared not risk becoming "counterrevolutionaries."<sup>12</sup>

Yet even in the middle of the antitraditionalist period, popular religious sentiments flared up occasionally. Consider the curious emergence of the spirit of the Canadian Communist doctor Norman Bethune at the height of the Cultural Revolution. Bethune became a volunteer doctor for the Communist army in the late 1930s and died of a blood infection on the battlefield in the northwest. Mao Zedong's essay praising his selflessness became one of the most widely read of Mao's works. My Shaanbei informants told me that in the early years of the Cultural Revolution the spirit/god of Bethune (*Baiqiu'en shenshen*) was traveling around Shaanbei to cure people's illnesses. There was no temple dedicated to Bethune; people needed only to utter his name and light Yan'an brand cigarettes (supposedly Bethune's favorite cigarette or because he met Mao in Yan'an) to get his divine assistance.<sup>13</sup> In one village in Zizhou County, the mass of worshipers became so large that the local militia (*minbing*) had to throw a hand grenade next to the crowd to disperse it.



Religious activities in Shaanbei were only severely interrupted for a mere decade. The late 1970s marked the beginning of the shift in policy away from radical leftism and antitraditionalism. The actual brevity of this interruption of popular religious life is surprising, for it is often assumed that the interruption was much longer. As early as 1978, accompanying the return of markets, some temple festivals revived, often disguised as agricultural fairs and only with very timid religious overtones. Then, among other stimuli, the news of government-sponsored renovations of famous religious sites spread, and the impetus for reviving worship began. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Shaanbei people rebuilt and renovated their temples, and the scale and beauty of these temples often far exceeded that of the original ones. This large-scale religious revival in many ways resembled the post-World War II boom of the so-called "new religions" in Japan (McFarland 1967) and the religious boom in Taiwan in recent years (see Jordan 1994; Katz and Rubinstein 2003; Pas 1996). During the same two decades, many old spirit mediums and yinyang masters resumed their practice and many new ones appeared. It is interesting to note that, nowadays, when a Shaanbei peasant says that he or she believes in "superstition" (*jiang mixin*) there is often no sense of fear or embarrassment as there would have been during the Maoist era; the term "superstition" (*mixin*) has apparently been purged of its negative and derogatory connotations and become as normal as the word "customs" (*fengsu*).

Most of the well-educated elite and many of the Shaanbei urban dwellers, however, still frown on or make jokes of blatantly "superstitious" behavior (see the paternalistic remark made by a university professor quoted in the epigraph to this chapter). Popular religion is indeed a contested site through which different interpretations of reality compete for an audience, and the battle between modern atheist ideologies and traditional religiosity is an ongoing one. The difference between today and the Maoist era is that few people if any are willing to fight for the Marxist-atheist cause against the overwhelming masses of believers and the wide and fast circulation of miracle stories.

### *Popular Religious Landscape in Contemporary Shaanbei*

#### *Deities*

Even though popular religion in Shaanbei is not confined to temple-based activities, temples built for different deities are the most visible tes-

timonies to the level of intensity of popular religious life in contemporary Shaanbei. Temples and their accompanying opera stages (when they have any) are easily identifiable by their traditional architectural style of red wooden columns and plain gray or glazed golden-colored tiled roofs. When traveling in Shaanbei, no visitor will fail to notice the many temples that dot the landscape, on mountaintops, in the valleys, and alongside the roads. According to the estimate of a Yulin Prefecture government agency, by the middle of the 1990s there were well over ten thousand temples in the prefecture (Fan 1997: 98). Among these, three to five hundred had supra-local or supra-county influence, about one thousand were at township or rural district level, and the rest were village-level temples (*ibid.*).

Shaanbei people often identify famous temples not by temple name but by the name of the site, be it a mountain, a valley, or a stretch of desert. The most famous and the largest in scale of all temple sites in Shaanbei is the Daoist White Cloud Mountain (*Baiyunshan*), which, like many famous religious sites in China, is actually a cluster of temples.<sup>14</sup> The second most famous temple site is the Dragon King Valley (*Longwanggou*), which is the focus of this study. Other famous sites include the Great Harmony/Serenity Mountain (*Taiheshan*) in Yan'an City, the Dragon Bond Mountain (*Helongshan*) in Suide County, the Eastern Sand (*Dongsha*) in Yulin City, the Blue Cloud Mountain (*Qingyunshan*) in Yulin County, the Mountain Worship Top (*Jishanliang*) in Jingbian County, and the Ancient Spring (*Gushui*) in Hengshan County.<sup>15</sup> These famous sites typically have very impressive temple buildings and command a large temple ground. The overwhelming majority of temples in Shaanbei, however, are much smaller, one-hall, village temples.

Most of the deities worshiped in the past have been revived, even though some have declined in significance while some others have gained greatly in popularity. The most influential deity is still the Perfected Warrior Ancestral Master (*Zhenwu zushi*), who is the presiding deity of the White Cloud Mountain Daoist shrines and a score of other shrines all over Shaanbei. The other commonly worshiped deities include Guandi (*Guanlaoye* or *Laoye*), the Buddha (*Laofoye*), the Emperor of the Eastern Peak (*Dongyue dadi*), the Jade Emperor (*Yuhuang dadi*), the Three Pure Ones (*Sanqing*), the Three Divine Officials (*Sanguan*), Guanyin, the Monkey King (*Qitian dasheng* or *Dasheng*), the City God (*Chenghuang*), the Horse King (*Mawang*), the Three Heavenly Goddesses (*Sanxiao niangniang*), Sage Ancestor Lü (*Lüzu* or *Lü Dongbin*), various dragon



kings (*longwang*), various fertility and child-related goddesses (*niang-niang*), the God of Medicine (*Yaowang*), the God of Wealth (*Caishen*), the God of Letters and Exams (*Wenchang*), the God of Insects (*Bazha*) (see Shu 1969), the Mountain God (*Shanshen*), fox spirits (*huxian*) (see Kang 2002), and various efficacious officials (*lingguan*) and immortals (*daxian*). The above-mentioned deities are all worshiped in temples, but there is a separate category of deities that are worshiped only inside the home or in the courtyard. They include the stove god, Heaven and Earth (*tiandi*, which is strictly speaking not a deity), and the earth god (*tushen*).<sup>16</sup>

There were very few ancestral halls in the past in Shaanbei and none have been revived in the reform era, even though there are isolated instances of the rewriting of lineage genealogies. Shaanbei people have never had domestic ancestral altars (except perhaps a few gentry families who might have brought this tradition from the South), even though in the past, as was common in North China, they kept collective ancestral tablets (*shenzhu*) or large cloth scrolls with drawings of ancestral tablets that they used during special occasions such as during the Lunar New Year's ancestral worship ceremony (Cohen 1990: 515–19). There are visits to the graves of the immediate ancestors a few times a year on prescribed occasions such as the Cold Food (*hanshi*) / Clear and Bright (*qingming*) (Third Month Ninth)<sup>17</sup> but Shaanbei people do not believe that their ancestors' souls are active forces capable of protecting, benefiting, or troubling the living. On those extremely rare occasions when the souls of "old relatives" (S. *laojiaqing*, meaning dead ancestors) do become active and seek to communicate with the living, it is a sign of trouble and certain divine intervention would be called upon. There are also cases of certain ancestors who have turned into gods and act as tutelary deities for spirit mediums who are usually their descendants (see below on mediumism).<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, few Shaanbei people believe in or care about ghosts. There are no rites, domestic or otherwise, to propitiate the so-called wandering ghosts. The Buddhist monasteries and Daoist temples which had staged exorcistic rituals for individuals or communities in the past have not, to my knowledge, revived these activities.<sup>19</sup> Shaanbei people in general do not perform any rites on Seventh Month Fifteenth (the *zhongyuan* festival in Daoist terminology), the supposed date to feed the hungry ghosts (see Teiser 1988). This said, however, I hasten to add that there are two kinds of ghost-like monsters that some Shaanbei people still say exist.

The first are the "paralysis monsters" (S. *tanjiezi*) who kidnap children's souls and cause them to go into paralytic fits. The second are "hairy ghost gods" (S. *maoguishen*), mischievous monsters whose powers can sometimes approximate that of minor gods. They can employ different techniques to harm people and their property, making people fall ill or causing valuables to disappear. It is sometimes said that some spirit mediums secretly worship these *maoguishen* to harm people and to generate business. Nevertheless, the discourse on ghosts or monsters is not an elaborate one in Shaanbei.

One recent surprising development in Shaanbei popular religion is the erection in a few places of temple-like structures dedicated to the memory of the three most prominent deceased leaders of the PRC: Chairman Mao Zedong, Premier Zhou Enlai, and General Zhu De. These structures are built on temple grounds, adjacent to real temples, and they are built with temple funds. Supposedly these structures and the statues in them have been built to commemorate the great leaders but not for worship. The burning of incense and spirit money is explicitly prohibited inside these structures. Yet some visitors put lit cigarettes between the fingers of the statues; some explain that they do this because they think the Chairman, the Premier, and the General liked smoking cigarettes when they were alive (recall the cigarette offering in the Norman Bethune story recounted earlier). Even though it is not difficult to imagine some Shaanbei people asking the spirits of Mao, Zhou, and Zhu to bless and protect (*baoyou*) them—the prohibition against burning incense and spirit money hints at the existence of worship—I did not get the feeling that these were established and popular cults.<sup>20</sup> Even the Mao picture (sometimes with Zhou on the opposite side) traffic talisman fad that was all the rage in China in the mid-1990s died out in Shaanbei in the late 1990s. One function these commemorative temple-like structures do perform is to lend legitimacy to the popular religious temples on whose ground they stand.

#### *Temples, Temple Associations, and Temple Festivals*

Like Chinese people in other places, Shaanbei people build temples for their gods and goddesses both because they think the deities deserve a beautiful abode and out of communal pride. A beautiful and well-maintained temple and a "red and fiery" (*honghuo*) temple festival reflect well the strength and state of blessedness of the community.<sup>21</sup>

The variety of temples dedicated to different deities is quite astonish-



ing, and an outsider observer would wonder why villagers in this village worship this set of deities whereas villagers in another village worship another set of entirely different deities. In a way the choice of deities of each village is largely a result of historical accident. Sometime in the past a deity might have appeared to a villager either in a dream or through a medium asking the villagers to build a temple for him (or her),<sup>22</sup> or a villager felt grateful for the help of a particular deity (e.g., the Perfected Warrior Ancestral Master) and decided to build the deity a temple in his own village, or a deity decided to make a villager his spirit medium by possessing the latter. Whether or not a temple would be built eventually depended on whether or not other villagers were convinced of the importance of the task and the availability of resources. The maintenance and expansion of the temple would then depend on how efficacious the deity had proved himself to be in responding to the villagers' requests. If the deity became less efficacious, his following and temple donations would dwindle, and eventually the temple would fall into disrepair and the cult would disappear. The same cult could revive, however, after years of disuse, if another villager made a convincing case for the deity. Thousands of temples were destroyed during the Maoist era in Shaanbei, but today a significant proportion of them have been rebuilt (though not necessarily in the same locations). More often than not, the initiation of the rebuilding of the temples depended on a miraculous reappearance of the deity to the villagers.

As tradition dictates, Shaanbei people stage temple festivals at least twice a year, one during the Lunar New Year and the other for the deity's birthday.<sup>23</sup> These temple festivals are organized by temple associations (*hui*), which comprise a small group of responsible and generally respectable adult men who are approved by the deity through divination. If the temple has a medium he will usually become a core member of the temple association. The members of the association are called "association heads" (*huizhang*), and the head of the association is called the "big association head" (*dahuizhang*).

Traditionally, every year in the first half of the first lunar month the temple association organizes a temple yangge troupe to "visit door to door" (*yanmenzi*) around the villages in the vicinity of the temple to greet the villagers and to collect donations for the temple.<sup>24</sup> On First Month Fifteenth the association oversees the communal festival at the temple. The temple festival on the deity's birthday is a much larger event, lasting typically for three days, and thus requires much more organizational ef-

fort. Depending on the level of prosperity of the temple community, different folk performing arts are staged for the deity as well as for the community. The goal of every temple festival, like that of other festive occasions such as weddings and funerals, is to produce "excitement and fun" (*honghuo*). If the temple commands a large sum of donations, the temple association will invite an opera troupe to perform folk opera, the culturally ideal choice for temple festivals in honor of deities' birthdays. But if the temple endowment is modest, the temple association will then only invite a folk music band or a storyteller to enliven the atmosphere. Lots of firecrackers are also a must.

Two genres of folk opera are popular in Shaanbei. In most parts of Shaanbei, Shanxi Opera (*Jinju*) enjoys the widest popularity because of the historical and cultural proximity of western Shanxi Province to Shaanbei. In fact, before Liberation there were not many native opera troupes in Shaanbei and numerous Shanxi opera troupes traversed the Shaanbei landscape to perform at temple festivals. In the southern part of Yan'an Prefecture and the western part of Shaanbei another folk opera genre, Qinqiang (literally "the tune or sound of Qin"), is more popular because of the cultural domination in these areas by the Guanzhong Plain to the south. Qinqiang is also quite popular in Yulin City, partly because it was enjoyed by soldiers from Guanzhong stationed in Yulin City during the first half of the 20th century. Unlike in some parts of Fujian, Guangdong, and coastal China (Dean 1994; Johnson 1989), ritual drama has never been an important part of Shanxi and Qinqiang opera repertoires. I also did not encounter any Mulian-themed opera performances. As in other parts of China, traditional dynastic and mythical stories are the most prevalent in Shanxi and Qinqiang operas. Traditional stories also provide the most common themes in Shaanbei storytelling at temple festivals. Folk music bands play a variety of festive music, overlapping with many tunes they play at weddings and funerals.

Many temple festivals in Shaanbei also serve as occasions for commerce. Zhao Shiyu (Zhao 1992, 1995) has argued that, because of the imperfect development of marketing networks in North China and the sparseness of permanent marketing towns, temple festivals in North China in late imperial China had substantial commercial significance. In many ways this is still true today, at least in Shaanbei, where itinerant traders bring their commodities to sell to temple festivalgoers.

All temple festivals entail some kind of pilgrimage, when people from outside of the regular temple community come to pay homage to the de-



ity, meet old friends and relatives, and enjoy the excitement and fun. Daughters who have married out come back to their natal villages, and parents visit their daughters when their in-laws' villages are having temple festivals. When long-distance pilgrimage is involved and the number of outside visitors is high, the temple associations have to arrange accommodation for them. Large temples often have dormitories or build temporary structures for pilgrims. Sometimes when a large number of pilgrims come from one particular locale they will organize into groups to take care of themselves. A famous example of a locale-based pilgrimage organization is the "eight big congregations" (*badahui*) for going to Baiyunshan (the White Cloud Mountain) in Jia County.<sup>25</sup> Because the temple festival at Baiyunshan is so crowded, different congregations in different areas have to arrive on different days to be accommodated, fed, and received properly.

#### *Ritual Specialists*

Human intermediaries are often required in the interactions between Shaanbei people and their gods (spirit mediums) and when esoteric ritual knowledge and actions are needed, for example for funerals and burials (*yinyang* masters).

According to my informants, there are two broad categories of spirit mediums in Shaanbei. Both kinds are categorically called "horse lad" (*matong*, reminiscent of the *jitong* or *tang-ki* in Taiwan). When a deity possesses the medium it is said that the deity "descends from the horse" (*xicama*), and when the deity leaves he or she "mounts the horse" (*qima*). Temple murals often portray the deities as riding horses in the clouds. When possessed, the medium makes frequent horse snorting sounds.

One kind of medium is called *wushen*, whose tutelary deities are so-called "proper gods" (*zhengshishen*) such as the Monkey King. When this medium becomes possessed, the occasion is called "tripping (on?) the altar" (*dietan*). The *wushen* often uses a heavy, three-pronged wrought-iron sword (*sanshandao*) as ritual paraphernalia, which he shakes and waves. Some *wushens*, however, do not use the wrought-iron sword but merely fall into an altered state of consciousness when possessed. The other kind of medium is called *shenguan*, whose tutelary deities are ghosts-turned-gods, immortals (*daxian*). For ritual paraphernalia a *shenguan* usually beats a heavy drum made of wrought iron and goatskin (*yangpigou*) as he chants and dances. The dancing and performing is called

"dancing the great god" (*tiao dashen*). In the past the *shenguan* used to have a fake queue on his head to dance with, hence the irreverent rhyme "Zhang *shenguan*, Li *shenguan*, their dicks waggle as they swing their queues" (*Zhang shenguan, Li shenguan, yangqi bianzi qiu dongtan*). My impression is that *shenguan*s are usually found in northern Shaanbei and Inner Mongolia while *wushens* are usually found in areas further south. Systematic historical and field research needs to be done to ascertain the relationships and differences between the two kinds of mediums. My initial guess is that the *shenguan* mediums exhibit more influence from Mongolian shamanism, as suggested by the use of the goatskin drum, whereas the *wushen* practice is more indigenous to Han Chinese culture. During my fieldwork I heard a lot about different mediums but unfortunately witnessed only four in action, three of whom were drum-playing *shenguan*s and one a *wushen* though without the sword.<sup>26</sup>

People go to see the mediums for all kinds of problems but mostly for treating illnesses. Regardless of the kinds of deities possessing them, all mediums seem to be able to cure illnesses. They are especially effective in treating illnesses that are considered "weird" and "wayward" (*xiebing*), not the kind that regular doctors can deal with. These illnesses include soul loss and disturbances by bad spirits such as the *maoguishen* ("hairy ghost gods") mentioned earlier, so exorcism is an important component of their repertoire.

The mediums are often the ones who initiate the building of temples for their tutelary deities. Many temples have "resident" mediums the clients can consult. The mediums usually do not live in the temple but at home, which is never far from the temple. The mediums can conduct séances either at home or at the temple, and they can always make house calls if the clients cannot come to visit them. When a deity uses a medium, the reputation of both the deity and the temple depends upon that of the medium. Popular mediums bring more donations to the temple, and the retirement or death of a medium always means a crisis for the cult unless a new medium is quickly chosen by the deity. When there is no medium, people would resort to conventional divination methods (described in Chapter 6). Some mediums can attain considerable fame as healers and diviners, thanks to the efficacious power of the deities that come down to them; and Shaanbei people love spreading and swapping tales of divine/medium efficacy, such as a miraculous healing, thus generating a whole regional lore about famous mediums and their tutelary



deities. The fame of a medium may be measured by how crowded his or her "consultation sessions" are, from how far away people come to seek help (especially from outside of Shaanbei), and how many sedan cars (*xiaochē*, literally "small cars," signaling rich or high official patrons) often line up outside the medium's home.

Yinyang masters (or geomancers, called simply *yinyang* or *pingshi* in Shaanbei) form the other important category of ritual specialists, and are in fact much more important than mediums. Yinyang masters specialize in the determination of auspicious dates for weddings and funerals and auspicious sites for houses and graves. Many Shaanbei people might never in their lives consult a medium, but almost all, even most urbanites, will have to use the service of a yinyang because of the importance for Shaanbei people of death rituals. In rural Shaanbei, to build a house or to bury the dead without first consulting a yinyang is unthinkable. The ritual paraphernalia a yinyang uses are a compass (*luopan*) and a ritual manac. The surface of the compass has many concentric rings of traditional directional signs for the purpose of, for example, making sure that a coffin is properly aligned in the grave or that the main gate of the house makes the right angle with the house. The almanac, not the regular kind available for purchase in bookstands, is for calculating dates according to the compatibility of personal and cosmic signs. During my fieldwork I did not have the opportunity to see how yinyang masters work on housing sites, but I witnessed many times their important ritual work relating to funerals and burials. They make the elaborate and colorful "soul-directing canopy" (*yinhunfan*) from paper, conduct the soul-calling ritual at the burial (so that the wandering soul of the deceased will come back into the body in the coffin), orchestrate the worship at the grave, pacify the earth god at both the burial site and the home of the deceased's family, purify the homes of the neighborhood after the funeral, and mete out other ritual prescriptions to ensure auspiciousness and ritual propriety. Another important ritual both mediums and yinyang masters can perform on behalf of their clients concerns the protection of children. According to Shaanbei folk belief, small children before reaching twelve years old (traditionally a child is considered one year old at birth) are susceptible to all kinds of dangers, especially to those so-called "life-course obstacles" (*guan* or *guansha*, "obstacle/difficulty demons").<sup>27</sup> In the past, only those children who were very vulnerable to soul loss and other serious illnesses needed to go through the ritual called "passing the obstacle"

(*guoguan*) or "exterminating the obstacle-demon" (*puo guansha*). But partly in response to the reduced number and increased value of children, today many parents feel the need to let their children go through the ritual, which is conducted at temple festivals annually for a small fee. At age twelve a child passes the last obstacle, at which point the parents present a white rooster to the deity as a token of gratitude for his or her protection. Both yinyang masters and mediums, and sometimes even laymen, can officiate at "pass the obstacle" rituals.

Unlike mediums, selected by deities as their "horse lad," yinyang masters have generally inherited their trade from their fathers. Usually one male child in each generation is picked to inherit the trade. Whereas there are many female mediums, there are only male yinyang masters. And while mediums practice their trade out of divine calling (ostensibly), yinyang masters are like Daoist priests or Buddhist monks who rely on esoteric knowledge. Apparently anybody can become a yinyang as long as he is able to get his hands on the right knowledge, hence the folk saying "it takes no effort for a learned man to become a yinyang" (*xiucai xue yinyang, yi bo jiu zhuan*). Shaanbei people often used this expression to compliment me on the apparent ease with which I understood what they happened to be teaching me.

Besides yinyang masters and mediums, there are a small number of Buddhist monks, nuns, and Daoist priests in Shaanbei who reside in officially registered monasteries and temples and are paid salaries by the local Buddhist or Daoist associations. Buddhism used to have a strong presence in Shaanbei before the 20th century, but today only a few monasteries in Shaanbei have permanent clergy. Their numbers are very small. Sometimes the monks are called to conduct a funeral service, but often lay villagers are hired to do similar Buddhist funeral ceremonies (the latter eat meat and drink alcohol at the funeral banquet just like the other guests).<sup>28</sup> There are even fewer Daoist priests, who are mostly concentrated in the White Cloud Mountain Daoist Shrines in Jia County. Despite the fact that both Buddhism and Daoism are "official religions" recognized by the state, their institutionalized expressions are extremely hampered by the latter. Ironically, it is the "feudal superstitious" elements of religion that enjoyed the most vigorous revival during the reform era. A yinyang once told me proudly that they [i.e., the yinyang masters] were the key actors in reviving folk religion and rituals in Shaanbei whereas the Buddhist monks and Daoist priests have not made a similar come-



back.<sup>29</sup> 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