

[Home](#) [Chapter](#) Body, Belief,
and the State

[About This Essay](#)

[FlashPaper version](#)

Body, Belief, and the State; three portraits from rural Sichuan

“Place” itself is central to the portrait of belief we will sketch, and place is the principal theme of this digital monograph. The framing in place is itself framed in time: in this regard we are fortunate that the missionary, natural historian, and ethnologist David Crockett Graham studied Chinese popular religion in this area of Sichuan, during the period from 1911 to 1949 (his years of residence in China were neatly marked off by the nationalist revolution of 1911 and the communist revolution of 1949). As part of his missionary work, Graham was keenly interested in the nature of religious belief in the Chinese countryside; what struck him most was the worshipper’s understanding of the objects of worship, and particularly the question of wherein the gods and their sacred power reside: did the penitent believe in the god or the image of the god; was belief “religious” or idolatrous?

One day [in the 1920s?] while sitting on a sandbank beside the Min River, Graham devised a way to put the question to a test. He took a stick and drew a picture of the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy (*Guanyin Pusa*) in the sand. A farmer boy came along and looked at the picture. Graham told the boy, “This is Guanyin Pusa. You had better worship her.” The boy looked at the picture a moment and then kowtowed to it. (excerpted from Graham, 1927 footnote on page 68). Graham reflected on the incident in his dissertation at the University of Chicago, “Religion in Szechwan Province, China”:

Is the god really present in the image? Is the image to be regarded as the deity himself? In Szechuan province the answer is yes. When the people or the priests pray to an idol they feel they are praying to a real god who can understand and help them. Beyond this they do not think. They simply regard the image as the god himself. The following explanation, given by a priest on Mount Omei, is of special interest. The god is only one and invisible, but in each temple may be an image of the god. He is in space, but he is capable of being anywhere, and when the people worship him in the presence of the image, he is there, and becomes actually embodied in the image, so that the image is the god. (1927, 68)

Graham saw this belief in the embodiment of the god in the image as the defining distinction between primitive superstition and religious belief. The missionizing agenda that shaped Graham’s view is mirrored in the modernizing agenda of the contemporary state, which (we shall see) likewise focuses on embodiment to distinguish between feudal superstition and approved religion. The body-belief dichotomy also extends to the other half of the popular religious transaction: the ritual disposition of body in worship. The argument here is that the question of “belief” is fundamentally misguided; that a focus on belief in Chinese religion misses the point and reads-in a Western preconception. According to the sinologist Lucian Pye, for example:

Even the most secular of Western Scholars, possibly unconsciously reflecting their religious heritage, tend to attach inordinate importance to the question of whether people “truly believe” in their professed ideologies. Consequently, they have little understanding of the cultures in which the degree of belief is less important than ritualized actions and practices. Lip-service, if carefully and uninterrupted practiced, can serve the purposes of authority quite as well as internalized

convictions. In Chinese culture praxis has generally been more important than ideology.” (1996, 40-41)*

Pye’s assertion that belief is secondary to practice in China is supported by the importance of ritual in Confucian self-cultivation: a correct heart will follow from correct action.[1] The emphasis on “authority” is given added weight when one considers that the gods embodied in Chinese popular religion are often deified officials.[2] Thus Ahern (1981) maintains that, in the popular tradition, worship is a matter of learning to negotiate with secular authority through ritualized transactions with the sacred counterpart to the imperial bureaucracy. Religion, then, is understood as taking bodily form in correct performance of these transactions, rather than as any correct set of beliefs—as orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy.

James Watson puts orthopraxy in a broader historical and political perspective, arguing that cultural identity in imperial China differed from European traditions precisely in its emphasis on practice instead of belief (1998). In this argument, Chinese cultural identity—as distinct from a national identity lately fostered by the state—was negotiated through participation in a unified set of cultural practices that defined a group as cooked rather than raw, civilized rather than uncivilized. To be Chinese, in other words, was about form, not content, in a system that ensured centralized unity through practice, while allowing local diversity of belief. Thus Watson’s thesis suggests that locality in Chinese popular religion-- an individuated particularity of time and place and persons-- was a defining aspect of belief. And if the imperial state prioritized practice it did so as a way of accommodating the localism of Chinese belief systems.[3] It was only under the height of Maoism in the Cultural Revolution, Watson explains, that the state for the first time cared about correct thought and moved from a system based on orthopraxy to orthodoxy—with resulting disastrous social disruption and disintegration.

Orthopraxy addresses the macro-structural perspective of Chinese cultural unity, but not the question of local belief. And while Watson posits the break with this tradition that came in the Cultural Revolution, he leaves open what importance we are to attach to notions of belief today, either in the popular imagination or on the part of the state. These questions are even more interesting now, with the revival of popular religion—and the emergence of other religious organizations in the post-socialist era.

This essay will explore the context and significance of contemporary religious belief in one small place in China, and consider the state’s policies toward religion in the post-reform era. For the past ten years we have studied the temple activities of a rural community in Sichuan. We have written on the activities in one local temple as an effort at spontaneous and voluntary political organization (see essay on Chuanzhu Temple in Belief chapter). In another work, we focused on the social networks and political functions embodied in the temple’s historical development (Flower 2004, reworked as “The Way In” on this website). This paper is an effort to say something about what it means to people in this community to participate in local religious activities on a more emotional level. In a sense, our own work has tended to look at the formal structures of religious practice; here we want to go on to say something about belief itself, and about the relationship between beliefs and state policy.

The first portrait of belief we present draws on the pre-revolution descriptive ethnography of David Crockett Graham. Graham’s observations from the republican era serve as a marker of sorts for gauging the persistence and change in popular religious belief in Sichuan. The second portrait describes the personal experience one individual in the village had with a Christian house church movement. We then will consider the fate of two local temples, and conclude by looking at state policy on religion, reflecting on how those policies affect society at the grassroots.

First, to the aptly named David Crockett Graham, who saw himself as an explorer of the West China frontier as much as a missionary.

D.C. Graham’s Portrait of Belief in Sichuan

Graham sought a deeper understanding of Chinese religion not only because he believed it would assist in his work as a missionary, but also because he was a man of tremendous energy and curiosity, who was eager to learn about all facets of life in Southwest China where he lived for nearly forty years. In his extensive travels on foot throughout Sichuan, he frequently stayed in local temples and even carried out scientific surveys of temple activities in several communities. His desire to make a clear distinction between superstition and Christianity likely motivated his keen interest in the nature of belief in Sichuan, and the embodiment of the gods in particular. But his findings also suggest the deep localism of popular religion, as well as the real emotional power of its belief.

The notion that the god is present in place (as in the sketch of the goddess Graham drew on the riverbank) led Graham to conclude that Sichuan popular religion was a kind of “primitive animism” fundamentally different from the transcendent higher religions.[4] In popular religion, the image is not just a symbol for the contemplation of higher spirits but is the embodied spirit. This is most clear when he investigates beliefs with respect to ostensibly inanimate objects, such as stones worshipped as deities, or sacred trees:

At Suifu, two old cypress trees are worshipped as divinities. It is not that gods dwell in them, but that the trees themselves are gods. They are said to have been planted in the Ming Dynasty, or possibly earlier. It is asserted that they once made a pilgrimage to Mt. Omei. I have been told by aged priests who were experts in such traditions that very old trees,

especially cypress trees, are able, after many ears, to develop into tree deities. There is a tendency in some localities to burn incense to aged trees or the stumps of these trees. (1927, 77)

As Graham describes it, this “animism” imbued the everyday world in which the Sichuanese lived, even extending to the deification of turnips that grew to abnormally large size, called “turnip kings” (*luobu wang*). The logic Graham saw underlying these beliefs was, on the simplest level, practical material benefit. Thus he also tells the story of man who had some very fine bulls to run the stone rollers in his oil factory. Because the bulls helped him prosper, the man began to burn incense to the largest bull and worshiped it as a god. Graham observes that “[h]is action was, in his own mind and those of his Chinese friends, the natural result of his growing sense of gratitude, wonder, admiration, and awe towards the bulls that contributed so much to his prosperity.” (1927, 77)

The embodiment or “animism” that Graham observed in popular religion underscored the particularity of belief. And just as the gods were identified in very particular bodies, they were manifest in particular places, in unique features of the landscape that gathered religious power. Beyond, then, the idea that “temples are sacred places” Graham also notes the importance of place in the siting of temples, commenting that “there is a very noticeable tendency to build temples, when possible, in places where the natural beauty or the strange scenery arouse the feelings of wonder and awe.” (1927, 56). Graham goes on to describe some of the types of these special places to be found in Sichuan: Caves, unusual rock formations, cliffs, bubbling springs, strange or particularly dangerous river currents. The idea that place was of particular importance was further suggested in his observation that when a statue was removed from its location in a temple, the location was still worshiped.



Here are a series of images which demonstrate the play between landscape and local temples. In the first slide we see Graham's photo of a god of a particular scenic gorge in northern Sichuan. The next three slides show a temple Graham photo



Graham was also fascinated by the temporal aspect of what he termed the “mana effect”; that is, by the idea that belief in popular religion was about the now as well as the here, the particular place and the present moment. This meant that it was possible for living people to become gods. He cites as evidence the living

Buddhas of the

Tibetan tradition, and the following example:

At the gateway of the Ta O Si temple on Mt. Omei is an idol which is the image of a man who is still living—at least, he was in the summer of 1925. He is an old man who is deeply devoted to Buddhism, and who has given much money to the Ta O Si temple. He was therefore deified while he was still alive. The writer has heard of a similar case in Yachow. (1926, 76)

[In fact, the case in Yachow, or Ya’an—the location of our own fieldwork—we will return to later in this presentation]

The fundamental localism of popular religion, its particularity in time and place, meant that belief in a variety of gods animated all aspects of daily life. Every occupation, even stealing, had a patron deity, and every activity seemed to have a god to aid it. The very ubiquity of the gods, and their quotidian presence, suggested to Graham that popular religion was a lower, functional form of belief, tied to the material world. As he put it, “Religion in Szechuan is exceedingly practical.”

Every phase of it, every rite and ceremony, every god or temple, has to do with the satisfying of some human need that is felt to be important. They are the techniques that have been worked out and used during the past centuries by the masses of untutored people as a means of securing satisfaction of the primary needs of man—food, sex, protection from enemies, from the forces of nature, and from disease, and play. (1927, 81)

It is significant that Graham adds “play” to his list of popular religion’s functions. The religious activities he witnessed and described were much more than the practical satisfaction of material desires. They were, in fact, filled with the “heat and noise” (renao) of lively community events, during which the social and emotional dimensions of belief rose to the fore.[5] The following passage condenses what Graham identified as the key elements in this belief:

The emotions of awe and wonder, the emotional thrill, allied to the mana reaction, are elements that

are exceedingly important, and which lie near the heart of the primitive religions. The organized religions of Szechwan, perhaps more or less unconsciously, have become past-masters in arousing these emotions. In large temples, located on hills that are seen far and wide or on spots noted for the wonders of their natural phenomena, great deities, wearing the clothing of temporal rulers and often wearing crowns and covered with gold-leaf, priests with beautiful official robes and masters of the rites, incantations, and ceremonies, and great festivals that are the crowning religious and social events of the year—all these arouse wonder, admiration, and awe, and result in the loyalty of the common people to their religious organizations. (1927, 80)

The “mana reaction” was Graham’s consistent interpretation of the god’s immanent affective power to arouse “awe and wonder.” The god’s festival was the event—the particular place/time—in which the god was most vividly embodied, and his mana most manifest. Festivals were also emotional experiences that reaffirmed a shared local identity among the participants. Graham goes on to describe one such festival:

In Szechuan some of the greatest religious festivals are on the birthdays of leading deities, and center about the temples. I have witnessed several, and they are very awe-inspiring. There are processions in which there are often more than 20 deities who are carried in gaily-decorated sedan chairs or on platforms covered by beautiful pavilions. The god in whose honor the festival is held of course has the chief place in the procession. Sometimes soldiers carrying guns are asked to join in the parade: many flags and silk banners are in evidence, and sometimes large lanterns. Actors dressed to represent certain deities ride in beautiful sedan chairs, impersonating the deities; high officials ride on horses, and there are musicians playing on native instruments. The streets, homes, and shops are packed with spectators. As the great procession moves slowly along, people in the homes and shops burn incense, candles, and paper money in worship of the deities, and bow reverently to the gods and sometimes even to actors who impersonate the gods.

Elaborate feasts are held in temples for those who have helped or contributed. A company of actors may be engaged, who for several days give free theatricals for the hundreds of thousands who flock to see and hear them. The expense of the feasts and theatricals are borne by the temples, many of which are highly endowed.

There is a prominent social element in these festivals, which should not be overlooked. These are great occasions when one can meet his friends and acquaintances, when he is released from the everyday humdrum duties of life, and derives thrill, pleasure, and amusement from the feasts, the procession and the theatricals. In other words, there is the element of play, (1927, 46-47)

Thus religious belief, according to Graham, was not simply the individual seeking instrumental security in his worldly affairs; it was the social glue that bound together the community in a series of activities that were entertaining and added zest to life. To Graham’s Baptist sensibilities, the performances of local opera and the overall tone of “amusement” must have seemed a far cry from the serious piety of worship to which he was accustomed. Still, he also seems to have appreciated the genuine emotion aroused in a group of people who “truly believed” that the god was present, embodied in that particular time and place.

The god’s embodiment was reciprocated in the actors’ “impersonation” of the gods, and by the role of soldiers and “high officials” in the social drama. The participation of officials in religious life was quite natural—and expected—given the identity of the gods as officials themselves in the sacred bureaucracy. Nearly all the temples Graham described housed these deified officials, many of whom, like the city god (Chenghuang) or Chuanzhu (the Lord of Sichuan) appeared in a network of center-and-branch temples that extended secular authority through sacred power.

The city god was the sacred counterpart to the county magistrate, and branch city god temples throughout the countryside re-presented the central city god temple in each county seat. Chuanzhu was the historical official Li Bing, provincial governor of Sichuan in the state of Qin at the dawn of the first empire, whose fame as an upright official and hydraulic engineer is canonized in the central temple of his cult, located at the Dujiangyan waterworks he constructed in the third century BCE. Branch Chuanzhu temples were strategically placed at points in the local landscape where natural forces needed to be harmonized, according to geomantic (fengshui) principles.

Temples were places where a political bargain was struck in religious ritual: acceptance of imperial authority in exchange for responsiveness to local interests. Real-life officials were expected to play a role in the metaphorical enactment of state power during the god's festival, or when the god's power (ling) was called upon under special circumstances of cosmic imbalance, such as flood or drought. Belief, then, encompassed an ideal of state involvement in local affairs, and the participation of local officials in religious ceremonies was both an obligation to the community and a measure of their concern for the people.

On occasion, officials led the performance of rituals directly, in a rather complex interplay of symbolic images and live actors. Graham himself was excited to find that the old imperial ceremony of the emperor ritually plowing the first furrows to welcome back spring was still observed at the county magistrate level during the Chinese Republic:

In 1925 this ceremony was performed in Suifu on the twenty-first and twenty-second days of the twelfth moon. In the magistrate's yamen a large paper water-buffalo, and also a paper boy called a ngao mer had been previously prepared. Over one-hundred small water-buffalo made of clay had been placed inside the paper water-buffalo.

On the morning of the twenty-first, the magistrate first worshipped the two paper images in the court of his yamen to the accompaniment of horns that sound a little like Scotch Bagpipes. Then the magistrate joined in a procession going out of the North Gate to a special plot of ground where a plow and a live water-buffalo were waiting. In the procession the paper images were carried in front of the magistrates. On reaching the plot of ground, the magistrate again worshipped the two paper images, which had been brought along in the procession, and then ploughed three furrows with the plow and the live water-buffalo. The magistrate and other dignitaries drank tea together, after which the procession returned to the yamen through the East Gate. This day's ceremony is called welcoming spring.

The next day the two paper images were again taken in procession to the plot of ground which is called the Yin Ch'uen Ba, or the [river] flat where spring is welcomed. The magistrate again did obeisance to the two paper images. There were about 20 officers called the ch'uen kuan or spring officials. After the magistrate had worshipped or kowtowed to the two paper images, the twenty spring officials fell on the paper images with clubs and beat them to pieces. At this point the onlookers rushed up and tried to secure one of the mud images of the water buffalo. Those who were not successful snatched pieces of the paper images. I was told that these relics were taken by the lucky ones to protect the inmates from evil spirits. The second day's ceremony is called da che'uen, or beat spring. The main object of the two days' ceremony is to induce spring to come so that crops may grow and prosper.(1927, 42-43)

Graham's excitement at finding this ceremonial survival of the imperial era is understandable in light of the contemporary attacks against popular religion under the "anti-superstition" campaigns that had been underway since the beginning of the twentieth century.[6] In many ways, Graham saw himself as a collector of folk customs that were endangered by both the modernization agenda of urban elites (and later, the Nationalist government), as well as the chaos unleashed by the warlords in the 1920s. Temples, especially in the cities and county seats, were

taken over and transformed into schools and public offices, or commandeered by warlords to serve as barracks and storehouses. By the early 1940s, surveys conducted by Graham indicated a sharp reduction in the total number of popular religion temples (Graham 1961, 210-211). Those remaining temples were almost exclusively in the countryside, many of them local branches of temple networks, now made even more local by separation from their centers. Graham diagramed and photographed these temples, documenting for posterity what he thought to be the last vestiges of beliefs that were rapidly dying out in a time of turbulent political and cultural transition to modernity.

Our own interviews with villagers in Xiakou who remember those times suggest that even as the local centers of state cult temple networks were commandeered in the county seat, their ritual responsibilities to the people were not forgotten. As one older resident remembered: “It was minguo 28 (1939). It didn’t rain for 48 days, so the [county] government hired somebody to pray for rain (qiuyu)—the people (laobaixing) demanded it!” He explained that the qiuyu ritual took place in its traditional zone between the city god temple and the river (the “ying chun ba” of the plowing ritual Graham described?), but the county magistrate did not enact it. Instead the government hired a proxy Daoist priest, who also organized a group of young men in the street performance of a battle between the shuilong (water dragon) and the hanba, a kind of monster representing drought. In addition to the ritual performance, he emphasized that people were forbidden to eat meat during the qiuyu, “and if someone saw you eating meat, they would grab it right out of your hands!” Popular will enforced communal penance, just as the people demanded the ritual as a fundamental moral obligation of the state to address a disordered cosmos. The city god temple’s meaning as place persisted, outliving both its usurpation and the unwillingness of government officials to perform the qiuyu themselves.

By the late 1940s, civil war, banditry, and opium addiction left Sichuan in crisis. In fact, the remaining temples in Ya’an that continued their activities —all in the countryside as Graham notes (1961; 210, 212)— may have become even more important during these especially chaotic times, and the elements of belief that Graham described—embodiment, place, emotion, “renao”—even more pronounced. Villagers remembered new spiritual possession (ganshen) cults that arose during this period. Ganshen—literally, “feeling the spirit”—was typically associated with exorcisms of evil demons. The ganshen would fall into a trance indicating that the healing god had taken over his, or more often her, body. Ganshen was also associated with millenarian cults, in which pronouncements from the god were made through a possessed spokesman. Villagers also remembered particularly active temple festivals, with many participants in the paocha rituals of self-immolation and penance.[7] . The paocha ritual involved young men who served as the god’s escort on his festival day, running (pao) up and down the route of the procession brandishing a fork (cha) that swiveled and clanked. They vowed (xuyuan) this service to the god in exchange for healing and protection of family members. Paocha participants would often pierce their skin with metal hooks, from which hung small oil lamps.

These memories suggest that temples—as places enacting local belief and the ideal of morally responsive governance—were called on to bring order to social chaos.

David Crockett Graham would no doubt have seen this upsurge in popular religious activity as the last gasp of superstition, the passing of which he would not regret. His interest in popular religion was that of the ethnological collector, and of the Christian missionary who sought to replace superstition with higher religious belief. Graham’s conversion strategy, like that of most other missionaries of his day, was to concentrate his efforts on the Chinese elite, most of whom shared Graham’s dim view of “primitive” superstitions held by the common folk, and whose Confucianism Graham respected as a near moral equivalent to Christianity. At the same time, Graham cast his net among the ethnically distinct “tribal peoples” (particularly the Chuan Miao, but also the Qiang) whom he considered more innocent, and less burdened by the accumulation of superstitious beliefs than the average Han Chinese.

The process of attacking popular religion that began with the anti-superstition drives of the republican period

reached its full impact under the communist revolution. With the unprecedented penetration of the state down to the village level during the 1950s, all local temples were commandeered, and the beliefs of popular religion fully outlawed as “feudal superstition.” Control was also extended to the “higher religions,” placing all religious belief into institutional frameworks that could be bureaucratically managed, such as the United Front Department, and the approved “three-self” Christian church. Established in 1951, the Three Self’s movement of Chinese Protestants aimed to separate Chinese Christianity from its imperialist overtones by emphasizing “self-government”, “self-support”, and “self-propagation”. Gradually taking on the function of an “ecclesiastical authority,” its leaders worked closely with the communist government. In 1958, coeval with the consolidations of the Great Leap Forward, demoninations officially ceased to exist.[8] Due to the dissatisfaction that resulted (evangelicals in particular were subjugated), many of the illegal “house church” movements in China can be dated to this period.[9]

With the enthusiasm of “high socialism” in the Great Leap Forward of 1958, the revolution itself became a kind of religious movement, replacing earlier beliefs. The Great Leap’s guiding principle was that revolutionary consciousness was the key to modernization through increased production. Belief in human willpower was the faith of this revolutionary religion, encapsulated in Mao’s slogan that “Man will indeed overcome Heaven” itself. The spectacular failure of the Great Leap—an estimated 30 million died in the subsequent famine—essentially marked the end of belief in the revolution. Yet that same failure was understood in radical political circles as a resulting from insufficient revolutionary consciousness, a lack of faith. In the ensuing Cultural Revolution, the cult of Mao and the emphasis placed on sincerity, introspection and confession pushed the religiosity of the revolution to new extremes, but by that time (in the Sichuan countryside, at any rate) local people said they were just going through the motions. Traumatized by the famine and years of class struggle, they had “seen through” it all and lost their faith in the revolution.

The “second revolution” of decollectivisation and market reforms under Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s returned production to farm families and repudiated the class struggle of the socialist period. In this new context—that seemed in many ways to mark a return to ways of life prior to the revolution, and that offered a refreshing degree of local autonomy—old religious beliefs and customary practices began to make a comeback in what has been termed the “resurgence of tradition.” If we make a cursory comparison between what we observed in the early 1990s and what Graham described over half a century earlier, we can see that, on the surface at any rate, some of the elements of popular religious belief that Graham had observed either persisted or were brought back to life in the post-socialist period. The “primitive animism” of worshiping inanimate objects; the reappearance of temples in particular fengshui places, as well as the worshipping of former temple sites (as Graham had noted in his day); “hot and noisy” (renao) temple festivals; even the reappearance of specific deified contemporary figures that Graham had mentioned—all these phenomena suggest some kind of continuity in belief across the revolutionary divide.

But do these superficial continuities mean the same things as they did in Graham’s day? What transformations occurred in the remembering? And what practices and beliefs did not persist into the present context, and why? To address these questions, we first turn to Graham’s chief cause: Christianity, and one encounter with the House Church movement in contemporary Sichuan.

An Individual Portrait of Belief in Xiakou, Zhu Congde in 1993

The Christians and the robbers

There was a couple from Heizhu who believed in Christianity. One Sunday they went off to the church meeting, and they locked the door to their house. Two robbers decided they would break in and steal their rice. They broke the lock and went inside, but when they grabbed the rice, something

strange happened. They both suddenly felt very tired and fell asleep. When the couple returned from church they found the two robbers, but instead of beating them, they prepared a big meal, cutting up some smoked ham for the occasion. When the food was ready, the robbers woke up and accepted the invitation to eat. After dinner, the host said you must be very poor and hungry to come here and steal our rice. Go ahead and take it back with you. The robbers were too ashamed to do this, and they started coming to the church after this experience. You see, God made the robbers fall asleep. He protected the family, but it was their belief in the good and their good deeds that saved them. So those people really believed and you can see that it is real-- you can experience it!

This story was told to John by Zhu Congde shortly after he began attending a house church movement in a neighboring community. We chose this story to begin with because it asserts the conscious importance of belief in a Chinese religious experience, and it connects that belief to a physical transformation in bodily experience and moral demeanor. The belief of the Christian family caused God to make the robbers fall asleep. The robbers were morally transformed through their encounter with these true-believers. The moral transformation of the body through belief in the Christian god parallels the popular religious tradition in which the landscape and its community can be morally transformed by the beliefs embodied in the temple.

We can learn more about this indigenous Christianity by examining in more detail the case of Zhu Congde and his encounter with the rural house church movement. The Christian house church movement is undertaken by discreet rural leaders working outside the party-sanctioned three-self's Christian organization. Zhu Congde's understanding of Christianity fascinated us in the way he localized it to speak to his own values, and in why, in the end, he gave up the new faith he had believed in so fervently.

Zhu Congde was an old man when we met him, with a well-known history in the village as an idealist and something of a character. They ironically referred to him, with some affection, as Zhu De, the name of the Sichuanese leader of the Red Army, second only to Mao as an early hero of the Revolution. The irony was that Xiakou's Zhu De was not a great man, and not a brave man, but he did show enough courage during the famine, when he was a small brigade leader, to distribute grain among some of the villagers against the commune's orders. He had lived a hard life. Born into poverty and forcibly conscripted into the Guomindang army in his youth, Zhu Congde experienced the depravation and fear of the "old society" and was a great performer during the "recall past bitterness" campaigns. He became a local activist for the Party after Liberation, and loyally filled a series of village-level posts until his desperate defiance of the commune brought him before an "anti-right deviationist" struggle meeting. While he was not "capped" a rightist, he was so traumatized by the experience that he never again held an official post, even when the leadership asked him to. In his defense, he said that he never used his position to profit himself or his family; during the famine his parents, his wife, and two of his children starved to death. The one son who survived later became for a time the village Party branch-secretary, but he only tolerated his father, and left Zhu Congde to do the farm labor while he went off to "do business". At 77 years old, Zhu Congde was neglected, malnourished, and had only corn cobs to burn for his fire, but his wiry frame could still shoulder the heavy buckets of nightsoil up the steep path to the distant plots, and he still spent days at a time in a lean-to on the mountain, breaking new ground and gathering medicinal herbs from the mountainside.

Zhu loved to talk, for which he was sometimes ridiculed as "acting like an old woman" (but for which we were grateful). A man of some learning, he had been educated in the "four books and five classics" of the Confucian canon, and held a carefully hand-written transcription of the Sui Shen Bao into which he had copied his family's genealogy, as well as some local lore and legend[10]. He could find New York, Washington, Los Angeles and San Francisco on his map of the world, and he talked about current events such as the role of China in the United Nations and the break-up of the Soviet Union. He could sing the old mountain songs, so well that a folklorist from the city once came to record him. It was with this spirit of learning and respect for culture that he approached Christianity. Zhu's grandson's wife, who did not live in Xiakou, but came fairly often and seemed to care for the old man, introduced him to the house church in Heizhu. The experience impressed Zhu Congde; he went there

several times, and he talked about it with John. Rather than analyze his beliefs, let us quote from John's notes taken from some of those conversations:

November 13, 1992

Zhu Congde found Christ in his heart last week! He first said that he had "prayed to Tianfubaba [Heavenly Father]" to arrange a good buyer for his brooms, and then we found out that his grandson's wife took him to a Christian meeting in Heizhu... According to Zhu, some call it crazy, but I say it is realism [xianshizhuyi], the things they say make sense: a person doesn't need to be rich, all a person needs is to eat enough, have enough to wear, that's all. The point is to be saved; "if your heart is sincere, heaven will answer" He approved of the church, quoting Chairman Mao's dictum that their "words and actions were in accord" (kou hao he xingdong yi zhi), and he liked their egalitarianism: "no seniority, they all call each other brothers and sisters." Above all he seemed to relate to the universal message of Christianity; he said that "the most fundamental thing in human nature is freedom," which he equated with faith, and that "people are the same all over, they all have conscience." The way he talks about Christianity reminds me of his stories of the Wu lineage temple in the "old society" and of the Party movements in the early 1950s when he was a member of the poor and lower middle peasant's association. He seems to be happily making connections between his new-found religious belief and all the values he has gathered from his own experience-- everything from Confucianism ("rectifying the heart and making the will sincere" /zhengxin chengyi) to the quotations of Chairman Mao...

January 30, 1993

Today we visited Zhu Congde who is still taken by his "tianfubaba". ... He said that his own interest and belief comes from the simple maxim "xinjiu dejiu" (if you believe you will be saved), but this belief is not just a way to be blessed with riches and 'worldly achievement'; rather its soul is sincerity, hence the interpretation of the fifth commandment as meaning not simply 'thou shalt not kill' but that one should not have bad thoughts or wish bad things on others. He also was at pains to differentiate his new religion from superstition and Buddhism not only in terms of ritual differences, but also in terms of a kind of simplicity: he contrasted the opening of the local Chuanzhu temple and all the money spent on it (both government funds and funds solicited from the masses) and all the money they ask of you (buying paper money, incense, contributing to the temple) with the austerity of the "jidu jiao" (Protestant Christianity):

They don't ask for money. If you don't have money to buy a bible-- this thick! as thick as the Collected Works of Mao Zedong! It would take two years to read it all! -- then those with money buy the bibles and give them to those who don't have money.

He seems to have internalised the inner sincerity of this new religion. ... There is no question that he takes to the study of it seriously, and, of course, he studies it in the same way that he once studied the classics: he carefully copies the main points into a little red notebook that he keeps...

For Zhu Congde, it is because Christianity is a part of that 'world of letters' that he is attracted to it and can assimilate it. Finally, as part of that greater world, his association with "jidu jiao" and with the bible makes him a part of something even greater. As he will tell you: "The whole world reading one book, that brings the whole world together as one."

March 28, 1993

After everyone left he told us about his latest reflections on Christianity. He explained that he no longer believed because no one else in Ya'an believed, and he needed the support of a "society" to

practice his religion. To him the idea that belief is personal and can be carried out despite one's isolation from others was conceptually impossible. But he then went on to articulate his attraction to jidujiao, first talking once again about the egalitarianism of the meeting and how everyone was brother or sister, with no ranks separating them. Then he explained the phenomenon of the Heizhu religious revival as being related to "reality" that one could experience (tihui) directly. In fact, he told three stories that he used to counter charges that Christianity was not realistic and ineffective; all "true" and taking place around Heizhu recently.

[The first was the story of the Christians and the robbers we began with. The second is:]

The pious parents and the resurrected son:

"There was an older couple, also from Heizhu, who believed in Christianity. Their son did not believe and laughed at them. One day he had to be rushed to the hospital because his appendix burst. When the parents came, the doctor told them it was too late-- their son had died. They took the body to the morgue and the parents prayed over his body. After a while the doctor heard a voice coming from the morgue and discovered that it was the young man come back to life! After this, the son went with his parents to the Christian meeting and believed."

The last story was not a miracle, but to Zhu Congde it was also an experience that showed the reality of Christian faith in action:

After the meeting, the leader (huishou) had everyone to his house to eat. Of course there were too many people to feed them well, so they ate rice porridge and sweet potatoes. But since I was a guest they treated me very well and gave me fish to eat.

It seems to me that his (former) faith was motivated more by a respect for Christian values than by the tales of the miraculous and the potential for Christianity to profit him. The miracles are no doubt important to show the efficacy, the "reality" of religious belief, but I get the sense that Zhu Congde was really moved by their simple generosity (the meal that they shared-- hongshao xifan [rice gruel and sweet potatoes] for themselves and fish for him are the ultimate symbols of poverty and abundance). Such a stance of worldly denial must have a strong appeal in these times of greed and materialism-- what Zhu Congde calls "pocket stuffing"—especially to someone like him who has so little, and so little prospect for getting anything more from life...

In the stories Zhu Congde emphasized the ability of religious participation to effect a moral-physical transformation in the people around him. Indeed, physical healing appeared to be one motivating factor for local participation in the house church movement. Daniel Bays (1996) in a study of early 20th century indigenous Christian movements in China notes the special parallels between evangelical Christianity and Chinese heterodox traditions, specifically identifying Christian millenarianism and the concern with physical healing as points of commonality. One could draw the same parallels with the immanence in time and place and the emphasis on embodiment in Graham's description of popular religious belief in Sichuan during the republican period. In a similar way, Zhu Congde's favorite formulation of his Christian belief was that it was "reality" (xianshi—literally, "now-solid" or "now-true"; he often employed the revolutionary form of "realism" (xianshi zhuyi)) and could be "experienced" (tihui—"body able").

To be sure, some aspects of Zhu's Christian experience differ from Chinese popular religion. He was intrigued by the notion of the whole world reading one book, and his Christianity had elements of a universal "Great Unity" (da tong) that went well beyond local concerns.[11] But an abstract God removed in time and place was not the Tianfu Baba that caught his fancy; what was distinctive about Zhu's encounter with Christianity was the need he felt for a personalized intimate network of believers. Zhu's story—like Graham's portrait of popular religion—underscores the notion that religious belief is most fundamentally a community affair. Without a local community of believers with whom to share his participation, there was no point.

Still, Zhu Congde clearly saw in Christianity a potential antidote to the moral decay that had beset his community. In the early 1990s, there was much talk in China about the “vacuum of values” and “a crisis of belief.” In general terms, Chinese intellectuals and common folk alike expressed concern that the disillusionment in the aftermath of the Maoist period had left the people with nothing to believe in. The revolution destroyed the old fabric of society, but nothing had replaced it. The market-driven policies of the post-Mao period offered only the pursuit of wealth, which was seen as destructive of social relations and as engendering corruption and cynicism.[12] As one local saying expressed it: “we used to say ‘serve the people’ (wei renmin fuwu); now we say ‘serve money’ [or, serve the people’s currency, wei renminbi fuwu].”

At the same time as his experimentation with Christianity, Zhu Congde also participated in a revival of a local temple devoted to Chuanzhu, the Lord of Sichuan.[13] The temple was in its own way an attempt to reassert moral values in a society that seemed to have lost its way, and it offers a glimpse at some of the continuities in belief, as well as the transformations that have occurred in popular religion in its revival.

The Chuanzhu Temple

On July 21, 1992, the Longxi river flooded. Several homes were destroyed in mudslides, and the township’s school building was washed away, along with two sizable sections of the North Road connecting the three upland valley townships of Xiali, Zhongli, and Shangli with the city of Ya’an. With the road washed out, all the communities north of Longxi were effectively cut off. (See figure 4) The village of Xiakou was one of the hardest hit. Three homes on the west side of the river were crushed by a house-sized boulder, which also destroyed a section of canal above the village as it rolled down the mountain. In short, the flood of 1992 was one of the worst in memory.

The flood precipitated a crisis of credibility for the local government, blamed by many villagers for neglecting their responsibility to maintain local infrastructure. Worse, the township officials had significantly exacerbated the crisis by clamping down on stirrings of “feudal superstitious” activity at the local Chuanzhu temple, destroying the small Chuanzhu statue just two days before the god’s festival day, one day before the flood. Given Chuanzhu’s power to control floods, and his historical identity as heroic official and engineer, this move inadvertently gave efficacy to the god. In the eyes of many local villagers, the coincidence of the flood on the heels of the temple’s desecration showed the god to be embodied with effective power (ling). In response to this sign of the god’s ling, a group of local residents revitalized the temple, directly challenging the local party’s authority. (See figure 5)

In the process of bringing the temple back to life, many stories circulated concerning the embodied power or ling of Chuanzhu. In one telling of the temple’s desecration, the township government officials came to smash the statue and burn his clothes, but when they poured water on the statue to extinguish the flames, three Chinese characters materialized on the god’s body. In another story, a woman who fainted at the temple was said to have been struck by the god, and when they examined her back they discovered a mark left by the slap of the god’s hand. The “punch lines” of both these stories—what the characters said, or why the god chose to strike the woman—were left hanging; what seemed to be more important to the tellers was the ling of the god made manifest.

Embodiment was also the most politically sensitive belief in the temple revival, especially in the form of spiritual possession (ganshen), which was singled out by the state as the worst case of “feudal superstition” and strictly prohibited. While the stated reason for this prohibition was that gullible believers would be defrauded, the antinomian potential of ganshen was clearly threatening to the state. There was some good reason for this attitude, as millenarian texts were circulating at the time, and one local man declared himself possessed by a “proclamation official” (xuanming guan) of the Goddess of Mercy, warning people to repent their sinful ways. The proclamation official made the rounds of local houses, explaining his possession and declaring his message with “heavenly music” inspired by the spirit:

I am the proclamation official (xuanming guan) for the Father of Heaven, the Mother of Heaven and Guanyin (Tiangong, Tianmu, Guanshiyin).

Everyone must quickly respect heaven and earth (jing tian, di); only then will good days (hao nian hao yue) come back again; 80 to 90% of the people must believe in heaven and earth, only then will good days come back again.

We must want the good days to come back again; respect (jing) heaven and earth; respect Guanyin and respect the tudi; socialism will flourish for 10,000 years [a slogan from the Cultural Revolution: shehui zhuyi hong wan sui].

The people (wan min) are ruled by heaven; the underworld (yin jian) also manages the people; the people of this world don't believe because they can't see, they can't feel it, but when the time comes they will know... the people of this world (yangjian ren) only have the public security bureau to control them, but in the underworld everything (wu fangmian) will be taken into account:

People who curse heaven and earth will have their whole family die...→Officials (dang guande) must be good officials; they must do good things for the people; they should build bridges and repair roads...

People who steal and rob, people who are not filial (bu xiao) will be struck dead by lightning; one in a thousand will be punished to make others see...→Today the market is very unstable (shichang hen bu wending); rice will be as precious as gold (mi yao xiang jinzi yi yang de gui)...

Now all the Pusa are requesting (yaoqiu) the people to rebuild them temples; they have 'eaten thirty years of bitterness'; if you don't let them come back then the people living on the temple sites will have their houses burned.

Everyone must believe in them; only then will they save the people.

The proclamation clearly has an apocalyptic message, but couched in moral principles hybridized from both religious and revolutionary sources, much as Zhu Congde drew on a revolutionary conceptual vocabulary to understand Christianity. People we saw reacted to his performance with either polite but disinterested sympathy (seeing him as mentally disturbed), or with outright scorn and ridicule. On the whole, local people tended to be skeptical of ganshen, accepting the state's definition of it as feudal superstition, but they also drew a clear distinction between ganshen and the temple. Once when I was discussing spiritual possession (ganshen) with a middle-aged man, he replied to my question about the difference between "feudal superstition" and religious belief by referring to the temple:

It's hard to say clearly what the difference is. Take the Chuanzhu temple for example. For some people it's part of their religious belief, others just go to get some benefit from the spirit. They don't understand or care who the god is. Maybe we can say that religion has a use in society, it can help keep peace in society and can provide spiritual comfort for the people. Superstition is praying for material benefit. It is also a way of explaining things nongmin [peasants] don't understand.

Here superstition is private, ignorant, narrow material benefit, while belief is public, understanding, socially useful and therefore spiritually comforting. The temple is conceived of as a place open to moral meaning and self-understanding, highlighting its role as a site for negotiating the shared fate of the community.

Especially for many of the older people involved in its activities, the temple was a place to address what they saw as moral erosion and to voice their own values. At a temple festival, one old man voiced the common complaint that "today everything's really crooked (wai de hen)," explaining that:

People don't believe in heaven and don't believe in earth—they don't believe in anything! It's young people's personality today, they don't respect old people. What are old people? What are these gods? [Young people] just want to buy things...to eat well, dress well, have fun—in the cities now they are everywhere! ...They don't care if they die: no heaven, no earth, no spirits (shen), no belief (xinyang).

They can do anything because they believe in nothing... (fieldnotes,)

This was something more than the perennial rant of the older generation against ‘kids nowadays.’ We frequently heard such complaints about relationships that many local people felt had deteriorated under the socialist market economy. The idea that “now it’s everybody out for themselves” was tied to resentment of the growing gap between rich and poor and feelings of vulnerability, of being left behind. The reactions against the commodification of social relationships voiced in the temple were (in a negative way) similar to the sentiments underlying Zhu Congde’s positive admiration for the egalitarian selflessness of the Christian house church: both decried the breakdown in society caused by capitalist reform and called for a return to basic moral values grounded in religious belief.

The temple was also a place that gathered the power of moral outrage against the state more directly. The villagers held up Chuanzhu, the upright official and master builder, as a mirror to expose the township government’s corruption and overall indifference to local needs. In this reflection, the local government was discredited; or, as one temple participant put it, “they’re not real party members.” The many criticisms of the local government voiced in the Chuanzhu temple often took the form of negative comparison to the upright cadres of the collective period. These views were held by the same people who had endured the horrors of the Great Leap Forward, and who on other occasions expressed deep rejection of socialist collective production. The contradiction only underscores the creative agency of remembering; now the idealized “real” Party itself had become part of the moral repertoire of historical memory (Feuchtwang 2000, 165-6). Local leaders had squandered that legacy and a new relationship needed to be forged through the temple.

The opportunity for negotiating a new relationship presented itself in a change of leadership at the township level. The new party branch secretary Gao recognized the seriousness of the temple’s challenge, and his response was an effort to control the damage by co-opting the temple’s message in three ways: First, he encouraged rather than suppressed the revival in a move to channel the temple into administrative structures (especially state-sponsored Buddhism) under party control. Second, he tried to redirect the temple’s criticism of the party’s political failure toward the positive goal of economic development through tourism. Finally, he sought to identify the party with Chuanzhu in order to co-opt the god’s power.

This last point was the most interesting, and perhaps the most successful strategy that Gao adopted. A widely circulated story had it that when Gao visited the temple and performed the ketou to Chuanzhu, the statue fell on top of him, interpreted as the god thanking the new party secretary for his support of the temple. In this representation, the god is a powerful participant, beckoning his secular counterpart with the enactment of ritual propriety. In another incident we witnessed, Gao apologized for arriving late to a meeting at the temple, rather pointedly explaining that he had been busy looking after the township irrigation system—surely an intentional impersonation of Chuanzhu’s historical and power identities, as if to say, “I am not a pale reflection of the upright official/ builder ideal, but the very embodiment of it!”

Gao invoked traditional symbols the villagers would recognize, even as he tried to impose from above a modern redefinition on the temple. The irony, of course, was that Gao’s impersonation of the god—an expectation in popular religion—contravened his own instruction to the meeting on avoiding “incorrect” behavior, by which he meant practicing feudal superstition, particularly and specifically identified with spiritual possession (ganshen). Gao’s cooptation through impersonation is even more ironic in light of the Chuanzhu’s own story, in which Li Bing (Chuanzhu’s historical identity) opened Sichuan to Han Chinese settlement after gaining control of the indigenous people precisely by coopting their religious beliefs through the strategy of embodiment. As the story goes:

This bit of folklore illustrates Li Bing the politician in action, winning confidence in Shu while conquering the Min River. Animist Shu religion had regarded the Min as a deity. The governor

coopted this indigenous belief and made it a Qin state cult by building a temple to the god. Prior to his governorship, a local custom had prevailed whereby two maidens were purchased annually, by popular subscription, to provide sacrifice victims for the river spirit. The sacrificial ceremony had proceeded in the manner of a wedding. Superstition had it that unless propitiated each year with a pair of new brides, the min might overflow.

Li Bing ended the practice by a combination of tact and showmanship. He first offered two daughters of his own in betrothal to the Min god and arranged a nuptial banquet by the riverside. The Li girls were dressed in bridal finery, and an empty throne was set up for their riparian fiancé. While crowds looked on, the governor then invited the ethereal bridegroom to drink a toast to the occasion. He drained his own cup but the cup set before the empty throne of course remained full.

As if taking offence at the god's refusal to drink, Li Bing drew a sword, challenged his would-be divine son-in-law to a duel and prudently left the scene. Just then two bulls appeared on the riverbank. They locked horns and began fighting, which was taken to be a duel by proxy for the combat between the governor and the Min River god. After awhile Li Bing returned, sweating profusely as would a swordsman in the heat of action. He commanded his lieutenants to aid him, claiming the bull facing south represented himself, and the other one, facing north, his foe. When an assistant slew the northward facing bull, this symbolic act subdued the river spirit as well. Through the medium of the bull, Li Bing had won. [story quoted from Sage, 1992,150-151]

Cooptation in the case of Gao was appreciated because it was mutual: Gao showed that the state could understand, could speak the language of the local community and recognize local concerns. Through cooptation, the temple became a locus for negotiation and compromise. It was not important that the state actually believe in the efficacy of local gods, but rather simply that they engage the institutions that surround them. That is perhaps the true significance of orthopraxy: not the irrelevance of belief, nor even lip-service to authority, but rather the performance or ritual embodiment of mutual accommodation.

The story does not end on such a happy note, however. After a few years of ever-more active Chuanzhu festivals, complete with performances of local opera, the state clamped down on the temple's activities in the name of "public order." Gao had been dismissed, and a harder line replaced the tolerant attitude he displayed toward the temple. The festival this last summer was disappointing to some local people; they said there was not enough renao.

Other local temples met with a harsher fate. In a neighboring township, local residents saw the opportunity to revive the San Sheng Gong (Temple of the Three Sages), by rather brazenly erecting the inscription "Tourist Center" above the main entrance. Clearly hoping to achieve the same kind of mutual accommodation that had worked in the Chuanzhu temple, they restored the local gods that had once been emplaced in the temple—an eclectic pantheon even by the standards of popular religion. These included the rather standard concatenation of Confucius, the God of War, and the God of Wealth, along with the city god (untypically represented with his entire family), the Grain God, and the ubiquitous Goddess of Mercy. But most interesting were the very particular figures associated with bodily transformation: some rather weird half-man half-beast spirits, including a chicken-footed god of the kind Graham documented, and a deified local doctor, Mr. Lan, connected to the temple's history (and the most likely candidate to be the case of a deified living person that Graham had heard mention of in Yachow in the 1920s).

The particular stories associated with the temple all invoke the embodiment characteristic of local folk religion. San Sheng Gong is named for the three sages, but the main temple deity is the city god, chenghuang. The temple was built in 1777 (Qianlong 41), under the leadership of the Luo family in Zhongli Township, after a dispute with the central city god temple in the county seat of Ya'an, twenty kilometers away. According to the story of the

temple's founding, when it was the Zhongli contingent's turn to serve as temple leaders (huishou) in Ya'an, the city people treated the visitors disrespectfully, accusing them of skimping on the jiudawan feast on the city god's festival day. Feeling wronged, the people of Zhongli petitioned the county magistrate to allow them to build their own city god temple that could serve the upriver townships of Xiali, Zhongli, and Shangli. The government agreed and the Zhongli group held a ceremony of incense burning and divination to ask permission of the city god. The results were good; the city god was willing to fenshen, literally "divide his body" to take up new residence in the auspicious placement found for the new temple at Shuita Xi, Xiali Township.

When they ran short of wood in building the new temple, the Luo family devised a scheme to invite a ganshen spirit medium who, possessed by the spirit of chenghuang, gave specific locations in the area surrounding the temple where the required sources of wood could be found. The night before this embodiment of the god, Luo sent men into the forest around the temple to strip the bark from suitable trees and to write the words "san sheng gong" on the trunks. In this way, the god's will was carried out, and the temple was completed with the donated wood. In another incident that demonstrated the god's ling spiritual power, on one occasion when the huishou neglected to invite an opera troupe for chenghuang's festival day, a troupe from the provincial capitol of Chengdu mysteriously arrived to perform on the appropriate day. When asked how they knew to come, they replied that several months earlier a man from Zhongli had made the arrangements, and paid them ahead of time. The benefactor was said to be chenghuang himself.

Chenghuang presides over the judgment of souls, assigning the deceased of Zhongli district to the appropriate level of the underworld. He also has the power to cure disease for the penitents who pledge to perform the paocha ritual on his festival day. People still remember the festival of 1930, when more than 10,000 attended, and over 1,000 men ran the paocha. As the story goes, a local army commander, who was stationed at the nearby Buddhist temple of Bifengsi to recruit soldiers in the area, came down with an incurable skin rash that afflicted all his troops. When told by a local resident that the Sansheng gong chenghuang could cure the disease, he prayed to the god and the rash disappeared. To fulfill his ritual obligation, the commander sent a large group of soldiers to paocha.

Next to chenghuang in the temple is the figure of Mr. Lan, the beloved local doctor whose healing powers are exercised through the temple. Local people say that Lan passed by the temple one day when it was being renovated and craftsmen were carving new statues of the gods. He jokingly asked if the sculptor could make a statue that looked like him. When Lan passed by the temple again a few days later, he discovered a statue carved in his likeness, and realized that it was a sign that he would soon die. He gathered up all his medical texts, brought them to the temple and placed as many as he could in the hollow back of the statue, burning the rest in front of it. In a few days he died, but he had stored his healing knowledge within his figure in the temple. To show their respect (and no doubt reflecting the prevailing chaos of the 1930s and 1940s) local people placed two pistol-bearing bodyguards with Lan's statue. Today Mr. Lan's powers of healing and moral example of kindness are still embodied in the temple.

Perhaps the San Sheng Gong was just too vivid a remembering, too local, particular, and idiosyncratic for official toleration. Beyond this, and despite the gesture toward mutual cooptation that its self-proclaimed identity as a tourist center suggested, the temple revival was a clear case of spontaneous self-organization outside the control of the state, and therefore illegal. Township officials shut the temple down and destroyed many of its statues. What angered local people most was that the temple was attacked as part of the crackdown on Falungong, with which they vigorously denied any connection. Back in Longxi township another temple—one led by a local woman healer—was blown up with dynamite, also under the rationale of cracking down on Falungong.

One possible explanation for the actions of state agents might be the commonalities of healing and embodiment that could connect popular religion with Falun Gong. In examining Falun Gong, Richard Madsen observes that,

Chinese traditions assume a profound interpenetration of matter and spirit, body and soul. To bring health benefits, the physical exercises of qigong must be accompanied by moral cultivation...And moral cultivation involves a spiritual exercise, a way of focusing the mind. Like most qigong practitioners, Falun Gong members do not make a clear distinction between physical and spiritual healing. Thus, from a Western viewpoint, most forms of qigong look more like religion than medicine. (Madsen 2000, 244)

By the same token, popular belief might look more like medicine than religion. But the commonality is only superficial. Falun Gong is a primarily urban phenomenon. It draws on the traditional emphasis on body, but is completely modern in its focus on individual spirituality and an associational identity wholly divorced from a sense of place (the cult's founder, Li Hongzhi, operates out of Queens New York). In the small part of Sichuan we study, Falun Gong has not had a presence in the countryside. Yet there were plenty of examples of healing and ganshen spiritual possession going on at the same time as the temples—activities that have actually increased significantly in recent years.[14] Individuals can openly carry out these activities with no consequences, but community initiatives—by their very localism and particularism—are perceived as threatening.

Conclusion

What is the sense of locality that defines the traditional religious community in rural Sichuan? Does it conform to the physical boundaries of the political village or the township? The answer is fuzzy. The Chuanzhu temple is sited at the edge of the township seat, yet is referred to as Xiakou village Chuanzhu temple. On the god's festival day processions come from other neighboring villages, and the temple itself is one of many branches of the cult center in Dujiangyan. To make things more complicated, worshippers at the Chuanzhu temple also worship at a variety of other local temples.

To understand this sense of local community, we might refer to Fei Xiaotong's metaphorical rendering of the difference between Western and Chinese modes of association: Fei likens the Western model to "straws in a bundle" where the individual is associated in a group with boundaries set by attachment to a common abstract principle, shared by each and all of the group. Chinese modes of association, on the other hand, are like ripples from a pebble thrown into the water. They are ego centered, begin with the family and as one is able to successfully cultivate oneself morally and ritually, extend outward in ever-larger radiations. One person's network is never the same as another person's.

One can get a sense of this distinction by comparing the spatial arrangement of Chinese Christian churches and popular religion temples: the church's orderly rows of seats oriented to the central altar stand in contrast to the idiosyncratic configurations of the temples.[15] The gods as well as the participants in any particular temple extend outward in overlapping networks, like Fei's ripples, suggesting that, while the village may be a significant category of membership it is hardly a rigorous bounded defining community.

What does the state make of all this? It is precisely the ideosyncratic particularity of popular religion that makes it illegible to the modern state[16], and therefore threatening, while Christianity can at least be controlled. It is easier to grasp a bundle of straws than to scoop up ripples in a pond. Those ripples, as we have seen, once extended to encompassing the state. Works on the role of popular religion as bureaucratic metaphor have shown that the "standardization" of gods into a state cult, and the "superscription" of state power onto gods and temples constituted a surface of orthodoxy and hegemony under which multiple meanings and interests contended (J.

Watson, 1985; Duara, 1988b). Thus order was achieved only through a fine balance of mutual accommodation between interests—individual and collective, local and imperial—and multiple meanings condensed in the shared symbol of temples and gods. Temples inscribed imperial authority, but they also were forums for the expression of popular opinion (mingqing) that the state had to recognize.

Popular religion temples in late imperial China were institutions that helped insulate the community from the destructive/extractive penetrations of the state, but as such they needed to engage the state. Likewise the temples were an important pivot point where the state sought to win the hearts and minds of the local communities. It did this by attempting to coopt local religious beliefs. The state was able to impose its sense of incorporation and obedience; the community held onto its distinctiveness.

In the name of modernization, the state today has adopted a policy of scouring the particularity of local belief from the landscape, and either encouraging in its place a benign homogenized loyalty to national symbols[17] or tolerating individual participation in the major religions, each of which have bureaucracies under the control of the party. But in the countryside, belief is fundamentally linked to community; the healing of temples is a social healing brought about through specific moral action in the particularized landscape. There remains still a strong urge among China's people to seek the unity of moral cultivation, bodily well being, and an engagement with the state on issues of political concern. In the countryside, this is evidenced by the upswing in healers and a frustrated desire to redevelop popular local religion. The state's focus on organization allows individualized expressions of belief or bureaucratized religion but discourages the development of public community associations such as the temples of popular religion. The frustrated efforts of communities to develop their own institutions to give voice to their discontents may result in making these discontents worse when individuals are left in isolation and kept powerless. Ironically, perhaps, moral communities at the grass roots level may be the best bet for revitalizing the party's leadership, since their aim is more to engage the state than to challenge it.

Body transformations are an essential and enduring element of Chinese popular religion. Whether in calling on the embodied power of a god for protection, enlisting a spiritually possessed healer to cure a sick family member, or even experiencing the "reality" of indigenous Christianity, body is fundamental to belief. Community—the social body—is also an integral element of popular belief, one that is perhaps even more of an issue today than it was in the past. The widening gap between rich and poor, the worship of money, the commodification of relationships, and the indifference of the state to local problems—all these constitute a moral malady wracking the social body and tearing it apart. Local temples—connected to the particularity of local deities, landscapes, and community histories—are places where communities re-member themselves, and where moral healing is embodied.

[1] . Fei Xiaotong asserted that traditionally Chinese society was ruled by ritual predicated on self-cultivation and restraint : "On the surface, "a rule of rituals" seems like a self-generated form of social order in which people's action are unrestrained by laws. Actually, 'self-generated' is the wrong word here, because a rule of rituals implies that one uses one's own initiative to follow conventional rules. Confucius often used the words restrain (ke) and bind (yue) to describe the process of ritual cultivation. These words suggest that "a rule of rituals" does not occur in the absence of society, does not stem from natural human instincts, and does not depend on directions from heaven. (Fei 1992, 99-100)

[2] (fn here about folk Buddhism, also referencing standard works on popular religion, e.g. Feuchtwang).

[3] The argument thus framed makes an interesting fit with Weller's (1987) discussion of Unities and Diversties in Chinese religion. Weller, although he is not addressing questions of belief per se, distinguishes ideologized beliefs propagated by the state purveyors of orthodoxy with local pragmatic explanation of religious practice which are more flexible and express political alliances and local social concerns and tensions. Drawing on the work of Weber

and Geertz, Weller demonstrates that elite religious constructions are abstract, while the popular tradition is pragmatic. Weller asserts that Buddhism in Taiwan was an elite construction and developed along these abstract lines in contrast to the particularized or pragmatic concerns of the popular tradition.

[4] Graham's proselytizing was aimed at the educated elite, and his work and personal notes express admiration for humanist morality of Confucianism. He was more critical of Buddhism, which he saw as "degenerate" in its popular, rather than philosophical, form.

[5] Reference literature on "renao"—Weller

[6] The standard reference on this topic is Duara (expand).

[7] Ganshen—literally, "feeling the spirit"—was typically associated with exorcisms of evil demons. The ganshen would fall into a trance indicating that the healing god had taken over his, or more often her, body. Ganshen was also associated with millenarian cults, in which pronouncements from the god were made through a possessed spokesman. The paocha ritual involved young men who served as the god's escort on his festival day, running (pao) up and down the route of the procession brandishing a fork (cha) that swiveled and clanked. They vowed (xuyuan) this service to the god in exchange for healing and protection of family members. Paocha participants would often pierce their skin with metal hooks, from which hung small oil lamps.

[8] Gao in Bays p346-7

[9] Gao in Bays p347

[10] A Confucian education was not unusual for the older men in the village. This was not philosophical training but memorization of texts to achieve basic literacy. In addition to the four books students also learned from the Dang Jia Shu and Sui Shen Bao, practical handbooks listing the names of common household items, and the rules and rituals governing family affairs.

[11] "Great Unity" was a traditional concept of universal harmony, especially in the interpretation of Confucianism championed by Kang Youwei in an effort to reform the Confucian tradition from within at the end of the nineteenth century. Kang's reinterpretation of Confucianism was to a large degree modeled on Christianity. The classic discussion of "Great Unity" is Joseph Levenson's *Confucian China and its Modern Fate* (ref.). Duara notes other examples of syncretic, universalist themes emerging in popular religious movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (ref.).

[12] cite madsen (2000) article

[13] We have written about the revival in more detail elsewhere and so the section that follows draws from those earlier writings.

[14] "suanming xiansheng" who gain their powers through bodily transformation by being "stricken" and then recovering with the skills, and smaller shrines sponsored by individuals add to this the bei at the road protection shrine that speaks of a near-death, transformative experience.

[15] Madsen emphasizes the nesting box structure of Chinese Catholicism in his ethnography on the topic, describing how local structures are intended as "miniature copies" of the more central structures, a pattern that clearly plays down local particularity. (Madsen, 1998; p27)

[16] reference James Scott, *Seeing Like a State*

[17] The most absurd example of this homogenization we came across was the representation of a “local belief” in a tourist development perched in the mountains directly above San Sheng Gong. The painting of Nuwa patching the sky is based on a pan-Chinese legend, localized to Ya’an by the story that the rainy weather there comes from the hole she is sent to patch. The oil painting is in Western style, reminiscent of Michelangelo, the painter is from Hong Kong, the painting is valued because of the “international acclaim” it received, and the content has no connection to local belief.

About This Essay

Body, Belief, and the State

This essay is an overview of beliefs associated with local popular religion, drawing comparisons between our fieldwork observations on the resurgence of traditional culture over the 1990s and research on popular religion in this region of Sichuan done from 1911 to 1949 by the missionary/explorer/anthropologist David Crockett Graham. We presented earlier drafts of the essay to the Anthropology Department Seminar at the University of Oxford and the China Seminar at Manchester University in 2002.