COPYRIGHT NOTICE
Shahar/Unruly Gods

is published by University of Hawai'i Press and copyrighted, ©1996, by University of Hawai'i Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.
NB: Illustrations may have been deleted to decrease file size.
Introduction: Gods and Society in China

Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller

The religious landscape of China is complex. Scholars usually distinguish among at least four Chinese religious traditions: the popular religion, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. The popular religion is sometimes referred to as the “diffused” religion or the “lay” religion of China, while the latter three are commonly designated the “institutional” or “clerical” Chinese religions. The idea of Chinese popular religion includes religious beliefs and practices that were shared by the overwhelming majority of the Chinese laity in late imperial times, commoners and elite alike. It has continued unchecked in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and overseas Chinese communities, and has surged again in the People’s Republic of China after decades of discouragement. This popular religion has no canonical scriptures. Its heterogeneous beliefs, myths, and values have been transmitted, to a large extent, by popular lore (fiction, drama, and visual arts) and by symbol and ritual. Similarly, popular religion by and large lacks religious institutions independent of secular organizations, such as the family, the clan, and the guild. Thus, it does not exist as an entity independent of Chinese society and culture, and for this very reason it has no name. Western scholars coined the phrase “Chinese popular religion.” Villagers in Taiwan are apt to say that they have no “religion” at all, even though they burn incense daily to various gods and ancestors. Here they are contrasting their daily practice with institutionalized systems featuring clergy, core texts, and formal membership. Still others simply have never heard the term religion (zong-jiao); it is a recent word in Chinese. By contrast, China’s three main institutional religions had canonical scriptures and professional clergies, which were aware of their own distinct religious identities. The case of Confucianism is further complicated. Scholars have some-
times reserved this name for the moral and spiritual dimension of this tradition, referring to the rituals performed by Confucian scholars in their capacity as officials by the term “state religion”; we will maintain this distinction.1

These four traditions were of course intimately related to each other, as mutual competition encouraged mutual borrowings. Erik Zürcher introduced the influential metaphor of the pyramid to describe the relationship between the institutional religions of China and the popular religion. The institutional religions, he suggested, resemble peaks that emerge from the same mountain base. At the top—the level of learned clergy, the authors of canonical scriptures—these peaks appear far apart. But at the bottom—at the level of lay praxis and beliefs—they “merge into a much less differentiated lay religion” (Zürcher 1980:146).2 Historians, whose access to the lay religion has been limited by the paucity of written documents, have until recently tended to view the Chinese religious landscape from the peaks. Thus, their studies are inclined to highlight the differences between China’s religious traditions. By contrast, anthropologists, whose field work focuses on the praxis of religion in daily life, tend to emphasize areas of congruence.

One area of congruence is the supernatural. The state religion, Daoism, Buddhism, and the popular religion are all polytheistic. Beginning in ancient times state officials worshiped a large pantheon of deities arranged in a hierarchical bureaucratic structure at the apex of which stood Heaven (Tian). The Daoist clergy venerated their own divine bureaucracy as well as a rambunctious group of unruly deities known as immortals (xian). Buddhism enriched the Chinese supernatural with a host of its own religious characters, including buddhas (who have escaped the wheel of incarnation) and bodhisattvas (who choose to remain in this world until all others are saved). Finally there is the pantheon of the amorphous popular religion, which has been the richest and most diverse of all. The Chinese laity worship a plethora of supernatural figures, ranging from local guardian saints to national deities, from deities of popular origins to gods of Daoist or Buddhist descent.

For lack of a better term in English, we will follow common practice by referring to all these spirits as “gods.” Such use should be taken to imply not the omniscience and omnipotence of the Abrahamic god, but something more akin to Catholic saints: spirits of dead worthies who can respond to requests from the living. Even this comparison risks obscuring the range of such spirits in China, from personified nature spirits (foxes, monkeys, stones, constellations) to subdued bandits to moral exemplars. The key Chinese term is shen (as in the common terms guishen, “ghosts and gods,” or shenfo, “gods
and Buddhas”), which refers abstractly to vital force and concretely to gods.

At least four types of gods—Daoist, Buddhist, state, and popular—thus exist in China. Yet these four groups are by no means distinct. Gods are mutually borrowed and sometimes are shared by two, three, or all four religions. The popular religion inherited many of its deities from Daoist and Buddhist mythology, and the supernatural bureaucracy of the imperial state was administered by deities of popular descent. Likewise, under the laity’s pressure, the Daoist and Buddhist clergies sanctioned local cults and adopted popular deities into their supernatural realms. In the process deities’ images were changed. Imperial state officials attempted to Confucianize local cults, and Daoist and Buddhist clergy clothed borrowed deities in their respective religious terminologies.

This volume begins a systematic reexamination of the rich and complex world of Chinese gods. Drawing on recent research, it challenges some previously held notions regarding the Chinese supernatural. The seven essays that follow survey a large number of gods of varying sorts: local deities who rose to national prominence, deities who figure primarily in spirit-medium cults, and others in whose honor large temples have been built. The essays cover a lengthy time period from the Southern Song to the present.

Two sets of questions underlie this volume. First, what is the relationship between the Chinese supernatural and the Chinese social and political order? Do the Chinese heavens mirror the social and political landscape of late imperial China, or do they turn it upside down? How are they the products and producers of relations of power and identity? Western scholars have pointed out significant similarities between the Chinese supernatural and the bureaucratic structure of the Chinese state; they have thus tended to describe Chinese deities as bureaucratic and their relationship to society as a metaphor (e.g., Ahern 1981, Wolf 1974a). The following chapters, however, show that the bureaucratic idea applies only to one segment of the Chinese supernatural. Indeed, these essays reveal that the Chinese heavens were neither a passive metaphor for China’s political order nor a simple reification of its social hierarchy. Rather, the heavens expressed and negotiated the tensions within society. Chinese gods did mirror the existing order in some ways, but they also shaped it, compensated for it, and changed it. They participated in the dynamics of power and struggles over identity that characterized China as much as any other society. These essays begin to suggest the historical, geographical, social, and cultural patterns that reverberated with the images of Chinese deities.

The second set of questions concerns the transmission of gods’
cults. How were the diverse images of the gods disseminated, both geographically across regional and linguistic boundaries and temporally from one generation to the next? This is especially pertinent to the popular religion, which, unlike the institutional religions of China, has neither religious organizations nor canonical scriptures. Here the volume addresses the question of unity and diversity in Chinese culture. To what extent, if at all, is one popular religion shared throughout the vast Chinese state? How are shared images transmitted, and how do they interact with local variations? How did the pressures toward a unified cosmology contend with the centrifugal forces of diversity?

Deities as Bureaucrats

Chinese gods often resemble earthly bureaucrats in many ways. In Max Weber’s definition, a bureaucrat derives authority from his legally defined post, not from his person (Weber 1968), and many Chinese deities are known to their believers by their posts only. They are defined by their functions and not as individuals. Henri Maspero noted that in China “divinity is a responsibility like a public function: the title endures but those who hold it succeed one another . . . These are functionary gods who receive a position, who lose it, who are promoted or demoted” (Maspero 1981:87). The conception of deities as functionaries is especially apparent in the case of territorial deities, whose jurisdiction is defined geographically. The two notable examples are the gods of the locality (tudi shen), who are typically responsible for a village or neighborhood, and the city gods (chenghuang shen) (literally “wall-and-moat gods”), whose jurisdiction parallels that of a magistrate in late imperial times. These deities serve given terms of office and are then promoted or demoted according to their performances (Wolf 1974a:134–145; Hansen 1993:75,108).

Hierarchy that stipulates the jurisdiction of each office and provides for the supervision of lower offices by higher ones characterizes every bureaucracy (Weber 1968:956–957). Such a hierarchy is clearly apparent in the pantheon of the Chinese state religion. Already during the second millennium B.C.E. the Shang theocrats conceived of the heavens as an elaborate hierarchy of ancestors, each with his specific jurisdiction (Keightley 1978). State bureaucrats in later generations likewise conceived of the heavens in hierarchical terms, downplaying the association of Shang gods with ancestors. The state enhanced this idea in local cults by assigning popular deities to specific positions in a celestial hierarchy, fashioned after its own bureaucratic structure. It is noteworthy that the divine bureaucrats thus
appointed were subject to the authority of their earthly counterparts, who had assigned them their positions in the first place. State officials—most notably the emperor himself—could revoke deities’ titles, demote them, or even physically punish them if they failed to perform their duties (Cohen 1978, Seidel 1989–1990:255–256, Ebrey and Gregory 1993:7–8).

Daoist clergy, like Confucian officials, envisioned the heavens as a vast hierarchical bureaucracy. As early as the fifth century C.E., the Daoist mystic Tao Hongjing (456–536) “made strenuous efforts to fit the Daoist gods of all the various traditions into one orderly flow chart” (Seidel 1989–1990:255). Daoists of later generations supplemented his efforts by devising an entire system of divine ministries, each complete with a presiding officer, assistants of all sorts, and an army of subordinates (Maspero 1981:92). A celestial bureaucracy also figures in the pantheon of the popular religion, though less prominently than in Daoism and the state religion. Its lowest ranking official is the Stove God (Zaojun), who ascends on New Year’s eve to heaven to report to his ultimate superior, the Jade Emperor (Yuhuang Dadi), on each family’s behavior.7 The netherworld, as depicted in the popular religion, is likewise bureaucratic. By the tenth century at the latest, the Chinese laity conceived of purgatory as a series of tribunals fashioned after earthly courts and staffed by fearsome bureaucrats (Goodrich 1981, Teiser 1993).

The bureaucratic image applies not only to the structure of the Chinese heavens but also to the rules by which they operate. David Keightley has suggested that already during the Shang period Chinese religion was permeated by the optimistic belief that the heavens operate according to decipherable and stable rules—rules that, according to Weber (1968:958), are the preconditions for bureaucratic government. These rules were evident in a routinized system of sacrifices, specifying which gods were entitled to which offerings in anticipation of or thanks for specific favors (Keightley 1978:214–216). The primary means of bureaucratic communication is the written document (Weber 1968:957), and, interestingly, Chinese ritual has made extensive usage of the written language since ancient times. Some paleographers maintain that the earliest Chinese ideograms, discovered on Shang oracle bones and tortoise shells, were invented to communicate with deities.8 Han officials, like their descendants throughout the imperial area, used identical written documents to communicate with human colleagues and with gods (Seidel 1989–1990:255–256).

Written communication with the divine characterizes not only state rites but also Daoist ritual. The offering of texts is the most common form of Daoist sacrifice. Memorials “couched in . . . administrative jargon” (Seidel 1989–1990:255) are burned, whereupon
they materialize in the divine courts to which they have been addressed (Schipper 1982:122–125, 1985:34). The centrality of the written document in Daoist ritual reflects the symbolic significance of the Chinese script in Daoist mysticism. The Daoist priest perceives in a character’s graphic form the essence of the thing it represents. He thus considers the script a key for the understanding, and hence the taming, of the forces underlying reality (Seidel 1989–1990:251–254; Robinet 1991:128; Schipper 1982:124). In the popular religion written documents likewise figure prominently. Charms (fu), for example, are bureaucratic writs, which subdue demons by the superior authority of the gods. Whether written by Daoist priests or by the ritual specialists of the popular religion (mediums or diviners), they use administrative terminology. Like other official documents, charms are valid only when sealed. They therefore invariably carry the seal of the god in whose name they were issued. Emily Ahern noted that the application of the English term charm to such written communiqués with the supernatural is in one sense misleading. The word charm, like the related word magic, implies the application of extraordinary forces. However, these written messages to the supernatural are supposed to operate exactly like written messages to humans (Ahern 1981:24–30).

Thus, the Chinese heavens in this context resemble the bureaucratic Chinese state in their complex hierarchy and their largely bureaucratic modes of communication, both clearly related to their secular equivalents. Furthermore, many deities share emblems of power with earthly bureaucrats. Their temples resemble magistrates’ yamens and like them are surrounded by a bevy of clerks, runners, and soldiers (Ahern 1981:2). Deities, like officials, are carried in sedan-chairs during yearly inspection tours, and when officiating in court they carry the same trappings of judicial authority. Even the instruments of torture employed in the courts of the netherworld resemble those once used in earthly courts. These are often depicted in stirring detail in murals and paintings exhorting the faithful to behave morally (Maspero 1981:185, Goodrich 1981:43–57, Teiser 1988, Teiser 1993:129–130, Vidor 1984). In addition, anthropologists have often reported that people will explicitly liken deities to secular bureaucrats, for instance comparing the Earth God to a policeman or the Jade Emperor to the president (e.g., Wolf 1974a, Jordan 1972). Why are the Chinese heavens envisioned, at least to an important extent, in bureaucratic terms? This question can be answered from several vantage points, and we will present only a few here. First, in the eyes of Chinese commoners state bureaucrats wield power so overwhelming that bureaucratic terms offer a clear way to under-
stand any power, even divine power. Indeed, the bureaucratization of the Chinese heavens may lead us to reassess the degree to which the state penetrated and influenced local society. Historians and political scientists have revealed the limitations of the Chinese state in reaching the local level. The general bureaucratization of the heavens, however, reflects a long-range impact of the state on the peasantry (Wolf 1974a:145). In more general terms, these images of transcendent power speak to basic processes of Chinese socialization, family, and local life, all of which encourage images of what Steven Sangren (1991) calls “alienated” power.

Second, bureaucratic heavens certainly can serve the interests of a bureaucratic state. In imperial times state officials in their capacity as priests of the state religion promoted a conception of the heavens as a mirror image of their own bureaucracy. Such heavens could have encouraged the population to accept the existing sociopolitical order as natural. They precluded the introduction of a new system of government and prevented the questioning of official authority. The bureaucratized supernatural “did not open the possibility of a radically different kind of world” (Ahern 1981:83). It therefore enhanced the hegemonic position of the ruling Confucian elite, at least insofar as it successfully dominated other possible interpretations.

Yet we should also note that an image of the heavens fashioned after the existing political order did not necessarily serve only those who ruled. It could have benefited subjects as well. Ahern has suggested that Chinese ritual, which was modeled so closely after the bureaucratic procedures of the Chinese state, served as a learning game, teaching peasants “how to analyze (and so manipulate) the political system that governed them” (Ahern 1981:92). In her view, Chinese ritual procedures teach people how to obtain power, how to obtain access to those in power, and how to limit those with power. Chinese god-bureaucrats are not simple tools of power, but rather terms through which power could be negotiated and fought over.

Last, we need to be careful not to interpret the bureaucratic dimension of the Chinese supernatural reductively, as a tool consciously or unconsciously designed to benefit one or another social group. The bureaucratic image serves intellectual goals as well as political ends. It enables the classification of natural phenomena and the ordering of reality. The primary concern of the imperial bureaucratic religious mentality might have been, as Anna Seidel has suggested, “not Realpolitik and domination, but the integration of absolutely everything into one coherent system” (Seidel 1989–1990: 256). Thus, it is entirely possible that the heavenly bureaucracy influenced the earthly one as much as mirrored it. Keightley has suggested that the bureaucratic mentality of Shang religion informed the bureau-
ocratic structure of the Shang state: “The habits of an optimistic, manipulating, and prognosticating religious logic endowed the order and structure of ranks and hierarchies, jurisdictions, contracts, and stipulated criteria which were emerging in Shang secular administration with special worth” (Keightley 1978:224). Seidel has similarly concluded that “the Chinese supernatural bureaucracy does not, after all, seem to be a copy of social conditions; it is the other way around. The Han administrative structure was itself based on a pre-existing religious model” (Seidel 1989–1990:256). Recognizing that the significance of the bureaucratic image of gods goes well beyond the reinforcement of secular politics also helps explain why Daoists should so actively promote the idea of a heavenly bureaucracy (as seen especially in Robert Hymes’ essay in this volume): they are more interested in asserting an ordering control over the world than in promoting the civil bureaucracy. It also helps us focus more broadly on how the gods speak to general processes of power in China.

Deities beyond the Bureaucracy
The studies in this volume both build on and move beyond this discovery of the bureaucratic facet of the Chinese supernatural, suggesting that many deities are not conceived in simple bureaucratic terms and that the parallels between Chinese religion and politics are only partially revealing. Some of the most popular gods do not carry the trappings of office, and their power is not imagined in bureaucratic terms. They do not belong to a celestial bureaucracy. Their devotees address them in a personal language rather than in an administrative jargon. While the bureaucratic idea clearly dominates in the state religion, in the popular religion it is but one of several ways to think about the supernatural. Even in Daoism an exquisitely constructed bureaucratic order coexists with an ideal of self-perfection toward immortality that owes nothing to bureaucratic hierarchy.

Much recent scholarship reminds us of the dangers in too simple a Durkheimian reduction of religion to social structure or in too simple a Marxian one of religion to the interests of the ruling class. Moving beyond the metaphor of gods as bureaucrats helps us to focus on areas of contention and creativity, to reveal more complex evocations of the heavens, and to see the relationships between the production of identity and deity. Such an analysis relies on a more nuanced picture of the meaning of gods and also on a fuller understanding of various kinds of secular power in China. Several earlier works pointed the way in this direction. Ahern (1981), for example, had addressed the apparent lapses in the way the heavenly world modeled secular bureaucrats and argued that they helped empower
worshipers with knowledge of the system. Sangren’s work brought our attention to nonpolitical kinds of power. He discussed how female deities—by definition not plausible bureaucrats—revealed tensions in the position of women (Sangren 1983). Later, he argued for a much more general conception of power and hierarchy through an idea of spiritual efficacy (ling) that does not rely on the secular political order (Sangren 1987). At about the same time, Hill Gates and Robert Weller (1987) urged a more thorough rooting of Chinese religion in the experience of daily life and in the struggle to impose (and resist) particular interpretations. This argument attempted to move beyond seeing god-officials as unproblematic reinforcers of secular politics. Finally, Stephan Feuchtwang (1992) emphasized the level of raw violence that underlay many ideas about the heavenly order.

The most obvious examples of nonbureaucratic deities come from the Buddhist pantheon. Deities of Buddhist descent figure prominently in the pantheon of the popular religion, and they are anything but bureaucrats. Yet this does not diminish their powers in the least. In this respect it is enlightening to read the sixteenth-century novel Journey to the West (Xiyou Ji), where Monkey (Sun Wukong), himself a deity, rebels against the entire celestial bureaucracy. When the Jade Emperor fails to subdue this mischievous simian, the Tathāgata Buddha is called in for the rescue and with a snap of his fingers imprisons Monkey under a magic mountain (Yu 1977–1983:170–175). The Buddha does not belong to the celestial bureaucracy, and he has agreed to quell the rebellious Monkey as a personal favor to the Jade Emperor. Nonetheless in the author’s eyes the Buddha is much stronger than the Jade Emperor.11

One of the most prominent Buddhist deities is the Bodhisattva Guanyin, who in China took on a female form. Guanyin, like other Chinese goddesses, does not belong to a celestial bureaucracy. Chinese female deities, whether of Buddhist, Daoist, or popular descent, usually bear no iconographic resemblance to bureaucrats. For the most part they favor personal appeals over bureaucratic communiqués, and in some cases—notably that of the Queen Mother of the West (Xi Wang Mu)—their communication with mortals may even assume an amorous and sexual tone (Cahill 1993). Despite their nonbureaucratic characteristics, female deities occupy prominent positions in the pantheon of the popular religion. In Taiwan, for example, Guanyin ranks second in number of temples, and the goddess Mazu ranks third (Qiu 1985:103,214). Goddesses upset the gender hierarchy of late imperial China, which placed men above women. Thus they testify that Chinese religion is “more than a sterile reification of the social order” (Sangren 1983:25). Furthermore,
many of them defy the Confucian ethos of late imperial times by refusing to marry. Guanyin, incarnated as Princess Miaoshan, refused to be wed despite her father’s explicit order (Dudbridge 1978:85–98). Mazu and Wusheng Laomu (the Eternal Mother) likewise declined to marry. These goddesses remind us of how much power lies outside politics, in the ability to recreate families and nurture children, but also to threaten male ideas of patrilineal unity.

Even some Daoist deities are anything but bureaucrats. The Daoist heavens feature, side by side with the celestial bureaucracy, a group of carefree immortals (xian), whose power is not envisioned in bureaucratic terms. The immortals achieved their blissful state by withdrawing from worldly politics, and they do not resemble earthly officials (Seidel 1989–1990:248). Daoist scriptures sometimes describe them as saints in disguise, holy fools hiding their true natures behind a simpleton’s façade (Strickmann 1984). Some Daoist immortals have been incorporated into the pantheon of the popular religion, where their eccentric traits have been accentuated. Paul Katz notes, elsewhere in this volume, that the celebrated Eight Immortals (Ba Xian) are often depicted in vernacular novels and plays as lascivious drunkards. Here the move beyond bureaucracy glorifies another sort of power, a kind of creative urge at the margins of formal order. Daoism constructed its detailed bureaucratic arrangement only to transcend it through meditative unity with the transcendent Dao and to tease it with a celebration of eccentric immortality. This is a specific example of the more general case where ordered hierarchy generates a kind of creative counterpower at its margins.

Thus, the bureaucratic image applies only to some Chinese deities, and then often only partially. Even where bureaucratic emblems serve to illustrate a deity’s power, the deity in question may be far removed from the typical bureaucrats of late imperial times. The personalities, careers, and educational backgrounds of numerous deities who occupy positions in the celestial bureaucracy often differ markedly from the appropriate background of officeholders in late imperial China. In other words, the Chinese supernatural may reflect the Chinese political structure at the same time that it upsets its underlying social order. The Stove God is a case in point. Oral folktales, unlike Daoist scriptures, often describe this heavenly bureaucrat in an unflattering light. According to one tradition he is a voyeur who enjoys watching women disrobe in front of the stove; according to another he was originally a gossipy old woman (Chard 1990:173). Even the Stove God’s ultimate superior, the Jade Emperor, emerges from oral folktales as a figure strikingly different from the learned Confucian scholars of the earthly bureaucracy. According to one tradition he is a trickster and imposter, who has achieved his exalted
Introduction: Gods and Society in China

position by sheer luck (Feng 1936:247–248). In another tradition, the Jade Emperor represents a threat of apocalyptic violence just underneath the surface of those imperial robes—perhaps showing the power of a real emperor but certainly not that of a bureaucrat (Feuchtwang 1992).

The Stove God and the Jade Emperor occupy positions in the celestial bureaucracy. Yet in oral literature they deviate from the Confucian ethos, according to which morally upright literati are to assume the responsibility of governance. Other heavenly bureaucrats likewise defy accepted social norms, and their dubious backgrounds are reflected in their ghostly origins. Ghosts are usually the departed souls of people who died prematurely, leaving no descendant kin behind to provide for them in the netherworld. They have thus no choice but to pester the living for offerings. It is even said that they sometimes attempt to escape their ghostly fate by killing someone, who will then substitute for them. Arthur Wolf, who saw in Chinese gods a symbol of earthly officials, argued that there is a sharp difference between them and ghosts: while gods are respected, ghosts are despised; while gods are worshiped, ghosts are merely propitiated (Wolf 1974a:169–174). We are becoming increasingly aware, however, that no clear line separates gods from ghosts (Yü Kuang-hong 1990). Many gods, perhaps even most, share the kinds of premature and violent deaths, often by suicide, that typify malevolent ghosts, and like the latter, they have no descendants to worship them. Barend Ter Haar, for example, has suggested that popular deities in Fujian “have evolved from what were originally (considered to be) vengeful hungry ghosts—feared and worshiped for this very reason” (Ter Haar 1990:349). The ghostly roots of so many deities again speak to kinds of power in China well beyond the imperial state and its bureaucrats. While many of these gods have a bureaucratic side, they also draw on the power of the margins, of death, and of the outside (where both the lowliest ghosts and the highest gods are worshiped). Donald Sutton’s essay in this volume reminds us that the term enfeoffment itself (typically used for the appointment of gods) is not bureaucratic; instead, it implies a recognition of the power of foreign princes—an attempt to internalize external power.

Oral literature and written fiction in the vernacular often highlight the ghostly origins of gods. According to an oral tradition from Jiangsu, the Stove Gods—here described as the composite of several deities—were foreign soldiers who had been stationed in the houses of local Chinese as spies. Their hosts murdered them and, fearing revenge from their ghosts, appointed them as gods of the stove (Chard 1990:174). Even such prominent deities as Guangong and Zhenwu encountered untimely and violent deaths; the fourteenth-
century novel Three Kingdoms (Sanguo Yanyi) describes in detail the violent death of Guangong, who was beheaded by his enemies (Luo 1986:619–623). Zhenwu, according to one version of his myth, was a butcher who committed suicide by cutting out his own bowels (Seaman 1987:2). Several of the deities discussed in this volume were likewise victims of murder or violent accidents. Some (Nazha, Zhong Kui, and members of the Infernal Generals [Jiajiang] group) committed suicide, and one (Mazu) willed herself to death. Most of these deities had national significance, and many serve as patrons of community cults.

The ghostly and even demonic origins of some deities continue to lurk behind their respectable appearances. Some deities may be just as dangerous to the community within which they live as ghosts are. For example, the Wangye spirits, who cure diseases, are also the demonic perpetrators of these same diseases. Their modern cult in Taiwan reflects their dual nature; the believers simultaneously worship and exorcise them. Even as people make offerings to the Wangye, they place these deities’ images in a boat that is sent adrift at sea or burned (Katz 1987:197–215). A similar situation occurred with the Gods of the Five Paths to Wealth (Wulu Caishen), whose cult was prevalent in seventeenth-century Jiangnan. These five deities were derived from diabolical mountain spirits called shanxiao, one-legged fiends notorious for hurling rocks at lone travelers and leading them astray. The Gods of the Five Paths to Wealth continued to betray their noxious origins by seducing young girls and debauching wives. Like the Wangye spirits, these devilish deities were simultaneously exorcised and worshiped, sometimes through female mediums who claimed to have had sexual intercourse with them (Glahn 1991, Cedzich 1995).

Thus the Chinese supernatural is neither a mere tool of China’s political system nor a simple reification of its social hierarchy. We know now that the bureaucratic facet of the pantheon is but one of many. While some deities are described in bureaucratic terms, belong to a celestial bureaucracy, and receive communications through administrative documents, others are different. Furthermore, even where popular deities are arranged in a bureaucratic hierarchy, their social and cultural backgrounds are often radically different from those of earthly bureaucrats. Thus, at least in some cases, the supernatural simultaneously mirrors the administrative structure of the state and defies its underlying social reality. The bureaucratic image coexists with social defiance and social deviance within the images of the gods themselves.

Most of the deities examined in the following chapters do not fit the bureaucratic model of the pantheon, and the few who do occupy
celestial bureaucratic posts are still radically different from the typical officeholders of late imperial times, the Confucian literati. Hymes examines a Song-period cult, prevalent in Jiangxi, of three deities known as the Three Lords of Mount Huagai (Huagai San Zhenjun). The Three Lords did not belong to the celestial bureaucracy, and their authority was inherent in their person. Similarly, interactions with them were not patterned after bureaucratic modes of communication. Instead, the believers appealed to them in a personal language. Hymes suggests that the laity’s interaction with the divine is often marked by a personal vocabulary, while a bureaucratic language characterizes Daoist communication with the supernatural. He contrasts the Three Lords with the extraordinarily bureaucratic mechanisms of Tianxin Daoism (which was very popular at the time), and he concludes by showing how the more modern Stove God is open to both bureaucratic readings (as the Jade Emperor’s agent) and personalistic ones (as a household guest). Katz discusses another nonbureaucratic cult that emerged during the Song, that of the immortal Lü Dongbin. Varying social and religious groups understood Lü’s image differently over time. While Daoist clergy promoted him primarily as a master of internal alchemy, the laity conceived of him as a miracle-worker, an exorcist, and, above all, a member of the rambunctious group of deities known as the Eight Immortals. Some novels and folktales even elaborate upon Lü’s misadventures with prostitutes. Katz qualifies Hymes’ suggestion that the clergy promoted a bureaucratic view of gods by pointing out that immortals like Lü were never bureaucrats, even for professional Daoists. Bureaucratic and nonbureaucratic images coexist even within the clerical traditions.

The subject of Brigitte Baptandier’s paper is a female deity, Lady Linshui (Linshui Furen), whose cult is prevalent in Fujian and Taiwan. Like other female deities, such as Mazu and Guanyin (Princess Miaoshan), Lady Linshui defied the social ethos of late imperial times by refusing to marry. Like them too she blurs the distinctions between god and ghost: she died young and left no descendants. Lady Linshui’s persona is complex, with both benevolent and malevolent aspects. Her alter-ego and nemesis is a snake demon whom she subdues following a series of battles, in which she heads the celestial army of yin forces (yinbing). Her iconic image reflects her dual nature: she sits on the serpent’s head.

Sangren analyzes the myths of three deities, Nazha, Guanyin (Miaoshan), and Mulian, none of whom is a celestial bureaucrat. Sangren refers to them instead as “family-relationship gods,” because their myths, as narrated in vernacular fiction and drama, express key tensions inherent in the Chinese family. Nazha is an Oedi-
pal son who attempts (unsuccessfully) to kill his father. Miaoshan refuses her father’s explicit order that she marry and is executed by him (only to be reborn and reunited with him). Mulian undertakes heroic exploits on behalf of his mother. Sangren suggests that these myths enjoy immense popularity exactly because they express feelings, frustrations, and tensions that are repressed in the normative and self-conscious self-representations of Chinese culture. They are the emotion-laden results of the production of gendered identity in China.

Meir Shahar examines the images of popular deities as reflected in vernacular works of fiction. He surveys a large number of gods, which he classifies into three categories: female (such as Guanyin and Mazu), eccentric and rebellious (such as the drunken monk Jigong and the mischievous monkey Sun Wukong), and martial (such as Guangong and Zhenwu). He points out that none of these groups belonged to the male-dominated literati elite of late imperial times. Shahar suggests that the colorful and humorous pantheon, as depicted in vernacular fiction, offered literati and commoners alike liberation and relief from accepted social and cultural norms, thus functioning much like carnival in medieval Europe. His essay not only shows the alternative power of women, or of outsiders more generally, but also indicates how state power can generate its own antithesis, a power of resistance or escape through reversal.

Sutton studies a group of devilish demon-quellers known as the Infernal Generals (Jiajiang), whose cult is prevalent in today’s Taiwan. The Infernal Generals originated as “ghostlike creatures in bad deaths or bad lives.” They appear in the form of face-painted amateur performers prone to possession. The Infernal Generals perform a ritual exorcistic dance, which is variously influenced by Daoist, shamanic, and operatic traditions. Sutton examines the history of this cult since its appearance in eighteenth-century Fuzhou. He argues that icon and gesture have played a greater role than text in the transmission of these deities’ cult, that performance is more important than myth, and that practice outweighs ideology in shaping their role.

Finally, Weller examines two cases in which spirits of questionable Confucian morality have risen to popular prominence that rivaled that of more properly bureaucratic gods: east-central Guangxi in the 1840s and Taiwan in the 1980s. Both cases witnessed a growth in the popularity of deities known more for sex, drunkenness, gambling, and murder than for dedication to bureaucratic order. In the former, a matricidal deity named King Gan rose to prominence, while in the latter, humble ghosts, some those of known criminals, became the object of widespread cults. The most popular of these reverses regu-
lar ritual procedures: worship is performed at night and features cigarette offerings instead of incense oblation. Weller suggests that the rebellious facet of the pantheon has always existed side by side with its bureaucratic and orderly dimension. However, this upside-down facet of the supernatural comes to the fore in those cases where the bureaucratic state loses control over religion.

Most of the deities described in this volume do not fit the bureaucratic model of the supernatural, or else fit it only partially. In addition, many of them belong to marginal social groups, and they often deviate from accepted social and cultural norms. Yet as several of the authors point out, the popular conception of a deity often differs significantly from its image in the eyes of Buddhist monks, Daoist priests, or imperial scholar-officials. Vernacular fiction (both oral and written) and drama often present the mischievous, rebellious, and antinomian aspect of a deity. The same deity, however, may emerge from other literary genres in a completely different light. Katz shows that novels and folktales highlight Lü Dongbin’s lustfulness, while Daoist scriptures generally portray him as a respectable master of internal alchemy. Shahar notes that members of the Unity Sect (Yiguan Dao) downplay Jigong’s love of wine, while novels invariably portray this eccentric monk as a drunkard. In some cases state officials and religious professionals consciously attempt to reform popular deities. Prasenjit Duara has shown, for example, that the state bureaucracy attempted to mitigate the rebellious aspect of Guangong’s personality. State-sponsored literature depicted this martial deity as a filial son and a scholar well versed in the Confucian classics (Duara 1988). In other cases members of the laity, who were seeking government sponsorship for a deity, themselves cleansed him of all dubious traits. In this manner the noxious Wutong goblins were transformed during the twelfth century into the venerable Wu-xian deities (Glahn 1991, Cedzich 1995).13

Kenneth Dean (1993:131–171) has shown that Guo Shengwang, possibly the most important local deity in Fujian, is understood differently by various social groups. While popular legends highlight this deity’s lowly social origins and his struggle to establish a lineage of his own, Confucian literati praise his filial piety. Guo Shengwang’s cult, like his legend, takes different forms in different social milieux. He is currently the object of Confucian rites performed for reasons of social prestige by one lineage, and he figures simultaneously in Daoist rituals shared by larger segments of Fujianese society. James Watson has similarly shown that the goddess Mazu is interpreted in diametrically opposed ways by different social groups. While government officials promoted her cult along China’s southern shores as a symbol of state hegemony, “Taiwanese people accepted her as the
embodiment of their own independence” (Watson 1985:302). The Taiwanese therefore largely avoid Mazu in state-controlled temples and appeal to her only in temples they themselves constructed. Contradictory images of this goddess coexist also in Hong Kong’s New Territories, where leaders of prominent lineages conceive of Mazu as a symbol of lineage domination and have coerced satellite villages to participate in her festivals so as to express this domination. For their part, however, members of the satellite villages regard Mazu as their own patron deity, who would never deign to assist the dominant lineage (Watson 1985:311–313,315–320).14

It is thus clear that bureaucratic gods do not stand opposed to another set of female, marginal, or outcast deities. Instead, the bureaucrat and the vagabond, the mother and the suicide, intertwine, inextricably linked in the person of many gods. One voice spoke more loudly than the others at times, and interested groups fostered one reading over another, but all the possibilities are typically present. Like the god-kings of Polynesia or of some classical Western societies, the power of many Chinese deities “is typically founded on an act of barbarism—murder, incest, or both . . . Power reveals and defines itself as the rupture of the people’s own moral order” (Sahlins 1985:79). Power, in other words, always appears to be external and alien. And yet it is the king’s own power. Only slightly altered for Chinese deities, we see upright bureaucrats and nurturing mothers with ghostly roots in breaches of accepted kinship and political structures, insiders and outsiders at the same time. Chinese deities thus form part of a complex web of different kinds of power that draws on bureaucracy and violence, filial piety and self-destruction. These various dimensions of power, often combined in versions of a single deity, allow us to focus on how religion allowed people to contend and coexist, to impose and resist interpretations.

**Deities and Social Dynamics**

The essays in this volume show that the Chinese supernatural features a rich gallery of nonbureaucratic deities alongside a heavenly bureaucracy and that channels of direct and personal appeals to the divine exist alongside bureaucratic communication. Furthermore, these essays reveal that even where gods are arranged in a bureaucratic hierarchy and carry bureaucratic emblems of power, their personalities and careers are often radically different from those of idealized officeholders in late imperial times. What types of tensions within Chinese society does the Chinese supernatural reveal? What dynamics produce these deities and make them sensible? Under what circumstances—economic, social, historical—do eccentric and rebel-
lious deities, which have always coexisted with the heavenly bureaucracy, come to the fore? Where and when does a personal language overshadow bureaucratic vocabulary in communicating with the divine?

First, the difference between bureaucratic and personal communication with the divine is related, at least in some cases, to the difference between clerical and lay religions in China, between institutionalized and domestic religious practice. Hymes’ essay on the Song-period cult of the Three Lords of Mount Huagai reveals that laypersons, unlike Daoist priests, used a personal vocabulary to address these deities. Hymes suggests that the interaction of the laity (including the elite) with the divine is often characterized by a personal language, while a bureaucratic vocabulary marks Daoist communication with the supernatural. He argues that one use of personal vocabulary might be to distinguish an individual’s own relationship to the divine and experience of divine authority from those of religious professionals (by which he means Daoist, not Buddhist, priests). This case shows how the institutionalization of meaning under Daoist professionals helped promote a particular reading of gods; it also reminds us strongly of the limits on institutionalized religion in China, and thus of the limits on the ability of Daoists (or anyone else) to solidify a unified interpretation across the entire population. Lay and professional interpretations always pushed against each other in China, as both Hymes and Katz make clear in their essays.

Second, the nonbureaucratic and rebellious facet of the Chinese supernatural clearly relates to political tensions. State officials bureaucratized local deities by granting them posts in the celestial hierarchy and, in some cases, Confucianized them by mitigating their socially dubious traits. Nonbureaucratic deities, as well as gods who carry the bureaucratic trappings of office but deviate from accepted social norms, may rise to prominence in those times and places where the state loses control over religion. When the state fails to project its own bureaucratic image into the heavens, nonbureaucratic cults have the opportunity to become dominant. This theme is developed in Weller’s essay, which highlights the role of the Chinese supernatural in the political struggle between state and local society, between state bureaucrats and local elites. Weller suggests that local elites tend to promote the cults of antinomian deities, who deviate from the Confucian ethos, in those cases where their interests conflict with the state’s. He shows that the rise of ghostly deities in Guangxi of the 1840s paralleled the collapse of state control over the region. The Guangxi cult of the matricidal King Gan thrived when the faltering state encouraged local elites to act as strongmen instead of aspiring
officials. Hymes similarly argues that the Southern Song elite of Fuzhou Prefecture tended to favor a personal, rather than bureaucratic, vocabulary in negotiating the world of the gods at a period when local gentlemen conceived of themselves primarily as powerful and benevolent local patrons rather than as potential bureaucrats (Hymes 1986:177–199). Such gods make arguments for local versions of alternate power; they do not just reflect the political landscape or enforce a hegemonic control.

More broadly, the inversions apparent in the Chinese supernatural world may be interpreted as a (largely unconscious) attempt to balance the Confucian ethos that guided late imperial society and politics. This theme is developed in Shahar's essay, which applies Bakhtin's interpretation of the European medieval carnival to the Chinese supernatural. According to Bakhtin, carnival offered medieval people a humorous respite from the austere and hierarchical ethos that governed their daily lives (Bakhtin 1984). Shahar similarly suggests that the colorful and humorous aspect of Chinese deities offers literati and commoners alike liberation and relief from accepted social and cultural norms. The female, martial, and eccentric gods he discusses all defy the official ideology of late imperial times, which placed men above women, learning above physical heroism, and etiquette above spontaneity. Shahar suggests that like the European carnival, the upside-down aspect of the Chinese heavens functioned as a safety valve, allowing society to let off steam. But again, as with carnival, given the right historical circumstances, defiant gods could also provide the necessary symbolic resources for rebellion. Where political control is powerful, humor may be the only option for escape or resistance, with the humor itself providing the best defense from accusations of immorality. At the same time, the ludic aspect of many deities added greatly to their broad appeal.

The political dimension of nonbureaucratic deities is especially evident in periods of social and political unrest. It has long been recognized that female (hence nonbureaucratic) deities, rather than male gods, often occupied central places in the millenarian movements that sometimes threatened the Chinese state (Sangren 1987:166–186). Thus, for example, the White Lotus rebels of 1774 were firm devotees of the Eternal Mother (Wusheng Laomu) (Naquin 1981). Similarly, many rebellious and eccentric gods figured in the pantheon of the Boxer uprising of 1900. The Boxers were often possessed, for example, by the mischievous deity Sun Wukong, who had attempted to dethrone the Jade Emperor himself (Esherick 1987). Millenarian rebellions often originated in poor and underdeveloped areas, defined by G. W. Skinner as the peripheries of China’s macroeco-
nomic regions (Skinner 1977). We have at present very little data on the geographic distribution of cults in late imperial times. However, Weller’s research suggests that Skinner’s distinction between cores and peripheries may be useful to the understanding of the spread of nonbureaucratic cults. He suggests that nonbureaucratic deities figured primarily in peripheral areas, where government control was limited and local elites did not necessarily collaborate with state officials. In such areas it was relatively hard for state officials to control religious life by bureaucratizing and Confucianizing local deities. Often, tensions between state and locality remain in earlier layers of a cult, even in core areas. Thus, Lady Linshui sits on the snake she conquered (see Baptrandier’s essay, elsewhere in this volume), a New Territories Mazu image is built around the stone image of an earlier deity she has “eaten” (Watson 1985:310), and Taiwanese worship the ghostly Lord of the Foundations (Diji Zhu), who preceded their residence. A history of conflict, and an image of power as both autochthonous and externally imposed, often remain in myth and image even in the most central cults.

Third, the way the Chinese supernatural joins in economic discourse creates another area of dynamism. Weller’s essay demonstrates that in Taiwan of the 1980s the growing popularity of mischievous and ghostly deities paralleled an increase in speculative investment—in the volatile stock market and the illegal lottery system alike. Weller suggests that when profit appears less as a product of hard work than as a result of luck, greed, and insider connections, playful deities who do not heed moral principles come to the fore. Such capricious deities match the fickle nature of profit itself. Thus, in the rapidly expanding and yet unstable economy of the 1980s Taiwan witnessed significant growth in the popularity of eccentric deities, such as Jigong, Nazha, and Sun Wukong, as well as a growing cult of ghosts. Sutton’s essay also shows the close connection between market and religion, explaining both the shared core of Jiajiang performance and its tremendous innovation and rapid evolution as responses to competition for business. During roughly the same period when Weller documents the increased popularity of ghostly gods in Taiwan, Sutton shows the sudden success of new types of Jiajiang performance based on spectacular self-mortification of possessed mediums.

Richard von Glahn’s study of the Gods of the Five Paths to Wealth in seventeenth-century Jiangnan suggests a similar correlation between a fast growing, precarious money economy and the prominence of mischievous and even demonic deities. The inflation and economic instability that accompanied the growth of the money economy in late Ming Jiangnan “gave rise to a conception of wealth
as a dispensation from inconstant and demonic forces” (Glahn 1991: 713). It was under such conditions that the noxious Wutong spirits, notorious for raping women, came to be worshiped—under the name Gods of the Five Paths to Wealth—as gods of riches. China has long had a commodity-based side to its economy, which rested uneasily with the Confucian authority of the state. It should come as no surprise that this tension showed up as well in religious practice.

Fourth, the Chinese supernatural interacts with the strains inherent in the structure of the Chinese family. Chinese gods articulate the frustrations felt by females and males alike within the patrilineal and patriarchal Chinese family system. The heavens do not merely mirror the Confucian-sanctioned Chinese family, they also compensate for it. This theme is developed in Sangren’s essay, which examines three deities whose myths express discords intrinsic to the Chinese kinship and marriage system: Nazha’s attempted patricide, Miaoshan’s refusal to marry, and Mulian’s heroic exploits on behalf of his mother. All three deviate from accepted social norms by their refusal to marry, and the first two also explicitly defy patriarchal authority. Sangren suggests that these deities’ myths show the cost in unfulfilled or unfulfillable desires paid by Chinese individuals as gendered members of their society.

Baptandier analyzes family tensions in the myth of Lady Linshui, another female deity who refused to wed. Lady Linshui did eventually submit to patriarchal authority and married, only to abort her fetus and die of a hemorrhage following a successful fertility ritual she performed on behalf of the community. Her myth is typical of many female deities, who, even though they serve as fertility goddesses, never acted as real mothers themselves. Baptandier notes that Lady Linshui’s failure to produce a son is a breach of contract with the patriline. Similarly many of the deities discussed in this volume, females and males alike, died young and childless. Their premature deaths are strictly speaking unfilial, for these deities abandoned aged parents, and, more significantly, broke a chain of ancestors and descendants meant to be infinite. Unfilial behavior as well as other manifestations of social defiance on the part of Chinese deities are, as Sangren suggests, expressions of unachievable desires borne of Chinese social institutions. Yet given the right historical circumstances, these deities may serve as behavioral models. For example, Guanyin (Miaoshan) served as the patron deity of marriage-resistance cults in nineteenth-century Guangdong (Topley 1975).

**A Chinese Religion?**

These essays thus document an ordered diversity in the images of gods, which both grows from and helps constitute the structural ten-
Introductions in Chinese society. This evidence poses anew the old problem of cultural variation in China. How far do social and historical differences create genuine cultural diversity? To what extent do Chinese share a unified culture? The problem was first introduced into the study of Chinese religion in the classic debate between Maurice Freedman and Arthur Wolf (Freedman 1974, Wolf 1974b). Freedman believed in a kind of shared Chinese cultural essence and argued for the assumption that “a Chinese religion exists” (Freedman 1974:20). Wolf argued the opposite: “We should begin by reconstructing the beliefs of people who viewed the Chinese social landscape from different perspectives . . . The fact that an idea was shared by people with such very different perspectives would suggest to me that it was relatively insignificant or that it was easily invested with very different meanings” (Wolf 1974b:9). While the debate has been greatly refined in the two decades since then, the basic question remains as vexed as ever.

The material in this volume clearly moves away from one aspect of Wolf’s work on religion, or at least from typical readings of his work. We no longer see the Chinese supernatural as a mere reflection of China’s social hierarchy and political structure. The image of gods as bureaucrats and nothing more (if such was ever Wolf’s intention), as each of these essays shows, loses sight of many of their most interesting features. Yet at a deeper level these cases force us toward some position like Wolf’s: that Chinese religious interpretation moves hand in hand with social experience. The difference from Wolf is less in fundamental outlook than in the clearer view we now have of the tensions and pressures inherent in both Chinese society and religion, and of the ways in which interested parties might actively promote and resist particular interpretations. Religion is not a reflex of Chinese social structure, or even of class, gender, or geographical position. It is instead part of an ongoing dialogue of interpretations, sometimes competing and sometimes cooperating.

This need not imply diverse and multiple religions in China, as opposed to Freedman’s notion of a unitary one. Indeed, however odd these deities are in relation to a set bureaucratic idea, and however rooted in local history, they would still seem familiar to Chinese anywhere. After all, the complex social tensions that intertwine with these deities occurred across China: the undercurrents of competition and jealousy in the ideally harmonious family, the political and even military control held by local elites beneath the state, and markets and individual profit motives in a system that officially frowned on merchants. When we consider as well the absence of effective, unified control over religious interpretation, we should not be surprised that a fairly uniform undercurrent flowed through Chinese religion everywhere. From seductive fox fairies to patricidal sons, breaches of Con-
fucian morality ran all through the cracks of a religion that claimed to worship upright officials.\textsuperscript{17}

China thus clearly had a kind of unified religion, in the sense that even the wildest variations drew on a set of general themes, shared ambiguities, and common tensions. The bureaucratic image did not dominate at all times or in all places, but everyone recognized it. The set of alternatives, contradictions, and inconsistencies also spread widely. Dead virgins, parent killers, and unidentified corpses occur over and over, and spring from the dynamics inherent in real family and political relationships that the metaphor of gods as bureaucrats covers up.

Seeing gods as a metaphor for bureaucrats is thus not wrong, but it reduces them in two ways: Chinese deities are not just bureaucrats, and they are not simply a metaphor. Gods are both products and producers of social power. This enables them to function as a way of speaking about secular political power, as a metaphor for bureaucracy, but it also clarifies their much broader significance for other realms of power in family life, gender relations, and even the most general process of defining otherness.

What people shared was not the set of ruling ideas that Freedman expected, but instead a set of unruly ideas built around related social experiences of power, a disorganized palette of possibilities that was always ready to break out in different directions. While this is not the kind of neat structuralist unity of simple transformations out of a consistent base that Freedman expected, it is nevertheless a remarkable achievement in a country as diverse as China, and one with such weak mechanisms of religious orthodoxy. This brings us to the second major theme of this volume, the problem of what mechanisms could have transmitted these ideas across China.

**Transmission**

The Chinese supernatural displays regional diversity. Some deities are worshiped only in specific localities, with followings limited to provinces, districts, river basins, towns, or even individual villages. Four of the essays included in this volume are concerned with what are essentially local gods. Hymes studies three deities whose cult was prevalent in Song-period Jiangxi, and Weller examines local cults in nineteenth-century Guangxi and twentieth-century Taiwan. Both Sutton and Baptandier study deities who figure primarily (though not only) in Fujian and its neighbor Taiwan.\textsuperscript{18} Nonetheless, the pantheon of the popular religion also displays many deities shared throughout China. Thus, the other three essays in this volume examine cults that are prevalent throughout China or at least through large areas of it.
Lü Dongbin, studied by Katz; Nazha, Guanyin (Miaoshan), and Mulian, whose myths are analyzed by Sangren; and the large array of deities surveyed by Shahar all figure through vast areas of China. How were their cults transmitted, both geographically across regional (and linguistic) barriers and temporally from one generation to the next? What processes allowed a deity to be shared across such a diverse country, especially in the absence of strong institutions of religious control?

The problem of the pantheon’s transmission can be divided into two closely related questions: first, which social, religious, or political groups sponsor a deity’s cult? Who are the people who pronounce the efficacy of worshipping a certain deity, transmit the god’s cult from one region to another, build temples in the god’s honor, and finance the rituals conducted therein? The second question concerns the shaping of a deity’s image. Which media—literary, dramatic, or visual—transmit the gods’ myths and their visual images? How do the devotees learn of the personal identity—the appearance and the biography—of the deity they worship? These questions pertain not only to deities who are worshiped throughout China, but even to those we have termed “local.” Chinese “localities” are sometimes large indeed. Some provinces are as large as, or larger than, certain European countries. Thus it is difficult to explain how cults are transmitted even within such “localities.” How, for example, did the deities studied by Hymes rise to prominence in Song-period Jiangxi? Which mechanisms spread the cult of the Infernal Generals, studied by Sutton, throughout Taiwan?

A comparison to the spread of Buddhist and Daoist deities can illustrate the difficulties posed by the dissemination of popular cults. Buddhism and Daoism have religious institutions and a professional clergy, which sponsored gods’ cults. Both religions also have canonical scriptures, where the deities in question are described. Thus, for example, the Buddhist image of Guanyin and the Daoist conception of Lü Dongbin are transmitted primarily through canonical scriptures, which circulated among the Buddhist and the Daoist clergy. By contrast, the amorphous popular religion has neither canonical scriptures nor a religious establishment. How are its cults transmitted? And which media shape the popular conception of the gods, including those who figure also in the Buddhist and Daoist pantheons? Which mechanisms, for example, shape the laity’s conception of Guanyin as Princess Miaoshan, and which literary genres transmit the popular image of Lü Dongbin as a lascivious drunk?

Travelers of various sorts contributed significantly to the spread of gods’ cults. As Ter Haar pointed out, “for a cult to spread beyond the immediate boundaries of a village and/or district, it was necessary
that there should be a group of traveling people to transmit it” (Ter Haar 1990:373). The travelers in question were often merchants. Valerie Hansen has noted that local cults, such as that of Mazu, spread during the Southern Song from specific localities to large areas comprising several provinces. She correlated the expansion of regional cults to the Southern Song’s economic growth and suggested that merchants played a crucial role in the transmission of cults across regional boundaries (Hansen 1990:164–166). David Johnson has similarly argued that the spread of the City God’s cult during the late Tang and Song was related to the economic revolution of the period and that the mercantile elite played a crucial role in this cult’s transmission (Johnson 1985:417–424). Other groups of travelers that played an important role in the dissemination of gods’ cults included officials, who were stationed away from their home provinces, and migrants (Hansen 1990:164–166, Ter Haar 1990:387–388). The latter group contributed to the transmission of two cults discussed in this volume. Lady Linshui and the Infernal Generals, discussed by Baptandier and Sutton respectively, were brought to Taiwan by immigrants from Fujian.

Another group of travelers that contributes to the transmission of gods’ cults is pilgrims. Pilgrimage sites enhance the prestige of the deities with which they are associated, just as the gods have endowed them with sanctity in the first place. Yü Chün-fang has shown that the growth of Guanyin’s cult corresponded to the emergence of pilgrimage sites associated with her name, such as Xiangshan in Henan and Putuo island off the Zhejiang coast. She suggested that “only when Guanyin became associated with certain sites and when people began to make pilgrimages to these places did the cult of Guanyin really take root in China” (Yü Chün-fang 1992:191–192). Pilgrimages are often related to the fenxiang (literally “incense division”) network of affiliated temples. When a new temple is constructed, its incense burner is usually filled with ashes brought from the incense burner of an existing temple for the same deity. This founding rite is ideally followed by yearly pilgrimages on the part of the affiliated group to the senior temple. In this volume Baptandier examines the fenxiang network of Lady Linshui, thereby tracing the spread of her cult. Kristofer Schipper has argued that some communities joined the fenxiang network because they were interested in the economic, social, and even military ties it offered them. He suggested that at least in some cases deities’ cults spread due to the communication networks offered by the fenxiang system, rather than because of these deities’ own intrinsic qualities (Schipper 1990:410,414; see also Dean 1993:83–93).

In addition to travelers of various sorts, the state bureaucracy also
contributed to the transmission of the pantheon. The state granted divine titles to popular gods and in some cases built temples in their honor. Thus it attempted to capitalize on these gods’ prestige at the same time that it further enhanced their cults. As James Watson has pointed out, “the state both led the masses and responded to popular pressure; it both promoted and coopted deities” (Watson 1985:323). One god in whose cult the state played an important role is Zhenwu. The Yongle Emperor (reigned 1403–1424) attributed his success in the usurpation of the throne to this martial deity (Seaman 1987:23–26). Once in power he embarked upon a massive construction effort on behalf of his divine patron. A large number of temples dedicated to Zhenwu were erected on Wudang Mountain (in Hubei Province), which was transformed into a national pilgrimage center. Ongoing sponsorship on the part of the Ming court, combined with a steady stream of pilgrims to Wudang Mountain, transformed Zhenwu into “the object of one of the few truly ‘national’ cults, involving all levels of society” (Lagerwey 1992:293).

Thus, various groups of travelers—merchants, officials, migrants, and pilgrims—have been as important as the state in the transmission of deities’ cults. Cults spread along commerce and migration routes, and temples are interconnected through the fenxiang pilgrimage network. But this does not address the problem of how people come to understand the particular personality of a deity. How are the gods’ images conveyed to the devotees? It appears that in many cases oral literature was the earliest genre that shaped a deity’s image. Devotees extolled their local gods by narrating miracles, which testified to these gods’ efficacy (ling). Such stories, still told by believers today, were also narrated by professional storytellers, who spread them along the same commerce routes traveled by merchants, officials, and migrants. Thus, for example, Shahar’s essay in this volume points out that Hangzhou storytellers transmitted the earliest legends about the eccentric god Jigong. Where the majority of the population was illiterate, oral fiction reached wider audiences than written literature. Shahar notes that Qing-period literati were keenly aware of the role of oral literature in the transmission of religious beliefs. Some oral folktales were transcribed and published in the early twentieth century, and others are still available to the fieldworker. Baptandier in her essay draws on contemporary oral traditions regarding Lady Linshui, and Robert Chard’s study of the Stove God is partially based on published folktales (Chard 1990:167–182).

Sutton’s essay in this volume also focuses our attention on iconography, procession, and ritual. The historical record often makes these physical means of transmission difficult to retrieve, but the history of the Infernal Generals in Taiwan is recent enough for Sutton to trace
their development. In the case of the Generals, oral and written forms were clearly secondary to dance, makeup, and performance. Practice may be just as important as speech, even though it may be more difficult to recover historically.

Another medium that plays an important role in the dissemination of myth is drama. The significance of the Chinese theater in the shaping of social norms and religious beliefs has been noted by many scholars (e.g., Schipper 1966, van der Loon 1977, Ward 1979, and Johnson 1989). This volume highlights the role of drama in the dissemination of gods’ cults. Indeed most of the deities discussed in these essays are the subject of plays. Katz, for example, compares the portrayal of Lü Dongbin in Yuan-period zaju plays to his image in Daoist scriptures, and the three deities Sangren examines are all the subjects of dramatic representations. Likewise, the gods surveyed by Shahar figure in the theater, as does even a local deity such as Lady Linshui, the subject of Baptandier’s paper. Gods’ lives are celebrated in a large variety of regional dramatic styles, including various forms of the puppet theater: hand puppet, rod puppet, shadow puppet, and marionette. Drama reaches a wide audience because, like oral literature, it is not limited to the literate elite. Troupes of traveling actors brought gods’ lives to all segments of society, thereby enhancing these deities’ cults and shaping their images.

In the modern period gods’ lives have also been celebrated in movies and television serials, which may be animated, enacted, or—in the Taiwanese case—played by televised puppets. Thus, for example, the Eighteen Lords, studied by Weller, have been the subject of a movie as well as a television serial. Both capitalize on the Eighteen Lords’ popularity at the same time that they further enhance their cult. Likewise, most of the deities discussed by Sangren, Shahar, and Baptandier have been celebrated in movies and television series. These mass-media productions testify to the close relationship between drama and ritual, which still characterizes Chinese religion. Shahar points out that the actors portraying Jigong on television serials wear exactly the same colorful clown garb as do his possessed spirit-mediums, and both enact exactly the same character.

It is noteworthy in this respect that the religious content of many traditional plays is often matched by the ritual function of their performance. Most forms of regional drama, including puppet theater, are performed on religious occasions, such as festivals. Many plays have an exorcistic function, and most are considered an offering to the gods, who are invited to watch them. Plays are usually performed in temple courtyards, with the stage facing the altar (although they now also take place in theaters and television studios). The gods watch the plays, of which they are often the protagonists, alongside
the human audience. In some cases plays include dances, which convey the gods’ appearances and bearings rather than their myths. Sutton points out that the Infernal Generals’ cult has been transmitted by performative troupes of exorcistic festival dancers, influenced in part by operatic traditions. His evidence shows how little influence written texts can sometimes have and how much myth can bend to follow performance. The demon-quelling Zhong Kui, who performs an acrobatic exorcism at the end of the annual ghost festival, is similarly performed by a member of the operatic troupe in full makeup (Weller 1987:71). The line between ritual and drama could be very fine.

Oral fiction and drama reached the unlettered masses because understanding these forms does not require literacy. But for this very reason their power to transmit religious beliefs across regional and temporal barriers is limited. Oral fiction, narrated in the local dialect, is by definition regional, and most plays, performed in local dialects, are not written down. Thus, with rare exceptions, neither oral fiction nor drama can shape a deity’s cult throughout China. Neither can they guarantee the continuity of religious tradition across generations. Similarly, much domestic ritual and iconography (like the carving of god images) rests in the hands of local experts with no broader institutional mechanism that could guarantee unity of practice. Here lies the importance of another medium that has played a crucial role in the dissemination of gods’ myths: written fiction in the vernacular. Forty years ago Willem Grootaers noted the significance of the late Ming novel Journey to the North (Beiyou Ji) in the dissemination of Zhenwu’s cult (Grootaers 1952, Seaman 1987). In this volume, the majority of deities discussed by Katz, Sangren, Baptandier, and Shahar are also the subject of novels. Shahar discusses in general terms the role of fiction in the transmission of the pantheon. He points out that almost every single god whose cult has been widespread through vast areas of China is celebrated in a novel. Many of the novels in question were written during the late Ming, and their significance in the dissemination of religious values was noted by Qing literati.

Some novels on the supernatural—the Journey to the West (Xiyou Ji) and the Enfeoffment of the Gods (Fengshen Yanyi) are two examples—portray an enormous cast of supernatural characters. Others celebrate the career of one deity only. Both types generally appear rather late in the history of the deities they describe. In many cases myths were first transmitted by oral literature and drama, and perhaps by ritual (as Sutton points out). Only later were they written down in the form of a novel. Written novels can control the growth and variation of the oral, dramatic, and ritual traditions. These
novels often serve as a unifying source for oral literature and drama across regional, linguistic, and temporal barriers. Shahar argues that the written vernacular plays an important role in the pantheon’s transmission because of its relationship to oral literature and drama. The novels reached every segment of late imperial society because they served as sources for storytellers and playwrights. Thus, those who could not read the Journey to the West heard Sun Wukong’s adventures as narrated by storytellers or saw them enacted on stage. Often deriving from oral literature and drama in the first place, novels would in turn influence oral and dramatic performances.

Some novels are related to another literary genre that played a role in the dissemination of gods’ cults: baojuan (Precious Scrolls). For example, a late Ming novel celebrating Guanyin was influenced by a baojuan text (Dudbridge 1978:44–50, 56–58). Temples sometimes distribute baojuan as proselytizing literature, and in some cases they publish novels as well. Shahar notes that a seventeenth-century novel about Jigong has been distributed in Taiwanese temples with a commentary attributed to Jigong himself, written in the automatic spirit-writing technique of the stylus on a planchette. Ursula Cedzich points out that at least one modern edition of the Journey to the South (Nanyou Ji), describing Huaguang’s supernatural career, was commissioned by a temple, also in Taiwan (Cedzich 1995:141, n. 8).

While novels and precious scrolls disseminate the gods’ myths, statues, murals, paintings, and various forms of folk art, such as prints and papercuts, transmit their visual images. Stephen Teiser suggested that as early as the medieval period visual representations—murals, paintings, and illustrations—played a crucial role in shaping Chinese ideas of the netherworld. Some of these illustrations were used in “mortuary rituals performed by families to assist the spirit of the deceased in its journey through the chambers of the nether world” (Teiser 1988:459). The artists who created visual images of hell were sometimes believed to have gone there themselves and come back. Their depictions of the netherworld were therefore considered accurate (Teiser 1988). As late as the first half of the twentieth century, graphic depictions of the tortures awaiting sinners in hell exhorted the believers to behave morally. Thus, for example, the Beijing Temple of the Eighteen Hells contained lifelike statues of the officers of the netherworld tormenting their hapless victims (Goodrich 1981:43–57), and painted scrolls in Taiwan still depict in detail the judicial proceedings awaiting evildoers in purgatory (Vidor 1984).

Visual representations of the gods are found both in temples and inside the laity’s homes, where they usually take the form of colorful prints. Since the late Ming period, woodblock prints of the gods have
been mass-produced by a simple process, utilizing one block for the outline and one block for each added color. By the early twentieth century they could be purchased for less than a cent, and thus they found their way into practically every home, in villages and cities alike. Such paper gods are either placed inside the home as objects of domestic worship or pasted on the doors to ward off evil spirits. When burned they serve as horses transporting the deities to heaven, for which reason they are known as *zhima* (paper horses). By far the most ubiquitous among these paper deities is the Stove God, whose image is burned on the twenty-third of the last lunar month, when he is sent to heaven to present his report on the family’s behavior. He is welcomed back from his trip early on New Year’s day, when a new image of him is pasted on the kitchen wall (Day 1940, Goodrich 1991, Po Sung-nien and Johnson 1992).

Some prints depict not only a deity’s image but also scenes from his divine career. Other forms of visual art likewise narrate the gods’ biographies. Grootaers has noted the significance of frescoes depicting Zhenwu’s life in the dissemination of this deity’s myth. In a survey of two rural counties in northern Hebei, he found no fewer than forty temples containing such frescoes (Grootaers 1952:163–181). In this volume Katz examines the portrayal of Lü Dongbin’s career in Yuan-period murals preserved in the Daoist temple Yongle Gong in Shanxi. The origins of such visual narratives vary. Grootaers suggests that most of the frescoes in rural Hebei mirror oral traditions, though some may have been influenced by the hagiographic novel *Journey to the North*. Katz sees in the Yongle Gong murals the dual influence of Daoist scriptures and local traditions, always open to multiple interpretations. Baptandier argues that Fujianese and Taiwanese bas-reliefs celebrating Lady Linshui’s life faithfully follow novels, although the source of their authenticity seems to float back and forth across the Taiwan strait.

Drama as a form of visual art contributes to the shaping of deities’ appearances, as well as playing a significant role in the dissemination of their myths. The costumes and makeup of performers enacting the gods on stage are often identical to the deities’ iconic representation. Thus actors (and puppets), dancers, and spirit-mediums convey the gods’ likenesses to devotees. It is noteworthy that at least in some cases the believers recognize a deity’s appearance but are not aware of the god’s myth. In this volume Sutton points out that even some of the Infernal Generals’ performers identify only these deities’ appearances and gestures, and not their myths, which probably derived from iconic images in the first place. In contrast to the essays that concentrate on fictional sources (especially those of Sangren and Shahar in this volume), Sutton argues against the central importance
of written texts in the transmission of the Infernal Generals’ cult. He reminds us that meaning lies as much in action as in words, as much in ritual as in text.

The significance of oral and written fiction, ritual, and folk art in the dissemination of deities’ myths and images highlights the importance of interdisciplinary research for the study of Chinese religious tradition. The body of religious beliefs and practices now variously called “Chinese religion” and “Chinese popular religion” is inseparable from the fiction, drama, and popular arts that served as vehicles for its transmission.

Conclusion
Religion defines values and shapes identity. As a result, it forms a natural part of the negotiation of power and self, from the level of the family to that of the nation as a whole. Religious variation interacts with broader social variation because religion both makes sense of the world and actively shapes it. Religion does not simply mirror the existing social order. Yet not all religions appear to have as clear a dialogue with social variation as the Chinese popular religion. The key to its great flexibility has been the lack of central institutions capable of controlling religious interpretation. Much of the mechanism of interpretive control in Christianity, Judaism, or Islam has been absent in China. The social relations of religious interpretation in China appear to have been so loose that a wide set of alternative possibilities lay dormant in the system even under the strongest state control, allowing an easy transition to new sorts of gods when circumstances changed. The meaning of a complex ritual or of a god would always be up for grabs.

The essays in this volume show that the Buddhist and Daoist establishments exercise only limited influence on the spread of deities’ cults and the shaping of their images. Members of the laity play a role as important as Buddhist and Daoist clerics in the construction of the supernatural. Merchants, migrants, and pilgrims spread gods’ fame; storytellers, novelists, actors, and artisans portrayed gods’ images. The power of the state to control religious interpretation, like that of the Buddhist and Daoist clergies, has been limited. The state made every effort to promote its version of a bureaucratic and Confucian heaven. Nonetheless, even deities such as Guangong and Mazu, whose cults had been sponsored by the state, were understood differently by diverse religious, social, and political groups (see Watson 1985, Duara 1988). Even when the state was strong and apparently successful in promoting a bureaucratic understanding of gods, alternative interpretations waited in the shadows.
Introduction: Gods and Society in China 31

The result for China has been the lack of either a shared orthodoxy or a consistent and unified system of ruling ideas. The unmanageable nature of this set of ideas has given Chinese popular religion the power to adjust to radically new kinds of social conditions. In contrast to the old state cult, which naturally died with the old state, change without transformation has been easy for popular religion largely because the lack of tight controls on interpretation and the creative tension inherent in Chinese gods kept the doors open. This allows the disorganized unity of Chinese religion to continue, vital and familiar, under social systems as radically different as late imperial China, capitalist Taiwan, and the socialist People’s Republic of China.

Notes

2. See also Ebrey and Gregory 1993:12.
3. See Dean 1993:154–159 for an example of systematic elite attempts to put a Confucian gloss on a local god by emphasizing the deity’s filial piety over his less upright characteristics.
4. Sectarian movements, which emerge from the amorphous popular religion, do have religious institutions and scriptures, although not on the scale of Buddhism or Daoism. Partly for that reason, we have a clearer understanding of their dissemination (see, among other studies, Overmyer 1976, Naquin 1981, Jordan and Overmyer 1986, Ter Haar 1992). Although we will refer to these sects in passing, we do not undertake their systematic study in this volume. Their deities in general are open to the same kinds of analysis we attempt here.
5. See also Levi 1989:203.
6. On the granting of divine titles during the Song, see Hansen 1990:79–104.
9. We will not address the question of why so much imperial political imagery remains salient in the late twentieth century. Clearly it survives in part for the reasons most informants would state: things have always been done this way and cannot be changed simply because officials now wear neckties instead of peacock feathers. More fundamentally, bureaucratic government has not faded at all during the twentieth century, but instead has expanded still further. To the extent that the pantheon is a commentary on power itself, perhaps little has changed. Even so, there have been some changes, such as rumors that “Jade Emperor” is
Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller

simply the name of an office whose incumbent rotates or the spirit-medium transcript of a panel discussion involving the main deities of five world religions, moderated by Guan Gong (Shengxian 1978). They urge respect for the Constitution and filial piety.


11. See also Weller 1987:110–124, who argues for fundamental differences between the Buddhist and all other Chinese cosmologies, especially in their refusal of the bureaucratic metaphor.

12. See also Schipper 1982:58 and Yü Kuang-hong 1990. Anthropological studies conducted in Taiwan more than two decades ago had already shown that ghosts can undergo a process of deification (Harrell 1974).

13. Regarding multiple meanings of the same deity or ghost, see also Katz 1990:194,206; and Weller 1987.


15. Even deities who occupy positions in the celestial bureaucracy sometimes support local claims against the state. The god of agriculture (Shennong) denounced plans for the Taiwanese state-owned oil company to build a new refinery in Gaoxiong on the grounds that the pollution threatened the local community (Shoudu Wanbao, 6 May 1990).

16. It is noteworthy that it is generally considered inauspicious to bury an unwed woman in her natal family’s burial ground. Taiwanese families sometimes rid themselves of an unmarried daughter by depositing her ashes in what is known as a guniang miao (maiden temple). These small shrines are sometimes visited by prostitutes “who take the collective soul [of unwed girls] as a kind of patron deity” (Wolf 1974a:150).

17. The authors in this volume also show no simple unity of opinion on this issue. Sangren in particular tends to emphasize the shared images of alienated power throughout China, which leads him to a position closer to Freedman than to Wolf.

18. See also Dean 1993 on local cults in Fujian.

19. Baojuan literature played an important role not only in the transmission of myths but also in the shaping of religious and moral values; see Overmyer 1985.

20. Since they were usually replaced on New Year’s day, they were also known as nianhua ([New] Year’s pictures).

Literature Cited


Introduction: Gods and Society in China


Introduction: Gods and Society in China


