Give or take a few days, it has been one year since the old woman was last here. At that time, she had been diagnosed with an incurable illness and been told to prepare for death. Instead, she came to the birthday celebration of a deified scholar, Dong Sihai, known and worshipped locally as the Great Teacher, to beg him to cure her illness. Now alive, healthy, and profoundly grateful, she is discharging her debt to the deity as she had promised a year ago, by draping herself in a saddle and bridle and crawling to the festival on her hands and knees. It is midwinter, and the ground is rocky and frozen; before she has even left her home village, the palms of her hands are already bloodied. Other villagers, who have heard about her miraculous recovery, line the road to witness this act of devotion, some attempting to soften her path by lining it with reed mats or corn stalks. When she reaches in the neighboring village where the birthday celebration is being held, the assembled crowd parts before her, awed by both her piety and the benevolence and power of the Great Teacher. Arriving at the festival tent where she had made her desperate plea the year before, she is overcome with emotion and unable to stand long enough even to place the incense in the burner before the tablet of the god.

This scene could be set in almost any village in late imperial China. Indeed, it seems to evoke the ahistorical quality that is often ascribed to religious belief in “traditional” societies. The fact that it occurred in February 1998 might suggest that the modern world simply had not yet caught up with this part of rural China and swept away the customs of the past. The apparent timelessness of this scene, however, also masks a great deal of change. Over the past century and a half, the village in the story and its neighboring communities have undergone constant structural, political, and social transformations. Every aspect of village life has been touched by change, not least of which is how villagers understand and relate to the sacred. Religion is hardly timeless, and numerous beliefs, customs, sacred sites, teachings, and rituals have come and gone.
What has remained constant is that religion continues to permeate all aspects of life in rural North China. People of all ages and stations engage the sacred in prayer and ritual, in a mentality of customary norms and mores, and in a diverse array of votive and charitable organizations. Religious groups and teachings give shape and direction to popular beliefs and concerns, and festival occasions provide both entertainment and an arena for the public expression of personal piety and commitment to the public good. Even after centuries of policy aimed at weakening, controlling, or eradicating it, local religion continues to remain as potent and vital a force in the village society of rural North China as it had been in that of early modern Europe or Tokugawa Japan.

This book will examine the varied expressions of religious life in rural North China as they intersected with the forces of historical change and evolution of local society over the course of 150 years, from the middle of the nineteenth century through the close of the twentieth. The geographic focus of this study is very limited, a small area of Cang, a county located in the southeast of Hebei Province. Over the course of 1997–1998, and again during the summers of 1999 and 2002, I conducted fieldwork in these villages, in the intervening periods collecting archival materials from libraries in Tianjin, Beijing, and Tokyo. My hope is thus to combine the anthropologist’s understanding of local society with the historian’s perspective on social change, the better to present the world of local religion on its own terms, and to show how an understanding of religion can shed light on aspects of the long-term evolution of rural North China.

Local Religion: The Issues

Scholarly understanding of local religion in rural North China has been based primarily on three types of source materials. The first are official records from the Qing and, to a lesser extent, those from the Republic and People’s Republic. They would include central documents such as the Veritable Records of the Qing (Qing shilu), as well as records of missionary affairs (jiao’an) and the depositions of captured religious rebels. To this category, we might add the semiofficial writings of the Confucian literati, such as the Detailed Refutation of Heterodox Teachings (Poxie xiangbian), written by the mid-Qing magistrate Huang Yübian. Such records must be used with some caution, because they, like any official documents, present only the perspective of the state. Thus, when the records are interested in local religion at all, they tend to portray it as marginal or criminal, focusing primarily on instances of conflict, and by extension, on the use of reli-
gious belief as an arm of resistance or a tool of social control.¹ Other highly orthodox sources, such as county gazetteers, do provide information on significant events and landmarks, but are often so highly stylized as to reveal relatively little about local religious organization or custom.²

A second source is unofficial writings, both votive, such as scriptures and temple inscriptions, and descriptive accounts, such as literary portrayals of village life and reflections of folk belief in genres such as ghost stories and religious opera. Scriptures include both the official and apocryphal canons of Buddhism and Daoism and more significantly, those of the genre known as “precious scrolls” (baojuan), the scriptural and historical record of the syncretic teachings known collectively as “sectarianism.”³ Temple inscriptions and other epigraphic materials from sacred sites reveal patterns in construction and patronage and reconstruct the miracle tales associated with temple cults. Literary sources, such as the genre of “strange stories,” vividly depict stories of the gods and themes such as human profligacy and divine retribution.⁴

No more than official documents, however, can descriptive texts be taken as a direct expression of religious consciousness. As literature, their content was influenced by the conventions of genre, whereas the style of writing reflects a specific author and his perceived audience.⁵ Thus, the prose of precious scrolls is often highly specialized, inscriptions in temples reflect the artistic and scholarly aspirations of the local literati who composed them, and the plot lines of plays or novels were altered to make them more entertaining. More fundamentally, those who actually penned these texts were quite often of a different class than the largely illiterate villagers for whom we hope the documents speak. In other words, although unofficial texts are free from direct government supervision and do suggest the sort of beliefs and ideas that may have circulated within local society, they rarely reflect the voice of the villagers themselves and cannot shed light on how ideas were manipulated or understood.⁶

Nor is the disjuncture between text and belief solely a function of class. Taking his cue from the school of microhistory, Paul Katz has shown that any religious text is a kind of public performance, whereas interpretation is a personal matter. As such, religious belief and devotion cannot simply be reduced to a function of class or any other system; the ultimate refuge of religious consciousness is in the heart and mind of the individual. Thus, although the detailed analysis of personal theology is usually reserved for religious thinkers, or at least those literary enough to have left a written record of their thoughts, it must have place in the study of popular theology as well. Outside of Chinese studies, microhistorical analysis of personal re-
ligious thought, the best known example being Carlo Ginzburg’s landmark analysis of the belief system of a sixteenth-century Friulian miller, demonstrates the flexibility of individual belief, even within a highly dogmatic religious system. To paraphrase Ginzburg’s own introductory statements, religion is as much personal “mentality” as mass “culture.”

Ethnography and fieldwork provide a third source of information on local religion and local society. Although the greatest concentration of fieldwork data in China still concerns Taiwan, Hong Kong, and increasingly, the southern provinces of Guangdong and Fujian, there is also a great deal of historical information available on North China. Many of the classic ethnographic studies of rural North China date from the Republican period, most notably those of Li Jinghan, Sidney Gamble, and the scholars of the Japanese South Manchuria Railway (Minami Mantetsu, hereafter referred to as the Mantetsu surveys). Such records are by far the most faithful representations of village society in Republican North China. Rich in data on a variety of topics, these sources often contain verbatim (although translated) records of interviews with peasants and have served as the empirical foundation for some of the most influential scholarship on rural North China. Since the 1980s, the revival of opportunities to conduct research in China has resulted in an expanding number of field studies of the social history of the region. Recent works have examined the interaction between state and local society, the social dynamics of village society, and kinship structures. Fruitful cooperation between Chinese and Japanese scholars has resulted in extensive data collection projects rivaling those of the Republican period. Fieldwork has also been the basis of recent work on topics related to religion, such as sectarianism, clan temples, and ritual theater.

Each of these three types of materials—official, literary, and ethno-
graphic—paints a different picture of local religion, which corresponds roughly to the disciplinary perspectives of history, humanistic religious studies, and anthropology, respectively. The difference among these pictures is often so great as to make them difficult to reconcile. Official attempts to suppress heterodox teachings focused on rooting out organizational structures, rather than policing or correcting the beliefs of ordinary individuals. Yet an analysis of Ming and Qing precious scrolls reveals the vibrancy of popular belief, the theological realm casually dismissed by the state as “wicked words” (yao yan). Ethnographic studies, however, reveal that the battle between what the state would portray as its own orthodoxy and sectarian heterodoxy (for want of better terms) was not simply a tug-of-war between two poles. The ability of any religious institution, be it state or
sect, to project its power and knowledge onto the real world of local society is, in reality, quite weak. Indeed, some would claim that such power is wholly illusory, existing only at the level of symbol and representation.\textsuperscript{11} The challenge is to combine these perspectives of policy, representation, and reception, and to demonstrate their interaction in local society. To be sure, scholars of Chinese religion have been keenly aware of the importance of both utilizing and transcending disciplinary boundaries and have produced work of extraordinary sophistication and conceptual breadth as a result.\textsuperscript{12} Nevertheless, a great deal of territory remains unexplored, especially at the interstices. Indeed, many fundamental empirical and interpretive questions about daily religious life in rural North China remain subject to speculation. How did the successive waves of political and religious currents produced in Beijing and Tianjin actually reach the villages, and what sort of impact did they make? What sort of religious specialists lived in the village, what sort of extended networks did they represent, and how did their practice influence the everyday religiosity of the household? What role did organized teachings play in local religious life, and how did they fare under various political regimes? Perhaps most fundamentally, how did the numerous specialized layers of religious custom, performance, and knowledge interact to form a coherent whole? This study hopes to at least begin to answer some of these questions for one small part of North China.

This said, it should be emphasized that it does not intend to represent the entire North China Plain, much less to define a “North China type” of religious experience. Although ready contrasts can be made between the organization, ritual form, and social significance of religious life in rural Hebei and that in local studies of Guangdong or Fujian, it is a fundamental assumption of this book that local religion is precisely that—local. Although local society is part of a larger regional culture, it is not simply a product of that culture, but rather a discrete sphere of innovation, communication, and personal identification. Thus, rather than attempting to speak broadly for a North China (or any other) “type,” this study will use the specific example of one part of Cang County to illuminate some of the larger themes of religion in the social history of rural China, which are briefly introduced below.

\textit{Local Religion and Political Change}

The first question is how external changes affected local religion, how (to rephrase Charles Tilly’s classic dictum of social history) ordinary vil-
lagers “lived the big changes” of policies and attitudes toward religion. From the Late Imperial period through the Republic and People’s Republic, the practice of local religion became the object of increasingly ambitious programs of government control and regulation. During the Ming and Qing, central authorities attempted to infuse local and bureaucratic elites with Confucian values, but were less concerned with what Kung-chüan Hsiao called the “ideological molding” of the peasantry than in maintaining the appearance of orthodoxy around a set of common symbols and practices. Especially among the lower classes, there was nothing akin to the inquisitions of Catholic Europe. Rather, the more pressing concern was the exertion of control over marginal religious figures, such as Buddhist monks, the eradication of heterodox sectarian organization, and the suppression of illicit cults.

During the Republic and People’s Republic, more ambitious policies were applied toward rural religion, facilitated by the ever-increasing access of central authorities to village life. Republican reformers attempted to free up local resources by tilling cemeteries into farmland, eradicating wasteful customs, such as elaborate funerals, and most notably, by continuing the late-Qing campaign to destroy temples and build schools (huimiao xingxue), while at the same time promoting a politically charged Confucianism and “advanced” religions such as Christianity as a way of promoting a spiritual modernization of the masses. The most sweeping policies came under the People’s Republic, which envisioned a far more comprehensive reform of village society than had any of its predecessors. While asserting its authority over state-sponsored religious organizations in the cities, the government moved quickly to break the power of religious custom and organizations in the villages, a policy which reached fruition in the Cultural Revolution and softened significantly during the 1980s and 1990s. The 1999 campaign against Falungong, however, demonstrates that religion still occupies a special place in policy formation.

The vicissitudes of policy aside, what impact did the sweeping political changes of this period actually have on local society? First, how were religious policies themselves implemented? How and when were local temples appropriated? Which religious groups were able to coexist with the state and what was the fate of those pushed underground? How did the cultural authority of religious figures fare under regimes that were overtly hostile to local religious organization? Of equal importance are the secondary effects of larger economic and social change on local religion. How did the insecurity brought about by all-too-frequent periods of war or famine reveal itself in the mentality of religious belief? Extreme duress often
prompts a radicalization of belief, most notably toward millenarianism. Although this particular reaction has occurred numerous times in the history of China, this fact alone should not lead us to believe that demographic insecurity automatically prompts peasants to begin planning for the apocalypse. Conversely, why did the relative security experienced under the People’s Republic not erode religious belief, as so many observers of the 1950s and 1960s had predicted, but indeed lay the foundation for a revival of local religion in the 1980s? Finally, beyond the simple rise or decline of religious fervor, how did the new political ideas (such as Maoism) that made their way into rural society shape the contours of popular belief?

Local Religion and Local Society

In rural China, as in most local societies, religion both defines and expresses community. Within any territorially defined group, such as the village or neighborhood, as well as voluntary organizations, such as occupational or votive societies, participation in religious activities provides a public realm in which to exercise leadership. The dual expression of civic concern and personal piety affords a very real customary power and stems from an understanding of the importance of religion to common welfare, in terms of both ensuring divine protection and fortifying the moral structure of the community. Beyond simply representing the community, however, the power to define as well as associate with the greater moral good also suggests the ability of local elites to dominate it. This may be accomplished through personal association with the symbols of religious authority, including those promoted by the state, or through domination of the organs of spiritual efficacy, such as ritual functions. Nevertheless, just as perception of the religious good of the state is multivalenced, so too is the religious life of the community beyond the ability of any one group to dominate. Even public expressions of village hierarchy in highly structured rituals, such as processions, are necessarily contested in their interpretation.

Beyond the constant redefinition of community in ritual practice, religious belief also retains a significant place in the local economy of knowledge. Despite the centralizing and standardizing influence of scriptural and liturgical traditions that have circulated around the North China Plain for centuries, as well as the ever-expanding network of mass communications and increasing mobility of peasants, rural China retains a dizzying number of local customs, cults, and rituals, leading anthropologists to once have questioned whether a “Chinese religion” existed at all.
Indeed, the question of how local religious culture (and all culture, for that matter) fits into the larger context has engaged scholars of China for decades and turns to a large degree on the role of some form of political or social hierarchy in the propagation of culture. Such a hierarchy is implied in any model that proposes a binary division between the high culture of the elite and the expression of this culture by the masses. This division can be expressed variously as orthodoxy versus heterodoxy, great versus little traditions, or center versus periphery, but in each case assumes a unified cultural hub or network from which knowledge flows outward, often accompanied by some expression of authority or power.

This understanding of the flow of knowledge within local society is itself very much influenced by the Skinnerian model of the marketing of goods, which is based around a hierarchy of central places. According to this model, not only goods, but also information and culture, are carried between villages and central market towns and cities, the latter serving as nodes of rural communication and effecting a certain standardization of the local; however, just as market exchange trades low-value raw materials from the periphery for finished goods from the core, the exchange of culture is not between equals. Whether the cities and towns were to be understood as bastions of standard, high, or orthodox culture, or simply of central control, it has always been assumed that they should exert a civilizing influence over village culture, keeping local deviation within a certain orbit.

Although this model has much to recommend it, an oversimplified model of a culturally orthodox semiurban core reigning in the rural periphery is certainly not the whole story. In light of the coincidence of the geography of imperial administrative authority and cultural expressions of geographic imagination, such as the “celestial bureaucracy” of spiritual forces, it is tempting to assume the existence of a single network along which all power, knowledge, and culture flowed. As Skinner himself was quick to point out, however, no single core-periphery model can stand alone, and the centers of trade, administration, and religion do not necessarily coincide. Particularly within local society, although the flow of knowledge and culture does rely heavily on nodes of communication, such as marketing centers, it also travels along routes exclusive of them. Local expressions of culture are not merely a misunderstanding of high or official culture. Rather, the latter is itself a text, like a template, which local actors can interpret for their own ends. Rather than attempting to copy elite culture, local actors use it as a foundation upon which to “individuate,” building consciously unique cults, rituals, and resources. Such a perspec-
tive is particularly important in questions of religion, which must consider the interaction between strong cultural centers in terms of governmental and ecclesiastical orthodoxies, and the numerous layers of regional knowledge and tradition seen in local devotion. 27

Fieldwork Methodology and Sources

The primary source for this study is fieldwork conducted in rural Cangzhou. Over the course of 1997–1998, and again during the summers of 1999 and 2002, I made eighteen trips to Cangzhou, in each visit remaining for three to six days. While in the villages, I stayed with peasant hosts, who were extremely hospitable and generally forthcoming about their histories, beliefs, and practices. On most occasions, I was accompanied by Pu Wenqi, of the Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences, who introduced me to the area and was of invaluable help in providing background information, introductions, and assistance with understanding the very thick Cangzhou dialect.

The interviews themselves were informal and only loosely structured. After our arrival in the village, friends would soon begin to gather in the home of our host and we would begin asking questions on a particular topic, such as the role of spirits in good fortune, the ritual activities of a particular sect, or the history of the village. After my first few visits, it became clear that prepared questions were of little use and that I would gain much more by letting conversation flow naturally. On returning to Tianjin, I would then review my notes to discover if any important points had been missed and make plans to address these points on my next visit.

Our closest interaction was with local religious leaders, particularly those of the two sectarian teachings introduced in chapter 7. In many of the villages that we visited, these sects remain the center of religious life: they provide ritual services for individuals within the community, are frequently touted as moral exemplars, and are by far the most knowledgeable about matters concerning the sacred and spirit worlds. Although this close association with sectarian leaders opened many doors with other villagers, it could also become a liability. When asked about their own beliefs, ordinary villagers would frequently defer to “experts,” such as the sectarian leaders, scholars from Tianjin, and occasionally, even to me. Thus, to gain a more complete view of how different members of the community understood the same questions, we made a point of interviewing a range of people, men and women, young and old, in groups and individually. Again, the most successful interviews were ordinary conversations, and much of
our work was conducted during the course of other activities, such as milling corn, pulling weeds, or repairing farm implements.

In addition to fieldwork, this study also relies upon a number of written sources. Two nineteenth-century surveys, the 1842 *Diagram of Household Registration in Tianjin* (*Jinmen baojia tushuo*) and *Diagram of Villages in Qing County* (*Qingxian cuntu*), from roughly 1875, are an important complement to the interviews. These sources provide detailed data on individual villages, such as size and structure, as well as numbers of temples and religious specialists in each community. Not only do these sources reach back to the early nineteenth century, but, because they cover every village in Tianjin and Qing Counties (the latter included my fieldwork area from what is now Cang County), they also provide far more breadth than interview data alone would allow. County gazetteers, generally of limited use as sources of local custom or religion, do provide important background on the history of Cang County, especially patterns of temple and monastic construction. Within Cang County, sources such as temple and grave stele (most of which are recorded in the gazetteers) provide further detail on individual events. Ethnographic studies of North China, such as those mentioned above, are cited to lend further context and corroboration to my findings in Cang County. The larger history of sectarian organization is recorded by sources in Tianjin. Within the Tianjin Municipal Library are personal reminiscences of members and leaders of the Li Sect and records of the 1951 campaign against the Way of Penetrating Unity (*yiguandao*). The histories and teachings of the sects are recorded in sectarian scriptures, and I am grateful to Li Shiyu for allowing me to make photocopies of many of those in his collection. The question of how such scriptures were used and understood by the faithful is dealt with in the text itself.

**Chapter Overview**

The goal of this study is not to establish the hard rules that define the religious life of the typical North Chinese village, but rather to demonstrate the mosaic of forces that together have shaped it over time. After an introduction to the history and village society of Cang County in chapter 1, each subsequent chapter introduces a different facet of this picture: the role of the village, the circulation of knowledge, the inability of urban culture and sects to penetrate rural religiosity, the flashes of millenarianism, and the importance of everyday ritual and moral concerns to the long-term evolution of village society. Because the organization is thematic
rather than chronological, each chapter will present a slightly different temporal focus, some reaching from the late Qing to the present, others presenting a closer examination of one or two decades.

Chapter 2 discusses the role played by the village in the organization and propagation of religion. Administrative reforms enacted in the late Qing and early Republic increasingly focused on the village as a unit of fiscal and social control. This strengthened the geographic and social boundaries of the village, further solidifying the criteria and responsibilities of membership, most notably in terms of an affective sense of collective religious welfare. Religious resources, such as temples and sectarian groups, were supported by the community and became closely identified with the religious life and interests of the village as a whole, although this rarely was reflected in a collective ritual regimen. The administrative and affective importance of the village as an organizational unit of secular and sacred life was seen again beginning in the late 1970s, when the infrastructure of rural religion was reconstructed in the wake of Collectivization and the Cultural Revolution. Although village boundaries had been frequently erased and redrawn over the previous two decades, these newly formed villages quickly recreated a sense of religious community and identity during the post-1979 reform era.

Chapter 3 addresses the economy of religious belief as seen in the case of xiangtou, villagers who heal through the power of fox spirits. Literature and scripture abound with stories of the ability of spirits to sicken and heal. Yet in Cang County, knowledge of the power and motivation of fox spirits, as well as the specific healing arts of xiangtou, are products of an intensely immediate and local culture. Most Cang County peasants know of fox spirits through stories of cures enacted by them through local xiangtou. Reflecting the immediacy of the sacred, such stories take place in neighboring villages, and in the present day. Local beliefs concerning sickness, spirits, and the efficacy and arts of xiangtou reflect the influence of written culture, but this is far from doctrine. Rather, because religious knowledge is transmitted and shaped through an evolving oral tradition, it is constantly reincarnated as a meaningful part of a living local culture.

In the case of xiangtou, knowledge of spirits and healing reflected in literature indirectly inspires a living, oral culture of belief, but does not dominate it as would a fundamentalist reading of scripture. A similar role could be attributed to other religious institutions, such as sects, which did not dictate local belief, but rather engaged it in a dialectic exchange. Over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a number of religious teachings were active in rural Cang County, each gaining ascen-
dancy as they appealed to social realities and needs. Chapter 4 examines the state of monastic Buddhism, demonstrating that the teaching as a self-consciously distinct tradition had all but disappeared by the late Qing. During the Republican period, the few Buddhist institutions that did remain in Cang County were not connected to a larger Buddhist tradition or network, despite the Buddhist revival that was taking place in Jiangnan. In rural Cang County, Buddhism had become entirely incorporated into local religious life. Monks were recruited and trained locally, lived in village temples, knew little of Buddhist scripture or ritual, and were virtually indistinguishable from popular specialists.

A similar phenomenon characterized the numerous sectarian teachings that flourished among the villagers themselves. Best known to historians for their millenarian tendencies, such teachings actually represented a wide range of beliefs and organizational styles. Chapter 5 introduces the Li Sect, which was immensely popular in the city and suburbs of Tianjin but could not develop a significant following in rural Cang County. Like monastic Buddhism, the pseudomonastic Li Sect relied upon highly trained, celibate specialists, a prospect that was more economically viable in urban neighborhoods than villages. Thus, while the teaching developed independent soteriological and social significance in Tianjin or the nearby town of Duliu, in rural Cang County, it was reduced to a mere shadow of its most characteristic doctrines, most notably the admonition to refrain from alcohol, tobacco, and opium.

Chapter 6 examines the explosive rise and precipitous decline of the Way of Penetrating Unity. This teaching, with its high degree of mysticism and predictions of an immanent apocalypse, found a ready audience in the troubled first half of the twentieth century, particularly in the war-ravaged villages of Republican North China. By 1950, the teaching had a nationwide following, including large numbers of devotees in the Communist Party and People’s Liberation Army, yet had all but disappeared by the end of 1951. This was partially due to the concerted campaign to eradicate the sect, but more fundamentally to the return of a degree of stability and prosperity to rural society.

Finally, chapter 7 presents yet another view of sectarianism with an introduction to two more teachings, the Teaching of the Most Supreme (taishangmen) and the Heaven and Earth Sect (tiandimen). In contrast to the Li Sect and Way of Penetrating Unity, neither of which was able to establish a significant foothold in village religious life, the Heaven and Earth Sect and Teaching of the Most Supreme have been active in rural Cang County since the early Qing dynasty and continue to flourish at the outset
of the twenty-first century. These teachings are integral to village life and identity, a source of ritual power, and an outlet for the sincere devotion of the villagers who train to become ritual specialists. As such, it is not surprising to see the longevity of these organizations, even during the darkest days of the Cultural Revolution, or their energetic revival since the late 1970s.