CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

> The gods were erected by peasants. When the right time comes, the peasants themselves will throw away these gods with their own hands.
>
> —Mao Zedong

Research Questions and Overview of Main Themes

The reform era (from the early 1980s onward) of the People's Republic of China has witnessed a massive reemergence of ostensibly traditional Chinese folk beliefs and practices. For more than thirty years the Communist state had tried to eradicate cultural expressions of the old, pre-Communist China, stigmatizing them as superstitious or "feudalistic," while building a new, socialist culture. Then Mao died, and the economic reforms began, accompanied by significant ideological relaxation. It is in this historical context that the folk cultural revivalism phenomenon is happening: all of a sudden people are busy rebuilding or renovating temples, ancestral halls, and graves that were torn down during the Cultural Revolution, reconstructing family genealogies that were burnt by the Red Guards, reenacting long suppressed rituals around births, weddings, and deaths, going to temple festivals, reading ritual handbooks and consulting fortune-tellers and geomancers, praying for male babies, or simply thinking feudalistic thoughts (see Wolf 1996). It is clearly not yet the time for the peasants to throw away the gods with their own hands, as Mao had hoped. What if the peasants want to keep the gods?

If many Chinese peasants today are engaged in popular religious practices that are traditional in appearance, one would like to know: *What makes this repertoire of traditional beliefs and practices compelling for people today? How have various factors combined to enable the revival of religious expressions that are often still prohibited by law?* This study attempts to answer these questions by providing an ethnography of the revival and social organization of one particular temple in rural Shaan-

bei, north-central China (see map 1). Through this case study it explores the more general and widespread cultural logics and sociopolitical processes underlying the revival of popular religion in reform-era China.[1]

One of the many simplistic explanations of the religious boom in reform-era China is that, disenchanted with the bankruptcy of Communist ideologies, the Chinese people feel "spiritually empty" and therefore want to return to traditional religious practices (or to seek new spiritual solace, as evidenced by the rapid growth of the number of Christian converts). This study emphatically argues against this kind of monocausal explanation for a phenomenon as complex as popular religious revival. My research shows that popular religious revivalism is the result of many factors. At the core of Chinese popular religion is the concept of magical efficacy (*ling*), which is conceived of as a particular deity's miraculous response (*lingying*) to the worshiper's request for divine assistance (granting a son, granting magical medicine, bringing rain, resolving a dilemma through divination, granting prosperity, etc.). However, these miraculous responses are socially constructed: it is people and their actions that enable the establishment of human-deity relations and interactions. Shaanbei people "do" popular religion not only by praying and presenting offerings to the deities but by building temples, organizing and participating in temple festivals, sponsoring and watching local operas, making and buying incense and spirit paper money, bribing local state officials, networking with other temples and other institutions, fighting over temple leadership positions, and even planting trees and building schools. The revival of popular religious institutions and activities thus illustrates the coming together of many social forces: the political ambition of local activists, the regulatory and paternalistic interventions of local state agencies, the economic interests of temples, merchants, and related specialists (including folk musicians and opera performers), the collective religiosity and fun-seeking spirit of the worshipers, and the increasingly frequent translocal linkages between social actors in local communities and outside actors. An adequate interpretation of popular religious revival has to take into consideration all the different social actors' desires and actions.

Even though the revival of popular religion is a very complex phenomenon, temple-based religious activities are the most exciting and popular in Shaanbei. According to a recent survey conducted by Shaanbei local folklorists, the number of temples that have been revived in Shaanbei exceeds ten thousand. Because of the increasing prosperity of the area,

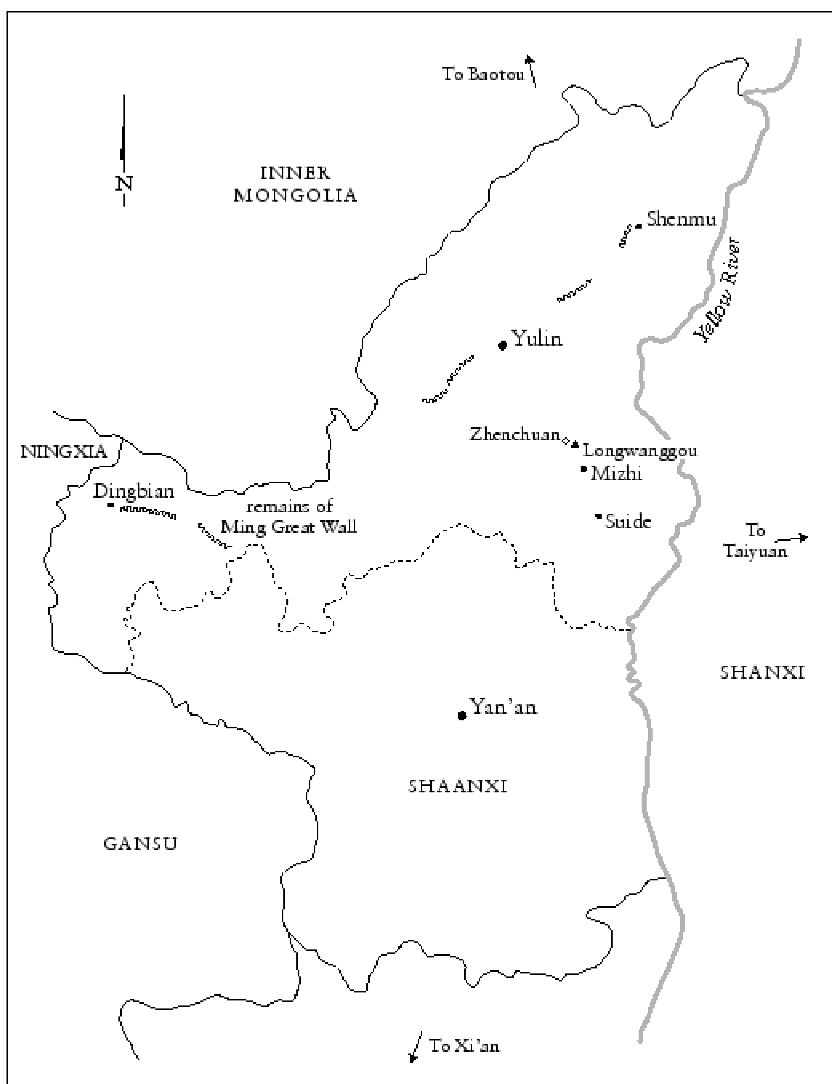
the scale of temples and temple festivals is often many times larger than that in the past. Temples typically sponsor and "stage" a wide range of folk cultural activities such as performances by folk dance troupes (*yangge*), music bands and storytellers, folk opera, "offering presentation" processions, animal sacrifices, and temple festivals. It is not an exaggeration to characterize temples as the "motor" of popular religious revivals and a major carrier of folk cultural traditions. Therefore this book focuses on temple-based popular religious revivals in depth in order to bring to light the processes and mechanisms of the social organization of folk culture in reform-era Shaanbei.

By way of anticipating the arguments in this book, I will briefly lay out the many intertwined sociopolitical factors that enabled popular religious revivalism in Shaanbei. *First*, temple associations are a key folk social institution that is pivotal in producing and reproducing popular religion. *Second*, popular religious activities such as temple festivals provide the loci for expressing enduring peasant values and desires such as hosting and mutual help. The modes of "producing" popular religion entail replicating and extending the principles and mechanisms of the organization of peasant secular life, which enabled quick revitalization of popular religion even after severe suppression. *Third*, village-level local activists seize upon temples and temple associations as a valuable political, economic, and symbolic resource. The reappearance of temples as sites of power generation and contestation is accompanied by the emergence of a new kind of village- and township-level local elite. The story of a temple boss and his political strategies illustrates the shifting sociopolitical terrain in contemporary rural China. *Fourth*, shifting priorities compel the local state to regulate and even to profit from popular religion rather than suppress it, thus giving temples space to thrive. Different local state agencies interact with temple associations and temple bosses, and this interaction indicates a new kind of state-society relationship in the reform era.

Let me now provide a brief overview of the intertwined themes of the book: 1) popular religion and folk cultural revivalism; 2) agrarian political culture and agrarian public sphere; and 3) the local state and shifting state-society relations.

Popular Religion and Folk Cultural Revivalism

This book investigates the post-Mao revival and the social organization of a dragon king temple in a place called the Dragon King Valley



MAP 1. Shaanbei, Showing Yan'an and Yulin Prefectures and Location of Longwanggou

(Longwanggou) in the Shaanbei area (northern Shaanxi Province) of north-central China.[2] Since the early 1980s, the Heilongdawang (Black Dragon King) Temple has evolved into what I call the Longwanggou Complex, which includes, in addition to the main temple, two subsidiary halls, a primary school, and a large-scale reforestation project. The core of the book is a case study of the social organization of the Longwanggou Complex. Based on ethnographic materials gathered in one locale, this book follows the tradition of local studies in anthropology. However, it is neither a community study nor a study of a temple cult. Rather, it reveals the sociocultural processes that enable folk cultural revivalism in contemporary China and examines the impact these revivals have on the agrarian sociopolitical landscape.

Scholars of Chinese religion have customarily distinguished the localized, textually-light popular religious cults from the translocal, universalizing and textually-heavy elite traditions of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism (Faure 1987; Yang 1961; see also Teiser 1995).[3] Like all dragon king cults in agrarian China, the cult of the Heilongdawang is a popular religious cult *par excellence*, despite its recent development into a regional pilgrimage center in Shaanbei and its even more recent inclusion into the officially recognized Daoist institutional structure.

Even though I will discuss the nature of Shaanbei people's religiosity and some of the religious activities that take place at Longwanggou, the emphasis of the book is on more than the *religious* aspects of popular religion. For example, I hope to highlight the temple organization that animates Longwanggou as a *folk social institution* that sprang back to life during the reform era. The temple association, though a structurally simple folk social institution, is nevertheless extremely versatile in its capacities. It enables the building and maintenance of the temple, staging the annual temple festivals, coordinating and interacting with other institutions such as other temple associations, opera troupes, folk music bands, local state bureaus, and even foreign NGOs. These different institutions all have different logics of operation, but somehow they have worked together to enable folk cultural revivalism. This study will show that the temple association plays a crucial role in staging Shaanbei "folk culture" (e.g., temple festivals), expanding folk cultural space, and affecting the local sociopolitical terrain.

Few China observers today would deny the fact of folk cultural revivals, i.e., the reappearance of a repertoire of traditional practices. However, some scholars point out that though many of these practices assume

a traditional form, they carry meanings different from those of the past, and therefore we should not mistake the return of these practices as a revival of unadulterated tradition. For example, Helen Siu argues that Chinese local society has been so thoroughly transformed by the monopolization of state power that folk tradition has been irrevocably "diluted" and transformed, and that traditional practices we see today are "cultural fragments recycled under new circumstances" (Siu 1989b: 134). Using the example of a female shaman practicing in the reform era who employs many Maoist jargons and imageries in her exorcist ritual, Emily Chao expresses a similar view on the immense impact of the socialist era on tradition (Chao 2000). She argues that this kind of "ritual bricolage" and the audience's ambivalent reception of it only reveal that reform-era rural China (in her case among the Naxi minority people of Yunnan) no longer has "a singular all-encompassing belief system" (ibid.: 506).

This perspective points out the differences between "traditional practices" in the reform era and those before the Maoist era. It echoes the "invention of tradition" argument influential in recent anthropological studies (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and warns us against taking cultural innovations as continuations of past traditions. However, this perspective might lead one to assume that what existed before Maoist suppressions was a tradition that was more coherent and authentic. Yet such an apparent coherence was equally a result of "inventions" and efforts of "recycling." Different cultural inventions slowly cohered into a "tradition" or "traditions" (e.g., Buddhism or Daoism or a particular deity cult) over hundreds of years, but the constituent parts can always be broken apart, recombined, and reformulated into new traditions (hence the simultaneous novelty and traditionalism of new religious movements such as Falungong). The "feudal tradition" that came to be suppressed or destroyed during anti-traditionalist campaigns during the Maoist period and reinvented in what appears to be a piecemeal or haphazard manner in the reform era is a complex, dynamic, ever-changing cluster of institutions, practitioners and consumers, knowledge and practices fully amenable to innovations, inventions, and reinventions all the time. Popular religion is "traditional" in precisely this sense. It allows for individual innovation, collective experimentation, and probably plenty of failures (e.g., Chao's female shaman). It can also endure suppressions, lie dormant for a long time, go underground, minimalize, and reemerge in new forms in response to new historical conditions. It is undeniable that religious traditions in China in general suffered enormously under the ra-

tionalist regimes of the twentieth century. Yet suppressions also cause the dispersal of religious personnel and knowledge and the disaggregation of coherent traditions that prepare the ground for the recombination of different elements and a freer space for innovation. The rapid growth of different qigong sects with innovative, syncretist teachings after Mao's death attests to the vitality of Chinese religious traditions.

The form (organizational framework) of temple-based popular religion is relatively simple: there are no elaborate and symbolically complicated rituals; there are no intricate theological maneuvers; there is typically no priesthood. One can even characterize popular religious temples as *minimalist religion*. However, even though the form is simple, the contents need not be. Under unfavorable conditions, popular religion survives in its minimalist, bare-bones state, almost hibernating. Elaborate temples and statues are replaced by secret home altars and small, carved statuettes; long chants accompanied by bells and drums are replaced by a few muffled murmurs (see DuBois 2005: 172). Under favorable conditions, however, popular religion expands, elaborates, and no degree of exuberance is unimaginable. The Heilongdawang Temple has developed from a small, makeshift shrine in the early 1980s to the multibuilding, multifunctional Longwanggou Complex of today. Many of Taiwan's temples and their festivals also attest to popular religion's expansiveness. Temples, temple oracles, temple associations, temple festivals, opera troupes, worship, and pilgrimage, all go together to form a cluster of mutually constituting and reinforcing popular religious cultural idioms or elements. Because of this close inter-connectedness, the revival of one cultural idiom necessarily sparked off a chain reaction of the revival of the other cultural idioms. Throughout Chinese history, popular religion has waned and waxed, minimalized and elaborated, and what we have witnessed in the past half century is simply one cycle in the long course of its changing fortunes.

Some scholars have argued that the return of popular religion during the reform era signals the strength of local communities to reassert their autonomy and to resist the state (see Feuchtwang 2000). The return of lineage power in many parts of southeastern China is the most obvious example; so is the return of village or community-wide festivals. Wang Mingming, who conducted fieldwork in southern Fujian, points out that the revival of community-wide ritual actions indicates a desire on the part of the villagers to rediscover the cultural and historical meanings of local communities, which had been neglected or attacked during the collec-

tivist era. The rotation of responsibilities among villages to organize the annual temple festival renews villagers' sense of locality and communal solidarity and mutual cooperation (Wang 1996: 70, 76). Ann Anagnost 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. The state in turn periodically repossesses these spaces during anti-superstition campaigns; thus the state 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. Based on her fieldwork in rural Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province, Mayfair Yang (2000) argues that local ritual traditions operate on an "archaic" economic logic of ritual expenditure that not only resists the state's developmental economic regime but also the incursions of global capitalism. Yang also emphasizes the importance of spatial negotiations with the state and Capital in the revival of religious sites in the reform era (Yang 2004).

Perhaps the best example of treating popular religion as communal resistance 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 was subjected to grave social suffering during the Maoist era. The villagers were politically persecuted because of their implication in regional interethnic violence and sectarian movements and their connection to the arch-symbol of the feudal era, Confucius. They were also forcibly relocated from their village because of the building of a large hydroelectric dam nearby and were poorly compensated. During the reform era, the villagers sought political and moral-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 retrieving memories of the community prior to its destruction.

My own study builds on the insights of these scholars. However, I have tried to focus even more on the state-society interface. Too much emphasis on communal resistance diverts attention from other important aspects of popular religious revivals such as the actions of the local state and the power claims of local elites, and the frequent mutual accommodation, negotiation, and collusion between local state agents and local elites. In the local world, state and society are complexly imbricated.

While popular religion does have the potential to serve, and sometimes does serve, as a vehicle of popular resistance against the state, I suggest the political implications of the revival of popular religion are often more complex than the resistance perspective can fully capture.

One aspect of popular religion often neglected by China anthropologists is that of temples as providers of magical efficacy as a symbolic good (but see Gates 1987; Moskowitz 2001). Scholars of Japanese religion have recently highlighted the service provider aspects of contemporary Japanese religion (Hardacre 1997; Reader and Tanabe Jr. 1998). Much of popular religion in China too involves the provision of spiritual services (e.g., exorcism, protective talismans, divination, spiritual counseling such as fortune-telling) and the payment for these services (on the spot or delayed, e.g., in the form of vow-fulfillment). This service provider perspective points to the undeniable fact that religion is business in addition to involving beliefs and sacred symbols. It also brings our attention to analyzing the *social organization* of popular religious enterprises. Of course, temples are not merely businesses; yet they can hardly survive without a "business model" (i.e., ways of generating income). Recognizing the economic aspects of popular religion should not be seen as economic reductionism or as cheapening the religious experience of my informants; rather, not recognizing them and limiting our understanding of religious activities as purely "religious" or "spiritual" would risk another kind of reductionism.

Agrarian Political Culture and Agrarian Public Sphere

Since the 1940s many anthropologists have studied both the characteristics of, and changes in, peasant societies.[4] Anthropologists who studied China confronted an agrarian empire whose large rural sector demanded scholarly attention. Even though the agrarian nature of mainland China has diminished significantly in the past century, it still looms large on the national sociopolitical landscape. Yet the Chinese agrarian society of today differs considerably from those of the Maoist era (1949–1980), the Republican era (1911–1949), and the late imperial era (Ming, Qing dynasties). A long list of scholars, including social historians, political scientists, anthropologists, and sociologists, have traced its various transformations: the nature of peasant rebellions, peasant support of the Communist Revolution, the Land Reform and its consequences, collectivization and Maoist rural politics, the peasants' role in de-collectivization, and reform-era rural politics. In a word, scholarly at-

tention has been mainly trained on the thoroughly *political* nature of state-peasant relationships, especially during the post–1949 socialist era. The imagery is one in which the state attempted to capture the peasantry for its political purposes and the various peasant actors at various historical moments welcomed or resisted these state initiatives.

Even though my study is situated squarely within this tradition of scholarship on Chinese agrarian society, its focus on social aspects of popular religion also relies on another scholarly tradition, the anthropology of Taiwan, in which studies of popular religion occupy a place of honor. Among other concerns, studies of popular religion in Taiwan often highlight the *politics* of popular religious organizations and rituals (notably Ahern 1981a, 1981b; Bosco 1994; Gates 1996, 2000; Katz 2003; Rohsenow 1973; Sangren 2003; Seaman 1978; Weller 1985, 1987b, 1994). Political factors such as the state, ethnicity, class, and local factionalism are the mainstay of these analyses. As the PRC undergoes political economic "liberalization," its transformational trajectory in some ways resembles that of Taiwan in the past half century. Therefore it is important to see whether popular religion in the PRC plays a similar or different role in articulating, among other things, the interests and desires of various social actors in agrarian society. I argue that the revival of popular religious organizations does not denote simply "people power" reclaiming power from a previously hegemonic socialist state; rather, these folk social institutions contribute to the formation of a new power field in which the local state interacts with local society in new ways and with new rules.

Studying the revival of folk rituals and temple communities in southern Fujian, Kenneth Dean contends that the communities created by these ritual systems, e.g., 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 which supposedly bridges the state and society (ibid.: 191). With rising popular appeal 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. The contexts of popular religious activities such as temple festivals, spirit medium séances, and funeral and wedding banquets encourage and facilitate a kind of sociality radically

different from that of the Maoist era, where political campaigns, militarized organizations, collectivist production drives, and class struggle dictated villagers' social lives (see Solomon 1971). 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, a desire to seek fun and excitement, or otherwise mostly personal and familial concerns.

As opposed to the bourgeois public sphere discussed by Jürgen Habermas in the context of Western European sociopolitical development in the 18th and 19th 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 the formation of a "public opinion" (even though it has such potentials); 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. In the idealized world of the salon and the café, members of the Western bourgeoisie discussed and debated public issues and gradually formed a public (understood as a *political* public) between the state and the private individuals and families (see Keane 1998). In this model of civil society, "rational" communication is key: ideas were exchanged and debated. However, worshipers at temple festivals typically do not engage in political discussions (or any "reasoned discourse"), and the ephemeral nature of temple festivals prevents the worshipers from forming a viable public. There have been isolated instances of communal protests that have been reinforced by common membership in worship communities, but these tend to be locale-based protests that do not have the potential for wider development (see Jing 2000). Robert Weller (1999) expresses doubt that religious communities based on territorial cults could ever become the basis for forming a larger civil society. It is too early to say in which directions temple-based cultural forms might evolve in China. Given the significant role popular religion plays in Taiwanese politics today, similar developments might also occur in the PRC.

In the past decade or so the idea of "minjian" (civic, nongovernmental) gained salience in public discourses in the PRC. While the idea of "people" (*renmin*) still retains a lot of currency (as object to be acted upon by the state or to be served by "civil servants"), the idea of minjian points to an expanding public sphere where citizens act upon their own initiatives (see Yang 1994). Temple associations are minjian organizations that spring from the autochthonous needs of different sectors of society

(see Brook 1997; Fukao 1998). A temple association is a condensed and visible form of communal power of a particular locale. This communal power is manifested in the grandeur of the temple and the scale of the temple festival. As one of the most vibrant folk social institutions, temple associations have played a crucial role in expanding the folk cultural space and agrarian public sphere in reform-era China (see Gates 2000).

China scholars have long recognized the crucial role the local elite play in mediating the larger polity (imperial state or modern state) and the local peasant communities (Duara 1988a; Esherick and Rankin 1990; Friedman et al. 1991; Hsiao 1960). Local elites occupy positions of prominence in local society because of their wealth, formal political position, political influence, social connections, moral authority, education, ritual knowledge, experience, leadership abilities, or a combination of these factors. Their strategies of maintaining an elite status across generations involve the conversion between symbolic capital (e.g., education, imperial degree titles) and other forms of capital (land, business, political connections, etc.) (see Bourdieu 1984). Local elites are usually the most aware of, and responsive to, outside forces. They tend to desire to occupy local leadership positions especially when these positions yield tangible or intangible dividends (e.g., extra income, prestige, opportunities to network with other local elites, etc.). For example, Gregory Ruf describes how the managing elites of the reform-era village enterprises in the Sichuan village he studied are comprised of the village Party secretary and his relatives and social intimates (Ruf 1998: 144). In my analysis, the local elite is comprised of village- and township-level local leaders who are often outside the formal state officialdom, even though they might be coopted by the state in one way or another (e.g., being selected as a member of the county Political Consultative Conference).

One very interesting phenomenon in Shaanbei is that many 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. In other cases, they have become temple bosses because only they have the know-how and connections to the local state to negotiate with, for example, the local Religious Affairs Bureau. One may also speculate that during the reform period, the Party secretaries have lost a considerable amount of power and therefore they want to capture the popular religious sphere to compensate for their loss of power.

As soon as we understand popular religion as a local resource, similar

to local enterprises, it becomes easier for us to see why certain members of a community are particularly enthusiastic about reviving and expanding local temples. These are people who are interested in reviving and capturing the popular religious sphere to build or augment their basis of local influence and authority. Such an interest is usually couched in terms of serving the deity or the community. For example, in Jun Jing's study of the revival of the Confucius Temple in the village in Gansu, the new temple managers (called 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: 21). Through the rebuilding of the temple and the reestablishment of rituals, these men reassert their authority as ritual specialists and the moral leadership roles denied to them in the previous era. In this book, I highlight the career of Lao Wang, the temple boss at Longwanggou, so as 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 extra-local resources and sites to buttress their legitimacy and power.

Another category of social actors actively involved in popular religious revival is of course the many kinds of religious specialists (i.e., Daoist priests, geomancers, Buddhist monks, spirit mediums, fortune-tellers), who hire out their service for a fee. Because of their specialized training and higher literacy, these religious specialists are not so much local elites as local *cultural* elites. So 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. Looking at the actions of local elite activists does not undermine 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.

The Local State and Shifting State-Society Relations

That popular religious institutions like Longwanggou can exist at all in the People's Republic of China today is not self-evident. The Chinese Communist Party that controls the state apparatuses is committed to an atheistic worldview. While for political purposes the party-state tolerates orthodox and "proper" Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, and Christianity as "recognized religions," cults for dragon kings and fertility goddesses are "feudal superstitions" and thus decidedly beyond the pale. Like hundreds of thousands of local temples throughout China, the Heilongdawang

Temple was destroyed during the early phase of the Cultural Revolution in 1966; yet, like countless other local temples, the Heilongdawang Temple was rebuilt almost as soon as the reform era began in the early 1980s. In 1998 the temple was even recognized by the local state as an official Daoist shrine, thus raising it to a new height of legitimacy, unthinkable a mere decade or so before.

Important to my account of the revival of folk social institutions such as Longwanggou is the analytical distinction between the two guises of the Chinese socialist state: the policy-making central state and the *local state* that implements and often bends the policies. In the reform era the local state has increased its administrative and fiscal autonomy considerably vis-à-vis the central state. Previous studies of the relationship between the state and popular religion have often stopped short of providing a picture of the behavior of the local state. The state does not act directly upon popular religion; rather, it is the local agents of the state who do. If left unpacked, "the state" tends to become reified. Similarly, "the people" (or "the community") might also risk being reified, especially when treated as "resisting," always presumably 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 and desires are involved. Recently some China scholars have tried to look beyond the central party-state and analyze the behavior of the local state (Blecher and Shue 1996; Esherick 1994; Oi 1989, 1999; Pieke 2004; Shue 1995; Siu 1990; Wank 1995, 1999), focusing on the realms of political actions and the economy. Because of its nested interest in the locale, the local state necessarily behaves differently than the central state. (I sometimes use "local state" as shorthand to refer to local state agents and agencies as a collectivity, but I do not intend to reify the local state. Just like the state, the local state is also an amalgam of administrative structures, political processes, policies, and crosscutting intentions and desires.)

In our story of Longwanggou the local state takes the forms of township (Zhenchuan), county (Yulin County), and prefecture (Yulin Prefecture) level government bureaus and bureaucrats. In this book I try to show, with the case of Longwanggou, that in Shaanbei the local state has entered into a new, more regulatory relationship with local society characterized by practical mutual dependence. I argue that the tolerance toward, and even encouragement of, popular religion by the local state is,

among other things, an instance of local state protectionism, i.e., the local state's effort at providing an environment that fosters local social and economic welfare. In the eyes of the local state popular religious temples are also resources to be cherished and taken advantage of, e.g., taxing the merchants at temple festivals. One county government is necessarily going to protect its county's temples against those in other counties. My study thus contributes to the recent discussion of local state behavior and shifting state-peasant relations in reform-era China.

In order to survive and thrive, temple associations and temple bosses have to negotiate with different local state agencies and to 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 necessarily has to accommodate local state penetration. 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" (i.e. state encroachment) from above and "societalization" (i.e. capture by societal forces) 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 also Dean 1998b; Katz 1995: 180–89).

Doing Fieldwork in Shaanbei

This book is based on materials collected during eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Shaanbei between 1995 and 1998 (summers of 1995 and 1996 plus fourteen months in 1997 and 1998). I conducted the fieldwork on my own, without being accompanied by any officials. Being Chinese helped me avoid the bureaucratic red tape and official restrictions that often hinder foreign researchers. I deliberately did not seek out an official research or educational institution for formal affiliation because I knew the topic of my research, i.e. popular religion, could be quite sensitive and could bring unwanted trouble to my host institutions. I was extremely fortunate that the temple boss of Heilongdawang Temple, Lao Wang, took interest in my work and allowed me to use Longwanggou as my fieldwork base. The dormitory room at the temple became my home and workspace. The temple turned out to be an excellent

base because things happened constantly. Given the Heilongdawang's popularity among Shaanbei people, I could literally sit at the temple and still be able to talk to people from all over Shaanbei and beyond. I could also visit neighboring villages and towns or go on extended trips to other Shaanbei locales whenever I wished. During the course of my fieldwork I ran into and talked to many local officials and police officers. I told them I was researching local folk customs and they were happy to leave me alone. As long as they were not told officially about my presence (e.g., through a letter of introduction from an official agency), they would not have to take responsibility for me if something went wrong. My affiliation with Longwanggou was often enough to guarantee that I could be safely accommodated (*meiwenti*, literally "no problem"). The legitimacy of Longwanggou and the status of Lao Wang provided the smooth acceptance of my prolonged presence in the local arena.

Even though the focus of my research was on the Heilongdawang Temple, I visited dozens more temples and their festivals. I traveled widely in multiple locales in Shaanbei, especially in the counties of Yulin, Shenmu, Mizhi, Zizhou, Hengshan, Suide, and Yan'an City. When speaking with informants I engaged them in casual conversations instead of conducting formal interviews. The thousands of Shaanbei people I encountered and talked with included temple officers, opera troupe members, cultural workers, educators, local officials, ritual specialists, and ordinary villagers and townspeople. For data collection, participant observation was as important as conversations with informants.

Even though I can call myself a "native anthropologist" because I am originally from China, rural China presented to me a world very different from the one I had known. Having grown up in Beijing and Hong Kong, I encountered rural China in a sustained manner for the first time during my fieldwork in Shaanbei. Shaanbei was very much culturally "Other" to me. I speak fluent Mandarin, the official language, which is comprehensible to most urban Shaanbei people but only partially comprehensible to Shaanbei peasants (thanks mostly to their increasing exposure to television programs). Shaanbei dialect (*Shaanbeihua*) belongs to the northern dialect group (from which Mandarin was derived), though it differs from Mandarin significantly. It required some effort to learn to understand Shaanbeihua, especially the rich repertoire of unique vocabulary.

Organization of the Book

Besides the introduction, this book has eleven chapters.

In *Chapter Two* I present a survey of the history, society, and culture of Shaanbei as a region, emphasizing the social structure and organization of contemporary Shaanbei society (e.g., town and country, class and status groups, the village and the peasant family).

Chapter Three covers the general aspects of popular religion in Shaanbei. I first trace briefly the turbulent history of the fate of popular religion in Shaanbei in the 20th century. Then I outline the popular religious landscape in contemporary Shaanbei, including discussions of temples, temple associations, and religious specialists (e.g., spirit mediums and yinyang masters). In *Chapter Four* I analyze Shaanbei people's religiosity and examine the ways in which Shaanbei people construct the deities' magical efficacy. I examine the bureaucratic and personal models of conceiving and interacting with deities. By identifying different modalities of "doing" religion in China, I also provide a possible resolution to a well-known debate in the study of Chinese religions: is there one or more Chinese religions?

Chapter Five recounts the legends of the deity and presents snapshots of the history of the temple from the early Republican era, through the different phases of the Maoist era, and finally up to the present day. I introduce the concept of "text act" to characterize the extensive use of markers of textual and inscriptional legitimation at the temple.

In *Chapter Six* I describe the social organization of the temple complex and examine the ways the temple provisions the Black Dragon King's magical efficacy to worshipers. I examine the temple association as a folk social institution. I present the activities and organization of the temple complex in today's Longwanggou (e.g., temple finance, personnel). I look at the key to the rising popularity of the temple: the versatility and the efficient running of the temple association. I propose that we see temples as, among other things, providers of magical efficacy. In *Chapter Seven* I compare and contrast the organization of a funeral with that of a Longwanggou temple festival. I propose the concept of "event production" and argue that when Shaanbei people produce popular religious events such as funerals and temple festivals they mobilize a very basic set of principles and mechanisms. I suggest that the simplicity of the organizational structure underlies the ease with which popular religion is revived.

I also present "hosting" as a major cultural idiom in the organization of major peasant household events and temple festivals. *Chapter Eight* details the native concept of red-hot sociality (*honghuo*). I argue that temple festivals provide the ideal occasions for Shaanbei people to produce and share red-hot sociality, one of the most desirable states of being for social events. I also engage in a discussion of the political implications of peasants' desire for honghuo.

Chapter Nine tells the story of temple boss Lao Wang. I examine his rise to prominence in the local community as master craftsman, petty capitalist entrepreneur, peasant intellectual, and local elite. With the example of Lao Wang I try to elucidate the processes and mechanisms of the rise of a new kind of local elite in rural China. *Chapter Ten* deals with the ways in which popular religion is embedded in the larger agrarian political culture. I present examples of the articulation of temple politics and village politics in Longwanggou. I look at how the expansion of the temple has drastically changed the configuration of village power and authority structure and how village factionalism informs temple leadership struggles.

In *Chapter Eleven* I analyze the role the local state plays in the revival of popular religion in Shaanbei. I first discuss the dynamics between policy and practice in relation to "feudal superstitions." Then I outline the process through which Longwanggou interacted with, and gained approval from, different local state agencies, thus acquiring legitimacy and legality over time. I present and analyze two episodes of "rituals of legitimation" to show how temple boss Lao Wang harnessed power and legitimacy for both Longwanggou and himself. I end this chapter with a discussion of the interpenetration of politics and religion in the agrarian public sphere.

In *Chapter Twelve,* the concluding chapter, I revisit the central themes of the book and try to draw out some of the broader implications of the study.

Even though this is a study of China, I believe that many of the themes and concepts in the book will be of use to non-China specialists, especially those who work on the ethnography of the state, grassroots activism, the politics of legitimation, cultural production, civil society and the public sphere, popular religion, the role of religion in contemporary society, agrarian social change, post-socialism, and sociality. Particular conceptual and theoretical contributions that might interest comparatists

include popular religion as idiom of communal hegemony (Chapter 4), text acts (Chapter 6), event productions (Chapter 7), red-hot sociality and rites of convergence (Chapter 8), agrarian public sphere (Chapters 8 and 11), local elites (Chapter 9), the local state and the politics of legitimation (Chapter 11).