

宗教 人类学

金泽 陈进国◎主编

ANTHROPOLOGY
OF RELIGION
(Vol.4)



第四辑

名家特约 Special Approximations

田野现场 Field Sites

本土眼光 Local Visions

域外视野 Overseas Perspectives

思想交谈 Thought Dialogues

学术评论 Book Reviews



社会科学文献出版社
SOCIAL SCIENCES ACADEMIC PRESS (CHINA)

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B920-53
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C1676345



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B920-53
05
V4

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

宗教人类学. 第4辑/金泽, 陈进国主编. —北京:
社会科学文献出版社, 2013. 9
(宗教学理论研究丛书)
ISBN 978-7-5097-4503-8

I. ①宗… II. ①金…②陈… III. ①宗教学-
人类学-丛刊 IV. ①B920-55

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2013) 第 067802 号

· 宗教学理论研究丛书 ·
宗教人类学(第四辑)

主 编 / 金 泽 陈进国

出 版 人 / 谢寿光

出 版 者 / 社会科学文献出版社

地 址 / 北京市西城区北三环中路甲29号院3号楼华龙大厦

邮政编码 / 100029

责任部门 / 人文分社 (010) 59367215

电子信箱 / renwen@ssap.cn

项目统筹 / 宋月华 范 迎

经 销 / 社会科学文献出版社营销中心 (010) 59367081 59367089

读者服务 / 读者服务中心 (010) 59367028

责任编辑 / 范 迎 王琛场

责任校对 / 谢 华 李 能

责任印制 / 岳 阳

印 装 / 北京季峰印刷有限公司

开 本 / 787mm × 1092mm 1/16

版 次 / 2013 年 9 月第 1 版

印 次 / 2013 年 9 月第 1 次印刷

书 号 / ISBN 978-7-5097-4503-8

定 价 / 89.00 元

印 张 / 29.5

字 数 / 456 千字

本书如有破损、缺页、装订错误, 请与本社读者服务中心联系更换

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名家特约

SPECIAL APPROXIMATIONS



Local Religion in North China in the Twentieth Century

The Structure and Organization of Community Rituals and Beliefs

Daniel L. Overmyer

“For these three to five days, Dayidian is a joyful place for all, men, women, old and young...Humans and gods share their joy.”¹

For many hundreds of years, community festivals for the gods in rural north China have had their own forms of organization and institutionalization in temples and villages, with their own forms of leaders, deities and beliefs. Despite much local variation one can find similar temples, images, offerings and temple festivals everywhere, all supported by practical concerns for divine aid to deal with the problems of everyday life. These local traditions are a structure in the history of Chinese religions; they have a clear sense of their own integrity and rules, handed down by their ancestors. There are Daoist, Buddhist and government influences on these traditions, but they must be adapted to the needs of local communities. It is the villagers who build temples and organize festivals; Daoists and Buddhists and other specialists may be invited to participate if they are available, but only to provide what the people need and want. In the past, and even now in many places, all members of the community have been expected to participate and contribute, regardless of



their class or economic status; local leaders and merchants have a special obligation to do so, to support the honor of the community and its gods.

Preparations for a community ritual in Shanxi province introduce us to the organization required:

Several months before the *sai* festival proper begins the Chief Community Head (*sheshou*) invites all the other Community Heads and the accountants (*zhangfangren*) to gather at the temple, where after a meal they begin to decide on assigning tasks for preparations, so the *sai* activities are set. Next, the Community Heads cooperate with the Chief in beginning to raise funds, purchase or make [what is needed], write and deliver invitations, and arrange everything, because everything must be prepared and ready before the festival begins. Many assistants are involved in these activities. About ten days before the ritual begins, with the temple all properly arranged, increasing numbers of workers arrive. When all is as it should be, then all the Community Heads and Incense Elders go to the temple to burn incense for the chief deity and report to him, asking his permission for the villagers to conduct a three-day *sai* to congratulate him on his birthday and offer thanks for his kindness. They also ask the god to forgive them for any sins or mistakes they might commit during the festival. With this the *sai* rituals begin.²

In addition to this kind of organization, the local religion on which such community rituals are based shares a common set of theoretical assumptions, its own 'theology', which is based on the belief that the living and the dead, gods, humans and ghosts are all connected by bonds of mutual influence and response. These bonds of mutual obligation are based on a moral universe in which righteousness, respect and destructive behavior eventually bring their own rewards. Promise, efficacious response and gratitude, disrespect, cheating and punishment; all of these are manifested in specific material ways and provide the basic assumptions underlying ritual. The human counterpart and

stimulus for the efficacious response of the gods is sincerity, *qiancheng*, in prayers and offerings, sincerity based in faith that the gods really exist and can indeed respond. All of this is reinforced by the beliefs that the gods were once humans, that humans can still become gods, that deities and the dead can appear in dreams and can speak or write through spirit-mediums, and that the dead live in an underworld from which they can be called up or to which their living relatives can go in séances to see how they are. Through *fengshui* and intercession with the gods the natural world is also part of this system of influence and response. Siting of graves and buildings that recognizes and respects the flow of power in the landscape brings blessings; proper worship of the gods can bring rain or stop floods. It is this network of relationships that provides the underlying logic and coherence of local cults.

Local gods manifest flows of power that are believed to be beyond those of ordinary humans; they are present in their images, tablets or paintings, but are not fully encompassed by them, because at festivals they are invited to attend, and are ritually sent off at the end. They are invited to descend and sent back up, so they seem to have an undefined realm in the sky, beyond their earthly incarnations. They must also be ritually implanted in new images, which are powerless before their 'eyes are opened' (*kaiguang*). They need respectful offerings of incense and food to elicit a positive response; the absence of such attention can lead to divine resentment and punishment. Some gods begin as the spirits of powerful, miracle-working persons, others are homeless ghosts desperate to be given a title and place of their own, to be located in the divine-human system. The coherence of this system resonates with patterns of relationships in local society, which are also based on reciprocal responsibility. Here society and religion are transformations of each other.

Chinese local religion is based on family worship of deities and ancestors on home altars but, as is indicated in the above quote, it also involves large-scale rituals participated in by members of the whole village or township community, on the occasion of what are believed to be the birthdays of the gods or to seek protection from droughts, epidemics and other disasters. In all ca-



ses these festivals invoke the power of the gods for practical goals, to ‘summon blessings and drive away harm’. These three-to-five day celebrations involve weeks or months of preparation, careful organization, the mobilization of large numbers of people, hiring outside specialists such as priests, spirit-mediums, various types of musicians and dramatic performers, coordinating activities with surrounding villages, and erecting temporary sheds for images of gods brought from elsewhere, as well as sheds for operas and food. The major ritual activity is processions carrying images of the gods through the villages involved; the components and routes of these processions need to be arranged in advance. In addition, merchants come from the whole area to display their wares on mats and tables beside the roads and in the temple area. The whole affair can involve tens of thousands of worshipers and onlookers, sometimes crowded so tightly together that one can scarcely move, as I can personally attest from observations in Hebei.

The focus of this book is on these community festivals in all their dimensions—ritual, social and economic—emphasizing their organization and structure and the beliefs and values expressed by them. Since most studies of such festivals have been based on evidence from south China including Taiwan this book is on local traditions in the north, one of the founding areas of Chinese civilization. This is an important distinction, because there are significant differences between aspects of local religion in the south and north, one of which is the gods who are worshiped. In her *Changing Gods in Medieval China, 1127–1276* (Princeton, 1990), Valerie Hansen’s discussions of local ritual traditions in the Southern Song period include lists of deities venerated, noting differences among southern local and regional gods and those related to Buddhism and Daoism. This last category includes Guanyin, Zhenwu, Lv Dongbin, and the God of Mount Tai; these deities, along with City Gods, Dragon Kings and Tudi Locality Gods are all found in the north as well. However, except for Tianhou, the goddess of sailors and fishermen, none of the local and regional gods Hansen names are found in the north, including the most widespread southern regional gods, Zitong, King Zhang and Wuxian,