

Spectacle and Sacrifice
*The Ritual Foundations of Village Life
in North China*

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David Johnson

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To

Wu Xiaoling 吳曉鈴, in memoriam

and

Wang Ch'iu-kuei 王秋桂

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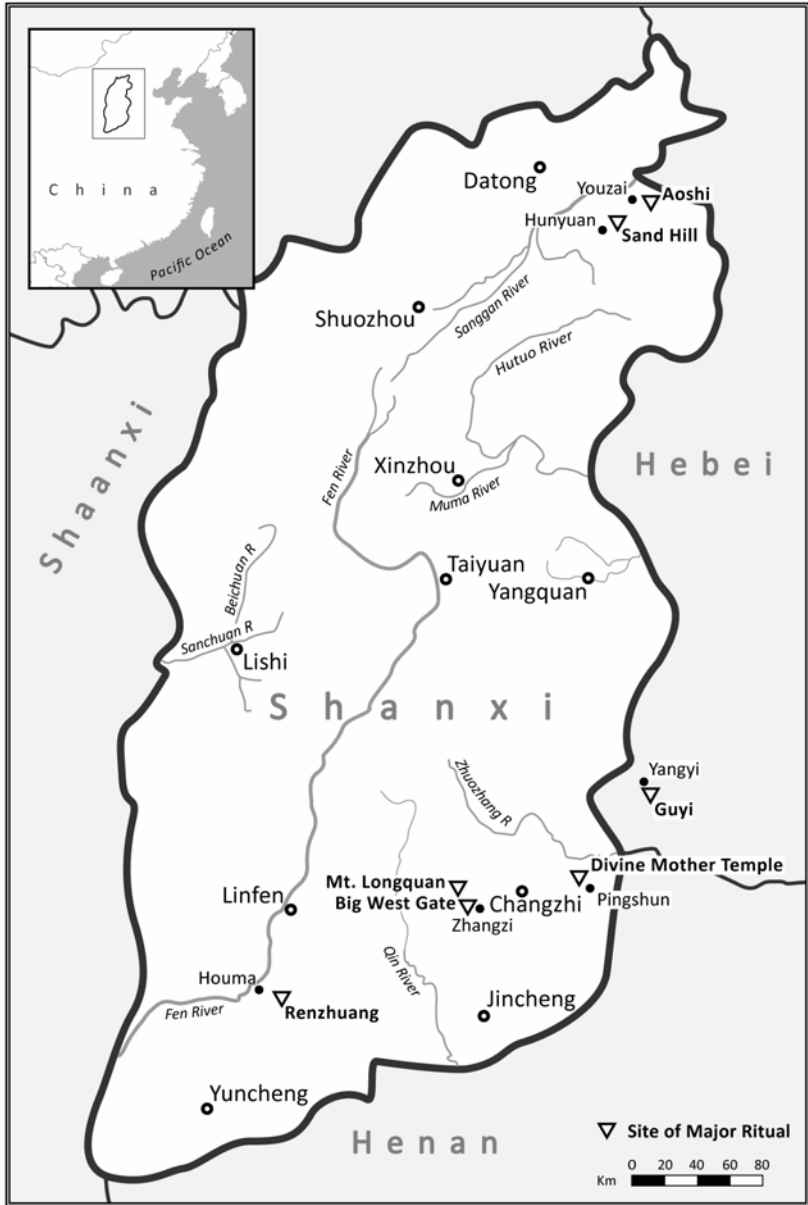
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Map 1 Sites of major New Year and *Sai* rituals discussed in this book.

Introduction

DEFINITIONS AND ARGUMENT

This book is about village rituals. In southern Shanxi the festivals at which the most important rituals were performed were sponsored by territorial units called *shê*. *Shê* were frequently identical with natural villages, but especially in southeastern Shanxi some *shê* were made up of a number of villages and some large villages contained several *shê*. A festival might be sponsored by a single *shê*, or sponsorship might rotate among a group of them.¹ *Shê* were highly stable; when a *shê* was composed of several villages it therefore amounted to a long-lived village alliance. Alliances of villages (and of *shê*) may have been as significant a structuring factor in the countryside as Skinner's standard marketing areas or Kuhn's *tuanlian*.² *Shê* existed only to sponsor festivals and their associated rituals; it was villages that were the basic units of settlement in rural China. Therefore in this book I consistently speak of village festivals and village rituals, even though strictly speaking they often were *shê* festivals and *shê* rituals in southern Shanxi.

By "rituals" I mean the scripted performances through which villagers interacted with the Powers, natural and divine, nameless and

1. I use "festival" here to refer to the event in its entirety, including commercial activities, socializing, gambling, and so on, while "ritual" refers to those portions of a festival that had special symbolic importance. (For a general description of temple festivals, see Wu Cheng-han, "The Temple Fairs in Late Imperial China.") But a hard and fast distinction is not possible; for example, was a procession a ritual?

2. Skinner, "Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China: Part I"; Kuhn, *Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China*.

named, malevolent and benign, that they believed had a certain degree of control over their fates. Although many rituals took place in the household—funerals, exorcisms, offerings to the stove god, and the like—rituals performed for the village as a whole had a particular importance. The residents of a village believed their fate was, in part, bound up with its rituals. Because the rituals were dense and complex and the entire community was actively involved in staging them, they had a powerful emotional impact. The people who grew up with them could never unlearn them.

Village rituals were of two basic types, seasonal and liturgical. Seasonal rituals belonged to the realm of custom; people did them because they had always done them, and the notion that they might have had authors was unimaginable: they may have changed, but they had always existed. They were performed almost exclusively in the village lanes and nearby fields and seldom required the guidance of specialists. They frequently featured exorcisms, of a kind that did not use priests or rely on textual authority. Seasonal rituals were embedded in seasonal festivals; by far the most important of these was Yuanxiao, which centered on the day of the first full moon of the first lunar month, the climax of the New Year celebrations. Liturgical rituals, by contrast, were focused on a temple and the temple's god; they took place during the annual festival celebrating the god's birthday, featured sacrifices rather than exorcisms, and used written liturgies and opera scripts, which necessarily had authors. Their most important segments were carefully scripted and performed on stages or in stage-like pavilions, with little room for spontaneity; they were performed by specially trained members of the community and directed by experts from outside the village.

Every village ritual, whether seasonal or liturgical, was a combination of spectacle and sacrifice. The spectacles tended to be public and filled with color and excitement, while the sacrifices or offerings were performed inside temples and were far more solemn. Seasonal rituals like New Year, in their communal aspect, were virtually all spectacle, sometimes entertaining but at other times frightening or horrific. Official rituals—which we will not consider in this book—had far more sacrifice than spectacle; indeed, they were deliberately unspectacular. Liturgical rituals, the most important of all village rituals, combined spectacle and sacrifice in roughly equal measure. Their central spectacle was the

procession, their sacrifices a combination of food offerings and operas. In southeastern Shanxi, the largest and richest liturgical rituals were embedded in great festivals called *yingshen saibui*, or *sai*.

Part I of this book describes four village New Year celebrations, seasonal rituals; Part III describes three *sai*, liturgical rituals. Part II is a brief overview of the operas performed at liturgical rituals in southern Shanxi. This subject might seem irrelevant in a book about the ritual foundations of village life, but in fact operas were indispensable to temple festivals not only in southern Shanxi but all over north China from as early as the eleventh century.³ Stages in southern Shanxi temples are the earliest physical evidence of opera in China. The oldest surviving one is dated 1157, but inscriptions prove that there was a temple stage in the Houtu Temple in Qiaoshang village, Wanrong county, in the first decade of the eleventh century, 150 years earlier. This is considerably earlier than the earliest non-epigraphic literary evidence.

In China, ritual and opera always went together. Even Daoist and Buddhist priests incorporated highly dramatic material into their rituals. Sometimes the ritual action itself was inherently theatrical, as in the exaggerated gestures of an exorcist; in other cases, drama was added to ritual, as when adaptations of scenes from operas were used as a sort of counterpoint to the more solemn parts of a ceremony. Real priests performed on stage in certain operas, and actors sometimes performed real exorcisms for villagers. In the remote valleys of northwest Hunan as recently as the early twentieth century, there were bands of spirit-mediums who traveled from village to village, first performing the rituals that were needed by the community and then changing costumes and staging the Buddho-Confucian opera about Mulian rescuing his mother from Hell, which was itself construed as a kind of communal exorcism.⁴ Rather than thinking of village ritual and village opera as two

3. Since customary or seasonal village rituals were not temple-centered and were not focused on sacrifice, they did not employ ritual opera. They did make use of other kinds of performance, some very spectacular, as we shall see. I use “opera” in preference to “drama” because the latter can refer to many different kinds of performance while the former points specifically to stories enacted with music on stages.

4. Li Huaisun, “Chenhe xi ‘Mulian’ chutan,” p. 44.

separate genres, we should view them as different facets of a single ritual-operatic performance complex.

Asserting that ritual and opera had much in common does not, however, explain why, virtually as soon as opera appeared, it began to be performed in rural temples. What about opera made it so attractive to country folk that they spent large sums of money constructing stages in quite adequate temples and made significant changes to time-honored rituals? A convincing explanation of why opera was adapted so quickly to ritual use in the countryside would illuminate much that is still obscure about the history of both opera and village ritual in China, and I return to this matter in the Concluding Observations. For the moment, it should be clear why a chapter on ritual opera occupies the center of this book.

After this brief survey of the main themes of the book, I turn to some questions that are likely to arise in the minds of readers. To put it baldly, why should we bother with village ritual? This is really two questions: Why bother with villages? And why bother with ritual? As for villages, at least two issues are in play. There are those—probably a large portion of the historians who study China—who feel that it is not important to study villages because the people who lived in them had no influence on events. But what events are we talking about? If the relevant arena is the abstraction we call “the state,” then we must bid the farmers adieu except for those times when they rebelled or otherwise caught the attention of the mighty. But if the arena we are concerned with is a village, or even a county, then villagers obviously had an influence on the course of events. So it all depends on the kind of events we choose to study.

But why study a village when there is an entire country to work on? One reason is that to study an entire country one has to work at such a high level of generalization that the results are of little interest. Most historians will disagree with this: large generalizations are precisely what they—or at least reviewers and graduate seminars—find interesting. They prefer structure to texture, explanation to incident; after all, what can detail, no matter how fine-grained, tell us? From this perspective, understanding China means answering questions deemed to be important, developing large generalizations, and so on. This is what we were taught was the historian’s prime task, and it is completely legitimate. But it is important to recognize that this conception of the historian’s

craft involves a commitment to a particular definition of understanding. Relying on abstractions like the state, social structure, or modernization estranges us from what is most human in our subject. Is the price worth paying? At a sufficiently high level of generalization apples and oranges are similar—both are round, grow on trees, and contain seeds—but in that rarefied atmosphere we can no longer taste the apple or smell the orange.

Village studies are also criticized by raising the problem of typicality: How can one or a few villages stand for many? The implication here is that understanding rural Chinese society and culture requires a survey of large numbers of villages. But this assumes precisely the definition of understanding that I just called into question, and obviously cannot be accepted uncritically.

There is another, blunter response to the typicality issue: in the present state of our knowledge of Chinese villages, especially before 1949, who is to say what is unique and what is typical? At the moment we know next to nothing about Chinese rural life, especially before the brutal simplifications of the twentieth century. In my research I have been surprised again and again by the striking differences in the ritual repertoires of villages in the same region. I agree with Philip Huang's conclusion that "even in the 1930's, all but the most highly commercialized villages of the North China plain were still relatively insular communities."⁵ For a long time to come, every additional village that we study will force us to adjust our ideas about village culture to make room for new and unexpected information. Our studies will not necessarily enable us to make more powerful generalizations, but they will force us to recognize possibilities we had not previously imagined.

Another reason why many historians of China feel that villages are not worth studying is that virtually everything we know about village life, at least before the twentieth century, comes from tainted sources, sources written by men who for the most part knew next to nothing about the countryside or who, if they did, felt there was nothing of

5. Philip Huang, *The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China*, p. 219. The insularity of north China villages is one of Huang's basic arguments in this book. He gives some remarkable examples on pp. 221–22.

value to be found there unless it had been appropriated and reinterpreted by people like themselves. This fundamental bias in our sources, the unquestioned assumption that villages and the people who lived in them did not matter, is so universal as to be virtually invisible. The result is a profoundly impoverished view of Chinese history and culture. For example, two of the three large *sai* discussed in Part III took place at temples in Zhangzi county dedicated to the ancient culture hero Hou Yi, the great archer who saved the world by shooting down nine suns when all ten appeared at the same time. The festivals were held on his birthday, the sixth day of the sixth lunar month, and were probably among the most splendid festivals in all of north China. But the only thing the sections on popular customs in the Qing dynasty Zhangzi county gazetteers say about the sixth of the sixth is: “The villagers vie to present offerings of animals at the San Zong Temple(s). They also present offerings to the god of livestock,” and “On the sixth month, sixth day, the villagers offer *sai* in the San Zong Temple(s) and to the god of livestock.”⁶ These books do not even hint at the realities of village practice, yet they belong to a genre that many historians believe to be our best source for local history.

To my mind the best historians are those who see the people they are studying and thinking about as in some sense akin to them. They enter the world of their subjects by using concrete, specific, human-scale evidence such as biographies, diaries, and direct observation. What they write has the same characteristics. It is sometimes called “microhistory,” and there are many celebrated practitioners of it among historians of Europe.⁷ This sort of history partakes of a quality I call

6. Ding Shiliang and Zhao Fang, *Zhongguo difangzhi minsu ziliao: Huabei juan*, p. 622, quoting *Zhangzi xian zhi* 長子縣志 (1778), and p. 624, quoting *Zhangzi xian zhi* (1816).

7. They include Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Natalie Davis, Robert Darnton, and Carlo Ginzburg. For modern China there are also some notable contributions, including two works jointly authored by Edward Friedman, Paul Pickowicz, and Mark Selden: *Chinese Village, Socialist State and Revolution, Resistance, and Reform in Village China*; Ralph Thaxton's *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China*; and Huang Shu-min's *The Spiral Road*. These books cannot, however, be compared with microhistories by historians of Europe since they are so heavily concerned with political power and economic conditions in the very recent past. The books by Friedman and his coauthors draw lessons from the experience of a single village that seem intended to be relevant to rural China

anecdotal. The dictionary definition of anecdote is “a short account of an interesting event of some kind,” but I use the term simply to refer to accounts of specific events or places or persons. Every such anecdote is embedded in a social, cultural, historical, and symbolic matrix from which it cannot be separated and without which it cannot be understood. Thinking about a particular event or state of affairs or person brings with it a consciousness, sometimes focused, sometimes vague, of the whole world within which it existed. It is one thing to read about the Industrial Revolution, for example, and quite a different thing to read biographies of James Watt or Matthew Boulton, or to turn from a history of navigation to an account of John Harrison’s invention of a true marine chronometer. Full-scale accounts of particular events, such as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s carnival in Romans in 1580 or Robert Darnton’s massacre of cats in Paris in the late 1730s, have the same ability to reveal entire worlds.

Accounts of particular events or places or people, if reconstructed as completely as possible, confront us with a richer, more complex reality than conventional histories can. But what can a historian do with such material, with mere anecdotes, even defined in this generous way? This is like asking what is the point of studying a single village. My response is that the anecdote can lead to understanding, although not the sort of understanding sought by most historians. It is understanding achieved not through analysis but through empathy. Intellectuals tend to value empathy less than analysis because they assume that the most important kind of understanding comes from framing “interesting” questions and answering them, or developing large generalizations. But it is not obvious that analysis is superior to empathy in understanding human beings and the worlds they create. Is science a better way of understanding people than poetry?

A final variant of the objection to studying villages arises from impatience with studying villagers. There are after all many studies of kings

as a whole. (Note the shift from “Chinese Village” to “Village China” in the titles.) Whether they have found a solution to the “typicality” problem is an open question. *Catastrophe and Contention* and *The Spiral Road* are much more “anecdotal” in the sense developed in the following section.

and generals, poets and philosophers, and of specific events in which they played leading roles (which incidentally fit my definition of anecdotal history). This bias toward well-known individuals is understandable, since their careers and creations are far better documented than any peasant's—but it still is a bias. Are they really more worth studying? Who is more important, the official who decrees policies or the individuals who may or may not carry them out? Do we not assume that if we deal with leaders we will know better what actually happened? But is this in fact the case? We assume, for example, that the works of Zhu Xi have an importance incomparably superior to anything a villager might write. But who read Zhu Xi? Only a very small number of highly educated men. Most people came into contact with Zhu Xi's ideas, if at all, at second hand, in a myriad popularizations, or third hand, in oral interpretations of those popularizations, and so on. If we want to understand Zhu Xi's impact, obviously we should study the popularizations and their interpretations, and scholars have begun to do this. The point here is that Zhu Xi's works, or the poetry of Du Fu, or the essays of Chen Hongmou, monuments of Chinese philosophy, literature, and statecraft though they may be, have little to teach us about the attitudes and values of ordinary people. To assume that knowledge of Zhu Xi's works automatically brings an understanding of his influence is a fundamental error. We must start at the bottom and work up, which, outrageous as it may sound, means giving the villager's worldview priority over Zhu Xi's.

This is my very long answer to the question Why bother with villages (and villagers)? The second question was Why bother with ritual? The answer is very clear. Chinese culture was a performance culture: even in pre-Qin times Chinese philosophers were concerned more with how people should act, and what counted as good actions, than with using logic to prove propositions. Ritual was the highest form of action or performance; every significant life event, social, political, or religious, was embedded in and expressed through ritual. If we wish to understand how Chinese people thought and felt about the family, the community, the state, or the gods, we must study the rituals by which those thoughts and feelings were expressed and shaped. Of course, not all scholars are interested in attitudes and values; they may

wish to study economic conditions, social formations, or the institutions of imperial rule; technology, art, geography, or food; power, prestige, or conflict. But if one is interested in the symbolic world of the broad population, educated and uneducated alike, then, in China, it is essential to study ritual.

The subtitle of this book was chosen very deliberately: I am interested in the ritual foundations of village life, not the religious foundations. Although I use the terms “religion” and, especially, “popular religion” from time to time, I do so only when there is no alternative. Adam Chau correctly suggests in his recent book that we “should question the very concept of ‘belief’ in the Chinese popular religious context, as the concept carries with it enormous Judeo-Christian theological baggage.”⁸ The term “religion” carries even more baggage, and it is important to make clear at the outset why I think so. I suspect that for most of my readers, as for me, “religion” implies an ecclesiastical organization, a church; and traditionally churches have been defined by their doctrines. One was not born into a religion; one became a member by means of formal rituals, such as baptism and confirmation. Conversion was possible: it involved acceptance of the doctrines of the church; denial of those doctrines brought expulsion from it.

China did not have religions in this sense of the word. This is what so frustrated the Protestant missionaries in particular, who insisted on asking the people they met what religion they believed in (“*Ni xin shenme jiao?*”); the question simply baffled those they were questioning.⁹ Similarly, the term most frequently used today for (religious) beliefs—*xinyang*—grates on the ear like the neologism it is.¹⁰ Buddhism is the

8. Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous Response*, p. 59.

9. Note that a Chinese word for “religion” (*zongjiao*) had to be invented as well. The traditional term, *jiao* (teaching), did not capture the full meaning of the word in European languages. I single out Protestants in the text, but, as is well known, Catholic missionaries also struggled with the question of whether Chinese beliefs were doctrinally acceptable.

10. I was fascinated to discover in Chau’s *Miraculous Response* (p. 48) that villagers in northern Shaanxi use the word *jiang* 講—to discuss, to speak about—where we would use the term “believe,” as for example in the phrase *jiang mixin* 講密信: “believe in superstition.” (Of course, *mixin* is another neologism.)

closest the Chinese came to religion in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic sense, but it is not monotheistic, which puts it in a radically different category. My point is that the foundations of Christianity are complex structures of carefully formulated definitions and tightly argued conclusions created by medieval theologians using tools provided by Greek logic and metaphysics. The Christian church was virtually created out of centuries-long theological disputes about highly complex and abstract concepts such as Original Sin, the Trinity, the Real Presence, and so on,¹¹ and the same presumably can be said of Islam and Judaism.

Chinese philosophers, to say nothing of ordinary people, were simply not interested in that sort of thing. But tremendous debates concerning what we call “ritual” took place in every dynasty. How imperial rituals were to be performed, whether certain actions were ritually correct or not—issues such as these were as close to the heart of Chinese religion as theological disputes were to Christianity. The leaders of the Christian churches were intensely concerned with heresy—improper beliefs—and punished heretics mercilessly. By contrast, Chinese thinkers, following Xunzi, usually assumed that if people’s actions conformed to the proper patterns, the beliefs could be left to take care of themselves. And ritual supplied the proper patterns. This was an idea that was shared by virtually all Chinese, of all classes and stations, from chief minister to farmer.

Communal rituals were thus the highest expression of the values and beliefs of ordinary people. At the same time, traditional Chinese village ritual practices were extremely heterogeneous. Villages literally within

11. For a taste of this, see Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, chap. 18. Even laymen could be passionately engaged in these theological disputes; for a charming example from the fourth century, see *ibid.*, p. 636. In the late thirteenth century, the archbishop of Canterbury ordered priests preaching to the simplest audiences to “expound to the people in the vulgar tongue, without any fantastic texture of subtlety, the fourteen articles of faith, the ten commandments, the two precepts of the gospel . . . the seven deadly sins . . . the seven chief virtues, and the seven sacraments of grace” (Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*, p. 391). What is notable here is the precedence given to the articles of faith, that is, the creed, the distilled essence of centuries of theological analysis and debate.

shouting distance of each other could have radically different ways of sacrificing to their deities or of driving away evil influences.¹² Since there was no ecclesiastical authority to enforce ritual conformity, and since officials had little interest in the customary practices of villagers as long as they did not disturb the peace or weaken the tax base, it was natural for a state of ritual autarky to develop. This is another reason for focusing on single villages or small regions.

This state of affairs is fatal to Maurice Freedman's argument that "a Chinese religion exists."¹³ To anyone who has studied Chinese villages closely, it is obvious that there was no single system of beliefs and practices most ordinary Chinese followed. There were deities known to virtually everyone (Guanyin, the Stove God); practices that were widespread (processions, pilgrimages); and the forms of temples and altars were much the same everywhere. Yet as soon as one looks closely at local ritual practice, whether domestic or communal, seasonal or liturgical, differences far outweigh similarities. And what else would one expect in a country where the population was measured in the hundreds of millions, where there was no established church, and where the organized religions that did exist were unsympathetic to the dogma-haunted sectarian mentalities that in the West produced creeds, catechisms, heresies, and excommunications?

PARTICULARS

The most important of the village rituals described below were still celebrated in southeastern Shanxi in the 1930s, as they had been for centuries. They were fabulous affairs involving hundreds of participants and thousands or even tens of thousands of spectators. People came from miles around to watch the processions that villages sent out with all the pomp they could muster to invite the gods of neighboring villages to their festivals. Some of the temples in which the offering rituals took place were massive structures with roofs of beautifully glazed tiles

12. Compare the practices of two neighboring Zhejiang villages described in two volumes by Xu Hongtu: *Zhejiang sheng Pan'an xian Shenze cun* and *Zhejiang sheng Pan'an xian Yangyou cun*.

13. See Wolf, ed., *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, p. 20.

and walls painted the same dusty red as the imperial palaces, located in settings of considerable beauty away from villages and towns, from which they dominated the surrounding landscape like castles. Others were closer to inhabited places but still were imposing and well maintained because of the importance of their cults.

The villages of greatest interest to me, although I devote only half of this book to them, are located in the watershed of the Zhuozhang River and its main tributaries, whose central city is Changzhi. The waters of the Zhuozhang flow east, parallel to the Yellow River, through a gap in the Taihang Mountains and thence into the Grand Canal. The Taihangs are very rugged and form a significant barrier to communication.¹⁴ The mountains to the west and north of Changzhi are also a challenge to travelers, and so the region is fairly self-contained. At its center is a fertile plain roughly forty by seventy kilometers, surrounded by ranges of hills that are heavily cultivated up to the point where the soil becomes too sparse to support anything besides grazing and forestry. Much of the soil is loess, and the deep water-carved gullies and ravines characteristic of the loess region are frequently seen.

The Changzhi region is heavily populated, its counties varying between 200 and 600 persons per square kilometer. But these statistics do not distinguish between cities and villages. Looking at the large-scale maps in the Shanxi Provincial Atlas of counties such as Tunliu and Pingshun is far more instructive: they are black with the names of villages.¹⁵ Truly, this is village China. It is in villages such as these that the people we meet in this book lived, and in some cases still live: people like Xu Youyi, who preserved the last surviving copy of the liturgy of the Fan-drum ritual in Renzhuang village; Li Fubao of Lu village in Jincheng county, an Entertainer who accumulated over eighteen

14. But note that Shanxi dialect, or more precisely the Hanxin subgroup of the Jin dialect group, is spoken 75–100 km east of the southeast Shanxi border, which runs along the eastern base of the Taihang Range. From a geographical point of view this is hard to understand; is it a remnant of the forced Ming migrations from Shanxi to Hebei? See Wurm and Rong, eds., *Language Atlas of China*, map B7.

15. Oddly, areas in the heart of the plain, such as the eastern parts of Tunliu and Zhangzi counties and the western part of Lucheng, show much less dense concentrations of villages. Could this be a remnant of the “big fields” of the commune system?

exclusive ritual Territories in two decades; Yao Jitang and Zhang Yutang, who recopied the script of *Thrice Inviting Zhuge Liang* in the depth of the winter of 1925 in the village of Xinzhuang, hurrying to finish it before the New Year; Niu Zhenguo of East Big Pass village in Zhangzi county, who wrote down the *Handbook for Use Before the Gods of the Sai* in 1911; as well as the many others whose names have been lost forever.

For as long as there have been people who can be called Chinese, they have lived in southern Shanxi. Chinese culture was already very old in Shanxi when most of south China was still in the hands of indigenous peoples. Virtually every field in its river valleys has probably been cultivated for thousands of years. The Shang ritual center of Anyang, where the oracle bones were discovered, is just across the border in Hebei, and Houma, the site of a great Zhou bronze foundry, is in southwestern Shanxi. The maps in the Shanxi volume of the *Atlas of Chinese Cultural Relics* show southern Shanxi thickly covered with Shang, Western Zhou, and Eastern Zhou archeological sites.¹⁶ Thus it is quite possible that some ritual performances in southern Shanxi, such as the killing of scapegoat figures to drive away evil influences, or the great fires at New Year (of which the lanterns now so closely associated with the holiday may be a domesticated substitute) go back a long, long time. Hou Yi, an ancient culture hero assumed by most sinologists to have been embalmed in literary legends as early as Han times, was the object of a flourishing cult in southeastern Shanxi as late as the 1930s. The festivals that are the subject of this book have histories counted in centuries, not millennia, but the long historical horizon of the region in which they emerged and flowered is not irrelevant, as we shall see.

No residents could avoid participating in their village's festival, and it is hard to imagine that anyone would have wanted to, since a village's festivals were at the heart of its inhabitants' sense of their place in the world, what made their village worthy of their neighbors' respect. In many places, important roles in the rituals and operas were passed from father to son, who presumably were among the most respected mem-

16. Guojia wenwuju, *Zhongguo wenwu ditu ji: Shanxi fenge*, 1: 70–73.

bers of the community. But there was a place for non-elite villagers as well: they performed in shows of various sorts, gave demonstrations of martial prowess, and played in bands. Every village festival was different: there might be a distinctive display in the procession, or a unique opera during the offerings in the temple, or liturgies that were used nowhere else. And every one was taken very seriously.

Some of the largest festivals employed professional ritual masters and hereditary outcaste actor-musicians. These two types of specialists possessed ritual handbooks or opera scripts, which may have been in their families for generations. Their presence brought dignity and a certain consistency to the prayers, hymns, food offerings, operas, and the other activities that took place within the temples.¹⁷ During the core rituals of the three days that most of these festivals lasted, the temple courtyard was packed with scores of participants, all wearing special costumes. Any remaining space must have been occupied by spectators. The temples were lavishly decorated: offering tables and all their paraphernalia were arranged in the offering hall; miniature thrones for the invited gods were set up in the main hall; special rooms set aside for the use of the gods were furnished with valuable furniture, paintings, and objets d'art; and in some of the temples intricately carved walls made of tiles fashioned from deep-fried dough extended across the entire width of the courtyard to set off the inner ritual space.

The gods feasted and watched operas, and so did the people. Those who could not squeeze into the temple courtyard to watch the gods' operas often gathered at temporary stages constructed near the temple where operas in popular regional styles were presented. Field or household work was put aside; the entire village was swept up in the excitement of the processions and feasts, buying and selling, gambling and drinking, and every other sort of enjoyable pastime. Authority, whether ecclesiastical or political, cast no shadow over the revelry. There were no Daoist priests or Buddhist monks, and no county officials, unless, as sometimes happened, the magistrate himself was the sponsor of the

17. The dominance of Daoist ritual specialists in southeastern China, with their fairly standardized ritual texts, may help explain why there was less variation in village rituals there.

festival, thus turning himself into an honorary commoner. These grand celebrations were the creations of the people, with no interference or direction from higher authority, and they knew it. The temple festivals were essential to their communal identity, sharpening differences that were already marked by dialect, costume, and cuisine.

A festival could not hope to be successful unless it was guided by villagers who were competent administrators. Planning for the next year's celebration began even before the current festival was over, with the selection of the sponsoring village (if the festival was sponsored by a village alliance). Under the supervision of a committee of villagers with executive authority, responsibility for everything from the stabling of horses and mules to the construction of temporary stages was assigned to specific individuals. Those who did not perform their tasks properly risked fines and even corporal punishment. Funds were collected from the community, generally on the basis of ability to pay, and a public accounting was made at the end of the festival.

In addition to temple festivals, the rural year was punctuated by seasonal festivals, the most important of which by far was New Year. At this time villages put on processions and other shows, some of them extremely elaborate. Fire, appropriate for the ending of winter, was used in many forms, ranging from lanterns to gigantic bonfires. There were usually exorcisms, and masked dramas and large-scale dances, performed on the ground, were common. These features have a strongly archaic feel to them. Since there was no approved model, either official or local, for New Year festivals, endless variations developed around certain basic practices, such as the display of lanterns. Seasonal festivals belonged to the people at large rather than village elites and local specialists. The carnival spirit was abroad, and formal rituals were much less in evidence, and for these reasons strong and even violent emotions sometimes surfaced.

Village festival life everywhere in prerevolutionary China, whether temple centered or seasonally based, was rich, complex, conservative, and extraordinarily diverse. Festivals and their associated rituals and other performances provided the symbolic and intellectual materials out of which ordinary people constructed their ideas about the human world and the realm of the Powers, presented in settings that guaranteed they would have maximum impact. These festivals took place

throughout the year; in the more densely populated regions, a festival probably occurred within walking distance of any given village on average once every week or two. Without knowing a great deal about these aspects of rural life, it is quite impossible to understand Chinese history.

A brief word is in order about the sources I have used in writing. My attention was first drawn to southeastern Shanxi by the publication of a liturgical manuscript dated 1574 discovered in Nan Shê village, about seventeen kilometers north of Changzhi. Before long other liturgical manuscripts were located and (eventually) published. Such documents are extremely rare and are also very important because they are the only source of authentic information on the details of north Chinese village ritual practice. These texts form the core of the primary sources on which this book is based.

In addition, I obtained transcripts of oral histories of aging ritual specialists and musicians that had been prepared by local scholars and then edited for possible publication; copies of long and extremely detailed descriptions of one of the great *sai* prepared by an educated native of the place where it was celebrated; and published descriptions of various aspects of seasonal and liturgical rituals written by specialists but obviously based on extensive interviews with local people—although the sources of the information were not always specified, and the accounts appeared to have undergone extensive editing. During visits to southeastern Shanxi, I conducted interviews with villagers, including ritual specialists, that were recorded and later transcribed, and collected scarce publications and unpublished articles.

As I began to realize the degree to which I had underestimated the richness and vitality of village symbolic life, I simultaneously realized that hardly anyone with direct knowledge of it was still alive. A millennial change was under way; the old ways had vanished, and now even memories of them were disappearing. In addition to the intellectual program outlined above, I began to feel an obligation simply to preserve the knowledge of what some villagers had achieved and thus to restore to them something of the respect they deserved but which, because of our ignorance, they had never received.

My aim of describing as completely as possible the most important rituals of a few villages is what at least some anthropologists aspire to. But since almost none of the rituals are still performed, I have had to reconstruct them from texts and other evidence, which is what historians do. This has led me into the territories of both anthropologists and historians. Both are likely to be dissatisfied with the results, since my experience in the field was not extensive enough to allow me to write a solid ethnography, and the archival base is not rich enough to allow me to write a European-style local history.¹⁸ But for all its limitations, I hope that this book, by showing the depth and complexity of Chinese village culture, will persuade its readers that they can never understand China if they ignore the country folk. If so, I will be content.

18. Cf., e.g., the sources available to Edward Muir for his *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice*.

