The Politics of Legitimation and the Revival of Popular Religion in Shaanbei, North-Central China

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From the early 1980s onward, popular religion has enjoyed a momentous revival in Shaanbei (northern Shaanxi province), as in many other parts of rural China. But despite its immense popularity, popular religion still carries with it an aura of illegality and illegitimacy. Not properly Daoism or Buddhism, which are among the officially recognized religions, popular religion in theory constitutes illegal, superstitious activities. This article addresses questions of the legality and legitimacy of popular religion by analyzing the case of the Black Dragon King Temple in Shaanbei and its temple boss. It examines how not just popular religiosity but the actions of local elites and local state agents have enabled the revival of popular religious activities, focusing particularly on the legitimation politics engaged in by temples and their leaders.

Keywords: *politics of legitimation; popular religion; local state; local elites; Shaanbei*

From the early 1980s onward, popular religion has enjoyed a momentous revival in Shaanbei (northern Shaanxi province), as in many other parts of rural China.[1] Tens of thousands of temples have been rebuilt during the reform era; local opera troupes crisscross the countryside performing for deities and worshippers at temple festivals; *yinyang* masters (geomancers) are busy siting graves and houses and calculating auspicious dates for weddings and funerals; spirit mediums, Daoist priests, gods, and goddesses are bombarded with requests to treat illnesses, exorcise evil spirits, guarantee business success, and retrieve lost motorcycles.

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As its appeal rises among the rural masses, popular religion is in the process of regaining its institutional significance within what might be called the agrarian public sphere in rural China. Popular religious activities such as temple festivals (*miaohui*), spirit medium séances, and funeral and wedding banquets encourage and facilitate a kind of sociality radically different from that of the Maoist era, when political campaigns, militarized organizations, collectivist production drives, and class struggle dictated villagers' social lives. Instead of responding to state-imposed political ideals and campaign goals, villagers today are engaged in social interactions based on kinship or community obligations and responsibilities, on a desire to have "fun" (*honghuo*, the Shaanbei colloquial equivalent of Mandarin *renao*—literally, "red and fiery"), or on other concerns that are mostly personal and familial. Unlike the bourgeois public sphere discussed by Jürgen Habermas in the context of western European sociopolitical development in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the agrarian public sphere in today's rural China is not characterized by a conscious and open engagement with issues of politics or government or by the formation of a "public opinion" (even though the potential for such engagement and formation exists). It is "public" in form and expression but is not "for the public" in the sense of ideological orientation toward the greater good of the "imagined community" of nation, state, or some such larger collectivity.

Even though popular religion is an umbrella term that encompasses a broad range of disparate phenomena, temple-based religious activities are the most exciting and most enjoyed in Shaanbei. A government agency in Yulin prefecture estimated that by the mid-1990s there

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were well over 10,000 temples in the prefecture alone (Fan, 1997: 98).[2] Because of the area's increasing prosperity, temples and temple festivals are often many times larger than were those in the past. Temples typically sponsor and "stage" a wide range of folk cultural activities, including performances by folk dance troupes (*yangge*), musical bands and storytellers, folk opera, "offering presentation" processions, animal sacrifices, temple festivals, and so forth.

It is no exaggeration to characterize temples as the motor of popular religious revivals and a major locus of peasant cultural productions. As a result, the most significant institutional player in Shaanbei's peasant cultural revival is the temple association, which in every temple ensures that temple's smooth running and stages festivals in honor of the deity (or deities) enshrined there. Typically, a temple association is composed of a small group of generally respectable adult men (called *huizhang*; lit., "association heads") who are willing to serve the deity and the community. Their leadership roles are often confirmed not just by communal acceptance but by divination, indicating approval by the deity as well. Each temple association customarily has a leader (*dahuizhang*; lit., "big association head")—that is, the temple boss—who is usually the person who is most capable, as well as most respected by members of his community.

Besides being a site of both individual and communal worship, a temple is also a political, economic, and symbolic resource and a generator of such resources. A beautifully built temple and a well-attended temple festival attest not only to the efficacy of the deity but also to the organizational ability of the temple association and the community. Although most temples derive a modest income from donations and can only break even financially, a few—such as the Heilongdawang Temple, which I will describe below—can harness a large surplus income for the local community. This increase in financial strength brings better roads, improved irrigation systems, and better schools for the surrounding villages.

To be elected as an officer of the temple association can bring an individual extra income (in the form of a salary or a subsidy), prestige, respect, power to manage temple finances and influence local affairs, and occasions to interact with other prominent local figures and to use his connection with the temple for personal gain. Being a temple officer, usually couched in the cultural idiom of "serving the god," is often

emotionally satisfying for the man and for members of his family. However, not everyone can or wants to become a temple officer. Most villagers in fact shy away from direct involvement with temple affairs: temple office is public office, and decision making inevitably means creating enemies and resentments. Those most inclined to desire these positions are ambitious local activists who enjoy public life and who are interested in the political potential opened up by the revival of popular religion (see Duara, 1988: 148).

Despite its immense popularity, popular religion still carries with it an aura of illegality and illegitimacy. Not properly Daoism or Buddhism, which are among the officially recognized religions (the other three are Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam), popular religion in theory constitutes illegal, superstitious (*mixin*) activities.[3] All the village compacts (*cunmin gongyue*) I have seen in Shaanbei explicitly state that villagers should not engage in such superstitious activities as worshipping deities, consulting spirit mediums or fortune-tellers, and the like. Officers of the Public Security Bureau (*gong'anju*; i.e., the police) told me that they are supposed to treat superstitious activities just as they would gambling, prostitution, drug trafficking, and other crime. But in reality, the police almost never crack down on popular religion; indeed, they are often invited by the temple association to attend the temple festivals and to help maintain order and direct traffic. Besides the local police, many other agencies and members of the local state insinuate themselves into the burgeoning agrarian public sphere for power and spoils. The Religious Affairs Bureau is the most prominent local state actor in registering and regulating temples and religious activities.

How have Shaanbei people managed to engage so visibly in popular religious activities without incurring the wrath of the party-state, which is no less atheistic today than it was during the high socialist era? How do temple bosses convince the authorities that they are legitimate leaders of the village communities? I address these questions of legality and legitimacy by analyzing the case of the Heilongdawang Temple and its temple boss, Lao Wang. I begin by examining the now-dominant thesis that in the revival of popular religion we see the emergence of communal power vis-à-vis the state. To complicate this picture, I introduce two categories of social actors that play key roles in the revival of popular religion: local elites (exemplified by the figure

of the temple boss) and local state agents. Then I describe and analyze the politics of legitimation engaged in by the temple and the temple boss. I trace the trajectory of the temple's garnering of official endorsements and provide an ethnographic account of a key legitimation ritual (a plaque-hanging ceremony) at the temple that marked its rise in status from popular religious village temple to Daoist shrine. I conclude by characterizing the interpenetration of local state agencies and local society in the realm of popular religion.

THE STATE AND THE "POPULAR RELIGION AS RESISTANCE" THESIS

The reform-era socialist state is willing to open up to popular religion a space that had been closed off in the past. This space seems to be one of the current regime's "zone[s] of indifference" (Tang Tsou's phrase; qtd. in Shue, 1995: 93), as the state is embroiled in other difficulties, such as the problems of money-losing state enterprises, massive layoffs of their employees (*xiagang*), birth control, the "Taiwan question," and the like. However, the state still can and sometimes does, if it so chooses, exert brute force over popular religion, if only to periodically "make its power visible" (Anagnost, 1994: 244). Ann Anagnost calls these sporadic bursts of activity against popular religion (or other "vices" such as prostitution, corruption, smuggling, piracy, and other crime) "fetishized demonstrations of political efficacy" (Anagnost, 1994: 244).

The recent crackdown on Falungong (Dharma Wheel Practice), Zhonggong (Chinese Divine Practice), and other *qigong* sects shows clearly how relentless the party-state can be if it chooses to parade its power. These sects have, among other things, posed threats to the Chinese regime's ability to control space (see Chen, 1995). Group qigong practices effectively turn public spaces into intensely private and communal domains, as concerns for private health and vitality override any ideologically orchestrated uses of the same spaces (recall mass processions and public struggle campaigns during the high socialist era).[4] The state's paranoid reactions to these challenges speak volumes about how much ideological significance it still invests in these spaces (e.g., urban spaces, public parks, squares), which were

originally created and continue to be maintained by the state. On the other hand, the state has become much more tolerant of unthreatening religious activities within the private space of people's homes, such as the installation of a domestic deity and ancestor altars.

A number of scholars have argued that the return of popular religion during the reform era signals the strength of local communities to resist the state. The reemergence of lineage power is the most obvious example; also returning are village or community-wide festivals (see Feuchtwang, 2000). Anagnost (1994) argues that the rebuilding of temples and the procession of local tutelary deities are instances of local communities symbolically reclaiming their own space from the homogenizing, totalizing party-state. Because the state, in turn, periodically repossesses these spaces during antisuperstition campaigns, it and local communities are engaged in a protracted "politics of ritual displacement" (Anagnost, 1994: 222-23). For the local communities to be negotiating with and resisting the state at all is proof of the resurgence of communal power during the reform era.

Studying the revival of folk rituals and temple communities in southern Fujian, Kenneth Dean contends that the communities created by these ritual systems—for example, the Three in One cult network—are "disruptive communities" because they are irreducibly local and multitudinous (Dean, 1997: 177). Ritual actions induct individuals into communities of believer-practitioners, and these "multiple public spheres" not only challenge the state's cultural and ideological strictures but also provide a case against the Habermasian concept of a singular bourgeois public sphere that supposedly bridges the state and society (Dean, 1997: 191). Another researcher who has conducted fieldwork in rural southern Fujian, Wang Mingming (1996), also points out that the revival of community-wide ritual actions indicates a desire on the part of the villagers to search out and rediscover local communities' cultural and historical meanings that had been neglected or attacked during the collectivist era. The rotation of responsibilities among villages to organize the annual temple festival renews villagers' sense of locality, communal solidarity, and mutual cooperation (Wang, 1996: 70, 76).

Perhaps the best example of treating popular religion as resistance and communal self-assertion is Jun Jing's study of the revival during the reform era of a Confucius lineage hall/temple in a village in Gansu

province (Jing, 1996, 2000). The Kong-surnamed village underwent enormous social suffering during the Maoist era. The villagers were persecuted politically because they were implicated in regional interethnic violence and sectarian movements and because they were connected to the supposed archsymbol of the feudal era, Confucius. They were also poorly compensated for their forcible relocation from their village, made necessary by the construction of a large hydroelectric dam nearby. During the reform era, the villagers sought political, moral, and cultural redress by rebuilding the village lineage temple as well as other deity temples. At the center of this revival movement was the politically charged process of reclaiming physical space and retrieving memories of a moral community that had been destroyed.

While agreeing with these scholars on the potential of popular religion to serve as a vehicle of popular resistance, I think that this "community versus the state" binary opposition is overly simplistic. In this article, I suggest that we also look at other important aspects of the popular religious revival, such as the actions of the local state, the power claims of local elites, and the frequent mutual accommodation, negotiation, and collusion between local state agents and local elites.

THE ROLE OF THE LOCAL STATE IN THE REVIVAL OF POPULAR RELIGION

Important to my account of the revival of popular religion in rural China is the analytical distinction between the two guises of the Chinese socialist state: the policy-making central party-state and the local state that implements the policies, often bending the rules in the process. In the reform era, the local state has considerably increased its administrative and fiscal autonomy vis-à-vis the central state. Recently China scholars have tried to look beyond the central party-state in analyzing the behaviors of the local state (Blecher and Shue, 1996; Esherick, 1994; Oi, 1989, 1999; Shue, 1995; Wank, 1995, 1999). Because its interests are embedded in its locale, the local state necessarily behaves differently than the central state.

The local state takes the forms of township-, county-, and prefecture-level government bureaus and bureaucrats. In reform-era Shaanbei, the relationship between the local state and ordinary

peasants is strained, to put it mildly. Shaanbei peasants invariably have a negative image of representatives of the local state: they take things away but rarely give anything back; the local officials are good-for-nothing and corrupt, spending all their time eating, drinking, singing karaoke songs, and dancing with prostitutes (see Gates, 1991); the traffic police are too rapacious; the birth control work teams are brutal in imposing fines and punishments; doctors at the county hospital are asking for too much gift money; and no one can hope to win a lawsuit unless he "has someone" (*youren*) in the county or district court. In the eyes of peasants, the local state is better at squeezing the people, not serving the people (see Pan, 1997). In contrast, a myriad of gods, goddesses, spirit mediums, yinyang masters, and fortune-tellers form a vast efficacy (*ling*) service sector that enjoys the people's trust and allegiance.

So what characterizes the relationship between the local state and popular religion in Shaanbei? Freedom of religious worship is protected by the PRC constitution, but superstition is not. It is up to the state to categorize one activity as proper religion (*zhengdang zongjiao huodong*) and another as feudal superstition (*fengjian mixin*). Much of Shaanbei popular religion hovers in the huge gray area between legitimate religion and illegitimate (thus illegal) superstition. After Liberation, the Yulin and Yan'an Prefecture Civil Affairs Bureaus (*minzhengju*), which have branches in the county governments, were responsible for overseeing religious affairs in Shaanbei. Recently, a separate religious affairs bureau (*zongjiaoju*) has been established in reaction to the growing prominence of religion in Shaanbei society.[5] Theoretically, it is the officials of the local religious affairs bureau who make the distinctions between legitimate religion and illegitimate superstition, following directives and religious policies set by their superiors (in the religious affairs bureaus at the provincial and central levels) and by the central government. The same bureau is responsible for supporting proper religion by registering and supervising religious institutions and personnel, leaving it to the local police to crack down (*daji*) on superstition. However, in specific instances on the local level, the decisions distinguishing proper religion from superstition are not easily made, nor would such distinctions easily translate into government action. To my knowledge, there has been no effort targeting superstitious activities in Shaanbei since

the 1980s—a laxity that partly accounts for the vibrant popular religious life there—even though much of Shaanbei popular religious life (divination, mediumism, rain prayers, symbolism of hell and divine retribution, etc.) would qualify as superstition according to criteria of the Maoist era.

The criteria are still the same, but the behavior of the local state has changed. Nowadays the agents of the local state (e.g., officials of the religious affairs bureaus and the public security bureaus) are not interested in taking action against superstition, because they derive no benefit from doing so. Unlike during the Maoist era, being fervent (*jiji*) in stamping out superstition is no longer a sign of political rectitude and good political performance (*zhengzhi biaoxian*). In fact, a fervent antisuperstition attitude is so connected in people's minds with the ultra-leftism of the Cultural Revolution era (which has been officially declared as aberrant and wrong) that it earns its holder a bad political reputation. And it is quite plain to everyone in the local state that to crack down on popular religion, no matter how superstitious in appearance, will meet with popular disapproval and even resistance; it "will not win people's hearts" (*bude renxin*).[6]

The shift away from radical antitraditionalism to regulatory paternalism is best demonstrated by the registration of temples by the prefectural religious affairs bureau.[7] In theory, only temples that are legitimately Daoist or Buddhist can become institutional members of the official national Daoist Association or Buddhist Association. However, in practice it is extremely difficult to ascertain the Daoist or Buddhist qualities of different temples. The overwhelming majority of Shaanbei temples do not have clergy or an easily identified set of doctrines. And the range of religious activities at any one temple can be quite wide and confusing to anyone who is looking for some pure Daoist or Buddhist characteristics. Even historically Daoist or Buddhist temples have accommodated elements that are "impure." In a word, most Shaanbei temples are what scholars of Chinese religions have called folk or popular religious temples, exhibiting a hodgepodge of different practices that have their origins in different traditions.

Adding to the problem of apparently indiscriminate Daoist and Buddhist syncretism is the presence at many temples of clearly "superstitious" activities such as spirit mediumism, which is

condemned by not only the religious affairs bureau but also the official Daoist and Buddhist associations. Despite these apparent difficulties, the process of registering temples was in full swing in the 1990s, probably to catch up with more than a decade of their mushrooming growth. In 1999, an official of the Yulin Prefecture Religious Affairs Bureau was named a province-level model worker for his outstanding work in the effort—a far cry from the high socialist era, when a cadre would have been praised for smashing a lot of temples, not for registering them.[8]

As I spoke to temple officers of different temples that were applying for registration, I found that this process always took some time and a lot of effort. Typically, a temple association has to treat the official representatives of the local state—from the religious affairs bureau and other related bureaus and offices—as guests of honor at temple festivals, at banquets, and on other occasions. The local state and the temples have thus developed a patron-client relationship: officials support temples that pay them respect and tribute. Besides benefiting from temples in these informal ways, local state agents also gain financially as they collect fees and taxes from merchants and peddlers who come to do business during the temple festivals. Members of the local police station, who must be invited to festivals to maintain peace and order, are paid for their services with money, free lodging, good food, cigarettes, and liquor. Small wonder that the police do not crack down on temple activities.

Jean Oi (1999), studying the political economy of reform-era rural China, has highlighted the active role of the local state in enabling local economic growth. She calls this phenomenon local state corporatism. I suggest that the behavior of the Shaanbei local state toward the temples can be interpreted similarly: temples are like enterprises that generate prosperity for the local economy (especially if they are regional pilgrimage centers) and income for the local state. It is thus in the interest of the local state to protect local temples as they would local enterprises. The local state's new, regulatory relationship with local society is characterized by practical mutual dependence. Registering temples and thereby making "superstitious" local cult centers into respectable, official Buddhist or Daoist "venues for religious activities" (*zongjiao huodong changsuo*) is an act of indulgence, granting these local temples protection against any possible

future antisuperstition campaign coming from the central government. It is instructive to note here that while the imperial government attempted religious control by frequently granting majestic-sounding titles to individual deities (e.g., Mazu, Guandi; see Watson, 1985), the same strategy is not available to the secular state today. But in registering the temples in order to regulate them if necessary, the modern state is employing a control strategy long used by the late imperial state.[9]

Another way to protect illegal superstitious activities is to reframe them as quaint and harmless "folk customs" (*fengsu xiguan*) or "traditional culture" (*chuantong wenhua*) not worth any government's while to suppress. These customs, though "primitive" and "laughable," can serve as colorful regional cultural attractions for tourists. As the domestic tourist industry has burgeoned, Shaanbei in recent years has jumped on the tourism bandwagon to promote and sell Shaanbei's charming peasant culture and scenic beauty.[10] Images of Shaanbei rusticity have appeared on television, in newspapers, in novels, and in movies. Local folklorists have begun to sing Shaanbei's praises. And scholars arrive from afar to do research on Shaanbei folk culture. The temples, however, need to be vigilant and guard against any excessive appropriation and encroachments by the emerging tourism bureaus, a new feature in some local states. To a considerable extent, scholarly attention to folk traditions legitimizes these very traditions. The academicization of popular religion has been under way in Taiwan and Hong Kong for quite some time, and this process of legitimation is often directly linked to formations of regional identities (e.g., see Katz, 2003a, 2003b; Sangren, 2003). Similar processes have begun in China, most noticeably in Fujian and Guangdong. Kenneth Dean (1998: 261-63) has reported on the "conferences of the gods" in Fujian, where academics, local folklorists, popular religious practitioners, local officials, and worshippers have gathered at public stagings of academic conferences on local deities and local religious traditions.

I do not mean to convey the impression that all the different agents in different local state bureaus are somehow acting in concert to indulge the revival of popular religious temples. Different local state bureaus and agents have different kinds and degrees of involvement with the temples, though they might share a common predatory interest (see Dean, 1998: 264).[11] For example, the township and county industrial and commerce bureaus (*gongshangju*) and taxation bureaus

(*shuiwuju*) are primarily interested in collecting fees and taxes from the merchants who conduct business at the temple festivals; the police and traffic police (*jiaojing*) are primarily interested in maintaining order and collecting what might be called protection fees from the temple associations; the religious affairs bureau has a duty to implement the government's religious policies (*guanche zongjiao zhengce*) by registering temples (all the while squeezing as many gifts and other benefits from the temples as possible); and the electricity bureau (*dianliju*) officials also expect gifts before the temple festival, or else the power to the temple might just be cut off "accidentally," disabling the opera performance and more or less the entire festival. Most other local state bureaus have nothing to do with temples or temple festivals, though they probably wish that they too could win a piece of the pie.

It is useful here to contrast the local state's behavior concerning popular religion and that concerning birth control. Local state agents also know that the birth control policy is extremely unpopular among the masses, yet they have to enforce it or suffer grave personal career consequences. For example, during the period of my fieldwork, many counties in Shaanbei received serious warnings from the provincial government about their poor birth control work (*jihua shengyu gongzuo*): the township or even county top administrators could lose their jobs on the spot (*jiudi chuzhi*) if, on inspection, they were again found to be ineffective. Subsequently, a wave of drastic, sometimes draconian, measures were adopted in the Shaanbei countryside to curb illegal pregnancies and births (e.g., raiding or tearing down offenders' homes when they failed to pay fines). By contrast, the higher-ups do not reprimand local officials for failure to root out superstition. As a result, the local state is extremely relaxed about popular religion. I was told by one county official that as far as he could remember, since the beginning of the reform era the issue of religion or superstition had not been mentioned even once in county government meetings.

Another factor behind the permissiveness displayed by the local state toward popular religion is that local cadres may fear the consequences of offending the deities. Birth control resisters are merely people; some actors in popular religion are gods. In theory, all cadres are Communist Party members and presumably atheists, unafraid of gods and divine retribution. In reality, however, as members of local

communities influenced by the communal hegemony of believers (who are more often than not their close kin), local cadres are often believers themselves, and they are therefore unwilling to interfere with popular religious activities. Many village temple bosses are current or former village Party secretaries—some, atoning for the sin of having wronged the village deities during the Maoist era, are now their devout servants.

Previous studies of the relationship between the state and popular religion have often stopped short of describing the behavior of the local state (Anagnost, 1987, 1994; Bruun, 1996; Malarney, 1996; Weller, 1985, 1987). The state does not act directly on popular religion; rather, such action is left to the local agents of the state (I sometimes use "local state" as a convenient shorthand to refer to these agents as a collectivity). If left unexamined, the term "the state" becomes reified. Similarly, "the people" (or "the community") has also been reified, especially when treated as "resisting," presumably always in a collective manner, the state's interference in their religious life. Neither the state nor the people are monolithic actors, and as far as popular religion is concerned, many different kinds of social actors and many different kinds of social actions are involved.

LOCAL ELITES AND THE REVIVAL OF POPULAR RELIGION

China scholars have long recognized the crucial role that local elites play in mediating between the larger polity (imperial state or modern state) and the local peasant communities (e.g., Duara, 1988; Esherick and Rankin, 1990; Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, 1991; Hsiao, 1960; S.-M. Huang, 1998; Rankin, 1986). Local elites occupy positions of prominence in local society because of their wealth, formal political position, informal political influence, social connections, moral authority, education, ritual knowledge, experience, leadership abilities, or a combination of these factors. They tend to desire to occupy local leadership positions especially when such positions yield tangible or intangible dividends—extra income, prestige, opportunities to network with other local elites, and so on. Their strategies of maintaining an elite status across generations involve conversions between symbolic capital, such as education and imperial

degree titles, and other forms of capital, including land and business and political connections (see Bourdieu, 1984). It has been argued that the relative insecurity of local elites in traditional Chinese society was a fundamental factor in shaping their repertoire of flexible strategies (Rankin and Esherick, 1990: 306). Just like their late imperial predecessors, local elites in today's China are also the most sensitive and responsive to outside forces.

In today's Shaanbei, becoming an official in the local state is still the most desired route to local elitedom; indeed, many local government cadres are rumored to have paid tens of thousands of yuan to buy a county vice mayorship. That is why, I was told, there are so many vice mayors in each county. Official positions are understood to be lucrative because officials can take bribes (as can managerial elites in state-owned enterprises such as coal mines and factories). On the other hand, village official positions (e.g., village head, village Party secretary) are no longer eagerly sought after, because they no longer yield as much power as they did in the Maoist era and the trouble they entail often outweighs their benefits.

Two new types of local elite have emerged in reform-era rural Shaanbei. The first type is the new rich: its members are individuals who have reaped financial benefit from the economic reform through a combination of hard work, connections, and political savvy.[12] Most of them are private entrepreneurs (*getihu*) or bosses of successful village- or township-owned enterprises. The second type of local elite is the moral leader: its members are individuals who wield authority and influence because of their moral strength and their advocacy of traditional social values. Leaders of temple associations often belong to this type. Helping to revive a temple and becoming a temple officer are culturally sanctioned means of harnessing local power (magical as well as secular and political). Because of the traditional cultural conservatism of social values embodied in temple legends and divination messages, temple officers are aligned with traditional idioms of authority and community.

Some men want to become temple officers precisely because they are interested in reviving or maintaining traditional values in what they perceive as a society in moral decline. These tend to be older villagers who have a vested interest in reviving a folk cultural space in which they can exercise moral authority and in which their knowledge

of traditional lore is valued. The temple managers studied by Jun Jing (1996) and the lineage leaders studied by Wang Mingming (1996) belong to this type. In Jing's study of the revival of the Confucius Temple in a village in Gansu, the new temple managers (called *yuanzhu*, or "vow-takers") are middle-aged or elderly male villagers, most of whom had suffered political persecution and social discrimination during the Maoist era (Jing, 1996: 61). Through the rebuilding of the temple and the reestablishment of rituals, these men reassert their authority as ritual specialists and reclaim the roles as moral leaders denied to them in the previous era.

The new rich and the moral leader are of course ideal types, and often particular individuals embody characteristics of both. The new local elites frequently have a symbiotic relationship with the conventional local elite—that is, village-level cadres and local state officials—and sometimes they simply merge into each other (e.g., through marriage and kinship ties). For example, Gregory Ruf (1998) finds that the managing elites of the reform-era village enterprises in the Sichuan village he studied are composed of the village Party secretary and his relatives and social intimates. Similarly, in Shaanbei some temple leaders are current or former village Party secretaries. In many cases, Party secretaries are the most genuinely respected and knowledgeable members of the community, so their being elected to be temple bosses is not surprising. They also have a great deal of experience in organizing large-scale communal activities, and their skills are easily transferred from organizing brigade production and political campaigns to organizing temple festivals. Sometimes they have become temple bosses because no one else has the know-how and connections to the local state to negotiate with, for example, the local religious affairs bureau. It is also possible that the Party secretaries, whose authority has been considerably reduced during the reform period, want to capture the popular religious sphere to compensate for their loss of power (see Jing, 1996: 89-90).

As soon as we understand popular religion as local resource, just like local enterprises, it becomes easier for us to see why certain members of a community are particularly enthusiastic about reviving and expanding local temples. Below, I highlight the at once ritual and political maneuvers of temple boss Lao Wang in order to delineate the changing character of the local elite, who build on and capture

institutional resources in local society while reaching out to the state and other extralocal resources and sites to buttress their legitimacy and power.

Where village factionalism exists, members of opposing factions vie for control of the temple association the way they would the villagers' committee. The example of Lao Wang illustrates how the temple serves as yet another battleground for local political maneuvers and intrigues. Because temple offices are public, the cultural ideal for a temple officer is someone who cares for the common good without partiality. In reality, however, all recognize the inevitability of temple officers' serving their particularistic interests. Given the internal divisions of every community, a temple officer is bound to be perceived as a benefactor and ally by some people and a bully and enemy by others. Hence the importance of legitimation politics. With or without the temple association, micropolitics is endemic in village communities. The political aspect of popular religion has long been noticed by anthropologists who studied Taiwanese local societies (e.g., Rohsenow, 1973; Seaman, 1978), but in the context of reform-era rural China, we witness the reemergence of a site of local political contest and negotiation that had been completely suppressed during the Maoist era. The promise of power held out by the realm of popular religion may have motivated the local activists to revive and enlarge this realm and to compete for its fruits (see Duara, 1988: 148).

When we look more closely at the rise of a new kind of local elite accompanying the revival of popular religion, we see that the revival does not denote simply "the people" reclaiming power from a previously hegemonic socialist state (i.e., the "domination versus resistance" trope); rather, folk social institutions such as temple associations contribute to the formation of a new field of power, in which the local state interacts with local society in new ways with new rules. Instead of viewing the revival of popular religion as a common interest shared by an undifferentiated mass (peasant communities), we can unpack this mass and look at different social actors' different interests, focusing especially on local elites and their desires. Of course, a focus on the actions of local elites does not deny the importance of popular religiosity, for without this latter element it would be impossible for the local elite to mobilize the support of the average villager. Simi-

larly, though in this story the religiosity of temple boss Lao Wang takes a back seat to his politically driven maneuvers, I am by no means dismissing his religiosity as a hypocritical sham.

THE HEILONGDAWANG (BLACK DRAGON KING) TEMPLE AND THE LONGWANGGOU (DRAGON KING VALLEY) COMPLEX

Shaanbei people resort to many deities for divine assistance when they have the need. However, the dragon king (*longwang*) is the agrarian deity par excellence, especially in drought-prone North China (see Duara, 1988; Gamble, 1954, 1963; Grootaers, 1951). He is the provider of the most important agricultural resource, water (in the form of rainfall). There are many dragon kings in Shaanbei, each with a different origin story and "administrative" locale. Heilongdawang (the Black Dragon King) is the local rain god administering the general vicinity of Zhenchuan township.[13] Heilongdawang is considered a much more powerful god than the throng of village dragon kings, because he has an imperially conferred official title: the Marquis of Efficacious Response (Lingyinghou).[14] In the past, peasants in nearby areas who had failed to obtain rain from the lesser dragon kings came to Heilongdawang for help. As is only natural, the wish for a good harvest is coupled with the wish for peace, because the threats of war or civil disturbance, like those of drought and locust attack, are often immediate and real. The couplet on the two front columns of the Heilongdawang Temple reads, "Out he comes from his dragon palace, the winds are gentle and the rains timely; / Back he goes hiding in the sea, the country is peaceful and the people without troubles" (*chu longgong fengtiao yushun; ruhai cang guotai min'an*). In fact, in the past as well as today, believers come to Heilongdawang to pray for divine assistance for all kinds of problems. In the past decade or so, greater numbers have been asking Heilongdawang to help them with their businesses, to bless them so they will get rich.

Torn down completely by the villagers themselves during the Cultural Revolution and rebuilt from scratch in 1982, the temple has been expanding in grandeur ever since.[15] Its fame really took off in the mid- and late 1980s, when stories of Heilongdawang's efficacy spread

widely in Shaanbei, and when the Heilongdawang Temple began to host by far the longest, the most diverse, the best, and the most expensive opera performances in Shaanbei. The temple coffers swelled as its fame soared. It is now the richest nongovernment-managed temple in Shaanbei, receiving more than a million yuan in donations from worshippers each year.[16] Although the temple is hidden away in a long, narrow valley, its recently constructed grandiose main entrance gate (*pailou*) of carved stone stands right on the east-side curb of Shaanbei's only north-south thoroughfare connecting Baotou in Inner Mongolia and Xi'an, the provincial capital of Shaanxi.[17]

The new Heilongdawang Temple perches majestically on the edge of a cliff on one side of Longwanggou (Dragon King Valley). Its layout resembles that of most Chinese temples: the temple's main hall houses statues of Heilongdawang and his attendants, divination instruments, a donation box, incense pots, an exquisitely carved mural lauding the deity's divine power, a stele recounting the legend of the deity and the rebuilding of the temple in the reform era, and numerous plaques and banners donated by worshippers praising Heilongdawang's efficacy. Next to the temple is a natural spring in which the dragon king is supposed to dwell. The spring is believed to have magical curative powers and is sought after by many visitors. Even though the temple's main hall is the center of ritual interaction between the god and worshippers, the temple has in recent years been expanded to include an opera stage; a grand, stepped open-air auditorium conforming to the contour of the hillside; an additional hall dedicated to the five dragon king brothers (of which Heilongdawang is the youngest but most powerful) and their mother (a fertility goddess); a three-story dormitory building; a primary school; and a reforestation project called the Longwanggou Hilly Land Arboretum (*Longwanggou shandi shumuyuan*) that encompasses more than 1,200 *mu* surrounding the temple and includes hundreds of species of trees and other plants. This entire amalgam of physical features and activities can be termed the Longwanggou Complex. All the operations of this complex are funded by worshippers' incense money donated to the temple.

Before the Cultural Revolution, the temple was run by the three villages immediately surrounding the temple. In the early phase of its revival in the early 1980s, six neighboring villages were added. This was a strategic move on the part of the then temple association leaders,

at a time when they were in dire need of labor and money to rebuild the temple and were highly vulnerable because official attitudes were uncertain. The expansion of scope of the temple's social organization is also a legacy of the Maoist era: during the collectivist era, all nine villages belonged to the same production brigade, which was part of the Zhenchuan Commune (now a township). However, representatives from the original three villages still form the core of the temple association.[18] In fact, because the physical site of the temple is in the territory of Hongliutan village, the temple officially belongs to Hongliutan; for this reason, most of the officers of the temple association, including Lao Wang, are Hongliutan villagers. Like most village-level temples in Shaanbei, the Heilongdawang Temple is a popular religious temple run by ordinary villagers and has no professional clergy. Even at temple festivals, no Daoist or Buddhist liturgies are conducted; in southern China, in contrast, the "Daoist liturgical framework" is typically prominent in important temple activities (see Dean, 1997, 1998). Nevertheless, the Heilongdawang Temple officially became a Daoist temple in 1998 (more on this below).

TEMPLE BOSS LAO WANG, THE HEILONGDAWANG TEMPLE, AND LEGITIMATION POLITICS

When I first met temple boss Lao Wang in 1996, he was 54 years old and had been the head of the temple association for fourteen years. Even though the temple's revival was a collective effort, Lao Wang's leadership, skills, and vision were largely responsible for its success in becoming one of the best-known temples in Shaanbei. Lao Wang can be said to have been endowed with the "grassroots charisma" that characterizes most communal religious leaders (Feuchtwang and Wang, 2001). Having been a village primary school teacher, stonemason, carpenter, painter, decorator, tailor, master artisan, building contractor, and trader, Lao Wang was a versatile man who in many aspects transcended his humble peasant background.[19] Being the temple boss was a full-time job for him, and he was by his own choice the only person on the temple staff who was unpaid.[20] However, he was the de facto decision maker of the temple association and wielded tremendous influence in local society, not only in his own village but also

within Zhenchuan township. When I asked Lao Wang why he devoted so much energy to the temple, he told me straightforwardly: "Because I want to leave a [good] name [for posterity]."[21] Yet it was also obvious that Lao Wang was interested in seeking fame and power in the here and now.

Two major interrelated issues always confronted Lao Wang: first, the legality and legitimacy of the Heilongdawang Temple (and the Longwanggou Complex), and second, the legitimacy of his own status as temple boss. Lao Wang was aware that some temples in Sichuan, Henan, and elsewhere had been torn down or closed, as news of these events was sporadically broadcast on the radio or TV. He also knew that sometimes the government could simply decide to appropriate a temple when doing so was deemed lucrative. For example, in the 1980s the county government in Jiaxian (a neighboring county) took over the control of the White Cloud Mountain Daoist Shrine, the most famous religious site in Shaanbei. Without the Heilongdawang Temple, Lao Wang would lose the basis of much of his power, so the most important task for him was to protect the temple from local state encroachments and from the possible charge that it was a venue for "feudal superstitious" activities, which might lead to unwanted official intervention.

Yet it would be an even worse scenario for Lao Wang if somehow the temple thrived but he was no longer the temple boss and its control fell into the hands of his rivals in the village. Since the revival of the temple, all Hongliutan villagers had benefited from the temple's money: they enjoyed a first-rate primary school, improvements in the irrigation system and roads, increased income (e.g., they were employed by the temple, sold goods during the temple festival, and rented farm land to the temple for its hilly land arboretum), and generally a better reputation. But some villagers benefited more and in more ways than others; they had become Lao Wang's clients and staunch political supporters, while those who felt left out or slighted by Lao Wang became embittered. It also became clear to all contending for power that whoever controlled the temple resources could also exert tremendous influence in village politics. Therefore, a loosely cohesive clique opposed to Lao Wang had formed in recent years. They launched frequent attacks on his reputation and would be only too happy to see him go down.

This constant threat heightened Lao Wang's concern with legitimating and buttressing his power as temple boss. He had to make sure that he was adequately protected from attacks by his enemies and was equipped to launch any counteroffensive if needed. Lao Wang's desire to protect the temple was obviously predicated on his maintaining his leadership position. In other words, protecting himself was his most important political task. His situation suggests a number of questions: What strategies had he been employing to legitimize his power? What material and symbolic resources had he been mobilizing to maintain his position as temple boss? What were the relationships between his strategies to protect the temple and his strategies to protect himself? What can these strategies tell us about the larger structure of local authority and power in Shaanbei today?

As the above description makes clear, Lao Wang's leadership legitimacy and the temple's legitimacy were intimately intertwined, and the legitimation strategies in which he had been engaged therefore often affected both. Sources of legitimation (in the form of validation, recognition, endorsement, and support) for the temple and Lao Wang fell into two general categories: local people (villagers in his own village and those in the other eight villages) and people and institutions from beyond the immediate surroundings of Longwanggou.

Hongliutan villagers' support for the temple was strong and broadly based because of all the benefits the village was deriving from its success. Even though the temple had achieved regional fame and wide appeal, Hongliutan villagers still considered it their village temple, not much different from a village-run economic enterprise (see Ruf, 1998); their support for it is therefore not surprising. Support from the other eight villages was also strong, because they had also benefited from the temple's success (gaining financial subsidies for irrigation projects and schools, for example).[22] Because Lao Wang played the most crucial role in making the temple successful and had the ultimate say in how to allocate temple resources, most locals pledged their support to him partly out of genuine respect for his contributions to their welfare and partly in a conscious effort to parlay that support into future gains. In addition, Lao Wang was elected by the representatives from the nine villages and his position was ritually confirmed by divination, indicating that Heilongdawang endorsed the decision. Thus, failure to support Lao Wang was tantamount to

challenging the divine endorsement. The strongest expression of local villagers' support for both the temple and Lao Wang was the large number of people who volunteered to help out each year at the temple festival. Even though Lao Wang had enemies in Hongliutan, he was elected village chief (*cunzhang*) in 1996, a triumph that attested both to the level of his popularity and to his desire to consolidate his power by obtaining an official public office.

People outside the immediate neighborhood of Longwanggou demonstrated their support for the temple by frequently visiting the temple, enthusiastically participating in its annual festival, and donating to it in gratitude for Heilongdawang's blessings and divine assistance. Stories of Heilongdawang's magical efficacy had been spread far and wide by believers, and his power was amply attested by the number of people worshipping him and the incredible amount of incense money they donated to the temple each year (more than a million yuan annually since the mid-1990s, a staggering sum by Shaanbei standards).

Popular enthusiasm was an important source of legitimacy for the temple, but it was not enough to ensure that the temple could survive another antisuperstition campaign such as those launched during the Maoist era. The only true assurance would come from official endorsement by the government. Thus, to legitimize the whole enterprise, Lao Wang and his associates attempted from the earliest time of the temple's revival to secure official institutional status for it. These endeavors required the temple officers to go beyond their home turf and interact with local state agents at the county and prefectural levels and with other social actors even further afield.

In 1982, the recently rebuilt temple was blessed by the Yulin County Cultural Bureau (*wenhuaju*) with the designation of a county-level cultural treasure (*xianji wenwu*). The Longwanggou Cultural Treasure Management Office (*Longwanggou wenwu guanlisuo*) was established as a result. The temple was able to garner this status as "cultural treasure" (*wenwu*) not because of the newly constructed temple site, as magnificent as it was, but because of its beautiful Republican-era stone gate that was spared destruction during the Cultural Revolution. Thus, the temple attempted to protect itself by claiming its value as a cultural and historical artifact. Even though

strictly speaking this status protected only the stone gate, not the entire temple, at least the temple now was officially sanctioned.

In 1988, Lao Wang and his colleagues initiated a reforestation project as a strategy to lend legitimacy to the temple activities; the incense donation money is used to plant trees around the temple, an obviously meritorious act for the local community. The Yulin Prefecture Forestry Bureau (*linyeju*) subsequently granted the project an official name: the Longwanggou Hilly Land Arboretum.[23] The significance of this project has to be seen in the larger contexts of rising national environmental concerns in the reform era and of Shaanbei's harsh setting. Yulin county, like many of Shaanbei's northern counties, is constantly threatened by desertification and dust storms (part of the Maowusu Desert of Inner Mongolia extends southward into Shaanbei), and its long history of human settlement and dry climate have left Shaanbei with a severe tree shortage. For this reason, reforestation has always been a high-profile issue in Shaanbei. The Longwanggou reforestation project capitalized on the moral virtue of environmentalism and quickly gained regional, national, and even international attention as the first civic (nongovernmental) hilly arboretum in China. Newspapers reported on the arboretum; officials and foreign dignitaries visited it; botanists, forestry specialists, and other scientists came to bestow their approval and marvel at this folk initiative; environmentalist groups from Beijing and representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from Japan came to plant trees. One cannot underestimate the aesthetic and emotional appeal of the green hills set against the often-parched landscape of Shaanbei's loess plateau. Because the reforestation project would not have been possible without the money from donations to the temple, the arboretum justified the superstitious activities of the Heilongdawang Temple. The success of the arboretum was a huge boost to the official status and image of the temple, and the temple has been riding on this success ever since. In the 1990s, a few other Shaanbei temples followed suit and used temple funds to initiate reforestation projects.

In 1996, Lao Wang founded the Longwanggou Primary School to replace the original Hongliutan village school. The villagers in neighboring Batawan were happy to close down their small and dilapidated village school and send all their children to the new Longwanggou school. Its classrooms and teachers' offices were housed on the third

floor of the new and spacious three-story temple dormitory building, and the children used the large temple courtyard as a playground. Because the temple is situated midway between the two villages, the children had to walk a little farther than before, but that was a small price to pay for a much better school. Founding the school involved winning approval from the Yulin County Education Bureau (*jiaoyuju*). All the school's expenses were covered by temple funds. Only two of the dozen teachers were on the government payroll; all the rest were paid by the temple. The parents of the schoolchildren needed to pay only a minimal fee for tuition and books.

Because the Longwanggou Primary School had better conditions and better funding than the other Zhenchuan schools, it quickly became the best primary school in the entire township, surpassing in academic achievement even the long-established and well-equipped government schools in Zhenchuan town. The Longwanggou Primary School is a nongovernment-operated (*minban*) school. As China's reform-era educational policies increasingly allowed more "societal forces" (*shehui liliang*) to support education, the school was also capitalizing on a national trend. Its accomplishments, just like those of the arboretum, would not have been possible without temple funds. The school therefore provided further justification for the temple's activities, despite the apparent incongruity between secular education and folk religious tradition.

Although important in the legitimation of the Heilongdawang Temple, such official endorsements of the temple had been indirect—none really pertained to the temple per se. However, in 1998 a long-waited boon finally came: the Yulin Prefecture Religious Affairs Bureau granted Longwanggou official status by approving the establishment of the Longwanggou Daoist Shrine Management Committee (*Longwanggou daoguan guanli weiyuanhui*). In other words, the Heilongdawang Temple was now officially a Daoist temple, and Heilongdawang a Daoist deity. From then on, the temple itself was finally legitimate and enjoyed the legal protection of the PRC constitution (as discussed further in the next section). As popular religious deities, dragon kings traditionally hovered at the edge of official Daoism; they were not quite members of the Daoist pantheon. But these were just minor details that both the temple association and the Religious Affairs Bureau were willing to ignore. The "Dao-ification"

of the Heilongdawang Temple and other similar popular religious temples made these temples "legible" to the state (Scott, 1998), even though the process involved a willful misreading.

Obtaining the above-mentioned official statuses and endorsements was the temple association's deliberate strategy of dissimulation: it sought to protect the temple by highlighting its aspects as a cultural artifact, its environmental and educational achievements, and its ties to an officially recognized religion. In other words, these officially sanctioned statuses were clever covers for temple activities that would otherwise be condemned as superstitious (e.g., providing divine spring water and divination, two of the temple's services that appealed most to worshippers).[24] Anthropologists studying popular religion in Taiwan had noticed the ingenuity of the Taiwanese people in disguising their rituals to make them more palatable to authorities bent on repression or reform (Ahern, 1981; Weller, 1987). Similar techniques have also been at work in China, where some compromise was struck between complete submission to party-state ideological control (atheism, presumably) and total assertion of popular religious autonomy. The temple officers willingly subjected the temple to state regulation only so as to be able to do what they liked. The local state agents, for their part, permitted what was permissible and turned a blind eye to those activities that were not. Both parties came out of the transaction happy.

As the temple boss and central figure who initiated most of these maneuvers for legitimation, Lao Wang became the primary beneficiary of the local state endorsements. Because he was the paramount leader of the temple association, he naturally took up the most important post of each of Longwanggou's official institutional designations. He became the director of the Longwanggou Cultural Treasure Management Office, the director of the Longwanggou Hilly Land Arboretum, the honorary principal of the Longwanggou Primary School, and the chairman of the Longwanggou Daoist Shrine Management Committee.[25] Lao Wang also acquired a few other positions, which were all related to his temple work. In 1995, thanks to the international connections he had cultivated, he was selected as one of the few members of the Chinese chapter of Inter-Asia, a Japanese-funded NGO that organizes regular transnational activities to promote friendship among the common people of Asian countries. In 1996, he was

elected as a member to the Yulin county branch of the People's Political Consultative Congress and, as I mentioned earlier, he was elected the village chief as well.

That so many titles—a total of eight, if temple boss is included—were concentrated and overlaid on one person should not surprise anyone familiar with contemporary Chinese society and political culture. Because titles convey a person's sociopolitical prominence, every power seeker attempts to garner official positions and thereby accumulate as many official titles as possible. Lao Wang's numerous positions are of course outside of the local government bureaucracy, yet his leadership has been repeatedly bolstered and legitimated by official titles conferred by the local state. These titles gave Lao Wang social "face" (*mianzi*) in his interactions with the sociopolitical worlds beyond Longwanggou (see Jacobs, 1980; Wilson, 1994). They also increased the stakes of the power contestation between Lao Wang and his rivals: Lao Wang would risk losing all of his titles if he failed to maintain paramount control of the temple.

A PLAQUE-HANGING CEREMONY TO COMMEMORATE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE LONGWANGGOU DAOIST SHRINE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Every year the Heilongdawang Temple stages its annual temple festival in honor of the deity in the middle of the sixth month of the Chinese lunar calendar. The festival usually lasts for six days and culminates on the thirteenth day of the sixth month, Heilongdawang's birthday. Because the Year of the Tiger has two fifth months (*run wuyue*), in 1998 the Longwanggou annual temple festival was pushed back to the very end of July. Just a month earlier, the temple had received approval from the Yulin Prefecture Religious Affairs Bureau to establish the Daoist Shrine Management Committee. To celebrate this important moment in the history of the temple, Lao Wang decided to hold a ceremony. He commissioned Liangr, a master carpenter, to make a beautiful 6-foot-long wooden plaque and carve on it the inscription "Longwanggou Daoist Shrine Management Committee"; this would then be used in the "plaque-hanging ceremony" (*guapai yishi*).[26]

Lao Wang invited the relevant officials and leaders of some other important temples in the area to attend the ceremony, to be held at noon on Sixth Month 13 (4 August)—that is, Heilongdawang's birthday. Noon on the thirteenth had traditionally been the most valued time of the entire temple festival; the opera troupe then would play "Bao Wenzheng Chopping Off Chen Shimei's Head" ("Zhameian"), Heilongdawang's favorite piece.[27] The timing of the ceremony indicates how serious Lao Wang was about the event. By holding the ceremony, he was literally arranging a meeting between Heilongdawang, the temple boss (himself), the guests he invited (especially the official representatives of the local state), and the festival-going masses. The ceremony would infuse the popular religious space and time of Longwanggou with the secular authority of the state, thereby ritually bolstering Longwanggou's and Lao Wang's legitimacy. At this ceremony, the politics of legitimation was given a ritual form, and a popular religious festival was laden with political significance.

The opera performances began on Sixth Month 9 (31 July) and would last until Sixth Month 14 (5 August). That year, three opera troupes were invited, and as had been the case for the previous decade or so, it was by far the best and the most expensive set of opera performances in Shaanbei. By rough estimate, a few hundred thousand visitors and pilgrims came to Longwanggou during the six days of the temple festival. The entire valley was jam-packed with people, food stalls, watermelon sheds, game circles, pool tables, circus and performing troupe tents (some with freak shows), incense and firecracker stands, makeshift convenience stores, all kinds of small booths, and even little gambling dens scattered here and there in the crowd.

It was almost noon. The yellow dust stirred up by yangge dancers and drummers during the offering presentation procession (*yinggong*) earlier in the morning had settled, and the Henan opera troupe had just finished their performance. It was decided that Heilongdawang's favorite opera would be performed by the famous troupe from Xi'an after the plaque-hanging ceremony. Tables and chairs were set up on the opera stage that faced Heilongdawang and the audience. The entire valley was a chaotic mass packed to the rim, though the space in front of the stage and on the stepped stone auditorium was somewhat more orderly, with a few thousand people in the audience. Everywhere one heard a drone of confused noise. The loudspeakers announced

that there was going to be a ceremony at noon, after which the opera performance would resume. More people pushed near the stage to see what was happening.

The guests and speakers entered from backstage and were seated, with the usual polite negotiation about who would sit where. The head priest of the White Cloud Mountain Daoist Shrine ended up sitting in the middle, the position of honor, apparently because he was the oldest in the group. The chief of the Yulin Prefecture Religious Affairs Bureau and the assistant chief of the Yulin Prefecture Civil Affairs Bureau sat on the left of the priest. Three temple bosses from other temples, two officials from the township government, one former Longwanggou temple association officer, and then Lao Wang himself, who chose to sit at the corner (perhaps as a gesture of modesty), were in one row behind the adjoining long tables covered with ceremonial red cloth. A microphone stood in the middle. Lao Wang rose and made the first speech, welcoming the "leaders" (*lingdao*) of the local state and other guests to the temple festival and the occasion of the founding of the Longwanggou Daoist Shrine Management Committee. He humbly thanked everyone for supporting the activities of the temple and especially boasted about the achievements of the arboretum. He ended his short speech: "As a Daoist shrine we should seriously carry out the religious policies of the Party and make ourselves into a model in 'loving the country and the religion' (*aiguo aijiao*) and in promoting our great traditions."

There was applause from the audience,[28] then a long string of giant firecrackers was ignited next to the stage. At that moment, the wooden plaque was lifted up from behind the guests and brought to the front to be shown to the audience. The chief of the Religious Affairs Bureau took the microphone: "I announce that the Longwanggou Daoist Shrine Management Committee has officially been established!" More applause came from the audience. Lao Wang shook hands with the bureau chief and excused himself because he was too busy with all the work of the temple festival to even sit through the rest of the ceremony. The plaque was brought to the temple office and hung alongside the other plaques (of the Cultural Treasure Management Office and the arboretum) outside the temple office door, as if bragging about the temple's newly endowed legitimacy. A few more people made speeches after Lao Wang left. The head priest of the White Cloud

Mountain Daoist Shrine talked about how happy he was that the Heilongdawang Temple had now become a "brother" Daoist shrine. The chief of the Religious Affairs Bureau explained the importance of gradually ridding Longwanggou of all superstitious elements and becoming an exemplary Daoist shrine.[29] The assistant chief of the Civil Affairs Bureau used the opportunity to advertise the bureau's new charity program. One of the two township officials lauded Longwanggou's role in promoting the economy of the area. The whole ceremony lasted about forty-five minutes. When it was over, the stage was quickly cleared and the performance of "Bao Wenzheng Chopping Off Chen Shimei's Head" began.

The plaque-hanging ceremony seemed to be used as an occasion for staging something bigger, marking not just the Heilongdawang Temple's now officially sanctioned legal status as a Daoist temple (and hence its protection by law) but more significantly the legitimacy of the entire Longwanggou complex (including the Heilongdawang Temple, the arboretum, the Longwanggou Primary School, and especially temple boss Lao Wang himself). The actual plaque-hanging ceremony, though short and simple, was a condensed moment in the larger context of the entire temple festival spectacle. As I noted above, the timing of the ceremony corresponded to the moment when Heilongdawang was supposed to be the most present. The *personal-charismatic presence* of Lao Wang was made to coincide with the *magical presence* of Heilongdawang and the *political presence* of the local state. The ceremony presupposed as well as added to the powers of Lao Wang's leadership.

The plaque-hanging ceremony thus illustrates aptly the "symbology of power" (Geertz, 1980: 98) in Longwanggou. The legitimacy, not to mention legality, of the Longwanggou Complex (including Lao Wang's leadership) was ritually evoked and confirmed by the co-presence of all the participants at the temple festival: Heilongdawang (looking down from his throne, receiving offerings, listening to prayers and requests), Lao Wang (receiving guests, making the speech, hanging the plaque, busying himself with matters big and small), representatives of the local state (being hosted and entertained, making speeches, shaking hands with old friends and colleagues), leaders of neighboring religious organizations and communities (chatting with one another, making speeches), and, most

important of all, the masses of festivalgoers (watching the opera, listening to the speeches, praying to Heilongdawang, playing games, selling and buying food and other things, just being there and enjoying themselves). The whole ambiance was one of abundance, great fun (*honghuo*), and "shared well-being" (Abélès, 1988: 396).

Much "ritual labor" (Abélès, 1988: 398) had been expended by Lao Wang and Longwanggou, and to good effect. Although not a religious specialist, Lao Wang was certainly a master of the ritual orchestration of power and authority. The material and symbolic resources drawn on by Lao Wang in staging the plaque-hanging ceremony-cum-legitimation ritual certainly paled in comparison to those available to the Qianlong emperor as he staged the imperial sacrifices (see Zito, 1997) or to the Chinese party-state as it staged an October First National Day Ceremony (e.g., on the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC in 1999). But the financial and symbolic resources Lao Wang could mobilize were nevertheless considerable. As the temple boss, he not only had Heilongdawang on his side but also commanded Heilongdawang's large pool of donation money.[30]

The plaque-hanging ceremony at the temple festival also illustrates the coming together of many interests: the political ambition of Lao Wang, the regulatory and increasingly people-friendly assertion of the local state, and the collective religiosity and fun-seeking desires of the festivalgoers. The ceremony as a ritual form served as a medium into which different social actors could infuse their different meanings and agendas. Out of political considerations, and with his rivals in mind, Lao Wang enlisted the help of the local state to protect the temple and to confirm his leadership position. At the same time, Lao Wang was also demonstrating to representatives of the local state that the Heilongdawang Temple is truly a popular temple and that protecting rather than meddling with this local institution would be in their best interests. The local state officials were willing accomplices in Lao Wang's agenda because they had much to gain from promoting the reputation of a local pilgrimage site. Increasingly seen as corrupt and uncaring, the officials were only too happy to show their presence as benevolent figures among the masses, paternalistically endorsing these folksy, and perhaps in their eyes foolish, activities.

The intricate mixture of elements of religious and political power and authority in this legitimation ritual point to the conclusion that, to

quote the political theorist Claude Lefort, "it is impossible to separate what belongs to the elaboration of a political form . . . from what belongs to the elaboration of a religious form" (Lefort, 1986: 261; qtd. in Abélès, 1988: 392). Many ritual forms and religious connotations exist in today's political acts—for example, those "political dramas" engaged in by the former French prime minister François Mitterand as studied by Marc Abélès (1988), or the U.S. presidential "sociodramas" studied by James McLeod (1999). In the context of contemporary rural China, the resurgence of any religious symbolism in political life and the conscious presence of the secular state in the midst of folk religion indicate a shift away from the Communist party-state's earlier forms of ritualism, which were purely political (see Apter and Saich, 1994; Bennett, 1976; Whyte, 1974), toward a more complex amalgam of expressions and assertions of sociopolitical power and authority that draw on different sources within an increasingly pluralizing society.

SHIFTING STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS IN RURAL CHINA: THE CHANNELING ZONE

The nature of political life in the reform era is decidedly different from that of the Maoist era. At the national level, during the reform era the older generation of revolutionary leaders gave way to a new generation of technocrats and the state's priorities shifted from political campaigns to promoting economic growth. At the local state level, economic development has largely replaced political performance as the major criterion for judging an official's worth. The Longwanggou case shows that the local state is inclined to exchange protection of local temples for economic benefits even if doing so means protecting superstitious activities that are technically illegal. The permissive attitude of the local state is one of the most important factors in enabling popular religion's revival in Shaanbei.

The stories of Lao Wang and Longwanggou suggest pertinent areas of inquiry concerning the formation of community-level local elites in reform-era rural China. One such area is the reemergence of a more "traditional" mode of authority structure in agrarian local politics. Prasenjit Duara (1988) has argued that since the beginning of the

twentieth century, as the state penetrated more deeply into local Chinese society, the traditional "cultural nexus of power" came to be replaced by mercenary, naked power devoid of culturally sanctioned legitimacy. He and others also claim that with the state's further penetration into agrarian local society under the Communist Party, traditional modes of elite leadership were replaced by the socialist mode of poor-peasant class domination and revolutionary Party commandeerism (see Chan, Madsen, and Unger, 1992; Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, 1991; Madsen, 1984; Siu, 1989). According to other scholars, the retreat of the socialist state from radical antitraditionalism has created room for the return of more "traditional" forms of authority and power (Anagnost, 1994; Feuchtwang, 1993, 2000; Jing, 1996; Luo, 1997; Wang, 1996). Has the reform period brought back the traditional cultural nexus of power? How different is Lao Wang from late imperial rural local leaders?

Another pertinent area of inquiry opened up by Lao Wang's story is the importance of "the locale" as the power base of the local elite. Because of the fame and influence Lao Wang had garnered over the years as the temple boss, he became a prominent figure—a somebody in the local society of Zhenchuan township. His political ambitions might take him beyond Longwanggou, but because of his reliance on Longwanggou as his power base, Lao Wang would remain a village- or township-level local elite. Other studies have also shown that local elites must base their power on local resources, such as village enterprises, community temples, and local supporters (Esherick and Rankin, 1990). Only very few can ever rise from the village level to become members of the translocal national elite. And those who manage to achieve national fame and prominent positions in "the Center" have done so because of their achievements in their particular locales (e.g., Daqiuzhuang Yu Zuomin's rise to the Center as a representative to the national People's Consultative Congress; see Gilley, 2001; N. Lin and Chen, 1999).

In the past decade or so, the idea of *minjian* (the civil, nongovernmental) has gained salience in public discourse in the PRC. While much official emphasis remains on "the people" (*renmin*), as object to be acted on by the state or to be served by "civil servants," the new focus on minjian points to an expanding public sphere where citizens act on their own initiative (see Dean, 1997, 1998; M. Yang,

1994). Lao Wang and his associates have capitalized on the favorable attention won by the Longwanggou Hilly Land Arboretum as the first such minjian arboretum in China. In fact, its twin features of minjianness and folk environmentalism have captured two of the most important ideological emphases of the reform era: privatization and environmental protection. Longwanggou has therefore gained an aura of legitimacy and savvy that, with good cause, has made other temples jealous.

Temple associations are minjian organizations that spring from the indigenous needs of different sectors of society (see Brook, 1997; Fukao, 1998). A temple association is a condensed and visible form of communal power in a particular locale. This communal power is manifested in the grandeur of the temple and the scale of the temple festival. Because temple associations are among the most vibrant folk social institutions, they have played a crucial role in expanding folk cultural space and agrarian public sphere in reform-era China (see Gates, 2000). Yet my case study has also shown that to survive and thrive, temple associations and temple bosses have to negotiate with different local state agencies and accommodate official rent-seeking so as to secure different kinds of official endorsement and protection. In other words, as the agrarian public sphere expands, it must deal with the penetration of the local state. Some scholars have argued that in China the growth of civil society is led and enabled as much as constrained by the state (Chamberlain, 1993; Brook and Frolic, 1997). Philip Huang (1993) has proposed the concept of "the third realm" to characterize the protean space that lies sandwiched between state and society and is subject to both processes of "state-ification" from above and "societalization" from below. Temple-based popular religious activities and the local state's involvement in endorsing these activities constitute an important part of this realm in today's Shaanbei (see Katz, 1995: 180-89).

One metaphor that may be appropriately applied to (local) state-society interactions in China today is that of "channeling." As the Longwanggou case study has shown, the temple association interacts with not the local state per se but rather the separate local state agencies that function with relative autonomy. Different linking and articulating channels were established by the temple to link it with individual local state agencies. And each local state agency likewise

established channels with multiple supplicants from local (i.e., minjian) organizations. Through these channels, the local state agencies siphon money and gifts upward while bestowing downward official institutional statuses and protection. Conversely, supplicants in local organizations (e.g., temple associations) pay tributes and deference upward to the local state agencies and capture official recognition and legitimacy flowing downward. The reemergence of the importance of the locale (as mentioned earlier) and the increasing compartmentalization of the local state further facilitate the multiplication of these channels.

We may call the space that is crisscrossed by these channels the "channeling zone." I have borrowed this expression from the title of the anthropologist Michael Brown's book on New Age communities in the United States (Brown, 1997). In fact, the human links established between local state agencies and local minjian organizations in China are very similar in nature to the New Age channelers that Brown describes. The channelers are vessels through which spirits of different entities (Buddha, Jesus, aliens, "ascended masters," etc.) speak and interact with the audience. Likewise, the local state agencies or agents do not generate legitimacy or legal protection themselves; they merely channel this precious cargo to those who need it—for a price. And the temple associations or temple bosses do not produce the gifts and money they pay to the local state; rather, they channel upward these resources from the local communities and the masses. Applying Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's metaphor of the rhizome (tubers that grow in an uncentered, unhierarchical, unpredictable, and sprawling way), Mayfair Yang (1994) has aptly characterized the *guanxi*-based sociality in China as rhizomatic networks that are capable of subverting the state, which is rigid, mono-organizational, and "arborescent" (i.e., treelike, with a central trunk—another term borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari). The Longwanggou case suggests that sometimes rhizomatic growth does depend on guiding structures (as do vines growing on a trellis): as local elites like Lao Wang reach out and up to different local state agents through guanxi-pulling, the rhizomes grow inside or alongside the channels, thus linking local state agencies and minjian organizations.

CHARACTER LIST

aiguo aijiao 愛國愛教
Baiyunshan 白雲山
Batawan 八塔灣
bude renxin 不得人心
chu longgong fengtiao yushun; ruhai cang guotai min'an 出龍宮風調雨順; 入海藏國泰民安
chuantong wenhua 傳統文化
cunmin gongyue 村民公約
cunzhang 村長
dahuizhang 大會長
daji 打擊
dayantu 大煙土
dianliju 電力局
erji gonglu 二級公路
eryaoling guodao 210 國道
Falungong 法輪功
fengjian mixin 封建迷信
fengsu xiguan 風俗習慣
getihu 個體戶
gong'anju 公安局
gongshangju 工商局
guanche zongjiao zhengce 貫徹宗教政策
guapai yishi 掛牌儀式
Heilongdawang 黑龍大王
honghuo 紅火
Hongliutan 紅柳灘
huizhang 會長
hukou 戶口
jiaojing 交警
jiaoyuju 教育局
Jiaxian 佳縣
jihua shengyu gongzuo 計劃生育工作
jiji 積極
jiudi chuzhi 就地處置
ling 靈
lingdao 領導
Lingyinghou 靈應侯
linyeju 林業局
longwang 龍王
Longwanggou 龍王溝
Longwanggou daoguan guanli weiyuanhui 龍王溝道觀管理委員會
Longwanggou shandi shumuyuan 龍王溝山地樹木園
Longwanggou wenwu guanlisuo 龍王溝文物管理所
mianzi 面子
miaohui 廟會
minban 民辦
minjian 民間
minzhengju 民政局
mixin 迷信
pailou 牌樓
renao 熱鬧
renmin 人民
run wuyue 閏五月
sanhuang yisheng 三黃一聖

Shaanbei 陝北
Shaanbei xiao Xianggang 陝北小香港
shehui liliang 社會力量
shuiwuju 稅務局
wenhuaju 文化局
xiagang 下崗
xianji wenwu 縣級文物
xiaobaihuo menshi 小百貨門市
xilubianwai 西路邊外
Yan'an 延安
yangge 秧歌
Yiguandao 一貫道
yinggong 迎供
yinyang 陰陽
youren 有人
yuanzhu 愿主
Yulin 榆林
Zhameian 鏟美案
Zhenchuan 鎮川
zhengdang zongjiao huodong 正當宗教活動
zhengzhi biaoxian 政治表現
Zhenwu zushi 真武祖師
Zhonggong 中功
zongjiao huodong changsuo 宗教活動場所
zongjiaoju 宗教局

NOTES

1. Administratively, Shaanbei comprises Yan'an and Yulin prefectures. My principal fieldsite was in Yulin county, which is one of the twelve counties belonging to the Yulin Prefecture. Yulin city is the seat of both the Yulin county and prefecture governments. The loess plateau and cave dwellings of Shaanbei were made famous when the Central Red Army, led by Mao Zedong, made Yan'an the capital of its revolutionary base area from 1935 until 1945 (my fieldsite in Yulin was under Nationalist rule during that period). For Western scholarship on Shaanbei during the revolutionary period, see Apter and Saich, 1994; Esherick, 1994, 1998; Holm, 1984; Judd, 1986, 1990; Keating, 1997; Selden, 1971. For studies on contemporary Shaanbei, see Hershkovitz, 1993; Holm, 1994; Kang, 2002. This article is based on materials collected during eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Shaanbei between 1995 and 1998. Even though my research focused on the Heilongdawang Temple, I visited dozens more temples and their festivals and spoke to Shaanbei people from all walks of life on diverse occasions. Because I engaged informants in casual conversations rather than formal interviews, I have not provided the citations to interviews common in some social science disciplines. I conducted the fieldwork on my own, without being accompanied by any officials. In addition, participant observation was as important as conversations with informants for data collection. For a fuller view of the characteristics of Shaanbei popular religion, see Chau, 2003, 2004, forthcoming a, forthcoming b).

2. Of these temples, 300 to 500 (i.e., less than 5%) had supralocal or supracounty influence, about 1,000 (about 10%) were at the township or rural district level, and the rest (85%) were village-level temples (Fan, 1997: 98).

3. Although I object to the categories "superstition" and "superstitious activities," in this article, I use these terms in conformity to official Chinese designations.

4. For analyses of uses of the same urban spaces by voluntary, neighborhood yangge dance troupes (without religious overtones), see Graezer 1998, 1999.

5. Unlike the civil affairs bureau in Shaanbei, the religious affairs bureau has no county-level branches and operates only at the prefectural level.

6. The local state is still alarmed by, and occasionally cracks down on, potentially subversive religious activities such as the revival of sectarian movements (e.g., Yiguandao) and clandestine Christian proselytizing.

7. As far as I understand it, even though the bureau collects applications from temples and grants official status to qualified temples, its decision has to be approved by the prefectural government, the prefectural Communist Party committee, the prefectural People's Congress, and the prefectural court. I did not investigate the details of this internal process.

8. The Republic of China government on Taiwan has always made temple registration an important task. Much as in the PRC, all popular religious temples in Taiwan that are not obviously Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist are identified as Daoist in the official classifications (Jordan and Overmyer, 1986: 243).

9. C. K. Yang (1961: 188) has noted that in the early Qing dynasty, 84% of the registered temples and monasteries in China were built without official approval, a statistic that suggests a rather weak form of government control over temple building similar to Shaanbei's situation today.

10. Shaanbei is now renowned for having "three yellows and one holy" (*sanhuang yisheng*), an expression that refers to the yellow earth, the Yellow River, the burial site of the Yellow Emperor, and Yan'an, the revolutionary holy land.

11. Even though temples are not enterprises operated by the local state, they can still be viewed as "backyard profit centers" for some local state agencies (see Y. M. Lin and Zhang, 1999).

12. The famous Yu Zuomin of Daqiuzhuang is a new rich local elite (Gilley, 2001; N. Lin and Chen, 1999).

13. Zhenchuan, the township at the southern end of Yulin county, bordering Mizhi county to the south, has major commercial significance in Yulin prefecture, second only to Suide 50 kilometers to the south. From the mid-Qing onward, and especially during the Republican period, it was famed for its role as an entrepôt between the pastoral and semipastoral hinterland to the north and west of Shaanbei (the so-called *xilubianwai*—i.e., the west beyond the walls; Yulin shizhi bianji weiyuanhui, 1996: 358) and the major cities in the North China plain, especially the coastal city of Tianjin (for export). Pelts, wool, carpets, processed intestines (for making sausage casings), Chinese herbal medicine ingredients, salt, and so on were stored in Zhenchuan before going east and south, while tea bricks, grain, textile, alcohol, and other consumer goods went north and west. The traffic in opium (*dayantu*) in the 1920s and 1930s only followed well-practiced trade networks and heightened the excitement in an already-bustling town with the promise of quick wealth. Now, after the Maoist hiatus, Zhenchuan has regained its wholesale entrepôt status and is actually nicknamed the "little Hong Kong of Shaanbei" (*Shaanbei xiao Xianggang*). Zhenchuan is about 3 *li* to the north of the Black Dragon King Temple. The fate of the Black Dragon King Temple has been intricately tied to the commercial strength of Zhenchuan. Many of the petty capitalist entrepreneurs who donate large sums of money to the temple today have extensive business dealings in Zhenchuan.

14. I have not been able to verify the historical authenticity of this title, but whether genuine or spurious, it is used in the cultural construction of Heilongdawang's divine power and legitimacy.

15. The temple stele traces the origin of the Heilongdawang Temple to the Zhengde reign of the Ming dynasty (1506-21 C.E.).

16. The Daoist White Cloud Mountain (Baiyunshan) in a nearby county (Jiaxian) remains the most famous and most visited religious site in Shaanbei, but it is completely under the county government's control. The main deity worshipped there is the Perfected Warrior, Zhenwu Zushi.

17. The thoroughfare is now called National Highway 210 (*eryaoling guodao*), recently aggressively improved to a second-grade highway (*erji gonglu*). The Wuding River (literally, "river with no fixed course"), one of the major rivers in Shaanbei, flows south along the west side of Highway 210.

18. Representatives of the six villages newly added to the temple association are each village's Party secretary, village head, and village accountant. No such restriction applies to temple officers from the core three villages.

19. Lao Wang has a "small hundred things" store (*xiaobaihuo menshi*) in Zhenchuan, and he says that the money he earns there keeps him from worrying about his livelihood so he can concentrate on temple affairs. Even though he has not farmed for a long time, Lao Wang's *hukou* (household registration) is still rural.

20. Everyone working at the temple other than Lao Wang was paid a salary: the caretaker, the divination poem decipherer, the accountant, the driver, the electrician, the treasurer, the custodian, the supplies procurer, the manager of the hilly land arboretum, the gardener, the teachers at the primary school, and the numerous part-time and seasonal laborers and helpers. Lao Wang's choice to not receive a salary was obviously a conscious maneuver, designed to make him appear selfless in the eyes of his colleagues and the worshippers.

21. This desire to leave a good name is pervasive among Shaanbei peasants. Concern for posterity can be seen as a "cultural schema" (Ortner, 1989) that prescribes a certain course of social actions.

22. Most of these other eight villages also have their own village temples, which have been revived in recent years. However, these are all minor temples in comparison, even though some of the deities enshrined in them (e.g., the Jade Emperor) have a much higher rank than Heilongdawang in the divine hierarchy.

23. For a detailed description and analysis of this reforestation project, see Chau, n.d.

24. This instrumentalist reading of the temple association's maneuvers should not lead us to overlook the villagers' genuine desire for a better school or a reforestation project for their own sakes.

25. Even though Lao Wang's now-deceased father spent many years as the village Party secretary, he himself never became a Party member. Had he been a Party member, he would not have been able to be a member, let alone chair, of the Daoist Shrine Management Committee, because Party membership prohibits its holder from belonging to any religious organizations. But it does not follow from the absence of the names of Party members from official rosters of temple officers that in fact Party members cannot assume leadership roles.

26. Organizational plaques are crucial material markers of an institution's legitimacy in Chinese political culture. Only Communist Party organs are allowed to use red for the characters on the plaques.

27. Heilongdawang is thought to love "Zhameian" because it is about the legendary Song dynasty Kaifeng city magistrate Bao Zheng (popularly known as Bao Gong), and Heilongdawang himself is believed to be also a god of justice. Older people say that this particular piece had been played at noon on the thirteenth for as long as they can remember.

28. Shaanbei people normally don't applaud during or after an opera performance at temple festivals. Yet they do applaud after the performance if they are in a theater hall and the performance is officially organized. They have also learned to applaud after speeches, whose delivery almost always occurs on an official occasion.

29. As far as I know, Longwanggou did not become any more Daoist after this ceremony than it had been before.

30. For example, in 1998 Lao Wang spent about 250,000 yuan to invite three opera troupes to perform at the temple festival, including one from Kaifeng, Henan province, and one from Xi'an, the provincial capital of Shaanxi province.

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