

# Miaohui, the Temples Meeting Festival in a North China Area

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**Abstract** We examine the multiple purposes and modalities that converge during a circuit of festivals, *miaohui*, that temples organize in recognition of local gods and which are attended reciprocally by temple representatives from the surrounding area in North China. The festivals involve intense expressions of devotion to one or more deities, while offering an opportunity for representatives of other villages to seek recognition through rather boisterous drumming and prolonged choreographed dancing. We note also the emergence of Mao as a great god whose legacy as Chairman of the CCP is projected in order to legitimate current Party leadership and their policy of reform while concurrently acting as a powerful denial of those same policies from the perspective of villagers.

**Keywords** *miaohui*, popular religion, ritual, Mao cult, North China

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In this article, we consider a ritual that is annually practiced in many villages of North China, *miaohui* (庙会). Our points of observation are Fanzhuang and a number of neighboring villages in the south of Hebei Province. In Fanzhuang, *miaohui* is celebrated for several days during the early part of the second lunar month. It is a grand meeting and many temple organizations near Fanzhuang are expected to participate. While each attending village presents its own festival, there is a measure of prestige to be invited to the festival in Fanzhuang, an administrative town among the local villages. For all who participate, there are occasions for prayer to the many gods that are represented, and occasions for dancing and joy among the many participants. There is recognition of the superiority of the gods among men, as well as recognition of the superiority of some dead men among the living, and

yet, in an apparent contradiction, there is a denial of hierarchy among men who organize the festival—a challenge to foundational characteristics of the Chinese system of authority relations in the context of an appeal to ultimate authority.

In Fanzhuang, the principal focus of attention has been the Tablet of the Dragon King. This tablet would be removed from its year-long placement in the home of one of the organizers and paraded to a place prepared for its celebration. Traditionally, the Dragon King was sought to bring rain to a parched earth—having effectiveness (*ling*, 灵) not possessed by earthly administrators.

Local folktales speak of *ling*, recalling the times when the Dragon King was able to bring enough rain for the planting of crops. In each village there are individuals, spirit-mediums, who are able to communicate with spirits and address problems of the villagers. The gods can enter these men, speaking through them in an extraordinary language of which the mediums have no conscious awareness.

In this article we shall focus attention on roles and behaviors of the ritual participants rather than on the *ling* of the gods. Of special interest are the energetic activities of women during *miaohui*. While men are the principal organizers of the festival, it is the women who predominate in actual ritual practice, singing songs, playing cymbals, and burning the incense and paper that float upward to the gods. These women are almost always older and postmenopausal. They are at that station in life when conservative social behavior is fully expected. Yet, on the days of *miaohui*, these women are freed from conventional constraints, and the visits from other villages lead to dancing and prepared entertainments of a profane kind, thereby loosening the bonds of convention on women in the face of gods that have the power to punish errant behavior.

Having been inspired by Stephan Feuchtwang's visit in 1996 to Fanzhuang, the first author, Xudong Zhao, has attended the *miaohui* in Fanzhuang seven times and he has attended the celebration in Nanzhuang three times. In the spring of 2005, both authors visited Nanzhuang, at which time a visit to the ritual in a nearby village, Gaofeng, was also arranged. Then, during the subsequent eight months, the second author, Duran Bell, conducted interviews with the leaders of *miaohui* in a number of surrounding villages, most notably a large village, Yanghu, which possesses four "gates" and associated temples. Bell also attended a second and larger *miaohui* in Nanzhuang in November 2005. As the several villages studied differ in many details, more



**Figure 1** Women dancing in the streets of Nanzhuang, 26 March 2005

attention will be given to them later. Most obviously, the size and regional significance of Fanzhuang must be noted and with that size, and perhaps because of it, there is a much larger number of gods represented. Secondly, the god of primary importance to the rituals may differ from one village to another. In Fanzhuang it was the Dragon King, while in Nanzhuang, it was an ambiguously identified “*lao mu*” (老母) in the smaller, lineage-based *miaohui* that took place in March; and it was a dragon god, Zhangye (张爷), in Nanzhuang’s larger, village-level, *miaohui* that took place in November. Given the prevalence of drought conditions in the countryside of North China, it is to be expected that village gods who have an ability to secure rainfall would be predominant.

### **The people and the land: the meaning of center and hierarchy in *miaohui***

The festivals to which we shall direct attention occur in Zhao county, Hebei Province, in North China. The villages are all situated in the eastern part of the county and administrated by Fanzhuang Township. It is said that part of the area is in an ancient path of the Hutuo River; and for this reason, it is

particularly suitable for pear trees. Several old men in Nanzhuang recall that pear trees grew naturally before the reforms of the 1980s and before farmers became dependent on chemical fertilizer in their efforts to secure higher and higher levels of production. When they evaluate the changes in their lives, the old-timers often comment on the better tasting old natural pear. The area of pear cultivation is prosperous relative to neighboring agricultural zones in the west of the county. And given a commonality of lifestyle, people in the villages of the pear region tend to intermarry and interact in trade and in religious ceremonies.

In each village there is at least one temple which functions as an important public center and as a center of ritual observances. Often there is one main temple and other small temples surrounding it.<sup>20</sup> As a collective representation, the village temple is certainly a place where some kind of magic power is thought to reside. In some sense, it is similar to the ancestor's tomb in Merina society as a source of increased fertility.<sup>2</sup> The area surrounding the temples is always protected as a sacred space. It must be protected from the many potential sources of pollution that may arise in the form of nearby wild ghosts whose powers can be nullified only through the various methods of ingratiating, such as giving food and other items to them as offerings.

The term *miaohui* is composed of two Chinese characters. *Miao* (庙) means temple and *hui* (会) means meeting together. So *miaohui* means literally that the temples in the area are joining together for a meeting. Furthermore, the concrete meaning of 庙会 also refers to a reciprocal relationship among all the temples in the pear-planting area.<sup>3</sup> When one temple holds *miaohui* on some days, the other temples are invited to take part and provide incense-oil-money for the village's gods. At that time, an invitation card is presented to the temple heads (会头), indicating the date on which the neighboring village would have its own *miaohui*. In responding to this invitation, each village attempts to return to the others at least as much incense-oil-money as it has received. The main day (正日子) of *miaohui* in Fanzhuang is the second day of the second lunar month; in Nanzhuang it is in the middle of the 10th month; and in Changxin it is the 29th of the fifth month. This reciprocal circle is called *chuantong* (串通) in the local dialect or patois, implying that the villages are connected to each other through the medium of *miaohui*.

Perhaps the most important thing for many villagers, and the greatest attraction for outsiders, is the display on the days of *miaohui*. This is a display of religious observance and of multivillage cooperation. Of the festivals in

the region, the *miaohui* of Fanzhuang is the most magnificent; and several scholars, especially folklorists, have described it.<sup>4</sup> The *miaohui* in Fanzhuang also involves the greatest financial expenditure and reputation, the largest number of people attending, and the greatest presumed efficacy of its gods. Consequently, many villages attempt to join its cycle of reciprocity. In 2000, the number of the temple organizations taking part in the *miaohui* in Fanzhuang appeared to be more than 100, while in Nanzhuang and Changxin, the numbers were less than 50.

The villagers are proud of the *miaohui* of their village, and they are eager to boost its reputation. On the days of *miaohui*, many scholars, television crews, and photographers are invited to observe the proceedings. As a result of publicity and scholarly examination, these festivals are known all over China and even outside of it. People come from Beijing and even from abroad. On the days of *miaohui*, the calligraphic scrolls or precious-inks, 墨宝 in patois, are exhibited. At the bottom of each so-called precious-ink is a small card on which the name, title, country, and so forth, of visiting scholars and experts are written. In this way there is concrete confirmation of the central place of the temple in the world. Indeed, when Bell interviewed people in Changxin, he was asked about the absence of his colleague Zhao at the time of its previous *miaohui*. Since the latter had consistently attended their festival in recent years, there was a very evident concern that his absence implied a loss of recognized importance for their festival.

The local significance of *miaohui* can, perhaps, be best illustrated by reference to Changxin, a small pear-growing village adjacent to Nanzhuang. It is a town much poorer than Nanzhuang, with a conspicuous indication of impoverishment in the form of an entry passage-way that seems always to be flooded by one foot of water. After not finding the veterinarian who was the official organizer of the village *miaohui*, we were directed to the home of another man, finding his wife and child sleeping on a concrete floor near the front door. Upon learning of our interest, the man rapidly departed and returned with an armful of wall hangings. He then provided us with the story of their village goddess. The story is as follows:

Almost two thousand years ago, a girl of this village (whose surname was Jiǎ (賈), the same as that of our host) was working in a field when a man on horseback rushed in her direction, chased by a group of armed men. The girl offered protective shelter to the man and bandaged his wounds; and when it was safe for him to leave, he did so. However, the girl's father feared impropriety and made

harsh accusations, prompting the girl to commit suicide by jumping into a well. After a rather brief passage of time, the man whom she had protected, Liu Xin, became an emperor in the Han dynasty; and, remembering her kindness, he sent his servants to find her. Upon learning of her death and its circumstances, he recognized her as 娘娘 (a term that applies to the concubines of the emperor); and thereafter Changxin recognized her as a (water) god, 水祠娘娘, and held a *miaohui* in her honor.

The wall hangings that our host presented were intended to recall this story in every detail, and they were always hung in proper sequence at the Changxin *miaohui*. Since their village god had lived in this village and was a putative ancestress of our host, it is clear that this man and his village possess a legacy of enormous value, amidst their material poverty. Indeed, as the man displayed the lovely hangings with modulated voice and beaming face, the roughness of the room faded from view. We could see immediately the importance of the festival.

In earlier times, celebrations of the Dragon Tablet in Fanzhuang were devoted to praying for rain. Prayers for rain were also directed toward Zhangye in Nanzhuang and the water god (水祠娘娘) in Changxin. According to Luo Zhenying, one of the 19 meeting heads (会头) of the Dragon Tablet Meeting (龙牌会), *miaohui* was an old custom that emerged from the drought caused by the shifting course of the Hutuo River. At that time a Dragon Tablet (龙的牌位) was placed by several old people in the middle of the village, and a dragon temple was then built. They prayed for rain; and when it arrived, as they had hoped, villagers conveyed their appreciation to the gods by preparing vegetables and steamed bread (大馍), as offerings to the Dragon Tablet.<sup>5</sup>

There is a procession, parading the Tablet around the village, for two hours or more. The time of the Tablet moving is at nine o'clock, which is signified by chanting scriptures and firing firecrackers in a row. At about noon, the Dragon Tablet is placed in the marquee. After the placing of the Dragon Tablet, the village temple organization is charged with protecting the Tablet day and night from damage from wild demons, tramps, madmen, and so on. They are also responsible for helping add incense and oil to the banners and lamps in the marquee. Various kinds of spectacles, much like carnivals in the West, are performed in the following four days; and at noon of the fourth day, the Tablet is returned to the home of the current leader, accompanied by the same chanting and noise that was experienced on the first day. Before the returning of the Tablet, an accumulation of



things, such as offerings, incense, food, and paper money, are piled up in a mound and burned. Everybody worships on bended knees around the burning mound. On the morning of the sixth day, the Tablet is moved again, this time to the main room of the person who will be leader in the next year. And during that evening, after supper, all 19 heads get together in the home of the new leader and examine financial accounts of the ritual in front of the Dragon Tablet. After all the heads agree with the balance of the incense-oil-money donated voluntarily by the participants of the *miaohui*, a list of income and cost of the *miaohui* in that year is burned in front of the Dragon Tablet. When this ritual is accomplished, a new (sacred) center is recognized in the village, a fact that is more fully consolidated on the eighth day with a ritual of chanting scriptures, known as *yuan tan* (圆坛) in patois, intended to make the new location of the Tablet more stable.

Recently, an ancient origin of the Fanzhuang *miaohui* was invented and new collective memories have been given substance and life. As it happens, Liu Qiyin, a folklorist who lives in Shijiazhuang, the capital of Hebei Province, had occasion to observe the Dragon Tablet Festival in 1994. As he watched it, he recalled studies conducted in rural Hebei Province by his professors at Beijing Normal University. On the basis of his professors' findings, he concluded that the Dragon Tablet must be directly connected with the Gou Dragon that in ancient times represented the whole Chinese nation. With these associations asserted, Liu became very excited and promoted the idea that Fanzhuang's festival was a "living fossil" (活化石), originating in prehistoric times when people prayed to a dragon whose exploits are legendary. In other words, the Dragon Tablet of Fanzhuang has its place within the very origin of the Chinese people. Although there remains the notion that the Dragon Tablet arose initially in response to a local need for rain, it is becoming more common in Fanzhuang for its origin to be found in the Gou Dragon. In 1997, an illustration of this genealogy was inscribed on a large rectangular board, and each year it has stood near the entrance of the marquee on the days of *miaohui*.

In this collusion between a scholar and the temple heads, a new memory has been invented. And the ease with which it is accepted is prompted by a general perception among villagers that the Dragon Tablet is at the center of the world. Any statements on the central importance of their temple can never be dismissed. On the Dragon Tablet there is the inscription: "Seat of the Spirit of the Dragon, True Commander of the Ten Sections and the

Three Regions of the Universe” (天地三界十方真宰龙之神威). On a red cloth banner across the top of the marquee, the following words are written: “Great Assembly of the Dragon Tablet Transmitted down the Ages Whose Awesome Fame Shakes the Four Quarters” (龙牌盛会传千古，世代圣明震四方). Other banners display the symbolism of the Dragon King as central to the universe. On the top of the marquee, they hang nine banners of the Nine Dragons which in times past were authorized only for use by the emperor himself. On the right side of the banners there are the words: “The Gods’ Majesty Alarms the Universe” (神威惊天地); and on the left: “The Sacred Spirits Suppress the Heaven and the Earth” (圣灵镇乾坤). These symbols construct a central sense of power and authority in the universe for Fanzhuang village. Once again, we see the importance of the festival.

In Fanzhuang the home of the current ritual manager (会头) is central prior to the removal of the Dragon Tablet to the marquee, while the rest of the village is peripheral. The time zone during which the Tablet is moved to the marquee (起龙牌) is sacred, but it is also a time for carnival-like pleasure on the streets, outside.

### Ritual as theater

While *miaohui* is undeniably a sacred ritual, it is also a festival of entertainment and feasting. Quite commonly, there will be an opera performance during *miaohui*, such as the one that we observed in Gaofeng. We learned, however, in one village after another, that with the continued decline in the price of pears, it was no longer possible to pay for operatic performances. One person gave the cost of such a performance at RMB 800; and as recently as a few years ago, there could be one such performance during each of the several days of *miaohui*. Our apparent surprise that such a seemingly important aspect of the festival would be omitted was met with only a calm denial of financial capability. Since this financial problem was a common one, it seems to have produced no embarrassment. Gaofeng is rather exceptional in the area in that arrangements had been made with factories in the village to support the operas; and the temple was able to provide 11 such events during its *miaohui*.

It is clear that the opera is of importance to the host village. Our arrival in Gaofeng was greeted with great pleasure by the villagers. Children followed us





**Figure 2** Opera in Gaofeng (seen from the stage), 26 March 2005

in large numbers, joyfully shy of our cameras; and the leaders of the *miaohui* led Bell onto a wing of the stage so that he could be noticed by all in attendance. The international significance of this *miaohui* had been firmly established.

In the absence of, or in addition to, operas provided by the host village, there are performances provided by visiting villages. These performances are less grand but rather extraordinary, nevertheless. In these cases, people from other villages arrive in costume, play drums, and dance for the host village and guests. The village *miaohui* that took place in Nanzhuang in November (October in the lunar calendar) was noteworthy for the seemingly competitive nature of the performances provided by visitors.

We asked one of the visitors to explain the purpose of the dancing and were told that they danced for the gods. This claim is plausible, given that the god in question was Zhangye, a dragon who appeared in human form at some indeterminate time in the past. Presumably, this *person* might enjoy the dancing. However, it is clear that those whose attention was on Zhangye were under the marquee singing and praying, while those outside in the street were dancing to the public. For the visiting villages, the celebration of Zhangye seemed to be largely an occasion for a competitive display on the turf of the host. At one point, there seemed to be total pandemonium as the drumming under the marquee merged with the drumming and dancing of



**Figure 3** People from a neighboring village performing in Nanzhuang, 16 November 2005

four different villages on the street outside. And the dancing by each village continued interminably. Much energy was being expended by people, many of whom were of rather advanced age. And with this energy and excitement, one could sense the reality of the ritual as a magnificent experience for those in attendance.

The residents of Nanzhuang did not engage in this competitive entertaining at their own *miaohui*. However, they did perform a simple dance as visiting villagers arrived—three persons moving backward and circling around each other in a figure eight motion—leading new arrivals toward the marquee where the offerings of the visitors could be presented to Zhangye. But in this case, the dancing of the host villagers was often overwhelmed by the oncoming group, which might be beating drums, clanging cymbals, and carrying banners with the name of their village waving above them, thereby making their arrival a moment of significance.

Yet, even in the absence of an opera, the host village has central place at the festival. First of all, the fact that other villages are willing to attend a *miaohui* is a measure of the importance of a village. If a village is richer than many of its neighbors (as is the case with Nanzhuang and Fanzhuang), it is in the interest of people in surrounding villages to develop relationships

of trade and marriage—关系. When one interviews the organizers of a *miaohui*, one is likely to receive an exaggerated estimate of the number of temples that are commonly in attendance. This number is one that can rank each village relative to others. Hence, the attending villages gain importance through performance while receiving villages gain importance from the number in attendance.

We should not forget, however, that *miaohui* is a religious festival and the host village provides something rather exceptional; it provides its god and the *ling* of its god for any who seek the benefits thereof. For example, in the recent past, some of the visitors to Nanzhuang had been suffering drought and had come to pray to Zhangye during *miaohui*. Although prayers to their own god had failed to produce results, sufficient rain followed their prayers to Zhangye. Subsequently, this village has been in very regular attendance; and they have adopted Zhangye as one of their own gods. However, visitors do not pursue a competition among divinities. They do not arrive with depictions of their own god placed in front of their procession. It is not the gods who must compete for space and attention, but the visitors themselves. Visitors offer entertainment. The entertainment is an alternative focus that directs people away from the marquee and into the streets. While some visitors come to Nanzhuang because of the recognized *ling* of Zhangye, most come for other reasons and never approach the marquee. Instead, they dance for the crowd, rest, and then dance again. We can see that the festival offers multiple layers of meaning, which are interpreted and/or used by different persons in different ways.<sup>6</sup>

As one watches and experiences the surrounding bedlam, one may sense a near incompatibility of the ritual under the marquee with the activities outside. Those on the outside came, performed, and disappeared; most of those on the inside sang and prayed for endless hours—singing in unison, paced by drums and cymbals—and sending burnt offerings to Zhangye. If there had been dancing under the marquee, then this dancing would have been integral to the ritual. But few, if any, of the dancers ever approached the marquee. Theirs is a competition among communities, not a meeting of temples. Moreover, in the past (at least in many villages), *miaohui* may have functioned as essential components of annual or semiannual markets, as Dean suggests for Southeast China,<sup>7</sup> and the festivals are scheduled to coincide with the rhythms of agriculture, making it timely for itinerant merchants to arrive with equipment and other infrequently purchased items.

Moreover, the temporal spacing among the rituals produces a convenient circuit for merchants.

When an earlier version of this article was presented at a Beijing conference in 2005, our suggestion that the dancing constituted a “negation” of the sacred was disputed, and perhaps rightly so. However, our *experience* of *miaohui* was of negation—the convenient confluence of incompatible elements. This incompatibility is plausibly deniable when the confluence of disparate elements has become the common expectation.

Scaldeferri describes a “poor people’s festival” commemorating the Virgin Mary in Southern Italy that involves a cross-country procession with a statue of the Virgin leading the way. As they march up and down the mountain, there is dancing, singing, eating and drinking, and the making of great noise with voices and musical instruments:

I studied the behavior of some participants in detail....

1) During the 2000 June climb, Dominico, a pilgrim from Terranova di Pollino, played the ogranetto [a diatonic button accordion], drank and danced uninterrupted, almost in a trance, in the very tough final section of the procession, repeating the same long performance in the July festival. Officially, this performance showed devotion, but it was also a personal test of endurance, gaining him the admiration of the audience.<sup>8</sup>

The self-promoting character of their actions can be hidden behind a shield of cultural expectation. When rituals become embedded in festivals, then they become frameworks within which many unmentioned or seemingly ancillary objectives are sought—and sought conventionally. A sacred ritual may not be limited to sacred performance, it is the total situation that constructs a *miaohui* and which constructs the popular experience. The profane integrates with the sacred as an essential component of the sacred experience. The experience of celebrating the gods is heightened by the profane. Dean suggests that Chinese theater has its origin in demands for ritual performance, so that the seemingly profane aspects of *miaohui* owe their existence to the sacred ritual.<sup>9</sup> A similar origin appears to apply to Roman theater.<sup>10</sup>

### Ritual and the state

Buddhism and Taoism found ways of incorporating many of the popular deities and, indeed, the imperial state was able to recognize and elevate certain persons and deities to particular positions within the relevant pantheons

(as in the case of the water god, 水祠娘娘), thereby integrating the emperor and his staff seamlessly into the system of deities and creating a uniform bureaucratic system of imperial and spirit powers.<sup>11</sup> By the time of the Tang dynasty, Buddhism and Taoism had become state-supported orthodoxies—expressing an elite culture that joined with Confucianism in supporting the status quo. But popular religion was never controllable. It might be used by local elites for their own purposes, but the content and dynamics of popular cults were commonly unpredictable and (with some justification) feared by the state. According to Seiwert, “popular religious culture was a turbulent flow that was difficult to control and to channel into the calmer current of the orthodox traditions. Time and again these turbulences swelled and sometimes they swept away dynasties.”<sup>12</sup>

In contrast with a centralized form of power that has been common to Western states, the state in China has been and remains strongly decentralized in its administrative and ritual dimensions. Relative to people of the villages of China, the state has been very far away;<sup>13</sup> and the system of power has been perceived to be very multifaceted with a highly ranked bureaucratic system whose local administrators have limited power to provide benefits but great power to punish. The domain of the gods has been not very different. In addition to a local god who might be specific to a given village, there would be a panoply of gods of various powers to which ritual appeals could be made. But unlike their earthly counterparts, these gods were subject to direct appeal; and some had fabled willingness to respond, as the following testifies: “When we farmers seek a bit of rain the government cadres are useless, they cannot give us any, so the Dragon King is the head of us who suffer bitterness. He is very effective (特别灵).”<sup>14</sup> Apparently, rain has fallen after every rain ceremony, sufficient to sow some seed.

Hence, village rituals are not symbolic of state power; they are more important as substitutes for a state that is unable or unwilling to provide assistance.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, in our observations of *miaohui*, we are impressed by the simplicity of its presentation. No great wealth is manifested here. The representations of the gods are not elaborately carved statues. Indeed, in the villages that we studied, the gods are depicted in two-dimensional drawings, taped to a cloth that forms the rear of the enclosure or marquee.

The modern Chinese state classifies popular religion as superstition and as inconsistent with its scientific industrialization program. The forces of the state are arrayed as contrary forces that attack local belief and ritual. Such religions, having a basis in an earlier “feudal” society and having spirits and

gods that reflect the styles of older days, were condemned during the 1950s and largely prohibited for 20 years. Indeed, the peasantry as a class is subjected to condemnation as the carrier of the culture that enabled foreigners to subjugate and humiliate the otherwise indomitable central kingdom.<sup>16</sup> Only by routing out all vestiges of the old China can a new proud and powerful China emerge and triumph. As a consequence, the local people adopted the strategy of agreeing in public but acting differently in private (阳奉阴违); it is a skillful mask developed for dealing with a strong alien power. The struggle between the political power of the modern state and popular authorities on affairs of temples, as Feuchtwang and Wang note, has led to a cycle of destruction and reconstruction of temples.<sup>17</sup> In the face of the official ideology, all of the popular revival activities had to be supported by legitimate reasons, either natural or supernatural.

In Fanzhuang, many people remember that the Dragon Tablet was suppressed at the end of 1950s. The villagers ceased their activities of burning incense openly but continued to do it at night. Some village cadres even criticized feudal-superstition publicly in the daytime, while burning incense at home at midnight. In 1979 the Dragon Tablet was reopened in private (家里祭祀) and a *miaohui* was held. However, in 1983 the *miaohui* of the Dragon Tablet was renewed publicly (搭棚办会) around a marquee for the first time after having been closed down for 10 years by the Cultural Revolution.<sup>18</sup>

It is said that the revival of the Dragon Tablet *miaohui* was supported by a key person who retired and went home as an old-Red-Army man (老红军). Liu Lancheng, also nicknamed Liu Fengzi (Madman Liu), is afforded the role of patron elite for *miaohui* in the village. At the same time, the villagers devised a legitimate reason for the *miaohui*—putting up a platform for an opera performance (搭台唱戏)—and applied to the township and the county for an endorsement. Since the director of the county once was Liu Lancheng's old subordinate (老部下) and since the reason for the *miaohui* appeared to be legitimate, the revival planning of *miaohui* was permitted finally by the county government.<sup>19</sup> A similar surreptitious device was employed in Miaogang, a township in Jiangsu Province of South China. Steven Feuchtwang provides a vivid example of the Old Tai Temple's revival.<sup>20</sup> The villagers were able to suggest successfully to local leaders that such a revival would stimulate tourism and, hence, economic development—an issue of great importance to those leaders. Official approval for the rebuilding of the temple in Fanzhuang was facilitated through a process of “double naming,” whereby the building was



officially a *museum* that would be of value in attracting tourists, but quite transparently it was also to be an active temple.<sup>21</sup>

There is evidence that the policy of the government and of Party leaders has softened. The Party leader in Nanzhuang dismisses *miaohui* as old fashioned, but he claims that people have a right to practice such ritual. And when we interviewed managers of *miaohui* in other villages, we were told that there was no longer any fear of official sanction. There was only one exception and this exception is interesting.

In a large village, Yanghu, that contained four temples, there is one temple that is “Buddhist.” Indeed, people in other temples claimed, in error, that this temple had a resident monk. In fact this temple is located in a local schoolhouse to which villagers have limited access, and the government has not allowed the building of a real temple. Furthermore, the only god depicted in the school is *lao mu* (perhaps, it is Guanyin). But according to the *miaohui* leader, the government regards their ritual as superstition. The villager clearly did not understand why his temple could not be rebuilt which others are allowed, especially since Buddhism carries a degree of legitimacy. The problem for this temple, we surmise, is that its god is the Maitreya, or the *future* Buddha; and for many centuries whenever the emperor seemed to have lost the Mandate of Heaven, amidst famine and warfare, there would arise within the peasantry a belief that the arrival of the future Buddha was eminent and that He would establish a new dynasty. Hence, the Maitreya carries an insurrectionary portfolio not known to this villager.

The revival of popular religion, temples, and festivals has attracted the interest of a number of anthropologists. Wolf considers the “new feudalism” and its psychological bases;<sup>22</sup> Yang focuses on the evolving nature of modernity discourse in the context of global capitalism, borrowing from George Bataille’s theory on ritual expenditure.<sup>23</sup> Feuchtwang and Wang introduce a comparison between mainland China and Taiwan.<sup>24</sup> And finally, Jing Jun from the “social memory perspective” describes a process by which a temple dedicated to Confucius was reconstructed.<sup>25</sup> The temple was rebuilt, destroyed, and then rebuilt again in a Dachuan village in Gansu Province of Northwest China. According to Jing Jun, this process can be given a social meaning through the construction of a collective memory.

The gods of popular religion are, in general, members of a pantheon of greater and lesser gods—a hierarchy, modeled along the lines of the imperial system. In Fanzhuang this hierarchy was evident, given that a number of gods were represented, each in a location or size that reflected its rank among

heavenly forces. On the other hand, the organizers of *miaohui* do not array themselves into a hierarchy. Rather, in Fanzhuang and in the smaller, lineage, *miaohui* in Nanzhuang, the leadership of the festival rotates within a group. And in other villages, the leader may be the only person who was willing to volunteer for the job—leadership carries no special status. So, given the common tendency toward hierarchy in Chinese social organization and given the obvious hierarchy among the gods, it is interesting and perhaps a bit surprising that there is a general lack of hierarchy among the organizers.

### **Mao as figure, Mao as ground**

After a decade during which the Communist Party of China had systematically sought to eliminate warehouses full of Chairman Mao's writings and paraphernalia, it was decided to celebrate Mao again in recognition of his 100-year anniversary in 1993. No doubt this celebration was launched with genuine feeling of admiration and gratitude for the great leader. But many have claimed that after a decade during which the ideas and policies of Mao had been largely abandoned, the legitimacy of the government was at risk; and it was necessary to demonstrate the continuity of the Party under Deng Xiaoping with the historic struggles of the people under Mao. According to Barmé,

As the Reforms further transformed Chinese society from the mid 1980s, cultural and economic dislocation began to have an increasing impact on the populace. Widespread resentment against the effects of the Reform, in particular inflation, corruption, and egregious nepotism within the Party, began mounting to crisis level in 1988. It was also the year in which Mao Zedong initially showed signs of making a popular comeback.<sup>26</sup>

Although the specific policies of Mao were being abandoned, the Party argued that there was a “crystallization of his collective wisdom” that remained foundational to party policy. The party that pursued the reform was also the party of Mao. However, the evolving “MaoCraz” was arguably not the product of the Party. The apotheosis of Mao was not a function of Party manipulation. It would appear more accurate to suggest that the Party was forced to join forces with Mao, as reform-generated tensions began to mount and as many people harkened back to Mao as the only true leader.

Following the mid-1990s, a new Mao cult spread all over Hebei Province; and in 1998 a picture of Chairman Mao was displayed during the *miaohui* in Fanzhuang. Several villagers were asked about this. To quote one of them:



**Figure 4** The apotheosis of Chairman Mao (Nanzhuang)

Chairman Mao is the great god (大神) who is the bigger than other gods, such as ox-ghosts, snake-god (牛鬼蛇神). When he comes out as a god, these other small ones can't be coming out; and the world will be calm. The reason for the disorder (不太平) in recent years in China is just because Mao had not yet become a god.

It should be pointed out that 牛鬼蛇神 (the small gods) is a derogatory term that has been used to characterize members of the intelligentsia and various power elites in the Mao period. Hence, the villager quoted is reflecting critically on the current period of increasing inequality and hierarchy in China and to his desire to reverse this circumstance by supporting Mao as god.

In 2001 a picture of Mao was displayed on the top of the temple in Nanzhuang, replacing the previous inscription that held the title of the temple, 张爷庙 (Zhangye Temple). The reason for this, according to a villager, was to appease the village and township cadres who might otherwise interfere with the *miaohui*. Mao, whose own attitude toward "feudal superstition" is well known, could now come forth to legitimate religious practice. However, it is likely that other reasons prompted the placement of Mao at the temple. For example, when we asked about the presence of Mao in a nearby village temple, we were told, "Oh, someone put it there and forgot to remove it." Such explanations are not credible. They serve only to avoid a real discussion

about the respondent's feelings about Mao as god, avoiding a topic on which peasants are poorly prepared to elaborate. In contrast, some of our academic colleagues believe that recognizing the apotheosis of Mao requires no explanation, given the fact that many gods were, in life, far less eminent.

In 2002 a picture of Chairman Mao was displayed during the period of *miaohui* in Changxin village. In this case, Mao was placed front and center relative to all others. The village's main god, 水祠娘娘, or the water mother, was placed in a lower order behind Chairman Mao. A manager of the *miaohui* told us that their application for a formal registration of the *miaohui* and its temple (给庙上户口) had not been endorsed by village leaders and that, consequently, the *miaohui* was only informal and perhaps even illegal. And in like manner, in 2005 Chairman Mao was displayed under the marquee during the *miaohui* in Nanzhuang (as shown in figure 4). In this case, he was placed to the left side of the tableau that featured the other gods—having the appearance of an approving observer of the proceedings. By 2005, organizers of *miaohui* in Fanzhuang Township seemed no longer concerned with official sanction; and villagers could be seen showing reverence to Mao's image in the same manner as to other gods. Mao had emerged as a very complex god.

While it is common that a god, such as Guanyin, may serve different purposes for different people, the purposes of Mao are potentially contradictory. Certainly, the Mao of the Party who legitimates the reform conflicts with the Mao who defends peasants from the exactions of landlords, capitalists, and Party bosses. In his discussion of the T'ien Hou cult, Watson suggests that "T'ien Hou, like most Chinese deities, symbolized different things to different people."<sup>27</sup> According to Sperber's "natural approach model," the many different versions of a god may be reconsidered as *public* representations, and not simply the mental representations that emerge from the cognitive processes of individuals.<sup>28</sup> Hence, although each individual may possess his/her own conception of Mao, a single temporally contingent and contextually specific conception can emerge within a public, as each individual converges onto a common image. In this way a *public* image can emerge that possesses few of the complications and contradictions of individual perceptions. As a member of a group, each individual can selectively forget and selectively remember in the comfort of consensus.

In the villages a picture of Mao as the promoter of equalitarianism is mobilized as the dominant representation, confronting the current political

realities of political domination and social inequality in the reform process—allowing peasants to detach Mao from the party of reform. However, this can be realized only by reflecting in the spirit world a hoped-for new reality in the world of mortals; it is only by remembering a carefully constituted Mao that one can imagine a Mao who would emerge to protect them from the various demons that now confront them. The authorities dare not deny the godly status of Chairman Mao, no matter how strongly they may rail against popular religion. However, the image of Mao that is projected by the Party strategically forgets the equalitarian Mao and allows the Mao as Chairman to move to the center of attention. For both the peasants and the Party, Mao is remembered and forgotten, but on contrasting dimensions, reflecting Rubin's ambiguous figure-ground principle.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

While the mortal Mao accepted an imported Marxian view of religion, in his afterlife he and popular religion gain new meanings together in mutual fluorescence. Prayers to Mao are not seen as a substitute for state-funded irrigation projects that would provide a secure water supply. But in the absence of such projects, and in the absence of officials to whom appeals for such projects can be made, there seems to be nothing to lose by approaching the gods. In the increasingly desperate financial position of these villages, the peasants cannot afford to dismiss any conceivable source of support. However, as we have emphasized, religious festivals such as *miaohui* offer opportunities for the achievement of a number of other objectives, some of which seem almost contradictory relative to the singing and praying under the marquee.

The "total situation" of *miaohui* seems to require the confluence of the sacred with the profane, as mature women abandon customary decorum to dance gaily in the streets of Nanzhuang and as opera performances provide comic relief in Gaofeng and Fanzhuang. Indeed, in Gaofeng the audience for the opera seemed larger than the village, leaving only those women who must protect the gods from mischief to receive us under the marquee. After all, there was neither drought nor flood to torment the people then, allowing the gods to remain in reserve for another day.

## Notes

Yu-Kao Liang, and Menghe Tao, *Village and Town Life in China* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1915).

<sup>1,2</sup> Maurice Bloch, *From Blessing to Violence: History and Ideology in the Circumcision Ritual of the Merina of Madagascar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Xudong Zhao, *Quanli yu gongzheng: Xiangtu shehui de jiu fen jie jue yu quanwei duoyuan* (Power and justice: dispute resolution and multiauthorities in a North China village) (Tianjin: Tianjin Classic Publishing, 2003), 180–5.

<sup>4</sup> See Tieliang Liu, “Cunluo miaohui de chuantong ji qi tiaozheng—Fanzhuang ‘longpaihui’ yu qita jige cunluo miaohui de bijiao” (The tradition of the village festival and its regulations—Fanzhuang’s “longpai” festival in comparison with festivals in other villages), in *Yishi yu shehui bianqian* (Ritual and social change), ed. Guo Yuhua (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2000), 254–309; and Gao Bingzhong, “Minjian de yishi yu guojia de zaichang” (Popular rituals and the presence of the state), in *Yishi yu shehui bianqian*, 310–37.

<sup>5</sup> Liu, “Cunluo miaohui de chuantong ji qi tiaozheng,” 260.

<sup>6</sup> This is a fact that has been suggested for rituals more generally. See Satsuki Kawano, *Ritual Practice in Modern Japan* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005); and Nicola Scaldaferrri, “Devotion, Music and Rite in Southern Italy: The Madonna del Pollino Festival,” in *Performing Ecstasies: Music, Dance and Ritual in the Mediterranean*, ed. Luisa Del Giudice and Nancy van Deusen (Ottawa: The Institute of Mediaeval Music, 2005), 169–83.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Religion in Southeastern China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Scaldaferrri, “Devotion, Music and Rite,” 174.

<sup>9</sup> Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Religion*, 180.

<sup>10</sup> Ruth Webb, “The Protean Performer: Mimesis and Identity in Late Antique Discussions of the Theater,” in *Performing Ecstasies*, 3–11.

<sup>11</sup> Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power and the State: Rural North China, 1900–1942* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> Hubert M. Seiwert, with Ma Xisha, *Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects in Chinese History* (Boston: Brill, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Fei Xiao Tung, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> Stephan Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion in China: The Imperial Metaphor* (London: Curzon Press, 2001), 241.

<sup>15</sup> Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Religion*.

<sup>16</sup> Choong-Huan Park, “The Country and the City: Modernity and Rural-Urban Distinctions in Contemporary China” (paper presented at Earth-Bound China Research Conference, Beijing, 15–16 September 2005).

<sup>17</sup> Stephan Feuchtwang and Wang Mingming, *Grassroots Charisma: Four Leaders in China* (London: Routledge, 2001), 140.

<sup>18</sup> Gao, “Minjian de yishi yu guojia de zaichang.”

<sup>19</sup> Liu, “Cunluo miaohui de chuantong ji qi tiaozheng.”

<sup>20</sup> Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion*.



<sup>21</sup> Binzhong Gao, "The New Temples as Museums of the Old: An Ethnography of Folklore in China" (paper presented at the American Anthropology Meeting, Washington, DC, 3 December 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Arthur P. Wolf, "The 'New Feudalism': A Problem for Sinologists," in *South China: State, Culture and Social Change during the 20th Century*, ed. Leo M. Douw and Peter Post (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy, 1996), 77–84.

<sup>23</sup> See Mayfair Yang, "Tradition, Traveling Theory and the Discourse of Modernity in China," in *The Future of Anthropological Knowledge*, ed. Henrietta L. Moore (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 93–114; and Mayfair Yang, "Putting Global Capitalism in Its Place: Economic Hybridity, Bataille, and Ritual Expenditure," *Current Anthropology* 44, no. 4 (2000): 477–509.

<sup>24</sup> See Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion*; and Feuchtwang and Wang, *Grassroots Charisma*.

<sup>25</sup> Jun Jing, *The Temple of Memories: History, Power, and Morality in a Chinese Village* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> Jeremy Barmé, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe 1996), 16.

<sup>27</sup> James L. Watson, "Standardizing the Gods: The Promotion of T'ien Hou ('Empress of Heaven') along the South China Coast," in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 292–324, 302.

<sup>28</sup> Dan Sperber, *On Anthropological Knowledge: Three Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>29</sup> E. Rubin, *Visuell wahrgenommene Figuren: Studien in psychologischer Analyse* (Visually perceived figures: studies in psychological analysis), vol. 1 (Berlin: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1921), 20. See also Donald Olding Hebb, *Organization of Behavior* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1949).

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