



Edited by Shin-yi Chao

Chinese Popular Religion in Text and Acts

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Chinese Popular Religion in Text and Acts



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*Edited by
Shin-yi Chao*

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Cover illustration: Shin-yi Chao
Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden
Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6372 362 6
E-ISBN 978 90 4855 036 4 (pdf)
DOI 10.5117/9789463723626
NUR 718

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Acknowledgements

I would like to take the opportunity to express my appreciation to the contributors of the volume. They have been most understanding and generous with their time and resources in helping me during the translating and editing process. Thanks are also due to Professor Stephan Feuchtwang and the anonymous reviewer who offered inspiring suggestions and piercing criticism on the manuscript. Their comments helped to make this a better book. My utmost gratitude goes to my husband, Kevin Clark, who edited the English of the translated chapters and my own from the first draft to the page proofs. Without his patience and scholarly expertise, I would not have been able to carry out the project as such.

This volume grew out of a project originally under the auspices of the Humanity Center, University of Rochester. The support from Professor Joan S. Rubin, former Director of the Humanity Center, is deeply appreciated. Although the volume itself was completed without a designated grant, the translation at its initial stage received funding from the university's School of Arts and Sciences. The staff at the university's Rush-Rhees Library has been an invaluable source of help. In particular, the interlibrary loan department fetches books and articles on my behalf across the US at lightning speed. I thank them profoundly.



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In memory of
Professor Daniel L. Overmyer
a pioneer in the study of Chinese popular religion



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Introduction

Text, Acts, and Traditionalization: Performing Chinese Popular Religion

Shin-yi CHAO 趙昕毅

This volume explores Chinese popular religion practiced among people across social strata from the late medieval to present times. As a creative cultural expression, popular religion—ranging from village-centered local practices to countrywide movements—has been a major confluence of social groups in the long *durée* of Chinese tradition. Events like life-rhythm ceremonies, including mortuary events, calendrical festivals (ghost festivals, for example), temple fairs, and pilgrimages all involve participation of the clergy, the laity, the elite, the commoners, the government, and the governed. The discussions also draw in institutional religion, since popular religion, as the chapters will amply show, has been in constant discourse with the ideological structure imposed from the top.

Popular religion surely has its autonomy, but it does not live in a sanitized vacuum free from impacts of the state and the clergy. Common people have had access, however indirect, to the reservoir of symbols of the three “great teachings” (Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism) and have taken inspiration from the tenets and practices generated or refined by so-called high culture. Folk tales, for example, recruit canonic Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian figures as miracle workers who grant this-worldly rewards. Beneath the pragmatic pursuit of happiness that characterizes popular religion lays the narrative constructed by concepts of karma, samsara, immortality, bureaucratic hierarchy, albeit with alterations fitting the worldview of the common folk. The learned clergy and scholar-officials often rebuff the folk renditions of institutional religious doctrines and liturgies as distortive. Such criticism, nevertheless, effectively betrays the autonomy and potency of popular religion. Omitting institutional religion when studying popular religion, ironically, risks an inadequate assessment of the creativity of popular religion in appropriation.

Chao, Shin-yi (ed): *Chinese Popular Religion in Text and Acts*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023.

DOI: 10.5117/9789463723626_INTRO



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“There are Daoist, Buddhist and government influences,” Daniel Overmyer has pointed out, “but they must be adapted to the needs of local communities.”¹ If we were ever under the impression that the state and the clergy were in control of shaping the Chinese religious landscape, that is largely because the materials produced by the state and the elite are too readily accepted as reality instead of wishful thinking. The attempts by the state to regulate popular religion through bans, laws, and the like—are too often taken to have been successful. Once researchers place their attention on texts produced or employed by common folk, as the contributors have done, the ascendancy of people in their own religious matters becomes clear.

While essays in this volume are historical in scope—ranging from late medieval to present times—they are ethnographic in approach. The boots-on-the-ground method of historiography has been forcefully argued in recent decades.² A combination of field studies and historiographical research is the shared methodology among the contributors. They all have done their share of fieldwork searching the “archive of the people”³ and folk canons in locating and collecting primary texts from oral tradition, visual culture, and local ritual manuscripts. Libraries, in the meantime, have also been eagerly searched. Newspapers, flyers, diaries, gazetteers, and religious canons all have been keenly utilized.

The purpose of this volume is not to offer an all-inclusive survey of Chinese popular religion. Instead, the volume explores in depth selected practices and experiences. While adding new materials and analysis to well-known varieties of belief such as the cults focusing on doomsday, the underworld, or Lord Guan, the research also draws attention to under-the-radar deities and holy figures hiding in the mountainous countryside or among the urban crowd.

Texts, Acts, and Agency

Contributors to this volume hail from an array of academic disciplines—history, anthropology, folklore studies, religious studies, and Sinology—with diverse theories and methods for assessing Chinese popular religion. What

1 Overmyer, *Local Religion in North China in the Twentieth Century*, 1.

2 This approach has been argued, showcased, and reviewed in Overmyer, “Lishi, wenxian he shidi diaocha,” 212; in Overmyer ed., *Ethnography in China Today*; Jordan and Overmyer, *Flying Phoenix*; Sutton, *Steps of Perfection*; and more recently, Thomas DuBois and Jan Kiely, ed., *Fieldwork in Modern Chinese History*.

3 DuBois and Kiely, *Fieldwork in Modern Chinese History*, xvii.



we have in common is the taking of texts as the starting point for investigation. Why texts? Popular religion is, after all, act oriented. Nevertheless, texts entail acts in popular culture—popular religion in our case. Conventionally, the word text connotes written or printed words. In studying popular culture, however, texts are often transcriptions or descriptions of something that was never in writing originally, such as an interview, a folktale in oral tradition, a performance, a practice, an object, and others alike. Thus, scholars have argued for an extended usage of the word text that “stands for any interpreted object, verbal or otherwise.”⁴ Text is “things,” whether “a song, a story, a dance, or a cooking pot,”⁵ but not just the “things” *per se*; the “interpreted object” includes the process of producing and receiving the “things.” Text is the fulcrum for studying the people behind the two intersected actions, producing and receiving. In a case study of spirit writing, Stephen Feuchtwang adeptly characterizes texts as a “performance of written emotion.”⁶ As Clifford Geertz analogizes, “The culture of a people is an assemblage of texts.”⁷

The texts of popular religion elicit acts. Sectarian scriptures, for example, urge the audience to take action. “Faithful and pious” actions are prerequisites for salvation.⁸ In response, generations of sectarian leaders and members diligently “practice scriptures,” borrowing the title of Barend ter Haar’s recent book, with acts of devotion.⁹ *Gongguo ge* 功過格 (“ledgers of merits and demerits”), a type of ethical instruction itemizing and quantifying supernatural retributive justice, abetted the reshaping of the moral cultivation among the scholar-officials and beyond.¹⁰ Short versions of *gongguo ge* were further generated for mass circulation as a sub-genre of “books of piety.”¹¹ The rapid growth of salvationist religion and “redemptive societies,” in Prasenjit Duara’s terminology, in the early twentieth century resulted from soteriological meliorism promoted in texts produced via spirit writing.¹² At times, readers respond to texts vehemently and creatively. The

4 Titon, “Text,” 69. This is a revised and extended version of a journal article under the same title by the same author in *Journal of American Folklore* 108.430 (1995): 432–48.

5 Wilgus, “The Text Is the Thing,” 244.

6 Feuchtwang, *The Anthropology of Religion, Charisma, and Ghosts Chinese Lessons for Adequate Theory*, 100.

7 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 448.

8 Overmyer, *Precious Volumes*, 282.

9 Ter Haar, *Practicing Scripture*.

10 Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit*.

11 Goossaert, “Late Imperial Chinese Piety Books.”

12 Duara, “The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism.” Philip Clart and David Ownby assert that “texts shaped their [redemptive societies] identities and fueled their rapid expansion”;



centuries-old doomsday oracle reincarnated in modern print in the summer of 1923 stirred unprecedented hysteria among the public, as demonstrated in Fan Chun-wu's chapter in this volume. Upon encountering the challenges from the Western world and its religion, redemptive societies reconfigured their old eschatology into a global mission of human redemption.¹³

In addition to soliciting acts, texts also mediate acts. A deity who originated in Shandong and was introduced to Shanxi in the thirteenth century, for example, would not have been fully integrated into the local pantheon without help from the mechanism of local oral tradition (see chapter 8, this volume). Inscriptions on stelae, plaques, and gratitude banners that grace temple constructions and grounds, another example, perform acts of authorization through their physical appearance. They convey messages beyond verballity through a sociocultural symbol system. Adam Chau writes: "More than, and sometimes rather than, *reading* these texts, the audience *feels* the force of their presence" (chapter 2, this volume). In such cases, the inscriptions mediate desired effects not through conceptual contents but as material things.

Chau's excursus highlights the concept of "agency of things" or object agency. Catherine Bell has argued that texts should be "seen not simply as expressions or reflections of changing social situations but as dynamic agents of change."¹⁴ Alfred Gell, who is credited to be the *de facto* founder of the object agency theory, contends that "objectification in artefact-form is how social agency manifests and realizes itself"¹⁵ Human beings are the primary agents in need of objects as secondary agents to execute the agency. *Habitus*, for example, cannot be formulated without the material world. The prayer wheels in Buddhist monasteries, another example, generate not only meritorious power for temple goers but also desired effects on them.

The object agency theory has met its share of challenges. The concept of agency was first introduced into social sciences to describe the relationship

see their "Introduction," in Clart, Ownby, and Wang eds., *Text and Context in the Modern History of Chinese Religions*, 7. See also DuBois, "The Salvation of Religion?" 126–31; Katz and Goossaert, *The Fifty Years That Changed Chinese Religion, 1898–1948*, chapter 4; and Palmer, "Chinese Redemptive Societies and Salvationist Religion". For surveys of earlier studies on the topic, see Ownby, "New Perspectives on the 'Dao' of 'Huidaomen,'" 563–78, and Schumann, "Redemptive Societies," 184–212.

13 See chapter 1 of this volume. For research focusing more on religious sectarianist influence on the political aspects of China-Japan collaboration in the Republic period, see Shi Lu 施陸 [Erik Christopher Schicketanz]. "Minguo shiqi jiujiu sixiang yu zhengzhi lunshu."

14 Bell, "Ritualization of Texts and Textualization of Ritual in the Codification of Taoist Liturgy," 369.

15 Gell, *Art and Agency*, 21. Gell defines an agent as "one who 'causes events to happen' in their vicinity," *Art and Agency*, 16.



between the culture/structure/system of society and the individuals within.¹⁶ Agency is “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act,” Laura Ahearn writes, “while praxis (or practice) can be considered the action itself.”¹⁷ The social structure shapes individuals’ actions which in turn reconfigure society. As acts of reconfiguring continue and accumulate, structural change eventually occurs to the system. Human beings possess the capacity, or agency, to make change. Things as things, scholars opposing the object theory argue, lack “personhood” to be an agent and cannot be said to have agency.¹⁸ However, in social sciences, things are studied as “persons” with life (“social life”), biographies (“cultural biography”) and genealogies.¹⁹ A thing “grows” beyond the intention of its creators as it reaches the recipients. Scriptures, for example, were produced to distribute the messages. Yet, numerous tales have been told about scriptures becoming sacred objects capable of protecting their pious owners by performing supernatural feats. Objects mediate between the initial objectives of the production and the repurposed functions by the recipients through their agency.

A looming issue concerning texts in studying popular religion is the presumed elite dominance in textual production and reproduction. To address this concern, two intersecting facts are in play: First, common people also produce texts. Second, the common people reproduce and reconfigure the elite’s texts upon receiving them.

Texts available and deployed for studying popular culture, or popular religion in our case, have gone beyond what was created by official-scholars and eminent clergy.²⁰ The Chinese Folklore Movement of the 1920s and 1930s engendered the modern scholarly inquiry across academic fields to explore the voice of the great masses. Local religious tales, practices, and beliefs have been transcribed, collated, and analyzed as part of folklore and social history. Since then, scholars in various disciplines have striven to expand the horizon of sources.²¹ They conducted fieldwork, traveled among archives, searched antiquarian inventories, and even learned to navigate through

16 Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*; Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*; Ortner, “Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties.”

17 Ahearn, “Language and Agency,” 118; see also pp. 112, 117.

18 For a succinct survey of the disputes against the object theory, see Feldman, “Object Agency?” 149–51.

19 Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things,” 64–91; Hoskins, “Agency, Biography and Objects,” 74–83.

20 Johnson, “Communication, Class, and Consciousness in Late Imperial China,” 34; DuBois, *The Sacred Village*, 2–4; Overmyer, *Precious Volumes*; Cao, *Zushi de zupu*.

21 For a critical review of the modern folklore studies (*minsuxue* 民俗學) in China in the earlier part of the twentieth century, see Faure, “They Went to the People but Did They Hear Them?”

online databases. A body of texts beyond the so-called high culture or Great Traditions has been amassed. Materials thus utilized in this volume spread across fields: oral interviews, visual art, leaflets, hand-copied manuscripts, uncatalogued and repurposed stelae, un-canonized liturgical manuals possessed by unordained ritual experts, scriptures and commentaries produced by sectarian groups, on top of standard sources such as gazetteers, newspapers, diaries, memoirs, and sectarian scriptures. The aim is to carry out sympathetic engagements with the emic-internal perspectives of people whom they study while expatiating etic-analytic narratives.

Emphasis on nonconventional sources does not mean denying the influence of texts produced by elites. The common folk do not (and did not) live in a cultural vacuum, as Skinner's exposition of standard marketing areas has shown.²² While villages might very well have remained "relatively insulate" even in the 1930s,²³ they have not been immune to inculcation from the upper echelons of the socio-cultural-political realm. For example, the tale of Meng Jiang 孟姜, which triggered the abovementioned Folklore Movement in the 1920s, found its origins in the Classics.²⁴ Yet, the elite influence on folk religion is far from direct and straightforward. The cult of the goddess sisters Ehuang 娥皇 and Nüying 女英 in Hongdong 洪洞 in southern Shanxi Province is an illuminating example.²⁵ Ehuang and Nüying were historical figures, so to speak; they were the daughters of King Yao 堯 and wives of King Shun 舜, the two sage-kings most exalted in Chinese historical records and the Classics. However, in the cult of Ehuang and Nüying in Hongdong, the two sage-kings faded into background figures. The main religious festival in the area is an annual two-day multi-village procession that escorts the two goddesses' statuettes in palanquins from their husband's temple to their father's (the two temples are called Temple of King Yao and Temple of King Shun respectively). This celebratory procession and associated temple fairs have won recognition as "intangible cultural heritage" at the state level in recent decades through a hard-won campaign.²⁶ Some villagers have been earnestly involved in the campaign. Despite their rather meager school education (middle school at the best), they self-learned reading classical Chinese and researched information about King Yao and King Shun in

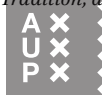
22 Skinner, "Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China: Part I," 3–43.

23 Huang, *The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China*, 219.

24 Chiu-kuei Wang, "From Pao-chüan to Ballad." *Asian Culture Quarterly* 9.1 (1981): 48–65.

25 Chen, *Beiguoshenqu de da niangniang*.

26 You, *Folk Literati, Contested Tradition, and Heritage in Contemporary China*.



traditional records, especially the Classics, which have been deemed as the *crème de la crème* of the literati legacy. The villagers cited elite-created texts to elaborate, if not to prove, their own narrative of their local cult as well as its legitimacy. Recognizing agency in villagers' reconstruing of elite texts allows for a more nuanced discussion of local tradition and the act of reading.

Reading, as illustrated above, is a process during which readers de-contextualize and re-contextualize a text in their own contexts. A reader receives a text; he or she reproduces and performs it by digesting and transmitting it. This process gives rise to different interpretations and understandings in different reading groups. The meanings of texts, from scriptures to rituals, easily go beyond the reach of the original authorial intentions in the recipients' interpretations. Furthermore, the direction to which the recipients take their interpretations is determined less by the individual readers than by the community that hosts the readers, whether a village or an association (from a religious organization to a book club). Not only do the creators of texts lack control over the interpretations, but also the readers themselves. While reception of texts is a process of a reader's own mind, this mind is informed with the impact of the "interpretative communities" in which the reader is situated, argues Stanley Fish.²⁷ An interpretation might be embraced by one interpretative community but ignored by others.²⁸ For example, the reading of the *Daodejing* 道德經 according to the *Xiang'er* 想爾 commentary was held authoritative in the early Celestial Master (*Tianshi* 天師) community but was unnoticed in literati circles at the time.²⁹

The "interpretative community" theory applies not only to interpreting verbal texts but also to material texts, as the following eighth-century anecdote attests. A gravely ill elite woman made a donation to cast two Buddha statues.³⁰ Before the statues were completed, she passed away. Demons came, seized her soul, and headed to a mountain. Suddenly two rather dirty-looking individuals appeared. They rescued the soul from the beastly hoard and returned it to her dead body. The woman came back to life. The story concluded by identifying the two rescuers

27 Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 322.

28 Titon, "Text," 71.

29 For a scrupulous introduction of the *Xiang'er* commentary, in addition to a full English translation, see Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 29–148.

30 Dudbridge, "Buddhist Images in Action: Five Studies from the Tang," 385. The original story is in Li Fang (925–996) et al., ed., *Taiping guangji*, 386.3080.



as “the two freshly cast Buddhas.”³¹ They were not the celestial Buddhas which the statues represented, Dudbridge points out, but the statues themselves. The statues were freshly cast but not yet cleaned, so their manifestations looked dirty. Such an understanding of Buddhist icons embodied “a theology [that] bears much more relation to the age-old system of sacrificial cults” in indigenous Chinese religion.³² In other words, a Chinese Buddhist, albeit a devoted and elite one, understood Buddhist images through the framework of her indigenous “interpretative community.”

As for the social agency of written texts, it has long been effectively democratized thanks to the advancement of the printing industry. Chinese society ventured into the age of printing by the tenth century.³³ At the end of the Tang dynasty (618–690, 705–904), the infrastructure was developed for producing “crude popular prints” for mass sale.³⁴ An unintended result of this development was that publishing could be commissioned at a price affordable for the less advantaged. Meanwhile, reproducing scriptures as a ritual donation was advocated as a true charity worthy of merit in the Chinese religious economy.³⁵ With the availability and affordability of printing facilities along with the promise of karmic rewards, ordinary people were ready to sponsor the reproduction of religious books for distribution. Self-publishing was no longer an exclusive privilege of institutes and people of means. Common people could fund the printing of texts of their own choice to spread messages that they endorsed.

With or without printing techniques, texts—in writing, orality, and imagery—play a significant role in ritual discourse advancing the evolution of religious traditions.³⁶ Iconographic tableaux and ritual literature materialize the discursive agency of ritual traditions. The popular cult of the infernal Ten Kings that surfaced in the late ninth century is a good example.³⁷ By the end of the twelfth century, artisan studios in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, were

31 Dudbridge, “Buddhist Images in Action,” 385.

32 Ibid., 388.

33 Chia and de Weerd, eds., *Knowledge and Text Production in an Age of Print: China, 900–1400*.

34 Dudbridge, “A Thousand Years of Printed Narrative in China,” 55.

35 Bell, “Printing and Religion in China;” and ter Haar, “Buddhist-Inspired Options.”

36 Stevenson, “Text, Image, and Transformation in the History of the *Shuilu fahui*, the Buddhist Rite for Deliverance of Creatures of Water and Land,” 37–38; Bell, “Ritualization of Texts.”

37 For the initial and early stages of the Ten Kings cult, see Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism*.



producing hanging portraits of the Ten Kings to be used in ritual settings.³⁸ The scrolls depict the Kings sitting in imperial headgear behind large desks in majestically decorated courts. Suave-looking gentlemen in civil official attire hold written records in their hands, while more papers are on the Kings' desks. On the ground before the Kings are deceased wrongdoers being punished by tortures corresponding to the verdicts delivered. These ritual paintings, argues Lothar Ledderose, “transformed the outwardly Buddhist hells into courtrooms, and the kings into bureaucrats.”³⁹

In addition to ritual paintings, liturgical manuals also facilitated transformation along with diffusion of the Ten Kings cult. As Wang Chien-chuan demonstrates (chapter 4, this volume) Daoist texts from the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), both scriptures and ritual companions, adapted the Buddhist Ten Kings into the Daoist Ten Perfected Lords of the Subterranean Bureau (*difu shi zhenjun* 地府十真君). A further evolution of the ritual tradition of the Ten Kings worship unfolded during the Ming-Qing period through ritual calendars, liturgical manuals, and religious “precious scrolls” (*baojuan*). The cult of the Ten Kings refashioned the Indic Buddhist hell with the Chinese bureaucratic ideal. This new infernal court system then reconfigured the netherworld landscape created in ancient Chinese popular belief as well as that of early Daoism.

The ritual recitation of “precious scrolls” is another example of liturgical texts facilitating adaptation. In Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, the worship of Taimu 太姥 (*tailao* in Mandarin, “great-grandmother”),⁴⁰ the mother of the Wutong 五通 (discussed below), has been popular since the fifteenth century if not earlier. The Taimu precious scrolls (太姥寶卷) have been in the repertoire of every “scroll-recitation master” (*xuanjuan xiansheng* 宣卷先生) in Suzhou. These masters have inserted the liturgical directives adapted from local Daoists' ritual manuals into their own ritual of reciting the Taimu precious scrolls (chapter 5, this volume). Through the Daoist liturgical framework and popular religious oral tradition, the Taimu cult has continued to reinvent itself and mediate people's life experiences.

38 The so-called Ningbo scrolls were exported to clients as far away as Korea and Japan. Approximately 400 pieces of the Ningbo scrolls, produced between 1195–1279, have survived. They are preserved in museums across the world, especially in Japan; see Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*, 163–85; and Kwon, *Efficacious Underworld*, 65–74. Kwon argues convincingly that the Ten Kings hanging scrolls at the Seikadō Bunko Art Museum in Tokyo were products of Korea in the style of Northern Song China.

39 Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*, 163–85, especially 163.

40 The Chinese characters are written as 太姥 and pronounced as “taimu” locally. Berezkin and Goossaert, “The Wutong Cult in Modern and Contemporary Suzhou Area,” 153.



Tradition and Traditionalization

The open-ended adaptation and inspiration between ritual traditions highlight the consideration of tradition as a process instead of a static state of the past. The paradoxical concept of “new tradition” has long been deployed in the study of popular culture.⁴¹ A century before the term “invented tradition” was made fashionable,⁴² folklorist Edwin Sidney Hartland in 1885 contended, “Tradition is always being created anew and that traditions of modern origin wherever found are as much within our province as ancient ones.”⁴³ Generative accumulation is an obvious impetus of the constant renewal. Every generation has its own inventions that end up flowing into the reservoir of tradition and refreshing it. Unlike a reservoir, however, tradition does not develop organically. The development process involves volitionally selecting and recreating to fulfill updated social purposes.⁴⁴ New generations selectively preserve the past pursuant to their own emerging social context. Chosen experiences and practices are described as “traditional” and then become “tradition.” Thus, tradition is not an inherent property of the past but rather a quality ascribed to a selected past by contemporaries. The continuing impacts of the present on the past are encapsulated in the notion of “traditionalization,” a process of projecting the present into the past in order to create the assumption of an unbroken genealogy tracing back to a tacit collective ancestry.⁴⁵ Tradition is not the past but a selective past, real and invented.

Scholars have been analyzing Chinese popular religion through the concept of multivocality and the results have been fruitful.⁴⁶ Traditionalization in light of multivocality of religious symbols can serve as a new paradigm to approach the religious pantheon and rituals. One good example is the cult of Wutong 五通. Wutong, a name that literally means “five (*wu*) penetrations (*tong*),” were venerated as saintly guardians (*shenggong* 聖公) in Wuyuan, Anhui, in the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127). Yet, this saintly pentad, with multiple reincarnations in the future in either one

41 Ben-Amos, “The Seven Strands of Tradition,” 99.

42 Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*.

43 Burne, Machado y Alvarez, and Hartland, “The Science of Folk-Lore,” 120.

44 Dell Hymes, “Folklore’s Nature and the Sun’s Myth,” 353–56; Ben-Amos, “The Seven Strands of Tradition,” 116.

45 Dell Hymes, “Folklore’s Nature and the Sun’s Myth.”

46 See, for example, Robert P. Hymes, *Way and Byway*; Kang, *The Cult of the Fox*; Weller, *Resistance, Chaos, and Control in China*; Katz, *Demon Hordes and Burning Boats*; Watson, “Standardizing the Gods.”



or five individuals, had a dubious origin in mountain goblins.⁴⁷ The Song court demolished Wutong temples in Kaifeng as part of a campaign against illicit cults while endorsing the Wutong spirits in Wuyuan and granting the latter new titles, so they also became collectively known as the Wuxian 五顯 (Five Manifestations).⁴⁸ The Wuxian were welcomed into both the Daoist and Buddhist pantheons with new titles of bodhisattva and numinous-officer (*lingguan* 靈官) respectively. In line with the diabolic side of their past, Wutong came to be worshiped across the Jiangnan area in the late Ming as spirits who granted quick but often ephemeral wealth in exchange for sexual favors and other offerings. This image of god of wealth, “which encompasses a number of distinct supernatural figures,” argues Richard von Glahn, served as “symbolic representations of money” in a late Ming Jiangnan that was undergoing dramatic socio-economic change and instability.⁴⁹ At the same time, the Wutong were adapted by the publisher-writer Yu Xiangdou 余象斗 (fl. 1588–1609) in the *Journey to the South* as the three-times reincarnated protagonists that are named Wuxian, Huaguang and Wutong in each incarnation respectively.⁵⁰ This amalgam, which resulted from “creative syncretism,” also functioned as sources of symbols in the Wutong cult, argues Ursula-Angelika Cedzich.⁵¹

The Wutong-Wuxian worship was adopted in Fuzhou, Fujian Province, during Qing times to be the new identity of an illicit cult of the pentad of plague deities, the Five Emperors (Wudi 五帝). The local elites strategically identified the Five Emperors to be Wuxian of Wuyuan for the purpose of legitimation, and the common folk enthusiastically approved this

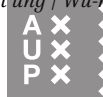
47 Both Ursula-Angelika Cedzich and Richard von Glahn reconstructed the trajectory of the Wutong from their devious past. See Cedzich, “The Cult of the *Wu-t’ung/Wu-hsien* in History and Fiction,” 156–80; von Glahn, “The Enchantment of Wealth,” 651–57; and von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*, 180–221.

48 The court of Song Emperor Huizong 宋徽宗 (r. 1100–1126) granted titles on Wutong of Wuyuan in 1109 despite the earlier demolishing of Wutong temples in Kaifeng for lack of official registrations. In 1174, Song Emperor Xiaozong 孝宗 (r. 1162–1189) granted Wutong of Wuyuan new titles, each containing the character *xian* 顯, hence the name Wuxian; see Luo Yuan 羅源 (1136–1184), *Xin’an zhi*, 5.2a; and Hansen, *Changing Gods in Medieval China, 1127–1276*, 133.

49 Von Glahn, “The Enchantment of Wealth,” 653. Von Glahn continues to argue that the Gods of Five Paths to Wealth surfacing in the eighteenth century rewarded fortune to the worthy just like proper deities should do.

50 The full title of the fiction is “Biography of the Wuxian Numinous Officer and Great Emperor, Huaguang the Celestial King” (*Wuxian lingguan dadi Huaguang tianwang zhuan* 五顯靈官大帝華光天王出身志傳).

51 Cedzich, “The Cult of the *Wu-t’ung / Wu-hsien* in History and Fiction.”



“manipulative misidentification.”⁵² A “traditional” worship of the Wuxian-Wutong in Fuzhou was invented.

Back in Jiangnan, or Suzhou to be specific, the Wutong cult took yet another detour, as Chen Yongchao’s chapter on the veneration of Taimu in this volume shows. This time, the five spirits were assimilated and eclipsed. Yu Xiangdou’s fiction, introduced above, depicts the protagonists as filial sons in three different reincarnations tirelessly rescuing their original mother. The mother, respectfully referred to as Taimu in Suzhou, has become the central figure of a domestic cult. Wutong and their wives were worshipped only collaterally next to her. The Taimu–Wutong cult illuminates the complex and endless trajectory of recreated tradition.

The process of reinventing in popular worship takes place simultaneously with heterodox dissemination and hegemonic consolidation of worship. The Wutong cult is only one example. Lord Guan (Guangong 關公, d. 220), another example, was a military man when alive and his worship entered monastic Buddhism by the late eighth century.⁵³ Yet, in the eighteenth century, spirit-writing groups whose members consisted largely of self-labeled Confucian moralists, recast Lord Guan into a spokesperson of Confucian tradition to rebuke Buddhist clerics (Li Shih-wei’s chapter, this volume).⁵⁴ Further examples of prolonged tales of gods and miracle workers being shaped and reshaped are analyzed in Vincent Goossaert’s and Wang Yao’s essays in this volume. These tales—referred to as “myth” in religious history and “religious folklore” in folklore/ethnography studies—have been constantly updated with reframed narratives. The deified and canonized figures in new narratives, with added twists or omitted details, project a new social reality. They justify re-structured pantheons, divine protocols, and ritual lineages. The past is recounted in myriad local and temporal variations. The present creates its tradition to legitimate its envisaged future. As Glassie’s often-cited paradox states: “Accept, to begin, that tradition is the creation of the future out of the past.”⁵⁵

Tradition has been compared to a folk canon, which signals its authority in authenticating practices and institutions in the current social norms.⁵⁶ The status quo is validated by reference to the past state (real or fictive).

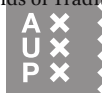
52 Szonyi, “The Illusion of Standardizing the Gods.”

53 The earliest record of Lord Guan as a partner of a Buddhist monastery-temple was written in 802, but the tale must have been in circulation before then, see Ter Haar, *Guan Yu*, 28–9.

54 For an analysis that places the anticlerical discourses in late imperial China, see Goossaert, “Late Imperial Chinese Anticlericalism and the Division of Ritual Labor.”

55 Glassie, “Tradition,” 395.

56 Ben-Amos, “The Seven Strands of Tradition,” 105–16, esp. 116.



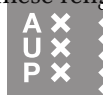
Society succumbs to its renewed needs for authority in legitimization by canonizing the selective past with creative interpretation.

Canonizing into tradition, or traditionalizing, is a process that needs a medium, visual or verbal. The Buddhist *shuilu* liturgy was perpetuated on Baodingshan, Dazu, through stone carvings of iconographic tableaux (see chapter 3, this volume). The numerous late imperial tales of the Daoists nicknamed Scorched Heads being punished for breaching the taboo against pollution, reinforced the emphasis in Daoism on ritual purity in the wake of the acceptance of “impure” local cults into the Daoist liturgical programs (chapter 7, this volume). Gods “traveled” to a new place and entered the local religious tradition through new oral tales and the mechanism of naming deities (chapter 8, this volume).

Textualization surely is not guarantee for permanent traditionalization. In a local cult focusing on Wei Huacun 魏華存 (chapter 9, this volume), learned men kept written records of and guidelines for their village collective pilgrimages in order to preserve their cherished tradition as they remembered it. The process of traditionalization through textualization was underway, but it was abruptly interrupted by upheaval and change. Even the written text itself was discarded and almost ended up being recycled.

However, when a new generation traditionalizes its past, or “restores the tradition,” texts are the most heavily consulted references. This is demonstrated in Ye Tao’s essay in this volume on the retrieved practice of presenting paper stelae at the Zongsi temple in Zhuyang 祝陽 Town (*zhen* 鎮), not far from Mt. Tai. When the villagers reinstated the use of mock stelae, they looked into transcribed interviews and older people’s recollections for authenticity and authority. Texts again, like the stelae and gratitude banners at temples that Adam Chau investigates (chapter 2, this volume), act as a source of legitimacy in the popular religious tradition.

This collection of essays is an outcome of the “Text, Context, and Performance” project sponsored by the Humanities Center, University of Rochester. The discussions center on Chinese popular religion but will also be of use to China scholars in popular culture from late medieval to contemporary times as well as non-China scholars in folklore, religious art, and ritual studies. Seven out of the ten contributors are from mainland China and Taiwan. They showcase some of the finest and newest research on popular religion that has been conducted in Chinese. The remaining three contributors are based in the United Kingdom, France, and the United States respectively. The contributors work in different fields (folklore, history, anthropology, and religious studies). Together, we seek to develop a cross-disciplinary new paradigm for studying Chinese religion in particular and Chinese society



in general. After all, popular religion diffuses and permeates throughout society.⁵⁷

Organization of the Book

The book is divided into four sections. The first section introduces the two types of interaction between text and acts: texts elicit acts and texts execute acts. The following three sections explore popular religion in text and acts through three aspects: ritual (including scriptures used in rituals), gods as well as god-like miracle workers, and finally practice/activities, particularly pilgrimage.

Section One: Texts and Acts

Fan Chun-wu's essay, "Confluence of Fears: The 1923 Doomsday Hysteria in China," brings our attention to redemptive societies, "the most significant religious phenomenon of the Republican era."⁵⁸ An etic-analytic category devised by Prasenjit Duara and other scholars, redemptive societies refer to the laity-led salvationist groups which surfaced in a wave during the Beiyang 北洋 warlord government period (1912–1927). Groups of this kind varied widely in nature and some of them did not even regard themselves as religious organizations. Nevertheless, they shared a core message of the coming of *kalpa*-catastrophes resulting from the perceived moral corruption in society at the time. Eschatology of this type had surfaced from time to time in late imperial China and was billed as heresy subject to government investigation. Nevertheless, the warlords and their administrations, for various reasons, were tolerant and even supportive at times. Redemptive societies enjoyed unprecedented freedom, however short-lived, and they developed quickly.

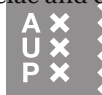
While their members spread across social strata, redemptive societies, especially the medium and large ones, were headed by literati with traditional education and conservative values. Their anxiety about the collapse of social norms under the onslaught of modernity was expressed in the form of eschatological beliefs. In August 1923, one such redemptive society openly predicted that the world would end on September 25 (the

57 Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*.

58 Goossaert and Palmer, *The Religious Question*, p. 121.

fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month) of that year. A collective hysteria ensued. Fan's essay investigates this short-lived yet widespread doomsday panic by exploring the social, technical, and intellectual infrastructure that facilitated its speedy advance. The apocalyptic narrative of the 1923 prophecy, as Fan demonstrates, was recycled from an old *kalpa*-catastrophe divination that had been in circulation since the sixteenth century (and still surfaces now and then, most recently in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic). However, in 1923, this old prophecy stirred a collective fear of unprecedented speed and scale. This reaction was due to the combined factors of newly imported scientific knowledge and print media, Fan argues. Redemptive societies used newspapers and newsletters to spread their messages, including the apocalyptic ones. They had come into contact with the West and had appropriated science as well as Christianity in substantiating their own eschatology. Modern printing houses were capable of reproducing tens of thousands of flyers in a matter of days. The news of Great Kantō Earthquake in Japan on September 1, 1923, reached China in a most timely fashion thanks to the new industry of newspapers. This earthquake, happening less than a month before the predicted doomsday, was taken by many as a prelude to the apocalypse and further escalated the preparation for survival. The predicted day came and went. The man who made the prediction mysteriously disappeared, while other religious leaders offered their own responses. In the end, points out Fan, this doomsday mania confirmed the importance of meliorism and universalism among the Chinese religious groups, who would later play a role in Sino-Japanese relations.

The next chapter, "Temple Inscriptions as 'Text Acts'" by Adam Yuet Chau, takes the reader into a different aspect of text and act. Inspired by speech act theory, Chau proposes the method of the "text act" and explains that "a text act is an act of writing or inscribing that conveys its power through its physical presence as much as, or more than, the specific contents in the text" (p. 81). He first looks into banners and plaques conspicuously displayed on temple walls and windows. They are inscribed with fixed expressions of gratitude for favorable divine interference in times of crisis or critical occasions. These banners and plaques are so profoundly associated with proclaiming the gods and temples' benevolent miracles to a public audience via traditional customs, Chau argues, that temple-goers know these are "ex-votos" even before reading the inscriptions. Chau then proceeds to analyze another type of commonly seen temple inscriptions: those on stelae and cliffs. One of the temples studied is the Heilongwang 黑龍王 (Black Dragon King) temple in Shaanbei 陝北. This temple boasts an impressive display of stelae and cliff carvings which "exude and display



the legitimacy and power” of both the temple and the temple boss himself. The illocutionary force is conveyed through multiple channels rather than just the content of the inscriptions. The authorship, sponsorship (cultural and political elite from the outside world), and the visual presentation (the size and quality of the stele and the total aesthetic impression) all work together to impress the viewers of the temple’s “power and legitimacy.” The visual presentations “produce the intended impacts on the viewers that could not be openly narrated through words.” Finally, the stelae also offer a rare glimpse of the complexity of deity worship in local religion. For example, a water goddess was credited for a miracle of healing (Figure 2.2). In conclusion, Chau asserts, “in a ‘text-rich’ society such as China (and even in ‘text-poor’ regions such as Shaanbei), text acts are one of the most effective vehicles of communicating and wielding power and legitimacy.”

Section Two: Ritual and Scripture

Hou Chong’s chapter, “*Shuilu* Rites and the Baodingshan Rock Carvings of Dazu,” offers a theory of the function and design of the magnificent rock carvings on Baodingshan 寶頂山 (Treasure Summit Mountain) that Buddhist abbot Zhao Zhifeng 趙智鳳 (1159–1249) labored over seven decades to create. Several interpretations have been proposed by Chinese scholars to characterize the underlying principle of the site’s layout and composition.⁵⁹ Unsatisfied with them, Hou theorizes that the Baodingshan complex was created as a venue for holding the “rites of deliverance of creatures of water (*shui* 水) and land (*lu* 陸)” or *shuilu*, a grand Chinese Buddhist ceremony for not only redeeming the departed souls but also for blessing the world of the living. The theory that the sculpted caves at Dazu played a role in the *shuilu* tradition was first proposed by Michel Strickmann,⁶⁰ but Daniel Stevenson, in his defining 2001 article on *shuilu*, voiced reservations on this interpretation.⁶¹ Hou’s article, with new materials, rejuvenates the discussion.

Hou presents three arguments to support his theory. First, he analyzes the verse found nearby Baodingshan that praises Zhao Zhifeng for “carving

59 In addition to interpretations proposed by Chinese scholars reviewed in Hou’s chapter, Angela Howard argues that the rock carvings at Baodingshan were based on esoteric Buddhism and “functioned as stations of pilgrimage route”; see Howard, *Summit of Treasures*, xiv.

60 Strickmann, *Mantras et mandarins*, 487, n. 19, as cited in Stevenson, “Text, Image, and Transformation in the History of the *Shuilu fahui*,” 64, n. 43.

61 Stevenson, “Text, Image, and Transformation in the History of the *Shuilu fahui*,” 41 and 64, n. 43.



the stones in pursuit of filial piety” (*keshi zhuixiao* 刻石追孝). Hou argues that the carving of the stones can be used in pursuit of filial piety because a ritual site for performance of *shuilu* was created through the carving. Second, the assemblage on the carvings is inclusive—from Buddhist and Daoist divine individuals to mortals and infernal creatures—and all of them, including humans and ghosts, are surrounded by clouds. These two traits, inclusivity and clouds, are properties of *shuilu* paintings which are signposts of ritual space for *shuilu*. Thirdly, the “(never) relapse and lose my bodhi-mind” *gāthā* inscribed on the site numerous times was a precept used in *shuilu* rites in the twelfth century. The presence of this *gāthā* signals the ritual function of the space as a venue of *shuilu*.

Continuing in exploring the salvific aspect of Chinese ritual, Wang Chien-chuan's chapter, “The Worship of the Ten Kings of Purgatory during the Ming-Qing Period,” investigates the prevalent cult of netherworld rulers administering postmortem justice. It brings new insights into the pivotal but understudied stage of the cult's transmission and transformation in late imperial times. Employing numerous texts in various genres—scriptures, liturgical manuals, piety books, precious volumes and others—Wang demonstrates how the cult of the Ten Kings, originating in Buddhist monasticism, reconfigured the earlier Chinese underworld landscape shaped in medieval liturgical Daoism even as it underwent Sinicization and localization in popular religious piety.

Although the worship of the Ten Kings is now syncretistic, it started as a Buddhist monastic ritual promoted and officiated over by monks. During the late Tang dynasty, Buddhist monks preached grotesque purgatorial punishments and advocated veneration of the ten purgatorial rulers for leniency. The worship expanded and evolved through the following millennium, Wang argues. During the Southern Song (1127–1279), the Ten Kings underwent Sinicization while venturing into the Daoist liturgical reservoir to inspire the invention of the Ten Perfected Lords of the underworld. In the mid-fifteenth century, a new veneration practice of observing the Ten Kings' birthdays began to take shape, thanks to the legend of Li Qing 李清 returning from death. The legend spread widely after being cited in a popular religious calendar/almanac. It was also incorporated into various genres such as ritual manuals, piety books, and precious scrolls (*baojuan*) with various degrees of modification. Some new versions of the Li Qing legend are barely recognizable. Nevertheless, the clergy were not eclipsed. Through the Qing dynasty, Buddhist monasteries continued to be the hub of producing and distributing liturgical manuals venerating the Ten Kings.



The next chapter, Chen Yongchao's "Feasting with the Great-grandmother: The Tea Banquet Ritual Programs and the Worship of Mother of Wutong," continues the discussion on liturgical adaptations in making and remaking ritual traditions through a comparative study of the ritual handbooks on the *chayan* 茶筵 or Tea Banquet. The Tea Banquet is a veneration practice in the cult of Taimu 太姥 (*tailao* in Mandarin, Great-grandmother), the mother of Wutong 五通 in Suzhou folklore. In comparison to her sons, Taimu is practically unknown among the Western academics.⁶² Yet, in the Suzhou area of Jiangsu Province in eastern China, local records leave no doubt that she has been worshipped as the family head over her five sons, collectively known as Wutong (among other titles), and five daughters-in-law. Tales about her life journey in multiple reincarnations were likely transmitted via ritual hymns during late imperial times.⁶³ Eventually, *baojuan* or "precious scrolls" with Taimu as the title character were developed. At least ten different precious scrolls dedicated to her have survived.⁶⁴ They vary in plot and character development, but they share the same ending: Taimu along with her sons and daughters-in-law hold a feast with innumerable divine guests. This lavish dinner party serves as the framework for the Tea Banquet ritual.

Combing through numerous liturgical manuals and interviews conducted during fieldwork in the Changshu area of greater Suzhou, Chen distinguishes two styles of Tea Banquet ritual performance: that of local Daoist experts and that of scroll-recitation masters. The former carries out the Tea Banquet as a self-standing ritual program. The scroll-recitation masters, however, compress the Tea Banquet into a segment of their recitation ritual performance.

The literary genre of *baojuan* was developed around the sixteenth century among religious sectarian groups and was quickly adopted into the general popular religious narrative.⁶⁵ Written in a prose form, *baojuan* is ideal for oral performances. Listening to recitations of precious scrolls (*xuanjuan* 宣卷) became an enjoyable pietistic pastime for laity by the seventeenth century. In the Changshu area, scroll-recitation, locally also known as *jiangjing* 講經 ("telling scriptures"), grew widely in the early nineteenth century. Through a detailed comparative study, Chen concludes that the

62 A recent publication in English on Wutong has introduced the Great-grandmother (there translated as Grand Dowager); see Berezkin and Goossaert, "The Wutong Cult."

63 Taimu *baojuan* is a generic title of the "precious scrolls" centered on the Great-grandmother; the individual scrolls may have alternative titles.

64 Chen, "Taimu *baojuan* de wenben goucheng ji qi yishi zhishe—jiantan Wu di shenling *baojuan* de lishi yuanyuan," 5–17. In the two appendices of the article, Chen provides a survey of the ten different Great-grandmother precious scrolls he has collected.

65 Overmyer, "Values in Chinese Sectarian Literature," 220.

scroll-recitation style of the Tea Banquet ritual derived from the Daoist style, even though scroll-recitation is a ritual tradition distinct from Daoism. After comparing his fieldwork notes with the older versions of the liturgical manuals, Chen further points out that the restored Tea Banquet, in both its Daoist and scroll-recitation styles, has been reduced in scale, though the way they are abridged differ due to the internal logic of their ritual frameworks.

A discussion on ritual in Chinese popular religion arguably requires inclusion of scripture as demonstrated in the last essay of the section, “Knowledge and Ritual: The Dual Nature of the *Scripture Illustrating the Holiness of Emperor Guan* (*Guandi mingsheng jing*)” by Li Shih-wei. Li offers a close reading of a spirit-writing text of Lord Guan (i.e., Emperor Guan), the deified general Guan Yu 關羽 (d. 220). Lord Guan is one of the most popular deities since the late imperial time. His cult has been the subject of excellent research.⁶⁶ The incessant attempts in reinventing his character by various social groups warrant scholarly interest.⁶⁷ Li’s analysis highlights the reinvention and transmission of Lord Guan worship through textualization and ritualization.

Guandi mingsheng jing 關帝明聖經 (hereafter *Mingsheng jing*), the title-text of this chapter, was produced through *fujū* 扶乩 (or *fuluan* 扶鸞), a type of spirit-writing ritual. *Fujū* can be traced back to a ninth-century custom: on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, women sought divination about the coming silkworm harvest.⁶⁸ In late Ming times, scholar-officials formed *fujū* groups and composed “morality books” (*shanshu* 善書) in the name of divinities through spirit writing. Lord Guan came to be one of the most common divine patrons of spirit writing cults by the eighteenth century.⁶⁹ Numerous revelations attributed to him were circulated in print.

66 For a recent major publication on the Lord Guan cult in English, see Barend ter Haar, *Guan Yu*. For the “superscription” of the images of Lord Guan, see Duara, “Superscribing Symbols.”

67 One of the striking reinventions of Guan Yu in contemporary China makes him a protagonist of bromance in the genre of slash fan fiction; see ter Haar, *Guan Yu*, 245; Tian, “Slashing the Three Kingdoms.” It might warrant notice that bromance fictions centering on Guan Yu are primarily written by woman authors for woman readers.

68 For succinct reviews on spirit writings in historical times, see the two classics: Xu Dishan (1894–1941), *Fujū mixín de yánjiú*; Jordan and Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix*; and Shiga, *Chūgoku no kokkurisan*. David Jordan also came across *Mingsheng jing* when he researched a sectarian spirit-writing group in Taiwan in the 1960s; see *Flying Phoenix*, xi. For the most recent research on spirit-writings, see Goosaert, *Making the Gods Speak* and Schumann and Valussi eds., *Communicating with the Gods*.

69 Records about Lord Guan giving moral admonishment through spirit writing appeared in the mid-reign of emperor Kangxi (r. 1662–1722), see Wang Chien-ch’uan, “Spirit Writing Groups in Modern China (1840–1937),” esp. 652–68, although Lord Guan might have his debut in spirit writing sessions as early as the mid-sixteenth century for purposes other than giving moral instructions, see ter Haar, *Guan Yu*, 211.



The *Mingsheng jing*, despite of being a latecomer, has been one of the most popular Lord Guan texts.

The *Mingsheng jing* represents a revisionist effort to proselytize “correct” beliefs, as Li demonstrates. First, it Confucianizes the godhead of Lord Guan; second, it Sinicizes the beliefs of reincarnation along with purgatory; and third, it rebukes Buddhist postmortem redemption rituals. The main text of *Mingsheng jing*, transmitted via spirit writing in the name of Lord Guan, is in a simple language style meant for easy recitation. This divine revelation should be recited daily and at special occasions (funerals, vow-making, etc.) for supernatural benefits. Faith-based charity groups also organized collective recitation of the *Mingsheng jing* at their meeting places along with elaborations by paid professional lecturers. Through ritual writing and reading, a revisionist interpretation of Lord Guan was produced, authenticated, and disseminated through reading, chanting, and lecturing. It is a classic by the common people and for the common people. Its significance in comprehending Chinese tradition is no less than that of the classics produced by the literati.

Section Three: Saints’ Legends and Gods’ Lore

Vincent Goossaert’s chapter, “Scorched Head: Daoist Exorcists and Their Divine Generals in Jiangnan Lore,” explores a series of thrilling narratives featuring the Daoist *fashi*-priest Scorched Head, a nickname derived from the burns on his head. The stories typically begin with the protagonist during apprenticeship learning the Thunder rites commanding Thunder generals. Either innocently or mischievously, he summons a Thunder general while on the toilet. The martial deity, realizing where he landed, angrily burns the trainee-priest’s head. Having learned his lesson, the novice eventually grows into a full master in the Thunder rites. The wound on his head, however, remains through his later career. He uses the pus from the open wound on his head to cure illnesses and to produce thunder to help individuals and the community.

Numerous legends of Scorched Heads circulate verbally and in print. They have constantly cross-hybridized during the process of transmission. Goossaert asserts that, read together, they are less biographical accounts than stories hiding core tenets. The Scorched Head legends obviously convinced the audience that the *fashi*-priesthood was a noble vocation. The stories also underscore the absolute taboo against ritual pollution. A simple transgression of saying invocations on the toilet



thus was punishable by severe head-burning, because the toilet represents the pollution of all pollutions. Yet, the wound on the priest's own body, Goossaert points out, is also the source from which the divine power derives. The Scorched Head stories are not only a reminder of the dangerous liminal status at the threshold between the apprentice and the master-priest but also of the belief that Daoist *fashi*-priests literally embodied divinities.

Wang Yao's 王堯 chapter, "Assimilation by Names: A Mechanism of Pantheon Development in Local Religion," investigates the transformation of a local pantheon through the fluidity of the name-identity association of deities. Wang's investigation centers on a group of deities who share final syllables in their titles, Erlang 二郎 ("second youngster/brother"). Within this group, an individual could be referred to by different titles and a title could be applied to different individual members (with distinct hagiographies and iconographies). This relatively flexible title and identity association did not derive from misidentifications, Wang argues, but resulted from a complicated local mechanism of naming deities, a mechanism that allows the locals to manipulate their gods' identities and status. Supplementing ethnology with epigraphy, she traces the changing association between the names and designations of several *Erlang* deities across Hongdong County over centuries. Her study shows that through fusion, lengthening, abridging, or adopting gods' appellations, villagers have been assimilating and promoting deities as well as apotheosizing new ones. Consequently, the local pantheon has expanded and is in constant revision.

The fluid identity of gods is not a unique phenomenon of Hongdong. Scholars have long noticed that popular religious deities such as the Jade Emperor, and city gods, etc., have changing identities. This has been linked to, in Feuchtwang's term, the "imperial metaphor," which points to the state's influence.⁷⁰ Wang Yao's research, however, highlights the indigenous impetus for the contingent godhood. From there, she addresses intriguing but understudied issues such as the autonomy of the local pantheon; the process of apotheosis; the mechanism of upward mobility along the divine hierarchy; and the impacts of imported deities on local religious landscapes.

70 Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion in China: The Imperial Metaphor* (London: Routledge, 2001). This was first published in 1992 under the title *Imperial Metaphor: Popular Religion in China*.

Section Four: Temple Festivals and Pilgrimages

Shin-yi Chao's chapter, "Building Temples and Making Pilgrimages: The Cult of a Daoist Immortal in Village China," explores an enduring local cult of a Daoist *xian* 仙 ("transcendent" or immortal), Wei Huacun 魏華存 (ca. 252–334). Her hagiographical materials in the Daoist canon convey that she received divine enfeoffment after finalizing her self-cultivation on Mt. Yangluo 陽洛 in northwest Henan Province. Daoist sources, however, fail to mention that the locals built a temple for her on Mt. Yangluo where they came to pray to her for resolving misfortunes such as droughts. From this temple, a tutelary-deity worship eventually unfolded, and by the mid-fourteenth century, it had developed into a network of branch temples scattered in villages across the area.

In addition to temple stelae, Chao deploys a hand-copied pamphlet from the turn of the twentieth century to reconstruct a village's collective pilgrimage during the Qing dynasty. The pamphlet contains the preparation calendar, inventory check list, the route, samples of announcements to be posted along the route, itemized budgets of payments in cash, instructions on proper behavior and speeches during the ritual visit, and finally, rosters of names and tasks of individual participants of parade troupes. More than logistical records, it showcases village authority in operation through religious affairs in the traditional times. The compiler explained that he wrote the records down in order to preserve the way things were and should be, so that future generations could follow them. The compiler's intention to traditionalize their practice through textualization failed, but it helped future researchers to reconstruct it.

Ye Tao's 葉濤 essay, "Stone Inscriptions on Mt. Tai and Contemporary Folk Pilgrimage: A Speculation on *Lefu Yinbei*," investigates a specific pilgrimage procedure in relation to the Taishan 泰山 cult. Taishan, or Mt. Tai, with its complex multifaced symbolism, has since the beginning of the twentieth century attracted modern academics such as Édouard Chavannes.⁷¹ The mountain has been one of the most important pilgrimage sites for all social strata thanks to its symbolic power of cultural and political legitimization as well as the reputed supernatural efficacy of the gods.⁷² Mt. Tai continues to hold a firm place in the Chinese imagination of the underworld administration despite rivalry from the Fengdu 酆都 and Ten Kings' courts of Daoism and Buddhism.

71 Chavannes, *Le T'ai chan, essai de monographie d'un culte chinois*; Naquin, *Gods of Mt. Tai*.

72 Dott, *Identity Reflections*.



Tens of thousands of stone slabs and plaques on Mt. Tai testified to its glorious past, but only a fraction of them, while still numerable, have survived. Ye first summarizes the current state of the stelae and plaques on Mt. Tai, which offers a background insight of collective pilgrimages organized by *xianghui* 香會 (“incense associations”). This survey also showcases Ye’s expertise on Taishan stelae. However, there are challenging puzzles even for experts. On one stele, Ye encountered a term he could not understand, *lefuyinbei* 勒夫陰碑. The four characters were carved on a pilgrimage stele used to describe a vow-fulfillment annual pilgrimage over four, instead of the conventional three, consecutive years.

Years later, Ye extended his investigation to the outskirts of Mt. Tai, to a village called Zhuyang 祝陽, which hosts a temple dedicated to Zongsi dadi 總司大帝, whom the locals believe to be an assistant-in-chief to the Lord of Mt. Tai in the underworld administration. At the Zongsi temple, Ye reencountered the puzzling term, *yinbei*. He witnessed at the temple festival a ritual called *song yinbei*, in which the local people in and around Zhuyang were sending (*song*) a mock stele made of paper with a celebrative parade before submitting it to Zongsi dadi by burning it. Presenting his analysis of Zhuyang village’s folklore in both writing and oral forms, Ye argues that the *lefuyinbei* on the stele at Taishan refers to the same activity in Zhuyang, that is, creating a mock stele made by paper and presenting it to the divinities by burning it before erecting a real stone stele.

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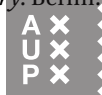
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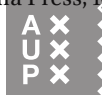
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