There are many ways for pilgrims and tourists to travel to the Palace of Eternal Joy (Yongle gong), one of the oldest and most important cult sites of the immortal Lü Dongbin. In the spring of 1991, my wife Liu Shufen and I began our journey by taking a train to the town of Sanmenxia in Henan province. From there, we hired a car, which first had to be ferried across the Yellow River. This was no easy task. Recent downpours had caused the waters to run high, and because the ferry was unable to dock, we were required to disembark and wade the last few feet to the shore. Next we drove thirty miles along winding and bumpy dirt roads over the hills of Shanxi province and then across dusty acres of wheat fields until we reached the rural town of Ruicheng. From there, we headed north to the palace. The original site of the palace (now submerged) was about ten miles southwest of Ruicheng in the town of Yongle, located along the northern bank of the Yellow River next to a ferry crossing between the provinces of Henan and Shanxi. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the entire temple complex was moved to its present location in Ruicheng in order to make way for a dam construction project.

Introduction
After purchasing our tickets, we entered the palace through its main gate, which was constructed during the Qing dynasty. The feeling of entering a sacred realm was accentuated by the lush vegetation inside the courtyard, which contrasts with the relatively barren landscape outside, as well as by two rows of stelae along the eastern and western walls of the temple complex. From the main gate, we chose to proceed to the original entrance of the Palace of Eternal Joy, the Gate of the Limitless Ultimate (Wuji men), which was built during the Yuan dynasty. At this point, we ascended to a higher level of sacred space by climbing a flight of stone stairs to the gate’s huge wooden doors. We then passed through the gate’s portals, along a path, and up another flight of stairs to the palace’s three main halls (which are described in greater detail in Chapter 1): the Hall of the Three Pure Ones (Sanqing dian); the Hall of Purified Yang (Chunyang dian), dedicated to the immortal Lü Dongbin; and the Hall of Redoubled Yang (Chongyang dian), dedicated to the founding patriarch of the Perfect Realization (Quanzhen) Taoist movement Wang Zhe (1113–1170) and his leading disciples. The gate and three main halls contain world-famous murals first painted during the fourteenth century, which are described in detail in Chapter 4.

After descending from the Hall of Redoubled Yang, we promenaded through a park full of colorful flowers and venerable trees, including an old and gnarled ginkgo (yinxing) tree supposedly planted by Lü Dongbin himself. This park also contains the stone tablet that once marked the reputed site of Lü Dongbin’s tomb. The western side of the temple complex houses a museum filled with various artifacts of the palace’s history. This portion of the complex contains a hall for the local qigong association. We also visited a small temple dedicated to Lü Dongbin in the western part of the complex. Inside this stone building known as the Shrine of the Patriarch Lü (Lüzu ci), whose walls are not covered with murals but with banners offered by pilgrim troupes (mainly from Taiwan), worshipers can burn incense in front of a stone statue of Lü under the attentive gaze of the Perfect Realization Taoist charged with overseeing the site (see Figure 1). Worshipers can also perform divination rituals by drawing individually numbered bamboo sticks, or qian, and consulting a mid-nineteenth-century handbook to determine the meaning of the texts corresponding to numbers on the sticks (Smith 1991:235–245). After completing our tour, we
exited through the main gate to return to the world of rural north China. The itinerary we followed while inside the palace was but one of many, and many pilgrims intent on worshiping Lü Dongbin choose to bypass the main halls and proceed directly to the Shrine of the Patriarch Lü. Others visit the gardens first and head for the halls and other buildings later.

By the time we visited the Palace of Eternal Joy, I was well into the first year of a research project on the history of the palace and its cult of the immortal Lü Dongbin, one of late imperial China’s most popular yet also most multifaceted deities. The palace had started out as a small shrine to Lü constructed during the tenth century. This shrine was rebuilt and greatly

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**FIGURE 1**
The Shrine of the Patriarch Lü. This photograph of Lü’s shrine was taken by the author while doing field research at the site in 1991. An undated statue of Lü sits inside the shrine, flanked by two attendants and ceremonial regalia. A Perfect Realization Taoist priest residing at the Palace of Eternal Joy stands in the foreground next to a collection box (more than halfway full) and incense burner. Note the stele at the back of the shrine and the decorative murals in the background.
enlarged during the thirteenth century by members of the Perfect Realization Taoist movement. I went to the palace to gain a clearer understanding of the cult of Lü Dongbin. It was also essential that I consult the palace’s inscriptions in order to locate passages scholars had omitted from their transcriptions. Finally, I hoped to gain a better sense of the arrangement of the palace’s sacred space and its potential impact on visitors, be they tourists or pilgrims. Visiting the Palace of Eternal Joy helped focus my attention on the elements contributing to the physical and spiritual power of sacred sites. Flora, halls and other buildings, statues, stelae, murals—these are the things that sacred sites are made of. They are not only material items but also constitute different types of texts, a term frequently used to denote any configuration of signs transmitted to readers, listeners, or viewers. In analyzing the sacred space encompassed by the Palace of Eternal Joy, the entire site can be viewed as a macrotext featuring the presence of both complementary and contradictory texts. The factors contributing to this textual diversity are discussed below. I also consider two important pairs of concepts: text and textuality, and hegemony and resistance.

Goals and Methods

The main goal of this book is to explore the cultural diversity of Chinese sacred sites. Nearly a century ago, the renowned French sinologist Edouard Chavannes (1865–1918) focused attention on the importance of such sites with his observation that in China mountains are in fact divinities (Chavannes 1910:1). Since that time, and particularly during the past few years, scholars have devoted considerable effort to understanding the roles played by mountains, temples, and other sacred sites in Chinese cultural history. My work follows this scholarship, specifically by addressing some of the questions and topics raised by Susan Naquin and Yü Chün-fang in their important introduction to the volume Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China. These include the roles played by religious professionals at sacred sites, the layout and architecture of such places, the overlap between sacred sites and commerce or trade, the types of links established between shrines to the same deity, and the importance of sacred time (Naquin and Yü 1992:26–30). At the same time, however, I hope that this book can help scholars overcome
the tendency to impose a unitary view on Chinese sacred sites and interpret
them from the perspective of an “implied pilgrim” or so-called ordinary pil-
grim. In order to achieve this goal, I explore the diverse range of ideas,
values, and beliefs expressed at sacred sites like the Palace of Eternal Joy. In
a broader sense, then, this book focuses on the problem of how sacred sites
and their texts are produced, indeed on how to historicize history in late
imperial China. Thus, I will not present one single “history” of the Palace
of Eternal Joy; instead, I examine whose history is told in which texts and
for what purposes.

My second goal involves tracing the diverse representations (or
“images”) of Lü Dongbin at the Palace of Eternal Joy. In doing so, I pose the
following questions: How did Lü’s cult change over time? Who contributed
to these transformations? In what ways did different images of Lü coexist and
interact? My research on local images of Lü is based on a broad variety of
texts, including hagiographical accounts in the Taoist Canon, local
gazetteers, local folktales, dramas, novels, and especially the murals and
stele inscriptions preserved inside the palace. Many other texts existed at dif-
f erent sacred sites throughout China (see, for example, the essays in Naquin
and Yü 1992), but the inscriptions and murals in the palace feature the spe-
cific images of Lü Dongbin that reflect the agendas of this site’s patrons.

Detailed descriptions of the history of the Palace of Eternal Joy and the
cult of Lü Dongbin are meant to help achieve the third goal of this book:
examining the degree to which the texts produced at sacred sites like the
palace had the potential to shape the mentalities of the late imperial
Chinese. I pay close attention to the problem of how different patrons of the
palace tried to use temple inscriptions and murals to promote their own rep-
resentations of the site’s history and the cult of Lü Dongbin as well as the
degree to which their efforts succeeded. This study thus endeavors to bridge
a gap that often arises between the history of ideas and the history of soci-
ety, a concern extending back to the first generation of Annæles scholars such
as Lucien Febvre (1878–1956) (Burke 1986:440, 442; Burke 1990; Chartier
1982:16–18, 32). I also stress the diversity of the texts produced at the
Palace of Eternal Joy in order to overcome the tendency of historians of men-
talities to overemphasize the degree of cultural unity in medieval European
society (Burke 1986:443; Chartier 1982:24–31; Davis 1983). Therefore, I
have chosen not to treat Chinese mentalities as Durkheimian “collective
representations” but as a variety of attitudes and beliefs that circulated throughout local communities. I also try to move beyond the idea that mentalities were static by exploring the ways in which they could change over time (Burke 1992:93–94). What follows then is an attempt to show how the diverse mentalities of late imperial China’s vast populace may have been shaped by sacred sites like the Palace of Eternal Joy as well as the cults and texts that flourished at such sites.

Because this book focuses on a single sacred site and its cult, it draws on methods employed by scholars of microhistory, a branch of historiography that evolved in northern Italy during the late 1970s and 1980s and whose best-known proponent is Carlo Ginzburg.11 While much research done by microhistorians remains experimental and focuses on Europe’s lower classes (or “lost peoples”), certain aspects of microhistory are highly attractive to the sinologist studying the history of a cult at one particular temple. Microhistory adopts a deliberately reflective approach to historiographical practice and the procedures of the historian’s work, choosing to reduce the scale of research in order to present a description of social practice and systematically test various concepts and theories. Microhistory also emphasizes the close reading of a small number of texts related to the history of society. At the same time, however, it pays close attention to the problem of interpreting texts in their historical contexts, recognizing the multiplicity of interpretations created by their actual audiences of readers, listeners, or viewers. Microhistory has the advantage of being highly eclectic, allowing the use of methods and theories from disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, and folklore studies. In the pages below, I adhere to microhistorical methods in providing a detailed account of the Palace of Eternal Joy and undertaking a close reading of how the texts produced at this site circulated and were received.

The structure of the book is as follows. Chapter 1 presents a detailed description of the Palace of Eternal Joy as well as a brief account of its history.12 I begin with a description of the town of Yongle and its environs, with special attention to the local economy and socioreligious organizations. This description is followed by an account of the main events marking the Palace of Eternal Joy’s history and development, drawn mainly from local gazetteers and temple inscriptions. The third section concentrates on the arrangement of sacred space at the Palace of Eternal Joy and its signifi-
cance. Although I mention many of the palace’s most important patrons, I
do not explore their motives for supporting the palace until discussing the
texts they sponsored in chapters 3 and 4.

Chapter 2 introduces the cult of the immortal Lü Dongbin. Most of
this section focuses on the various hagiographical traditions surrounding his
cult, especially those that influenced the growth of his cult at Yongle. The
evidence currently available indicates that worship of Lü took on a wide vari-
ety of forms during the Song. Different worshipers saw him as an itinerant
religious specialist, a patriarch of the Perfect Realization Taoist movement,
a healer and wonder-worker, a patron god of various tradespeople ranging
from ink makers to prostitutes, a powerful deity of spirit-writing sects, and
a member of that powerful yet rambunctious group of spirits known as the
Eight Immortals. These multiple images of Lü were created over centuries by
people from many different social groups of late imperial China, including
scholar-officials, Taoist priests, dramatists, tradespeople, and artisans. While
scholars such as James Watson have theorized that cults undergo a process
of standardization as they develop (Watson 1985), such a phenomenon
does not appear to have occurred in the case of Lü’s cult. Rather, the increas-
ing number of Lü’s worshipers led to an ever-burgeoning variety of images of
this immortal.

Chapter 2 also describes the adoption of Lü Dongbin’s cult by the
Perfect Realization movement during the Jin and Yuan dynasties. This
Taoist movement, whose numerous male and female members practiced
celibacy and the pursuit of immortality through rigorous self-cultivation, was one of late imperial China’s leading organized religions and has been researched by numerous scholars from China, Japan, and the West. However, most of this research has focused on three topics: the patriotic nature of the Perfect Realization movement; its doctrines, specifically its blending of beliefs from the so-called Three Religions (sanjiao; Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism); and its relationship to the state. Relatively little attention has been paid to the beliefs and practices of Perfect Realization masters and their lay followers, although recent work by Judith Boltz (1987), Stephen Eskildsen (1989), Vincent Goossaert (1997), and Florian Reiter (1981, 1986, 1988, 1994, 1996) has begun to fill this gap. In examining how the cult of Lü Dongbin was absorbed into the Perfect Realization movement, I emphasize the social and religious factors that led
to this movement’s immense popularity in north China during the late imperial era, particularly the ways in which the leaders of Perfect Realization Taoism attempted to popularize their doctrines of immortality and self-cultivation. The Palace of Eternal Joy provides an opportunity to see this Taoist movement in action as well as to determine the extent to which it shaped the mentalities of nonmembers.

Chapters 3 and 4 analyze the two most important types of texts preserved at the Palace of Eternal Joy: temple inscriptions and murals. It is fortunate that these texts survived the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and that their contents have been transcribed and studied by some of the leading Chinese scholars of this century. Most of the thirty-seven inscriptions at the palace have been recorded by Su Bai (1962, 1963), while many of these texts have been transcribed and reprinted in modern punctuated form in a massive collection of Taoist epigraphy collected and edited mainly by Chen Yuan (1880–1971) and his grandson Chen Zhichao (Chen et al. 1988). Regrettably, neither Su nor Chen reproduces all the lists of names of the palace’s patrons. However, their research provides sufficient material to undertake a preliminary study of the inscriptions describing the history of this temple. The palace’s murals have also been thoroughly researched by a number of scholars (Jing 1993, 1995; Steinhardt 1987; Tsang 1992; Wang Chang’an 1963a, 1963b).

Chapter 3 focuses on four types of inscriptions found at the Palace of Eternal Joy: commemorative inscriptions, official document inscriptions, hagiographical inscriptions, and poetic inscriptions. After analyzing the contents of these inscriptions, I explore the identities of the male and female patrons of the Palace of Eternal Joy who worshiped there and contributed to its growth. Epigraphic and other evidence indicates that the palace’s patrons were mostly officials serving in the area, members of the local elite and their dependents, and Perfect Realization Taoists who resided at or visited the palace. In describing these men and women as well as the ways in which they contributed to the growth of the Palace of Eternal Joy, I follow the example of Timothy Brook and other scholars in showing how their actions frequently involved investments of “symbolic capital” and how sacred sites like temples constituted part of a Chinese “public sphere” (Brook 1993; Dean 1997; Duara 1988a, 1988b; Katz 1995a).

In Chapter 4, I describe and analyze two different types of murals at the Palace of Eternal Joy. The first type, located in the Gate of the Limitless
Ultimate and the Hall of the Three Pure Ones, appear to have been painted in order to provide a setting for and even an object of the Taoist rituals frequently performed at the palace. The second type, located in the Hall of the Purified Yang and the Hall of Redoubled Yang, may have served as teaching materials to instruct Perfect Realization Taoists and perhaps pilgrims as well. I have paid special attention to the murals at the palace because these and other works of art like them have yet to be used fully as sources for the study of Chinese sacred sites.20

The final chapter of the book explores the reception of the above texts among the people of Yongle and its environs. I also examine the ways in which patrons of the Palace of Eternal Joy attempted to impose their representations of the palace’s history and the cult of Lü Dongbin on other members of the community as well as the successes and failures these efforts encountered. Inasmuch as there is no available evidence of direct reactions to these texts during the late imperial era, I have approached this problem by exploring how their contents are represented (or ignored) in other sources. This is hardly a foolproof method, as the available sources are limited, and it is often difficult to determine when and where different oral or written traditions arose. However, an examination of texts not produced by elite or Taoist patrons of the Palace of Eternal Joy reveals numerous different images of this site and its cult to Lü Dongbin. In particular, evidence presented in Chapter 5 reveals that the history of the palace described in local gazetteers and folktales differs markedly from that presented in temple inscriptions. The reception of images of Lü Dongbin contained in temple inscriptions and murals appears to have been even more complex, with widely diverse images of this deity existing in local gazetteers, dramas, novels, and folktales. While it may not be possible to fathom fully the circumstances behind the creation of such diverse representations and the interactions among them, their very presence indicates the limited impact texts such as temple inscriptions and murals may have had on local society.

Text and Textuality

My reading of the texts preserved at the Palace of Eternal Joy has been shaped by an awareness of their biases. Works in the Taoist Canon clearly reflect the agendas of the Taoists who composed them, depicting Lü as a
master who could initiate and instruct worthy disciples in the mysteries of interior alchemy (neidan; see Chapter 2). The murals, being the products of Perfect Realization Taoist patronage, present a similar view, albeit modified for popular consumption. Texts composed by scholar-officials and other literati, including local gazetteers and stele inscriptions, depict Lü as a well-educated literatus. The dramas described in chapters 4 and 5 are more problematic, because they reflect the worldviews of classically educated scholars who, for one reason or another, had not passed the exams or assumed an official post. Such texts emphasize Lü’s Confucian and Taoist learning, while also describing his willingness to convert others and the joys of immortality a successful adept could look forward to experiencing. Copiously illustrated novels such as the Journey to the East (Dongyou ji), which circulated in cheap and poorly edited versions for purchase or rental, contain images of Lü Dongbin intended for a literate but not necessarily classically educated audience. Such novels as well as local folktales emphasize Lü’s miraculous powers, while occasionally featuring humorous and sometimes even ribald stories about him as one of the Eight Immortals (Baxian).

This broad and problematic body of texts, each with its own image of Lü Dongbin, presents the social historian with a seemingly impenetrable tangle of data. Yet this tangle is also of great value, because it allows us to appreciate fully the vibrant diversity of social and religious life in late imperial China. This diversity has prompted me to reconsider the ways in which scholars study religion in China. We use the plural “Chinese religions” to refer to the different religious traditions that flourished in China, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity, and Islam. Based on the evidence presented below, I argue that we could also use the term “Chinese religions” to encompass the many different ways in which the Chinese people constructed and interpreted their own beliefs and practices.

This emphasis on diversity has also shaped my analysis of the texts produced at the Palace of Eternal Joy. In the course of preparing this book, I have endeavored to do more than simply read such texts, translate them, and analyze their contents in an attempt to reconstruct the past. I also analyze the palace’s texts in terms of their textuality, that is, the processes by which they were produced, transmitted, and understood. My understanding of these problems has been influenced by scholars like W. F. Hanks, who argues that textuality needs to be considered as an instrument, a product, and
a mode of social action (1989:103). The textuality of texts is also linked to their genre, that is, the ways in which established rules for writing and patterns of writing can shape their production and subsequent reception. Hanks argues that the successful study of a text’s textuality lies “in the mid-range between formalism, which dwells on the forms, devices, and constructions of closed artifacts (codes or works), and what might be called sociologism, which dwells on the large-scale fields of production, distribution, and reception of discourse” (1989:100). Although his comments are aimed at social scientists, I believe that they can also encourage historians of Chinese religions to examine critically the way texts reflect and interact with the societies that create them.

My thoughts on text and textuality have also been shaped by Adrian Wilson’s essay on the hermeneutics of social history (1993). Wilson notes that social history faces a “problem of historical knowledge” caused by the disparity between the questions historians ask and the evidence that is actually available. As a result, social historians face the question of how to reconcile attempts to reconstruct the past with the fact that no single method for achieving this goal has yet been agreed upon. In other words, while proper historiographical methods can help in locating historical evidence, their ability to produce actual knowledge of the past is much less certain. Wilson thus concludes that social historians are confronted by an “invisibility paradox,” routinely practicing history while neglecting to consider the theoretical implications of what they practice.

Wilson proposes two solutions to the problems described above: concept-criticism and the study of document-genesis. Concept-criticism involves the modification of one’s hypotheses in the course of undertaking research, particularly if a mismatch arises between one’s questions and one’s data. Another aspect of concept-criticism involves the questioning of the origins of concepts, including “society,” “traditional society,” and even “social history” itself. The study of document-genesis refers to three different approaches by which historians attempt to apprehend the documents collected in the course of research. The first approach involves treating documents as “authorities” or “windows upon the past” from which one can extract history by means of what R. G. Collingwood once derisively labeled the “scissors and paste” method. The second approach, embodied in the work of early Annales historians like Marc Bloch, chooses to treat documents as
evidence that the historian examines in order to recover the past. However, this approach tends to converge with the first in assuming that documents yield a direct record of the past (Wilson 1993:303). The third approach, which Wilson favors, involves treating documents as effects of the past, that is, the result of cultural processes that the historian tries to understand.

Wilson argues that there is an epistemological gradient between these three stances and that the third stance can help scholars move away from viewing texts as representing the past or evidence of the past toward a position of greater hermeneutical rigor that focuses on their textuality. Instead of reading texts as documents, the social historian should treat them as works reflecting different agendas that experienced varying forms of reception. This hermeneutical stance has many advantages. First, it forces us to recognize that each text has its strengths and limitations, and that no type of source is inherently more “valuable” or “accurate” than another. Second, it enables us to see how a single text can have different meanings in different contexts. Finally, by viewing texts as effects we can see that society records itself in all the documents that it generates and that “every document is a ‘record’ of the society [we study]” (Wilson 1993:319). I believe that Wilson’s argument is of value for historians of Chinese religions because it prompts us to reexamine our research methods and consider the potential benefits and pitfalls of adopting a more theoretical or interdisciplinary approach to our work.26

In order to determine the textuality of the palace’s texts, I have grappled with a number of important hermeneutical issues, especially those of authorial intention, contextualism, and reception. I begin by conceding that any attempt to determine authorial intention can be fraught with peril. For example, E. D. Hirsch notes that the interpretation of any text represents a choice by the reader rather than an ontological fact (1967:24–25). “The nature of a text is to mean whatever we construe it to mean . . . We, not our texts, are the makers of the meanings we understand, a text being only an occasion for meaning” (Hirsch 1976:75–76; see also Puhl 1980).27 Other scholars have pointed out that many authors assume different forms of implied authorship while composing different types of texts, making the determination of authorial intention even more difficult (Chatman 1978:146–151). In addition to implied authors, texts also have implied audiences composed of other individuals the author believes will share his
or her point of view. The same author can assume different forms of implied authorship in order to address diverse implied audiences in different texts or can even shift implied audiences in the course of the same text. However, it is extremely difficult to fathom whether these implied audiences actually read the works or accept the author’s agenda.28 Scholars evaluating textuality must also confront the gap between our own mentalities and those of the authors who wrote the texts we read (Harlan (1989a:584–587, 592; see also LaCapra 1982:57–58).29

Equally complex is the idea of “contextualism,” that one can best understand a text by placing it in its historical and social context. In the case of China and other complex societies, one is faced with not one but many contexts, making it difficult to determine with any precision which social and cultural phenomena may have contributed to the formation of a particular text, not to mention the ways in which they did so. Furthermore, society and culture may be viewed as texts in their own right that also need to be interpreted before one can turn to specific written texts (Harlan 1989a:594, 596, 602–603, 605; Harlan 1989b:624; LaCapra 1982:57). In the present case, the fact that knowledge of local culture and society in late imperial China is far from complete significantly impedes attempts to understand issues of author and audience that surround the texts produced at the Palace of Eternal Joy.

How can the historian cope with these problems? There are no easy solutions. David Harlan, inspired in part by the work of Noam Chomsky (1966), argues in favor of taking ideas of contemporary interest and projecting these backwards (Harlan 1989a:604–605, 608). However, Chartier argues that such an approach may run the risk of disguising rather than identifying past ways of thinking, thereby obscuring the vibrant originality and complexity of systems of thought as they existed in particular places and times (1982:16, 19–20). Overall, it seems fair to say that the cautionary statements of Harlan and others are largely valid and valuable, particularly if they can help overcome the “epistemological naïveté” that seems to have characterized some historical research (Hollinger 1989:611; Novick 1988). In researching the history of the Palace of Eternal Joy and the cult of Lü Dongbin, or any aspect of Chinese cultural history, one can hardly hope to sidestep nimbly key issues such as authorial intention and contextualism. There seems little choice but to move forward, inspired by the results of pre-
vious scholars, while also viewing one’s own preconceptions as a tool rather than a hindrance. In this spirit, I hope that this study represents a form of progress through its attention to the methodological issues surrounding the study of Chinese religions as well as its reevaluation of concepts such as unity and hegemony.

When one turns from the authorship of texts to their reception, a host of very different methodological issues arise, beginning with one’s understanding of the concept of culture. Many historians and social scientists, influenced by the writings of symbolic anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, have tended to view culture as a largely static and unified system. As a result, a considerable amount of work has focused on how symbols can serve as vehicles for the expression of meaning; the question of how symbols (and the texts expressing them) actually circulate and are interpreted has received less attention. More recently, however, a number of scholars have begun to stress the multiplicity or diversity of culture and its symbols (D’Andrade 1995; Barth 1993; Sharpe 1990:181; Skorupski 1976; White 1990:245). For example, in his study of Balinese culture Frederick Barth argues that diversity is a “ubiquitous” feature of most civilizations and cultures. Such diversity is seen in numerous areas, including variations in expertise among different members of the populace, differences between people in social status and daily life experiences, and gradations of purpose and intent underlying social behavior (Barth 1993:4–5). Such a view of culture has also begun to shape the thinking of the most recent generation of Annales historians, who are now turning their attention from the history of mentalities to the history of social practice (see, for example, Cerruti 1995; Lepetit 1995).

Another important innovation in cultural studies is the rise of practice theory. Scholars like Richard Bauman, Sherry Ortner, and Marshall Sahlins have begun to study how individuals (often referred to as agents or actors) manipulate and are manipulated by various forms of social structure and action (Bauman and Sherzer 1974; Ortner 1984; Sahlins 1981). Other scholars have begun to emphasize the importance of performance theory as well as the necessity of viewing language as a highly contested form of communication (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Becker 1979). Practice theory has helped shift the focus of sociological research from fixed cultural and social structures to the types of action that reflect and at times even generate
such structures. As Herbert Blumer notes, “Structural features such as ‘culture,’ ‘social systems,’ ‘social stratification,’ or ‘social roles’ set conditions for [people’s] actions but do not determine their actions” (1962:152). Practice theorists also use the concepts of hegemony and resistance to study the relationship between social structure and individual action, based on the assumption that much human action occurs in relationships marked by dominance and subordination (Ortner 1984:147–150; Williams 1977).

The advantage of the above-mentioned approaches to the study of culture is that they enable scholars, in the words of Robert Hymes, “to see culture, and so religion within culture, as a *repertoire* of models, systems, rules, and other symbolic *resources*, different and distributed unevenly, upon which people draw and through which they negotiate life with each other in ways that are intelligibly related to their own experiences, place in society, and purposes” (Hymes n.d.:13; italics in original). In other words, culture is not a fixed system but a fluid body of ideas that are expressed in a variety of texts.

Determining the circulation and reception of specific texts requires a detailed knowledge of the forms of communication both available to and used by the people of a particular society. In the case of late imperial China, David Johnson has sought to achieve this goal by subdividing that era’s society into nine sociocultural groups based on educational background and position in the structure of dominance (1985). Johnson’s more recent research focuses on the importance of dramatic performances, particularly ritual dramas, in propagating different mentalities (1989, 1997). James Hayes’ study of specialists and written materials in the New Territories provides important data on the types of texts that could circulate at the village level, including handbooks, popular encyclopedias, ballads, works of vernacular literature, and morality books (1985). Richard John Lufrano’s research on a relatively neglected source, late imperial merchant manuals, discusses the Confucian values contained in these texts and the ways they were received (1997). The study of temple murals in Chapter 4 supplements this research by demonstrating the importance of the visual medium in the history of late imperial mentalities and expanding the definition of “reading ability” to include three basic modes that are broadly recognized among historians and social scientists: reading, listening, and looking (Chatman 1978; Cort 1996; Paret 1988; Scribner 1981:3).
Establishing the types of texts that could transmit various ideologies is only the first step in evaluating their impact. The next question involves the extent to which the ideas expressed in these texts were received and understood. In treating this problem, I follow the lead of scholars who maintain that texts are dynamic and possess multiple meanings, thus being open to a wide range of interpretations once they begin to circulate (White 1990:244–245; see also Culler 1975; de Man 1971; Ingarden 1973; Pellowe 1990). In recent years, a growing number of scholars have begun to emphasize the active nature of a text’s reception, with leading figures like the French theorist Michel de Certeau focusing on how people creatively reinterpreting messages aimed at them (Certeau 1980; see also Darnton 1984, 1991). Carlo Ginzburg’s famous example of the ways in which the mental “grids” of the miller Menocchio shaped (and to his inquisitors warped) his reading of Christian texts indicates how active processes of reception molded medieval European imaginations (Ginzburg 1980). Perhaps one of the clearest formulations of reception theory and its implications for scholars today can be found in an essay by Robert Sharpe (1990). Sharpe argues that through the act of writing the author of a text creates what amounts to a possible world, which, while often clearly delineated and rhetorically powerful, remains a world of indeterminacy that can never be specified completely. As a result, readers or audiences are able to fill in the gaps of this imaginary picture based on their backgrounds and experiences (Sharpe 1990:185–186). In an article titled “The Birth of the Reader,” R. S. White takes Sharpe’s view one step further, stating that because texts are meant to be read, “Readers place their own meanings in texts. Each reader will place a meaning, a structural overlay, upon a text, and it is inevitably different from meanings placed upon the text by another reader” (1990:247–248).

An interesting example of the complex nature of reception at Chinese sacred sites is the case of the Jin Shrine (Jinci), located in northern Shanxi near the city of Taiyuan. Most official accounts view the Jin Shrine as a site for the worship of Tang Shuyu, the first ruler of the Jin state during the Zhou dynasty. However, the temple complex also features a cult site known as the Hall of the Sage Mother (Shengmu dian). The Sage Mother appears to have been a local water goddess, but from the Song dynasty on scholar-officials claimed that the Sage Mother was none other than Yi Jiang, Tang’s mother
and also the wife of the founder of the Zhou dynasty. Amy McNair shows how the Northern Song’s Empress Liu, who ruled on behalf of the emperor Renzong (r. 1023–1063) during his youth, ordered new and highly lifelike images of Yi Jiang to be placed in the Hall of the Sage Mother around the year 1050. This was done in order to strengthen the association between Empress Liu and Yi Jiang, and also to enhance the empress’ legitimacy in the eyes of the male bureaucracy. While this message may have been understood by members of the Song elite, it apparently had little impact on the local populace, who continued to worship the Sage Mother as a fertility goddess. The eight dragons carved on pillars in front of the hall may have symbolized the imperium to members of the elite, but to many local residents of Taiyuan they were seen as representations of the dragon kings who controlled the rains (McNair 1988–1989).34

It may be instructive to consider an early-seventeenth-century novel, titled The Romance of the Three Teachings Enlightening the Deluded and Returning Them to the True Way (Sanjiao kaimi guizheng yanyi), that treats this very problem of the reception of texts produced and promoted by religious specialists in China. In this novel, which has been studied by Judith Berling and Sawada Mizuho (Berling 1985; Sawada 1960), three specialists representing Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism lecture to a group of villagers only to find that nobody understands what they are talking about. When the Confucian scholar explains that the Great Learning (Daxue) describes the knowledge of great men, one villager asks if he means fat men. Another villager assumes that the Buddhist monk preaching about prajñā-pāramitā (the perfection of wisdom) is speaking in an unfamiliar dialect, while the Taoist’s sermon is greeted with gales of laughter (Berling 1985:198–200). Although works of literature by their nature may not reflect social realities, this novel is a reminder that in reading didactic or normative works one must guard against assuming that audiences exposed to such texts receive their contents in the way they are supposed to. Kenneth Dean’s new study of the Three in One religion (Sanyi jiao) reveals that its doctrines were “absorbed, co-opted, and reinterpreted” in many different ways (Dean 1998:14–15). Fortunately a number of Perfect Realization sermons and lectures (particularly yulu) survive, and it seems quite significant that even these works (which were compiled by members of the movement and tend to portray it in a flattering light) occa-
sionally portray lay members as being unclear about the finer points of Perfect Realization doctrine (Goossaert 1997:376–396).

Diverse processes of reception affected not only written and oral texts but also those presented through the visual medium. While it is generally recognized that images can be more rhetorically compelling than the written word (see, for example, Chartier 1987; Standing 1973), both depend on symbolic systems and rules of reference in order to communicate their messages (Goodman 1976). Recent research by Hung Chang-tai (1997) on modern Chinese woodblock prints with overtly political messages demonstrates that while artists working for the Chinese Communist Party attempted to reach a mass audience, their works were often viewed with great suspicion by Chinese peasants. Hung quotes a member of a work team that attempted to spread these new woodcuts around north China in 1938 as saying: “Party cadres applauded our [art] shows, but some peasants confessed that they could not make any sense out of them. The foreign-inspired woodcuts, they said, were too unfamiliar to them” (p. 53). Hung’s pathbreaking research validates an idea advanced over a decade ago by the art historian Michael Baxandall: “The public mind was not a blank tablet on which painters’ representations of a story or person could impress themselves; it was an active institution of interior visualization with which every painter had to get along” ([1972] 1988:45).

In the case of the Palace of Eternal Joy, the data presented in chapters 3 and 4 reveal that the temple’s main patrons, Perfect Realization Taoists and members of the local elite, made concerted efforts to present their representations of the palace’s history and the immortal Lü Dongbin in both temple inscriptions and murals. I argue that these texts were composed in part to propagate and even legitimate Taoist and local elite ideologies as well as representations of the world they lived in (see Burke 1992:95–96; Ortner 1984:140, 153; Sangren 1987a, 1987b, 1991, 1995; Gates and Weller 1987:5, 6). This position reflects my interest in the ideological aspects of culture (Zito and Barlow 1994:4–5), in particular the ways in which different ideological texts are produced in religious settings. At the same time, these different texts could be subjected to a wide variety of readings. Temple inscriptions and murals were the products of specialized knowledge that may not have been understood fully or appreciated by many worshipers, meaning that the reception of such texts could be highly problematic. The images of Lü...
Dongbin presented in the Palace of Eternal Joy texts reflect two overlapping traditions, Perfect Realization Taoism and literati culture. The texts produced by people belonging to these traditions made perfect sense to their makers and their peers; how they were received by people outside these traditions is another matter.

Hegemony and Resistance

The problematic reception of the Palace of Eternal Joy’s texts has important implications for understanding the concepts of hegemony and resistance. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci formulated the concept of hegemony in the years before World War II in an attempt to explain the success of Italy’s ruling classes in using education, language, ritual, and the mass media to impose their ideologies on the rest of society (Gramsci 1971). The concept of hegemony spread to the field of sinology during the 1980s and has had an important impact on the academic discourse of a number of fields, particularly gender and ethnic studies. In a seminal essay about late imperial society, David Johnson relied on Gramsci’s work to argue that “certain values are deliberately inculcated by a dominant social group, or a priestly class, to further its own interests, to bring salvation to the people, or both” (Johnson 1985:35–36). Impressed by “the extraordinary degree to which values and beliefs favorable to ruling class interests permeated popular consciousness” (p. 46), Johnson maintained that cultural integration in late imperial China may not have been “the natural result of the interaction of people with each other and with their traditions, but the willed product of a particular class” (p. 48).

Johnson’s penetrating analysis, particularly his historically sensitive treatment of late imperial China’s main sociocultural groups, has proven methodologically stimulating for subsequent scholars studying the creation and spread of ideas, values, and beliefs during that era. The present study also focuses on some of the questions Johnson raised, particularly the ways in which local elites and members of the Perfect Realization movement worked to propagate their values through different texts at the Palace of Eternal Joy. There has been a tendency to overestimate the ability of late imperial China’s ruling classes to achieve lasting hegemony or dominance. For example, in his
study of the Tianhou (Mazu) cult, James Watson argues that “the state intervened in subtle ways to impose a kind of unity on regional and local-level cults” (1985:293). Some scholars researching Taoist ritual implicitly support the idea of cultural hegemony by claiming that Taoism was able to influence the development of local cults by means of its “Taoist liturgical framework” (Dean 1993; Schipper 1985a, 1985b, [1982] 1993). Research on the history of Chinese sacred sites has also been marked by discussion of how members of the imperial family, scholar-officials, and clerics attempted to assert their hegemony over such places (Faure 1992; Lagerwey 1992; Yü 1992).

Far less attention has been devoted to the question of whether members of the late imperial ruling classes actually succeeded in dominating local religious beliefs and practices. Such a problem is not unique to sinology. Roger Chartier notes that research on the history of mentalities in the West has revolved around a dichotomy of production versus reception, the former being marked by creativity and the latter by passivity (1982). However, recent scholarship on reception and practice has begun to break down this dichotomy. For example, American historians influenced by the Birmingham School now see texts as open to a wide variety of meanings, including opposing ones. Thus, Lawrence W. Levine has emphasized that “popular culture” should not be seen as “the imposition of texts on passive people who constitute a tabula rasa but as a process of interaction between complex texts that harbor more than monolithic meanings and audiences who embody more than monolithic assemblies of compliant people” (1992:1381).

Research on resistance to hegemony in China began in the 1980s, undertaken mainly by anthropologists and historians. Their interest in resistance partly resulted from a nuanced reading of Gramsci’s writings, particularly since Gramsci’s interest in the concept of hegemony derived from a desire to locate and mobilize the voice of the Italian proletariat to resist elite dominance (Weller 1994:9). Sinologists have also been influenced by a growing body of scholarship on resistance (Burke 1986; Certeau 1980; Fiske 1989; Scott 1976, 1985, 1990; Williams 1977, [1980] 1991). The growth of postmodernism has also added a new theoretical impetus to studies of resistance (see, for example, Jenkins 1991).

The problem of how resistance occurs has begun to make a marked impact on studies of Chinese religions. Although James Watson’s study of standardization promotes the idea of cultural unity, it also reveals that the
late imperial state and local elites had little control over nonelite representations of deities like Tianhou and that attempts at standardization rarely enjoyed widespread success (1985). Michael Szonyi takes Watson’s argument one step further, arguing that certain locally written texts such as gazetteers and inscriptions merely created an “illusion of standardization” that concealed “a vibrant and changing local tradition” (1997). Kenneth Dean’s book on the Three in One religion presents a tantalizingly complex picture of how local rituals could provide a means of resisting hegemonic discourse (1998). P. Steven Sangren has shown in his work on the production and reproduction of meaning in various socioreligious contexts that, while in some cases hegemony remains largely unassailable, it can be challenged in others (1987a, 1987b, 1991, 1993, 1996). Finally, in their introduction to Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China, Susan Naquin and Yü Chün-fang state that “it was possible for a pilgrim to resist the influence not only of . . . advertisements [promoting unitary views of sacred sites] but of the very structure of the site itself” (1992:23).

The social historian Wang Mingming has examined the concepts of hegemony and resistance in his work on the pujing (ward and precinct) system in the Ming-Qing city of Quanzhou (Wang 1995). Wang’s research reveals that, while the state attempted to use the pujing system to maintain social control, the citizens of Quanzhou challenged that control by organizing festivals and other communal activities in pujing. Wang argues that in late imperial China creations of “place” were not simply hegemonic but represented an “active process of contest” between different social and political forces (p. 70). Based on Michel Foucault’s study of prisons, he concludes that Chinese histories of place represent “a process of political subjection and anti-subjection: on the one hand, place origination occurs in a centripetal manner and serves to integrate socio-cultural diversities into a state structure; on the other hand, it occurs in a centrifugal manner and facilitates the creation of grass-roots ceremonial culture and local socio-economic activities” (p. 71; italics in original). While the sacred space of the Palace of Eternal Joy differed significantly from the pujing of late imperial Quanzhou, Wang’s analysis is instructive in encompassing both attempts to create hegemony by China’s rulers and efforts at resisting such hegemony on the part of local communities. Similar forces appear to have sparked the production of different texts concerning the palace’s history and the cult to Lü Dongbin.
Perhaps the most systematic study of resistance in China has been undertaken by Robert P. Weller. Weller has combined the approaches of history and anthropology to research cases of resistance in China and Taiwan (1987a, 1987b, 1994, 1996) as well as rural resistance worldwide (Weller and Guggenheim 1982). In the introductory chapter to his book *Resistance, Chaos, and Control in China*, Weller argues that resistance encompasses not only armed rebellion but also passive subversion, noting that the ability of people to maintain alternative worldviews despite the pressure of hegemonic discourse constitutes an important type of resistance (1994:4, 12). Weller also explores the possibility that resistance can sometimes coexist with accommodation, citing research on carnivals by Mikhail Bakhtin and Umberto Eco (Bakhtin 1984; Eco 1984; see Weller 1994:12–13, 124, 167, 182). He concludes that in traditional and even in modern China the state and local elites faced considerable institutional obstacles in attempting to assert their dominance over local society and that “the official institutions of control breed reactions inherently beyond their control” (p. 204).

Weller also makes the important observation that, while many Chinese tend to leave the systematic exegesis of beliefs and rituals in the hands of recognized experts, such practices can also foster diverse interpretations (1994:115–124). The decentralized structure of Chinese religions with its resulting multivocality provides a resilient free space for resistance against attempts to impose hegemony (p. 115). Weller’s analysis indicates that scholars scouring written sources for definitive interpretations of Chinese beliefs and practices need to consider whether China’s elites could impose such interpretations on the general populace. Research on the late imperial Chinese state has shown that attempts to control local cults and other facets of popular religion met with only limited success (Overmyer 1989–1990; Taylor 1990). Local elites were somewhat better able to exert authority over local cults, but even their efforts frequently fell short of the mark (Schneider 1980; Weller 1994:53–56). Such occurrences are hardly unique to the late imperial era. In a series of chapters discussing the cult of the Eighteen Lords (Shiba wanggong) in postwar Taiwan, Weller describes how even today the spirits of seventeen men and their loyal canine companion receive offerings of cigarettes and other items from people desiring to make a quick profit, including prostitutes and members of Taiwan’s criminal underworld. Efforts by the state and the temple committee itself to mold
popular opinion by repeating legends about the temple and its deities in the
mass media have proved largely fruitless, mainly because temple cults usu-
ally prove unable to maintain “strong social relations of interpretation” to
support their views (Weller 1994:156–157, 169; see also Weller 1996).

The point of this book is not to deny the existence of hegemony—that
the Chinese ruling classes were able to influence local culture is an unde-
niable fact. However, for the purposes of this study I am less concerned with
the downward (or upward) flow of images than with the ways in which late
imperial mentalities could be influenced through the interaction of many dif-
ferent images, a process described in my earlier book on the cult of Marshal
Wen as “reverberation” (Katz 1995a). The metaphor of reverberation,
designed to explain the continuous creation of different yet interrelated texts
in complex societies such as China, provides a way to come to grips with the
dynamic interplay among different mentalities. In the case of the cult of
Marshal Wen, I have shown that Taoists, scholar-officials, and local wor-
shipers created different texts describing his cult’s history and significance
while sharing a common representation of Wen as a powerful martial deity
able to expel pestilential forces. Lü Dongbin’s cult is even more complicat-
ed, as there is a much larger body of texts produced by a greater variety of
authors representing a wider range of social backgrounds. However, in both
cases reverberation offers a means for understanding how the people of late
imperial China could worship the same deities yet also embrace many dif-
ferent images of their cults and sacred sites.