Diverse efficacy and moral complexity:
The religious revival in rural China

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DECLARATION

This thesis is my original work and it has not been submitted for any other degree or purpose. The content of this thesis is the product of my own work and all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources has been acknowledged.

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ABSTRACT

Religion plays an active role in rural societies in China. Most research on the religious resurgence in China since the 1980s has focused on the restoration of temples and the resumption of rituals, how religious services and commodities were commercialized, and how local elites or religious specialists have fuelled the revival. This study focuses on the motivation of rural believers and aims to explore how they practice religion in their daily life. Within this local context, popular religion is defined as the set of religious practices embedded in rural life and contrasted with the Buddhist and Christian institutional forms of religious revival.

During 11 months of fieldwork in a northern county, I observed people’s religious practices in temples and churches. There was a distinction between people’s informal practices and the institutions’ formal teachings and rites. My findings suggest that religious revival first took place through the religious practices of daily-practical modality in order to meet people’s need for immediate results in their everyday lives. At a later point religious revival followed the desire for institutional forms of discipline and knowledge. The revival thus exhibited tensions between these modalities of efficacy-based religiosity and the dharma-based religiosity centred on liturgical and scriptural modalities.

Monks and pastors strove to carry forward the standardisation process through their insistence on liturgical and scriptural disciplines and to educate the congregation in the importance of attending sermons to acquire orthodox knowledge. This led to the rise of religious awareness of being distinctly Buddhist or Christian and to the formation of small yet intimate communities of mutual support based on those religions. This became the new appeal of institutional forms. It not only led believers to the path of dharma-based religiosity, but also highlighted the value of self-cultivation within an overt moral order.

Rural people explored diverse religious forms that allowed the cultivation of morality and the moral self. This was in response to increasing social mobility and individualism as the rural village community fell apart. While believers sought efficacy from deities, they also received confirmation of particular moral codes confirmed by their experience of efficacy. This was based on their understanding that deities only bless the good. Buddhism and Christianity
exploited this concern by enacting severe religious sanctions and disciplines to consolidate the higher moral standard set for believers.

Within this diversity a gender division remained as women assumed spiritual responsibility on behalf of the family and men carried out obligations to ancestors. Women represented the majority of religious participants but instead of passive acceptance of “traditional” practices, they showed initiatives in selecting the modality they would adopt, doing volunteer work, studying orthodox knowledge and following ritual disciplines. Their freedom to choose among diverse religious activities and their willingness to devote themselves to a higher cause have brought transformations of rural religious lives.

Because popular religion is embedded in rural life, doing popular religion is an everyday pattern of living. The easy access to a temple or church and the continued stigmatization of the rural backwardness of religious traditions generated popular drives to express this diversity of religious transformation. Even though the rural societies are undergoing a process of social mobility and urbanization, popular religion continues to be central to people’s lives: it may simulate traditional approaches to deal with life’s uncertainties, but it exists in new forms that pursue diverse expressions of religious identity and knowledge.
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Chapter 1 Religious resurgence in China

1.1 Background to the research

The religious resurgence in China apparent since the 1980s has been reported as “most dramatic and unexpected (by both officials and scholars)” (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p.234) and as “the most ‘unexpected’ phenomena since the beginning of Reform and Open-up policy” (Liang 2015). Some scholars have described it as a revival of “religious faith and practice” (Lai 2003), demonstrated by a rise in the number of believers and temples and in the consumption of incense and ritual commodities. In 2003, one-fifth of mainland Chinese were found to identify with or be affiliated with some sort of religious faith (Ibid). Ji identified three key features associated with the ongoing Buddhist revival: an increase in the number of lay Buddhists; increased size and composition of sangha; and an increase in the number of and widespread repartition of monasteries (Ji 2012).

During research for this thesis a similar trend became apparent in Lu County in Northern China where institutional religions like Buddhism and Christianity are flourishing and popular religion is reviving, reflected in diverse activities like divination, fengshui, fortune-telling, the burning of incense, etc. Religion has been reviving in China despite the restrictive regulations of the past (Yang 2006), such as the anti-superstition campaigns, including the “destroy temples to build schools” movement of the 1920s (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p.55) and the Cultural Revolution period during which “all forms of religious activity were banned (Ibid. p.140)”.

Decades after these restrictive regulations, religion has re-emerged in China. The 1993 construction of a 108 meter high Avalokitesvara (guan yin) statue in the South China Sea sparked a wave of interest in harnessing economic benefits from religious activity (Hainan Daily 2005). In 1996 the central state slammed on the brakes by issuing policies prohibiting the construction of large unapproved religious statues ¹ and

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¹ Notice of the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council on issuing the ‘Opinions on Prohibiting the unapproved construction of temples and open-air statue of Buddha by the United Front Work Department of CPC Central Committee and the State Administration for Religious Affairs’ (1996).
established 10 meters as the maximum height. However, in 1997, the Lu County government agreed to build a 108 meter tall Buddha statue near the Spring Temple, located 100 kilometres away from the county seat. Local people shared stories about how the local authority had deceived their superiors in the Central government by claiming this was a statue of an ancient sage who was alleged to have been born there 2,000 years ago. The richest person in the province at that time, and his Company, sponsored the project and aimed to develop a scenic spot because the location was also famous for its hot spring. This site combined religious worship, with sight-seeing and leisure activities, and profitable enterprise.

This is one example of a religious revival where commercialization and tourism were combined. A spectacular opening ceremony was held at the Spring Temple in 2008, with 108 famous monks invited from other provinces to perform the ritual. It was a success, with tourists visiting from all over the world. The temple offered services such as embracing the Buddha’s feet, ‘inviting’ amulets or depositing ashes.

However, local people rarely visit the grand Buddha statue, not because of the high admission price (140 yuan) or the long-distance (about two hours’ drive), but because temples closer to their homes are also undergoing a resurgence and providing other deities’ statues and elaborate rituals. People do not have to go to the trouble of worshipping a deity some distance away because they can participate in religious practices closer to their homes and include them as part of their daily routines. The opening ceremony for a normal-sized Avalokitesvara statue in the All Buddha Temple located just five miles away from the county seat provides a perfect example of local religious activity.

Several monks were invited from other local temples to host the ritual at the All Buddha Temple. As for any other temple located in a village, there was no entrance or admission fee. The entire ritual was somewhat chaotic: people were crowded in twos

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2 See the Regulation on Religious Affairs (2004), article 24. Decree of the State Council of the People's Republic of China (No. 167)
3 108 symbolizes 108 types of troubles in Buddhism and 108 stars of destiny in Taoism. Most people consider it as an auspicious number.
4 It is intriguing that people use the term “invite (qing)” rather than "buy (mai)" when it comes to religious products and services.
and threes and wondered when the ritual would begin; some pushed their way to the front to place their offerings; and once the ritual started, many rushed to the kitchen at the back to have lunch and left before the ritual finished. When one woman indicated she wished to stay longer, her companion exclaimed, “We have already had lunch so why are we not leaving?”

Popular religion has merged with the requirements of rural life. Believers rush to the temple after sending their children to school, and, after burning incense and having a simple meal, they can return home before noon to cook for their family or pick up children from school. The cost of incense and paper is only around 10 yuan. In contrast, visiting the grand Buddha statue would take the better part of a day and incur additional costs including the admission price and transport costs. This is not to suggest though that the grand Buddha statue only operates as a tourist attraction. It holds religious significance for many visitors and the symbolic power of Buddha influences visitors to consume services offered at the temple. People often comment on pictures taken at a particular location where the Buddha’s palm appears to be placed on their heads.

It is this diversity of religious revival that is so intriguing. People seek different things from religious behaviour: the local government has ambitions for the economy, entrepreneurs see temples as a commercial opportunity, and people express their religious sentiments in temples and other sites. The bustling scenes at the grand Buddha statue and village temples present different aspects of rural religious revival. They represent continuity with the past but in the context of the very different world of the present. In the 16th century, a Jesuit missionary observed: “a horde of deceitful directors make a living by instructing those who consult them as to the correct day and hour for doing each particular thing in a day’s routine. They charge but very little for their fraudulent advice so that no one will hesitate to have an adviser” (Ricci 1953, p.137). In more recent times, local religiosity is impacted by trends in commercialization, modernization and the institutionalisation of religions.

Many scholars focused on China’s religious revival observed that temple monks or committees applied for a license or that there was cooperation between temples and local authorities for economic benefit (Chau 2006; Fan 2010; Gao 2006). This was observed in other parts of China where research also focused on temple leadership, for
example the research on four local leaders (Feuchtwang and Wang 2001) or the temple boss (Chau 2006). Katz described “triangular networks of power” and identified three groups that were directly involved: officials (who represent the state and attempt to carry out its policies), elites (who control the social and economic affairs of their communities) and religious specialists (who are in charge of the ritual aspects of communal life) (Katz 2014, p.6). However the main participants, namely the people who engage in religious practices on a daily or regular basis were often neglected in these studies.

The economic benefit referred to above presupposes a scenario in which, as long as a temple is constructed, it is assumed it will achieve benefits by attracting believers, and, as such, the main focus has been on the leaders and elites who decide to restore a temple or revive a festival. This assumes that people will be attracted to temples no matter what. In contrast this thesis focuses on the individual to see why they go to temples and what other religious practices are important to them. Diversity exists not only in the various forms of religious revival but also in people’s motivations and involvement in religious matters.

What of the situation where there are no local elites or charismatic figures to organize a temples’ reconstruction? In some villages, the memory of rituals and local traditions was strong enough among a sufficient number of inhabitants to allow them to take the initiative to re-establish cults; this was not always the case in other villages because of the untimely death of a few crucial religious leaders or specialists (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p.245). Scholars suggest that religious revival in China is due to charismatic leaders, but this thesis will challenge this conclusion. Evidence will be provided that many temple revivals were not led by powerful local figures but rather arose from the joint efforts of ordinary local people.

Even today, from the state’s and local religious bureau’s perspective, burning incense in an unregistered temple or seeking help from a self-claimed master is regarded as superstitious. Yet the religious revival, even in unregistered temples, has been swift as well as full-scale despite the presence of discrimination. People are not just simply copying what their parents or grandparents did decades ago. Instead they are re-inventing practices which are introduced after they have travelled to famous temples for
worship and sightseeing or after becoming the disciples of monks and learning the sutra. In many locations, popular religion, or popular religious elements, are not so publicly visible. People no longer carry deities to tour around in Lu County. There is newly emerging religious activity which has adopted popular religion without a deity. There is a diversity in this religious resurgence which is not captured in the history of legalised institutions.

I propose to examine the perspective of rural people, both Buddhists and Christians, believers or not, to see how they interact with religion and reshape their life accordingly. This thesis will study why people find fulfilment and satisfaction in religious practices. Religious tourism at major temples rarely attracts the village worshipers who are content to visit nearby temples. At the same time, there are now increasing numbers of rural people committing to new practices of Buddhism and Christianity. I will compare these different trends in religious practices observed in Lu County where this research was conducted.

1.2 Diversity

_What is often described as a revival of tradition in post-1978 Mainland China or elsewhere in the Chinese world is often, as we will try to show, a wave of reinventions and innovations that have been constantly evolving and adapting to modern contexts ever since the late nineteenth century, often blossoming during the 1920s and 1930s and again one or two generations later. (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p.4)_

When rural people nominate “tradition” as their reason for engaging in religious practices, they do so to avoid acknowledging in public their belief in supernatural forces. This is a direct consequence of the religious regulations in China which state that only the five institutional religions are recognised as legitimate religions and label the remainder as superstition. What I wish to discuss here is the proposition that there is a deeper reason that people practice popular religion that many may not view as a valid religion. They practise it as part of their daily routine independent of doctrinal religions.

So, setting aside the state’s definitions, what is religion? Religion is “a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and
clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz 1966, p.4). Within Chinese popular religion there is a system of symbols that recognizes and constructs the power of supernatural beings.

This system integrated traditions of individual salvation, such as self-cultivation through meditation and body techniques, moral living, and spirit-possession techniques, including spirit writing; kinship-based rites, such as life-cycle rituals and ancestor worship; and communal religion, such as cults to local saints and deities—all of which were only partly framed within the three institutionalized teachings of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism.” (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p.20).

At the same time, popular religion may also enhance communality in belief systems and morality. Religion is ‘a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them’ (Durkheim 1995, p.62). In a village community, which shares the same sense of morality, worships the same deity, and hosts sacred communal rituals, the community may well stand for the public good. Individual villagers may be pressured to fear the community’s authority and conform with the local morality.

Wallace defined religion as “a set of rituals, rationalized by myth, which mobilizes supernatural powers for the purpose of achieving or preventing transformations of state in man and nature” (Wallace 1966, p.107). This definition works for popular religion in that it offers people a means to pray for blessings and ward off evils. Popular religion is not always viewed as a legitimate religion as it is often linked with idiosyncratic practices. This is where Klass’s definition is particularly helpful. “Religion in a given society will be that instituted process of interaction among the members of that society — and between them and the universe at large as they conceive it to be constituted — which provides them with meaning, coherence, direction, unity easement, and whatever degree of control over events they perceive as possible” (Klass 1995 cited in Bielo 2015, p.12).
Popular religion comprises people’s daily and informal religious practices. Popular religion has, however, been stigmatized when viewed as deceiving and paralysing people.

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. (Marx 1970, p.131)

These comments by Marx reflect that, for many years, religion was contrary to the socialist core. When institutional religions were revived in China due to religious freedoms, popular religion was often seen as the revival of tradition, rather than of religion, because of its diffusion and pervasiveness throughout community life. Yang (1961) differentiated diffused religion from institutional religion. In his view diffused religion has “its theology, culture, and personnel so intimately diffused into one or more secular social institutions that they become a part of the concept, rituals, and structure of the latter, thus having no significant independent existence” (Ibid. p.295). Popular religion should not be regarded as non-religious just because it is embedded in daily life or cannot be easily identified like Buddhism and Taoism with their independent organization and disciplines.

Characterised by such diffuseness or embeddedness, popular religion is described by local people as acts of “burning incense”, “visiting tombs” or “visiting temples” to describe their behaviour rather than identify themselves as a Buddhist or Taoist. All these diverse practices have been included in this thesis under the category of religion because they all share the same assumptions that there are supernatural beings, namely deities, ancestors, or ghosts that intervene in people’s lives.

Behind the superficial variety, there is order of some sort. That order might be expressed by our saying that there is a Chinese religious system, both at the level of ideas (beliefs, representations, classifying principles, and so on) and at that of practice and organization (ritual, grouping, hierarchy, etc.). (Freedman 1974, p.20)

Thus, I propose that popular region has dual meaning: a. it is people’s everyday practices that give meaning to their life; b. it is a shared knowledge that is passed on through generations and shared by the community which makes religious organization
and monks unnecessary but also allows diverse practices and beliefs to co-exist as long as they conform to the communal morality.

In this research, I define popular religion as a set of practices dealing with spiritual beings, including everyday practices and major events occurring at important rites of passage. Burning incense daily at the home altar, visiting the temple twice a month or seeking ritual specialists for help when in need are some of its diverse practices. Such practices imply a relationship with a deity and ancestors, whether obligatory or reciprocal.

The “feudal tradition” that came to be suppressed or destroyed during anti-traditionalist campaigns during the Maoist period and reinvented in what appears to be a piecemeal or haphazard manner in the reform era is a complex, dynamic, ever-changing cluster of institutions, practitioners and consumers, knowledge and practices fully amenable to innovations, inventions, and reinventions all the time. Popular religion is “traditional” in precisely this sense. (Chau 2006, p.6)

Others term popular religion as diffused religion (Yang 1961), folk religion, folk belief or popular cult (Wu 2008, p.40). I choose popular religion (minjian xinyang) because it takes its cue from the people. Minjian means “among the people” and xinyang refers to beliefs or a belief in something. When people perform popular religion, it is the practice, not the belief that matters most in its categorisation as popular religion.

1.3 Modalities

As noted earlier, popular religion is characterised by considerable diversity both in practices and beliefs. Chau provided a useful framework (admittedly not a system) for analysing such diversity in Chinese religious life (Chau 2006, p.76). He identified five modalities for ‘doing religion’ in China:

1. discursive/scriptural, involving mostly the composition and use of texts;
2. personal-cultivational, involving a long-term interest in cultivating and transforming oneself;
3. liturgical, involving elaborate ritual procedures conducted by ritual specialists;
4. immediate-practical, aiming at quick results using simple ritual or magical techniques; and
5. relational, emphasising the relationship between humans and deities (or ancestors) as well as among humans in religious practices. (Chau 2011, p.549)
Unlike religious arenas in the West where religions compete with each other for adherents the Chinese religious landscape should best be understood as competition between different modalities of doing religion and even competition within each modality (Ibid. p.548). What Chau (2011) suggests is that there is not so much competition between religions, but competition between or within modalities which is reflected in the configuration of the modalities. He described popular religion as defined by efficacy-based religiosity where people attempt to maximize efficacy in what he terms ritual polytropy where they resort to ritual practices of many different origins and traditions. In contrast dharma-based religiosity requires people to ‘do’ religion in an orthodox way established under institutional religion.

Other scholars have noted that people often worship deities for their efficacy (Cai 2004; Zhang 2014). Since other modalities combine with relational and societal aspects (Chau 2011, p.552), I suggest a daily-practical religiosity as reflective of the configuration of the immediate-practical and relational modalities. When people burn incense twice a month in the temple, they want immediate results as well as to develop a long term relationship with the deity. Burning incense or regularly bringing offerings is people’s way of building a relationship with the deities.

The configuration of modalities framework will be used to analyse the emerging practices of learning sutras or Bible verses or attending rituals in temples and churches. This suggests a configuration of the daily-practical and liturgical/scriptural modalities that may not lead to the dharma-based religiosity which clergies desire but rather continue efficacy-based religiosity in combination with other modalities.

1.4 Popular religion

Wu suggested ten differences that distinguished between popular religion and doctrinal religion and he set the tone for subsequent research in proposing that popular religion is neither superstition nor institutional religion, as it does not have a fixed organization, a specific object of worship or doctrines and disciplines (Wu 1985, pp.242-245). He stressed the diversity, polytheism and practical nature of popular religious practices. These are the informal practices adopted by people when dealing with deities and spirits in their daily lives.
Chapter 1

It is efficacy-based religiosity that prevails in popular religion. Efficacy can be experienced by the individual or witnessed by the community. Communality in popular religion can be seen when people celebrate the deities’ efficacy and their community’s solidarity through communal worship at the village temple where they seek to serve the general good. Religion serves to strengthen social solidarity by communicating specific ideas and sentiments and by regulating and strengthening social relationships (Bowen 2015, p.26). A challenge in recent years has been how to recreate such communality when most villages have lost their village temple.

There is also a moral dimension to popular religion which is often overlooked. When people engage with religion, they follow the principle of a moral world where the good will be blessed. This is regardless of who or what is the source of the blessing, whether it is the Jade Emperor, the Heaven, some deity, the causality or the karma. It may not be essential to identify a clear object of worship, rather it is people’s search for efficacy that reveals their morality.

People mostly adopt a daily-practical religiosity, but monks introduce liturgical and scriptural modalities to regulate this search for efficacy. Reciting scriptures or attending rites on a daily basis is pursuing efficacy in the form of Buddhist disciplines. It may not recognise the goal of enlightenment which monks teach. This is the daily-practical configuration of the immediate-practical and liturgical/scripture modalities that differs from the formal or orthodox version of the same configuration in dharma-based religiosity.

The configuration of modalities can best demonstrate people’s pursuit for efficacy even when they adopt the liturgical modality. The revival of Buddhism and Christianity does not necessarily mean a revival in orthodox practices. Chau theorised that popular religion has a temple-based form but without elaborate rituals, theological manoeuvres or a priesthood (Chau 2006, p.7). People who burn incense in a Buddhist or Taoist temple rarely label themselves as a Buddhist or Taoist. With regards to popular Christianity Li (2017) argued that what people practice is a popularized form of Christianity. This still represents a competition between modalities, such as the liturgical, the scriptural or the immediate-practical, rather than primarily a competition between Christianity and Buddhism.
I will explore how the configuration of modalities pervades Buddhism and Christianity in Lu County and endorses the self-cultivational modality. These are new trends in this religious revival which lead through the dharma-based religiosity to disciplines of self-cultivation, not immediate practical results. This reflects people reinventing tradition for today’s environment.

1.5 The field site – Lu County

Lu County is located in the middle of Henan province. It was selected because there was interest in whether its magnificent Buddha statue would reshape the local religious landscape. After conducting field work it became apparent that local people’s religious habits were unaffected. Most of the people interviewed either treated the statue as a tourist attraction or a symbolic token. “The world’s highest standing Buddha statue”, “108 meters tall” and “108 kg gold” were propaganda extolling the symbolism of Buddhism: be blessed by Buddha through his image.

This county is among 832 national-level poverty-stricken counties identified in 2014 by the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development (2014). The poverty line was set at 2,300 yuan for the rural net per capita income (The China Economic Weekly 2018) which means that 40,815 households in Lu County met this standard. This could explain county officials’ motivation in seeking to improve the economy via religious tourism since the annual income from the Grand Buddha site in 2005 was around 5 million yuan (County book 2014, p.460).

At the time the research was conducted there were 900,000 people in Lu County divided into 25 townships. The whole county had about 500 administrative villages. This study focused on Shang village. This was recently divided into two parts with one part allocated to the Lu street subdistrict. The Lu Street subdistrict, with a total population of 38,007, had seven community neighbourhood committees. This subdivision meant

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5 The administrative village refers to the village-level division. It is the fundamental organizational unit in the rural.
6 The street subdistrict is a form of township-level division.
7 The size of a community neighbourhood committee varies. For example, the New Street community neighbourhood committee contains 12 villages with a total population of 17,000 while the Guan Village community neighbourhood committee only has one village with a population of 4,000.
that the layout of the natural village\textsuperscript{8} was altered by the administrative orders: people who used to be in the same village suddenly belonged to different neighbourhood committees. The identity of Shang villagers was interrupted when villagers were placed under the control of a new community neighbourhood committee. He (2013) pointed out that the traditional natural village was a society of acquaintance where around 50 households lived and worked as a community and shared all information, while an administrative village which included around 300 households formed a semi-acquaintance society where people knew little about each other.

Since most people in Lu County relied on agriculture, most villagers were quite friendly with their neighbouring villages both through marriage and cooperation in irrigation. Some villages even held annual temple festivals together. However the local government’s goal of building more factories and manufacturing plants to attract investment and create jobs changed this harmonious cooperative existence. Some villagers suddenly became rich after selling their land with each villager receiving thousands of yuan in compensation. The newly rich then built new houses and those adjacent to the main road renting their house to small businesses.

This further changed villagers’ livelihoods since once they had sold their land, there was less arable land\textsuperscript{9} for each household. This has led to two main consequences. First, the younger generation has taken odd jobs or migrated to the city. They usually return to the village once a year and leave their young children and old parents behind. In 2009, about 210,000 people in Lu County left as migrant workers, that is 40% of the village labour force. Shang village is one of those ‘hollow’ villages where half the villagers are absent. However since Shang village is adjacent to the county seat, it enjoys the benefits of convenient transport and easy access to schools and hospitals. This triggered the second main consequence. Since their three-storey houses have more empty rooms, villagers rent their rooms to even poorer villagers from the mountain area. It is estimated that about 10% of the resident population are outsiders in Shang village\textsuperscript{10} who either buy a house or rent a room, when they settle in the village.

\textsuperscript{8} The size of a natural village varies from hundreds to thousands or even more villagers. 
\textsuperscript{9} In many villages, each family only has about 300 square metres of land to farm.
\textsuperscript{10} Villages located in the county seat have a much higher rate of outsiders.
Religious resurgence in China

This has broken up the traditional constitution of a village where old-timer villagers have lived for generations. Now villagers no longer know their neighbours. There has been a significant shift from a society of acquaintance (Fei 1992) to a baseless society (Wu 2011) in which most migrate to the cities.

In a society characterized by this level of familiarity, we achieve a level of freedom whereby we can do whatever we please without fear of violating the norms of the society. This type of freedom is unlike those freedoms defined and protected by laws. The social norms in a familiar society rest not upon laws but, rather, upon rituals and customs that are defined through practice; hence, to follow these norms is to follow one’s own heart and mind (xin). In other words, society and the individual become one. (Fei 1992, p.42)

The village used to be “the establishment of a moral community—a group of people who share common norms, values, and morals” (Eller 2007, p.21). In recent years there has emerged mistrust of those new settlers because they are unfamiliar. Are they good people or not? How do they make a living?

The public space for socializing in the village has also diminished. Liu (2015) called it a “rice field” where villagers brought their own meal and ate together in that place while chatting with others about grain prices or someone’s approaching wedding. Now people stay inside their three-story house to watch TV and shut the door. Villagers have lost the chance to exchange information and chat while newcomers have less opportunity to meet their neighbours.

He (2013) summarized three characteristics of the semi-acquaintance society:

1. Rural life becomes diverse with an increasing heterogeneity which lowers the familiarity among villagers.

2. With the loss of local consensus, the traditional rules can no longer regulate villagers’ behaviours.

3. Villagers no longer regard themselves as the subject of the village and dissociate themselves from the village. (He 2013, p.73)

Lu County is a typical kind of Northern Chinese society in that “it lacks powerful patriarchal clan and is too close to the central state so the village must form its own strong regulations to solve all kinds of problems” (He 2012, p.118). Villages
traditionally formed through small groups based on kinship\textsuperscript{11} while the village head used to mediate any conflicts. Now, although villagers still elect the village head to govern the village, they have to go to the community neighbourhood committee for major events like enrolling children in a school or building a house. At the same time, the relationships between villagers and cadres becomes increasingly strained by the latter’s corruption or their sale of collective assets despite villagers’ objections (He 2008a, pp.162-163). Villagers believe that the village head is intent on making money, rather than developing the countryside.

Therefore, villagers have experienced a loss of community cohesion. Some argue that the rural sector is going through cultural rupture as the old cultural system that sustained social order is impacted by social changes and the new one is not yet fully established (Gao and Tan 2013). Consequently, the interpersonal relationships among villagers are reduced to a minimum level and have become materialized. The exchange of gifts at social occasions used to follow the principle of reciprocity (Yan 1996) but now gifts to the village head have developed into bribery in disguise. People hold extravagant banquets for weddings or funerals to brag about “the ability of money to offer them face (mianzi), respect and status” (Tsang \textit{et al} 2018, p.374), instead of the banquet being an occasion for loved ones to bond emotionally. This has become an invisible burden since people are forced to follow the trend and compete in the amount of money they spend (Pan and Liu 2016). Some families hire operas or cultural performances with a simple stage on the road before hosting a wedding or a funeral the next day. This is in stark contrast with the past when villagers voluntarily helped each other. The human relationships and reciprocity that mattered most in the past have been transformed by commercialism.

In addition to changes to the landscape of the village, each house has been influenced by urbanization, the “most profound change that affected Chinese societies in the twentieth century (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p.271)”\textsuperscript{11}. Data in 2005 showed that 56% of families were nuclear and only 34% extended families (three generations living together) (County book 2014, p.123). This reflects the change in family values and dynamics.

\textsuperscript{11} This is why families need male heirs to grow stronger.
Yan noticed a tendency of “shifting the individual from an individual-ancestor axis in social relations to a new axis between the individual and the party-state” (Yan 2010b, p. 493). When young farmers migrate to cities to “provide a decent standard of living for their families, send their children to school and provide themselves with other social benefits (Tilt 2013, p. 297)”, their parents shoulder the responsibility to look after and raise their grandchildren.

In other words, the rising individual in rural China should be understood more as a self-protective reaction to systematic discrimination by state socialism than as a development inspired by ideas of autonomy and freedom. This may explain why the family remains a meaningful unit of the collective and the ultimate goal of the pursuit by the rising individual. (Yan 2010a, p.34)

This is regarded as dual individualization, of both mobile workers and the sedentary family members from whom they are separated (Barbalet 2015, p.15). The individualization in rural values “does not simply represent a copy of the European path of individualization but must be understood as Chinese-style individualization (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2010, p.xiii)”. The European style is characterized by a culturally embedded democracy and a welfare system (Hansen and Svarverud 2010, p.xi) while individualization in rural China emphasises more the dynamics within the family and the individual’s desire to be free.

China remains, for the majority of its population, a material rather than a post-material society concerned with economic survival and the improvement of prospects, rather than pursuing self-realization through choice of lifestyle characteristic of European ‘self-politics’ (Burgess 2017, p.89). Burgess apparently was talking about European style individualization that highlights individuals fighting for rights. I suggest it may be too narrow to only link “self-realization” with political rights. There are other expressions of individualization in rural China.

These relate to changing family values. Peasant values are changing to focus on personal well-being, rather than carrying on the family line by producing more male heirs (He 2013). This is why the function of rituals like funerals has been reshaped: a stage for a memorial becomes social capital designed to increase the host’s status. It should be noted that the virtue of prioritizing the other party is defined, and also
confirmed, by the structure of close-knit kin and acquaintances with low social mobility (Yan 2017). So, will the host’s relatives, neighbours and acquaintances continue to prioritise the idea of filial piety? Some have argued that performing the proper rituals was indispensable but believing in the existence of spirits or gods was not (Seiwert 2016).

To Durkheim, it was important to separate the profane from the sacred when “the profane is the ordinary, the mundane, the everyday realm—the one that we dwell in most of the time but that would disrespect or corrupt the sacred by contact” (Eller 2007, p.21). Under the influence of modernity, people’s understanding of what is sacred is different, and this has influenced the key concept of filial piety. Yan (2016) redefined it as “caring and supportive but not obedient”. The traditional norm of filial piety that stressed children’s obedience no longer applies as the young children assume more power from their parents.

Within this trend of individualization, I noticed that the nature of the husband-wife relationship and dynamics between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law has been revised. The husband-wife relationship played a minor role (Fei 1992, p.85) when the focus was on the family. The couple was in a cooperative relationship. This is in contrast to the new idea that “the pursuit of personal happiness also leads young couples to embrace a new fertility culture, which in turn changes the nature of rural family life” (Yan 2011). Now young couples are intimate and willing to have fewer children in order to have a better quality life. It means that the young couple challenges the parents’ authority.

All these changes have inspired my focus on religion. The structure of the village and interactions among villagers affect the way people view deities and religious communities. Lu County has a long tradition of burning incense. There were more than 100 temples in 1743 while now only a small proportion have been restored. The sign of religious revival started with the temple’s reconstruction and people resuming religious activities. But did this revival take any new directions?

Religion not only encourages moral action but also links individuals to communities (Meagher 2019, p.19). The disappearance of communal cults cuts off these links and
weakens traditional morality. Temples in villages like Shang no longer host communal rites and cater only to personal demands. However this does not make religion less significant in rural life.

When villagers migrate to cities to work, they may encounter difficulties that cannot be resolved according to rural customs and traditions. Migrant villagers are not necessarily comfortable with resorting to the use of the law either and may turn to spiritual support to deal with the unpredictable (Yang 2010). Their mothers or wives assume responsibility to burn incense on their behalf or to seek help from incense interpreters. In addition the morality preached by Buddhism and Christianity offers an alternative form of morality with which to deal with the perceived moral vacuum (Feuchtwang 2012) and strangers (Yan 2009). I propose that the resurgence in religion may also reflect people’s reactions to changed and therefore less familiar village rituals while temples and churches function as public spaces which neutralize individualization and social mobility.

In 2000, 10% of the Lu County population were illiterate and semi-illiterate, 41.6% had graduated from junior high school, 34.1% from elementary school, with only 5.9% graduates of senior high school (County book 2014, p.120). Yet, after attending the scriptural studies at Buddhist or Christian centres, many believers who graduated from elementary school forty years ago could read sutras or the Bible. They became modernized and educated through religious training.

1.6 Diverse forms of religious resurgence

Official figures show that in Lu County in 2005, there were 18 Buddhist temples and 17 Taoist temples. There were even more unregistered temples where people went to burn incense as part of a daily routine. The revival of registered temples and churches signalled a tendency to not only revive religion but also pursue “a modernist future, intended to overcome ‘backward’ superstitious practices” (Liang 2014, p.418). So, the question is, why are various forms of religious practice and participation flourishing in the face of science and modernity (Kipnis 2001, p.32)?
Liang proposed three explanatory models for religious revival: the invention of tradition, the state-society relation, and religious market theory (Liang 2015) and pointed out the limitations of each model. In reference to the first model, Chau warned that the invention of tradition “might lead one to assume that what existed before Maoist suppressions was a tradition that was more coherent and authentic” (Chau 2006, p.6). So can we treat the resurgence as following tradition or as Sui (1990) stated is it reinventing tradition through symbols “recycled and diffused in everyday social living to create new meanings” (Siu 1990).

The state-society relation model often reduces complicated social interactions to a simple binary relation (Liang 2015, p.165). It focuses on the economic stimulus or the elite effort but overlooks the individual believers’ initiatives. The fundamental defect of the religious market theory is that it is a theoretical projection from the perspective of Christianity (Ibid. p.166). Take Yang’s triple-market model for example. He argued that the gray market (religions with an ambiguous legal/illegal status) arose from heavy regulations so “more people practised alternative forms of gray-market, such as popular religion and shamanism” (Yang 2006, p.99). It is a false assumption that people practice popular religion because they have no access to other religions. If so, why do people still go to Christian home churches when there are 111 officially registered churches all over the county?

The religious market theory (gift market theory) is another attempt to explain religious revival. Since “gift exchange is an elementary form of religious life” (Ji 2009), people make exchanges with deities because they recognize the importance of their gift in ensuring a return gift from the deity. Liang, on the other hand, emphasized that morality is central to social solidarity in the gift model. He suggested that reciprocity and the expectation of reciprocity underpin the moral foundation of this society (Liang 2015). This raises new questions around the human-deity relationship: are deities obliged to respond to people’s wishes because of the gift, or do they grant blessings to reward moral behaviour? And how are these understandings impacting on people’s return to religious practices?

Palmer expands on the human-deity exchange: in a religious gift economy, the god—or a spiritual reality or principle such as karma—is a third partner in the exchange that also
involves believer and religious specialist (Palmer 2011). That brings a new dimension to religious revival because, by bringing gifts, believers are exploiting their human relationship with monks or incense interpreters. This highlights the role of religious specialists in the revival. Do they simply convey deities’ messages through the burning incense, or do they lure believers to accept more orthodox approaches under their control through appeals to efficacy?

The revival of Christianity is slightly different. Three factors have led to its revival in rural areas: the absence of faith, the threat to rural culture, and the desire for support from the church (Wu and Liang 2010, p.176). Yet, in contrast with Buddhism and popular religion, Christianity has emphasized the discipline of scriptural orthodoxy. When a lay Buddhist adopts the scriptural modality, he or she could be stimulated by the merit accumulated by reciting the scriptures, which I argue is efficacy-based, not dharma-based revival. But Christians are told to not only read the Bible, but to live by God’s words. Does this mean Christianity has been more successful in transforming to a dharma-based religiosity?

The discussion of Christianity’s revival may be more complex. Yang (2005) held that Christianity is the symbol of modernity and cosmopolitanism and this attracts young people. However others have pointed out that Christianity in China is stigmatised for its obvious foreign connotations linked to the country’s humiliating past as a victim of imperialism and colonialism (Li 2018, p.122). This means that clergies need to localize their teachings to reconcile with a troublesome past. My question is then whether this revival will create a Chinese version of Christianity.

I found four angles from which to look into the religious resurgence in rural areas. First, the role of women. The traditional domestic division requires “good men and believing women (Liang 2014)” which places an emphasis on different gender-defined virtues. One piece of research found that efficacious sorties centred on the goddess could ease family disputes because they convey the message that daughters and daughters-in-law should always be obedient (Hou et al 2011). Religious participation offers women a way to spend their spare time; and when they are part of a ritual, they are interacting with others which facilitates new connections and communities; more women become active participants in rituals (Li and Zhong 2016; Hu 2011; Yang 2012; Wu 2011; Xie
Further chapters in this thesis will explore women’s involvement in religious matters to see whether they conform with the traditional way of burning incense on behalf of the family, or fulfil more individual needs like self-realization.

Second, the role of religious communities. Lineage and religious organizations, although they were not active in the villages where we conducted interviews, undoubtedly play an important role for the elderly in some locations and the state may accept that they will come to play a larger role in the future (Thøgersen and Anru 2010, p.88). The findings in this thesis suggest otherwise. Christianity’s resurgence is ascribed to its faith healing and community orientation (Klein 2011). Somewhat differently the Catholic Church at the grassroots level, widely and systematically established by Catholic missions in previous centuries, effectively instilled the notion of religious governance and transnational association into these local Catholic communities (Li 2018, p.124). I attempt to explore the attractions of religious communities to see how they helped believers when “uncertainty prevails” (Burgess 2017, p.91) and “farmers were more exposed to environmental and economic risks” (Tilt 2013, p.297).

And in return, what do believers contribute to the community? Faith communities reinforce and encourage consensus in terms of theological belief through explicit mechanisms, such as the recitation of creeds, readings of sacred texts, and sermons from the clergy (Meagher 2019, p.20). Other research has indicated that religious communities affect people’s choices on consumption and “consumption practices serve as means through which communal and religious norms, values, and behaviours are learned and reproduced” (Karataş and Sandıkcı 2013, p.478). Thus, apart from being “sites of personal interaction and social interaction” (Stroope 2011), religious sites may have other appeal to rural people.

Third, the role of morality. Popular religion assimilates different types of morality, including loyalty and filial piety in Confucianism, karma in Buddhism, and rewards and retribution in Taoism but this side is often underestimated (Lin 2002, p.115). A strong reason for religious revival in contemporary China revolves around grassroots efforts to restore a morality beyond the state (Liang 2014). Liang ascribed religious revival to an individual’s need to restore a communal morality.
This might be the case in Lu County too when the morality endorsed by the state or the village becomes weak, especially in the face of high mobility. Many of the behavioural norms and moral values do not apply to people who lie outside one’s network of social relationships (Yan 2009). A religious community, in this regard, becomes instrumental in assisting people deal with others outside their circle. In my research, I ask these questions: for a community that no longer has or rather has a weak communal religious identity, does communal morality still work in the same way? Or will individual morality or desires eventually triumph over communal ones? And will the morality endorsed by religion establish a balance between traditional morality and individualist morality?

Fourth, the nature of rural life. If we accept Bielo’s assertion that religion is “a means to establish orderliness” (Bielo 2015, p.10), religious revival reveals how rural people attempt to recreate order in a changing society. Many Christians convert when they seek treatments (Qi et al. 2014; Chen 2007), thus, the attraction of healing exposes people’s distrust towards the hospital-based health care and inadequate rural social welfare. Healing involves a social exchange that stands in contrast to market exchange, and not only because if often involves spirit guides as agents, but rather for the fact that healing includes an element (more or less pronounced) of surrender and self-giving (Meintel and Mossiere 2011, pp.25-26). So, the question is, will healing lead to a deep commitment to the deity or does it rather reflect the continuation of the immediate-practical modality?

It is imperative to take rural life into consideration because being classed as a peasant or participating in a stigmatised superstitious practice such as burning incense, has left villagers exposed to reforms by the state and the elite. After all, there has always been a vast gulf between the religion of the elite and that of the peasantry (Wolf 1974, p.9). The idea of the peasant as comprising a distinct and backward cultural category shows no sign of losing its force (Cohen 1993). The peasant category is intimately linked with rural life and is an identity assigned at birth. Even people who are not farming for a living are still linked with this identity.

To be civilised is, among other achievements, to keep life-cycle rituals simple, ‘modern’ and without a belief in gods, ghosts and the afterlife (Feuchtwang 2010, p.183). What
continues today is rural people’s dedication to elaborate rituals and their belief in supernatural forces. Does this make them uncivilized? This thesis will explore how rural people make meaning of such rituals and how they compromise with the liturgical orthopraxy of institutional religion.

Religious resurgence is linked to venues for symbolic participation, concern about a general order of existence, and institutional separation from both science and the formal levers of state power (Kipnis 2001). The revival is diverse because the polymorphism of Chinese religion has allowed variation within religious life (Freedman 1974) and also because it is the community that determines convention and affirms that a ritual such as a funeral has been performed properly (Watson 1988, p.6). This thesis elaborates on what those diverse practices mean to people and how rural people take diverse paths in reinventing tradition.

1.7 Field methods

The main research methodology has been participant observation and conducting in-depth interviews with villagers. Some of the villagers are religious believers while others claim to be atheists but still engage in religious activities. I am fluent in the local dialect which helped me communicate with the villagers since hardly any of them speak Mandarin: which is too formal and thus less intimate. To protect my interviewees’ privacy, all the names mentioned in the following chapters have been changed.

I arrived in late March 2017 and lived in Shan village. It shared similarities with Shang village except that it no longer had a village temple. Many villagers visited the Huayan Temple in Shang village which was close by. Later I found out that this was the peak season for temple fairs. For the next few months, I made efforts to travel between villages. Temple festivals provided a safe place to talk freely about villagers’ life trifles with them and, stimulated by the fervent atmosphere of worshipping the deity, most stories related to the deities. Deities were a common component of rural life so the villagers needed little encouragement.

Thanks to convenient public transport and electric bicycles, people travelled to temple festivals to burn incense, watch operas, or just to attend the festivities. As a stranger and
outsider, I aimed to mingle with people without drawing any undue attention to myself. Unexpectedly, some people praised me, a young person, for showing interest in such “traditional events”. The majority of the participants were middle-aged and elderly and were often accompanied by their grandchildren.

I visited a dozen Taoist and Buddhist temples scattered around the county seat between temple fairs. After this period the Huayan temple was selected for long-term observation. It stood out from the other temples (which were content to stick with the traditional practices of daily-practical modality) because Master Feng, the monk running the Huayan temple, was ambitious to standardize it in an orthodox way by pushing the liturgical and scriptural modalities. So, it attracted both kinds of people, those who came to burn incense and those who pursued salvation through sermons and teachings. I noted their diversity with many people reluctant to forsake their popular religion for the formalized religion while clergy were keen to assimilate popular religion into their orthodox disciplines.

My youth was a double-edged sword: people were not offended by any questions I asked because they interpreted this as a young person’s ignorance and curiosity, but sometimes they thought I was too young to know something. “You will know when you are older”, they would reply. A disadvantage of being “local” was that people assumed I knew the answer. “As you know” was an answer I heard a lot. I had to explain to them that “I really did not know” so they would finally explain in detail. Being local not only referred to my accent but also related to my connections. When people asked where I was from, they were not satisfied by the name of the village, but they wanted to know the family I am related to. Then they would say, “Oh I know that one” or “my neighbour’s son-in-law comes from that village, so do you know him?”

Some people were worried that I spent so much time in the temple, and asked around about me: “what is her problem? Is she sick?” This reflected the focus of their religiosity on gaining immediate advantage from religious observance. While those in a self-cultivational modality were rather jealous. “You are so lucky to know the teachings at this age,” they said, “I envy you because I am too old and burdened by the family.” The accepted practice in which the mother represented the whole family at the temple made my presence conspicuous. However since burning incense is a female-dominated
practice, I did not experience any discomfort. I was only stressed when interviewees in temples constantly advised me to get married soon, although other people in the church would then assure me that God has a plan so not to worry.

I was initially focussed on popular religion until I realized that in Shang village, Christians outnumbered Buddhists. This led me to the Eastern Church, which was the largest in the county. Even though I was aware that Henan province had witnessed a rapid growth in Christianity, I was still stunned by the size of the crowd for a Sunday service: a large ritual in Huayan temple attracted 300 people but a normal Sunday morning sermon at the Eastern Church had 1,500 believers. The revival of Christianity separates their believers from the rest with their unique disciplines.

The Han people are often accused of having no belief or no religion. Burning incense or ancestor worship is seen as either custom or superstition. Most studies on Chinese religion tend to focus on ethnic minorities for typical examples. I would like to suggest that it is not that Han people have no religion but that Han people’s religion is overlooked. Lu County is a typical Northern county and the religious revival is quite obvious even without the economic boom from communal worship of a famous deity or the actions of a powerful local elite to carry forward a belief. I suggest that a county like Lu, and a village like Shang, are a miniature replica of other locations in Northern China and reveal how rural people react to radical social changes.

1.8 Thesis outline

Chapter 2 analyses local legendary stories that were circulated in the past, some of which still persist. These stories present many of the features of what is termed popular religion in this thesis. They embody the most important principles of the supernatural world. These prevailing principles are embedded in every part of rural life. Because of such embeddedness, people treat religious practices as part of their life and this leads to not only the hybridity of mixed-religious beliefs but also people’s practical orientation. The subtext of these stories is about rural morality which guides people’s behaviour imperceptibly through their relations with the deity and other experience. This chapter will lay the foundation of individual practices informed by communal morality.
Chapter 3 focuses on the practice of burning incense. Moral codes support the human-deity exchange system with a shift from “deities bless the good” to “deities bless the sincere” underlining reciprocity. Though burning incense is an individual activity, believers can socialize in the temple as co-witnesses of the deity’s efficacy and when they seek answers from incense interpreters, they are exposed to traditional morality. It is still women’s role to burn incense on behalf of their household.

Chapter 4 explores dramatic changes in the practices and values of ancestor worship. What remains unchanged is the male role in ancestor worship since males incorporate the bloodline. What constitutes a proper funeral and what qualifies a person as a filial son is still judged by the community. However with the collapse of local communities, more people use this as a stage to enhance their individual reputation by throwing a lavish or even controversial show. This reshapes the moral connotation of funerals and the moral core of filial piety.

Chapter 5 turns to temple fairs which are communal events to display people’s trust in the deity and their community. The most important role of temple fairs is to create an annual reunion for the whole community to celebrate the deity’s birthday and demonstrate their gratitude for the received blessings. However, with the community’s influence dwindling and the disappearance of village temples, temple fairs’ religious functions seem to be reduced. The community struggles to recreate the tradition of a cohesive village drawn together through communal rituals and operas as the embodiment of communal morality.

While chapters 3 and 4 analyse the daily-practical modality and the efficacy-based religiosity, chapters 6 and chapter 7 reveal the resurgence of institutional religions and the liturgical, scriptural and self-cultivational modalities. Buddhism and Christianity attract people with their systematic knowledge and their intimate communities both of which are absent in popular religion. When people devote themselves to temples and churches, they are encouraged to adopt strict discipline and morality. Buddhism and Christianity build on a practical orientation and offer profound moral precepts, charismatic leaders, fixed rituals and intimate fellowship. The pursuit of deeper meaning and a moral community that reverses individualism eventually leads to self-cultivational modalities.
Chapter 8 returns to the question of why religious resurgence is occurring. My findings show that popular and institutional religions represent different configurations of the resurgence. Changes caused by modernization and individualization have reshaped rural life and religious resurgence has to be understood within the context of these wider transformations.
Chapter 2 Local legendary practices

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will present a view of popular religious practices as they are reflected in the legendary stories that people tell. Although people’s current daily practices may differ from these legendary practices, these legends remain the foundation for much of the present-day practices. People learn from the stories they tell each other and these ‘traditions’ become reference points providing guidance for how they conduct themselves on a daily basis.

These stories are used to illustrate some of the main features of what is defined here as ‘popular religion’. This allows me to describe the celestial hierarchy and the efficacy of its beings, and how humans relate to deities, spirits, and ghosts in the celestial world. The stories provide a ‘traditional’ perspective on the morality of relationships between celestial beings and humans and within human society.

There are two local collections of stories that have been used. The first is the County book published in 1994 which covered a long period of time from about 2,000 years ago until 1988 (County book 1994). From the County book collection, I focus on stories from the 1980s. Historically, there has been a long tradition of local officials presiding over the compilation of the County book to chronicle local events, such as natural disasters and customs. While these official records provide important data about local events, they fail to mention how people have reacted to harsh environmental disasters or how local officials have assisted with these. I turned to local legendary stories instead as they do provide a record and insights into people’s daily life and how they reacted when unexpected things occurred. The Encyclopaedia of Folktale in Lu County published in 2016 was selected to supplement the official records. It contains 386 stories collected from the 1980s to 2014 and categorized into four main types: myth, legend, stories, and

1 A second County book was published in 2014, covering the period from 1989 to 2005 (County book 2014).
jokes (Yuan ed. 2016). The local Literature and Arts Association conducted interviews with local people and recorded their stories to preserve a strong rural culture.

These stories narrate the local history with vivid details and feelings, from the perspective of rural people, not officials. Both sets of stories thus reflect the ‘traditions’ that people have continued to value since the 1980s which provides a base point from which to understand everyday practices. No matter how and where these stories are told, like Passerini (1989) asserted, they reveal truths so the guiding principle is that all autobiographical memory is regarded as true, and the interpreter should discern in which sense, where, and for what purpose.

So, these are stories about the past and how people experience and remember the past. Religious knowledge was passed from one generation to another through them. It was easy to ascribe such practices to tradition and then argue that people practice them because tradition is valued. I argue that these stories do more than provide valuable information on tradition because they also depict an imperial rural world where popular deities appeared for a reason. This could be what Feuchtwang (2001) argued as the imperial metaphor where the rural world imitated the central imperial authority.

Although religious practices seem to be diverse depending on individuals’ understandings, I argue that there are commonalities. Chau made six basic postulates on Shaanbei people’s religious beliefs and practices and since Henan is not only adjacent to Shaanbei but also shares many similarities in culture and tradition, these postulates are applicable here.

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. (Chau 2006, p.66)

These six postulates cover most rural people’s religious views. One critical religious perspective is that deities are efficacious and can assist people. In other words, there is no need to question the efficacy of deities for they have all completed the transformation of deification and what matters now is for people to find a way to ‘please’ them for desired results. These stories provide templates of successful experiences as well as less successful ones which foster people’s daily-practical modality in doing religion.

However, Chau did not mention the religious promotion of morality, or what it meant for people to be rewarded by deities. Yang suggested that religion in imperial China “was somewhat obscured by the dominance of Confucian orthodoxy in the function and the structure of the state” (Yang 1961, p.104). So, I propose another postulate to emphasise morality: 7. That good people will be rewarded or assisted by gods even when they do not seek help. I will analyze the legendary stories in the next section to construct the celestial worlds that people envisaged.

2.2 Petitioning the celestial hierarchy

There is a vast system of celestial beings narrated in these stories and they originate from a diversity of religious traditions. Buddha and Manjushree from the Buddhist tradition are part of a larger system that includes Taoist deities and local spirits. While such deities and spirits may exist within differentiated doctrinal systems, these stories give the impression that they all share similar characteristics as celestial beings and undertake similar relationships with human beings.

From the standpoint of rural people’s projections, they built the celestial hierarchy as a mixture of inter-religious life-worlds through their experience and imagination. Originating from this polytheistic background, this hybridity gave rise to the practicality of popular religion: without the need to identify the deity, as long as they were enshrined, all deities could offer people help and the higher their rank was, the more powerful they would be.
I call it the hybridity of popular religion: people redesigned the image of Buddha and Buddhism to fit their daily life. As a nonindigenous religion, Buddhism successfully gained a firm foothold through localized and convenient practices, not doctrines. In terms of people’s daily-practical modality, they treated Buddha and Bodhisattva the way they treated any other local deities and they turned to Buddhism for blessing and protection, rather than Bodhi or the wisdom. Being deprived of the role of a teacher or the Enlightened, there is no difference between Buddha and other deities or spirits in these stories. Thus, like any other deities, Buddha could be approached by making offerings.

Duara (1988a) explored the popularity of *Guandi*, or the God of War, and referred to the process as superscribing symbols. No matter what the original stories were, different parties brought their own versions to “reveal the discontinuous nature of myth”. In exploring local legends and myths, the *Encyclopaedia of Folktales in Lu County* often portrays this “discontinuity” in regard to deities’ personality or background stories. For example, Manjushree, the bodhisattva who represents wisdom, was depicted as the daughter of Emperor Shenlong, a legendary figure from 30,000 years ago (Yuan ed. 2016, p.297). Her reputation for being efficacious and the process of localization were intertwined which reshaped her as amiable and local.

Superscription thus implies the presence of a lively arena where rival versions jostle, negotiate, and compete for position (Duara 1988a, p.780). As a historical figure known for his bravery and loyalty, *Guandi* became an efficacious deity who answered to people’s needs, no matter how trivial they might be, and also a fortune deity in Taoism and a guardian in Buddhism.

Because the green wheat was eaten by a stone sheep during the night, villagers have a poor harvest. They make offerings to Guandi, asking him to kill the stone sheep. (Yuan ed. 2016, p.324)

Guandi cured a woman who was possessed. (Ibid. p.326)

The localization process put Buddha and other Bodhisattvas into the celestial world where they mingled with other deities. Many stories were themed on deities socializing with
Local legendary practices

each other like humans. Though Buddha and the Jade Emperor originated in different systems, people pictured them in a good relationship.

Manjushree gave a banquet to improve the reputation of her temple and invited many deities (Ibid. p.241).

Jade Emperor invited Manjushree to a banquet on his birthday because of her efforts in developing Buddhists (Ibid. p.271).

On Buddha’s birthday, all kinds of deities went to say congratulations with fancy gifts (Ibid. p.288).

These narratives stress the positive interaction between Buddhist and Taoist figures and their interaction corroborates each other’s power. In the meantime, the ranking among deities is vaguely reflected: the Jade Emperor and Buddha were at the same level while other deities were inferior without detailed rankings. The story of the Stove God further illustrates this.

Since the Stove God has been given the title “Master of the House”, every family begins to worship him with offerings and incense. He returns to heaven and reports to the Jade Emperor once a year. To prevent him from making bad comments and causing punishments, people use maltose as bribery. People who are disobedient to their parents, mean to their wives and children or evil take this advantage. Because the Jade Emperor only listens to words, he cannot distinguish between truth and lies. (Ibid. pp.267-268)

A hierarchical system was revealed: the lower deity made a direct connection with people while the upper ones oversaw punishments and rewards. This mirrored the secular world when rural people could only make contact with lower officials like the county magistrate, and, by bribing them, people would benefit. This logic was also applied to deities. The humanity of those sacred figures was kept. So, at the end of one story, it was the angry and jealous Earth God that exposed Stove God’s iniquitous behaviours. It was not out of his kindness towards the people, but because he received no offerings when people only made offerings to the Stove God.

The celestial world was a miniature of people’s visualization of the secular world. They only dealt with lower deities and officials by maintaining a beneficial relationship through a bribe or gift exchange. The unreachable higher deities became the symbol of justice and
fairness. When the Jade Emperor made mistakes, it was the people around him who were blamed—not because he was fatuous or incompetent but he was the only one powerful enough to correct such wrongdoings. When rural people suffered from vicious people or officials, they entrusted higher officials or deities to impose punishments, which assigned to the deities or higher officials the role of teaching and monitoring moral behaviour. People needed to be in awe of deities because “the gods are powerful and represent public morality” (Wolf 1974, p.168). In the end, the Stove God who lied was severely punished by the Jade Emperor: even deities had to pay the price for immorality. It is revealed in these folklore records that the celestial world is a vast yet not so chaotic system where deities, spirits, and ghosts form a hierarchy in which they appeal to different segments of the population or are relevant at different moments in people’s everyday life. These stories provide examples, templates and insights for people to follow when getting in touch with deities for whatever reason.

2.3 People’s interactions with the deities

Local stories explain why and how people make interactions with deities. I argue that popular religion survives in rural areas because it meets people’s practical needs and their aspirations such as asking for a son or a huge fortune which are beyond the state’s control. Male progeny and praying for rain comprise the two key elements that are sought: which impact directly on family continuity and household survival.

In rural areas, where people rely heavily on farming, water becomes the most essential productive resource. The village, or villagers on behalf of the village, is involved in the praying-for-rain ceremony and in these ceremonies’ dragons appear frequently. There are about 15 stories portraying the procedure: people climb the mountain to see Dragon King Suo; the black dragon always brings rain after people make offerings; people see a yellow dragon who brings rain (Yuan ed. 2016, p.285/294/322). These stories highlight the communal nature of popular religion. There are demands at the communal level where every villager is grateful to the deity for bringing rain, a good harvest, or withstanding disasters. All the villagers attend the annual temple festival to celebrate the deity’s birthday as a communal token of their gratitude.
Each household desires a male heir. The family is the basic unit for social events and productive activity, so the need to continue the family dominates other personal needs. As people envisaged it, even the wife of the emperor had to turn to deities for help. The wife of the Yellow Emperor, the legendary ruler of China about 300,000 years ago, went to the Manjushree temple with offerings to ask for a son (Yuan ed. 2016, p.260); the emperor of the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 24) went to the same temple with lots of valuable jewels and a set of clothes (Ibid. p.265). One discrepancy in these stories is that Buddhism was introduced into China around 67A.D. which means that neither of those emperors and their wives could have visited a Buddhist temple but this did not stop people believing in the deities’ efficacy in providing male heirs.

Whether for the public good or to satisfy personal desires, these stories handed down the ages convey a basic principle in dealing with deities: one must bring a gift to prove one’s sincerity without exception. Because such methods are seen to work, there is no reason to explain their effectiveness (Fei 1992, p.98). Stories of a former emperor Liu Xiu also illustrate this. The format of stories related to him can be summarized in the following way: as he ran for his life, the light/night was too dark/his horse died/he lost direction; he promised that if the Heaven/the deity helped him, he would build a temple in return; and then, suddenly, there was light/a new horse/an omen to help him (Ibid. pp.83-95). His rulership and temples, the mountains and rivers named after him all demonstrate that the interaction with deities should be performed in a reciprocal manner.

Wolf argued that the gods are not viewed as having obligations to their subjects (Wolf 1974, p.126), so the question remains as to why deities grant wishes if they are not obligated to do so. I want to further explore the nature of this exchange system and assert that it rests on mutual reciprocity. Chau stated that people described it as “people depend on gods and gods depend on people” (Chau 2006, p.138). Since efficacy is socially constructed, granting people’s wishes is a good way for a deity to achieve popular verification.

A deity is obligated to grant people’s wishes because of their offerings. It is the deity’s responsibility to fulfil believers’ desires to a certain degree. People need to constantly demonstrate devotion, by maintaining a stable relationship with the deity, rather than only
turning to the deity for help when needed. People form a social relationship with deities since they believe that deities are the counterparts of secular officials. I argue that the most important function of these stories is that they construct the image of efficacious deities to the extent that if someone does not get their wishes granted, instead of blaming the deity, they blame themselves for not being faithful or being too greedy. This ensures that attention is paid to morality.

People are not satisfied with only making interactions with deities through exchange. Some need actual proof of deities’ existence as well as of their efficacy.

Someone saw a huge yellow dragon in a deep pond. When the story went around, nearby villagers began to worship him. If villagers prayed for rain, there would be rain within three days. One villager dared to question the deity. ‘I am not convinced of your efficacy unless you make me sick for half a month’ he said by the pond. When he got sick, he told his mother. She hurriedly made offerings and asked for forgiveness. Only then he gradually recovered. Hearing this story, no one dared to doubt the dragon again. One scholar kowtowed to the dragon after a praying-for-rain ritual, saying “I will call you efficacious if you show me your claw”. Just then a huge paw covered with yellow fur and sharp nails reached out. (Yuan ed. 2016, p.287)

A black dragon lived in a pond. He was vicious and never brought rain even during drought. One day a yellow dragon fell into the same pond and decided to do good deeds for the people but was defeated. He appeared in one villager’s dream and requested food, promising to fight with the black dragon after a good meal. Another villager was not convinced so he shouted by the pond. Just then a huge yellow dragon flew into the sky and almost scared him to death. (Ibid. p.294)

These stories demonstrate another principle that there will be severe punishment if one dares to challenge the deity’s efficacy. Since deities only reveal themselves on extremely rare occasions, more stories depict latent symbols or omens of deities. A white-bearded old man is a common feature.

A white-bearded old man appeared in a widow’s dream and gave her a treasure. (Ibid. p.221)

A white-bearded old man asked a young man to deliver two pillars to a location. When he got there, he found a temple. Then villagers
understood that it must be the fire god reminding people to restore his temple. (Ibid. p.295)

A poor tenant farmer dreamed about a white-bearded old man teaching him how to make a harvest. (Ibid. p.323)

Although his identity remained unclear, people treated him as some deity because of his efficacy. Thus, people’s interaction with deities should not be limited to scenarios where they declare that “if my wish is granted, I will bring something in return”. It is more common for people to acknowledge small signs in their daily religious practices as making such interactions. For many people, each occasion they burn incense is considered an exchange for general-purpose wishes like the family’s safety. Formal wishes are only made when they want something tangible or specific, like a grandson or a good career.

These stories also highlight the importance of worshiping deities in temples. One deity was seen to come to the temple and watch operas with villagers (Ibid. p.283). People gathered around the temple for various reasons but they could all experience the existence of the deity by learning from the temple or simply chatting with the people around them. Iconography in temples acted as local repositories of knowledge about the sacred realm, visibly representing who the deities were, what they looked like, and even their areas of expertise (DuBois 2005, p.42). The following stories provide insight into how to relate to the deities and where.

Several villagers go to the temple with offerings to burn incense and make a request. (Ibid. pp.283-285)

To bear a son, the Shi family went to the temple to make a wish, promising that once the wish is fulfilled, they will donate money and materials to expand the temple and will burn incense every year. (Ibid. pp.261-262)

The businessman made a wish in the temple that if he makes a fortune, he will donate money to perform an opera. (Ibid. p.295)

The wife of the emperor brings fancy offerings to burn incense in the temple for a son. (Ibid. p.260)

The villagers make offerings and burn incense in General Guan’s temple to ask him to kill the stone sheep. (Ibid. pp.324-325)
Having a good harvest every year, the Wang family take this as the blessing of Heaven and decide to build a temple as a token of their appreciation. (Ibid. p.333)

Following the rule of reciprocity, a vow should always be delivered on, with severe punishment falling on those who break their promise.

A merchant named Wang travelled from a distance to the Stone Temple because he believed in its efficacy. He promised that if he got rich within the year, he would build a new temple, offer a pig, a goat, and one hundred streamed bread, and a full-scale opera. After he made a large profit, he was reluctant to repay the deity. He decided to fool the deity by playing with the words, saying that “although I promised an opera, I never said how many people will perform so now I am singing to repay you”. Then he got ill and died several months later. People were all shocked. (Ibid. p.289)

In this case, he broke his word and tried to deceive the deity. His death proved the deity’s efficacy, and also served as a warning for others. This reminded them of the punitive nature of the deity and highlighted that deities can be both merciful and indubitable. It also laid the foundation for people to host temple festivals to appreciate and witness deities’ efficacy through operas, rituals and other experiences. Chau (2008) argued that masses of worshipers at Matsu festivals create a kind of collective testimonialism which confirms and authenticates an individual worshiper’s faith in the magical efficacy of the deity. While legendary stories elaborated on the deities’ efficacy, they also reminded people that deities are moral arbitrators and would bless good people no matter what.

2.4 Memorializing the efficacy of deities

2.4.1 The memory of localized deities

At the core of Chinese popular religion is the concept of magical efficacy (ling), which is thought of as a particular deity’s miraculous response (lingying) to the worshiper’s request for assistance (granting a son, granting magical medicine, bringing rain, resolving a dilemma through divination, granting prosperity, etc.) (Chau 2006, p.2). I want to argue that efficacy is a direct reflection of the deity’s responsiveness, namely, to what extent the deity grants a wish. Stories illustrate how a deity’s efficacy is experienced by local people but, at the same time, they may suggest that efficacy may not be permanent.
The local historical figure Yuan Dexiu, for example, was a beloved magistrate of Lu County during the Tang Dynasty. Yet after his death, some of his life stories were imbued with supernatural elements and, in a way, he was deified because of people’s desire for such a deity. Originally, he was commemorated as an honest and upright county magistrate who cared about local people. Subsequently some people worshipped him as a deity because of his magical power and heroic behaviours, such as walking on cloth as a bridge to cross a river, fighting with evil spirits and attracting phoenixes by playing the lute (Yuan ed. 2016, pp.238-240). He was memorialized after his death because of his morality while working as an official. As if the imperial hierarchy was not enough to confirm his power, magical attributes were then added to complete his efficacy.

However, even though his stories are still circulating today, this worship did not survive and he is no longer worshipped. Local deities like the yellow dragon or a local village deity are replaced by regional deities like Buddha, Bodhisattva or the Fortune God. The efficacy of deities is under constant construction and though stories of efficacious local deities remain, as my later chapters will demonstrate, there is no guarantee that people will keep worshipping such deities, particularly if their power or efficacy was never special or specific enough to last over a long timeframe. Consequently, they lost the competition with other more powerful deities. I argue that though the rank in the celestial hierarchy is not deterministic, the higher the position the more enduring the deity will be. I describe those higher deities as deities with concern for universal values who are worshipped throughout a broad region and address all kinds of needs to consolidate their efficacy.

These stories, on the other hand, do reflect rural people’s longing for good officials. Whether secular or sacred, they must put people’s concerns first. This is how people picture the Jade Emperor, the supreme ruler, as caring and loving towards the common people (Ibid. p.312).

2.4.2 Destiny
The idea of destiny also occupied a large portion of these stories yet is slightly different to deities’ efficacy because it remains as an invisible force. I regard this as a feeling of powerlessness when facing a predestined life. Consequently, turning to deities became
the strategy for altering one’s destiny. Many stories emphasised that one’s fate was predestined even before birth and no matter how hard one tried, one could never break the chain. A story recorded in 2001 explains this thoroughly.

Once upon a time, one southern merchant overheard a secret to open the stone gate of a cave to the hidden treasure. Following the instruction, he sought a special cucumber and made a down payment with the farmer, saying that the cucumber should only be harvested on the 100th day. In fear of it being stolen, the farmer took it home on the 99th day. Disappointed, the merchant decided to give it a try and went to the cave during the night, using the cucumber to open and then support the gate. The cave was full of golden beans and a golden horse. Hoping to make a fortune, he led the horse to the door but the cucumber broke in two. He grabbed a hand full of beans and ran for his life. No matter how hard he tried, he failed to find another cucumber like that one. (Ibid. pp.330-331)

One’s fortune is best defined as ming (fate). Or to put it in a common saying, if one is destined to have eight sheng\(^2\) of rice throughout their life, one will never get one dou\(^3\). Under the ming, the individual is powerless unless a supernatural being intervenes. The merchant’s one chance to change his fate was ruined by the farmer’s greed. Neither of them escaped their fate.

A wise man saw a unique eggplant in a garden so he promised the owner to pay for it on the 100th day. After making a deposit, the owner asked why. The wise man explained that after 100 days, this eggplant would become a golden key to open a stone gate. What he did not know was that the owner had already heard the story and knew that there was a golden horse behind the gate. Lured by the wealth, the owner picked up the eggplant on the 99th day and opened the gate. He tried to pull the golden horse away but the eggplant could not hold the gate any longer. The gate immediately closed and the owner became a white horse carved on the side of the gate. (Ibid. p.266)

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\(^2\) Sheng and dou are units of dry measure for grain.

\(^3\) Ten sheng equates to one dou.
These two stories are incredibly similar in plots and allegory. Even though there was no sign of a deity or any supernatural being, it was fate that played a vital role. This is the less visible component of popular religion that is often forgotten: apart from deities, there are other supernatural forces that affect people’s life. As Matteo Ricci observed in the 1600s: No superstition is so common to the entire kingdom as that which pertains to the observance of certain days and hours as being good or bad, lucky or unlucky, in which to act or to refrain from acting, because the result of everything they do is supposed to depend upon a measurement of time (Ricci 1953, p.136).

One’s failure or success is ascribed to destiny (ming). It is irrevocable yet can be subject to intervention by a higher force. Therefore, those who picked up the plant before the due date paid the price not only because they were tempted, but also because they were dishonest and broke their promise. This implies a moral code in which greedy people are punished by either fate or a deity and good people are blessed, either in their secular life or in another life. The next section will explore the morality within these stories as guiding principles in dealing with both deities and community.

2.5 Legendary morality

I argue that there is a hidden principle in dealing with deities: failure to get responses from deities should always be ascribed to personal conduct in that either the ritual is performed improperly or the prayer has a moral fault. Although people’s religious practices and experiences can be diverse, Freedman states that elite and peasant religions rest on a common base, representing two versions of one religion and that we may see them as idiomatic translations of each other (Freedman 1974, p.37). What I found in these stories is paralleled in the official morality system centred on Confucian teachings such that the non-elite morality is a mixture of Confucian and local norms.

Formal morality represented the imperial order and the Confucian culture while the morality practised by rural people was much more complicated and individualized. The formal morality was embodied in the norms controlling family and community, while when rural persons attempted to get a desired result, they often adopted a different moral position. The morality embodied in local stories reflects how they interact with their
family members, neighbours, and the whole community, and this may differ from the way they treat deities.

Duara asserted that the family is defined by the sharing of the same stove but there are cases when the basic unit of community activities was not the family conceived of as a group around the stove (Duara 1988b, pp.89-90). In this research, I studied the household as family members who live in the same yard or share the same stove to see how the morality shared in one family affected their behaviour. The most far-reaching morality is filial piety, to the parents and especially to the mother-in-law, and kindness to the daughter-in-law. Because mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are outsiders to the patrilocal family, they need to find a way to gain power and maintain their position. It is common to witness that the mother-in-law has absolute power over the daughter-in-law whose social obligation is to obey. A story recorded in the 1980s demonstrates this.

2,000 years ago, the Liu family was having a happy life until the mother-in-law made things difficult for her daughter-in-law and the whole family became restless. The daughter-in-law was still very obedient without complaints. One day, she met a white-bearded old man who gave her a magical whip. When the mother-in-law discovered this, she tried to use the whip to punish her but only created a flood. The daughter-in-law ended up forming a mountain while the mother-in-law was flooded into pieces and remains condemned forever. (Yuan ed. 2016, pp.315-316)
This captures the unequal relationship between parents and children that children have no way to regulate their parents’ behaviours and are obliged to follow orders. However since the reputation of a family member affects the whole household, sometimes children will draw support from deities. A bad person’s children had to take him to Manjushree’s new-liver-cave because they wanted him to be a good person and leave a good name for himself and his offspring (Ibid. p.272).

As for the neighbourhood and the community, making a sacrifice—costing either one’s life or time and efforts—is highlighted in many stories. A person named Stone was punished by a Taoist priest because he was ungrateful to both his mother and the villagers who took them in when they fled from famine (Ibid. pp.223-224); an elephant died for the community during fighting against a ravenous unicorn (Ibid. p.248). It is made clear that the starting point for dealing with neighbours is to be nice and helpful. Though being obedient to one’s parents is obligatory, being helpful to a neighbour is not, however the latter behaviour is indispensable if one wants to enjoy a widespread reputation for being good.

In this respect, holding a temple festival is a good opportunity to spread such virtues and also to be reciprocated by the deities. Stories are told that every household needs to pay their share for hiring an opera troupe to perform on the deity’s birthday: it is a collective ceremony. In other places, the temple also hosts a banquet for the whole village to celebrate the day and consolidate collective identity as well as faith towards the deity (Feuchtwang 2001; Chau 2006).

The Black Dragon King lives in the Black Dragon pond. He brings rain to fulfil people’s desire. He is very powerful yet he can enjoy incense. There is an opera performance on June 19th. Heaven and the deity will be happy, while the people are reassured.

(Yuan ed. 2016, p.285)

This local ballad demonstrates that local people and deities reached a clear agreement under the rule of reciprocity: the deity needs to be efficacious and the people grateful. When the manager of the opera troupe refused to perform because of a small audience, all their equipment was caught in a fire which could not be put out; after he burnt incense and started singing, the fire died out and all the equipment was intact (Ibid. p.295). His
refusal offended the deity because reciprocal obligations must be kept. A public event acknowledges the deities’ contributions to the village and reminds people what deities do for them. This Confucian and formal morality is expressed through operas or stories of the people.

At the same time, the deity’s punitive power when overseeing people’s morality is revealed. When officials are absent, people need to see the consequence of immorality. Far from ignoring and disregarding real society, religion is its image, reflecting all its features, even the most vulgar and repellent (Durkheim 1995, p.423). I hold that people tell these stories because they complement the punishments that should be implemented by officials but also because they confirm the people’s simple wish that bad people get punished. That is to say, the guaranteed punishments or judgments from deities or Heaven reassure people about the importance of and value in being moral.

These stories, especially those with adverse consequences are a direct reflection of people’s hope during periods of moral injustice. Deities are brought into people’s lives as an alternative so that good and evil must, at last, have their consequences.

A kind girl named Furong was industrious and helped her father farm. The landlord Zhang was diabolical, forcibly occupying other’s land and stealing their daughters. His six wives either were tortured to death or escaped so he had no children. One day he decided to force her father to agree to his marriage with Furong. Furong ran away and hid in a temple with the statue of Martial Liu and Goddess Chang-e⁴. She wept so bitterly that Chang-e was moved and then gave her a seed of a divine tree. She planted the seed chanting the spell. A big tree broke through the soil with gold and silver ingots as fruits. She began to pick up the fruits, hoping to share them with all the poor villagers. Just then, Zhang and his minions found her and tried to take her home. She silently prayed in front of the deities’ statues, asking them to take revenge for her and punish the bandits. Then she took her own life. The Martial Liu was so angry that all the fruits on the tree began to

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⁴ She is a famous mythological figure that lives on the moon.
fall and smashed the bad men to death. The wind spread all the fruits over the nearby hill to benefit the poor. (Yuan ed. 2016, pp.349-351)

When officials are not responsive and do not administer fairly, due to bribery or incompetence, deities always take control over justice and fairness. Even though in many cases the good suffer while the evil live happily thereafter, the interventions of deities ensure that there will be punishment even this happens in another life. What is also reflected here is that, although officials should uphold social stability and promote righteousness, their failure to do so was commonplace. This taught people that the imperial official system was not always reliable or efficient enough to protect people’s lives so people had to rely on deities.

When deities rescue or enlighten some people, it proves that those people are morally good and thus worth saving. The stories lay down traditions of morality that help to shape the moral community because these moral behaviours are narrated as essential in dealing with the celestial beings or the celestial beings are narrated as rewarding or punishing particular moral behaviours. They thus constitute a normative framework to which people either consciously or subconsciously refer in conducting their everyday lives, and by which they praise or condemn the conduct of others. Since this morality is given value through its association with celestial beings in these stories it carries greater weight as people consider their own behaviour in a changing society.

Here, I quote the story of a young girl named Taohua to demonstrate people’s expectation towards the deity and how the deity reacts.

A kind-hearted girl Taohua helped her father run an inn. One night, her father tried to kill a traveller for his personal belongings. She tipped the traveller off to save his life. Her father was so angry that he murdered her. Because she died for saving others, she was enlightened by a deity and then became a goddess of universal compassion. Her statue was placed in a cave with a small well in front of the altar. A nice inn-keeper was primed about a secret treasure. So, on the first day of the New Year, he would come to the cave and reach his hand into a small hole for a gold ingot. In the second year, he decided to cut the hole a little bigger hoping for more ingots. Unfortunately, there was nothing there at all on the third year. It was said that the Goddess punished him for being greedy. Because the cave was cool in the summer, local villagers always went there to
relax. If people did not dress properly, water poured from the well to flush them out because she was holy. Also, she was very efficacious in granting people their desire for children. (Yuan ed. 2016, pp.273-274)

The first half of her story reveals the dilemma between obligation towards one’s parents and commitment to a higher cause while the second part focuses on her efficacy and her punitive trait as a moral arbitrator. Her apotheosis fits people’s imagination: a deity must be a human first and then become a deity due to good deeds or high moral standards. Also, because of their experiences as a human being once, they can relate to people and understand their needs better. Several moral themes can be summarized: the reward for being good, the punishment for being greedy, the consequence of being immoral (dressing inappropriately) and the efficacy of the deity. When this story is retold, the moral core offers behavioural norms.

Consequently, to be good is vital for wishes to be granted. This leads to another question: what is the standard for being good or what qualifies as good. Many criteria in these stories overlap with Confucianism. What is noteworthy is that elements like burning incense or praying to the deity may not be mentioned, but ideas like “deities protect the good” or “good people will be rewarded” are preserved.

Deities undertook the responsibility to maintain the secular order in a religious sense, and “the gods often punish people for crimes against society at large” (Wolf 1974, p.126). Even when people did not ask a specific deity for help, as long as he or she was good, they would be blessed or protected in a general sense. Many stories reflect this.

The older brother was mean, and his wife was capricious. The younger brother was honest, and his wife was tolerant. The younger brother found a secret way to gain wealth and shared it with his brother. Due to their greed, the older brother and his wife ended up breaking their bones and spending all their money on healing. (Yuan ed. 2016, p.251)

Manjushree built a cave to cure people who had liver-related diseases. It also worked for people who had a “bad liver” (harboured evil intentions) like stealing or corrupting. Once they entered the cave,
their bad liver would be replaced with a good one, leading them to be virtuous. (Ibid. p.272)

Wangxiao was not obedient to his mother after marriage and was taken away by a huge dragon. He got what he deserved. (Ibid. p.296)

Although bad people went to the temple and burnt incense, they still received severe punishment because they did wrong (Ibid. pp.261-262).

This moral teaching was consistently embedded in this exchange system and it was supposed to cultivate in people correct behaviour as a supplement to the formal morality that was encouraged by the (imperial) state. That being said, there was always some deviant morality that focused on individual desires, rather than being a good person to others as Confucian morality promoted.

2.6 The imperial state’s control

The stories above depicted how rural people envisage deities and this is quite different to the imperial state’s control. People’s requests to deities always derived from a scarcity of food, lack of male offspring or this-worldly wealth while the emperor’s and official rites’ aim was to set the standard for orthodoxy, universal values and moral codes. Since the emperor needed to maintain his monopoly, elements related to that or which could threaten his dominance were forbidden.

The Xinglong (rising dragon) village got its name because some emperors were born here. Young scholars who wanted to pass their exams would intentionally come here and hope to get lucky. When the emperor heard about this, he ordered soldiers to destroy the fengshui of this village by changing its name to Guodian, which is homophonic to ‘pot bottom’. (Yuan ed. 2016, pp.336-337)

Official records, on the other hand, have exhaustive accounts of official worship and different levels of sacrifices. Feuchtwang highlighted the role of Confucianism in Chinese religion and noted that even where commoners and officials shared temples, official rituals were distinctive in their ceremonies in the absence of priests, and in the strict order of participation by official ranks (Feuchtwang 1977, p.586). Official cults aimed to “set limits of orthodoxy” (Ibid. p.595) and maintain the supreme order of the imperial state.
Feuchtwang analysed official sacrifices in the late Qing dynasty:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Great sacrifice</td>
<td>Rites at this level were conducted at the imperial capital only, either at the open suburban altars or at the temples within the walls. Sacrificial animals were washed three lunar months in advance; there was a three-day fast before the rite; and the emperor in person was the leading participant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Middle sacrifice</td>
<td>Rites at this level were conducted at the imperial capital and at lower-level capitals. Sacrificial animals were washed 30 days in advance; there was a two-day fast before the rite; either the emperor in person (at the imperial capital) or a delegated official of the appropriate administrative rank (at lower-level capitals) was the leading participant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Common sacrifice</td>
<td>Rites at this level were conducted at all capitals. Sacrificial animals were washed 10 days in advance; there was a one-day fast before the rite; and an official of appropriate administrative rank was the leading participant.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 (Feuchtwang 1977, p.585)

A three-level hierarchy of sacrifices was set: the imperial centre had the privilege to worship the Heaven and prove its ruling legitimacy while the others had the power to worship lower-level deities to conform to their order. The Lu County followed the centre in regulating worship as revealed by the County book compiled in 1743⁵. The sidian,

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⁵ The original edition of this Qing County book was finished in 1743 by the then county magistrate. Then in 2006, it was re-edited and printed by the local Culture and History Committee and the Centre for Cultural Studies on Mozi—a local sage born more than 2,000 years ago.
namely the officially approved register of sacrifices, set standards for propriety and illicit cults (yinsi):

The successive dynasties determined sidian and those not approved. Those that should not be worshipped are called illicit worship (yinsi). Our dynasty regulates the sidian and those on the list should be worshipped to acknowledge the deities and if incense associations and temple festivals are fatuous and licentious, they should be banned to show our sincerity. Therefore, miaoci is listed here in detail and the rest is miaosi. The two should not be mixed up. (County book 1743, pp.59-60)

The local county had the authority to determine what was proper or not. About 14 miaoci with detailed information were listed. I quote some of them:

The Civil Temple. Worshipping Confucian. Rituals held on his birthday, the 27th of the ninth lunar month.

The Fire God. Worshipped on 23rd of the sixth lunar month.

Mount Tai. Worshipped on 28th of the third lunar month. (Ibid. p.60).

In imperial China, every local official was responsible for a discrete administrative district, and this was as true of the supernatural bureaucracy as it was of their human counterparts (Wolf 1974, pp.134-135). The division was clear in that the state cults aimed to achieve a state of universal harmony and order continuing Heaven’s rule. This laid a foundation for the emperor’s monolithic legitimacy while ordinary people turned to deities for this-worldly benefits. The worship of General Guan was approved by the imperial court for his bravery and loyalty towards the country but this did not hinder people from turning him into a Fortune God. By controlling sidian, the imperial state also controlled the power to recognize the deity and in return, strengthened its authority to harness the deity’s power.

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6 Miao, si and ci can all be translated into temples. In local vernacular, si and miao is linked with both Buddhist and Taoist temples while ci links with (ancestral) shrines. However in many cases, si can only be used to refer to Buddhist temples while for the public and people who are less familiar with Buddhist knowledge, si and miao are mixed all the time.
One could view the register of sacrifices as a means of co-optation or manipulation, but the sources do not encourage this reading (Hansen 1990, p.86).

Since the City God controls natural hazards and defends against disasters so each year on the 8th day of the fourth month, people carry his statue for a tour of the district and host a temple festival (County book 1743, p.6). Yet, even though the county magistrate usually presides over the worship of the City God, this does not mean that the people cannot. Many local stories mentioned that people worshipped the City God for private needs while attending the temple festival. At the same time, there were 26 temples within the cities, more than 100 all over the county, ranging from Taoist deities to Buddhist figures (including some spirits that do not quite fit in these two categories) (Ibid. pp.80-87). This shows that temples that did not belong to the sidian overwhelmingly outnumbered official ones.

As discussed above, people worship deities in a daily-practical modality and the deities and temples they visit possess specific functions. This includes the God of Longevity, the Three Immortals, and the Mount Tai temple, and deities with universal functions, like the Stone Buddha temple, Auspicious Clouds temple, Manjushree Convent, Avalokitesvara temple, the Jade Emperor temple, and so on (Ibid. pp.82-85). All these various deities served similar but different purposes and they not only complemented the official cults but also offered people multiple choices: they can choose the deity they feel is most efficacious or turn to many deities at the one time. Official cults fitted the liturgical modality focusing on order and orthodoxy. These two systems—the official sacrifices, and the popular religion—were parallel to each other but with different aims. The use of religion to control the common people may have been legitimatised by the state cult, but in manipulating the masses, the managers of the society necessarily looked to religious arenas outside the strict confines of official religion (Feuchtwang 1977, p.581).

2.7 Deviant morality

The phrase “sincerity brings efficacy (xin cheng ze ling)” is frequently emphasised in stories since it attributes deities’ efficacy to a prayers’ cheng, which can be translated as
trustworthy, honest or sincere. This leads to a distinct understanding that the amount and type of offering could affect deities’ willingness to respond, namely that it is possible to bribe deities. It is a simple exchange system in which once someone is faithful in making offerings, the deity is then obligated to respond. As with the case of the Stove God mentioned earlier, once he accepted bribery, he then lied on the behalf of bad people.

Assisted by the fengshui master, one family found a perfect location for burial. The Wu family heard this and secretly buried their ancestor bones in that location. Within a few years, someone in the Wu family became a high-ranking official. (Yuan ed. 2016, p.455)

Zhang was so poor that he had nothing to celebrate the New Year. He stole several gold ingots from a family. He shared half of the ingots with another poor family. He used the money to run a business and became rich afterwards. (Ibid. p.465)

In both stories, there are immoral behaviours from either taking advantage of others or stealing. I regard this as deviant morality that aims to meet people’s demands at whatever cost. The worshipping of the Wutong God and the fox spirit expresses such deviant morality when deities make supplicants rich by stealing others’ fortune. There are no moral standards in such context, for either the deity or the supplicant.

Several elements became hallmarks of the Wutong cult: a diabolical pact with a shady spirit; the seduction or rape of wives and daughters; and the final culmination in tragedy and dissolution of the family's ill-gotten gains (Glahn 1991). This could explain why the Song dynasty had to issue a ban on Wutong and related worship because he was not a moral figure who fitted with Confucian values. Glahn (1991) referred to Wutong as a diabolical character: not a culture hero or reification of noble human qualities, but rather as an embodiment of humanity's basest vices, greed, and lust, and an actively maleficent demon that preyed on the weak and vulnerable. It is a deviation from the orthodox morality that in order to get rich, one can ignore the moral code and perform a reciprocal exchange with such a deity.

The fox spirit and the Wutong God were not recognized by the imperial deity system because they did not meet the moral aspects of a deity and they imposed a threat to social order and stability. That is why the goddess Matsu was accepted by the imperial state
because she transformed from a filial daughter to a compassionate deity. Watson (1985) summarized it as the process of standardizing the gods and consequently, a local figure got promoted and became the widely known T’ien-hou (goddess).

When the state had indubitable authority, only two categories of temple existed: those in the register of sacrifices and those outside it (Hansen 1990, pp.84-85). However, in rural religious practice, other deviations emerged. Even though local officials sanctioned twelve official sacrifices in accordance with the Book of Rites (County book 1743, p.59), they tolerated other worship. In a sense, there was both tension and cooperation between popular and official rituals in which the City God became a disciplinary institution (Feuchtwang 2001, p.67). In Lu County, a less detected deviation was the popularity of the White Lotus. Although it was officially suppressed and labelled a rebellion, it was unexpectedly beatified and even deified.

The rebellion leader Wang Cong-er recruited and trained soldiers in a valley. When they sowed wheat, it only took a minute to ripen. For this reason, thousands of soldiers were fed by a small amount of land.

A mountain shaped like a human was said to be the leader’s incarnation. There was a huge hollow oblate stone that was said to be their snare drum. Whenever the stone drum made a noise, it symbolized warfare; if it did not sound for a while, it symbolized peace and good harvest.

Since the White Lotus acted mysteriously, they always won the battle against the official army. So they were apotheosized by people. Many myths still went around like being invulnerable, turning beans into soldiers, and riding benches as horses. (Yuan ed. 2016, pp.229-230)

The rebellion won people’s favour because of their victory and magical elements. It confirmed different understandings of popular religion and official cults: the former stressed the attraction of magical or efficacious power while the latter highlighted orthodoxy. As Feuchtwang argued, the rites of official religion were a form of control, control of both the people and the lower gods (Feuchtwang 1977, p.593), while the practice of popular religion was motivated by practical needs. So bribing deities was being strategic in gaining their favour regardless of deities’ personality, morality and
whatever wicked or illicit method they deployed. It imitated the state because after all, the register of deities was “to harness the power of the gods for the purpose of the state” (Hansen 1990, p.28).

Thus, I argue that the deviation from the state, either in morality or worshipping unregistered deities, is consistent with people’s daily-practical modality and these deities assumed multiple functions for officials and people at different levels. So in the official ceremony, the City God was worshipped three times a year and there was no worshipping of spirits and ghosts, but for the people, it was equally important to worship hungry ghosts and other spirits who were under the control of the City God. In addition some officials and elites openly opposed the temple festival in Ming dynasty because, in a rigidly hierarchical society, it was rather anti-regulatory for all the social classes and genders to gather at the same spot, especially when women made a public appearance given they should be confined to the household (Zhao 1992). Still, with most people’s jubilation, the temple festival was the most welcome festival in the rural district and attracted almost everyone’s participation.

2.8 Conclusion

The conflicts between official cults and the state’s regulation of religion and people’s practical approaches remain even today and this will be further elaborated on in later chapters. I argue that in nature it is the competition between orthodoxy and practicality. Monks or Taoist priests were rarely mentioned in these stories because the exchange system can be performed easily by the individual as informal practices. And religious specialties like fengshui master or monks were only needed when unexpected things happened. Then a failed response from the deity could be ascribed to improper rituals or the prayers’ immoral construct. I assert that morality is at the core of these stories because it offers a perfect explanation for deities’ unpredictable responses.

These stories are still in circulation today and provide reference points for morality and reflect how people anchor their hope in deities as moral arbitrators. While the popularity of such deviations does not weaken the importance of morality, it does prove that what people choose to accept is flexible for they face certain life difficulties that are out of the
state’s control or the official cult’s instructions. There is a diversity of views on morality that exist within a seemingly single system of practices. As I move on to explore today’s rural life, such diversity will be more pronounced regarding what people do in everyday contemporary village life based on their needs and understanding of these past principles.

The persistence of worshipping deities supports Duara’s argument that the imperial state was impotent in controlling the rural sector, for example villagers worshipping the same deity, became mobilized through their incense association, to build an irrigation system for the public good (Duara 1988b). Similarly, some old people still remembered that when bandits attacked their village, the Monkey King used a spell to create the image of soldiers patrolling along the village wall to scare the bandits off. People turned to deities when the local authority failed to maintain the social order. Efficacious deities filled the gap when the government proved ineffective.

The stories also depict women’s role in the religious domain: they were responsible for burning incense to represent the whole family and worrying about having a son/grandson. Fathers or male images were absent from these stories because they did not assume this burden. This continues to this today, so does the importance of bearing male offspring.

As Fei argued, in traditional Chinese society, general standards had no utility (Fei 1992, p.78) because the practice of morality was firmly linked with the so-called differential mode of association of “distinctive networks spreading out from each individual’s personal connections” (Ibid. p.71) where “to each knot in these webs is attached a specific ethical principle” (Ibid. p.78). This principle works in a society of acquaintance when one household tends to stay in the same place for a long time thus forming a deep connection with the village due to their lack of mobility. This generated a communal morality that encouraged the individual to contribute to the household and the broader community. However, this landscape of stability was changed and this also affected the durability of religious practices and morality.

By using these stories, I want to depict the way local people treated deities and the celestial world in the past, and explore some prevailing principles guiding them to interact
with both people and supernatural beings. I argue that the norm of reciprocal exchange with deities and the unknowable role of destiny affected people’s religious practices, and the efficacy of deities was confirmed through these narratives. In these circumstances what mattered was for individuals to get responses from deities. Though the celestial hierarchy has become simplified with more local deities replaced by regional deities like Buddha, I found these stories invaluable for the moralities they conveyed.

Within the post-Mao moral crisis of ideological leadership and the moral vacuum of economic opportunity, people have turned to the morality of reciprocity and responsiveness in interpersonal, human relations (Feuchtwang 2012, p.124). Yet these stories show that the practice of reciprocity is not a new phenomenon but rather a continuation of past practices. The human-deity interaction mirrors interpersonal interaction, and especially the way people deal with officials.
Chapter 3 The revival of individual beliefs and practices

3.1 Introduction

Local people seldom use formalised jargon like “popular religion” or “Buddhism” but rather, the vernacular term “burning incense” (shaoxiang) to refer to their beliefs and practices. “Burning incense” is understood to encompass related religious activities and the people who conduct such practices. Apart from Christians, almost every household in rural areas would burn incense in the temple, at home shrines or in the graveyard. Although the official data on Buddhists and Taoists indicates they only comprise a small proportion of the population, my fieldwork data suggests that most rural people are engaging with popular religion in one way or another. This chapter will elaborate further on burning incense and other derived practices to observe the revival of popular religion at the individual level.

Although the number of shrines or study groups at one’s house is on the rise (Li 2016; Lu and He 2014), in Lu County, temples are still crucial to the continuation of popular religion. Relatively empty most days, temples are at the centre of focus on the first and the fifth days of every lunar month, and any special days (deities’ birthday, the anniversary of Buddha’s/Avalokitesvara’s Enlightenment, etc.) with a bustling and blissful scene. The temples’ main hall is filled with believers chanting sutra and playing musical instruments, while the yard is packed with believers burning incense and yellow papers. Regular, experienced visitors accomplish the whole process quite smoothly and leave in a hurry while newcomers may be a bit lost in the crowd, struggling to find a lighter or locate the right spot to place the incense. The entrance is occupied by small stalls selling incense and paper.
The whole area is immersed in smoke and chanting and a somewhat chaotic atmosphere. People gradually leave after midday and retailers pack up their stalls, leaving the temple in tranquillity. Within just a few hours, the temple undergoes dramatic change from bustling and busy to isolated with believers returning to their everyday routine. Burning incense is part of that routine but people only need to do it twice a month or when necessary.

“Burning incense” is the daily-practical modality I identify as a configuration of the immediate-practical modality and the relational modality: people maintain regular interaction with the deity by burning incense in the temple twice a month and rush to the temple for any immediate needs. The latter part ties in with religious specialists (e.g. monks, Taoist priests, and incense interpreters) who are specialized in problem-solving in the supernatural domain. Despite individuals occasionally receiving omens directly such as dreams, people still place reliance on specialists to reveal deities’ intentions. Though temples and monks are present and involved, people are not necessarily wishing to pursue disciplines. This is different to the liturgical or scriptural modalities.

Many scholars have criticized popular religion as utilitarian and practical (Cai 2004; He 2008b; Chen 2001; Cheng 2015). I argue that being utilitarian or practical does not make popular religion non-religious or inferior to institutionalized religions. People’s diverse religious practices in the pursuit for efficacy has driven the revival. There is a
mixture of individual practices and communal interactions: people often visit the temple with their neighbours or acquaintances, but make personal offerings and whisper their wishes to deities. They are experiencing deities’ efficacy through communal rituals and individual experience.

3.2 The reshaping of tradition

Chapter two discusses women’s spiritual role in the household and my fieldwork data confirms that women are still practising popular religion on behalf of their families. It is safe to say that 95% of temple goers are female and their spouses only deal with ancestors. This is the power of tradition, or people’s tendency to follow tradition in terms of religious practices. “It is our tradition” is the most frequently quoted explanation for why people burn incense. There is no denying that burning incense is passed on through the generations, but I argue that by nominating “tradition”, local people adopted a strategy of borrowing the state’s discourse to justify their behaviours and also to save themselves the trouble of talking about the supernatural world.

Matteo Ricci found that “they do not really believe that the dead actually need the victuals which are placed upon their graves, but they say that they observe the custom of placing them there because it seems to be the best way of testifying their love for their dear departed” (Ricci 1953, p.159). His observance in the 1600s confirms rural people’s persistence in using “custom” to explain everything. Where I differ from him though is that for people using the term ‘custom’ this does not necessarily equate with the conclusion ‘not really believe’. In rural areas, customs are those practices that are confirmed as effective or efficacious by previous generations. Since such methods are widely accepted as working, there is little interest in seeking the cause of their effectiveness (Fei 1992, p.98).

Religious practices referred to as custom or tradition are viewed as efficacious. I want to explore whether this is still the case in a changing society and to what extent tradition still speaks for efficacy. I argue that today’s tradition is not simply a continuation of the past but is also being constantly reshaped. What I found is a tendency to reconstruct efficacy with new resources that simplify local religious knowledge.
This is most evident in terms of deities’ local traits and functions. The Monkey King in Yuan village serves as an example. Villagers worship him in a mixed way: he is treated as a Buddha but his temple is decorated with Taoist elements like the diagram of the universe (the Tai Chi or Yin and Yang). In his seventies, Li voluntarily did bookkeeping in the temple and was convinced that Taoism and Buddhism are essentially the same. He led me to a stone tablet on which was carved the origin of the temple: in ancient times, a wooden statue floated here during a flood and some villagers began to worship; because the Monkey King was then seen as highly efficacious and protecting the nearby villagers, a new temple was reconstructed in 2004.

One woman in her eighties elaborated on the protecting the villagers: the Monkey King was credited with helping villagers defeat bandits in the past. The younger generation and people from outside the village test his efficacy through personal experiences or are informed by stories from TV. The TV series A Journey to the West was broadcast on the central television channel all across the country since the 1980s. It was so popular at the time that the audience rating was up to 89.4% in 1986. Unexpectedly, plots in the TV series became the basis of evidence for the Monkey King’s efficacy in rural areas. People recognized him as having escorted the monk to get scriptures from the west (ancient India) and safeguarding the monk against evil.

I argue that such a popularized image promotes him from a local deity to a national hero but at the same time, his ties with his locality of origin have become weakened. He is transformed from a village patron to a powerful regional deity who defeats all kinds of evils. TV played a significant role in enhancing the Monkey King’s efficacy. Similarly, the benevolent Avalokitesvara is praised as “serving the people”, which was once the most popular phrase in Mao’s time to describe a good official. As the most common medium in rural areas, TV is a considerable source of information conveying not only official advice but also contemporary knowledge. In Mao’s time, the state set up movie teams to present films in rural areas. It was estimated that, in 1965, 6 million movies were screened to audiences totalling around 4.6 billion (Xu 2007, p.94). When other communal entertainment activities are missing, many village people rely on watching TV to pass the time (Sun & Huang 2009).

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1 This TV series has been played over 3,000 times on TV and is still screened today.
In the same way, a turtle-shaped stone in the Huayan temple is also regarded as efficacious as a result of TV coverage. “Have you not watched A Journey to the West? The turtle helped them”, one villager replied impatiently. There is a belief that the turtle was placed in the temple thousands of years ago or during ancient times. Its long history verifies its efficacy. In the 1970s when this temple was transformed into a primary school, some families secretly viewed the turtle stone as the spiritual mother of their children because it was the only thing left.

Use of the term “following tradition” results from the aftermath of the state’s suppression of religious freedom. Temples which were considered cultural relics survived the campaign eliminating superstition. The criteria for relics was time. Consequently, restored temples tend to highlight their origins on the stone stele which can be traced back to a previous dynasty (at least 500 years ago). The saying that “ever since heaven was separated from the earth, most people believe in deities”, is used to explain people’s current beliefs in deities as continuing to honour tradition, while avoiding attracting criticism about these beliefs.

The essence of following tradition is to accept the preference for practices over beliefs: knowledge about the practices is less valued than actually carrying out the practices correctly. People grow up in awe of tradition because these practices are viewed as highly effective and there is no reason to seek the cause of their effectiveness (Fei 1992,
the revival of individual beliefs and practices

p.98). Tradition is used to refer to the accumulated experiences of the ancestors. Through modern practices, people acquire new experiences which in turn affect and modify current traditions before they too are passed on to future generations. To host Chrysanthemum Festivals at different historical periods is to recycle tradition because “the festivals had created for the participants’ specific social identities and historical consciousness to which successive generations have attached their own self-interested readings” (Sui1990, p.790). Therefore, even if burning incense is claimed as tradition, it is a reshaped tradition representing how local people depict the role of deities today.

3.3 Deities’ efficacy in the present day

3.3.1 The continuity of religious perspectives

This section commences with local people’s memories of times during the destruction of temples phase. When I mentioned the time when they could no longer burn incense, most villagers used the vernacular term “buxing” which has no counterpart in Mandarin. It has double meanings: not allowed and not popularized. It captures people’s awareness of the state’s objection and the mass mentality: burning incense was not popular in that period. With regard to superstition, state policy and its implementation were caught on the one hand between the eradication of backwardness, waste, and harm in the name of modernity, order and science, and, on the other with tolerance of the same practices on the grounds of morality, culture, and history (Feuchtwang 2010, p. 182).

After the 1980s, local people resumed burning incense when their neighbours or acquaintances started doing so. Once burning incense regained its popularity, people immediately followed the trend because they wished to turn to deities for help. Prior to the 1980s, especially shortly after the establishment of China, the state mobilized all kinds of resources to increase productivity and carry out land reforms which gained rural people’s trust. In the competition between the gods and the Party’s economic and spiritual agency, the gods simply did not measure up in terms of their efficacy (ling), the traditional measure of a god’s worthiness for being worshipped (Anagnost 1994, pp.241-242). Many of the elderly, now in their eighties and nineties, clearly remembered the period when they were starving due to prolonged wars and how there were improvements for them after the new China. As a result, people displaced their faith from the deities to the state after gaining benefits from the state.
However, this “displacement” of efficacy never truly eradicated popular religion because people have far more needs than just a full stomach. Temples and statues were destroyed but religious perspectives were not eliminated. Not to mention that due to a patchy health system, rural people still needed all the help they could get. Many people admitted that either they or family members were being treated by religious specialists and some secretly burned incense at home in the middle of the night during harsh political movements. Though the state tried to create an atheistic country, people confessed that they never stopped believing in the efficacy of the deity.

How can they not believe? There were always things that happened in their life that cannot be explained by science or modernity. One ninety-three year old woman remembered a miracle which happened in the 1970s:

We were walking along a road. I told my daughter there used to be a temple on the mountain. She laughed and said such a thing did not exist. A few days later, she told me her stomach ached for a while. I knew immediately that the deity was offended. I did not have any incense or paper. I just kowtowed in the yard in the night and confessed for her faults. Soon, the pain was gone.

Deities’ efficacy still manifests against the state’s will. This is how religious knowledge circulates: it was, and still is passed on through the generations as successful experience and political propaganda failed to create a new knowledge system to override the old one. The state is capable of mobilizing resources to increase land productivity, but it could not provide a solid solution to people’s spiritual and everyday needs. The very act of smashing statues proved the deities’ efficacy in unexpected ways.

People remembered someone suffered because of this: claiming to be fearless of deities, a branch secretary in one brigade dragged the earth deity’s statue on the ground with a rope and dropped dead three days later; another official took a stick and smashed the statue of the king of the hell and fell ill for two months, finally dying. These stories become new legends. They show people’s faith in deities is stable albeit with some fluctuations.

I argue that destroying temples and statues was inadequate to break down popular religion for it failed to renew people’s beliefs so people resumed burning incense the
moment they were allowed to, or even before they were officially allowed. The central state’s policies on religion were issued in 1982 but local people began to burn incense well before that. They took local cadres’ non-intervention as acquiescence. Due to religious policies, temples hang their official signboard on the most eye-catching place to prove their registration and legitimacy. However, in popular religion, whether a temple is registered or not, and whether it is Taoist or Buddhist, has little to do the deity’s efficacy. People need a place to communicate with deities.

So, since the 1980s, when people have faced dramatic changes and events, they have returned to the deities as they learned from their parents and legendary stories. Even today, rural people still turn to temples’ help when falling ill or suffering from mental issues, and what stops them from going to hospital is the economic cost as well as their distrust—there is a shared mistrust of hospitals. Unlike for other institutions, people constantly deal with sickness or at least hear about other’s experiences. Just as the efficacy of deities has been maintained through shared experience, hospitals have gained a bad reputation in the same way. Besides, when people turn to religious specialists, they can choose the one they are comfortable with while doctors in the hospital are complete strangers.

There have also been changes in the way people experience deities’ efficacy compared to the local legendary stories, in which the dragon deity reaches out a paw or a drought occurs to punish an individual’s wrongdoings. Given the trend of individual needs replacing communal ones, deities’ efficacy is currently revealed in more private and in some cases even in disenchanted ways. I will talk about the role of personal experiences and how tradition is valued in interpreting and constructing efficacy in the next section.

3.3.2 Experiencing deities’ efficacy

Li found that an increasing number of people tend to keep a distance with the sangha but practice their own belief in a “believing but not belonging” way, so he concluded that contemporary belief in Buddhism has become an individualized social form (Li 2004). Instead of calling this Buddhism, I argue that since these people appear in the temple, they are performing popular religion by the daily-practical modality to experience efficacy in their own way.
Insofar as the village temple belongs to the village community, the village as a whole worships the village deities as a community of believers (Chau 2006, p.69). This custom was broken with the loss of the village temple and some people converted to Christianity so now villagers are believers of deities out of personal choice. It was shown in chapter two that deities’ efficacy was constructed through their origins, stories about their miracles and through gaining recognition of the people. That is to say, the core of religious perception lies in the symbolic position the deity possesses and, simply being placed in the temple is enough. Whether the deity is specialized in the power of fertility, or the deity has originated from a certain lineage is not valued as much as the general perception that each deity is efficacious and powerful.

Still, current legends reveal that what constitutes efficacy changes, and how people experience and perceive deities’ efficacy is also changing. Each generation recreates its own efficacy. I argue that the new type of efficacy is constructed through highly personalized stories: less communal but more personal. It is the personal bond that maintains one’s continuous interaction with the deity. For example, a 93 year old woman remembered that when she was young (around the 1940s in the Republic area), lots of people witnessed the then county leader threaten the city god demanding that he bring rain and, if not, that he would bombard the deity’s statue. These days there is very little communal ritual and local leaders are absent from religious events due to the state’s policies. The deity’s efficacy is increasingly confined to the individual domain.

Along with the decrease in the number of temples, the diversity of deities is on the decline too. In the county seat, at least three Taoist temples are all called Zushi Miao, referring to the patriarch of the Taoist system. And the fortune god, the children deliverer goddess, the literature deity, the god of longevity, or the prosperity god can be found in every temple. Such convergence happens in Buddhist temples as well: Buddha, Manjushri or Avalokitesvara are the most common deities. Avalokitesvara has even become the counterpart of the children deliverer goddess. Thus, all celestial beings including Buddha and Bodhisattva, are treated as a deity for they have the same functions. A simplified religious knowledge implies that being consecrated is evidence of the deities’ efficacy.

2 In this story there was a heavy rain within three days and the county leader had to beg for the deity’s forgiveness.
Although the overall tendency in religious practices is to become more individualized, that is not to say that people keep their efficacious experiences secret. Conversely, many publicize their own success by presenting a silk red banner to the deity and whoever runs the temple hangs them at the most eye-catching place as a direct manifestation of the deities’ power. These banners have a fixed format:

All these banners have the same writing: sincerity brings efficacy.

To XXX deity in XXX temple (for granting a son):

All requests will be granted. /Sincerity brings efficacy. /Resourceful and powerful.

From: XXX from XXX village.

Date:

This worshipper made a new cloak for the Monkey King and the incense interpreter Dani dressed the deity.
If a prayer is satisfied, extra gifts can be presented. A 53-year-old woman visited many temples for her son’s marriage but felt this was unresolved until she visited the Monkey King temple. She claimed that the moment she set foot in the temple, she felt something different. After consulting with the incense interpreter Dani, she promised to donate hundreds of yuan once her son married. Another time, she was so thrilled to celebrate her grandson’s birthday that she brought a new cloth for the Monkey King with food offerings. Dani helped her burn lots of yellow paper and 300 golden paper ingots as promised. After the ritual, she made a new exchange: 300 yuan for her daughter’s successful in-vitro fertilization. Then Dani told her to light an incense stick and place it in the burner. After observing the smoke, Dani gave her a positive answer: the Monkey King said yes, your daughter will conceive. Satisfied, she handed over to Dani a red envelope.

It is a delicate occasion when modern medicine meets popular religion. It does not matter whether her daughter believed in the deity or not, what is of relevance is that the mother persisted in the old traditional method that she was familiar with. She was performing her role as the spiritual representative of the family just as most women do, burning incense for blessings for the whole family, including husbands, children and grandchildren.

### 3.4 Reaching out to deities

#### 3.4.1 The necessity of temples

Like incense interpreter said, whoever comes to the temple must be in the middle of something. That is why temples cannot be replaced by home shrines for temples can assist people to interact with the deity through communal rituals. Popular religion is characterised more by a belief in manifestations of the divine in earthly terrain than with faith in a heavenly divine being (Byrne 2019, p.5). People share the existence of deities with others during rituals, as well as benefiting from the sacred space that further enhances deities’ efficacy. Therefore, temples offer people a channel to connect with the deity which can be facilitated by religious specialists. Without religious specialists, a

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3 Dani at first refused to accept it, saying that “I am just following the deity’s order and you should thank him instead”, but took it after her repeated insistence.
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temple is highly unlikely to be regarded as efficacious because no one can convey and interpret messages from the spiritual world.

One middle-aged man shared his story:

I was bitten by a snake several years ago while irrigating farmland. The wound still ached after being cured in a clinic. I had to see an incense interpreter. He advised me to rethink my wrongdoings. I was confused. I am kind. I even stopped some teenagers from stealing birds’ nests. I finally remembered that a few years ago, I drank snake wine at a friend’s house.

People wish to understand what they encounter in daily life, even if the answer leads to the supernatural. Similarly, when people had weird dreams, they wish to know why. With the aid of incense interpreters who live in the temple, ambiguous dreams can be interpreted and become signs.

Besides having abundant statues of deities, temples have another unique advantage in the provision of a sacred place. One monk explained that evil things can adhere to people’s bodies and make them feel burdened or even sick; the moment they set foot in the temple, all evil things are forced to be left outside, so people feel relieved in the temple. Most people did admit that entering the temple makes them feel different and so, if they did not visit a temple for several days, they felt anxious and agitated. They took this as a sign that the deity “called” them to the temple.

Such a mentality prevails in almost every popular religion’s believers so that they turn to religion for practical benefits, rather than for the teaching. One believer even ascribed the deity’s efficacy to “I always get lucky playing mah-jong after visiting the temple”.

While others simply attributed their frequent visits to the fact that they felt comfortable there. However, some men described those women as “having mental issues (xinbing)”.

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4 There are more stories about problems being solved after consulting monks or incense interpreters. Someone successfully had a son after paying a visit to the most prominent Taoist temple and after making a wish with the deity. Another person’s grandson’s academic performance improved dramatically after his grandmother converted to Buddhism and started to learn the sutra. Another woman’s son was ill, and the monk explained to her that it was because her ancestors had done many bad things in the past.

5 Unlike a home shrine where one deity is usually worshipped, deities in the temple are far more abundant in quantity. In one wing room of a Taoist temple, there are 60 deities’ statues so as to cover a jiazi (a cycle of sixty years in the traditional Chinese calendar) so that people born in different years may find their own patron deity.
It is the same logic that is used when ascribing incense burning to “tradition” since it avoids any further discussion of spirituality or religion, however, this also undervalues women’s feelings and spiritual needs.

While often feeling neglected, attending temple can help these women since they are able to share with and listen to others. They feel supported and relaxed. This group of women share the same moral codes and often similar troubles such as difficulties with their daughters-in-law or quarrels with their husbands. Liu (2010) asserted that men and women participate differently in the spiritual realm: men’s focus is on their ancestors and women’s deities. Burning incense in the temple expresses women’s freedom in choosing their belief and deities (Xie 2014). People often turn to deities because rural life is full of uncertainties.

Temples are important for religious specialists in an entirely different way. Working from home carries the risk of being charged with “doing superstition” or being a “swindler”. In cities, diviners try to find membership and certification from some academic organizations to provide the legitimacy to perform. Some refer to themselves as “experts” (Li 2015). This is caused by ambiguity in the state’s policies on popular religion. Article 165 of the criminal law (1979) sets penalties for a “sorcerer” or “sorceress” using superstition to swindle or slander. In the new criminal law (1997), the original subject of the criminal law—the sorcerer, or sorceress—is extended to a general subject, which is a natural person (Liu 2011). Since conducting religious activities in a temple is lawful according to The Regulations on Religious Affairs (2017), either living or working in the temple enables incense interpreters to acquire a legal status since they are not officially recognized as monks or Taoist priests.

3.4.2 The channel to deities

Being placed in the temple indicates that these deities have already finished the deification process, so believers must find a way to get responses from a deity. The most popular term referring to a deity or the temple is “sincerity brings efficacy”. I detect a shift in emphasis from the deity’s efficacy to the individual’s sincerity. What remains the same is that there is never a universal principle on what qualifies as being sincere. So people seek an answer from successful experiences and as chapter two revealed, deities symbolize a worldly morality. Being a good person, in this sense,
becomes the last piece of the puzzle. Fulfilling one’s wishes proves the responsiveness of the deity, but most importantly, validates the person’s values as moral.

The lighted incense creates a channel, so burning incense marks the first step to commencing one’s worship. Therefore, incense is indispensable as the most common tool in deity-related activities. Gods are popularly believed to occupy the clouds and to register and respond to the scented smoke as it reaches them there (Byrne 2019, pp.8-9).

Temples located in tourist areas sometimes hype incenses with specific functions, such as “healthy incense”, “career incense” or “exam incense” at an expensive price. While in rural areas, incense is rather austere and cheap. Most believers bring their own incense and offerings and for those who do not, they can spend 10 yuan for a set: a bunch of incense, a dou (made of golden paper in a round shape) and about 7 ingots (made in gold and silver paper)—it’s cheaper if one buys gold and silver paper and makes their own ingots. This religious knowledge is widely shared by people that bring incense and paper and interact with deities. However their practices are still diverse: some people place three incense sticks at each burner in front of the deity statue, while some hold up the lighted incense and walk around the temple before placing them in the central burner. There is no universal rule for how to perform the “burning incense” process because everyone picks up such practices rather than being deliberately taught them.

Generally, burning incense works in a bidirectional way: it announces the individual’s intention and the shape of the incense and the smoke conveys the deity’s responses. Gui shared her story: there was a time that whenever she burned incense at home, the smoke always drifted into the northeast without any wind. Later, after becoming a regular at the Huayan temple, she realized that it was located to the northeast of her home. She took this as Buddha’s guidance for her to find this temple. However complicated messages can only be interpreted by incense interpreters (guanxiang). For this reason, incense interpreters encourage people to burn incense in the temple, or “the deity might be irritated when he/she conveys a message but the person cannot understand it”.

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6 A monk in the temple sometimes tries to correct people’s gestures but this usually turns out to be quite futile.
Even though local legendary stories provide no insight into how burning incense works, they suggest its function: to reach to deities for help. Whereas when Feuchtwang researched this almost half a decade ago, he found incense’s function served a broader purpose. During village tours of deity statues, each household would fetch incense ash from the temple’s burner and then place this in their own house burner, in such a way that “incense-burner, incense sticks, and incense ash are peculiar to the address of ghosts, gods, ancestors, and demons” (Feuchtwang 2001, p.24). Through incense, both temple’s and household’s thresholds were marked and a boundary was created between the divine and the ghosts, the living family and the deceased ancestors. The burning of incense marks the world of the sacred: deities, family members and other relatives. And what is left outside are those who are less welcomed, such as hungry ghosts, the homeless or strangers wandering to the village which present potential threats to the whole community and each family. Through incense, boundaries were marked between deities and worshippers, the living and the dead, and the present and the past.

If the deity was not carried around villages thus marking boundaries, a temple’s role in the community or even its survival might be affected. For example, one small earth deity temple was regarded as a village temple for the Shang village but is now unattended due to insufficient funds and lack of temple keepers. Consequently village tours do not occur. Instead the deities’ statues are placed on a table in a small bungalow close to where the village’s dumpsite is located. The monk from Huayan temple pays a villager to open its doors twice a month. The Huayan temple, on the other hand, through good management, now attracts believers from all over the county.

I have shown that people practice burning incense seeking the deity’s protection against ghosts or evil spirits, as well asking for assistance with wellbeing in this world. Even though the deity’s role in the community is declining, its role to connect the individual with the spiritual world is still the same. The incense’s basic role remains: the burning of incense indicates the deity’s acceptance of the individual’s wishes, and also symbolizes the embodiment of the deity itself. When the incense interpreter observes the lit incense carefully, it is the deity’s message that is conveyed through the shape of the smoke and its burning rate.
3.5 Embodied blessings

3.5.1 Derived practices
Apart from burning incense to communicate with deities, popular religion has other derived practices that extend to other aspects of people’s lives. I argue that this derives from religious expectations that deities and supernatural forces not only exist but can also alter people’s lives. So when people burn incense, they wish to get a response by familiarising themselves with any existing deity. To burn incense in the temple at least twice a month meets the most basic obligation and people’s attitude towards visiting the temple is similar to the way they pay a visit to a relative: you should never visit someone with empty hands. Also, the “gifts” people bring to the temple symbolize the nature of their relationship with both the deity and the monk, and may include vegetables, cooking oil and fresh noodles. As a payback, eating a meal in the temple amounts to removing ill-fortune. That is why many elderly people bring their grandchildren along to lunch so that also enjoy the deity’s blessings. This is the derived blessing of the reciprocal exchange system and though it is an unwritten prerequisite, one should bring something to activate the power of the meal. It highlights the importance of not only being mutual and reciprocal but also the idea of not being greedy: eating the meal without paying anything would be regarded as taking advantage of the deity. This logic is also applied to their secular life in that one should never exploit relatives.

Another prevailing practice is kanhao, which means seeking an auspicious day for an event. Lots of people who claim to be atheists—that is with no faith in either deities or spirits—still admit to seeking incense interpreters’ or monks’ help to kanhao and insist that they are just following tradition. The mentality here is similar to those who burn incense but make no contact with the monk: they do this to avoid any potential risks and to gain possible benefits. It is insurance against life’s uncertainty. It is also a practice of the daily-practical modality in that they chose practice over beliefs. So why bother trying to understand the theory behind kanhao or listen to monks’ doctrines.

Ideas like fate (ming) or luck also fit uncertainty, so people use them as a good excuse when life takes unexpected turns. I argue that these practices are religious too because people are seeking help from a higher source or to receive intervention from the
spiritual world, even though there is no identifiable spiritual figure. People are motivated by a sense of powerlessness towards uncertainty and that pushes them to religious-type practices. One man in his fifties turned to the temple because of a disastrous life.

I was born into a rich family. We lost all our fortune after we were labelled as the landlord class. My parents both died within a few years before I reached adulthood. I could not understand why I was suffering. After consulting a monk, I was told that the lost family possessions are compensated by the expanding family. It is true. My father was an only child but I have six siblings.

He was satisfied with this answer because it taught him to make peace with his life. He showed up a few times during sermons in the temple but was not motivated to follow the liturgical or scriptural modality. The daily-practical modality was sufficient to explain his fate.

While labelling themselves as traditional, people label officials and businessmen as superstitious or fetishistic. They believe that these people are more likely to experience uncertainties. Wenzhou’s commercial economy exploded after economic reforms and correspondingly religious activities underwent a rapid recovery (Anagnost 1994, p.239). Thus, the largest number of donations often came from businessmen, either for redemption from corrupt practices (such as selling counterfeit and shoddy products) or for future protection. Chu (2010) depicted how local people burn different kinds of spirit money to create a cosmic web of karmic debt and divine credit which contributes to the local economy.

Restricted by Lu County’s economic backwardness, rural people are rather frugal even in religious matters. The real reason might be the nature of popular religion’s embeddedness. Every step they take, is part of their daily routine. I call it religious because they are seeking help from a spiritual force and a symbolic power. They call it traditional because kanhao or burning incense is how they live their daily life.

Even people who are willing to pay 20 yuan for a certificate of Buddhism do not necessarily intend to adopt the liturgical or scriptural modality. What people are after is the efficacy of the certificate, not the discipline of liturgical worship. Chang was
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convinced that her work in the temple saved her from several adverse incidents, so she took her three grandsons to the temple to get each of them a certificate of Buddhism. She was not concerned about teaching them the discipline of abstinence that formally qualified one for a certificate. She was basically pursuing the same symbolic power in the certificate as others had assumed to be in the stone turtle. Although people with higher levels of education are attracted by the idea that they can access religious knowledge in various ways including through incense interpreters (Li 2004) many rural people see conversion as obtaining a certificate to supplement their daily-practical modality.

3.5.2 Preference for morality

When people burn incense, they are reliving the principle behind it, namely the idea of being good or being moral. All legendary stories have moral elements (Wu 2011; Lin 2002; Li 2005; Wang 2005). Many older people are convinced that the deity will not bless bad people regardless of whether or not they burn incense. This confirms the deity’s function as a moral arbitrator.

Under the lens of religious perspectives, many trivial matters can be interpreted as the deity’s warning against being immoral. To receive the deity’s blessing, a common understanding is that it rests on personal piety or devotion, explained by local vernacular phrases such as: efficacy comes out of worshipping; only you can know whether the deity is efficacious; sincerity results in efficacy; what you believe is what you get; if you are faithful, the deity will be efficacious. In these contexts, the divine power is in a broad sense replaced by personal piety.

One woman went to a Taoist temple with her husband after she heard the deity was extremely efficacious. They learned how to make an exchange with the deity, so they shouted their wishes loudly in the temple. She admitted that their wish was not fulfilled, but instead of blaming the deity, she rethought their behaviour and understood that it was their own fault for not being devout enough. This gives rise to another question:
how do people perceive devotion or piety? It can be seen as the common approach to build a direct connection with the deity by making an exchange: during prayer, the individual will speak about what goal he/she is after and what the payback will be. As a moral arbitrator, the deity will not be merciful if one breaks the promise. Several temple-goers shared their own experience of witnessing an older woman bawling in the temple with regret that she did not keep her promise after having a grandson and the boy died at the age of three. They reached the conclusion that one cannot deceive the deity just to save money!

The moral teaching is that one should never be greedy. One older woman mocked, “How could the deity grant your wish when you pray that your son be a high-ranking official in exchange for an apple? Or pray the deity brings you money while you sit still at home?” The rule for exchange must be reciprocal or even that one needs to make an effort first, then if one asks the deity’s help sincerely, one’s wish will come true. This logic highlights the role of people’s endeavour and the deity’s response. It is like hoping to add flowers to a brocade: you need to get the brocade first, instead of waiting for the deity to give you one. If you just sit back and wait, you are too greedy and will end up with nothing.

Along with social changes, the standard for being sincere is varying too. People explained that they were too poor to make big donations in the past so they worshipped the deity with their good heart. This led to three rules: a. the amount of donation or offerings does not matter as long as one is sincere; b. one should prepare offerings commensurate with one’s economic situation; c. one must always act under the deity’s guidance, namely being a good person. With its efficacious stories, popular religion elaborates on what constitutes morality in a religious context.

In contemporary Lu County, this is challenged by an abundant life and the market economy. The value of following the deity’s moral teachings, doing voluntary work or donating supplies is being challenged by the well-accepted idea that evaluates sincerity on the amount of money one spends. The stone tablet placed in every temple records the

7 It is a common understanding that if you go to this mountain to burn incense, you must do it three years in a row. So if your wishes have been granted, you should also visit the temple for the next three years.
amount of money donated and, in several cases, if the family makes a huge donation, they have the privilege of an exclusive tablet only for themselves. Otherwise, around a hundred names would be carved on one. This encourages competition in a disguised way.

I analysed moral codes in chapter two and this indicated that in the village, their morality was highly linked with Confucian teaching. So, being good to your neighbour, loyal to the country and obedient to your parents was raised over and over again with divine punishments for unethical behaviour. The socialist education since the 1950s shared a core set of principles, such as serving the people or learning from Lei Feng. In a sense, temples and the deities within were reflected upon with people’s idealization of a perfect world where righteousness and evil are far apart, and retribution is never absent.

People’s practicality allows them to diverge from prescriptive behaviour. Although the one-child policy was extremely rigorous in the 1980s and 1990s, rural people still found a way to have a son. Breaking the state’s regulations did not make them immoral people because, under local tradition, it was of vital importance to have a male heir. When rules and moral codes collided, the rural people chose to follow their own codes. They were not troubled by breaking the law because having a male heir was fulfilling filial piety, a higher moral requirement.

Such contradictory ideas also run through religious perspectives. For those who believe that “deities bless the good”, it is highly likely that they follow the deity’s teaching and try to be moral in exchange for the deity’s responsiveness while others may treat deities as secular officials that can be bribed. Palmer asked in his article: what type of economy is created when otherworldly or spiritual rewards are added to the equation? (Palmer 2011, p.587) and it is apparent that the market economy does not neatly incorporate the exchange system because there is no guarantee of the deity’s responsiveness. Therefore, the gift economy constitutes an economy of exchanges between people in which one does not seek rewards from other people, but from the gods and karmic recompense (Ibid. p.588).

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8 Lei Feng was a soldier in the People’s Liberation Army and after his death, he was characterized as a selfless and modest person devoted to the people and the country.
I argue that to counterbalance the unpredictability of the deity’s response, moral codes are added into the equation to stress one’s own behaviours and how that causes consequences, this-worldly or otherworldly. Though there are prevailing sayings like “heaven works in a mysterious way” or “fate is predestined”, there is also another saying that wins people’s favour: those who do good will be rewarded. These are the values that satisfy rural people: they need some concrete principles to compensate for the invalid or insufficient moral codes endorsed by the state. Once the logic of reward for doing good is accepted, getting a positive response from the deity also confirms one’s morality: they are the worthy ones. Almost imperceptibly, this creates a sense of moral superiority with which these people distinguish themselves from others.

Hansen concluded that the main criterion for the inclusion of deities on the official register was their power to perform miracles and she suggested that the historical record is understandably almost mute on those who fail to perform miracles (Hansen 1990, p.89). What I find puzzling is how the public reacts to those seemingly inefficacious deities. They may turn to alternative deities for help, but they are more likely to blame themselves. And link the probability of miracles to an individual’s morality. The interpretations of dreams and incense ensure believers attribute any failures to their own actions, rather than questioning deities. In this way, deities hold their efficacy and the temple maintains its reputation, while believers are compelled to reflect on their moral compass.

3.6 Incense interpreters

3.6.1 Personal sufferings

Incense interpreters are extraordinary individuals given their perceived ability as a divine messenger and their unique life experiences. Although anyone may become an interpreter, irrespective of gender and age, they do share similarities in that they are seen as being chosen and also as having suffered. I will introduce four incense interpreters to show this common ground.

\[^9\] Similarly, a Christian priest often said this on his sermons: we Christians have a (moral) bottom line. It implies that there is a huge moral difference between Christians and the rest of the people.
Dani was 55 years old and lived in Yuan village where the Monkey King temple was located. “The scared host 139XXXXXXX” was written in black on the red pillar. Two elderly women in their seventies who helped in the temple said that when she was young, people thought Dani was a lunatic. Many years later, villagers realized that she only acted in a weird way because she was chosen by the Monkey King. Once she accepted the power and her predestined course, she spent about twenty years interpreting incense as a living. During reconstruction of the temple, she acted as a mediator between the deity’s will and local villagers’ capability to follow this. When the village head initially agreed to restore the temple near the dumpsite, the Monkey King was not satisfied, so he told Dani he would leave the village. Upon hearing this, several women knelt and pleaded for mercy. Later, Dani told them that she saw the Monkey King do somersaults happily in a field, so they knew he had settled on that place.

Tan and his wife were both in their seventies and lived in the City God temple 10 years after the person in charge passed away. To maintain their daily life, Tan kept several sheep and ploughed their farmland while his wife raised a dozen chickens in the temple. Seen from the outside, this temple looked like a local residence with a concrete wall and red iron gates, except for the yellow flag floating in the air. Two goats were chained outside the gate and a mean dog barked at whomever entered. The main hall for the City God was located at the end of the yard and the living area for people and other small halls for deities were scattered on both sides.

Tan had a normal adulthood: he joined the army for three years and after discharge, he worked at the local post office. His wife commented, “He was not a believer and never burned incense”. One day when he was waiting for the train, a fortune-teller told him that he was chosen and unless he accepted his fate, he would keep suffering and maybe even die several times. He did not believe a word and refused to obey the deity’s will. Later, he was hit by a telegraph pole during work and the family began to arrange his burial. A second time, he fell into water and almost drowned. After he moved to the temple, his life began to get better. He even survived a 13-hour surgery that no one expected him to live through. His wife took these as signs of his being chosen and once he accepted this, the deity helped him go through any adversity.
Han and his wife were in their eighties and had lived in the Earth God temple for six years. Like the Tan couple, husband Han interpreted incense while his wife took care of daily life. He recalled being chosen by the deity at the age of seven. His wife remembered he suffered from “insanity” in his thirties, dancing and singing involuntarily from time to time. He could not help in caring for their children. He was told that this was not madness but a sign of being chosen. Since he was “honest”, his wife said, he refused to see patients even though the deity repeatedly told him to. “I do not know how to treat them so I will not deceive them, and I will raise my children through honest labour”, he explained. When he was sixty, the Supreme Lord (taishang laojun) finally revealed himself. “He was the white-bearded elder man,” he said and built a statue for him in the side room. Like the deity promised, ever since he started working at home, people came continuously. Since the previous temple-carer could not interpret incense, Han was invited by some villagers to perform this important service.

Although 68 years old Lu worked at home but liked to attend temple events and made the most of opportunities to publicize her good deeds. She built a reputation over the last 30 years. She provided people with solutions to their problems and also made an effort to persuade them to “take the right path”, meaning learning Buddha’s teachings. She described herself as “a disciple of the universe” and as “having extraordinary powers” and justified her curing of diseases as advanced science. She stressed the status of her patients all the time, boasting of retired officers of the county, or someone rich riding a fancy car from another city. This proved her ability as well her social network: she gained tacit consent from the local authority though she did not live in a temple. She revealed patients’ karmic reward as the cure for their present malady. During her self-promotion, she repeated that she was the one who suffered so others could benefit.

Their earlier experiences of being forced by the deity into the role of incense interpreter along with evidence of their sufferings, physical illness or mental issues, was glamorized as spiritual capital and as proof of their ability. There are entry requirements for incense interpreters so as to convince others of their calling. Individuals must observe transformative practices to convince onlookers of their competency (Singh 2018). In the case of planchette writing in Taiwan, those who performed the writing were always illiterate as a way to prove their authenticity (Jordan and Overmyer 1986).
It was their early sufferings and untaught gifts that proved their ability derived from the deity and “they treated their knowledge as a professional secret” (Wolf 1974, p.17).

Dani saw the Monkey King playing around the field while Tan was enlightened by the deity during dreams. When they observed the burning incense, they entered a state of trance or “ritual possession”. Ward (1980) stated the function of ritual possession as: psychologically, it protected the possessor’s self-image, allowed them to identify with gods, act out repressed impulses, and alleviate aggressive tendencies.

The accepted expertise of incense interpreters justified their charging a reasonable fee. The improvement of temples, such as repairing the roof or building a new house also serves to improve their own living condition. Yet, such new construction is taken as proof that they manage the money properly and glorify the deity. Their own life experiences reconfirm the religious perspective that individuals are powerless against divine interventions. So, they can only accept their fate. The deity triumphs over personal will.

3.6.2 Communication and interpretation

Nearby villagers referred to Dani as “the person with discerning eyes” (mingyan ren) which indicates her specialty in seeing things that ordinary people could not see. It is the same powerlessness towards life that stimulates people to seek out all sorts of help. Incense interpreters will always be needed “as long as uncertain outcomes exist—that is, as long as there are important, uncontrollable events that individuals want to influence or about which they want information” (Singh 2018, p.8).

During the interpretation, they strengthen the traditional morality unintentionally. A man in his fifties went to see Han about constant shoulder pain. After observing the smoke, Han told him to not worry because it was triggered by the man’s recently deceased father. Apparently, the father wanted to greet his son, so he tapped him on the shoulder, but he forgot that the ghost’s world is not the same as the living one. Therefore, what he thought was just a pat turned out to be a lasting pain for his son, but it proved his concerns. The solution suggested by Han was rather simple: he just needed to reassure his father—though he could not see him—by saying things like “I am doing well so live a happy life there”. Incense interpreters not only supply answers but also
serve as gentle reminders of the family role and members’ obligation towards each other: including the deceased ancestors’ influence on their descendants and the duty of the living.

Tan’s wife reminded believers to burn incense in the temple, not their house. She believed that once the incense is burnt, deities will descend from heaven; but since they cannot be seen by ordinary people, they cannot communicate with each other. Thus, the more frequently one burns incense at home, the more restless the house will be. The best way is to leave it to the professionals because they will know better. She concluded that most people, despite burning incense for their entire life, are still burning “bewildered” (hutu) incense. This leaves her husband and other incense interpreters as the only ones who can comprehend the meaning of incense.

Though incense interpreters are less enthusiastic than monks in educating people, they do impart religious knowledge, such as on the types of offerings and the principles of being good. “As long as you are good, the deity will look after you”, is what is promised. After all, they are the spokesmen of deities and this implies their virtue. Spirits only heal through mortals whom they have sought out, and they seek only those they determine as virtuous (Dorfman 1996).

The behaviours of the incense interpreters demonstrate their moral code: a. Loyalty/assiduity. Tan slept in the temple every day since they moved in to look after the temple; b. honesty and integrity. All the money donated by believers was spent on the temple with new statues and an opera stage or on repairing roofs. As a reward, they all lived a happy life with many children and successful grandchildren. They were living evidence of the deities’ efficacy.

However, the immoral incense interpreter will be forsaken. One middle-aged man lost his power after cohabiting with a woman. Though they were both divorced, cohabitation without marriage was considered bad in rural areas. Thus, losing his efficacy proved that there is a bottom line that should not be crossed. In a society of mutual acquaintance, news travelled fast and such behaviour was wholly condemned.
Deities sometimes use symbols to manifest their power to back up their agents. When Han decided to renovate the temple, he asked people to help him move a heavy stone burner. No matter how many times they tried or how many people helped, they could not move it. Then he realized that the deity must want the burner to be left there. Through such a collective effort, everyone witnessed the deity’s efficacy, while, as the chosen one, the incense interpreter has the power to clarify an obscure message. It is all about publicity since whoever constructs the most compelling explanation persuades others of that deity’s power (Hansen 1990, p.72).

3.7 Conclusion

I argue that burning incense symbolizes the informal and practical nature through which people seek beneficial results through the simplest actions. Knowledge about the deities’ origins becomes irrelevant to the efficacy of the deity as revealed in the incense. Since popular religion reflects how people live their daily life, it also mirrors the family divisions where women deal with deities while men serve their ancestors. Wolf, writing about Taiwan society, asserted that “while the gods are powerful and represent public morality, the ancestors are relatively weak and concerned only with their own welfare and that of their descendants” (Wolf 1974, p.168). Since men inherit the bloodline, they have to take responsibility for their ancestors, morally and spiritually.

I argue that burning incense is an individual act for the greater good. Women burn incense to pray for the entire family and to accumulate merit for their descendants. The continuity of the family still matters. One woman who participated in almost every single ritual in the temple said that every time she burnt incense, she first prayed for her husband. Another one expressed gratitude towards her husband for his support because she spent too much time in the temple voluntarily cooking or listening to sermons. This reflects age and gender differences.

The younger generation neither has the spare time nor the need to visit the temple because their mothers or grandmothers are praying for them. As one incense interpreter explained, young people only go to a temple when things are not going well. Only when the young generation grows older will this responsibility shift from mothers to daughters and daughters-in-law, and the responsibility for ancestors from fathers to sons.
This is how religious knowledge and practices are carried on through the generations and this explains why it is always the middle-aged and elderly who engage in religious matters. For the young, it is not yet their time.

Burning incense persists in rural society as it fits the rules of a society based on face-to-face acquaintance. Attending religious events can build up one’s identity. It was believed that bad people would not come to the temple, so whoever goes to the temple must be good. In addition whether people visit the temple or not becomes an important differentiator to distinguish the Other: it forms an identity around a certain group of people who do the same thing, which makes social interaction much easier and reduces the probability of making mistakes or even offending others.

However, as their way of life becomes more commercialized and their culture is reformed popular religious connotations and people’s sense of divine punishments could decline. When the Dragon Boat Festival (held on the 5th day of the 5th lunar month) approaches, the elderly tend to tie a bunch of colourful sewing threads on to the wrists of small children. This practice is well-preserved and commercialized—colourful bracelets are purchasable all over the street during this period of the year. However the next part is less well known and rarely practised: one month later on the sixth day of the sixth lunar month, the bracelet should be removed and tied on to eggplant to transfer all potential misfortune and illness.

Decorations were placed on eggplants in some farmer’s vegetable field.

What I discuss here is that wearing the colourful bracelets is indeed the heritage of tradition, but without the latter stage, it loses all its religious meaning. When people use
“tradition” to justify certain practices, it could be a response to what they have gone through in the past, but it could also be evidence of disenchantment. By claiming something is traditional instead of religious, the deities’ punitive nature is ignored, and divine punishment dismissed.

The deity’s public appearance has already been reduced to a minimum and the functions of the deity’s tour transferred to individual responsibility. Since religious perspectives are still part of people’s lives and passed down over generations with a lack of a new alternative practices like kanhao, however much people portray them as tradition, they are the response of people still influenced by “destiny” and still seeking solutions to life’s uncertainties.

Money has become an important indicator to measure one’s sincerity as another consequence of the market economy. Compared with donating vegetables or doing two hours’ voluntary work, donating 2,000 yuan is a more powerful symbol. This reveals the flexibility of popular religion. Incense interpreters take their sufferings as a validation of the deity’s efficacy to cover the fact that it is the disease that hinders them from living a normal life.

And, it is essential to comprehend popular religion’s values in today’s changing society. Because the celestial hierarchy is diluting, deities become more and more the preference of individuals, instead of being entrenched within the whole community. When all deities become universalized with similar features, rural people have more freedom to select one or the other, leading to diverse outcomes: following traditional practices to gain benefits or converting to Buddhist or Christian doctrines. After all, popular religion symbolizes the way rural people cope with their life with women assuming the spiritual responsibilities of the family. I hold that burning incense and ancestor worship are two fundamental forms of popular religion for they allow women and men, respectively, to engage in religious activities. The next chapter will focus on men’s obligation towards their ancestors and how that is also changing.
Chapter 4 The revival of ancestor worship

4.1 Introduction

Reviewing how the imperial state attempted to achieve the standardization of ritual practice, Watson concluded that “had this not been the strategy (conscious or unconscious) of state officials, Chinese culture could never have reached such heights of uniformity and coherence as it did during the late imperial era” (Watson 1988, p.11). The state strives to regulate culture through state-endorsed rituals and practices like the public memorial of the Yellow Emperor, and also attempts to reform the funeral system and the religiosity behind it.

Seiwert (2016) agreed that the core of the traditional Chinese religious system is to deal with the dead and practice ancestor worship. Even though this practice has been challenged by Christianity, in rural areas it is still considered of great importance in one’s family. It is safe to say that almost every household in the rural sector spares no effort to host a proper ritual. The motivations for people to make such a decision might be diverse though. I will study the practices referred to in local vernacular as “burning paper” and “visiting the tomb” to understand ancestor worship.

Similar to people burning incense, burning paper money to one’s ancestors and visiting tombs is also regarded as following tradition in Lu County. This happens elsewhere too.

For me the typical person—for the sake of argument, let’s say there is something we can label as ‘typical’—would be the Shijiazhuang retired truck driver who said he didn’t believe the spirits receive the burned paper but he burns the paper anyway. His meaning was somewhere between denying the existence of the spirits and denying the effectiveness of the ritual, plus somewhere between affirming the force of habit and affirming the sense of obligation. This is not prevaricating or equivocating, in my book. This is the essence of the custom and the material spirit of the Chinese lifeworld.

(Blake 2011, p.197)

This driver ascribed his practice to many reasons such as following tradition and fulfilling obligations but he made no reference to religious sentiments. I argue that even people who claim to be atheist or reject the spiritual intent of burning paper are motivated by the underlying reason of continuing with tradition. Under the influence of the state, tradition
is the easy and safe answer because it does not involve any spiritual elements which might be regarded as superstitious or backward. The truth is, when people burn paper for ancestors, they are acknowledging the lasting exchange between the living world and the afterlife.

That is to say, there is diversity in each individual’s motivations, but the overall religious perspective regarding ancestor worship is similar. I identified two key motivators in ancestor worship, namely meeting a spiritual need and fulfilling moral obligations. So ancestor worship, while termed tradition, is seen to be efficacious for it achieves two goals at the same time: preventing unsatisfied ancestors from haunting the family and expressing one’s moral obligation and reputation for being filial. Even though some may deny the existence of ancestors in another world, they still yield to the pressure from the community to uphold their prestige.

Based on his research in Shandong province, Yang acknowledged the family’s role in reproduction and argued that ancestor worship should not be understood from a religious angle because it is a sacrifice ritual that stems from a concern for the family’s continuity (Yang 2001, p.90). I argue that whether or not people simply conform to etiquettes and customs, ancestor worship is religious because it is a set of practices that stem from definitive beliefs about the ancestors’ role in this and their world. People do this because they want to not just honour their ancestors but gain benefits or hedge against risks from the ancestors.

When Blake wrote about the practice of paper money, he quoted from several prestigious newspapers distributed in major cities and he concluded that “The journalistic lampoonery is rather remarkable, if also limited, in the way it makes certain customary practices laughable by contradictions in the practices themselves” (Blake 2011b, p.467). It is the influence of the state’s discourse on religious matters that makes such a reasonable action become laughable for the elite. He added further that creating a Qingming holiday (the tomb-sweeping day) was “maybe an attempt to obviate the ever-pressing challenge from world religions such as Christianity” (Ibid).

I cannot agree with this because there are diverse reasons for such decisions. I argue that setting Qingming as a national holiday precisely shows the state’s intention to regulate
religious practices and generate profits\(^1\). It attempts to secularize ancestor worship by recreating a cultural rite like the worship of Fuxi (Seiwert 2016). Even though it seems that the state recognizes people’s desire to sweep their ancestors’ tombs, I find that the core of this festival has been substituted. The state encourages the bringing of only flowers, not paper and incense, to the tomb to show respect for their ancestors. This differs from the rural sector’s understanding that one should treat ancestors as living spirits in another world.

As Freedman argued, elite culture and peasant culture were not different things; they were versions of each other (Freedman 1974, p.23). In the Confucian perspective, sacrificial rituals do not presuppose the existence of spirits that need offerings but are ritual obligations to express respect and reverence for one’s ancestors (Seiwert 2016, p.132). However for a majority of rural people, a key concept of ancestor worship is that it is believed that ancestors’ spirits still exist and can affect their descendants’ life in various ways (Wu 2006, p.59).

Also, regional differentiation must be taken into account. As I noted earlier, diverse practices exist under the uniform religious formulations. In Lu County, it was never a tradition to sweep ancestors’ tombs on Qingming and thus making it a national holiday has no effect on local people’s practices.

Using tradition as an excuse shows rural people’s disadvantage. In the absence of a successful effort to forge a meaningful common cultural framework, contemporary China is characterized by an obvious lack of cultural consensus: between city and countryside; state and society; intellectuals and the public; and between many intellectuals and the state (Cohen 1993, p.153). Once associated with backwardness and superstition, it is difficult for the countryside to shake off such preconceptions. This is not without benefits though: the diversity that exists in popular religion found ways to survive in rural areas whereas the city became rigid and regulated. For example, rural people find ways to get around the rules that party members should be cremated after death; when some urban people burn paper at a crossroad, they are bombarded with criticisms for being

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\(^1\) There is plenty of news about the income made during the Qingming holiday. In Fujian Province for example, the total income was 4.145 billion yuan for three days. News source: http://www.fjic.gov.cn/jjxx/jjdt/201904/t20190408_4845778.htm
superstitious. The chief cause of this is that the religious sentiment that ancestors are considered as the living is not accepted in the state’s ideology.

I conclude that ancestor worship revives because people recognize the spiritual power of the spirits and the social prestige associated with proper respect for the ancestors. This chapter will explore changes in practices as a response to the changing society. Despite uniform religious formulations, there is diversity in the way people practice. As long as the ritual is encouraged by the community, the individual is able to make alterations or add new elements. That is why some people hire an opera troupe to manifest their willingness to spend money for the deceased, which is an expression of filial piety.

4.2 Filial piety: the core of ancestor worship and the resistance to funeral reform

Seen as symptomatic of rural backwardness, rural burial was condemned as superstitious and a waste of resources. This led to the state’s determination to reform funerals by insisting on cremation. As early as 1956, the central state issued the Opinions on Funeral Reform highlighting the importance of changing old funeral customs but after 1978 when the state’s focus shifted to economic development, the funeral reform stagnated and the traditional of burial was revived. The state council’s policy in 1982 was a response to that.

Cremation not only benefits by transforming outmoded habits and customs, breaking down superstition, constructing a socialist spiritual civilization, but also can help save wood and farmland. (No. 35 [1982] of the State Council)

This was a report issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs on funeral reform. Lu County made a thorough plan in 1987.

1. Dwellers with an urban hukou (residence) and public officers must be cremated after their death.

       ……

6. No entity or individual is allowed to sell coffins and burial related superstitious supplies in the cremation area.

7. No entity or individual should adopt the feudalist customs and superstitious practices, like fengshui, burial utensils or calling back the spirit of the dead. (County book 1994, p.971)
It is clear that people who have an urban residence and belong to a work unit are forced to cremate, while rural people are encouraged to do so but burial is acceptable as long as it is not extravagant or wasteful. Twenty years after this regulation, it was sadly admitted that because the traditional burial is deep-rooted, barely any people in rural areas chose to cremate, except cadres and work unit members (County book 2014, p.149). This was because the state failed to acknowledge the meaning of the funeral in the rural areas in terms of spirituals needs and social functions. People pursued an efficacious approach, rather than a modern and “civilized” funeral. So, in Lu County, there were times when cadres were secretly buried to avoid cremation and the official funeral home kept a place for people to burn incense and make offerings.

“The standardization of ritual reveals a unified Chinese culture” (Watson 1988, p.3) but in terms of death practices people need to express their diversity so people are willing to violate the rule since the state and rural people are not pursuing the same goal. The state wants a socialist atheistic funeral where people simply honour their ancestors. However rural people need reassurance that the deceased will not haunt the family and make them restless as ensured by following traditions.

Technically, the practice may be viewed as composed of two major parts, namely mortuary rites that immediately follow death, and sacrificial rites that maintain the long-term relationship between the dead and the living (Yang 1961, pp.30-31). The state’s ambition to reform the mortuary rites is doomed to fail because it does not take account of the second part, namely how people deal with the deceased in their daily life henceforward. Evidence from Anhui province, Zhejiang province and Henan province showed that after funeral reform, expenditure on funerals did not decline and people still buried a coffin in the ground with a small casket containing the ashes inside it (Zhang 2011; Chen 2006; Dong 2011). In such circumstances there was barely any improvement in saving wood or farmland.

This is not to say that the funeral reforms were a total failure for state modernisers because at least in Lu County, people began to be aware of the importance of being filial to one’s parents while they are alive in preference to spending a fortune on their funerals. Unlike the trend of hiring a troupe several decades ago, funerals are now simpler and represent a small display of the family’s piety. A lavish funeral becomes optional. It can be a bonus
point to increase one’s prestige but can also possibly result in ill reputation as unnecessary, showing off and out-dated.

Ancestor worship is a form of moral exchange and part of a ritual economy ensuring the ancestor’s continued well-being and positive disposition towards the living, while the living sometimes ask for special favours or support and assistance in case of business affairs, family issues or illness (Hüwelmeier 2016, p.317). Because the ancestors’ power is not as strong as that of deities, the funeral reflects the social norms of morality incumbent on the descendants of the deceased, especially the piety of the children for their parents. Thus, not performing funerals properly directly damages one’s social reputation and character.

People’s root concern lies in their perception of the afterlife. Among the Chinese, there is a strong belief in the continuity between this world (life) and the next (death) (Watson 1988, p.8). It is widely believed that the living world (yang jian) and the afterlife (yin jian) are identical thus it is necessary to burn paper materials such as cloth and money, (and possibly a mansion, car or even a servant) and make food offerings to ensure their wellbeing in another world. Based on this understanding, neither Buddhist nor Taoist rituals are required because spirits do not go through the samsara system or suffer in the eighteen levels of hell. What is valued here is to bury the deceased properly according to local practices involving a fengshui master and burial in the ground to ensure the ancestor’s happiness in the afterlife. It is the community’s established practices that determine whether the ritual is proper or not, but the consequence of an improper ritual falls on the family, spiritually and morally.

Because “the religious system in China allowed religious similarity to be expressed as though it were a religious difference” (Freedman 1974, p.38), the local diversity always generated something unique even as it deviated from the polity of the centre. For instance, Hüwelmeier (2016) quoted by Blake (2011a, p.198) suggested that “in China, for example, one can order Ecstasy, Viagra, and various types of condoms”. Blake’s book described this as a new tendency that happened in one small city but this author infers that this local practice is widely accepted. However the truth is that, this is merely a local difference and cannot represent the whole system.
That is why I try to avoid making such universal statements because I am aware of the risk of these becoming misleading. When Chu talked about paper money in the shape of American dollars, she did a wonderful job of putting that in the social context of the sharp contrast between rural tradition and coastal cosmopolitanism (Chu 2010). People in Lu County would never burn foreign currency because it makes no sense but in Chu’s case study, villagers had relatives who worked in America and by having USA dollars they further enhanced their reputation. Unless this case is seen from its unique social context, the local difference would seem to be unreasonable or even ridiculous.

In rural areas, the main function of funerals is to achieve what “relates to the transformation of one being or state into another, changed being or state” (Watson 1988, p.4). Being buried underground does not mean one ceases to exist and that is why burning money and making food offerings are indispensable and cannot be replaced by floral offerings as advocated by the state. A fengshui master or religious specialist assists the family to find a proper location and timing because “they controlled special modes of communications with the otherworld of gods, ghosts, and ancestors through offerings, prayers, charms, and divination” (Naquin 1988, p.66).

Because the first step of the funeral is “public notification of death by wailing and other expressions of grief” (Watson 1988, p.12), a family might compromise traditional rites and announce the death years after. Like Fei pointed out:

> If there are no reforms in these areas, then simply taking laws and courts to the countryside will not provide any of the advantages of a society ruled by law. Instead, it will only generate those disadvantages associated with having destroyed a society ruled through rituals. (Fei 1992, p.107)

Enacting the policy does not easily change people’s funeral practices because the spiritual implications are important to them.

### 4.3 Rituals for ancestors

#### 4.3.1 Paper money

Watson argued that the proper performance of the rites was of paramount importance in determining who was and who was not deemed to be fully “Chinese” (Watson 1988, p.4). I would not go that far, but as far as I am concerned, in the local society, doing a funeral
in a traditional way, properly or not, reveals one’s identity as a practitioner of traditional culture or popular religion, and distinguishes one from Christianity. More importantly, doing a proper rite has a much broader meaning linked to one’s moral obligation.

By burning incense and paper as either tradition or religion, rural people are seizing back the right to gain control over their lives and this is not backward at all. People’s practices reveal the way they see the supernatural world as parallel to reality. First, even though they all involve burning incense, other offerings for ancestors and deities are different because they are all subject to the hierarchy of spirit beings and their different roles. For example, though yellow paper is used on both occasions, under careful inspection there is a slight distinction between the one offered to the deity (biao) and the one to the ancestor (zhi).

Bundles of zhi and dou are sold in the store.

Biao is deep yellow and zhi is lighter; zhi is blank without any decoration while some types of biao have red patterns printed on it, written words like “ten million cash”, “Jade Emperor” or “Amitabha”\(^2\). This also highlights the precedence of local practices because there is no universal understanding of what biao and zhi are: they are treated as either money or cloth. The same thing happens to dou—a square object made of golden papers: the lotus throne, a container to store paper ingots, or a money mountain.

\(^2\) Intriguingly, I once witnessed someone burning a pile of biao printed "Amitabha” in a Taoist temple. This reflects the hybridity of religions discussed in chapter two.
There has more recently emerged a tendency to simplify the practices as some religious knowledge loses its importance. The application of *biao* to deities implies that it is more powerful and valuable than *zhi*. This distinction between offerings for deities and ancestors is made clearer in some scholars’ accounts. Feuchtwang found this in Taiwan: there were various gradations of “gold” and of “silver”, each with their proper use in a graded hierarchy of address to gods and spirits (Feuchtwang 2001, p.19). He also discovered a difference in offerings, which is less apparent in Lu County. Offerings to the gods of heaven must not have been presented previously to any other deity, whereas the offerings to the spirit soldiers may consist of food that had already been presented to the gods of heaven and the other gods (Feuchtwang 1974, p.110). This kind of “sequential order of access to offerings of food” (Ibid) indicates that ghosts played a minor role compared with the need to worship deities first and take care of one’s ancestors. In Lu County, the worship of ghosts is even less prominent.

That only *zhi* and gold/silver ingots are burned for ancestors prove that people are aware of such differences between ancestors and deities. Instead of questioning what symbols mean, people care more about the practice of valuing those symbols. Consequently, deities are worshipped in the expectation of blessings while ancestors are worshipped due to family obligations.

![People unfold the gold/silver ingots and *dou* before burning them.](image)

In Lu County, temples and home shrines with deities’ statues mark a sacred place to communicate with deities while it is less popular to have ancestors’ tablets at one’s home and there is no ancestor hall for any lineage. Tombs are isolated from people’s daily life, and ancestors seem to be less involved in daily events. The ghost is regarded as different
from ancestors and deities as it is seen as the Other and raises the fear of uncertainty and unwelcome strangers posing threats to the village. Thus, people rely on deities, are obligated to ancestors and keep their distance from ghosts.

Watson noticed ritual variations all over China and he explained that “they participated in a unified, centrally organized culture and at the same time celebrated their local or regional distinctiveness” (Watson 1988, p.17). So the devalued ghosts in Lu County represent a change in social perceptions where people engage with strangers more frequently and the strength of institutional temples and ritual services make ghosts less harmful and more controllable.

Through burning paper money and making food offerings, people are making connections with their ancestors’ spirits even though they live in another world without any physical presence. Compared with deities, ancestors deal with the family and barely pose a threat to others since “one man’s ancestor is another man’s ghost” (Wolf 1974, p.146). Thus, regular sacrifices for their ancestors are necessary for the family’s own sake. Ghosts however remain unpredictable. In Lu County, ghosts refer to those deceased people for whom no sacrifices have been made. For example, if people die before having a son, no one will worship them. Thus, lacking offerings makes them suffer in the afterlife so they wander on the earth. Both Buddhism and Taoism have special rituals to feed those hungry ghosts or save them from the purgatory that will end their sufferings and stop them from harming people. In other words, ghosts are out of people’s control but their danger is controllable with the help of religious specialists.

Palmer (2011) held that the offerings people present to deities is a gift in a religious gift economy for which he identified three different parties: the giver, the receiver and a spiritual source that could be described as karmic merit or cosmic recompense. When people burn paper money to their ancestors, they do want to have a beneficial exchange with the ancestors but where I differ from Palmer is that in this bidirectional exchange, people attribute to their own ancestors the delayed reward, not to a third source. I argue that the three-party chain of exchange between people and deities only works when a religious specialist is involved. Like I showed in chapter three, people send gifts—food offerings and money in red envelopes—to incense interpreters but they know that it is the
deity that grants their wishes. When people directly make contact with either deities or ancestors, they establish a relationship between the two parties in which they get blessings or avoid misfortune.

……some might say the most important, feature of the Chinese ideological domain: the idea of exchange between living and dead. Death does not terminate relationships of reciprocity among Chinese, it simply transforms these ties and often makes them stronger. A central feature of Chinese funerals and post-burial mortuary practices is the transfer of food, money, and goods to the deceased. In return the living expects to receive certain material benefits, including luck, wealth, and progeny. (Watson 1988, p.9)

In reply to my question about the purpose of burning paper, people often answered that “it is tradition, who knows whether it works or not”, or “who knows whether they received the paper”. Yet, they still do it twice a year because they are afraid of what might follow afterwards: no one wants to risk an angry ancestor.

4.3.2 Visiting the tombs

The acknowledgement of moral obligations to one another defines living in a society of familiarity where people know each other and judge each other’s characters by what they do. Since the funeral is held in the village and the tomb is often nearby, it is easy to tell whether the funeral is properly conducted and whether the family sweeps the tomb as they are supposed to. Neglecting this tradition damages one’s reputation as a moral person.

Some scholars hold that only those who believe in the existence of ancestral spirits and visit the gravesite or have an altar of tablets are ancestor worshippers. This leads them to the conclusion that only about 17.5 per cent of mainland Chinese are ancestor worshippers (Yang and Hu 2012). Similarly, Hu writes that ancestor worship activities in China are always centred on the gravesite of ancestors, the tablets of ancestors, and genealogies (Hu 2016, p.172). However, these three standards do not apply in Lu County, because for most people there is no genealogy of the family and three years after the funeral the tablet is stored away. What matters is a series of activities around the gravesite during and after the funeral.

The basic term for ancestor worship in the local vernacular is “visiting the grave” (shangfen). It contains at least two parts: the funeral and the following routine visits.
Local funerals do not use Buddhist ceremonies and some of the literati class even refused to use music (County book 1743, p.6). Another County record provided details on the process of funerals that indicated that both Confucian and popular religious practices play a part. For example, the eldest son needs to carry an earthen basin on his head while his wife needs to carry steamed bread on her back; public rituals with banquets—family members, relatives, neighbours, villagers, colleagues and all sorts of acquaintances are invited—are needed on the seventh day after the death, the thirty-fifth day, the 100th day, and the three year anniversary. After three years, only family members should visit the grave twice a year (County book 2014). It is hard to infer why Buddhist elements are not incorporated into funerals in the first place so I can only assume that a whole set of rituals performed in this way is considered efficacious enough. This practice has become a tradition that has prevailed in the county since then.

Instead of being focused on the correct meaning, people attach vital importance to the performance of what is considered the right ritual for the desired result. It is the same logic as that applied to the effectiveness of tradition: each step is clearly marked, and all that people need to do is to follow those steps. Thus if someone strictly performs each step of the procedure, but there is no tablet and genealogy in the house, they are still ancestor worshipers. Unlike the power of deities, the power of ancestors is seen in the absence of misfortune: that nothing adverse happens to the family proves the efficacy of the rituals because it implies that the deceased is pleased and satisfied.

The “proper ritual” takes spiritual beings into consideration. The deceased should be buried in the ground and a fengshui master should be invited to select an auspicious site (County book 1994, p.781). By seeking an auspicious date and site people acknowledge the possibility of intervention from a supernatural force and this I deem as a religious activity.

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3 I was curious about the practice of the earthen basin which should be smashed to the ground on the second day after death. I asked around and realized that none of the people who participated actually knew the reason for this practice. They all just provided the same explanation that “it is the tradition” or “that is how we do it”.

4 One woman complained in the temple that she originally planned to invite monks to perform a ritual for her deceased father in the temple. However her brothers were against this idea because they thought it was unnecessary and expensive.
This confirms the role of the community because “it is the community that determines convention and affirms that a funeral has been performed properly” (Watson 1988, p.6). Even though Chau argued that to maximize the efficacy a ritual polytropy exists in which people turn to various religious services (Chau 2011), local people in Lu County showed no pattern of incorporating various practices because as long as the community accepted a convention, there was no need to turn to another. A proper funeral here included a simplified Confucian rite witnessed by the public and a burial procedure assisted by a religious specialist. The ultimate authority for funeral rituals was the Confucian Classics ((Naquin 1988, p. 63) and by adopting their instructions, there was no need for monks or Taoist priests to hold separate rituals. Once all the procedures were fulfilled according to the plan, namely at what time to head to the graveyard or at what direction the coffin should point, the ritual would be efficacious.

A rather unique practice in Lu County is that local people highly value two specific days as the time to visit a grave: the second day of the second month and the first day of the tenth month. Some elderly people link these days as the time to open/close the gate of the tomb, spiritually, so the ancestors’ spirit can enter or leave. Although the younger generations seem to ignore such knowledge, they still support the tradition as providing reassurance against fear of the unknown and avoiding a reputation of not being a moral person.

Even if the community is declining as I will argue in chapter five, in this scenario visiting the grave is still part of communal morality because it expresses one’s gratitude for the upbringing one’s ancestors provided. Besides, it concerns one’s mianzi (reputation): regularly visiting the tomb will keep it clean, so others will know they are filial. Funerals and tombs are public places to show their filial piety through the money and energy they invest. “People will know there are still people in the family,” one elder explained as the reason to visit the tomb twice a year, “you clean the weeds, add more soil to the grave mound and place some paper.”

In China, ancestor worship is by nature an act of obeisance (Wolf 1974, p.159) and funerals and the subsequent banquets thus become a public display of one’s filial piety. Because the label of “being unfilial” plays a decisive role in one’s reputation, people do not risk the social condemnation if they ignore such obligations. With increasing
the revival of ancestor worship

commercialization, most funerals have become eye-catching with artistic performances, replacing the traditional musical performance.

On the third anniversary of Tang’s mother’s funeral, he hired a small troupe who started playing mournful music the night before and started again at 8 o’clock in the morning. The tune spoke for the nature of the event so whoever heard it would know it must be something related to death. Attracted by the music, lots of villagers gathered around to see what would happen. The family chose to hold the event at the main crossroads adjacent to their house and the mother’s photo and an incense burner were placed on a small table which was full of offerings. Around 10 o’clock, the ritual began: sons, daughters, grandchildren took a turn to kowtow and burn paper money. After this formal ritual, the art troupe began to perform operas and sad songs.

“Sent from the daughter” was written on the horn. “Heaven mansion” was written on the paper house.

What stood out was a man’s performance of crying before the bier. It should be a chance for sons and daughters to express their love by crying as loudly and sadly as possible, but on this occasion, it was outsourced to a “professional” performer. The performer even wore white linen around his neck which symbolized the family. Upon seeing this, one villager whispered that this kind of crying costs at least 100 yuan and it costs another 200 yuan to wear the linen.

In short, from beginning to end, it was very easy for an observer with a fair knowledge of costs to tell just how much money had been spent on a funeral. In fact, an observer was supposed to be able to tell. Because a parent’s funeral was seen as an expression of the son’s
filial devotion, he was expected to spare no expense. (Naquin 1988, p.49)

After the show was over, the troupe accompanied the family to the grave for subsequent rituals and kept playing music all the way. Although for the villagers, it meant that the fun was over, some still stayed there and commented on the entire show, saying that it must have cost around 1,000 yuan. Others discussed whether to participate in the subsequent banquet and what amount of cash gift was appropriate. One woman “complained”\(^5\) that they had to attend the banquet because her husband is close to the family, and as they lived near the county seat, they had to follow an expensive convention that set the minimum cash gift at 200 yuan.

At the cost of 200 yuan or more, some villagers went to the restaurant in the town for lunch to maintain the relationship with the host. But this public display backfired: one woman refused to attend the banquet because she knew the son was not filial. “What is the use of wasting money on the show when he treated her badly when she was alive,” she criticized, “this is just making noises.”

At both the public display of funerals and the private visits to the grave, at least two functions are fulfilled: to maintain the reputation of being filial and to avoid any possible spiritual risk. The criteria for judging their efficacy are rather simple: if the family live a happy life and have male heirs, it means the ritual was successful; if not, they need to turn to religious specialists. One woman said that it was inconceivable that her neighbour had two sons but four granddaughters; there must be something wrong with his ancestors’ tomb because he had no coveted grandson. She talked about this as common sense. People may give ostensible reasons like following tradition to justify their practices, but often what really matters to them is unintentionally hidden in such comments.

Local people have never accepted the state’s propaganda to replace paper offerings with flowers. Offering flowers represents people’s respect and memory of the deceased, but it would not achieve the same function as offering food and paper money: this demonstrates

\(^5\) These kinds of “cash gift” gradually become a burden because there are so many events to attend which means the family has to pay extra money for weddings, funerals, a new-born’s first month ceremony, etc.
that the deceased are still incorporated in people’s daily life and as long as they keep burning these offerings, there will be a vibrant continuity to their lives.

4.4 Changing dynamics within the family

4.4.1 Descending families

After observing funerals, He (2008b) argued the ontological value of “having a son to carry on the family name” was diminished by the funeral reforms so instead of using funerals to convey the ultimate concern of the sons, funerals were exploited to gain recognition through conspicuous consumption. The funeral is supposed to set examples for the young generation to learn the value of being filial through their parents’ devotion. It reveals that the meaning of filial piety and the motivation for funerals is varying too as a response to commercialization.

The traditional morality of filial piety stressed the children’s obedience towards the parents (Song 1994). But now, Yan (2009) argues that in the face of a moral vacuum or the rise of an egotistic culture, the younger and the older generations have reached a new type of filial piety: “caring and supportive but not obedient” (Yan 2016). Parents’ absolute power over their children has been reversed as the younger generation has become the centre of the family.

Because the focus of the meaning of life has shifted from the ancestors to the grandchildren (Ibid. p.245), Yan summarized this new type of family as descending familism where the young couple has more autonomy and authority as that of the parents declines. This gives rise to conflicts: between the traditional piety which requires children to obey their parents unconditionally and the new tendency where the young challenge their parents’ authority and choose their way of life. Consequently, more young couples move out once they get married, both in Lu County and in other places all over China.

However, the lack of social welfare makes it impossible to detach from one’s family entirely and other research reveals that young people still perceive the family as a collective of indisputable economic, social and emotional importance (Hansen and Pang 2008, p.98). Even if the young couple is seeking autonomy in their life, they still turn to
their parents for support. It is common to witness grandparents attending to their grandchildren because their parents have to work.

With the demise of first Confucian and then communist structures of mutual obligations and responsibilities, the every-man-for-himself values of the market economy and globalised consumerism have come to dominate family life and relationships among people (Hansen and Pang 2008). Hiring people to mourn for them becomes a purchasable service and by not living together, the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law may avoid conflicts on assuming family responsibilities. What remains unchanged here is that the younger generation also turns to their family for spiritual help. In Lu County, I found that spiritual obligation is neglected by the majority of the young people not because they do not have such a need for spiritual protection, but because they do not have to invest any effort: their parents do all the work for them. When mothers burn incense in the temple, they pray for their children’s wellbeing or success in life and career; and when fathers visit the ancestors’ tombs, they ask their ancestors to look after their offspring.

The transformation in families and villages is an adjustment to the trends of urbanization and modernity that increases diversity in one’s motivation for ancestor worship. Some people try to modernize the funeral by introducing strip dances as in other provinces\(^6\) to attract more attention. In Lu County, this would only result in notoriety for bringing shame to the ancestors.

Besides, for those who work in public utilities, there are more restrictions on holding a funeral in a way that is properly both religious and non-superstitious. Funerals are relative to one’s social role which means that the more powerful or wealthy a person is, the more resources should be deployed on the funeral as a demonstration of that wealth. However state officials, even at the grass-roots level, need to stick to the official policy.

When Qian hosted a funeral on the thirty-fifth day of his father’s death, he managed to keep paper offerings to a moderate number: being filial but not extravagant. As he was in charge of a state-owned unit, the unit sent a delegate to deliver a speech before the ritual began. His social position attracted many villagers and several local officials, and this not

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\(^6\) A family in Hebei province invited strip dancers to a funeral in 2015. See https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20150324016060
only maintained his reputation as a dutiful son in front of outsiders but also increased his reputation in front of local villagers for having such a broad circle of friends. To mismanage a major social event such as a funeral is to lose face in a major way for the household (Chau 2006, p.130).

As long as popular religion and its prevailing principles are still embedded in rural life, villagers engage in religious practices because they offer certainty and consolidate the morality that protects them from life’s uncertainties. Some scholars conclude that people who are active in certain ancestor worship practices tend to marry at a younger age (for the male respondents), have stronger fertility intentions, and have a significant preference for a son over a daughter (Hu and Tian 2018). This demonstrates how ancestor worship in the rural area is deeply embedded in the family but also obstructs the state’s intention to modernize rural areas, such as through the one-child policy.

4.4.2 Domestic labour division

Even though married daughters need to be present at the funeral to show their respect, it is still their brothers and spouses that actively participate. Married daughters, most of the time, kneel and cry on the side. Daughters-in-law’s filial piety is tested by their public display of grief at the funeral. In contrast with women burning incense privately in the temple, men represent the family on public events. The domestic division of labour within the family remains the same at least in rural areas. Wolf depicted division among ancestors, ghosts, and deities constructed as a social system.

Prominent in this landscape was first the mandarins, representing the emperor and the empire; second, the family and the lineage; and third, the more heterogeneous category of the stranger and the outsider, the bandit and the beggar. The mandarins became the gods; the senior members of the line and the lineage, the ancestors; while the stranger was preserved in the form of the dangerous and despised ghosts. (Wolf 1974, p.175)

Therefore, the men have responsibility in matters concerning ancestors while women worship deities on behalf of the household. Men withdraw from household religious matters and even feel ashamed to be caught doing that, even as they attest to tradition when they seek an auspicious day from an incense interpreter or sweep the tomb. Popular religion is revived because it is embedded in people’s daily life and gives meaning to
every major event in their life circle with men and women taking different roles. In the rural area, this division of responsibilities continues. This is discussed in Chau’s book regarding the Shaanbei peasants:

The answer is obviously different for men and women because of the persistent patrilineal ideologies and patrilocal marriage practices. Simply put, ideally, a peasant man should get married, have sons (at least one son, and maybe some daughters too), bury his parents properly, get wives for his sons, and marry off his daughters to good families. A woman, on the other hand, should be a good daughter before marriage, and be a good and helpful wife after marriage and assist her husband in fulfilling the above-mentioned life obligations.

She is equally implicated in the successes and failures of these household events as the wife of the head of household. A man’s (and his wife’s) status within the community gradually increases as he fulfills these obligations one by one, and his sense of his identity also consolidates over time. (Chau 2006, p.127)

His portrait is similar to what is found in Lu County where men are regarded as the bread-winners and the mianzi of the family while women are kept busy with household duties. This reflects the prevailing saying: men manage external affairs while women manage internal affairs. That is why when women attend their relatives’ funerals, they have to register their husbands’ name on the list for only men symbolize whether the household is present or not.

A woman has a delicate position in both her original family and her husband’s family as an outsider. Even though she is the leading participant in burning incense, her role is less recognized than that of men because of the man’s participation in the family’s major events. Among women, middle-aged and older women make up 80% of those who burn incense. When they burn incense on behalf of the whole family there is no need for the younger generation to visit the temple for the same purpose. One middle-aged woman remarked, “You never consider such issues when you are young. Raising kids and doing housework consumed most of my time”. However, the responsibility gradually shifts to them when they grow older.

7 The same thing happens when women make donations in the temple, this is also registered in their husbands’ name.
This domestic division is the same in Lu County but in contrast, the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship has changed dramatically. Women more than 50 years of age remember being controlled by their mothers-in-law because the latter had the authority in the family. In chapter two, I examined several stories in which the daughter-in-law was treated miserably but still acted nicely and obediently. In recent times the role of daughters-in-law has changed in the family, and this is confirmed by many women who say that they cannot treat their daughters-in-law the way they were treated. “Now, no one dares to say bad things about their daughter-in-law”, one woman commented. Another one rushed home after attending sermons in the temple to assist her daughter-in-law in babysitting, and she even used words like “asking for leave” to describe her situation.

This is why efficacious stories, especially about norms of correct behaviour, are circulated in the temple among many female believers. Given the changing mother/daughter-in-law relationship, the once bossy mothers-in-law are in need of stories pointing out why their daughter-in-law should be obedient or face the subsequent karmic consequence. Cheng shared a story: though her sister-in-law claimed to believe in God, she failed to take care of her ill mother-in-law, so she ended up with a crippled leg. Cheng’s conclusion was that it does not matter what you believe, what matters is that you must “xue hao”, namely learn to be good.

Burning incense and what it implies is consistent with the traditional expectations that children, including daughters-in-law, should show filial piety to their parents. Buddhism confirms this norm through many Dharma riddles, scriptures and rituals like the Bon festival. In popular religious practices, people get reassurance from each other’s stories. One 92 year old woman firmly believed that if the daughter-in-law was mean to her mother-in-law, the deity would not even accept her incense, let alone protect her. In her understanding, the deity’s preference for believers is linked with their morality. She then told the story of a woman in her seventies who used to be harsh to her mother-in-law and though she learned to burn incense, she was still in bad health. “This was the deity’s retribution”, she repeated.

The evidence demonstrates that these women’s passion for coming to the temple exceeded their spiritual needs or family duty and had become more individualized: the
temple symbolized a shelter for some women to temporarily be rid of the family burden or find an outlet for disputes within the family (further discussed in later chapters). Even though the temple had receded from communal affairs, it still nurtured a small community beyond the geographical and descent group.

### 4.5 Conclusion

Ancestor worship has revived in Lu County because people recognize the power of ancestors, the community and acquaintances in appraising one’s morality. Tradition is followed because it has two connotations: minimising religious risks and enhancing social reputation. The decision to host a proper ritual is made on religious grounds, but also satisfies social expectations. So diverse practices and motivations continue under the guidance of religious perspectives. This is the true meaning of tradition.

The preference for right practice over correct meaning gives it another strength as the practice can be adapted to changing social conditions. A monk may teach that it is useless to burn incense for others if they are not present but in practice, the mother burns incense for the entire household all the time. This enables flexibility when the younger generation is occupied working and is less involved in religious matters.

By visiting tombs, people maintain a living exchange with their ancestors to thank them for their upbringing and please them as well. Because this allows for a high degree of variation within an overarching structure of unity (Watson 1988, p.16), all the variations I found in Lu County revealed the way people cope with social changes and how they interact with others in facing “the decline of social trust” (Yan 2016). The older generations have a memory of what tradition should be but are constantly challenged by the younger generations’ new perspectives. So when they throw themselves into temple rituals or other religious events, they can easily relate to people who have a similar problem and in doing so they gain something they may never have in their house: spiritual support and rewards.

The efficacy of ancestors is interpreted in a highly individualistic way, but the appraisal of one’s devotion to the ancestors is social. That is why ancestor worship is reviving both because of people’s religious piety and because of the reputation they gain from it. Even
when popular religion does not constitute a profound system of belief like institutionalised religions, people’s stories of the efficacy of deities or the blessings of ancestors still motivate people to engage in a traditional way, no matter how hard the state tries to alter this. The term “popular beliefs”, which has the same meaning as popular religion, indicates the lack of its juristic formulation (Seiwert 2016). While in reality, whether people call it a tradition or custom does not imply they are not ancestor worshipers. As long as they burn incense and paper materials, they are not disengaged from the spiritual consequences.

Blake mentioned an older woman burning paper money for herself because in her eighties, “her son not only fails to show consideration for his old mother, but also often scolds the old woman” (Blake 2011b, p.461). For this woman, her lack of spiritual security directly derived from her daily life where she felt mistreated by her son and had no power to prevent it. This should not be regarded as backward but rather that she believed the afterlife exists and could affect her life.

Nevertheless, in China, the idea of the peasant as comprising a distinct and backward cultural category shows no sign of losing its force (Cohen 1993, p.166). It must be noticed that ancestor worship plays a role in morality for it teaches the young to support their parents. And it is powerful because the spiritual consequences are serious especially when the law is not similarly effective. After all, rural people still hold that “family troubles should not be made public”.
Chapter 5 Temple festivals: the changing role of the community

5.1 Introduction

The annual temple festival, a reminder of the past and of an earlier lifestyle, is still a communal event for villages. Prompted by rituals or operas, people talk freely about their life, especially as deity-related stories facilitate the experience of communal effervescence that arises from watching morality orientated operas. Each part of a temple festival symbolizes deities’ power and people’s gratitude for blessings and protection. Opera also serves as a reminder of the value of community-based morality. Picture this:

Narrow village roads full of stalls broadcast their products by loudspeakers Participants and passers-by find they are trapped in a situation where they have to jostle their way out. Children run around, begging for snacks, toys or tickets for the giant colourful inflatable castles. It becomes more crowded the closer one gets to the opera stage as the audience jostle with each other to sit as near to the stage as possible. Some people sit on a small stool that they carry while some just park their electric tricycle in the middle, regardless of blocking people sitting in the back. Once the opera begins, the whole area becomes flooded with musical instruments and singing. Some play mah-jong and poker under temporary shades to avoid the sun or sit in little groups to chat. Women can engage in any of these activities but as long as there is a temple, they are likely to weave in and out of the crowds to burn incense.

The most distinctive feature of this event is the bustling and even chaotic atmosphere. In local vernacular, it is described as renao or honghuo¹ to measure the crowdedness or the social heat. If these events are not honghuo they are not considered successful or satisfactory (Chau 2006, p.150). Attending such an event is called “gan-hui”. Gan is a verb meaning chasing or driving and in this scenario, hui is a noun referring to a three-day social gathering held in a village or a town with operas, commercial activities, and recreational activities. There are two types of “hui”: miaohui suggests the involvement of a temple (miao) that sets the tone for celebrating the deities’ birthday while hui is a

¹ Honghuo and re-nao are synonyms that describe the sense of chaos and bustle.
purely commercial fair. So miaohui is a special hui with the deities’ present. A rough estimate shows that in Lu County, there are at least 150 hui all year round, of which 100 are miaohui. As part of rural life, hui is a rare opportunity for the whole village to relax so it usually occurs during the less busy seasons with pleasant weather: 45 hui are held in the third lunar month and only one in the eleventh lunar month, to name but a few.

Marked by burning incense and attending rituals, miaohui is supposed to be an occasion “to bring individuals together, to put the masses into motion, and thus induce a state of effervescence—sometimes even delirium—which is not without kinship to the religious state” (Durkheim 1995, pp.386-387). The whole event is not only for rituals but is inundated with chaotic and noisy non-religious activities. So the chaotic miaohui area is informally divided into different sections: the temple, the opera stage, and stalls with commodities. I ask these questions: Is people’s incentive to attend miaohui religious? Or, do people playing mah-jong in the shadows have the same motivation as people burning incense under the sun?

One eighty year old grandma remembered attending the Miaopo hui for the earth god with her schoolmates seventy years ago when it was the biggest of all in the old society. At the same time many villages envied other villages holding their miaohui, and started to create their own hui by inviting a famous opera troupe to perform. Without the temple, do people experience the same emotions when they socialize and watch operas?

While chapters two and three focused on individual’s daily-practical modality, this chapter is about the communal nature of popular religion. The rituals held in the temple are a public display of the liturgical modality. Although temple festivals re-emerged in the 1980s, the landscape of the village had already been reshaped and this altered the role of temple festivals and the way in which people participated. I argue that popular religion’s communal role has been less resurgent as the rituals for the village deity or temple festivals have vanished and been reinvigorated.

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2 Miaopo is local vernacular for a temple on a slope.

3 The older generation tend to use the term “the old society” to refer to the period before the new China.
So in this chapter, I discuss the disappearance of communal temples from public life and how this has affected perceptions of morality in rural areas. Communal morality is losing its bonding force with villages losing their temples and this has led to a moral vacuum. People’s willingness to attend temple festivals reflects the subtle attraction of popular religion in its many aspects, particularly in constructing a communal morality. There is no better occasion than temple festivals for people living in the same area to gather in the same place. There is no other event that can reach the same frequency or breadth in Lu County. Furthermore neither the local authority nor the village head tend to host public events these days.

Importantly, I argue that temple festivals show how different agencies are active in the community assuming a role in moral guidance. Steinmüller studied people in another province, stating that “many of the decisions that people take in their everyday lives in Bashan not only include moral evaluations, but also ethical, in the sense that people need to ‘step out’ of ‘unreflective habitus’” (Steinmüller 2013, p.224). What I found in Lu County is that *hui* offer people an opportunity to review their moral choices by sharing their own stories and watching operas to confirm they are making sensible, moral decisions. This is how they do religion in the rural sector: they do not have to practice religion intentionally, but they are doing it by adapting to religious perspectives on moral grounds. They may not treat *hui* as a religious event, but they still experience other religious elements there.

### 5.2 The fate of popular religion since the 1900s

Motivated by modernity and science, the themes of the times, policies and opinions on religion changed dramatically in the 1900s. The popularity of imported concepts of religion (*zongjiao*) and superstition (*mixin*) marked this upheaval. Elites in the late Qing dynasty and the Republic period (1912-1949) called for social progress and set Christianity as the standard for religion. People’s everyday practices like burning incense and funeral rites were labelled as superstition for lacking a clear system and structure and wasting money and material. For instance, leading members of the first Republican governor in 1912 established a Society for Social Reform that advocated fighting against funeral rites, adoptions, temple festivals, the worship of statues of any kind, and geomancy (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p.53).
The launch of the New Cultural Movement (1915-1919) exacerbated this change when democracy and science became the centre of cultural reform and the elites argued: “that traditional Chinese culture was preventing China’s successful modernization” (Katz 2014, p.23). Campaigns were launched targeting popular religion and backward traditional culture, like “building schools with temple property” and “rectifying old customs”. The problem though was that the distinction between religion and superstition was simplified: “it targets whatever is not grounded in and strictly limited to the spiritual and moral self-perfection delineated by the theological scriptures of a world religion (Confucianism, Christianity, Islam Buddhism)” (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, pp.50-51). In the early 1920s, miaohui was criticised for its practices like burning incense and paper which were seen as increasing peasants’ superstition and promoting gambling habits (Li 2005).

Later, the then government strove to eliminate superstition through a range of policies: “Regulations for Registering Temples (1928)”, “Regulations for Managing Temples (1929)”, and “Regulations for Overseeing Temples (1929)” (Katz 2014, p.21). The most influential policy was Standards to Determine Temples to Be Destroyed and Maintained (1928). However, this policy failed to define what qualified a temple to be maintained.

The authentic “religions” (particularly Buddhism and Taoism in their purest form) and temples dedicated to heroes of Chinese civilization, Confucius among them, were to be preserved; the rest had to be destroyed. This distinction turned out to be impossible to apply on the ground, especially in the case of Taoism, which was indissolubly associated with local cults. (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p.62)

However this did have a far-reaching impact on separating popular religion (mixin) from approved religions (Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, and Islam). Mixin was particularly linked to “feudal” or “feudalism” with feudal superstition indicating that those practices were remnants of feudalism and should be reformed.

These policies were carried out in Lu County: in 1927, many temples and statues were destroyed; Buddhist and Taoist monks resumed secular life in order to make a living; sacrifice to Confucius was shut down (County book 1994, p.56). The sacrifice to Confucius was a part of the imperial sacrifice system which I discussed in chapter two and I argue that the shutdown implied the end of the imperial worship system and its
official cults. The use of religion to control the common people may have been legitimated by the state cult, but in manipulating the masses, the managers of the society necessarily looked to religious arenas outside the strict confines of official religion (Feuchtwang 1977, p.581).

The local authority’s reaction was motivated by something beyond religious control. Officials of Lu County confiscated temple property⁴ to compensate for a financial shortage in school funding (County book 1994, p.958). Similarly, in some regions, local commercial elites attempted to revive temple festivals as a key economic resource (Katz 2014, p.33). And villagers still performed the praying-for-rain ritual during a drought⁵ with one local county official even admitting in a letter to the provincial governor in 1914 that “although I am aware that praying for the rain is mixin, I still get down on the ground and pray for days because of the long drought” (County book 1994, pp.945-946). All of this reflects departures from central policies when the agency of the state proved ineffectual in rural areas.

The new China founded in 1949 at first tolerated religious activities. Peasants were still very enthusiastic about attending miaohui and all the family members would dress up, invite relatives over, and prepare a feast to celebrate (Hua 2012). The situation began to change after the propaganda of Destroying the Four Olds (i.e. Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas) in 1966 and was made worse by subsequent political movements that put both institutional religions and popular religion at a disadvantage by smashing deities’ statues and forcing monks to resume secular life. The government established the National Council on Cultural Affairs in the late 1970s with the implicit goal of replacing temples as centres of local cultural life (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p.217).

Therefore, as it was affiliated to the temple and popular religion’s “backwardness”, miaohui disappeared in rural areas. This is consistent with the distinction between the

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⁴ At that time, there were 155 temples in the county, 2,378 mu farmland and 37 hills for sericulture (County book 1994, p.965).

⁵ To perform this ritual, several elderly men would abstain from eating meat for three days and then carry the dragon tablet, wear a hat made from willow twigs, beat drums and clang gongs and pray to the dragon deity (County book 1994, p.786).
Temple festivals: the changing role of the community

elites/officials and local peoples understanding of popular religion. The policy-makers failed to notice or simply did not care that “one person’s superstition may be another’s religion” (Duara 1991). However, opera troupes and yangge dance groups, which typically performed for the gods at temple festivals, were also trained to turn their repertoire into revolutionary propaganda (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p.183) during the 1960s and 1970s. I argue that the emergence of the Eight Model Operas is a counterpart to operas performed during miaohui which also assumed the role of moral teachings.

There are four major character types in the operas: (1) the protagonists, usually CCP members without families who devote their entire lives to the Communist Party and the revolutionary cause; (2) the suppressed masses who serve as “families” to the CCP soldiers strongly supporting the Communist revolution and socialist construction; (3) the misguided but salvageable ‘middle’ characters who are from a ‘good’ (i.e., working-class) class background, but are manipulated by the villains so that they forget the centrality of class struggle, only to be redeemed by the protagonist or the suppressed masses and brought back to the correct “revolutionary” path; and (4) the ‘irredeemable’ enemies—landlords, capitalists, and foreign invaders, full of guile and violence and resolutely committed to self-interest, but always defeated by the end of the play. (Zhang and Corse 2018)

From the 1960s to 1980s, through political movements like “people’s communes”, villages centred on worshipping the same deity were reshaped into new communities designated by the state. The Eight Model Operas prevailed in rural areas because the state recognized the power of operas to instil ideas and morality. So they kept the form of operas of miaohui, but replaced the core with the state-endorsed morality about serving the people and being patriotic.

5.3 Local conditions after the 1980s

After the 1980s, temples were reconstructed and miaohui slowly resumed vitality. But not to be misled by the bustling scene described in the beginning, the recovery of miaohui did not assume a continuity with the past. Instead, there were many changes to the whole event, ranging from people’s motivation to the event’s focus. The same division between official and rural concerns continued to reshape miaohui.
The control of religion loosened after the state shifted its focus to an economy marked by opening-up and reform in 1979. Later, in 1982, the state issued the Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country’s Socialist Period (also known as the No. 19 document) which confirmed religion’s role in the socialist course. Meanwhile, the worship of Matsu in Fujian province demonstrated multiple benefits: politically, it served for the United Front Work; economically, it attracted believers from overseas to visit and invest. Such successful cases proved that if utilized properly, religion could be used to stimulate the local economy.

Local people, though they might not know the state’s policies, sensed the change through their encounters with local cadres. One woman shared her story:

> It was the early 1980s. I went to burn incense in the remains of an old temple. On my way back, I saw a cadre from that village. I got so nervous. I was afraid that he would scold me. Then a woman walked towards me from the field. She knew immediately what I was doing there. Without a word, she handed over a sack full of weeds, so it looked like I was farming.


It was similar in Shanxi province when in 1999 an official was named model worker for registering temples rather than destroying temples (Chau 2006). This showed that the official discourse on mixin gradually faded away in people’s life. At the same time, local officials realized the economic potential of miaohui and events related to temples. The county record described that: miaohui dates from the Tang dynasty as a place for believers to worship deities and Buddha; in modern times, it is transformed into commodity exchange fairs (wuzijiaoliu hui); miaohui was banned twice from 1958 to 1976 and after 1978, it returned to life (County book 2014, p.544).

There was no explanation as to how and why “temple festivals” became “commodity fairs”, but the profits from hosting one were substantial. In 1982, one hui attracted around 71 state-run commercial enterprises, from both local and nearby counties, and the daily turnover was 445,000 yuan (Ibid). Considering that the per capita yearly net income of peasants was 248 yuan in 1988 (County book 1994, p.8), it was indeed a respectable source of economic profits. Consequently, 16 temples were restored at their original site from 1989 to 2005, assisted by local authorities; and the temples and the
adjacent scenic areas played a significant role in the local economy (County book 2014, pp.765-766). People returned to religious life to seek spiritual guidance while local authorities exploited the temples’ economic potentials.

However, religion still remained undefined. Section four, article 19 of the Regulation on Religious Affairs (Order of the State Council [2004] No.426), stated that “Premises for religious activities shall include temples, monasteries, churches and other premises for fixed religious activities”. The local religious bureau provided a further explanation: Buddhist and Taoist temples, Islamic mosques, Christian and Catholic churches are included. This indicates a specific view of religion which left popular religion vulnerable. As a consequence, in order to restore a temple, it had to qualify as either Taoist or Buddhist to be approved by the religious bureau. As stated in previous chapters, popular religion worships a diversity of deities which meant that to get registration, the proprietors first needed to categorize the deity in accord with an institutionalised religion, or, as one village in Hebei province did, make use of Chinese people’s faith in dragons and transform their ancestral hall into a museum (Gao 2006). In other cases, the temple was preserved when it qualified as a cultural relic (Fan 2010). Therefore, the adherents of popular religion had to make extra efforts to regain their legitimacy to survive.

In sum, government policy on religion and its implementation at local levels got caught between restriction and management, between an insistence on registration and on the priority of country over religion, and tolerant management of unregistered institutions such as house churches and the great mass of small, local temples. On superstition, policy and its implementation are caught between eradication of backwardness, waste and harm in the name of modernity, order and science, and tolerance of the same practices on grounds of culture and history. (Feuchtwang 2010, p.182)

Without official approval, a temple’s fate depended on the local authority’s attitudes. In a news report, 5,911 illegal earth deity temples were torn down over 26 days in 2019 in Gaoyou city, Jiangsu province (“Gaoyou tore down temples” 2019). While in Lu County, several unregistered temples were safe (for the time being at least). Of those unregistered temples, some were very small and even unattended, and others had difficulty in providing a land certificate since all rural land was collective property. Chau admitted that “I found that this process always took considerable time and a lot of
effort” (Chau 2006, p.216). In another case in Yunnan province, the family gave up their own land to restore the communal temple and in return, the village committee drafted “a letter of guarantee” to allow this family to build a new house on the family’s “reserved land” (Liang 2014). Without a land certificate and affiliation to a Taoist or Buddhist association, their fate was at the mercy of the local religious bureau.

That is why temples which successfully acquire approvals display their certificate in the most prominent place to publicize their legitimacy. The grandmother who helps in the Huayan temple described this as “our temple has hukou”. In local vernacular, hukou symbolizes a privilege associated with recognised status, while believers cared less about the certificate issued by the authority.

Overall, the revival of popular religion and its activities was reshaped by religious policies in various ways. Fan claimed that in north China, it was common to have a temple for each village (Fan 2010) but now, it is impossible to reproduce that scene. Some village temples are long gone without any trace and other villages may suffer from a loss of crucial religious leaders (DuBois 2005), or no one wants to assume the responsibility to restore a temple. For most villages in Lu County, once they lost their village temples, villagers had to join adjacent village temples if they were in need or their miaohui became hui without the presence of any deities.

5.4 Recreated cultural festivals

Since that time the state has rarely directly engaged in religious activities, but some of its symbols and discourses are utilized by local people. For example, recently, the core socialist values—prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity, friendship— were frequently stressed during public festivals held in temples. Couplets posted on the temple’s front gate with those words reveal the state’s presence (Huang 2005). On a stone tablet placed in the City God temple, it recorded the history of being removed from the county seat and re-located in the suburbs:

Descendants of the Yellow Emperor and sons and daughters of China are devoted to carry forward the ancient civilization, preserve traditional healthy methods, be loyal to the nation, love people, show
filial piety to parents, raise children with a strong sense of morality, and seek righteousness; the construction of this temple is made possible through government at all levels and people of all walks of life for their donations and contributions. (Tablet inscription)

Put up to impress people with the power of a god, steles were not necessarily designed to be read (Hansen 1990, p.14). Now though, steles have become a sign of the government’s goodwill and the value of moral norms such as loyalty and filial piety. Apart from the religious bureau’s control of registration, the local cultural bureau and tourist bureau often appropriated religious events for a cultural performance along with its economic benefits.

The recovery process of Miaofeng Mount miaohui in Beijing showed that it was the government’s needs—such as having miaohui’s troupes performing on public events and having the temple reconstructed—that gave miaohui a fresh start (Gao 2001, p.2017). In 2008, this miaohui went one step higher and successfully applied for intangible cultural heritage status. The Lu County authority took a similar approach of turning the Qixi festival into a provincial-level intangible cultural heritage resource, regardless of the huge gap between the authority’s intention and ordinary people’s actions. Falling on the 7th day of the 7th lunar month, the Qixi festival highlighted two elements: paying tribute to ancestors and praying for cleverness for women (County book 1743). This festival has become a kind of Chinese Valentine’s Day because of its legendary love story.

The Sun brothers lived alone after their parents’ death. The elder brother married a lazy woman who decided to take over the family fortune. The younger brother, who was diligent, honest and filial to his sister-in-law, looked after cows so he was called the cowherd. After failing to poison the cowherd, the sister-in-law persuaded her husband to divide up the family property. One day, the ox spoke to the cowherd, ‘I am a star from the Heaven and banished to suffer but you are too kind to me. Remember to take me with you when you split up’. The cowherd only took the ox and they lived in a cave in the middle of a mountain. The ox taught the cowherd a secret: the daughter of the Jade Emperor, the waver fairy will come to the pond to take a bath and he should hide her clothes so she could not fly back to Heaven. The cowherd did so and they later married and had two lovely children. Before the ox died, he instructed the cowherd to keep his skin and hooves. When the Queen Mother found out, she sent soldiers to take her back. The cowherd wore the cowskin and hooves to chase...
them but he could not cross the Milky Way. Touched by their love, the Queen Mother finally decided that they could meet once a year. After the cowherd died, he became a star. (Yuan ed. 2016, pp.2-9)

This couple reunites once a year. The Lu County officials claimed that the cowherd was born in the County and a small cave halfway up Lu Mountain was his residence. On that day, they host an art show called *Our festival: The Story of Qixi*, themed on the alleviation of poverty⁶ and rural revitalization, aiming to promote excellence in Chinese traditional culture and festivals⁷.

However, the story’s moral themes such as being obedient to one’s brother, being honest and kind, the divine interventions, and rewards of being good are not celebrated by this show. They are substituted by new themes such as patriotism and social harmony. Through the patronage of cults such as that of Guandi, the elite was able to express its identification with the values of the state and the gentry (Duara 1988, p.148). As an additional attraction the village is located at the foot of a mountain famous for its grapes. So, this promotion of the Qixi Festival is a combination of consumerism and disenchantment. An advertisement proclaims, it is time to enjoy the charm of the mountain and taste delicious grapes.

However hardly any local people actually go to Lu Mountain on that day. It is neither a local tradition to visit that cave or the mountain on that day nor is there any legend asserting the benefits of doing so. Being recognised as a cultural heritage is not a strong motivator. In comparison, two months later (the 9th day of the 9th lunar month) when it is the Chongyang Festival, the mountain is full of people. The narrow pass is crowded by visitors and small retailers selling food and water. The once desolate cowherd cave is now full of young people and children. An elderly woman sitting in the cave advised visitors, “if you climb the narrow gate from the bottom of the cave to the outside, you will receive a happy marriage”. After that, she reminded people to make a small donation, as they do in any temple visit.

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⁶ The poverty alleviation is a basic policy issued by the central state.

⁷ An article published on 30 August 2017 on the Chinese Arts News.
The specialness of the occasion elevated the cave’s spiritual function. According to folklore, people who climbed the mountain on that day increased their longevity. But what good comes from donating to the cave and climbing out of it? And the cowherd’s story was not even related to the day. Yet, everyone was affected by the festival’s energy and competed to stand in the line.

People’s involvement in these two festivals confirms the division between official culture and people’s religious sentiments. I argue that officially designated festivals promote the state’s understanding of morality and religion, but without religious appeal, it is difficult to attract people.

Official worship of the Yellow Emperor in Shaanxi province indicates that once religious elements are applied, people are much more likely to attend. It has been re-invented and utilized as a symbol of the state authority (Wang 2007) through the Yellow Emperor’s symbolic meanings: national identity and collective cohesion. On one hand, it is an official ritual presided over by province-level officials and the 2004 public memorial ceremony claimed to be a national level ceremony with sacrificial utensils to match the ceremony of ancient emperors (Li 2005). The ritual is seen as a Confucian ceremony and a cultural memorial. By utilizing the “deontic power” of the charismatic or historical figures and ritual elements, it is confirmed that “there are rights,
duties and obligations connected with them that have to be observed” (Seiwert 2016). The state’s intention is clear in that this worship sets a model for cultural ceremony of historical figures. Because it is a public display, it conveys public morals and advocates for accepted ethics (Luo and Xu 2009). As the organizer, the state sets itself up as the model of moral values (Gao and Quan 2016). After all, the ritual observance is central for expressing and safeguarding social order and hierarchies (Seiwert 2016, p.131).

On the other hand, when all sacrificial rites and dancing were well arranged in the foreground, not far from the central stage ordinary people were occupied in burning incense to get blessings from the Yellow Emperor. The state attempted successfully to portray him as the national symbol of solidarity and unity, but it did not prevent people from treating him as a deity who can offer spiritual benefits. People’s practical needs always triumph over any other propositions of modernization or civilization. Both the state and people were exploiting the Yellow Emperor’s symbolic power for different reasons: nationality and spiritual protection respectively.

5.5 Miaohui in other places and times

5.5.1 What Miaohui should be like

Different to individuals burning incense in the temple, miaohui’s foremost function for the community is to worship deities, which means that it is a public event. Its key role aims to bring the deity back to the community and thus demonstrate the village’s identity through the single deity. Thus, the local government stimulated by the pursuit of economic growth and the local people in need of spiritual guidance have to reach a compromise. Decentring the ritual or replacing the core of the ritual has become the common approach.

In Lu County, 200 years ago, every year on the 8th day of the fourth lunar month, people carried the statue of the City God for a tour and hosted a miaohui to thank him for controlling natural hazards and defending them against disasters (County book 1743, p.6). Many older people remember deities touring from decades ago. This tour by the City God no longer occurs today. The local government even went further, borrowing the parade that used to march along the street with the deity, to perform on other occasions to create a bustling scene.
I argue that the reinvigorated miaohui is less religious in terms of public display or villagers’ involvement. In the past, miaohui was an occasion for the deity to tour the area, assert village boundaries and ward off outside dangers and the villagers were united by participating in the ritual and the feast. Now, without the touring, no deity can assume their old responsibilities and the deity is barely the centre of the event anymore. Since Lu County has lost this practice, I will turn to other scholars’ research for reference.

Feuchtwang described the deity-tour in Taipei in the 1960s and regarded the deity as the “territorial guardian god” suggesting the meaning of the ritual was to “protect the place marked out by the procession of the god-image against threats”, and most important of all, it was “to celebrate the ling (efficacy) of protection against the ling of danger to the settlement from invasion of its boundaries” (Feuchtwang 2001, p.24). The most crucial function of miaohui was to mark the geological boundary of the community and consolidate its awareness as a village.

It is vital in hosting a public event for villagers to be there. In the past, when the statue of the deity was taken out “for procession to signify his control of spirit soldiers and to dispel plague demons and malevolent spirits” (Ibid. p.46), both the geological and spiritual boundaries were marked: the former symbolized the community’s coverage as whoever lived inside were neighbours, not strangers; the latter revealed a purified area where ghosts were under the deity’s control. This also showed people’s fear of strangers or outsiders because they represented threats to the villagers’ safety. Similar fears were rife in Lu County. One local story was of an elderly woman who gave out gold ingots to poor villagers but disappeared when some southern barbarians tried to kidnap her (Yuan ed. 2006, p.356). This was similar to the soul-stealers in 1768 when the fear of wandering monks and homeless people generated a national sorcery scare (Kuhn 1990). Even today, rumours about people pretending to be monks to steal children from the village have become viral. With the increase in social mobility, once again, people are afraid of outsiders as they represent instability and uncertainty.

Originally, the whole village would host a feast after the ritual. Feuchtwang portrayed the feast as “a peace kept by the rules of reciprocity, obligation, patronage, and respect which produces not only feasts themselves, but also the temples and territorial cults.
whose calendars mark the occasions for feasting” (Feuchtwang 2001, p.91). He focused on the human-deity reciprocity while Chau highlighted the “volunteerism based on understandings of reciprocity and the division of labour among the helpers and specialists” (Chau 2006, p.126). As a result, the volunteerism extended to villagers’ social life, such as funerals and weddings where villagers were happy to volunteer in other household’s events as they understood and expected this reciprocity. In the same way, they helped on the deity’s birthday.

In his work in Shaanbei between 1995 and 1998, Chau witnessed this public event. At the annual temple festivals, many villages also have a “sharing the sacrifice (sacrificed animal offering)” ceremony in recognition of each household’s membership in the village community (Ibid. p.68). After the ritual, every household could take their share of the meat home. Through rituals, the cohesion of the village is consolidated with the witness of deities.

As a contrast, without a temple and a communal ritual, there is no way to enhance the village’s solidarity through everyone showing up to burn their own incense. I will take the Shan village and Shang village as an example. Shan village lost its village temple about 50 years ago and only the elderly people seem to remember this history. So if villagers need to burn incense, they go to temples nearby like the Huayan temple located in Shang village. However, due to administrative divisions, the Shang village was divided up so not all villagers shared the same sentiments. Therefore, the Huayan temple has to shoulder the responsibility to host the miaohui, not the village itself. When villagers from different villages were attracted to miaohui not many aimed for consolidating what belongs to the village but instead they focused on being blessed by the deity.

Also, without people’s volunteering in deities’ festivals, the local economy was affected, for in almost every village in Lu County people no longer host a banquet at their home. Now, the most popular approach for hosting major events is booking a fancy restaurant. People explained that it gained them more mianzi (face, reputation) and it was also following the fashion when everyone else did so.
When the community matters, villagers want to participate in the event and contribute to the bustling atmosphere because “an exciting (honghuo) festival is supposed to be directly proportional to how well they feel they have been blessed by the deity” (Ibid. p.138). But now, to host a successful miaohui, it is the temple and its believers who are not necessarily local villagers that are responsible for cooking the free meal as they follow the guidance of the master who runs the temple, not because they need to repay the deities’ favour in the old way. It is even worse in hui because without a temple there is no free meal and participants’ involvement is less consolidated.

Miaohui and hui have witnessed the decline of community and the role religion plays in people’s lives. I argue that without the village temple or a communal ritual to celebrate the deity’s birthday and mark the territory, the community is disappearing and with that the intensity with which people perceive communal morality embodied in the deity. Now, only the opera is kept as an attraction for public participation. Miaohui, as a social gathering and a religious ritual, is embodied in the ruler’s ideas of legitimacy and morality but it also reflects how the temple is managed. What seems to be unchanged is that it still relies on opera’s contexts to convey communal morality.

5.5.2 Operas in miaohui and hui

Children crowd around the stage to have a better look. The light equipment makes a dazzling stage at night in the midst of farmland.

Operas are the centre of miaohui. Rituals in the temple only last for hours but operas last for three days. It is clear that the theatre serves the function of assembling the community for religious worship and keeping community recreation under religious influence (Yang 1961, p.84). The performance of operas epitomizes miaohui as it is a
combination of the secular and the sacred in life. With its huge shed, colourful settings, loud music and singing, it creates the scene of ren-nao, and most importantly, an immersive experience. Operas are always held on the stage either on the main road or some spacious place which it is impossible to not notice.

One 81 year old man commented that he liked watching operas because figures were dressed like deities. This could explain people’s zeal when they have to sit under the hot sun for hours. Watching operas on TV by oneself at home is too boring and lonely compared with miaohui where there are companions and the sense of group involvement.

At Mount Tai’s miaohui, the opera was divided into three parts and played for three nights in a row, and it was the last day when the truth came out and bad people got punished. People were all absorbed in the show and when the bad people were sentenced to death, there was applause and shouting “finally” and “good”. It was an impassioned circumstance where people lived for the moral dynamics.

Here, I will elaborate on one opera in detail. The opera’s name is Eight Pieces of Clothes and allegedly happened in the Song dynasty:

A rich family appealed to the local authority because a thief stole eight pieces of clothing that were prepared for their daughter’s dowry. Meanwhile, a poor scholar Zhang wanted to take the exam in the capital, so he turned to his maternal uncle Dou for help. Dou asked his daughter Xiuying to bring her eight pieces of clothes to pawn. Xiuying was engaged with Zhang, so she packed money within the clothes. Zhang went to the pawnshop immediately and was mistaken for the thief. A local officer Bai kept beating Zhang until he confessed and then left him in the wild to die. When Xiuying heard of this, she committed suicide to protest. Luckily, she was able to tell her grievance to the King of Hell so the latter decided to bring justice back. In the end, Zhang was saved by a beggar and Xiuying was brought back to life and the two got married after justice was served.

This is a perfect opera for it reconfirms people’ religious perspectives that no matter how many twists and turns, good people will eventually come full circle and patch things up with the one they love by the help of either some impartial official or a deity, and there is always punishment for bad people. Other operas interpreted karma by saying that you reap what you sow, or promoting this about destiny: whoever is meant
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to be together will be together by the will of the Heaven, and bad people, such as those who seize other’s property (including their money, house, daughters or wives) will receive death penalty no matter what their social status is (e.g. the emperor’s son-in-law or a general’s grandson). Good people must suffer tremendously (e.g. being poisoned, framed or slandered) before the truth comes to light at the last minute yet they maintain their good nature all the time, such as in forbearance or kindness. It is realistic since the bad people are always in high places, the good are wronged by their families, such as stepmother, mother-in-law, and sister-in-law and some impartial officials from even higher ranking bring justice. In addition operas elaborate on the ideas of being loyal to the emperor and patriotic to the country.

People are attracted by these operas because, in some way, they serve as moral codes and regulations across a whole range of situations from a small family to almost the entire society. The idea is conveyed again and again that only good people will be rewarded, similar to the way local legendary stories talk about retribution and reward. In one opera, it was ironic that a notorious villain met with a beautiful girl during a miaohui and forced her to marry him. It almost felt like the past and the present intersected in the opera: the miaohui became a scene in the opera right before every audience’s eyes.

After burning incense, Grandmother Zhao in her seventies stayed to watch the opera. “Do you think the deity is efficacious?” I asked her. “Of course! All deities are efficacious!” she replied. “But you know, things are complicated,” she changed the subject. “My neighbours, a married couple, are not so good. When their parents were sick in the hospital, they refused to financially support them, saying that they had no money; yet shortly after their death, they built a new house; why did the deities not punish them?” She ascribed her health and her grandson being admitted to a college to the deities’ efficacy but this wrongdoing of her neighbours confused her. With a sigh, she said carefully, “This is life. Just make do.” After all, she was convinced that there will be divine punishment at the end of everyone’s life journey, so the bad will suffer in the afterlife.

In a sense, the deity and opera are tied up in a way that mutually benefits each other because the more renao the whole miaohui is, the more efficacious the deity is. That is
why operas are indispensable. “There was one time when we could not afford operas so we decided not to. That night, when I walked home, I saw two wolves staring at me”, the Earth Deity’s temple keeper explained, “The deity was upset. I burned incense the next day and promised to perform operas.” Her story resembled the one in chapter two where the deity set fire to the opera when the opera troupe decided to quit. Intertwined with the opera, the deity’s power is then demonstrated through the opera.

Miaohui does offer people a chance to talk about their beliefs and related experiences which they may feel ashamed to mention in daily discourse because of the risk of being stigmatized. Even though not all operas are deity-related, what remains the same is those religious perspectives like the will of Heaven or one’s fate which reveal how people experience life in a religious way. Similarly, when men chat in groups, they like to mention hearsay about how local leaders suffered tremendously after they personally destroyed a statue but Mao Tsetung remained free of any consequences. They unintentionally constructed a new celestial hierarchy and perceptions about fate where Mao outranked other deities while local leaders had to face the deity’s retribution even though they were simply following orders.

Compared with the revolutionary model operas played in the past, the operas played at miaohui are close to life. The moral teachings aim to maintain harmony within the family and order within society. This is rarely displayed in public rituals anymore, especially ones with a religious theme.

5.6 Contemporary landscape in Lu County

5.6.1 The simplified rituals
In this section, I will describe how local people perform rituals in a way that contrasts with those described by Feuchtwang and Chau. It reveals that even for villages with temples, the ritual to worship the deity and burn incense is built on individual participation, rather than a collective activity. This corresponds to the individualistic trend that underscores religious revival.

As I described at the beginning of this chapter, while rituals were held in the temple, many villagers were gathered around the opera stage or playing mah-jong—not so
religiously. This gives rise to a critical question: why does an individual feel the necessity to attend miaohui, and do people attend miaohui because of the deity’s efficacy? And for those occupied in other activities, to what extent do they want to be caught up in such effervescence, or is the experience of being there and experiencing the existence of the deity with everyone else good enough?

Chau asserted that a Shaanbei person would say: “I make honghuo (social heat), therefore I am” (Chau 2008). In Lu County, people shared the same passion for attending miaohui and contributing to the bustling scene. Indeed, miaohui could help an individual to gain faith in the deity’s efficacy and responsiveness through the whole atmosphere and participants’ personal stories. There, the community was symbolically represented by the attendance of the village head and a few of the older peasants, but even this arrangement was very informal (DuBois 2005, p.46).

The paradox is, though the temple should be the centre of miaohui, most people were occupied in other events adjacent to the temple. The temple was bustling with people coming and going and boisterous with ritual music and chanting, but also seemed to be isolated from the crowd. It struck me as an absence of interaction between deities and villagers. Some villagers agreed that they were only attracted to miaohui because of the operas and others took this opportunity to meet with old acquaintances when the time of miaohui brought everyone together. Chau held that people hurry to the market in the early morning because that is the most honghuo time, and they hurry to a honghuo temple festival because they fear missing the honghuo (Chau 2008).

Where I differ from Chau is in questioning whether people’s need for being part of honghuo is overstated. I argue that people who rush to a market in the early morning, do so largely because the earlier they got there, the more products they could choose from; similarly, in a miaohui what is the real honghuo? Operas were performed for three days from 9 am to 12 pm and from 1 pm to 4 pm while the ritual for the deity was only held on one morning for one hour while other recreational and commercial activities could last the whole day long. So, for people who wanted to socialize with their friends, did they care whether the event was honghuo or not?
Chapter 5

The answer is yes. No matter that the opera or the market created honghuo, they proved the deity’s efficacy. What mattered is what honghuo implied: people are blessed by the deity so they can enjoy themselves and this is confirmed by the crowd. That is why as long as these events were held around the temple, they were part of the deity’s efficacy. This could explain why different people were attracted to different events at the same spot and this division was even clearer if people of different religions were brought together, in terms of people’s willingness to stay for the communal event after making an offering.

A Taoist miaohui for Mount Tai was held from the 27th to 29th of the third lunar month and another one to celebrate Buddha's birthday was held on the 7th to 9th of the fourth lunar month - normally the middle day is the deity’s birthday. I found believers’ involvement was vastly different, as were the priests’ attitudes towards the ritual.

During Mount Tai’s miaohui, only one or two people knew that the deity was in charge of people’s souls after their death, while the rest believed that “he is a deity and they all bless people”. It illustrates the simplification of the celestial hierarchy where deities’ specialized functions and rankings become less relevant and all the deities are treated the same. The celebration for his birthday started with setting off firecrackers around 9 am and the ritual began at 11 am. Only two women accompanied Taoist priests in the hall while a dozen people sat far away and ate the free lunch in the yard while the majority were crowded around the opera stage.

The announcement for miaohui is posted on Mount Tai’s temple wall.
To make it even more interesting, there are three temples close to each other: the biggest one for Mount Tai opens every day, and two smaller ones for the Fire God, Earth deity and the God of the Northern Heaven, respectively, only open on Mount Tai’s birthday. Operas are available for three days, but access to the temples is only available on one day. As it was the convention, more believers attended on the deity’s birthday to worship all the deities. The honghuo was socially constructed to mark the uniqueness of the day.

In contrast, in the Buddhist Huayan (Avatamsaka) Temple, more people were involved in the ritual. It was estimated that about 100 people were lined up in the hall during the one hour ritual. The monk and some believers encouraged temple goers to participate to accumulate more karmic merits. As an extra attraction lunch started after the ritual finished. So willingly or not, some people took the advice to participate in the ritual while others sat near the kitchen, chatting and waiting.

The monk clearly knew how to mobilize people’s motivation by stressing the “immeasurable merits” accumulated by attending the ritual and postponing the mealtime to keep people around. Different strategies deployed by masters have a profound influence on the temple’s long-term development and this will be discussed in chapter six. I argue that although a temple may lose its significance in the community, by virtue of the master who runs the temple, the temple can still be the centre of the event and forge a small yet intimate community centred on the temple, not the village.

Zhao holds that miaohui was, in essence, a “carnival in daily life” and its primary function was to entertain the deity because it was a permissible occasion to be anti-normative where the feudalist hierarchy was temporally diluted (Zhao 2002, pp.123-135) and allowed all orders of the society to participate. This was miaohui’s unique attraction in the imperial times when women were confined to the household and made an appearance in public only during miaohui.

What remains normative is that women still assume the same religious role in burning incense on behalf of the family while their husbands tend to engage in other non-religious activities. To be specific, women normally come to the temple to burn incense and yellow paper, make some donation and participate in the ritual. One old lady even
handmade some delicate paper shoes for the deity. After that, they left miaohui heading home to cook a meal or pick up grandchildren. Men on the other hand rarely appear in the temple and are more interested in watching operas and spending more time there since they are free of household chores. With little interest in the rituals and practices, they talked about their neighbours or told anecdotes about former state leaders such as Mao’s miracles, and thus these men were experiencing the existence of deities in a much more invisible way.

So, people were attracted by honghuo because it was a “sharp contrast between the dull and bland drudgery of everyday life and the lively and exciting social events” (Chau 2008). People went to miaohui to live a different life. This explains why people’s behaviours in miaohui were rather casual. We can imagine an old couple who finished breakfast and were tired of watching TV, and then one of them remembered that there was miaohui on that day, so they decided to get out of the house and have some fun. They would not necessarily rush there because they knew exactly what it looked like since all miaohui were the same.

I found that though the connection between the deity and the village was weakening, miaohui was still embedded in their daily life as the way prevailing religious perspectives were. The traditional miaohui was a celebration for the deity but it had also become an event people chose to attend, rather than feeling obligated and this was illustrated when some villages had lost their village temple. This could account for the loose cohesion within villages in northern China especially compared with southern lineage or ethnic minority communities.

Villagers relive the past and their nostalgia is evoked by the old-fashioned handmade tools or operas that act out the past. And they relive the moral community as they remember what has been lost. This is their religiosity even if they cannot clearly identify exactly how the deity intervenes or how fate works. In such operas and social interaction they discussed how cadres paid a price for destroying temples or why their neighbour could not have a son due to fengshui, and they acknowledged that their life was subject to something else—supernatural forces or spiritual beings—and this was not superstition just because it was beyond science. All these social interactions
enhanced people’s religiosity. Invisible deities live in operas, rituals and people’s narratives. They play out the morals not only because they are taught to do so but also because they are afraid of the consequences of not doing so.

5.6.2 Entertaining and satisfying the people
For remote villages, miaohui or hui attracts the sale of all sorts of commodities produced in the village. With operas’ loud music and singing, the village is immersed in a festival atmosphere. One can smell fried snacks from far away. Young children are jubilant: some wait in front of the stall for the food and others crowd around playthings, like a small pool for fishing and riding swinging cartoon cars. And for villagers who still work on the land, the accessibility of farm tools becomes an extremely strong motivator. The traditional, out-of-date tools can only be found during this period.

Miaohui and hui thus is a miniature of a traditional lifestyle: a life rooted in the farmland. Even though many villagers now live in three-storey houses with a cement floor, they still prefer brooms made of a special plant, instead of a plastic one purchasable in any store. This is their response to the modernized rural scene. Needless to say, the rural sector is undergoing tremendous changes through urbanization, especially among young people who like to adopt fashionable urban lifestyles. When two young people passed by the food stalls, the girl told her companion, “I ate lots of this food when I was a kid but now I think it is unhygienic and unhealthy”. So instead of participating, they just passed by. While for older people, this annual event is a rare opportunity to be nostalgic.
Nevertheless, the necessity of miaohui and hui, or the charm of it, is deeply rooted in the rural life itself. It is the time when people find a purpose to get out of the house and mingle with others. The mah-jong and poker stalls are always full of people. Along the road or almost anywhere, you can always find two people playing Chinese chess and more people watching, or some people just sitting around in a circle and talking about any topics, from family chores to international disputes. One could argue that this is a common scene in every park in the city but in the rural areas, it is a luxury because villagers who are farmers rarely have leisure time. Several times a year, this is at least a temporary relief from the burden of farming and an opportunity to socialize in a bigger circle.

One afternoon, I had this conversation with a 63 year old farmer.

Me: why do you not hang out with your friend at any time? You can just call him.
Yang: there is no need. It is nothing urgent. He lives in another village (5 miles away).
Me: but how do you know he will come?
Yang: (with a laugh) He always comes to miaohui. Everyone knows the date. It is nice of you to come here and watch the opera. Young people do not like that.

Later that day, his friend, also in his sixties came and the two of them began to chat. Believers from different temples also interact with others during miaohui. On the second day of Mount Tai’s miaohui, a group of people (around 12) arrived at the temple in a small van, advising that they belonged to their village temple’s incense association around 34 kilometres away. After a collective ritual, every member got down to burn incense on their own and had some free time. One grandpa described this as a tour and hanging out time. At a cost of 15 yuan, they had a short trip to the county seat.

Similarly, some retired people living in the county seat would travel all the way to the town famous for its warm spring to watch the opera and spend the night in the hotel because it was said that their operas cost 100,000 yuan. This is an emerging trend in retired people and the leisure class: they can afford both the time and cost to travel to religious festivals. The rural farmers regarded such visits between temples as their leisure activity and highly cost-effective. I argue that this leisure class constitutes key participants in the revival of temples.
Even though people do not talk about morality, the focus on practices of morality is everywhere. After donating to the temple, one can ask for a red tape on which is written “The Good Life of Peace”. People wear this around their wrist or neck or even place it on their rear-view mirror or a handlebar. “Because others will know we donated money”, one woman explained. Upon hearing that, her companion corrected her: “Of course not! This is a symbol of your good heart”. The woman “selling” them explained that “just take as many as you want”. But when one old grey haired woman handed out two yuan and asked for two tapes, the custodian responded sarcastically, “how could you buy one for only one yuan?” Ironically, it proved not only that the so-called “good heart” did have a price, but also that it was not really a case of “as many as you want”.

This bewilderment applied to the free lunch as well. Because it was free, hundreds of people came to have a share, including temple-goers, opera watchers and retailers. Grandmother Huang was not happy about people having lunch without paying. She said, “you should never take advantage of the deity! Just donate some money as you want or the deity will not bless you.”

The logic that “everything has a price, even one’s sincerity” gradually takes hold as a result of the market economy. I argue that this also reveals the collision between different types of morality. The traditional morality highlights people’s contribution to the community, rather than drawing on the provision of the wealthy, so it teaches that “one should not take advantage of deity” and to “not be greedy”. While in terms of
individual morality, people pursue the maximum benefit to themselves, regardless of its impact on the community.

This illustrates changing dynamics within the village. When it was the village that hosted *miaohui* and served its villagers, the free lunch was for everyone because they were part of the village and had contributed. Now that it is the temple that hosts the free lunch, people who come from other villages and have the free lunch without making a donation, means that the temple bears the cost of the lunch. In this sense, the celebration of *miaohui* no longer performs the function of consolidating the village. So, when people from outside pour into the *miaohui*, they do not have to follow the reciprocity with the village deity which creates a chance for outsiders to exploit the generosity of the temple and local people.

### 5.6.3 The disappearing communal village

When villages lose their village temple, if they still host *hui*, it is to celebrate the community through opera. Lost deities mean that there are no more public religious activities in the village. Due to changes within grass-roots governments, the village head or village committee also no longer host public events, compared with meetings in Mao’s time or the film-watching of the 1980s and 1990s. What I sensed was the disappearance of the village as a group, and this was leading to a sense of moral decay as the traditional morality stressed by the community gave way to individualist preference.

Increased social mobility worsened the situation since traditional culture and moral codes are effective in a society of acquaintance but invalid in dealing with strangers in a disintegrating society. This can be revealed by all kinds of swindles that happened during *miaohui* and *hui*. In one hysterical scene, the swindler used the lure of “free magical medicine” to trick people out of their money. Dozens of people were tricked. Others watching on the side whispered to each other that “this is just a fraud”. But none of the onlookers stepped forward to expose the deception. In a community where everyone knew everyone else, people would have been obligated to help each other because their social network overlapped. But at this moment, many of the behavioural norms and moral values did not apply to people who lay outside one's network of social relationships (Yan 2009, p.19) (which was the case when people outside the village
attended *miaohui* and *hui*). They did not interfere because it was strangers swindling other strangers: they were under no obligation to intervene.

This is the moral decay rural people experience in their daily life. The *miaohui* and *hui* were supposed to enhance people’s morality and their solidarity towards the community but it had become a sign of a village’s wealth since the opera troupe or “the style was an extra status symbol for the organizers” (Siu 1990, p.776). In Lu County, it is the temple or the village committee that determines the troupe. Even though not everyone is expert in appreciating operas, there are some rather obvious clues. The name of the opera troupe reveals where are they coming from and normally troupes from bigger cities are considered better than local ones; the type of opera also indicates their quality. Plays involving crying and fighting scenes are more expensive since they require skilled actors and cooperation and coordination across the whole troupe.

Operas also reflect the village’s management and the local officials’ willingness and ability to host the event. If village officials only aim to make profits by charging money from retailers, operas are just a means to achieve that goal so they are less willing to pay a fortune. This was in contrast to various rich people who financed one-day or three-day operas to return a favour to the deity and won a reputation as a result. Most village operas were financed at about the same level, at a cost of 20,000 to 30,000 yuan. If operas were cheaper than that, people would laugh at the village who hosted it. Sometimes, if the village or the temple could not afford the cost, it would then be shared by all villagers. “It is like trading money for deity’s blessing and if you donate your money to the poor, who will bless you?” a villager said. But for that new *hui*, villagers were not happy to cover the opera because the whole event was created by the local authority to boost the economy, not because they needed it. So, the village committee had to find a way to cover the cost without the villagers’ contributions.

One middle-aged villager commented between acts, “Our village is too poor, so the opera is not so good; unlike the Xia town, I hear their opera cost a hundred thousand!” After a while, he admitted that if the opera was good, people wold think highly of the village and villagers would have *mianzi* too. Then, he went even further, saying that

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8 This town is famous for its warm spring and the Grand Buddha statue.
“this is because of the Grand Buddha! He blesses those nearby but we who live far away cannot be blessed”. The cost of the operas is linked with the efficacy of the deity. So when a temple hosts operas, it needs to make it grand to manifest the deity’ efficacy which is not the concern of the village.

Overall, since territorial division was under constant change due to administrative orders, the boundary was less important than in the past, and this was reflected in religious knowledge: the celestial hierarchy and deities’ personality was no longer recalled in detail since all deities were considered to have the same efficacy. The fundamental function of miaohui in memorializing the deity and the community was gradually being replaced by boosting the local economy through entertainment.

I argue that without the deities’ presence, the annual hui is not effective enough to convey communal solidarity and morality. It is a re-invention of the traditional miaohui in a new form. The missing temples and communal rites are not the only sign of lack of cohesion within the village. Another challenge comes from the division within the village caused by different beliefs. Since most villages had already lost their village deity, villagers were free to choose their deities, including God. The rise of Christianity split the village up when Christians refused to share the cost of operas. They withdrew from any activities related to another religion and were absent from non-believers’ banquets for weddings or funerals, including those of their relatives. They break up the solidarity associated with popular religion and the traditional rural lifestyle embedded in it.

The other challenge was the absence of rules to deal with strangers. People from mountain areas came to the county seat for job opportunities or better education and chose to live in villages like Shang and Shan because of their convenient location and cheaper rent. But people were still affected by the traditional morality that “moral rights and duties are defined and fulfilled differently in accordance with one’s position in a given relationship” (Yan 2009) which made it hard to place those strangers who were outside one’s network. The lack of public events reduced the chance for people to socialize. That is why I found that the rise of new religious communities (to be discussed in later chapters) made up for the diminished role of the village community.
Given its assumptions and beliefs, Chinese local religion has its own forms of organization, structure and inner logic, forms that are particularly apparent in village temple festivals (Overmyer 2001, p.9). The change of miaohui also reflects the dilemma of popular religion in that when the village is urbanized, people change their way of life and this touches the foundation of popular religion. Popular religion’s morality is tightly tied with deities so, without that, communal morality is losing its force. When people watch operas and are inspired by the happy ending where good is rewarded, it resonates with the prevailing religious concepts that there is a deity and each behaviour leads to a corresponding consequence. What is displayed in these operas, is a nostalgic past that people are familiar with which expresses their expectations of a moral community. “Are they not afraid of retribution?” an onlooker asked his friend confusedly when they observed the fraud. With a sigh, his friend replied, “People are not the same anymore”.

5.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I described temples’ communal role and the decline in the village’s cohesion. People’s perception is that the public spaces for villagers to communicate in and host annual events for deities, appear to have been compressed. The restoration of temples reflects the state’s control and local authority’s compromise in pursuing economic growth. Religion and religious practices have become increasingly individualistic. I argue that without a village’s support, it is hard to find a charismatic religious figure, such as depicted by other scholars, to run the temple and even expand their influence to social life (Chau 2006; Feuchtwang and Wang 2001). The elected village head often focuses on developing the village’s economy by selling land or making personal profits and there are not many chances to publicly display his or her leadership. So most village temples have been slow to change and temple keepers are only concerned about attracting believers, rather than modifying their daily-practical modality to liturgical or scriptural modalities. The revival of popular religion encounters difficulties when its communal role in the village is in decline and the state sets the standard for the liturgical modality to be less religious.

Official records describe four types of “feudalist superstition”: burning incense and worshipping deities; fortune-telling; fengshui; and praying for rain (County book 2014, pp.785-786). These are the most common practices in popular religion. This confirms
the similarity between religion and superstition, as well as the division between official discourse and people’s practices. The revival of *hui* and the promotion of cultural festivals reflects the local authority’s goal of diminishing the role of religion and religious events. I argue that without involving the deities, the new *hui* can only attract people through the expensiveness of the operas and this leads to the questionable status of the *hui*. It is not clear how long the *hui* will survive without deity’s in a disintegrating village.

People who practised popular religion happened to be those people who recalled the old morality. They admitted that life was getting better but that people were not moral any more. The moral vacuum they experienced was created with the sudden shift from collectivism to a market economy, when the goal of public life was replaced by the pursuit of individual wealth. A direct change was when the perception of “deities bless the good” gave way to “deities bless the sincere” which left room for new measures of sincerity by displaying money or commitment. The traditional morality was challenged because people constantly encountered immoral people who had a happy life—like the neighbour who refused to support their sick parents and the swindler—which was contrary to the traditional expectation that only the good will be rewarded.

*Miaohui* and *hui* are essential in the rural sector because they offer a place for people to interact outside their daily life and to find temporary relief from their burdens. When grandparents take grandchildren to such an event, even though neither of them may be consciously aware, knowledge is revealed and passed on through the generations. What is reproduced is how people experience rural life in a religious way. *Miaohui* is a miniature of traditional rural life where the community matters and the deities exist.

Once people thought that popular religion had lost its explanatory power, they either kept their practice as a reassurance or turned to other institutionalised religions. When the state tried to designate religion in a specific and codified way, popular religion proved that it was part of rural people’s daily life and could not be separated from that. Each individual needed to find their own way to cope with the moral vacuum, and as later chapters will explore, some turned to Buddhism, some turned to Christianity, and some maintained their popular religious practices and ancestor worship.
Chapter 6 The revival of a Buddhist temple

6.1 Introduction

In mid-August 2017, a three day Zen-Martial Arts and Health Lecture was launched by Master Feng the monk in charge of the Huayan temple (and the only monk there). For some years there had been an emerging trend with big city temples hosting summer camps or short-term training courses so young people could experience Buddhism through meditation and other practices. It was rare for rural temples to do so, and especially to target the middle-aged and elderly, as in the case of Huayan temple. With his ambitions to revive the temple, Master Feng made a great effort to attract more people to the temple by putting up large advertising posters and asking people to share promotional material on WeChat\(^1\). He described the three day Zen-Martial Arts and Health Lecture as offering a mixture of martial arts, acupuncture, aid from Buddha to cure diseases and health knowledge.

Master Feng invited a female lay Buddhist (jushi)\(^2\) to host and a male jushi to play Chinese zither to add atmosphere to the occasion. The one-day course attracted around 100 people. He instructed people to perform a ritual in the main hall first and then delivered a long speech, promising that this temple would take the lead in setting out on the path of enlightenment, and that everyone would be free of physical pain and worries in life through this practice. He introduced two mentors: master Fou who had studied martial arts in the Shaolin Temple\(^3\) and had travelled to many countries and the renowned Doctor Lou who was a practising doctor and a famous professor in the country.

The class began with several believers sharing their stories of being cured in this temple. One story was that after being charged 300,000 yuan by a hospital for treatment of hemiplegia, the woman came to the temple to learn martial arts from master Fou for two months and as a result she was able to walk again. She walked a few steps and bent over

\(^1\) WeChat was the most popular phone app in recent years throughout China and it is reported that it has hit 1 billion monthly active users in 2018.

\(^2\) A lay Buddhist (jushi) refers to those people who have already taken the Bodhisattva vows to obey the five Buddhist precepts.

\(^3\) This is the most famous martial arts temple.
to prove how flexible and healthy she was. One audience member whispered, “I know her! She is my neighbour. She could not walk a few months ago!” Upon hearing this, the crowd applauded in high anticipation.

This was just one of the many approaches Master Feng took to revive his temple, but it was not completely satisfactory. The audience showed less interest in health advice and medical knowledge but lined up to be treated the moment Doctor Lou performed acupuncture. Master Feng fuelled the zeal by bragging about the marvellous effect: once Doctor Lou punctures the acupoint, karmic creditors (which possess people) immediately run away; the moment I speak, they will be scared away. “Unlike me, you cannot see this spiritual stuff”, he shook his head to further emphasise this point.

However the theologically correct practices that Master Feng promoted did not attract people's interest with most participants more interested in gaining actual benefits on the spot, rather than learning the knowledge or conforming to the liturgy. This is why they rushed to the front to experience the treatment in person with several believers even kowtowing to master Fou to acknowledge him as their master for future treatment. Once the course was over, only 20 people attended the ritual to dedicate all the merit to all living creatures (parinamana), as Master Feng instructed.

What I recognised in the temple was the coexistence of diverse practices. There was a mix of the daily-practical modality most believers deployed and the liturgical and scriptural modalities that Master Feng promoted. The revival of Buddhism, at least in this temple, was the continuity of past practices and the innovation of new practices.

Local people rarely differentiate Taoist temples (miao) from Buddhist ones (si) because, as revealed in previous chapters, they treat Buddha and Bodhisattva as powerful deities in terms of their efficacy and blessings. With the help of the TV show The Journey to the West, many believe that Buddha is the most powerful deity because, in one episode, the monkey king’s attempt to rule the Heaven was defeated by Buddha and the Jade Emperor and other (Taoist) deities lost the battle. So people turn to any temple to

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4 This is a Buddhist term often quoted by master Feng. The original word is gongde zhu, and refers to those spirits that people are indebted to or have hurt in either previous lives or this life. It promotes the idea of “karma” that spirits can possess those who have hurt them.
practise their daily practical modality by burning incense and making an exchange with the deities.

Only devout Buddhists were aware of the distinction that *si* stood for Buddha and Bodhisattva. They hold that Buddha is superior to deities because he is free from suffering while others suffer from the samsara. To end that suffering, these devout followers did show a preference for liturgical, scriptural and/or cultivational modalities under instruction from authoritative leaders, from whom they undertook training in understanding the scriptures and meditational practices.

Located in the Shang village, the Huayan temple benefitted from its location adjacent to the county seat where there was convenient transportation and easy access. This was crucial since its main adherents were middle-aged and elder women who still assumed household duties so this enabled them to attend rituals or sermons and still pick up grandchildren after school or cook for the family. Most villagers in Shang village only enjoyed the benefits of walking to the temple to burn incense, but some believers from outside started to attend rituals and lectures. I argue that this temple’s revival relies on a small group of key believers whom I define as the leisure class - retired women with a pension and free time who devote themselves to Buddhism, and to the monk and his method of running the temple.

The Huayan temple stood out because Master Feng strove to bring in orthodox Buddhist knowledge and practices while other temples still adhered to old conventions. In the worship of the Black Dragon King, Chau examined how the charismatic temple boss managed to win the support of the local officials and local villagers (Chau 2006). It was different in Huayan temple because it was not a village temple so there was neither support from local villages nor a cohesive village demanding communal rituals. It was crucial for Master Feng to cater to different people’s needs and recruit loyal believers.

I want to highlight the role of people, not charismatic leaders. Evidence showed that before the Lu County religious bureau regulated temples around 1996, rural people had already started to reconstruct temples and restore rituals from 1979 (County book 2014, p.140). People took the liberty of resuming religious activities before the state issued guidance for religious matters (Document No.19) in 1982. The revival of rural temples
relied heavily on the religious specialist who ran the temple and his/her ability to attract more believers to donate. The Huayan temple scaled up its activities after Master Feng took over because his predecessor failed to attract generous donations.

Master Feng’s resolve to regulate the temple derived from his identity as an officially approved and well-trained monk. However his strength was he knew when to ride the tide. After learning about some believers’ passion for Monk Yinguang’s teachings, he introduced this teaching to his temple to supplement the obscure sutras. Thus, he promoted a self-cultivational modality alongside the liturgical and scriptural modalities. During this process, there were distinctions between what I call conventional believers who still focused on efficacy-based practices and those key believers who gradually converted to the dharma-based practices by not only hoping for this-worldly rewards as efficacy-based believers desired but also longing for enlightenment that could rescue them from endless transmigration. So it was common to find people adopting the configuration of modalities. I argue that although only a small proportion of believers successfully transformed their practices or converted to the new modality, the majority did not resist Master Feng’s ambitions to standardize rituals and doctrines because in doing so he assimilated the morality and practices from popular religion that people were familiar with.

6.2 Orthodox Buddhism

6.2.1 An officially approved leader

Master Feng attempted to formalise worship. In doing so he sought the approval of officials who had licensed the temple and him as its official monk. He was also seeking to convert believers to the more scriptural and liturgical practices of Buddhism, which to him were the correct ways of Buddhist worship. Though Master Feng shared certain similarities with incense interpreters, such as a focus on suffering and the ability to interact with deities, he had big ambitions to provide benefit for the people by propagating Buddhism.

The first step to revive Buddhism was to establish the monk’s authority over the temple so that he could enact reform. His charisma came from his early years of suffering and developing his public profile and this proved the legitimacy of his leadership. Though
the official term for a monk is *heshang*, in practice, people tend to call him master (*shifu*), which is a polite term with a strong emotional connection. As one Chinese saying goes: A teacher for a day is a father for a lifetime.

Ji identified three analytical categories which addressed “both the psychological and the sociological explanations of charisma: expectation, affection and responsibility” (Ji 2008a, p.50). These traits were displayed in Master Feng’s life journey and his management of the temple. He never failed to seize any opportunity to publicize his own attributes in order to appeal to believers as a qualified monk who only wanted the best for everyone but himself. He stressed his illness—he was sick for a very long time until he became a monk and he remained very weak—as a sign of being destined to become a monk, and how selfless he was by leaving his wife and son in his thirties. Even though he talked about how his sister cured him to prove he never embezzled donations, or how his son achieved fruitful academic results as being blessed by Buddha, he strongly opposed others’ chitchat in the temple. When he caught such a person engaged in idle chat, he would reprimand that person severely. Although deserting one’s young children and divorcing one’s wife is seen as a worldly activity that takes attention away from spiritual devotion, he managed to construct this as his sacrifice and determination to devote his entire life to Buddhism.

To prove his efficacy as being chosen, he mentioned countless times how he encountered good omens. For example, this story was a justification of why he was chosen to run this temple:

*It was eight years ago on a September day when I first set foot in here. I saw Avalokitesvara sitting in meditation dressed in white over there; I knew immediately that I could not tell anyone at the time because the mysterious will of Heaven should not be divulged. That is why I promised to build a pavilion for Avalokitesvara.*

This proves that he was chosen and had spiritual insight. He referred to incense interpreters as superstitious, while he claimed to be able to cure people’s diseases and ward off evil spirits, which is exactly what incense interpreters do. However with the

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5 *Shi* is teacher while *fu* is father.
identity of a monk, he differentiated himself from others because he could explain the reason in theological terms like karma. For instance, people become sick from eating meat, the equivalent of killing livestock.

He also frequently mentioned new buildings and well-decorated statues to prove his innocence: he did not embezzle any donation but utilized the money appropriately. Since temples serve the same function for gods as houses do for people, the quality of the dwelling was thought to affect the god’s well-being and so his (or her) power (Hansen 1990, p.57). As a visible manifestation, Master Feng won praise for his hard work and sacrifice in dedicating his time and energy to the improvement of the temple. This also enhanced Buddha’s and the temple’s efficacy.

If his early suffering and his ability to see omens and cure diseases formed a charismatic figure, not being greedy and having no interest in money confirmed his virtues. Many believers admitted that they were attracted to this temple because of Master Feng’s personal charisma. They were also convinced that he represented orthodox Buddhism so following him would lead to the path of salvation.

He consolidated people’s faith through his plans for the future. He planned to build a nursing home for the elderly where old people could gain good care while immersed in Buddhism. Since most believers were middle-aged and elderly, this was extremely appealing. Another plan was more idealistic: he promised to be re-born in Lu County in the next life so he could carry on what was left undone in this life. People took this as a noble and compassionate aspiration. As he said, “I came from another province, so if I am not a good person, how could I be selected as a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference Committee of Lu County?”

This did not mean he was not challenged. Recently he faced criticism for inviting women to deliver sermons. Instead of reversing this decision, he took advantage of an incident. One morning he held the monthly ritual despite the summer heat (over 32 ºC). Every attendee was sweating, and it was harder for jushi since they wore long robes. After kneeling for an hour, Huang jushi finally fainted. Master Feng ordered others to leave her alone because this portended that she was enlightened. A few minutes later, she woke up and burst into tears. Upon hearing this, Master Feng smiled, “after teaching
for so many years, this is the first time that dharma is revealed. Crying is salvation”. While he kept preaching, she began to shout:

You poor living creatures, please be enlightened; our master is so compassionate that he suffered a lot to benefit us.

The ritual had to stop as she cried even louder. Others carried her out to relax. With a big smile, Master Feng continued:

This is not a bad thing: you all benefit from her because she demonstrated spiritual power. That is why those spirits can speak through her.

Most participants were shocked and convinced that she spoke for spirits who benefited from sermons. So, this proved the efficacy of hosting sermons, whether preached by monks or nuns, and Master Feng’s correctness in managing the temple. A seeming drama caused by a fainting believer ended up confirming his authority.

Indeed, in its pure form charismatic authority may be said to exist only in the process of originating. It cannot remain stable, but becomes either traditionalized or rationalized, or a combination of both. The following are the principal motives underlying this transformation: (a) The ideal and also the material interests of the followers in the continuation and the continual reactivation of the community, (b) the still stronger ideal and also stronger material interests of the members of the administrative staff, the disciples or other followers of the charismatic leader in continuing their relationship. (Weber 1947, p.364)

Unlike incense interpreters who built their efficacy through one-on-one service, Master Feng aimed to construct his through public service and the image of orthodox Buddhism. He needed more than manifesting charisma.

6.2.2 Routinized management
“Be assured that I am leading you in the right way!” Master Feng promised. His confidence came from his orthodox and political status: he was the vice-president of the local Buddhist Association of China (BAC). In response to the appeal of

As discussed in chapter three, the temple is a scared place so spirits cannot enter. Master Feng offered a service so people could write the name of the deceased on a yellow paper and post this on the wall. These spirits can then enter the temple and gain benefits from rituals and sermons.
professionalism in China today, “experts” of one sort or another are now frequently used to validate authority (Li 2015). This identity verified that he was officially endorsed and able to practise Buddhism since he had received systematic training in a Buddhist college. So what he did in the temple was orthodox Buddhism, not superstition. By drawing the line with superstition, his rulership was legitimate in terms of religious policies which distinguished his temple from others in regard to doctrines and disciplines.

Ji (2008b) viewed the Buddhist Association of China as the outcome of state institutionalization and he believed that “its main functions were not licensing the priesthood and controlling the number of temples……but the mobilization of Buddhist clergy and laypeople to contribute Buddhist resources to the cause of state-building” (Ji 2008b, p.247). Master Feng’s emphasis on the principle of “loving the country, loving Buddhism” and the huge portrait of the current President Xi posted on his office wall were part of such state-building. Recently, “soft power”, and “harmony”, have become some of the most employed key words of Buddhists and pro-Buddhist scholars for legitimizing the current Buddhist revival (Ji 2012, p.22).

Master Feng made it clear that he had the support of the state and in return he launched small projects like investing in physiotherapy recovery equipment to make the county a truly blessed place. Building on his multiple roles—charismatic leader, the chosen monk, and the state-endorsed manager—he worked on normalizing people’s needs and standardizing all practices. For example faced with people burning a bunch of incense sticks at a time, he made a new rule that one incense stick was enough.

Rituals were standardized to conform to doctrines. There were three fixed rituals each month and special rituals for events like Buddha’s birthday or the Hungry Ghost Festival. He designated faithful jushi to perform specific roles: chanting scriptures, playing musical instruments or preparing sacrificial food. This enabled the temple’s operation when he was temporarily absent or occupied by other affairs. A retired doctor was recruited to provide medical advice during every ritual and sermons on sutras were given frequently, lasting from ten days to a month.

7 Namely the rites on the first and the fifth days of every lunar month, and a ritual for conversion (guiyi) on the third day of the month.
Orthodox knowledge was conveyed through these rites. Take the monthly guiyi ritual for example. It took about two hours. Participants maintained a kneeling position with hands clasped together in front of the chest for most of the time. Master Feng explained the Buddhist gestures of kowtow, holding incense and greetings in detail, and illustrated sutras to define the meaning of guiyi and the disciplines he insisted people follow, including the three types of almsgiving and four types of gongyang (supports or offerings). This ensured that the offerings in the temple were not a casual action out of people’s gratitude, but an act of fulfilling one’s duty as Buddha’s disciple. “The four types of offerings are clothes, food, beddings and medicines, and the merit of medicines is the highest because I and others can benefit”, he explained. It encouraged people to interact with the temple in the way he taught.

He educated the public about orthodoxy by drawing a line between the sacred and the evil/spiritual. Since all spirits are locked out of the temple’s territory, the only way to bring ancestral spirits in was to write their name and their date of death on a piece of yellow paper and post it on one wall. These spirits could then enter the temple and attend all the rituals and sermons to gain redemption. On the opposite wall, red papers were posted to bless living people by writing their name and birthday. At the end of every month, a simple ritual was held to burn all these papers symbolizing their fulfilment. Instead of asking a set price, he encouraged people to pay as much as they wanted for the paper.

The problem was that people’s “sincerity” had different prices. One woman just took several yellow papers without placing any money into the donation box. The elder helping in the temple was not happy, “This will not work! You can never take advantage of the temple”. This remark reflected the same reciprocal principle of exchange in that Buddha’s blessings required an equal amount of effort, either through material offerings or the donation of money.

Master Feng made sure that the temple was well managed and all the rituals were performed according to doctrines. With the help of mobile phones and social media, his orthodoxy was further promoted. He asked people to take pictures of rituals and post them on WeChat, and he sometimes shared pictures meetings with local BAC members.
or of attending the county’s Political Consultative Conference on the chat group named “Huayan temple study group”.

I argue that his standardized process helped revive his temple through organized rituals, and the provision of different services and teachings that offered people knowledge which they had no access to through popular religion. This is not to say though that people’s modality of meeting their practical needs can be readily transformed into the liturgical one as Master Feng expected. So he turned to Monk Yinguang’s teachings to promote a scriptural modality. As a result people expressed themselves in a configuration of these two modalities and some even progressed to the cultivational modality focusing on the Dharma.

6.2.3 Visiting monks give better sermons
Sun divided Chinese Buddhist ecology into three types and admitted that even though the state-recognized Buddhist establishments (Type I) attempted to “build a cohesive and disciplined sangha”, “their capacity to penetrate into the lay members’ lives and evangelical fever look pale when compared with some Buddhist groups in the second type” (Sun 2011, p.503). What I found was that Master Feng had built his temple into a combination of an approved state-recognised temple with the evangelical teachings

Believers listen to sermons. Jushi wear the long robe.

more common to Type II temples.

According to Sun, leaders of Type II religious groups emphasize the learning of doctrinal teachings and practices, the internalization of the religious messages, and the
enactment of the religious teachings in daily life (Ibid). This is exactly what the visiting masters tried to convey. One popular saying was that visiting monks gave better sermons, but in this case it was nuns.

Since Master Feng was not an expert at interpreting sutras, he made the decision to invite Monk Yinguang’s disciples to preach his teachings. At first, it was coincidental that a nun was invited. The sermon was popular but some opposed the idea of having a woman sitting on the throne. When Master Feng heard about dissenting opinions, he became more determined to invite nuns. “I will invite whoever I think is qualified regardless of their gender. I will support them at any cost. Whoever cannot accept this should find another temple”, he publicly announced. In return, all these visiting nuns—I will address them as masters as local people did—expressed their gratitude for being invited.

Their sermons focused on Monk Yinguang’s teachings, instead of directly elaborating on original sutras. So it was Monk Yinguang’s personal understandings and teaching methods that were conveyed to the public through his disciples. For example, these masters carried a glove-shaped balloon because he used it as a metaphor for sunyata. It maintained the consistency of those teachings. Then they could assure the audience that the only way to achieve enlightenment or redemption was by following Monk Yinguang and his teachings.

Monk Yinguang ran a state-recognized temple in another province. He bore the same political consciousness and awareness as Master Feng. These masters often brought up the importance of being thankful to the state and the Party and ensuring that their studies realised the “Chinese dream”. One master directly quoted President Xi: “it is necessary to strengthen the education on classics (jingdian)”9. The monks reacted quickly when the political wind changed. Around September, a rumour was spreading that posting religious teachings in WeChat groups could break the law. Since his followers created many WeChat groups to share his teachings every day, Monk

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8 Monk Yinguang’s teachings are based on his interpretation of several sutras, such as the Lotus Sutra and the Shurangama Sutra.

9 In the original context, this refers to “excellent traditional culture”, namely the Confucian classics, instead of Buddhism. It is misleading.
Yinguang made a quick response and asked these groups to disseminate Chairman Mao’s works instead.

These masters and Master Feng are strong supporters of orthodox Buddhism and openly opposed to superstitious practices like incense interpreters, but they know how to mobilize people’s motivation and conviction through omens. One master led the audience to sing a special chant to pray for cooler temperatures since there was no air conditioning or fans in the hall. Three days later, it suddenly rained. She happily took credit and convinced everyone to study harder. This also enhanced Buddha’s efficacy. So sermons became mutually beneficial because Master Feng needed a vehicle to attract believers while the masters hoped to propagate their teachings.

6.2.4 Teachings of enlightenment
Believing that they are holding the ultimate truth of the universe and the key to salvation, embracing the ideals and vision of their religious leaders, practitioners of Type II Buddhism often exhibit intense religious devotion and evangelical zeal (Sun 2011, p.503). The theme of their teachings is enlightenment and the superiority of Buddhism. They portray a picture where Buddha is superior to any other deity and thus teach that devotion to Buddhism is the only wise choice. Though other deities are efficacious, when the time comes they have to jump into the circle of samsara and suffer. Only Buddha is exempt from this. Only following Buddha can help people reach the stage of enlightenment to end any form of reincarnation. That is to say, the best almsgiving is to listen to teachings and save as many people as possible.

To prove their teachings’ authenticity and efficacy, masters used lots of “scientific evidence” to brand their teachings as science, instead of religion or superstition. This was a defence in order to avoid any accusation of being superstitious and show they conformed to advocating knowledge and modernity. They stressed that burning incense was not an act of Buddhism and the karmic merits accumulated by burning incense were negligible compared those accumulated from study.

Lots of their stories started with “an American scientist”, “one Japanese scientist” or “western science”. Masaru Emoto was mentioned frequently with his masterpiece *The Message from Water*, in which he claimed that human consciousness can influence the
molecular structure of water. One version held that when a glass of water is spoken to in a good manner—saying things like you are so beautiful—for a period of time, the water will form into beautiful crystals, but otherwise it will turn to dirty sediments. What is conveyed is one crucial ideal of the teaching: the power of thought. Everything is dependent on thoughts, and to make a better life one should change one’s thoughts in a positive way.

That is why Dr Ihaleakala Hew Len was thought to cure mentally ill offenders in one hospital by looking at their case files at his home and repeating four phrases: “I love you; I am sorry; please forgive me; thank you”. The idea was similar: the pure mind can help all creatures. So a monk living in Japan can purify a lake by chanting sutras around it. Every time the audience would react with exclamations, “how amazing Buddhist dharma is” or “how powerful our mind is”.

To encourage the audience to disseminate dharma, one master played the piety card, “tell your son he is not filial if he does not study Buddhism”. People were encouraged to save others because selflessness achieves enlightenment. In another story, a young mother who needed money to cure her son’s leukaemia donated 2,000 yuan to another young man who needed money for his sick father. Miraculously, her son recovered without treatment which proved that selfless love conquers any disease. The audience applauded. Through dramatic stories, Buddhist ideas were conveyed combined with traditional morality.

They reshaped and repackaged Buddhist teachings into “the truth about the universe” and this attracted people who claimed to be atheist or less interested in Buddhism. After all, the teachings offered solutions to individual’ sufferings and the uncertainty of life, in a way incense interpreters could not. However the Buddhist masters gained popularity by disseminating their professional secrets. Buddhism has become a basic system of symbolic reference for many Chinese in order for them to construct their individual identity and understand their life-world (Ji 2012, p.23). By re-shaping themselves in non-religious terms like knowledge or cultural heritage they avoid being limited by prejudices about religion and thus gain more social acceptance and space (Peng 2014).
Chapter 6

6.3 Division between believers

6.3.1 The emergence of key believers

Before Master Feng introduced the teachings, only two jushi regularly volunteered in the temple: one cooked in the kitchen and the other took charge of the daily evening ritual. Once he introduced the teachings, about 15 people became regulars. They attended all the rituals and sermons and then joined the study group authorized by Master Feng. I identify them as key believers, for they were not only involved in a liturgical way but also showed great enthusiasm to look after the temple. There was a division and differentiation between conventional believers and key believers based on their performance and involvement.

Unlike conventional believers who left the temple the moment they finished burning incense or chatted in the yard while waiting for the free lunch, key believers either played a role in the ritual (e.g. playing musical instruments or chanting) or participated in the full process. They had all officially “converted” and some went even further by taking another ritual. Guiyi was a preliminary commitment to Buddhist teachings and doctrines, while to take Bodhisattva vows (shou pusa jie) indicated that they became lay Buddhists. Only after this step could they officially become a jushi recognized by the sangha and qualify to wear long robes allocated by Master Feng.

Due to its solemnity, the ritual of taking Bodhisattva vows was held only once a year: on the 19th day of the sixth lunar month, the day Avalokitesvara achieved the status of enlightenment. The essence of this ritual is to accept the Five Precepts (i.e. prohibitions
against taking life, theft, adultery, speaking falsehood, and intoxication) and promise to obey the Buddhist morality. In essence guiyi is seen as a passport to the school of Buddhism and taking Bodhisattva vows symbolizes taking classes and obeying rules.

This also meant that they were accepting the Buddhist view of life and death. When it comes to the afterlife, popular religion shows its pragmatic nature and fails to offer a thorough explanation. Buddhism greatly expands this perspective by teaching that “the afterlife is the same as this life” and introduces the six ways of reincarnation (samsara). It claims that people still suffer after death due to their behaviour in this life and that burning incense and paper money is not sufficient to address this. Master Feng taught that guiyi manifest their identity with the three realms (trayo dhatavah) and after death, they will be exempt from living in hell but still have to go through samsara. Taking the Bodhisattva precepts means they will be unconstrained within the three realms and attain Buddhahood. Buddhism’s superiority was thus once again demonstrated.

Therefore, those who had already committed to Bodhisattva precepts expressed a deeper devotion to doctrines and expressed a sense of belonging to the temple. When key believers greeted people in the temple, they always said “welcome home” or “you came back!” They genuinely identified the temple as their home, so it was only natural for them to dedicate time and money to it and to influence as many people as possible to attend. After rituals, key believers always had lunch in the temple to accompany the monk and listen to his instructions. They wore the long robe in the temple to show their identity and responsibility: when conventional believers did not know what to do, they knew whom to turn to.

That’s why key believers showed extreme willingness to popularize Monk Yinguang’s teachings. As a matter of fact, it was several key believers who first encountered this “great dharma” from one jushi who lived in a big city. They started to study at home but later realized that it would be beneficial to preach it in a temple. So, through another key believer who knew Master Feng, they introduced the teaching to him in early 2017. After reading some books and listening to online sermons, he decided to accept it and host sermons.
After learning Buddhism, many people reflected on their morality and were inspired by karmic rewards or merits, and they started to use Buddhist standards of what constitutes a good person (Liang 2005). I argue that a self-cultivational modality is emerging among key believers and they have shifted from an efficacy-based religiosity to a dharma-based one. They are concerned about reaching enlightenment through sutras. Another study found that for jushi, “birth in the Pure Land” is the strongest motivating factor in their daily chanting (Zhou 2012). They spent most of the day either reading or listening to audio records of the teachings. Several jushi shared similar daily routines by starting the day around 6 am with chanting for an hour and a half: the Shurangama Mantra, the Great Compassion Mantra, the Calamity Dispersing Mantra, the Heart Sutra and one chapter of the Lotus Sutra. They abstained from eating meat and their lifestyle was self-disciplined.

They also maintained frequent interaction with the masters by bringing them food or inviting nuns to live in their house. This deepened their commitment since “charisma implies a continual circle of gifts involving leader and followers, in which hope, care, and trust circulate as gifts and counter-gifts” (Ji 2008a, p.48). In exchange for the masters’ knowledge and assistance to achieve their goals, key believers dedicated their loyalty, time and money.

After Xia jushi learned Monk Yinguang’s teachings, she became so devout that she quit running a small stall in the market in order to focus on study. She shared the teachings with neighbours or even random people on the street. When she passed through Shang village, she jumped off her bike when she saw an old man sitting in a wheelchair. “Come to teaching! You will be saved and maybe walk again if you achieve enlightenment”, Xia said to him compassionately. Xia’s enthusiasm related to her not very satisfactory family life so she was eager to make a change, even if it happened in the next life. More than once, she told me in private to not “step into a miserable marriage” and suggested that I seize the opportunity to be the master’s disciple (nun). She made herself a negative case: ever since she got married, she took the burden of the whole family and when her husband became paralyzed on his bed, she had to take care of him every day. Although desperate to be a nun, she knew her present family situation
precluded that. Instead she wished to be born as a man in her next life and never get married.

Several key women believers recounted their sufferings and their preference to be a man in the next life. Hong jushi went even further by insisting that after her young boy grows up, she will become a nun to carry on Monk Yinguang’s legacy. That is why Hui jushi abandoned her Tantra training, even though she had already studied for six years in a house group of two dozen believers and was aiming to graduate in two years. “The moment I learned about this one, I left”, she proudly said. She felt the urgency because she was in her sixties,” I am running out of time”. She was attracted by the teaching of Monk Yinguang because it explained sutras clearly in contrast to the Tantra training where she was told to chant the names of Buddha and Bodhisattva thousands of times a day.

Key believers shared the conviction that only Monk Yinguang’s teachings and practices would lead to salvation. Gradually, their relationship with Monk Yinguang changed: the commitment to the teaching was extended to attachment towards the master himself. They always expressed gratitude to him for imparting “dharma body (dharmakaya) and wisdom life” (fashen huiming). Therefore, some of them decided to establish an even more intimate tie. During a lunch break when Master Feng was absent, Hong asked if anyone else wanted to see Monk Yinguang, so they could yizhi (samsraya/nissaya/rest with him). This conversation followed:

Guo: Did we not already yizhi the last time we met with the master?
Hui: No. That was baishi (acknowledge someone as their master).
Guo: Is not baishi and yizhi the same?
Hong: You are confused. Yizhi means that the master will be responsible for your dharma body forever and ever. If you fall into apaya (four Woeful realms: hell, hungry ghost, animal, and asura), he must come to save you. You need to tell the master that you want to yizhi, then he will give you a certificate.
Xin: I see. Can you add me to the list? I have to babysit my grandson and cannot leave home.
Heng: That is not how it works. You must be there in person and kowtow to the master. It is not so casual.

Hong: The master who helps you guiyi simply guides you to enter Buddhism but the master who you yizhi will be responsible for you. That is why you have to choose wisely. Because if your master falls into hell, you will go down with him. If you want to yizhi Monk Yinguang, you need to make a statement that you will yizhi the teaching of the Lotus Sutras for eternity.

It was clear that even though they studied the teaching for around one year and practised Buddhism for much longer, they were still less familiar with institutionalized practices because this knowledge was taught by the monk. It was their aspiration to free themselves from sufferings by attaching themselves to Monk Yingung but because he was in another province he became an unreal symbol. So when they needed to establish real contact, they turned to Master Feng for he and his temple were close by. I argue that key believers transferred their gratitude for Monk Yinguang to Master Feng and by doing so, they became the core force to run the temple and support Master Feng and spread his charisma.

6.3.2 To listen is to achieve

Conventional believers made up the majority of attendees at rituals or sermons. For instance, the first day of a sermon could attract around 100 people with the grand ritual but only 30 people attended the next few days. In this stage, what they sought was a configuration of the daily-practical and self-cultivational modalities. They wanted to be enlightened, but they were urgent to see concrete benefits. To cater to this, a new strategy was deployed to emphasize the reward of being in the temple.

To put it in the masters’ words, to listen is to attain. It means that the audience can accumulate merit just by sitting in the hall. It was explained that there is a “real self” (zhenren) and an “unreal self” (jiaren) in each person’s body and even though the “unreal self” (namely the person) may doze off during the sermon or cannot understand the master’s deep accent, they can still achieve merit because the “real self” is listening spontaneously. That was why a nearly deaf woman attended sermons all the time.

Therefore, they were attracted to sermons because of what the masters promised and because the sermons did not interfere with their everyday activities. The sermons were
The revival of a Buddhist temple

held between 9 am to 11 am and 3 pm to 5 pm so they had the time to take their children/grandchildren to and from school or make a meal for the family. During the summer break, some women brought their grandchildren since whoever comes to the temple will benefit according to Master Feng. To listen and to understand is a totally different concept. Motivated by the benefits, they were so passionate that they were willing to spend about six hours every day in the heat either commuting on the road or sitting in the hall.

To achieve what? The ultimate goal was to live in the pure land after death and to be exempt from any further reincarnation and tribulation. By attending sermons, everyone could chengfo: either become a Buddha or achieve enlightenment. It was an oversimplified statement because one was promised the maximum benefits at the minimum cost, not to mention that the lunch at the temple was “free” and there were guest rooms available to take a nap.

In answer to the question above, the masters taught that Buddhism has ways to quantify gains through two key concepts: meritorious rewards (fubao) and karmic merits (gongde). They mark people’s life trajectory and determine the future. Meritorious rewards are related to people’s previous deeds and, as the masters said, only those who have enough meritorious rewards can listen to the sermon. It implies that these audiences are lucky because people who do not have enough meritorious rewards would never have the opportunity to access sermons. So they will remain in suffering. Karmic merits determine the future. It is wise to do whatever one can to accumulate merit to secure a bright future. Listening to sermons, attending rituals regularly, bringing food or oil to the temple, and helping in the kitchen can all add to people’s karmic merits. These conform with Buddhist disciplines.

Apart from spiritual benefits, there are other advantages. Some teachings offered solutions to life’s difficulties and setbacks. Masters lectured that “the best practising (of Buddhism) is to accept reality unconditionally”. Complaining too much will only let meritorious rewards slip. So, one must remember that it is oneself that makes life miserable and to change that, the only way is to study Monk Yinguang’s teachings, by attending sermons, reading books or listening to audio recordings. “Everyone will affect national stability and a single thought of the individual could have severe consequences,
ranging from natural disasters like earthquake and floods to harmonious family”, one master explained, “this is our responsibility as Buddhist learners”.

Others teachings paid attention to women’s low status in the family. After taking bodhisattva vows, the jushi abstained from eating meat but they still prepared meat dishes for the family. But masters had a more severe attitude and suggested that the mother should assert authority in the family by resolutely serving vegetarian food. They also energetically advocated other precepts, saying that apart from eating meat, having a “conjugal life” equated to taking life and whoever was obsessed with it would go to hell or be haunted by evil spirits. Their suggestions could create unwanted tension between those who adopted the Buddhist way and their family who had not, but then the solution was clear: to change others’ thoughts, one must change their mind first. The concept of the dedicated life was extremely appealing to women for they found in it another type of social group outside the family (Duara 2011, p.124).

Another pragmatic appeal was by offering healing and coping with diseases in Buddhist ways. Medicines, as a master put, will only transform a person’s body into a vicious cycle of recovery and disease. When one parent took his teenage son to the temple for healing, a master told them that all mental illness was caused by possession so apart from learning teachings he needed to supplement the teachings with the energy from the sun, namely the qi of yang and he was told to sit in the sun during the sermon. Similarly, cancer was caused by eating too much meat and being possessed by revengeful spirits.

To make their theories understandable, masters gave several vivid examples of believers who were magically cured of all kinds of diseases. Evil spirits that possessed that person would benefit from the teachings and leave for reincarnation. The sicker the patient, the harder they should study teachings. The answer to everything was to attend sermons in the temple: it accumulated merits and cured all sorts of diseases. Most believers already had a grievance against hospitals for overcharging, and this increased their prejudice. The obscure scriptures thus were easily accepted for the tangible benefits they offered.

So even conventional believers purchased audio records from key believers to play at home. This was to take advantage of the symbolic power of these “sacred” products or services to accumulate benefits without deep devotion. That was why conventional
believers also had a certificate of guiyi—some acquired it by travelling to a famous temple without attending any rituals. They were motivated by practical modality. It was a token of their attitude towards Buddhism and a more intimate connection with the master or the Buddha. They obtained the certificate without practising disciplines and attended sermons or rituals without understanding—some admitted that they found the chanting too noisy.

This diversity in the acceptance of teachings and doctrines led to different paths: some continued the configuration of modalities by attending sermons to accumulate merits for the afterlife as well as gaining this-worldly benefits while others became key believers who began the self-cultivational modality and expressed dharma religiosity. The latter not only attended all sermons but also organized a study group to “save” as many people as possible and demonstrated a deep level of loyalty and faith in Monk Yinguang and Master Feng for accepting this teaching. They became more active in the temple’s activities and were distinct from the others as they now shared the identity of learners of the great dharma.

Efficacy-based religiosity is effective as long as nothing goes wrong so there is no need for people to adopt another religiosity that requires more time and energy. Key believers adopted the liturgical and scriptural modalities for they wanted to pursue a deeper level of religious knowledge. And most importantly, they tended to be retired people with a pension so that they could afford the extra time devoted to study. The burning-incense-and-leave procedure only takes ten minutes while attending the whole ritual takes at least an hour, not to mention additional time to eat lunch and communicate with Master Feng. Most conventional believers were farmers and had to take odd jobs during the slower seasons. They did not have the luxury of being able to spend most of their time in the temple or to maintain a close relationship with Master Feng through food offerings and big donations. Being aware of these differences, Master Feng had to deploy various strategies to mobilize believers, as did those masters in sermons.
6.4 The synthesis of the popular and the orthodox

6.4.1 Master Feng: a fatherly figure

Master Feng sought to consolidate his authority in the temple through acting tough. Along with his compassionate character, he built another identity as a typical Chinese father: strict and indubitable. Whenever he gave orders, he expected people to follow his orders resolutely and when they disobeyed he rebuked them without mercy. He clearly stated that whoever came to the temple for help must listen to him only and if they wanted to be cured, they must follow his instructions and stop taking any medicines prescribed by doctors. His arbitrary decision-making no doubt derived from his charismatic leadership and his conviction of being chosen.

This was not an issue for believers who already followed him because they knew the whole “to scold you is to perfect you” speech but the newcomer found this embarrassing. In private, several jushi admitted that some people stopped visiting after being scolded. To excuse his bad temper, he exploited the Chinese image of a stern father. Other masters praised his methods, saying “the best way to practise Buddhism is to be obedient and always listen to the master, like parents disciplining their children”. No one questions a parents’ love towards their children and all children need to do is be obedient.

Therefore, those left behind were extremely loyal to him because they accepted that being severe only proved that he truly cared for them. One day after a ritual, he chatted with several jushi in the yard. One woman in her seventies was cleaning the floor when he started to talk about his aspirations. He stressed several times that everyone must listen to him, but that woman was still sweeping. Suddenly he got angry and scolded her for not paying attention. When she tried to explain, he stepped forward and kicked down the broom. The elderly were supposed to be respected, but in this scenario between a charismatic leader and a devoted believer who needed to be saved, no one had any doubts about his behaviour. Later, she apologized for not listening and attributed this to her “unenlightened” state. It was those interactions between himself and key believers that ensured their cohesion and devotion to his command.
But since the conventional believers were the majority, Master Feng had to compromise to reach the masses. Though he preached the disciplines required after conversion and the importance of the bodhisattva precepts, for people less familiar or interested in the scriptural modality, he lured them with instant effect. “Imagine a divine canopy crowning over your head to aid you and your family”, he advertised, “this is what happens after you convert”. He bragged about the miraculous healing power the temple had or the numerous merits accumulated by just being present. This suited people who followed the daily-practical modality. Since they needed a temple to burn incense, why not choose an efficacious one?

Master Feng was aware of the power of social network so he asserted that after converting one could establish a spiritual connection with Buddha and intimate interpersonal links with the monk and the social connections he possesses. It was appealing since he talked about powerful acquaintances, like primary officials in the capital, a cadre at deputy department level, the county mayor, and a president of a famous company, or mentioned a Living Buddha in Tibet as his Guru. He made people believe that once acquainted with him they could profit from his resources. In subsequent sermons, he mentioned rich people in his network who offered their private vehicles or spare rooms to entertain masters from far away.

Harnessing people’s beliefs asserted his authority and enhanced his status and power (Li 2009). Master Feng was using Buddha and the temple to consolidate his position while in other temples different deities like the black dragon king or the village deity (Wang 1997; Chau 2006) were exploited. “I can assure you that I will cure whatever disease because I am trading my own life for yours after you convert” was a promise he made to everyone. He exploited the daily-practical modality when people came to the temple for practical benefits as the first step. Later, he guided them to the scriptural and/or liturgical modality as he aspired to establish orthodox Buddhism among them.

### 6.4.2 The assimilation of traditional morality

As much as masters attempted to educate people in the authentic Buddhist way such as through abstinence, they also had to reach a compromise to get to the majority. To gain the audience’s favour, they used lots of vernacular terms and examples to make their message resonate for local people. They mentioned famous actors and actresses as
negative examples to prove that no matter how successful and wealthy they were, they still needed to suffer from the consequence of karma if they committed mistakes, even if it was on TV. “Watching TV harms you because you might have evil thoughts after watching murder or erotic scenes”, one master explained, “what is a better way to pass the time than by studying Monk Yinguang’s teachings?”

It was the carrot and stick strategy: they lured people with the reward of curing diseases, solving household conflicts, or amassing merits and warned people of the consequences of rejecting teachings like eternal sufferings. Therefore, people who attended the sermon would first feel privileged as they had enough meritorious rewards to be there, and later, they were compelled to accumulate more karmic merits to consolidate their happy life and what came after that.

Even though these masters all made a bold choice in becoming a nun, they still justified their behaviour by appealing to traditional morality as circumstantial evidence. They lectured the benefits of being divorced and throwing themselves into the Buddhist cause:

My mother-in-law was afraid that having divorced parents would hinder her grandson from getting married. One night she had a dream about her long-dead husband. He said he became an official in the afterlife. She was confused. I explained to her that he was promoted due to my sacrifice and service to Buddha.

Instead of bringing shame on the family, their divorce proved to be beneficial to the whole family. Another master shared the story of her two children both having high academic achievements and her ex-husband having a better career after their divorce. Clearly, they were all aware of rural people’s stigmatized opinions on divorced women and used secular standards to validate their choices and prove Buddha’s efficacy in aiding his disciples. Here, traditional morality was appropriated to support religious motivations. One master appealed to the family principle, saying that “in my family, my parents’ words were treated as the imperial decree”. The child’s obedience towards the parents would no doubt touch most of the audience.

10 For example, those who had a face pitted with smallpox must be affected by the causality of slandering the Lotus Sutra.
Obscure sutras were re-interpreted to solve family issues and focus on the issue of most concern to this target audience, namely the tension between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. Traditional morality is replete with spiritual punishments. What was once regarded as immoral such as being disobedient to the mother-in-law in Buddhist teachings faced karmic retribution. “If the daughter-in-law treated her mother-in-law badly, her own kids will suffer from certain diseases; whoever abuses their parents will end up in hell” the masters lectured.

These moral teachings and “scientific” examples proved to be readily accepted by the audience. In contrast, orthodox Buddhist teachings turned out to be less acceptable or even unwelcome. One day, a master asked her young disciple (who later admitted to being her daughter11) to deliver the sermon. She shared her own life story: she was so confused about her parents’ divorce and her mother becoming a nun; burdened with study, she left school and became a nun. At the age of 19, she was studying in a Buddhist school.

The audience praised her bravery and envied her worry-free life. Yet in the next breath, she began to state that women were inferior to men and suffered more, and most women were treated as breeding machines. Then she suggested that to change this miserable situation, women should study harder to get higher status in the family and bring honour to their ancestors, rather than simply bearing children to continue the family line. “One son becomes a monk, all his ancestors, and descendants12 will live in heaven. How glorious it is!” she said. And her mother, the master, took a bigger step, asking around: “since most of you have two children and many grandchildren, are you willing to give me one to be my disciple?” There was a long and awkward silence. With a little self-deprecating smile, she replied that “it seems that you still do not comprehend these teachings”.

Similarly, when masters talked about education as being useless, the audience was less responsive. Most parents and grandparents dreamt about their offspring enrolling into a

11 Some of the audience were quite shocked by this fact but later several believers admitted in private that they had already suspected this because the two looked so alike, but that they were too afraid to ask.

12 The word-for-word translation is that “one son/person attains wisdom/enlightenment, nine generations of the ancestral lineage will become immortal”.


good university and most people accumulated merit in their offspring’s name through attending sermons. The mission of Buddhism was to achieve individual liberation which was contrary to Chinese culture that treats life as generational and communal (Zhuo et al 2017). As discussed in chapter four, the goal of having a son/grandson to carry on the family line remained important. Becoming a monk would put an end to that aspiration. Though believers were willing to spend time studying or doing voluntary work, once it involved their descendants, there was not much room for negotiation. The idea of letting their offspring become a monk/nun was rejected by most.

6.4.3 Rituals for the public good

Durkheim divided religious phenomena into beliefs and rites: the first are states of opinion and consist of representations; the second are particular modes of action (Durkheim 1995, p.34). In a temple, rituals remained most fundamental. Sermons could only attract a limited number of believers but rituals were always overcrowded. Normally, a monthly ritual could attract around 200 believers while the daily study group numbered less than 15.

For most of the temple goers, they were happy practising the practical modality as long as they felt blessed. Pursuing self-cultivation entailed a different demand that also cost extra time, energy and money. That is why Master Feng exploited all sorts of rituals to make a name for the temple and to consolidate his authority. I argue that by attending the ritual, even if one simply stands in the yard, the sense of a community is formed based on experiencing the noisy and bustling scene and the collective effervescence.

Master Feng rarely missed an opportunity to deliver a speech before the ritual commenced. He talked about his efforts and the gains for the temple and Lu County. One day, he told a story about a sick young woman who could not be diagnosed in the hospital. “The moment she saw the truth, she was healed”, he said, “do you have any idea how incredible this is?” He revealed the answer: the woman’s deceased father-in-law possessed her and brought her to this temple. “He heard from other spirits that there was a sermon,” he said with a smile, “whoever attended would end their suffering, even the deceased.” To gain and retain charisma, a leader must be endowed with responsiveness to his/her followers’ needs so as to keep his/her gift socially relevant and meaningful (Ji 2008a).
There was thus a synthesis of different modalities to appeal to different people. The standardized ritual was performed by key believers under the liturgical modality while the majority aimed for practical results. It was believed that the doctor’s or master’s treatment only worked when combined with Buddha’s aid. That was the benefit of being in the temple, which could not be replaced by seeing any doctor or practising what was taught at home. Guo jushi, a woman in her early eighties, was so devoted that she attended almost every ritual, sermon and group study. She shared her own story:

Several days ago, I went into a coma and woke up in a hospital. I refused to take any medicine or test. I had had esophagus cancer for ten years. I never took a pill because I knew it would not work. I know that since I learned the Lotus Sutras, nothing bad will happen to me. I refused to be hospitalized because I knew I would die there. I knew I must be strong. If I am weak, my kids will force me to see a doctor. Now I realize the benefits of learning Buddhist doctrines. My mission was fulfilled: all my kids got married and grandchildren went to college and had a good job.

Along with confirming the power of studying Buddhism, the group shared their distrust towards the hospital and modern science. Stimulated by the teachings and intimate community, they transferred their trust to Buddhist teachings and related activities. They preferred to learn some moves to “stretch muscles” because master Fou promised that the longer your muscles got, the longer your life-span would be. Through listening and sharing, members of the community strengthened each other’s beliefs (Lu 2014).

Later that year, Master Feng decided to build a new three-storey dining hall and to show his determination, he launched a grand commencement ritual followed by a banquet. He invited several monks and an abbot from other temples to preside over the ritual so he could be occupied with welcoming visitors. Near the entrance, a male jushi was assigned to record donations with the donor’s name and the amount. It was estimated that about 30,000 yuan was received on that day, single donations ranging from 100 to 5,000.

After burning incense and making donations, some believers stayed for the banquet while most key believers volunteered to serve tables and help in the kitchen. Two tables were placed in the main hall for the distinguished guests such as visiting monks and
entrepreneurs—they donated 5,000 yuan each. The rest sat either in an unfinished hall or in the yard under the tree.

“Relations among feasters are not only hierarchical……The guests at a table also profess themselves to be equal……they are equal before the god who is the host-guest. They are equal before their local sovereign” (Feuchtwang 2010, p.65). Feuchtwang noticed equality among all the guests and those who sit at the same table. Master Feng approached every table to ask about people’s satisfaction towards the food and this made everyone feel respected and cared for. Apart from sitting at different tables, there was no way to distinguish how much money people had donated. Therefore, they were there to support the event and form a sense of belonging to the temple: their contribution was part of something big, or as Master Feng put it, this will benefit everyone in Lu County. As for key believers, by serving and helping, they identified themselves as the host: constantly checking people’s taste or whether they needed more food. It was a joint effort in which Master Feng demonstrated his charisma and his believers showed loyalty.

Individuals experienced insecurity when they lost their sense of communal protection so the efficacy-based belief was thriving with its focus on individual longevity, fortune and prosperity (Li 2017, p.36). By routinizing rituals and mobilizing people’s participation, Master Feng linked Buddha’s efficacy with each individual’s experience. During the ritual for the hungry ghost festival, he set two big tables in the yard for believers’ food offerings like fruit, noodles, oils and vegetables as he taught about the guiyi ritual.

Yue found that in some temples the manager sold food offerings like biscuits to retailers and nearby villagers and the latter sold them back to new tourists (Yue and Wang 2015). Therefore, what was meant for the deity, after being consecrated on the table, was put back into the secular again. As Palmer (2011) asserted, believers, as givers to the temple, received a karmic reward from a third party, namely the deity, for making food offerings, and the master, the receiver of their gifts, relocated offerings to the whole community. Master Feng rewarded those who attended to the end of the ritual with the privilege of taking some offerings back. Once the ritual had finished, sacrificial offerings bore the symbolic power of being blessed.
“Take fruit for your children. It is good for them”, he said. What happened later was unexpected with some beginning to pack lots of fruit. Afraid of getting nothing, others squeezed their way to the table and grabbed whatever was left. It all fell into disorder. Everyone was eager to take something except key believers. Deeply influenced by the teachings, they stepped out and only took one or two. “Everyone is myself, so I cannot be selfish”, one jushi said to another. However this incident revealed that the majority were still in the practical modality and only some were following the path of discipline and self-cultivation.

6.4.4 Vote for our master

Religious representations are collective representations that express collective realities; rites are ways of acting that are found only in the midst of assembled groups and whose purpose is to evoke, maintain, or recreate certain mental states of those groups (Durkheim 1995, p.9). Apart from religious rites that stimulated people’s devotion and attention, some other events held in the temple achieved the same effect to maintain the cohesion within the community created by the temple. The mutual care and consolation within a group was much more meaningful than the religion itself (Zhou 2012).

Master Feng built the WeChat group to occasionally release notifications on rituals and sermons. Later some key believers invited Monk Yinguang’s disciples to post teachings twice a day. So this group was renamed the Buddhist dharma study group and its membership stabilized at 80 people. Since some members were unfamiliar with operating WeChat, they often accidentally sent one on one messages to the group. Hong jushi, the youngest (46 years old) of the key believers, was appointed by Master Feng to take charge of the study group and the WeChat group since she was knowledgeable about the doctrines and the teachings.

Different modalities led to members’ different reactions. Hong and key believers only posted Monk Yinguang’s newest announcements and interpretations to the group while others tended to post articles with sensational headlines, like “a miracle comes around once in a millennium”, “an efficacious spell for longevity, male descendant or marriage”, or “repost this message to four chatting groups and a miracle will happen tonight to your daughter/son/husband”. Each time, Hong replied that this group is for
Buddhism learning only, and called on members to remain silent and only read or listen to the teachings.

Key believers had a rare opportunity to expand their lives after encountering these teachings. Though they still had to assume family responsibilities, once they entered the temple, they had different roles. Ping was assigned to run the temple when Master Feng was absent, Cheng cooked vegetarian meals for offerings, and Heng led the daily evening ritual. In general, they were easy to spot since they wore the robe not only because it symbolized their statue as *jushi*, but also indicated that they were committed to Buddhism. That was why they referred to each other as *jushi* or the dharma name given by the monk. They were gaining awareness of their religious identity and responsibilities.

In early autumn, an online event disrupted the temple routine. An account on WeChat named “my freewheeling vihara” announced a project to shoot 108 episodes of a Buddhist documentary. It called on people to recommend and vote for their master. The rule was simple: use one’s phone number to login into the voting page and click on the thumbs-up icon (up to three times a day per candidate). Two weeks later voting went viral when Monk Yinguang’s disciples asked for votes from the chat-room group. Key believers decided to mobilize whoever came to the temple.

Each day, they discussed their voting skills in the chat group against their own rules that the group was for study only. When they came to the temple, they exchanged tips and advice on how to persuade neighbours, friends, and relatives to vote. Hong posted that with the absence of morality and faith in today’s society, it is a great honour for us to have the opportunity to vote for our beloved and distinguished Monk Yinguang. Then she announced to the audience that voting for our master will accumulate incredibly immeasurable merits and blessings for the person and their offerings through generations.

A few days before the deadline, another candidate surprisingly outran Monk Yinguang (1,760,486 to 1,708,752). On the last day, they kept voting until midnight. Three minutes to midnight, his disciples sent a message to all groups calling people to “aid” him with thoughts, praying for him to win. The result was satisfactory and encouraging:
11 monks were selected and Monk Yinguang topped with 2,058,093 votes while the third place getter had only 211,646 votes.

The victory proved the efficacy of his core: by changing one’s thoughts, one can influence one's surroundings. The believers’ passion for voting derived partly from their faith in Monk Yinguang and partly from the accumulation of boundless merits. So, the competition for Monk Yinguang united believers and gathered them around Master Feng for he was the only monk at that time hosting sermons. Through their faith in the teachings and the ultimate goal of enlightenment, Master Feng gained a cohesive group and in return these key believers assisted him in institutionalizing the temple. Even just temporarily, ordinary believers and key believers achieved a feat together.

6.5 Conclusion

I argue that attending rituals or gaining a certificate for guiyi does not necessarily mean believers shift from the daily-practical modality to the liturgical or scriptural modalities. They still practise popular religion and their motivation is still efficacy-based. But once they accept the teachings, they become involved in the personal-cultivational modality as a combination of efficacy-based religiosity and dharma-based religiosity. At the end of each sermon and ritual, they always dedicated the accumulated merit to their family. It was a combination of the practical, liturgical and self-cultivational modalities since these women who spent time in the temple were still assuming spiritual responsibility for their family. Even some key believers purchased solar-powered audio players and placed them in the eaves of their house at a minimum volume. Without disturbing their life, everyone in their family and nearby spirits could all benefit. This was their compromise to save their family without forcing them to learn.

But after they started to pursue the self-cultivational modality and form a dharma-based religiosity, they were making a transformation. They stuck to Buddhist precepts and threw themselves into the temple activities. They become indispensable to the temple. A large number of believers could contribute to the visitor flowrate and the scene of renao which symbolized the temple’s efficacy. But it was the small number of key believers who volunteered in the temple’s daily operations. After all, there was only one monk and he could not oversee every aspect.
Key believers’ loyalty and commitment was a key factor in the successful revival of the Huayan temple. Another was Master Feng’ innovations to routine rituals and orthodox practices. He first exploited the efficacy-based religiosity and then applied moderate strictness, leading people to attend rituals and study sutras. He had to do this because there was no support from the local villages since Huayan temple was not a village temple nor a traditional centre of communal worship. He recruited loyal believers to carry out his reforms and to keep the temple’s operations running smoothly.

What I found different from others’ research is that those key believers were more active in the temple’s operation. They persuaded Master Feng to accept the teachings of Monk Yingunag because they wanted a sacred place to study as well as to save more people. They initiated the self-cultivational modality because they wanted knowledge and self-realization. They volunteered in the temple because they wanted to make it better to save more people.

I call this innovation because it is not simply reviving traditional practices of burning incense, but also re-inventing practices. By offering free lunch to whomever came to the temple during temple festivals, the temple made a name for itself. When the village community disappeared, the temple community stepped forward. It took advantage of those people who needed support from a community.

Those Buddhist teachings also exploited the traditional morality that rural people were familiar with and linked it with a deep explanatory, complex system of retribution. For the first time, some believers formed a sense of guilt over eating meat or killing livestock which inspired them to keep studying to redeem their sins. This was not valued in popular religion where the desired outcome was this-worldly benefits.

I call it moderate strictness because Master Feng had to compromise to meet the majority’s needs, instead of pushing orthodox Buddhism as he desired. He insisted that people should not burn paper but believe in Buddhism through the scriptural modality, so he refused to build an incense burner. Yet, when people kept showing up in the temple with bundles of yellow paper to burn, he backed down and announced that he would build a new burner. “If they do not burn stuff, they feel uncertain or incomplete”, he said with a sigh.
Huayan temple’s flourishing is not incidental. It reflects the joint efforts of Master Feng and key believers. The charisma of Master Feng, the authority of Monk Yinguang, the aura of scriptures, the solemnity of rituals and a group of supportive believers all provide a basis for not only revival but innovation. Inspired by this, more temples in Lu County started to invite masters to give sermons. They were fighting for key believers that were loyal and would contribute to the temple in the long term. I argue that people’s strong conviction in the teachings revealed an individualist tendency. After having grandchildren and retiring, these women were concerned about their fate and the meaning of life.

As for conventional believers, as long as they gained benefits, it did not matter what kind of modality they employed because they were doing religion in their own way. In one food offering ceremony led by Master Feng, he instructed them to perform the three-step-one-kowtow pilgrimage. Although the sandy ground was full of gravel and hurt a lot, they were motivated by the promise of accumulating immeasurable merits. Unless they were attracted to the big picture Buddhism provided, it was not so easy to truly convert to such doctrines, while converting in practise only was easy.

All visiting masters, some key believers and Master Feng himself liked to stress the phrase “adhere to teachings” (yijiaofengxing) as the code of conduct of an orthodox lay Buddhist. But it was never made clear whose teachings they referred to. Was it Buddha, Monk Yinguang or Master Feng? So it was also a game between Master Feng and believers because he wanted them to adhere to his teachings only. Conventional believers were content with meeting their practical needs, but key believers had frequent interactions with him. They were drawn to this temple because of Monk Yinguang’s teachings and they needed evidence of Master Feng’s support. When Fang carried a bag with a Lotus Sutra print which was Monk Yinguang’s trademark, Master Feng expressed his discontent. He held that his temple welcomes all sutras, not only Monk Yinguang’s. Yet, this did not stop others from reaching out to Fang in private to purchase. “We just will not bring the bag to Huayan temple,” Fang explained. By rejecting their desire to follow Monk Yinguang Master Feng risks losing them all.

One day, Master Feng shared his dream with key believers after lunch. He dreamed about a local BAC official who handed him a copy of the Lotus Sutras in front of a red
brick wall. Upon hearing this, they got very excited and kowtowed to him. “What is happening?” I asked in confusion. “Do you not get it? The red brick wall!” Ping shouted at me. Finally, I understood the metaphor: it was a play on words. Rearranging red (hong) brick (zhuan), becomes zhuan hong, which could be interpreted as the abbreviation of zhuanmen hongyang meaning “uphold (something) especially”. This dream forebodes Master Feng’s future of becoming a lecturer to carry on Monk Yinguang’s teaching. It was a happy ending for everyone.

As in Yue’s observation that the Goddess does not illuminate what is near (Yue 2016, p.254), only one of these key believers came from the Shang village. She quoted a Buddhist saying to explain: villains always gathered around the foot of the famous mountain. Christians are whom she referred to as villains since the revival of Christianity affected the village’s landscape and practices and challenged not only Buddhist teachings but also traditional morality. The next chapter will explore this new phenomenon.
Chapter 7 Christian conversion

7.1 Introduction

In the middle of October, given it was the slower, less busy season with pleasant autumn weather, Dong, the dean of the Eastern Church, decided to host a month’s Bible study on weekdays from 8 am to 10:30 am. This commenced on a Monday with about 230 people in attendance. Dong was strict about attendee’s attitudes towards learning. “You need to take notes carefully so you can go over the knowledge later”, he said, “do not use a piece of paper! Use a notebook.” With the use of a projector, key points of verses were clearly listed:

Section eight: the purpose of learning the Prophets

1: to learn God’s intentions (Hebrews 1:1-2)

2: to learn from prophets’ lessons: inspired by their loyalty and obedience and warned by their endings. (Hebrews 13:7)

The congregation listened carefully and took notes or shots of the slides. Two volunteers sitting at the back guided those who came in late to find a seat quietly. “Remember to be here on time,” Dong repeated, “God will not be pleased.” Though he frequently emphasized the rules, there were always people running late every day. It was understandable since young and middle-aged women could only attend church after dropping children at school. “God helps those who help themselves. We are labourers together with God,” Dong then ended the sermon by leading prayers.

This is the scriptural modality where learning knowledge is not only encouraged but required. In Sunday services and the bible study course, pastors constantly asked the audience to read certain verses and illustrated the importance of reading the Bible and following the words of God. They explained the Bible verse by verse and taught the congregation how to learn it properly. They emphasised the importance of following God’s words, which could mobilize people to the great cause of redemption, through a deep commitment to the church. The configuration of modalities is more prominent among Christians. Sunday services and study group are not only scriptural and liturgical but also self-cultivational. Believers may hope for concrete benefits like healing, but they also go to great lengths to follow Christian disciplines and teachings. This is a major difference to other religions which have a greater emphasis on cultivation.
Bruce (2011) discussed popular religion within Christianity in England as comprising a shared knowledge and an understanding of beliefs beyond the church so that some people are believers but without belonging to any church (Davie 1994). It is the belief that is valued: the acceptance of the tenets of dogma and a belief in a relationship with God. This was different to the situation at the local Eastern Church in Lu County in that the majority of the congregation identified with belonging to the church but their level of belief varied. Converting to Christianity did not readily change people’s efficacy-based religiosity and those converted believers continued to share similarities with the popular religion’s believers. I argue that there are Christians doing religion in popular religion’s way.

In local vernacular, Christians are “people who believe in the Lord” (xin zhu). The term “xin (belief in or trust)” is vague because it only indicates that people have faith in someone or something, but fails to clarify what that faith is or what exactly people believe in. In that sense, it could be understood as people’s trust in the deity’s efficacy or doctrines, or people’s willingness to build an intimate relationship with that deity. “Zhu (leader, master or owner)” captures the primary distinction: the object of the worship is unique.

The Eastern Church is the biggest in Lu County, covering approximately 1,500 square meters with around 1,000 regular churchgoers for weekly worship. On Sundays, the church assigns 10 volunteers to oversee the parking lot since people arrive from all over the county. The road is always crowded when the church holds events. An elder of the church proudly said that even taxi drivers come to the church around Christmas because they know free gravy soup will be served. On the Christmas Eve of 2017, around 2,000 believers crowded into the three-storey building for day long sermons and artistic performances.

With reference to Chau’s analysis of temple festivals producing social heat to attract people to them (Chau 2008), I argue that events held in the church have the same effect when thousands of people show up and demonstrate a high level of involvement and enthusiasm in the church in response to its disciplines and instructions. They attend sermons and prayers to celebrate God’s mercy in saving them and to experience him personally. This chapter will explore how Christianity has emerged in rural areas. I
argue that turning to Christianity often replicates efficacy-based religiosity but may also break with traditional religious habits and their social relationships. The proliferation of Christianity is reshaping the local landscape of religious diversity and breaking the dominant role of traditional culture in rural life.

### 7.2 The revival

A Norwegian missionary introduced Christianity to Lu County and built the first gospel hall in 1891 near the county magistrate’s office. In 1946, there were 4,600 believers in Lu County (County book 1994, p.49). Since the gospel hall was taken over by the liberation army and used as headquarters during the war (1945-1949), the county government transformed it into a patriotic educational base and allocated a different piece of land for the church in 1982. Since the new church was in the east corner of the county seat, people began to call it the Eastern Church. In 2005, the number of believers had increased to 28,100 from 18,000 in 1988 and officially approved churches and meeting points in Lu County had reached 111 with 276 pastors (County book 2014, pp.139-141).

Those believers, churches and meeting points belong to the so-called three-self (self-government, self-support, and self-propagation) churches but there are also the home churches that are not part of the three-self churches. Allegedly, in some parts of Henan province, the number of home churches’ believers double or even triple that of the three-self churches (Yang 2011; Yang and Dong 2014). The major differences between the two types of churches rest in their relationship with the government. The three-self churches are supervised by the China Christian Council and the National Committee of Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches in China (the two councils for short). The two councils oversee sermons and pastors’ appointments in the three-self churches. Home churches, on the other hand, have freedom to choose their content and self-management and are not supervised under government regulations. Most home churches maintain secrecy and do not welcome strangers at their gatherings. In this chapter, I focus on three-self churches and their believers.

Like the home churches, the three-self churches are also able to hold weekly meeting in private houses. It is much easier to have a weekly meeting at someone’s house
compared with building a church which requires land approval and religious registration. So, the two councils set a meeting point in each village and appoint pastors to deliver sermons and organize a study group once a week. This also explains why there are so many clergy in Christianity since they assume more responsibilities in socializing with the congregation through the weekly service, choir practise, bible study, regularly visiting believers’ houses, and deathbed visits and prayers.

Christianity is booming in a pluralistic cultural and religious layout (He 2011; Yin 2012) where polytheism and non-exclusiveness is the norm (Lu 2008). Plurality refers to recognition of the co-efficacy of other religions (Merrigan 1997) which contradicts Christian exclusiveness and monopoly. Thus, there are concerns that the revival of Christianity is harmful to the pluralistic layout of a rural cultural system and social harmony and stability (He 2011) and that their utilitarian priorities lead to certain irrational behaviour: in some cases, rural Christians have refused to go to a hospital but instead chose to pray (Hou and Hong 2008).

I hold that Christianity's revival is exploiting the practical modality embedded in rural life in the same way Buddhism does, and the utilitarian element also reveals how Christianity focuses on people’s practical needs. For example, in 1641, when a city in Zhejiang province suffered from drought, it was the missionary’s prayers that brought rain when the monk’s failed to do so (Fan 2011). I argue that the utilitarian focus should not be treated as a downside of the revival, but evidence of how Christianity has kept changing in a society that is itself transforming. Local Christianity caters to peasants’ needs for social security (Du 2011; Wang 2011) and offers people more than spiritual guidance. If the church is aware of a believers’ serious illness, church leaders will pay a visit to their house and offer financial support and during the busy season in farming, believers will offer free aid (Du 2011). The community develops from sharing rituals and also from practical offers of aid and assistance.

It is reported that most churchgoers are from marginalized groups and those that tend to be left-behind people (Tang and Duan 2018; He 2011), namely the elderly, women and children. The Christian church replaces the disappearing village community where believers can gain benefits from attending church or study group, whether it be spiritual assistance, support from the community, or healing. I also found a new emerging trend
in that more women in their thirties attended church with their children and more men of different age groups attended sermons. This indicates that people seek knowledge regarding the afterlife or spirituality because they have lost access to such knowledge as “the social transformation results in anomie and fragmented meaning system” (Chen 2007). In addition they seek company and support which they cannot find in the village community. Christianity, with its profound belief in the afterlife (Zhang 2012) and a loving community to support the congregation, is thriving in the rural sector.

Christianity is much more evident in the village since believers use house decorations\(^1\) to publicly display their belief and uniqueness. The first sign is a red cross hung on the roof or painted on a wall. Another sign is to post a couplet on the door. These are “a classic example of Christianity borrowing from traditional culture” (Yang 2011). The tradition of posting couplets written on red paper and a pair of pictures of the door-god on the front gate before New Year’s Eve can be traced back to thousands of years ago to celebrate the new year as well as bring fortune to the family and ward off evil. The couplet comprises a pair of lines of poetry that conform to certain rules and are written in classical Chinese style. Christians follow this practice but replace the content with

\[\text{The unique couplet marks a Christian house.}\]

\(^1\) Usually it is difficult to tell from the outside of a house whether a family is religious or not. Houses facing the crossing sometimes have a stone with inscriptions to ward off the evil. Mirrors may also be hung above the door or on the eaves to achieve the same effect.
words of praise and gratefulness to God (Wang 2011) and they replace the door gods’ effigy with phrases like “Emmanuel”, “Hallelujah”, “love” or the image of the cross.

For example in the picture above, the conventional structure of parallelism and rhyme is maintained in the couplet. The four characters of the scroll on the lintel, from right to left, state “the infinite divine grace” (da hao shen en). It continues with “thousands of families celebrate jointly the true God’s love” on the right, and “millions of households eulogize together the Saviour's grace” on the left. The huge character of “love” is printed under a red cross with doves and sheep. There is an active demonstration of their religious identity just as occurs in popular religion, for example through having an incense burner inside the house where it is sacred. Though this is not as conspicuous as the Christian couplet.

In a sense, this potential transformation through the internalization of an entire alien religious system represents the ultimate form of indigenization—a total syncretism, if you will (Kammerer 1990, p.286). By utilizing certain traditional elements, Christianity’s localization eases the tension between Christianity and traditional culture which ensures a harmonious co-existence. In this process, what is seen in the rural sector is not the same Christianity as in big cities, and it is marked by a synthesis of local cultural elements and Christianity’s unwavering core.

7.3 Exclusive beliefs

7.3.1 Only one true God

Chau found a shared conviction among Shaanbei people “That there are gods (or that it does not hurt to assume that there are gods)” (Chau 2006, pp.65-66) and people in Lu County share a similar perspective about deities’ existence. I argue that such a perspective facilitates people’s conversion to Christianity since the existence of spiritual beings is accepted. The only difference is that Christians must trust and obey the “one true God” and treat other deities as demons or the incarnation of the devil himself. This leads to an insurmountable gap between Christianity and the polytheistic religions when one religion’s deity is the other’s demon.
During Sunday sermons, pastors reminded people that the dragon worship of Chinese people, the Matsu worship in Hong Kong and the sacred cow in India were hideous and evil and other religions were created by demons. It is made clear that the only way to achieve eternal life is to follow God’s teachings. “Fengshui or fortune-telling is ignorance and superstition”, one pastor said, “there is no need to ask for one’s fate. If you do not believe in God, your fate will not be good.” This is zero-tolerance towards demon worship and any practices related to popular religion.

It is argued that Christianity is thriving in northern China due to the absence of popular religion which was destroyed during previous political movements, while in south China because ancestor worship is intact, popular religion is still actively engaged in people’s daily life (Yang 2014). It is the case in Lu County that popular religion suffered tremendously prior to the 1980s with the destruction of temples and a decrease in ritual specialist numbers, which meant that people had no temples or religious specialists to turn to when they needed help. Christians took this opportunity to fill the gap in people’s lives (Zhang 2014) created by the disappearance of popular religion and “what peasants experienced as the deficiency of traditional beliefs” (Wu and Zhang 2010).

The doctrines of Christianity provide a set of systematic and understandable beliefs (Liang 2006) which make up for the loss of popular religion. However as a unique and exclusive system, it ensures that once adherents encounter Christianity, they break with their old religious practices involving pagan deities. In traditional rural culture hospitality is made available to religious believers of different faiths. Initially, such hospitality may hinder people from turning to Christianity when their family or the community practice popular religion. But in this recent period of social transformation, as I discussed in chapter 5, the community based on the village is disintegrating, and the traditional village communality is collapsing (Zhang 2014). Like Chau argued in the 1990s, “when the majority in a close-knit village community believe in the village deity, it is extremely difficult to publicly present dissenting views” (Chau 2006, p.71), but the unravelling village society has removed this barrier. Becoming a Christian does not draw criticism because it is a personal matter, but it is what they do or do not do, like refusing to host a traditional funeral, that causes conflicts.
Therefore, the exclusiveness of Christianity, instead of creating a tension between Christians and non-Christians, becomes their signature of pure belief. Even for those who never visit a church, Christianity is not entirely unfamiliar because the exclusiveness of Christians is accompanied by an evangelical zeal with which most Christians proselytize to everyone. The initial strategy of Christianity decades ago was to convince people that since the Lord comes from the west, he was more powerful than Chinese deities due to the advanced western society (Yang 2014). This was the missionary’s strategy to reach believers in a convincing way. More recently I argue that though people may resent the west for inflicting suffering on their people during the late Qing dynasty and republic era, God still symbolizes western civilization and modernity, so in rural areas, it represents the opposite of the backward or superstitious popular religion.

I found that believers demonstrate multiple modalities when they convert to Christianity: the daily-practical modality for healings and blessings, the liturgical and scriptural modalities for instructions or uniformity of belief and practice, and the self-cultivational modality focused on knowledge and deepening their relationship with God. It is a combination of individualist needs and a loving community and a mix of modalities that is unique to Christians. Thus, pursuing moral uplift is stimulated by their own desires to be good Christians following the pastors’ instructions. Believers are replacing the village community with a Christian one with awareness of the common good.

“Some people have everything, but they do not have the Lord Jesus”, one pastor commented. He pointed out that believing in the Lord is something unique and fundamental to them while without such belief, one’s life is not complete. This reshapes the congregation’s perspective in that following and obeying the Lord’s teachings is not only a belief but also a part of their life and meaning system. As part of their identity, they constantly mention terms like “God”, “Lord” or “Jesus” during conversations to make a display of their faith. While people who burn incense rarely talk about deities in their daily life, Christians are more inclined to discuss God’s role.

7.3.2 The identity of being Christian
Non-Christians are aware that Christians do not burn incense and only visit the church, but their aversion to Christianity lies in certain simplified behaviours that originate from
Christianity’s exclusiveness and the imminence of preaching. They complain about constantly being addressed in a straightforward manner by Christian neighbours or relatives to give up demon worship and seek the one true God. As an elder of the church commented, pagan deities are a spiritual triad gang that have coerced people into burning incense or making offerings for a blessing. Christians simply repeat what they have learned in church in order to save others regardless of their acceptance by others. This shows their commitment in converting to Christianity by following instructions resolutely and their conviction that the Lord is the only saviour. Thus, they proclaim it is necessary to make a clean break with the polytheistic popular religion and forsake any pagan deities or spiritual beings. This directly impinges on the role of the ancestors and the prospect of the afterlife. In Lu County, I found that the three-self churches had made progress in reshaping religious perspectives and ancestor worship. Recently people honour ancestors out of gratitude and deny their power to bless or harm the family. So honouring but not worshiping the ancestors consolidates God’s authority. Through teachings and sermons, the congregation commits to following the pastor’s instructions and this marks their uniqueness.

To convert symbolizes one’s determination to break with the past and embrace a promising future. Pastors’ instructions guide them along the road. That is why the ritual of baptism is highly valued in the church not only in a symbolic way, but as representing the liturgical and scriptural modalities that pastors desire.
From the missionary viewpoint, baptism constituted a *rite de passage* in two ways. It marked a clean break with the converts’ pasts, both in terms of religious affiliations and socio-cultural habits, and it initiated them into a new type of religious community, the Christian congregation. (Klein 2011, p.602)

Normally, before receiving baptism, the church hosted a week’s revival rally to prepare those who had decided to be baptised by studying the Bible. On the designated day, the pastors dressed up and led those believers to the front to state their name, age and their commitment as witnessed by the whole congregation. During the ritual, the audience shared their commitment in believing in the Lord and this inspired those who had not yet been baptised.

Since some were drawn by the efficacy of the Eastern church, not everyone who attended church had been baptised. I argue that whether they participate in the baptism ritual or not, people’s conversion to a different path or to God’s way is unaffected. Attending church (baptised or not) is a powerful sign of conversion. Even for people whose faith is based on their experience of healing from illness, it is not only a utilitarian choice but in their view, a proof of God’s grace. For whatever reason people choose to convert, whether they are baptised or not, they express their acceptance of their new identity and then proudly demonstrate it through decorations on their house or by repeating God’s words in conversations as instructed.

Believers sat in the parking lot, listening to sermons through the loudspeaker.
Similarly to Master Feng at the Buddhist temple Christian pastors aim to standardize the behaviour of the congregation in order that they be true Christians and good servants even though believers adopt different modalities according to their own needs and living conditions. Many believers admitted that if they did not attend Sunday service for a while, they felt “extremely uncomfortable” and “restless” and so they were compelled to go to church. It was a feeling of guilt when they knew they were violating disciplines, and they were worried that they had not pleased God. This could explain why they would rather sit in the parking lot as a semblance of attending church than sit in the hall itself. I describe this as a continuation of popular religion: where ritual takes precedence over beliefs.

This derives from different understandings of God as Ng found among Chinese immigrants in America who converted: a judgemental and yet forgiving God from the mainline Protestant model, and a miraculous, tutelary God of their own practised faith (Ng 2002, p.205). The similarity is that in Lu County, some believers also treat God as a tutelary deity who bestows benefits. But the deviation does not affect their action: converted Christians give up seeking protection from the deities that their relatives or their ancestors worshiped. Sitting in the parking lot is their way of doing Christianity while what the pastor desires is their firm commitment.

“Even though they believe in the Lord, they do not transcend (this secular world), so having a belief cannot better themselves. The problem is that they separate their belief from life as if they just worship a deity up high in the sky. What they really should do is to sanctify their life,” Dong remarked. But even so, to meet the demands of the whole congregation, he and other pastors have to make a compromise in their preaching methods. “We have to do this. In some remote areas, the congregation is full of the elderly and they can only relate to homely metaphors,” he summarized, “and the noodle soup on Sunday.”

Christian doctrines discipline peasants’ words and deeds in their daily life (Zhang 2014) and have extensive influence over believers’ choices in funerals, weddings, and other social events. It is the exclusiveness and the identity of being Christians that defines their own style as distinct from popular religious practices. By redefining “filial piety”, modifying funerals and seeking support from religious communities, Christians form
their own identity. They are told constantly in church that they are God’s children and not to engage in any other form of religion.

7.4 Efficacy of healing

The nature of a person’s conversion experience is, to some degree, informed, shaped, and structured by the myths, rituals, and symbols of a particular tradition (Rambo 1999, p.264). This analysis fits most Christians’ experience and behaviours, at least in the rural sector, in that before or after conversion they do not entirely transform from one modality to another. I argue that most people still practice Christianity as a continuity of popular religion, namely stimulated by the daily-practical modality.

So narratives about the healing power of the Lord circulating in the village is a Christian way of constructing their efficacy. This is regarded as the generation of a new cultural idiom that “the phenomenon of ill villagers recovering from disease as an apparent result of believing in Christianity has acted to influence those villagers who have experienced ineffective treatment” (Qi et al 2014, p.403). Emerging from fragmented traditional beliefs, Christianity is gaining popularity due to its powerful self-explanatory system (Yang 2014) that explains the cause of illness and offers a way out. Believers are convinced that diseases are a way to reveal God’s plan as well as confirm the identity of being chosen. Through illness, God’s mercy and power are displayed.

Even pastors preached about healing power as a reward of conversion. One pastor told the story of baptising a dying patient in the hospital.

One sister visited a patient in the hospital. She talked about the Lord. A man in the same ward asked her, could you tell me more about this Lord? She then rushed to me and I decided to visit him that night. I told him the story of my grandmother waking up after dying for two hours and living 11 more days. Lying on the bed, he asked to be baptised right away. I picked up a bowl to carry water and baptised him. He was saved by the Lord before dying.

What attracted this dying man was the promise of an eternal life where he will no longer be troubled by disease. This emphasis on healing brings its own criticisms. Some scholars hold that rural people’s belief in Christianity is defined by the utilitarian nature of popular religion (Hou and Hong 2008; Gao 2005; Ng 2002), or in other words,
Christian conversion

Christianity has been popularized or assimilated by popular religion to attract wishing-votive behaviour (Qi et al 2014). Some even claim that “believing due to illnesses” is the main attraction (Chen 2007; Tang and Duan 2018). I would not deny that the healing power is a big attraction, but my data suggests that there is more to this than just this apparent motivation. The data indicates that the insufficient and inadequate social welfare in rural areas hinders peasants from seeking help from hospitals.

This could explain why they call God as their “backer” metaphorically. One middle-aged woman gave her answer with a story of hallucinatory realism.

It happened shortly after I believed in the Lord. My two kids were coughing that autumn. One day I prayed before going to bed: Lord, there is nothing I can do so I leave this to you. That night, I dreamed of Jesus, very tall, riding a motorcycle. He approached me, took something out of his pocket and handed it over. I was confused but I took it anyway. After a while, I realized that it might be some medicine. I woke up my kids, in great haste, and tossed it into their mouth. That night, the younger one did not cough at all and the bigger one just had a few coughs. If you do not believe in the Lord, you would not understand.

After experiencing how “marvellous God is”, she went to church every Sunday and intended to receive baptism next year. “I do not think I am ready,” she said, “I am still improving my spirituality by learning.” This was just one of many cases of people converting to Christianity due to their practical needs. But after they gained benefits, they tended to adopt the self-cultivational modality to secure what they had attained by the daily-practical modality. As the pastors told the congregation repeatedly, studying the Bible is the only way to approach God, and this is central to one’s salvation.

“Believing due to illness” captures such a mixture of modalities that even though people’s motivation is efficacy-based, they still adopt the liturgical and scriptural modalities as pastors instructed them through sermons and studying the Bible. The utilitarian orientation and the efficacy-based religiosity do not undermine people’s faith in the teachings, nor accelerate it. Miracles or the special bond with God drives people to convert to a different belief but it is through teachings and rites that they can internalize its faith (Liang 2006, p.80). I agree with the statement that people are easily attracted to Christianity due to its practical benefits but where I differ is that the idea of
internalization should not be the focus since it can mean different things for different people. Pastors want to internalize people’s faith to ensure consistency in practices through the congregation, but for some, conversion means to act like a true Christian and follow the example of the saints.

The majority, whom I identify as conventional believers, keep the daily-practical modality so they attend Sunday sermon because it is required by pastors and they are inspired by the idea that “to believe is to be blessed”, or “we believers are blessed”. They show enthusiasm and commitment for attending rites and study, which is the sign of the personal-cultivational modality, and this is different from conventional believers in popular religion who passively accept the configuration of modalities.

Most importantly, illness can also be interpreted as a result of sin. Many Christians hold that illness is caused by the devil’s temptation so as long as they confess before God, they will be cured (Wang 2011), or pray to God to seek forgiveness (Qi et al 2014). In this way, healing not only becomes a symbol of a miracle or the efficacy of conversion but a reminder of immoral behaviour. Their faith and the instruction they receive to redeem their sins reinforce each other.

“No matter what happens or whether they truly understand it or not, they have unwavering xinxin (faith or confidence)”, Dong said with a big smile. Similarly, it was found in northern Henan province that believers are taught to have xinxin in God’s plans (Wang 2011). Their xinxin in God, I argue, is what distinguishes them from other religions’ believers because they strictly follow the principle of one God and say no to other pagan activities. Whether their xinxin derives from miracles, healing power or ultimate salvation, it is strong enough for people to follow God’s path. The original utilitarian motivation provides the transition that leads to cultivational modality. As discussed in chapter 5, the disparate village community barely offers people any support and this makes the Christian community valuable in dealing with life’s uncertainties.

7.5 A loving community

People in the church tend to refer to each other as sisters (jiemei) and brothers (dixiong). It is a more intimate, informal and equal relationship. Ever since the founding of the
discipline, sociologists have argued that social relationships lie at the heart of religion (Krause and Wulff 2005, p.336). Christians in the Eastern church become sisters and brothers in a big family united by God and they can always count on their siblings for support, whether from their family or the community. Pastors sometimes address God as “our father” to express the same intimate relationship. Yet, in Chinese culture, the father is often blamed for spoiling the child so they prefer the servant/Lord relationship to father/child one: being a servant means one has to follow all the strict rules and undergo severe tasks.

This loving community is essential for Christians especially for those who become the minority in the village due to their different beliefs. Many scholars attribute the growth of Christianity to faith healing and community orientation (Klein 2011) and I argue that while healing is an attractive incentive to convert, it is the sense of belonging to a supportive community that solidifies people’s faith. Due to looser village ties, most villagers can only experience the sense of belonging to a community when they join other villagers during temple festivals or commodities’ exchange fairs organized by the village once a year. These are less frequent and engaging compared with Christians’ weekly meetings (Li 2008). The community orientation ensures that once Christians break up with their non-Christian family, relatives or neighbourhood, they can still get strong emotional and spiritual support.

The church was decorated during Christmas.

Thus, instead of worrying about being isolated, they gain support from the Christian community where all people share the same faith. First, all major religions in the world
place an emphasis on loving other people and helping those who are in need (Krause and Wulff 2005, p.327). This is especially true in Christianity where the communal love is highlighted and themes like “loving and caring, meek and self-effacing, more ready to give than receive” (Ng 2002, p.206) are often preached so the congregation can be there for each other. Such exclusiveness affects how Christians celebrate festivals and major events in one’s life journey which excludes their non-Christian relatives. I believe that the intimate community created by the church and the congregation, and the small meeting points scattered in the village facilitate Christians in finding a supportive and loving community that substitutes for what was once created by the village. Instead of feeling rejected, they find belonging in the church which separates them from non-Christian neighbours. That is why it is getting popular to get married in the church witnessed by the church community.

Such support is increasingly valued when the majority of churchgoers are women, the elderly and children (He 2011). It happens in Lu County too when rural young men become migrant workers and leave their aged parents, wives and children behind. Such a solitary lifestyle catalyses their active involvement in church activities (Tang 2008) where those left behind in empty-nest families can find a companion. The attendee can have lunch in the church’s dining hall or sit in the yard under the sun. Hundreds gather in small groups to share experiences and testimonies. The congregation creates a sense of belonging and security, so that the elderly no longer worry about disease and death, and women do not fear for their husbands and future life (Cheng 2017, p.89). Not only is there a systematic explanation of the afterlife, but pastors also show people how to achieve that eternity by contributing to this world.

The disappearance of the communal village or the family means that the individual has to deal with social risks (Li 2012) but joining in the church means people find new ways to share risks, which is the reverse trend of individualism or the ‘atomic individual’ (Tian 2009). People who go to church on a regular basis receive more support and tend to view this assistance more favourably than individuals who do not go to a place of worship on a regular basis (Krause and Wulff 2005, p.327). More than healing, the congregation share emotional support for anyone in need through the concept of love.
Christian conversion

In fact, anyone who has truly practised a religion knows very well that it is the community that stimulates the feelings of joy, inner peace, serenity, and enthusiasm that, for the faithful, stand as experiential proof of their beliefs (Durkheim 1995, p.420). After one sermon, one middle-aged woman knelt in the front row and cried quietly. Another two women stepped forward to comfort her. “My mother worships a statue in the house. Now I know it is wrong because it is idolatry. I plan to move it from the house, but I am so anxious”, she wept. “Do not be afraid. We will join you in prayer. God will give us strength,” they knelt down alongside her. “Here is my phone number. Call me if you need anything,” one of them handed her a card, “a small group of people gather in my own house regularly. You are most welcome”. “I will pray for you”, another one reassured her. They were taught to assist others with unconditional love as well as concrete actions.

This is revealed by the Christian version of the afterlife where Heaven is pictured as a harmonious community where one can reunite with one’s family. Christianity focused on building a loving community within and beyond this world. Being part of the community, supporting others within the community, and building a small community around one’s family or neighbourhood is the Christian way. As a result, devout Christians must first make their own house a small community to experience the Lord in an intensive way because the Lord lives among them. One middle-aged woman shared a story that happened before she converted. Visiting a Christian neighbour saved her from great pain in her back. She took this as a miracle that she benefited from setting foot in the yard of a Christian family, which later prompted her to convert. One’s relationship with the Lord can extend to everyone else in the family and reach out to neighbours. The conviction of faith comes from the sense of belonging to both the church and the community built on shared beliefs.

However, it came to my notice that the concept of love and community may have its limitations. Even though pastors stressed that “God so loved the world”, in practice, “the world” may be confined to Christians which jeopardizes relationships with non-Christians. One woman in her fifties was troubled by tensions with her mother-in-law:

My only son has cerebral palsy. A Taoist priest told me it is caused by some ancestors’ wrongdoings in previous lives. I made a vow to chant
the Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha Sutra for three years to redeem their sins. My mother-in-law is a devout Christian. She objects to whatever I do. Every month on the first and fifteenth day, I make food offerings to Kṣitigarbha. Each time, she deliberately kills fish or chickens in the yard. I try to accumulate merits for my son by not killing livestock or eating meat².

Their differences are irreconcilable because each of them acts from their faith. The instructions of “for God loved the world” does not seem to apply to non-Christian families. This makes the Christian community even more important. Pastors visit those who are sick to make sure that they can still experience God even when they are absent from the church.

7.6 Discipline and morality

7.6.1 To be a good Christian

The moral code of village members is blurred due to ethical anomie, so ethics is losing its role of a social norm and binding force, and this is worsened by the decline in local government control and village authority (Chen 2007). This is why Christianity’s comprehensive moral system is appealing for it fills up the deficiency of laws and regulations. And most importantly, apart from the key moral principle that parents should nurture children following the doctrine of God, other moral teachings preached in the church are also identical to traditional Chinese ethics (Wang 2011, pp.145-146). Thus, when pastors lecture the congregation to be moral, their interpretation of “good” is very similar to traditional morality.

The major difference is that as a servant of the Lord, one’s absolute loyalty and obedience to God is valued the most. Following the pastors’ instructions and the word of God is essential in being good. It is the only way leading to salvation. “God can overturn one’s destiny and eloquence. Though you were born in poverty, God will make you rich. But loyalty (zhong xin) is something that God asks for from you. If you are not loyal, God will not bless you. There are rewards for loyalty and punishments for disloyalty,” pastors repeated this all the time. Here, being loyal meant following God’s

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² Recently it has become popular to perform the ritual of releasing (captured) animals to redeem one’s wrongdoings. Believers buy fishes or other animals from the markets and release them in the wild.
teachings, and most importantly, following God resolutely. This became the moral
obligation that each Christian should obey.

I regard this principle of being loyal as the most crucial moral conduct of Christians
 corresponding to the exclusiveness of its teachings. And there were other specific moral
codes to guide the congregation in their daily life. Unlike the simplified morality in
 popular religion that “the good will be rewarded”, Christian morality is made very
tangible, not only expressed through life stories but also identified by the word from the
Bible. I argue that Christians identify an exact meaning of being “good”. To begin with,
it is to be the servant of Jesus and to serve the Lord firmly according to his teachings
through Bible verses. When the bible study groups studied the Book of Isaiah, the
pastor identified five sins, namely the sins of being selfish, greedy, pleasure-seeking,
idleness, and sneering at God. Thus, the opposite of these sins is the acceptable standard
of being good, which is being selfless, generous, plain living, hard working, and loyal to
God. “We cannot be the prisoner of lust”, warned the pastors. It was made clear that
lust was also not encouraged. These moral codes were consistent with village morality
which made it easier for the congregation to accept.

“You can have worldly success or comfort in mind, but not both,” commented one
pastor. Later he gave an example of a former volunteer who at first quit working in the
church to take care of her family business, and then even quit weekly worship and
ended up weary and with a broken family. The implication was rather obvious that one
should never seek worldly wealth at the cost of one’s belief because, without God, even
a huge fortune could not make a happy family. This is in clear contrast with the current
individualism of pursuing this-worldly wealth and also different from the traditional
morality of seeking family prosperity first.

Even when pastors addressed conflicts between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law,
the solution was still to be a good servant. Family disputes were described as “the
demon’s tricks” so only love could save them. If a mother-in-law is scolded by her
daughter-in-law, she should treat this as a blessing. It reflects the idea of “do not resist
an evildoer”. “My mother never complains about her three daughters-in-law, even when
they treat her unfairly,” one pastor quoted, “she is such a saint.” Loving people without
discrimination thus becomes the sign of a saint, which is the highest level of being
moral. After all, goodwill is rewarded, and tolerance is a true virtue. Conflicts can be avoided and a harmonious family can be maintained by showering others with love.

Yet, for the congregation, they need more than a benign God but also a strict ruler. Upon hearing this story, one sister sitting in the parking lot shared a story about her neighbour who verbally abused her daughter-in-law and each day ended up injured. “See? This is the divine punishment”, she concluded. This reflected the changing dynamics between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law and the idea that the mother-in-law should be nice to her daughter-in-law was implied.

Thus, it can be concluded that the morality preached in the church was a bit conservative since most of the congregation were the elderly and women who were familiar with traditional morality. It was similar in a church for immigrants in the USA where “faithfulness, duty, and responsibility form a cluster of conservative themes that are often emphasized inside the church” (Ng 2002, p.207). “It was said by one celebrity that how women dress measures the degree of civilization of a society”, said one pastor. He asserted that women should always dress appropriately to build a moral society. So, dyeing hair and wearing short skirts were not fashionable but instead considered prurient and of poor morality. Similar teachings were preached by a female pastor who suggested that wearing skimpy dresses indicated that one is filled with lust to seduce others. She held that people should only dress up to glorify God, rather than to show off. Though it is obvious that such morality was conservative and even antiquated, it pleased those middle-aged and elderly believers who hated to see the younger generations dress inappropriately. After hearing this in the church, they could impose it on their daughters or daughters-in-law because it was validated by the pastors.

The idea of “pleasing the Lord” and being good servants of the Lord was rather powerful because it affected believers’ behaviours. Christians were told that gambling and playing mah-jong were the devil’s temptation and were warned to keep a distance (Pan 2011). Even people who burned incense acknowledged that people who believed in the Lord did indeed have fewer “bad habits”. As a matter of fact, many males I met at

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3 Playing mah-jong is money- and time-consuming. Not to mention that people gossip about their neighbours during the game.
Christian conversion

temple festivals were happy about their wives going to church because “they do not have time to play mah-jong anymore”.

I argue that this results from believers’ and pastors’ awareness of the importance of morality and how it symbolizes their moral superiority. As Dong proudly announced:

Believing in the Lord is the moral bottom line. Because we would never risk our immortality. These atheists or people who believe in False Gods are fearless because, without the judgment of God, they have no morality.

Even one six year old boy who went to Sunday school described Christians as “learning to be good”. I argue that the idea of sin and the consequence of committing a sin restricted their behaviour. This was the power of listening to instructions and following God’s words.

When the pastor told the story about a preacher being unfaithful to his wife, the emphasis was that other pastors and the elders in the church helped him go through the Bible to see what God said about the extramarital affair. “After he realized his sins, he resigned his duty and devoted himself to pray for three years,” one pastor told his congregation, “then he and his wife had a happy marriage due to the grace of God and fellow workers’ care.” This was the same progression as from an individualist orientation where one realizes his or her fate by studying and the community orientation where one redeems his or her sin with the help of people from the church. Christian teachings reject an individualist orientation because it places individuals in the centre of the picture.

As one pastor said, our relationship with God is like exclusive lovers that do not allow anyone else or a mistress to disturb their relationship. Such exclusive teachings reshape Christian characters and create the image of Christians as having high moral standards (Wang 2011). This was the reason why parents or grandparents sent their children or grandchildren to Sunday school to learn from God. This not only contributed to Christianity’s high growth rate but also enhanced their identity as moral Christians.
7.6.2 God’s way will not be an easy path

A Christian should accept their fate and misfortune unconditionally because it is all God’s plan. Since God works in mysterious ways, servants should not question his authority but be prepared. Thus, healing not only symbolizes God’s efficacy but also reveals God’s tests to select believers. The logic is that only those chosen can become Christians and suffering is seen as a test. Whatever kind of disease, mental or physical, or life crisis is the means of God’s testing and only those who are truly loyal can pass it. Illness means being chosen by God (Qi et al 2014) and the only way out is to devote oneself to the church.

That is why the phrase that “a man meets with God when he has no one to turn to (or God commences when a man reaches the end of his tether)” was so popular among Christians. It contained the essence of their belief that for many, God is their last resort to life’s difficulties, and that “God’s way will not be an easy path”, as preached by the pastor. Believing in the Lord should not remain an empty slogan but should be put into action. All pastors stressed the importance of getting involved in the church’s events and studying the Bible at home. It was part of the church’s regulations, but most importantly, this was what pleased God.

“My three uncles all died unnaturally and painfully because they were possessed by deities⁴”, an 82 year old woman explained, “I was told I had the same talent. But I refused to do that. I turned to Christianity. Now I am still very healthy.” This is the same contrast I discussed in chapter 6 that conventional believers and key believers adopt different modalities when they practise religion, and in this case, Christians practise in their own ways. Attracted by the healing power does not make them less Christian because they accept that identity and all the exclusiveness that comes with it.

They turn down other religions and religious practices when they meet with God. So, the temptation from other religions is part of the test. That is why pastors frequently attacked idol worship ranging from a specific religion to popular religious practices. For instance, Buddhists chanting spells were said to speak the language of the devil;

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⁴ This meant that they had the ability to be incense interpreters. This lady was also told that she was chosen by the deity.
fortune-telling, sorcery, horoscopes, and divination all belonged to witchcraft. Such narratives enabled people to stick to Christian ways, even at the cost of breaking up with their non-Christian social circles.

But because of the united Christian community centred around their exclusive faith, they could always find support whenever they needed people to join with them in prayer or for the elders of the church to visit the sick. So when one middle-aged woman brought her twenty-year-old son to the church, she was hoping he could be saved from a mental illness. Even though he clearly acted differently, instead of keeping him at a distance, others constantly approached them to offer their support and give confidence. “He will be saved. God has a plan,” they all said, “we will pray for you”. I argue that this is less common in popular religion where morality has an individualist orientation or is family-based.

7.7 Bearing witness

Another major difference between Christians and popular religion is that the faith in the Lord should be accepted by the entire family, rather than being represented by the mother. Thus, when one member joined the church, he or she made every endeavour to proselytize other family members. This was following the instruction of “saving the whole family” through concrete actions.

“Raise your hand if your whole family is saved”, Dong asked at one sermon. Only a small proportion of attendees raised their hands proudly. “Less than half!” Dong looked
around, “God will not be pleased.” The traditional way of women representing the whole family was unworkable in the church because “family” was interpreted in a different way. Claiming to be Christian was not enough because attending church regularly was the best way to demonstrate one’s faith, rather than sending a delegate. For the same reason, it was noticeable that more men appeared in church. They wanted to witness God’s mercy with their own eyes. It showed that in Christianity’s revival, there was an emphasis on individual belief and commitment.

Meanwhile, attending church was also seen as the way to gain knowledge. It was the self-cultivational modality advocated by the church that managed to attract more male followers. One elder of the church attributed the greater number of male believers to the magnificent building and regular teachings, which made the church high quality. “Male believers, especially those from the upper class are attracted because it will not hurt their reputation,” she explained. This was a new trend which gradually reshaped rural Christianity as more men become active believers. “But most importantly of all, it is the wisdom from the Bible that attracts people”, she added, “I know some intellectuals and officials who came to the service after being proselytized by their wives”. By stressing those male believers’ social status, her intention was clear: she wanted to erase the outdated perception that the church only attracted poor people and rather to demonstrate its widespread popularity across the county. This was a sign that God blesses the county.

In return, believers share their own stories to testify of God. During the lunch break of the Sunday service, believers lined up in the hall to share in the testimony. There were miracles of healing, guidance and redemption. For instance, one sister was convinced that pagan gods were useless because her sister-in-law was paralyzed in bed for three years though she had burned incense her entire life; another sister was grateful for cured knee pains. “I knew I had to do this a long time ago,” she said, “but I just did not do it. Now I finally step forward to testify. Glory be to God.”

Through such narratives, the congregation returned the favour they had received from God by spreading the word that consolidated the community and brought in more members. As one pastor preached, it is not enough for wives or mothers to be there when their husbands and children are absent. This is their way to “glorify the Lord”
because according to pastors’ instructions, whatever people do should aim to glorify the Lord, not to bring honour to themselves.

“Although sometimes I am too weak, believing in the Lord is the best because I experienced God’s grace”, a woman in her sixties announced, “now I finally have time to devote to the Lord.” By “weak”, she referred to her early years of lazy attitudes when she did not come to church or study. Even though she first adopted the daily-practical modality when she wanted to have a direct result from believing, she agreed with the Christian claim of exclusiveness that there is only one God. So when she had more free time, namely being free of house duties after her children got married, she devoted herself to the Lord by attending sermons, bible study and bearing witness. I argue that she is the epitome of rural Christians in that whatever modality they adopt, they stick to the basic rule of rejecting other religions. This was a dramatic difference with other religions in that their determination, whether prompted through belief or healing, reshaped their perception of the supernatural world and transformed it from polytheism to monotheism. From this angle, I argue that the difference I found between key believers and conventional believers in Buddhism was less obvious in Christianity for the congregation showed a high level of involvement in church activities and clear identity of their faith.

7.8 What tipped the balance?

7.8.1 Funerals and filial piety

The traditional religious landscape used to be harmonious when people’s religious perspective was inclusive and polytheistic. That is why the flourishing of Christianity was regarded as posing a threat to such balance (He 2011), but this may not be a negative because Christianity was bringing dynamism to the rural sector in terms of religious perspectives and reform of certain rituals.

When other people talked about Christians, they would say “we cannot talk to the point” or “we do not see eye to eye” (shuo budao yiqi). This was because Christians liked to mention Jesus or the Lord in their conversations in order to preach. And their exclusive nature made it vital for them to save others from pagan deities. Thus, what irritated other people was their preaching methods which were rather persistent and even
stubborn. “They are learning to be good in the church,” one lay Buddhist said, “but I do not like them pestering us to convert.” Another lay Buddhist nodded, “my neighbour is nagging at me all the time! She says we are worshipping the devil.” It incurs repugnance but what really tipped the balance or caused conflict was the way they challenged traditional cultural and related practices, especially those involving death and funerals.

By carrying out funerals or rituals in the Christian way, it was implied that they were creating new norms that were different from normal practices. The most frequently mentioned criticism was that they were unfilial by not burning paper and incense to deceased ancestors. “They are crazy! How can they not burn paper for their deceased parents!” one villager complained angrily about her neighbour. Another older woman was convinced that believing in the Lord led to a bad end. She told this story:

My niece’s mother-in-law’s sister’s husband died a few years ago. His children dressed him in white clothes because the family believed in the Lord. One day he appeared in the dream of his younger son and warned them not to believe in the Lord. Why? Because no one burned incense and paper money for him after his death, he was in poverty, you know, in the nether world. Because of his white clothes, other people treated him as an evil spirit, so no one was willing to help him.

The portrayal of white clothes in the afterlife was in line with their convictions regarding the consequence of not following traditional practices. As I argued in early chapters, conventional practices were what confirmed a ritual as effective and moral. So in this case, the dream also worked as a warning that proved the legitimacy and efficacy of traditional practices and the deceased’s sufferings. “But do they not say believing in the Lord will bring one to Heaven?” I asked after hearing this. “Silly you! They are buried under the ground. They just say that.” she replied.

I argue that Christian practices related to funerals not only broke the dominance of traditional funeral practices, but most importantly, rejected the meaning behind such practices, namely to be filial through burning incense and paper money, and challenging

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5 By adding complicated kinship terms one can prove that this story is well-grounded.

6 The traditional shroud is colourful.
the loss of reputation associated with not performing a funeral ritual in the conventional, traditional way. As I showed in chapter 4, funerals were opportunities for the family to demonstrate their obedience in the village. One eighty year old woman remarked with anger, “their parents raised them for nothing! They do not cry or wear mourning clothes!” Therefore, without the understanding of Christian teachings, it was hard for them to accept the Christian way and this led to isolation and even unwanted tension due to their incompatible perspectives and practices.

However with the help of a supportive community centred on the church, Christians could find support, emotional and material, from the congregation. In the church they respected but did not worship ancestors because only God could be worshipped. This derived from the exclusiveness of their relationship with God. But this did not mean that believers followed instructions completely, for, in practice, there was a compromise between the strict liturgical modality and the daily-immediate modality which was not encouraged by pastors but rather passively accepted by them in order to win believers’ favour. In Lu County, I regard this as a moderate, pragmatic approach to achieving a modified version of funerals.

For Christians burning incense and paper money and kowtowing to the deceased was forbidden but it was acceptable to keep a sacrificial table with flowers, not incense (Wang 2011). The choir sang hymns and performed some shows so there was no need to hire traditional troupes. In other places, there were major compromises that undermined the exclusiveness of Christianity. He (2011) found that some Christians still believed in the existence of the netherworld and their belief towards ancestors and ghosts outranked that in the Lord; in another, Catholic case, believers carried out funerals with catholic elements but it was believed that the deceased live among them and needed to be worshipped regularly (Zhao and Tang 2008). Gao (2005) attributed this to the lack of qualified and normalised clergy leading to deviations in rural Christian practice. Where I differ here is that instead of disobeying clergies, such deviations were the result of pastors’ compromises to secure the congregation as long as their faith in God was not undermined. This was the strategy of moderated strictness to reach the mass of people.
After all, in rural areas, activities such as funerals or weddings were never a simple choice made by the small or nuclear family, but a large decision concerning all their relatives and the neighbourhood and even affecting their social reputation. Even though Christians received support from the church and the congregation, they still had to face a society where people were using different criteria. It was extremely difficult to create something new when there was an accepted set of funeral customs. Differences were destined to create strong tensions among different groups of people: Christian parents and non-Christian children, non-Christian parents and Christian children, and relatives of diverse religions.

Unless all the family members including close relatives were Christians, compromise was inevitable. When one woman took her young son to her father-in-law’s funeral, her son was told to kowtow in front of the sacrificial tablet to fulfil the grandson’s filial duty. After that, he told his mother he had a headache. “I knew immediately that it must be the Lord punishing him,” she explained, “I took him to a quiet corner and we prayed together for forgiveness.” Though her husband performed the role of filial piety in the traditional way, her absence from the ritual, namely refusing to kowtow or burn paper, still drew complaints from other relatives. “I do not care. We have moved to the county seat now,” she shared, “my upstairs neighbour always invites me to study the Bible at her house. I feel at home.”

Not all families are so lucky. After one Christian passed away, two of her daughters who were also Christians insisted on holding a simple funeral in the Christian way while the other daughter strongly opposed them in the name of being filial. After quarrels and fights, they finally reached a compromise: a Christian ceremony on the condition that the deceased wore a traditional shroud. We can imagine that if something goes wrong in the future, there will be further conflicts about the efficacy of the funeral and the consequences of not following tradition or not listening to God. After all, in many villages, the dominant forces remain non-Christian (Huang 2005).

Believing in the Lord “entailed a clean break not only with their former religious life but, more importantly, with the on-going religious activities of their kin and neighbours” (Klein 2011, p.603). This is why changes were made progressively so the daily-practical modality channelled the transition. Even Christians needed proof of their conversion.
One middle-aged Christian went to watch operas during the commodity exchange fair held in her village. “I was filial to my mother, so God blesses me,” she said, “I visited her tomb every year on the anniversary of her death, but not the first of the 10th lunar month\textsuperscript{7}. Now I believe in the Lord, I know that is all lies. I never burn paper for her. Still, I dream of her living happily in Heaven wearing clothes like a fairy. This gives me reassurance.”

For the same reason, church weddings were resisted less by non-Christians. Those who got married in the church still held a banquet in a restaurant and possibly included a short version of the ceremony by saying the wedding vows again in front of a professional wedding host for their non-Christian relatives and acquaintances. Christian funerals saved on costs for paper offerings (Gao 2005) as they were taught to be frugal and avoid extravagance in weddings and funerals (Pan 2011). Thus, holding weddings in the church now has multiple effects: under the witness of the community, not committing any sins\textsuperscript{8} and saving the effort and cost of an over-elaborate formality. All these factors contribute to people’s decision to convert.

\subsection*{7.8.2 Home churches}

However the Eastern Church faced challenges from other Christians in the home churches. Because the state did not clearly stipulate home churches’ illegal status unless they belonged to evil cults that were banned like the Shouters or the Eastern Lightning (also known as the Church of Almighty God), most home churches boomed. A campaign was launched in 1983 against the Shouters because it used Christianity as a cover to conduct counter-revolutionary activities (County book 1994, p.98). So, as the name indicates, home churches had their own mode of operation: followers attended services at someone’s house, not at an established church, without the presence of any pastors appointed by the two committees.

The difference between home churches and three-self churches remained unclear to most local people, though some complained about home churches being too noisy at

\textsuperscript{7} It is local tradition to visit the tomb on the 2nd of the second lunar month and on the 10th of the tenth lunar month. However, married daughters are only allowed to visit the tomb on the second date. No one can explain why. But this practice is preserved.

\textsuperscript{8} Traditional weddings would resort to a religious specialist to seek an auspicious day.
their evening gatherings. From the perspective of the state, home churches are reluctant to accept government supervision which means that their teachings may go unchecked\(^9\). Meanwhile home churches contend that the three-self churches are less spiritual and too close to the state authorities (Yang 2011). What I found was that a small, intimate community formed around a couple of believers and that their chance to interpret the Bible increased the attraction of home churches.

Unlike the pastors who talked about their training in the Seminary in the three-self churches, home churches’ congregations could freely discuss the Bible and their own interpretations. That is why pastors in three-self churches often warned the congregation to stay away from home churches because they were unorthodox (Yang 2011). “Be careful! Their understanding of God’s words can be superficial or even wrong”, Dong lectured. The intimate community and the liberty to speak freely attracted believers to the home churches but also posed a threat to the three-self churches’ authority that came from their legal status and institutionalization. In a sense, three-self churches’ monopoly on Christian knowledge and orthodoxy was under threat.

To maintain their secrecy, home churches normally restricted their small group of people to around two dozen. Outsiders could not come to a session unless they were invited. This gave the three-self churches an advantage in transparency and openness. “Whoever sets foot in the church will be welcomed and free to attend any sermon,” Dong said, “We are not hidden in the dark.” As there was no explicit regulation on a home church’s legitimacy, the local government had to make their own decisions and generally took no action against them (Yang 2014). So the competition between home churches and three-self churches remains.

### 7.9 Conclusion

If emotional relationships become increasingly important with age; if religion also becomes more important as people grow older; and if friendship ties are an important source of emotional support, then having close ties with friends in church should become an increasingly important source of psychological well-being as people grow older (Krause and Wulff 2005, p.329). Compared with Buddhists and popular religious

\(^9\) Several tragic murders were linked to evil cults’ believers, like the Zhaoyuan McDonale murder.
believers, that sense of emotional support is much more noticeable and more likely to be experienced by individuals in the Christian community.

I argue that since most people are raised in a popular religion-friendly atmosphere—except for those whose parents (at least one of them) are Christian—it is likely that their religious habits are consistent with the efficacy-based religiosity which emphasizes practices over meaning. Converting to either Buddhism or Christianity shows that in a society that is transforming, people now begin to seek meaning. But to truly devote oneself to one’s faith can consume an enormous amount of time which makes it difficult for the younger generation. One Christian described her involvement as a gradual progression:

When I first learned about this, I attended sermons quite often because it made me feel better. I was passionate for about one year. Then I acted like non-believers. I put it aside because my children were young and I was kept busy. It was over the past few years that I really put the Lord in my heart.

Her role as a wife and mother, and her responsibility to take care of the family overwhelmed her need to be with God. Then, in her sixties, after “forgetting God for many years”, she finally regained her faith when she had more leisure time.

This is similar to the key believers in Buddhism in that they burned incense at a younger age and then committed to teachings and doctrines in their later years. The data reviewed to this point suggests that older people were more involved in church because religion was more important to them (Ibid. p.328). It is true that older people may feel the imperative to know more about death and the afterlife, but they can also shift their focus from house duties, children and grandchildren to themselves.

Buddhist and Christian clergies had to compromise to accept the daily-practical modality as a supplement to the liturgical and scriptural modality. In the church, the configuration of daily-practical, liturgical and scriptural modalities was more prominent. The self-cultivational modality prevailed to construct the identity of being Christian through learning the Bible. Being Christian was associated with the idea of being good and morality became their unique symbol. To be moral was to glorify the Lord. “I would rather my son marry a Christian than someone who does not believe in anything,”
a lay Buddhist said. In this respect, having faith in either Buddha/deities or the Lord promoted one’s morality.

I assert that its community orientation facilitated the expansion of Christianity, and the accessibility to knowledge also gave impetus to its continuous growth. In popular religion, religious knowledge was held by only a small proportion of ritual specialists which consolidated believers’ preference for practices over meaning. However Christians were encouraged to not only learn knowledge but also to share it and proselytize. Christians were encouraged to be the recipient of knowledge, best exemplified by one brother’s catchphrase: God put wisdom in me, this earthenware. And the three-self churches and pastors held tight control over the interpretation of the Bible to educate the congregation. This I regard as an alternative to the self-cultivational modality with a communal sharing basis.

When one young woman distributed leaflets in the parking lot, one sister told her it was inappropriate. “My mother-in-law believes in God,” she replied without pause. “But you don’t,” the sister fought back. The belief that a mother can represent the whole family which applied in Buddhism and popular religion did not apply to Christianity. Christianity demanded every family member’s participation, not only their conversion. Only then, could one proudly announce that “you shall be saved, you and all your house.”

I argue that utilitarianism may not be a defect of Christianity because it is pushed by efficacy-based religiosity, but one is urged to make a change, in religious practices as well as in daily habits. It is true that the popularity of Christianity will no doubt undermine popular religion because it touches the latter’s fundamentals. For example, the reform of funerals redefines ancestors’ role and the value of obtaining advice on the precise time and position is also altered. The practice of seeking an auspicious day or hour to commence the ritual or determining which direction the coffin should face is overturned by pastors’ teachings that “There is no need to seek an auspicious day because, under God, every day is auspicious”.

These are the key points in characterizing rural Christians: a. the individual must believe and demonstrate their commitment by attending services and testifying in person; b.
morality must be prioritised; c. one must seek a relationship with God; d. healing and other miracles reveal God’s plans; e. studying the Bible is essential. This differs from popular religion and Buddhism since more emphasis is laid on a loving community, one’s personal morality and the necessity of study. It offers one insight into how rural people are dealing with the impacts of modernity and the market economy. They turn to a Christianity community when the village community is in fragmentation, and it is the fragmentation of the village that removes the stigma of converting to a unique religion. For those who have migrated to a strange village, attending religious events becomes a convenient way to blend in and join a welcoming community. Similarly, many immigrants encounter Christianity when they meet difficulties in a strange city. That is why I argue that Christianity will continue its revival due to its convenience and the efficacy of believing and converting.
Chapter 8 Conclusion

This thesis is an ethnography of diverse religious practices in Lu County. I describe the diversity of religious resurgence in the rural sector and answer the question of why people are attracted to religion. My data on popular religion, Buddhism and Christianity revealed various tendencies and revival strategies. In Lu County the resurgence was not “most dramatic and unexpected” (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p.234), because local people never truly stopped believing in the efficacy of practising popular religion even during the period of destruction of the temples. The Shang village and Lu County provide good examples of recent social changes and of how people react to these. Villagers do not passively accept what is imposed on them but demonstrate liberty in expressing their diverse religious practices and moral codes.

Let me begin my conclusions with a story.

Before a vendor died, he left his steelyard to his son and told him that the counterweight is short in weight so he could take advantage of customers. The son wanted to do the right thing, so he destroyed the counterweight. Shortly after that, his two young sons died, one after the other. He was so confused that he asked Heaven: why am I being punished for being good? Later that night, a white-bearded deity appeared in his dream and told him that the two boys were sent to his home as punishment for his father’s wrongdoing. The two boys were supposed to be sick and cost all the family’s fortune. But because he did the right thing, Heaven decided to take them back. Then the deity assured him that he would have other healthy boys in the future.

I have heard this story repeatedly at various temple festivals and from different people. A similar version is recorded in the local folklore encyclopaedia: when the husband decided to customize a lighter counterweight to cheat customers, his wife accused him of “having no conscience” and of “ill-gotten gains” and secretly replaced it with a heavier one which resulted in a booming family business (Yuan ed. 2016, pp.450-451). What is revealed in these stories fits with Chau’s postulates on rural people’s beliefs:

1. That there are gods; 2. That people should respect the gods and do whatever pleases the gods and should not do anything that displeases the gods; 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; 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. (Chau 2006, p.66)

Most people are born in a religious atmosphere with the presupposition that deities are efficacious, and they can experience the efficacy through certain means. However what these stories stress is the central place of morality and conscience in believers’ relationship with Heaven. My analyses of local legendary stories in chapter two suggests a seventh postulate that good people, moral people, will be rewarded or assisted by gods even when they are not seeking help. This is the hidden function of religion in that it confirms people’s morality and portrays a world where the immoral will be punished.

In this chapter, I review four conclusions I have drawn in the thesis: a. on the nature of the religious revival; b. the rising awareness of religious identity; c. the popularity of morality endorsed by institutional religions; and d. on the implications of future directions.

8.1 The nature of the religious revival

8.1.1 Changes in rural life

Lai argued that economic reform since the 1980s generated social insecurity and anxiety and “religion thus provides mental solace and spiritual fulfilment” (Lai 2003, p.60). The lack of an affordable public health system or comprehensive social welfare system for rural residents has certainly contributed to the revival of religion. However, I argue that the actual root cause of this revival is the embeddedness of religious practices in rural life. The aim in the revival of religion has been to return towards a more traditional rural view of life (in terms of beliefs and community cohesion), because this proves to be “more effective” (Fei 1992, p.97) even given the tremendous changes in rural society.

The first change was the collapse of the cohesive village. Many villages have been incorporated into a new subdistrict which means villagers’ memories of being members of a natural village are lost. Now they turn to the new subdistrict for any procedure related to marriage, children’s admission to school or death. Apart from the annual temple festival or commodity exchange fair and the village head’s election every three
years, there is rarely any collective activity to build the village’s cohesion. Villagers now elect their village head depending on the person’s ability to make money for the village, not on the basis of their moral integrity or uprightness or their morally earned money (Dorfman 1996). That has led to economic changes where some villagers make great fortunes overnight due to selling land while others remain in the same state of poverty. Unlike the trend some years ago to compete for urban residences and their benefits, many choose to keep their rural residence even when they work and live in the cities in case there is a chance to take advantage of any land sales. The increasing wealth further aggravates the tendency to build new houses or host fancy banquets to flaunt one’s wealth.

Therefore, villages have become estranged from the religious domain. There is no more village ritual to pray for rain or thank the deity for bringing a good harvest. Temples increasingly cater to individual needs. This reshapes the interpersonal relationships as well. Chau noted that in the 1990s when each household volunteered assistance in the deity’s birthday banquet, it was based on the “principle of mutual reliance between god and people” (Chau 2006, p.138). When village solidarity was applied to interpersonal relationships like a wedding or funeral in Lu County two decades ago, the host relied on other villagers to voluntarily serve at the tables or help in the kitchen. It was mutual reciprocity. But in recent times, as material lives have improved, people host events in a fancy restaurant where the guests are expected to gift money.

This means that villagers’ relationships with other villagers has faded. That is, when the younger generation migrate to the city, they no longer rely on the village or on farming like their parents’ generation. The village no longer offers a set of values and emotional bonds for villagers (He 2013). These values were produced through interactions among villagers and communal events. The shifting from a society of acquaintance (Fei 1992) to a “baseless society” (Wu 2011) or a “semi-acquaintance society” (He 2013) means there are fewer interactions among villagers and weaker bonds among them. Villagers feel that they are not close to others anymore. Voluntary assistance is replaced by hired help. Within the post-Mao moral crisis of ideological leadership and the moral vacuum of economic opportunity, people have turned to the morality of reciprocity and
responsiveness in interpersonal, human relations (renqing) (Feuchtwang 2012, p.124). The amount of gift money sent to the host becomes the sign to rank their relationship by and the amount of money spent on funerals or weddings determines one’s reputation.

This also means that the village loses its power to restrain villagers’ behaviour. Individuals in the past were always judged by the neighbourhood, and appraisal by the community played a decisive role in one’s social prestige. Since the village has become filled with outsiders and people no longer associate with their neighbours, such appraisal becomes less significant. So people throw an extravagant funeral hiring people to cry for them to compensate for their less filial behaviour when their parents were alive. The maintenance of a communal morality has fallen apart with the rise of an egotistic culture (Yan 2003) and ruthless and amoral self-interest (Feuchtwang 2012).

Within the family, the power dynamics have also been reshaped. Under the influence of the individualism of private belief, Chinese individuals have become disembedded from the traditional networks of family and community (Yan 2010) and because of the increasing affluence of the younger generation, the young couple assumes more power in the family (Yan 2011; 2016). I term this “relational individualism” inspired by Yan’s tripartite designation of Chinese personhood into the desiring individual, the moralist self, and the relational person (Yan 2017). Though rural people become more individualistic in choosing their own way of life or religious beliefs, they are still bound with the family and responsible for those they are related to. So parents look after their grandchildren when their children are occupied with work and burn incense or worship ancestors on their behalf.

However many elderly people especially those retired with a pension, liberate themselves from only being concerned with the family’s prosperity and household chores, and start to seek self-realization through religion. Being part of the religious community also enriches their life, with activities like singing in the choir, volunteering in the kitchen, leading in the ritual or preaching to others. The most crucial relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law is redefined when the latter begins to assume power in the family and the communal morality that stresses their absolute obedience to their mother-in-law becomes weak. Many daughters-in-law admitted that
converting to Christianity is their way to fight against their non-Christian mother-in-law’s authority.

What rural people have experienced is the decline of the village both in a sense of community and morality amid the increasing uncertainties in daily life. People have recourse to traditional methods or may reinvent traditions to deal with them. Religion offers them efficacious approaches and moral codes in these changing times.

8.1.2 The pursuit of efficacy

Chau asserted that “at the core of Chinese popular religion is the concept of magical efficacy” (Chau 2006, p.2) and Feuchtwang held that efficacy’s “effectiveness is transmitted in some manifestation of extraordinary or unexpected success or simply the avoidance of danger” (Feuchtwang 2001, p.84). Efficacy is the symbol of a convincing religious practice. I argue that the core of popular religion’s revival is the continuity of this efficacy-based religiosity.

I combined two of the religious modalities identified by Chau (2006), the immediate-practical and the relational modalities, into what I term a daily-practical modality because it fits with popular religion’s role in rural life: people rush to incense interpreters for immediate results and when they burn incense on a daily basis, they want to make sure that nothing goes wrong. It is to maintain positive interactions with spiritual forces in the long run that generates polytheism and pragmaticism. The daily-practical modality stands for this efficacy-based religiosity that prevails in popular religion. Religious practices in the rural sector often satisfy needs beyond what the secular state can offer. Efficacy is sought for trifles like sudden pain in the shoulder or an answer to whether the family’s bad luck is caused by the neighbour’s new house.

To answer Freedman’s (1974) question whether there is a universal Chinese religion, my findings in Lu County suggest that popular religion is the fundamental religious system for most people. However, I question whether ancestor worship on its own “is the fundamental belief system” (He 2012) because this conclusion ignores the reality of northern China where the patrilineal clan is less significant but women’s role in religious matters is more prominent. I argue that popular religion is the fundamental
system with its forms of burning incense and ancestor worship as its two indispensable features. This popular religion is fundamental because it offers people knowledge about life and death, and provides practices that can ease their concerns and strengthen moral norms. In this system women deal with deities and men deal with ancestors when carrying out their daily lives. Even people who claim to be atheistic or deny the existence of the ancestors’ spirits still follow this modality for different needs. This behaviour reflects the influence of customary practices more than institutional beliefs and disciplines.

My approach to religious revival is from the point of view of villagers. Their involvement in religious matters is not focused on economic benefits like officials or temple operators. They are more proactive in choosing the temple they believe is efficacious, not because of the publicity given by the state to a particular temple or other people’s experience of particular rituals. They need to experience the efficacy in person. And they can participate in the temple the way they want: to burn incense and leave, or stand and watch others performing rituals, or wait in the kitchen for a free lunch. They do not have to interact with monks or incense interpreters unless they need to. Leaving some money in the donation box is their way to make economic contributions to the temple and by being present they contribute to the temple’s efficacy in maintaining a bustling atmosphere.

However, because efficacy is experienced by the individual, it is easily doubted when one’s expectations are not met. The disruption to the village community and morality has challenged the deities’ efficacy as moral arbitrators. People are confused when the nonfilial son who should be punished enjoys a happy life, or the cadre who embezzled the villager’s collective property still holds office, or their prayers are not answered. In these situations there is an impression of the deities’ failure to respond to one’s moral crisis. Instead of questioning the deity’s efficacy, one is taught to review oneself. But under the logic of a market economy, they will turn to other deities who might be more efficacious.

Therefore, there is a rising trend of people taking new forms of religious practices as a response to the growing individualism in society. More believers acquire a certificate from the monk which ostensibly marks their conversion to Buddhism. But this is rather
the consequence of their daily-practical modality focused on efficacy-based religiosity. In the orthodox Buddhist understanding, the conversion requires a specific ritual which demonstrates one’s commitment to Buddhist teachings and disciplines. But because believers take it as a token of Buddha’s power or blessings, they spare themselves the trouble of following any of these disciplines. They avoid the ritual to maximize the efficacy. It is similar to people who combine daily-practical and scriptural modalities in reciting sutras as a powerful spell.

The religious resurgence in Lu County can thus be explained, first by the revival of efficacy-based religiosity as rural people seek solutions to daily problems and needs, and second, by the adoption of other modalities as clergies and the state attempt to regulate ritual activities and discipline followers in religious ritual and knowledge. The practices of most temple-goers demonstrate competition among daily-practical, liturgical and scriptural modalities as worshipers seek efficacy. There is also competition among different approaches within these modalities. For example, there is more merit accumulated by chanting sutras in the temple than in one’s house, pointing to a competition within the scriptural modality. In the light of such practices the monk also attempts to lure people into the temple because he calls for believers to be more mindful of correct ritual practices as they burn incense.

People worship a variety of deities because allegiance to one temple or one deity is not required. What this research found was that adopting the liturgical modality does not necessarily lead to the ritual polytropy that Chau (2011) suggested in order to maximize efficacy by performing multiple rituals from different religions, but it can also demonstrate the emergence of religious awareness defined by stricter institutional dharma-based religiosity. Consequently, some believers become more committed to the teachings and pattern their worship on a configuration of liturgical and scriptural modalities and even seek through them the self-cultivational modality in the search for spiritual awareness. Buddhists embrace the superior hope of being free of the six transformations while Christians happily accept the exclusiveness and commit to the only one God.
Conclusion

Buddhism and Christianity are on the rise and represent the advent of a dharma-based religiosity in villagers’ lives. They offer profound knowledge systems and universal moral codes. Devout Buddhists are inclined to treat incense interpreters as superstitious because although they can see things they do not put them in the context of karma, while the first lesson Christians learn is to reject all other religions and religious practices as false.

8.2 The rise of dharma-based religiosity

This thesis argues that there is a growth in dharma-based religiosity and its emphasis on liturgical and scriptural modalities, creating new forms of community while catering to a continuing desire for efficacy. Temples and churches appeal on the basis of daily-practical modality and then channel their followers into more dharmic modalities. Though efficacy-based religiosity also pervades the way people commit to Buddhism and Christianity, the revival in Buddhism and Christianity is different in terms of believers’ awareness of their religious identity and their adoption into community.

Christianity exploits the benefits of efficacy such as the powers of healing, but then it successfully combines these with liturgical and scriptural modalities by highlighting the importance of attending services, listening to sermons and studying the Bible. The exclusiveness placed on worshipping the one God facilitates this shift from atheism and polytheism to monotheism. Disciplines are taught to whomever comes to the church. In answer to the question posed in the introduction, this research found that the experience of the efficacy of healing leads to a deep commitment to God, the church and the liturgical and scriptural disciplines of Christian teaching.

Buddhism, on the other hand, is more influential among those who have already adopted the liturgical or scriptural modalities and accepted their disciplines. The watershed moment is the acceptance of the Bodhisattva precepts, not the certificate of conversion. Those who commit to the Bodhisattva precepts start to cultivate their identity as lay Buddhists through correct liturgical and scriptural commitment such as by abstaining from eating meat, and by reciting sutras daily, wearing the long robe and visiting the temple regularly. They identify themselves as xinfo (people who believe in Buddha) in the same way Christians call themselves xinzhu (people who believe in God).
They distinguish themselves from people who burn incense because they start to focus on the beliefs, not the practices.

That is to say, the configuration of the daily-practical and liturgical/scriptural modalities leads to two trends: the majority who obtain a certificate of conversion still seek efficacy and accumulate merit; the minority start to gain awareness of a lay Buddhist identity through correct liturgical and scriptural commitment. The configuration of daily-practical and liturgical modalities is most common among temple-goers. They share the ambience created by chanting, musical instruments, burning smoke and the crowd. Monks need the liturgical modality to demonstrate the noisiness of worship which is the sign of efficacy to popular devotees. So, to invite Monk Yinguang’s disciples to deliver sermons in the Huayan temple is part of Master Feng’s strategy to develop the liturgical and scriptural modalities, and these lead to a rise in personal-cultivational modality to embody that knowledge.

That is why I argue that those key believers are loyal to Master Feng not only because of his power to provide spiritual insights, but also because he was wise enough to accept Monk Yingung’s teachings. Key believers are devoted to the temple and the monk because they embody the combination of the liturgical, scriptural and self-cultivational modalities in taking the path of dharma and distancing themselves from the daily practical modality. The personal-cultivational modality facilitates their transition to dharma-based religiosity because it sets them the goal of obtaining Buddhahood through embodying the teachings. It adds an educational component compared with the method of only repeating Buddha/Bodhisattva’s name or the sutras or attributing everything to karma.

However there is a new tendency to adopt the self-cultivational modality in a search for efficacy. Monk Yinguang’s teachings, like the Christian sermons and Bible study, apply to everyone who comes to the institution with evangelical zeal. While key believers organize study groups to comprehend his teachings word by word, most temple-goers take the approach of “to listen is to be blessed”. For Master Feng, this is his approach to exploit the Monk Yinguang’s aureole to unite some loyal believers to assist him run the temple, and also add to the temple’s bustling scene with the monthly sermons. But this
proved no match for the churches’ weekly sermons and their pastors visiting villages once a week. I argue that the personal-cultivational modality was more common among Christians through their wide acceptance of the Bible.

Consequently, after raising the awareness of belonging to an institution and an exclusive religion, discipline leads these disciples to a community centred on their beliefs: people are obligated to visit the institution to demonstrate their piety as mandated by the clergy. Being part of the community “confirms and authenticates an individual worshiper’s faith in the magical efficacy of the deity” (Chau 2008, p.500) but also fosters a bond among believers and between believers and the community. This is what the village community used to offer.

Worship such as that of the Black Dragon King in Shaanbei, or that practised by the patriarchal lineage in southeast China, or that focused on the Confucius temple in Gansu province (Chau 2006; Wang 1997; Jing 2013) all show traits of commonality built by rituals centred on one deity to unite one village or villages. The names of the households who donated money to restore the village temple were inscribed on the tablet because “the temple restoration is not an economic endeavour, but a campaign to restore a moral community, tangibly represented by the list of donors” (Liang 2012, p.426). Such cohesion among villagers is long gone with most villages having lost their village temple or with existing temples no longer serving the village. When Master Feng performed rituals to pray for social stability and when his loyal followers voluntarily helped at the banquet, the village community was replaced by the temple community. In the same way churches hosted banquets and performances on special holy days to celebrate their community.

Since it is the community that determines convention (Watson 1988, p.6), what believers receive is communal recognition of their belief. This is especially valuable for those who feel no support from their family. As argued earlier, even though rural people have more freedom, their social relationships are still defined by family. Chinese family relationships are fundamental to village life and religion.

Kinship is a social relationship formed through marriage and reproduction. The networks woven by marriage and reproduction can
be extended to embrace countless numbers of people in the past, present, and future. (Fei 1992, p.63)

Relationships are formed by one’s marriage and kinship network and these are fixed. When an individual converts to an institutional religion the dissenting opinion against their conversion normally arises from within their close family. Thus lay Buddhists are persuaded by their family to eat meat for the sake of their health or are criticised by their spouses for spending too much time in the temple and neglecting family duties while Christians turn down ancestor worship and all pagan practices. Yet in their respective religious communities, they find support and conviction from those who experience similar opposition.

This thesis argues that this community orientation contributes to the development of both Buddhism and Christianity for these new religious communities compensate for the disappearing village and the weak bonds among residents. When the Huayan temple hosts sermons, believers can share lunch and take a nap in the guest room while believers in the church always share testimonies during the lunch break. These are crucial moments to create collective effervescence and an intense sociality (Chau 2008). Most peasants rely on farming and have no other social network except for their immediate neighbourhood and relatives, while retired people no longer have their connections in their old workplace. It is in the religious community that they find a sense of belonging and connection again. This is even more prominent in Christianity where the elders or pastors support new settlers and those left behind by family by visiting their homes or welcoming them to the church. When they attend the church or temple, it feels comfortable, welcoming and inclusive. This is a significant component of the appeal created by religious communities.

This highlights the role of authoritative figures in institutions. People recognize the authority of clergy in all modalities either in administering immediate aid or for imparting knowledge. They know it is karma or God that determines the future as Palmer (2011) noted, but they establish an intimate relationship with the clergy for extra benefits such as requesting prayer or the clergy’s special aid. It is the logic of human
relationships extended to religious communities and the authoritative figures are well trained in orthodox rituals and scriptures to lead them into communal disciplines.

8.3 Enculturation and morality

The resurgence of efficacy-based religiosity results in various forms that focus on individual social prestige in ways that add confusion to community morality. Hiring people to mourn the deceased or opera troupes three nights before an anniversary is a public display to maintain one’s social prestige as being filial, despite the fact that the son may not have treated his parents well. By making donations, sponsoring opera performances, and throwing communal banquets, wealthy families contribute a portion of their wealth to enhance their social honour based not on material accumulation but on material distribution (Yang 2000). The communal insistence on being thrifty and serving the public good is ignored in their accumulation of wealth.

The rise of institutional religions offers people a new and complete moral system given authority by religious identity. As discussed in the introduction, Liang (2014) held that grassroots efforts to restore a morality outside of the state is the real reason for religious revival. Where villagers have worked together to restore a village temple, their efforts have been fuelled in part by a desire to create a local community with a shared, common morality. Liang’s portrait of a united ethnic minority village strikes a sharp contrast with villages in Lu County where such cohesion is long gone. Instead of making a joint effort to restore the village temple, villagers saved themselves the trouble and visited temples located in other places and accepted whatever morality suited their needs.

The traditional communal morality was not taught in formal scriptures or practised as formal disciplines or liturgies, but such values permeated the way people lived these practices. Since deities were “said to reward those who lead virtuous lives and to punish anyone who violates the moral code” (Wolf 1974, p.163), receiving a response from the deities demonstrated one’s moral character. In the same way, ancestors punished those who neglected their responsibilities. The state’s pursuit of modernity destroyed those rites and attempted to replace them with a socialist morality that centred on serving the people. Impacted by the market economy, what people witnessed in their daily life was how an immoral person earned a fortune without any punishment. The criteria of
civilized society had been seriously damaged by the state’s developmental policies and its local cadres (Feuchtwang 2012).

I argue that people’s need for morality provided a strong basis for the resurgence of configurations of modalities that offer both efficacy and moral guidance. The scriptural and self-cultivational modalities furnish answers with strong explanatory power. Buddhism and Christianity set their moral codes to cultivate their believers in a new civilisation.

Rural people relate well to these new civil cultures as they share considerable similarities with traditional morality. Teachings and sermons in temples and churches convey the principles of family obligations, including daughters-in-law being obedient to their parents and parents-in-law. It is the same morality that is performed in operas at temple fairs, which are welcomed by the majority of attendees, namely the middle-aged and the elderly. Also, it highlights the public good. In the story of the steelyard cited at the beginning of this chapter, the wife is being honest and allows her customers to benefit from her kindness. This is contrary to the current modern emphasis on material well-being that encourages a hedonistic carelessness towards the rest of society (Feuchtwang 2012). Buddhism and Christianity preach to their congregations to love and save the world.

This outlook on life is extended to the afterlife where bad people will receive retribution in the next life such as being reborn as an animal according to Buddhism or experiencing judgment either as salvation or eternal suffering for Christians. The deities’ response is no longer unpredictable, but instead, reveals the power of karma or God’s plan. The state-endorsed morality like the socialist core values and role models pale in comparison. These profound systems avoid any concern about the deities’ efficacy: deities are obligated to bring efficacy in a reciprocal exchange, but any lack of a response relates to human behaviour. It reveals a bigger picture, where efficacy is either neutralized by one’s previous wrongdoings or accumulated in one’s next life. After all, karma and God work in mysterious ways.
In this increasingly mobile society, morality in churches and temples reaches to strangers who sit outside local networks. Because moral rights and duties are defined differently in accordance with one’s position in a given relationship (Yan 2009), Buddhism and Christianity teach people to treat strangers as their own family. Humanity’s bonds in brotherhood and sisterhood should transcend geographic, racial, economic and social boundaries (Ibid. p.20). In this light people presuppose that whoever comes to the church or temple shares the same moral code. There are no others than brothers and sisters who are religious and moral. This helps new comers to associate with long-term villagers who share the same beliefs.

This research found that the key to the morality endorsed by institutional religions lies in its link with believers’ identity. It prioritizes religious fealty over material wealth or social prestige. Disciplines like the ten commandments or the five precepts are preached with regard to severe sanctions. This contrasts with popular religion where divergence is rampant and fickle deities can be bribed or can make mistakes. Buddha and God, contrarily, represent fairness, impartiality and wisdom: they are moral perfection.

Therefore, converting to Christianity or Buddhism is marked by people accepting a new identity. It structures their moral codes in terms of mercy (not killing animals), loyalty (only following the word of God), or benevolence (spreading the word of wisdom to save more people). The fear of committing sins or of karma forces the congregation to examine their wrongdoings while people who burn incense only do this when their prayer is not answered. This leads these new believers to the path of pursuing dharma-based religiosity.

As dharma-based followers mature in liturgical and scriptural engagement, the self-cultivation modality becomes more appealing. These new dharma-based communities instil new commitments to revised moralities based not on the village but institutional religion. This brings increasing competition among religions, rather than earlier competition among modalities. So Christians publicize their high moral standards to serve the Lord while Buddhists advertise their mercy in not harming any livestock. Christians target any other religion as superstitious while Buddhists accuse Christians of not being filial. The competition is inspired by religious teachings and disciplines.
The civilising modality is the emerging tendency for it can cultivate knowledge as well morality through learning and behaving. Chau suggests that illiteracy and lack of leisure would preclude many from the discursive and personal-cultivational modalities (Chau 2011, p.552). Instead, what I found was that retired people with a pension were most committed to the liturgical, scriptural and personal-cultivational modalities regardless of their educational background. Audio players and DVDs are very accessible and at a minimal cost. There is a lower barrier to access knowledge now. However peasants who are busy farming or young housewives who are occupied by housework do not have the luxury to pursue modalities that are time-consuming. They settle on efficacy-based religiosity because it is practical.

I argue that the liturgical or scriptural modality can lead people to the path of dharma, but it is the personal-cultivational modality that facilitates this transition. The capacity to do so stems from learning scriptures or attending services. Even for most people who can read, Buddhist sutras and Biblical passages are still obscure and hard to understand. That is why the personal-cultivational modality has only become possible in recent years as more clergy interpret the scriptures for their followers in line with institutional training.

The question now is how these new religiosities are combined with newer traditions of socialist or multi-party democracy, individualism, and material success in a market economy (Feuchtwang 2012). This research suggests that rural people choose religious teachings to achieve self-realization. Influenced by civilising goals, key believers in Buddhism and Christianity show initiative to change their lives and even their fate. They no longer wait for efficacy to be delivered but want to be enlightened and chosen. In return, they become precious to their clergies because they share the same evangelical zeal to preach their religion. Supporting the institution becomes their religious obligation.

This research confirms that women are still the main participants in religious matters, but they improve themselves within these institutions such as by learning to speak Mandarin fluently to explain teachings to others or sing in the choir. They are actively engaged in the religious practices they find efficacious whether it means to visit a
nearby temple or redeem one’s vow in a remote temple. Meanwhile, more men attend sermons in churches or temples to build on their knowledge.

The rise of individualism in the wider culture has led to a strong interest in self-cultivation. The rise of Monk Yinguang and home churches ride the tide of a personal-cultivational Modality. There will continue to be growth in these as they appeal to greater individualism, but their devotion is seen as more of a threat to the state and may grow to be a threat to the religious clergy licensed by the state. Clergies in three-self churches warn their believers not to be led astray by joining home churches while only after being accepted by the monk who runs the temple can Monk Yinguang’s disciples deliver a sermon.

8.4 New directions

While the majority of a close-knit village community believed in the village deity, it was extremely difficult to publicly present dissenting views (Chau 2006, p.71) and equally difficult to convert to Christianity. The disruption to the village has removed this barrier and allows villagers to express their diversity. Villagers who are nostalgic can relive the past during temple festivals while on the other hand Christians may reject all such “pagan” practices.

In 2020 the coronavirus unexpectedly raised village cohesion through their efforts (led by the village head) to lock down their village and stop any outsiders from entering. Once again, outsiders were seen as a symbol of uncertainty and danger. Temples and churches were closed to prevent public gatherings. Believers in the chat group shared how many sutras they recited each day and dedicated all accumulated merit to those infected with coronavirus while churches encouraged their congregations to pray for everyone’s safety. Monk Yinguang’s followers in Lu County even raised money through their chat group to donate vegetables to Wuhan and two brave believers drove a truck all the way there. They carried out what was taught in their teaching to save lives in their own way.

The future of popular religion is by no means assured. Its ambiguous legal status allows local officials to reshape it into folklore while Buddhism and Christianity continue to encroach on its believers and practices. This has led to a hollowing-out of local religious
knowledge and practices. Even local deities have lost the battle against deities with wider reputations. Popular religion survives in the individual domain by providing efficacy through the everlasting logic that the absence of anything untoward proves the deities’ efficacy.

Events like illness or major life changes do lead to conversion to another modality or religion in search of a better solution. In this way, believers at first attracted to the institution for its purported efficacy become absorbed into a dharma-based religiosity. Buddhism and Christianity share key elements in the revival: formal teachings, authoritative figures, explicable rituals, strict disciples and specific target audience. Christianity has proved more popular as it deals more successfully with both efficacy and individuality than Buddhism for three reasons: a. formality is established in every three-self church with the Sunday service, Bible study and choir to educate and unite the congregation; b. Christianity emphasizes the salvation of each person so the mother/wife is no longer encouraged to assume the religious responsibility for the family; c. Christians are proactive in spreading the word of God.

Temples, on the other hand, vary from the burn-incense-and-leave approach to monthly sermons for cultivating discipleship. The Huayan temple’s success is rare among temples and largely due to Master Feng’s ambition to pursue dharma and Monk Yinguang’s teachings to impart knowledge. Monk Yinguang successfully converted obscure sutras into tangible targets so believers were not kept in the dark. They felt confident in their pursuit of enlightenment.

Many scholars despair that Christianity breaks the religious balance or the polytheistic convention of rural China (He 2011; Hou and Hong 2008). I, on the other hand, see this as Christianity’s success. It challenges polytheistic worship with its thousands of years’ history and its insistence on exclusivity makes it as firm as a rock. Efficacy is not only from God’s power in healing or blessing but is embedded in the community and their morality.

Instead of rejecting the manifestation of efficacy, pastors and believers in churches witness to efficacy of Christian practices and beliefs. Lu describes the “progressive
strictness” in Buddhism to first lure people with practical benefits and then guide them with scriptures (Lu 2008). I found this in Buddhism and Christianity in Lu County. Clergies lower their expectations and sacrifice strict disciplines to accept those who may initially be seeking immediate results, and then target them to accept the liturgical, scriptural or personal-cultivational modalities in becoming more orthodox. It is a progressive procedure building on efficacy but then combines efficacy with discipline and teaching supported by the community itself. This process also shows traits of moderate reform since cleriges have to deal with believers who only seek efficacy. Compromises are made when monks offer one-on-one service despite their disgust with “superstitious” incense interpreters and pastors urge the congregation to internalize their belief but tolerate those who only sit in the parking lot.

The rise of the individual and the individualization of society should be viewed as a reflexive part of China’s state-sponsored quest for modernity since 1949 (Yan 2010, p.489). The state strove to minimize the influence of religion during this quest, but embracing religion has been the rural people’s unique way to pursue modernity. There is a difference between what institutional religions teach and what people envisage they should be (Zhuang 2012) and this is the popular version of Buddhism and Christianity where the efficacy plays a dominant role. Efficacy is socially constructed (Chao 2006; Feuchtwang 2001; Chen 2008) and experienced by the individual with or without a community.

In this sense, the Christian home church is another informal or popular version of Christianity. Believers adopt the personal-cultivational modality to realise knowledge and experience the freedom to interpret the Bible in their own individualist way. The secrecy of the home churches even fosters an intimate small community where members are tied together. This contrasts with the exclusive knowledge of popular religion’s incense interpreters who “treated their knowledge as a professional secret” (Wolf 1974, p.17).

Because of the diversity expressed through practices and modalities, it is futile to tear down unregistered temples or forbid home churches. The ramification of doing so will lead to Fei’s concern that it “will only generate those disadvantages associated with having destroyed a society ruled through rituals” (Fei 1992, p.107). The failing
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community morality is a good example. Officials “had never stopped to think of how popular religion may have been meaningful in the lives of the people” (Duara 1991). If they had stopped to think they may have realized this, but for the sake of religious regulation, they chose to ignore the persistent value of religious practices and convictions in people’s lives.
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