

M. A. Thesis (KIN4593 – 30 ECTS)

Chinese Society and Politics



平安神

Mao Zedong as a Deity

A Case Study of a temple in Sichuan

Eirik Tvetene Malme

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

Dep. of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages

Spring, 2014

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Abstract

China has a long history of more than 5000 years. Other than technological inventions, arts and craft China has also made impressive contribution in the disciplines of the mind such as religion. One fascinating tradition was to honor heroes by building temples dedicated to their name. This was more than a simple symbolic act, they were incorporated into the cosmology itself. The lines between man and gods were blurred and fluid.

Today, the Chinese state, in accordance with Scientific Development, prefers to honor its heroes with other methods. Yet this does not mean that the custom has ceased to exist. Across the Chinese countryside temples honoring Chairman Mao Zedong and other great communist leaders can be found. Incense is burned, rituals are performed and prayers recited towards them in the same manner as the conventional gods.

This thesis attempts to explain how the continuation of this custom can be understood as well as address in what manner it has changed and adapted to the modern world. It bases itself primarily on a week of fieldwork at such a temple located in Sichuan as well as a visit to the founder of the temple.

All of those holding positions of responsibility at the temple that were interviewed argued that the terms religion and superstition were inappropriate to the local context. They held that what they were doing was a secular ritual intended to honor the heroes of the nation in the same manner as gods, but only at the symbolic level. This was to a certain degree contradicted by some of the local lay members that saw the godhood of the Chairman as a matter of fact. I argue that the denial of non-secular content at the temple by the leadership can be understood from a historical perspective where superstition is something inherently harmful and thus a label to be avoided. I further argue that the approach of the lay members arguing in favor of Mao's godhood can be understood as a continuation of traditional religious customs.

关键词: Mao Zedong, Popular Religion, Religion, Superstition, Culture

摘要

中国有非常悠久的历史，在近五千年当中发生了很多历史事件，包括政治、战争、科技等各个方面，当然还有文化的发展。文化存在于人们的心中，包括大家崇奉或者信仰的东西，譬如中国历史上有很多不同的哲学、思想、意识形态、宗教、民间信仰、迷信、邪教等等。然而这些概念常常被混合在一起，比如孔子是哲学家，但也有人觉得他是神；释迦摩尼是佛教创始人，是思想家，是哲学家，也有人觉得他是神。人们经常会把英雄神化，在其去世后为其造庙膜拜，这也是老百姓对英雄表示尊重的一个办法。

毛泽东被视为中国现代世界历史中最重要的人物之一，有人称他为政治家，有人称他为哲学家，又有人称他为思想家、理论家等等，还有人视他神，为他修筑寺庙，用他的金像做成护身符，视他为偶像等等。在一些人看来这是迷信，是需要反对的；但在另一些人的眼里，这却是奇妙的民间信仰，是文化的瑰宝。这特别让我们西方人感到迷惑，毛泽东是个人，还是个无神论者，为什么会被当作是一个神呢？

与现代科学和社会发展并存的还有许多奇妙的民间信仰，有很多人热爱他们的传统文化，热爱老祖宗留下的原始宗教。有人说这些都是迷信，可是没有人会同意自己的信仰在别人看来是迷信。作者被中国文化思想发展的历史深深吸引，因此本论文旨在研究民间信仰这块文化瑰宝，以毛泽东庙来为典型案例，来研究人们修筑这样的庙是否真的把毛主席当作神，人们如何崇拜他，有多少人会做这样的崇拜，还有这些崇拜的人与政府之间的配合如何等等。作者前往了中国四川一个毛泽东庙进行采访调查。这个寺庙里面有毛泽东、周恩来和朱德的塑像。作者访问了这座庙的创办人、管理人员、当地党员和群众代表，调查了他们的背景情况、寺庙的历史、他们对毛泽东的看法、他们觉得毛泽东是人还是神，有多少崇拜者以及他们的政治背景等等。

寺庙的创办人、管理人员和当地党员都同意毛主席不是神，强调修筑毛主席庙是为了尊重和纪念毛泽东，强调寺庙的情况和迷信或信仰没有关系，虽然他们在敬拜毛主席时使用的礼节和敬拜神的礼节是相同的，但是他们认为这是一种尊重，而不是信仰；但是有的老百姓跟他们看法不同，在他们看来毛泽东早就成了神，他们认为这是一种民间信仰。当地村民们都敬拜这个毛泽东庙，每年也有很多香客和游客前往，大多数把毛泽东作为偶像去崇拜，没有政治方面的问题。寺庙的创办人、管理人员和党员强调政府知道尊重毛主席跟迷信没有关系，强调修筑寺庙是历史上老百姓尊重英雄的体现，是一种文化，是被国家保护的。

Key Words: 毛泽东, 民间信仰, 宗教, 迷信, 文化

Foreword

I would like to thank both of my two excellent supervisors, Koen Wellens and Lu Minzhen, for their assistance, advice, recommendations of literature as well as patience in dealing with my irregular updates and confusing questions. I am also grateful to the staff members of both Zhejiang University and the University of Oslo whom I repeatedly pestered with questions of varying relevance. Yang Lu of Zhejiang University was in particular the main recipient of 麻烦 (*máfan*, trouble) from me and her helpful attitude and diligence was deeply appreciated. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the people I encountered at the Hong'en Temple in Sichuan, their cooperativeness, kindness and patience was deeply appreciated. My gratitude towards all of my interviewees must also be mentioned, they were all helpful, understanding and accommodating towards me, even when they were given no incentive to be so. I am also grateful to my friends and family that encouraged me and freely volunteered their assistance if I had required it. The staff of How Right Hotel in Mianyang should also be given an honorable mention as they treated me like a minor VIP, apparently just because I was able to talk their language. I am also very grateful to my guide in Sichuan that assisted me both with transportation and translation of local dialects. Without him my fieldwork might very well have been far less successful. I would finally like to thank a dear friend that assisted me not only with the transcription of interviews, proofreading of my Chinese abstract, helping me organize my fieldwork in Mianyang but also securing the assistance of aforementioned guide. Her assistance was simply invaluable.

Contents

Abstract.....	V
摘要.....	VII
Foreword.....	IX
1Introduction.....	1
1.1 ...Research Question.....	3
1.2...Theory.....	4
2The Fieldwork.....	9
2.1...Methodology.....	9
2.2 ...The Temple.....	14
3.....Findings.....	17
3.1...Divinity.....	17
3.2...Religious Rituals.....	20
3.3...Popularity.....	22
3.4...Political Aspects.....	28
3.5...Interpretation of Findings.....	30
4 ...Conclusion.....	35
Bibliography	39

Introduction:

Years ago, when I was a fresh exchange student in Beijing, I once found myself making small talk with a Chinese student. When I mentioned that upon a time I had worked at a cemetery she was deeply shocked, asking me: “Are you crazy!? That’s really dangerous!” When I inquired upon the nature of the danger she immediately replied with one word (that from her facial expression was in no need of elaboration): “Ghosts!” I managed to save the situation by displaying the cross hanging from my neck and referring to it as protection, something that had an immediately calming effect upon her. Unfortunately I did not press the subject further, meaning I squandered an excellent opportunity to learn more on the subject. Over the years I have had other similarly surprising encounters with Chinese popular expressions of belief. A bridge in Lanzhou that people would cross to cure their diseases (which was definitely not superstition according to our guide, since in this city everyone believed in it), getting effectively chased out of a temple when it was discovered I had eaten meat the same day, having taxi drivers insisting on driving me to a local Buddhist temple rather than a Christian church (because it was more effective to pray there) etc. Personal experiences such as these, as well as similar expressions of belief I have come across in popular entertainment and literature, have contributed to giving me a deep interest in these matters. Thus when I started my master studies at Zhejiang University I had already decided the general topic I wanted to write on: Chinese popular religion (民间信仰). The problem here is naturally that Chinese popular religion (see theory for definition of this term) is a very, very large field.

During my stay at Zhejiang University I remained convinced in my desire to write something on the subject of the religious scene in China, yet I remained vague and undecided on the particulars on the topic. Eventually, by an article somebody linked me too inspiration came at last. The article was about a temple in northern Shanxi that had acquired a fair amount of attention due to including Mao Zedong among its many religious idols. After doing some more reading on the subject I

discovered that this was not the only place that included revolutionary martyrs amongst the temple gods. In fact there are reportedly *hundreds* of temples in Hunan *alone* that include Chairman Mao in one form or another (personal correspondence). There are also many places where ordinary people have built temples dedicated to people killed during the civil war (civilians and soldiers alike) where reportedly people have prayed for healing and have had their prayers answered, resulting in the temples beginning to draw pilgrims at a large scale. These things fascinated me to no ends. Furthermore they resembled a clear example of Popular Religion as these temples were both built and maintained by the common people, often in a rather grey area regarding the state's jurisdiction. I had found my topic.

This topic is fascinating due to multiple reasons. Firstly, to a foreigner it seems very strange indeed that human beings that haven't even been dead for 50 years, never displayed any supernatural traits (according to official sources) during their lives or made claims thereof, were members of a political party that had a very strong atheist base and promoted atheism by at times forceful means, should be literally made into gods. Secondly, it can be argued to be a very clear display of popular religious belief (民间信仰) as compared to official religious practice (宗教) as it certainly fits nowhere into any of the five official religions of China (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Christianity and Catholic Christianity). In fact, it potentially threads close to superstition (迷信) as it may be argued to be subversive to the State in its certainly un-atheistic portrayal of politicians who are used as symbols of legitimacy by the ruling party. Thirdly, it can be seen as a continuation of traditional religious practice common in ancient China, namely the ritual tradition and deification of important personage. There is no need to go far to see examples of this historical trend, Hangzhou not only has a temple dedicated to the Song dynasty general Yue Fei but also one dedicated to its very own city god, the political administrator Zhou Xin. The question if Mao can (and if so, to what degree) be compared to the city gods of old is one I would very much like to give attention to in this paper.

Research Question:

How can the inclusion of Mao Zedong amongst the deities in Chinese temples be understood?

- Is the historical perspective gainful here?
- How can the debate on the terms 宗教, 迷信, 民间信仰 be applied to bring light to this subject?

I have chosen this question for my thesis as it will allow me to not only look at the reasons why you can find temples dedicated to The Chairman in China, it will also allow me to go into interpretations as well as implications of the topic. I have included the two sub questions because I believe these two must be addressed to properly answer the main question. The historical perspective cannot be ignored as, I will argue later in this thesis, the similarities between the deification of Mao Zedong and the deification of historical individuals through Chinese history are striking. The second sub question is equally important as bringing attention to how language and labelling have been used historically will also help to understand the modern situation.

Theory

When addressing a subject such as this it is important to keep in mind that the words we choose to use matter a great deal. This was made abundantly clear to me when I first tried to pitch my idea for a project to a Chinese senior professor: When introducing my idea for a topic I repeatedly used the terms “Mao cult” or “cultism”, as I had seen these terms used repeatedly by renowned scholars like Goossaert and Palmer (see *The Religious Question in Modern China*, 2011, for repeated examples of this). I saw no problem with this phrase, however, the professor I was conversing with patiently explained to me that I should avoid the term cult altogether on this subject. Not because of its meaning in English but rather because of the meaning of its closest approximate in Chinese: 邪教 (*xiéjiào*), usually translated as evil cult or heresy, a heavily politically charged word with very negative connotations (Mei-Hui Yang, 2008, p 128). He suggested I’d rather use more neutral terms such as worship or faith. This was not because of how I interpret these terms but rather out of concern of how my readers would interpret these terms.

Some central terms I plan on using repeatedly in this thesis will be “religion”, (宗教, *zōngjiào*), “popular belief” (民间信仰, *mīnjiān xìnyǎng*) and “superstition” (迷信, *míxìn*). Thus I need to explain briefly what I mean by them as the aforementioned anecdote illustrated: In traditional Chinese thought the proper upright order (正 *zheng*) was embodied in the state and the emperor. This stood in opposition to the negative influence of disorderly evil (邪 *xie*). Mencius (孟子, *Mengzi*) from the warring states period would refer to other philosophers’ teachings as heterodoxies (邪说 *xieshuo*, can also be translated as heresy) that were harmful to people’s morality and behavior (Mei-Hui Yang, 2008, p 138) and thus needed to be opposed. The Confucian Han dynasty adopted this framework and later used it to denounce the Yellow Turban Rebellion in 184 AD as a threat to all that was just and right. Following dynasties would, when they saw the need, make themselves the arbitrators that decided what practices were to be opposed and what were to be promoted. These terms remained in common use until

the end of the Qing dynasty where they were replaced by the terms religion and superstition. These were Japanese translations of the western terms but the meaning attributed to them strongly resembled that of the traditional terms. Religion was interpreted in much the same manner as *zheng* had been, as something positive for society and superstition was used where *xie* would earlier had been the word of preference. During the republican period there was also a strong tendency of equating religion with the western definition of religion, emphasizing centralized organization, common Holy Scriptures and an ordered hierarchy among the clergy, a definition that much of the popular religious practice in Chinese society did not fit under (Goossaert, 2005, p 14). The result of this was a state that labored to promote religions that took steps to fit in under the western definition and oppose those practices that did not. While thus usage of the terms religion and superstition has lessened significantly in the last decades they still remain in use. The phrase popular religion or popular belief (民间信仰) is a much newer term invented by academia intended to serve as a more neutral term for religious practices that do not fit under the official religions (Mei-Hui Yang, 2008, p 133). It serves as a handy way of referring to non-state sanctioned religious practice without drawing in the much more negatively charged term superstition.

When it comes to theory I have mixed feelings. On one hand I recognize that theory is an important tool indispensable to researchers. On the other hand there is a certain danger that overreliance on theory might lead to oversimplified interpretations of findings as well as forcing your findings to fit your theory rather than the other way around. Thus, my approach is to not refuse the usage of theory but rather to apply it lightly, more in the manner of a guiding framework than a lens of interpretation.

There are two theories that I see as beneficial to this study and intend to make use of. The first one is the theory of *diffused religion* put forward by C. K. Yang in *Religion in Chinese Society* in 1961. The other is the theory of *The Red, Black and Gray markets of religion in China* put forward by Fengyang Yang.

The theory of diffused religion is highly useful to me as it concerns itself with

the non-institutionalized religious practice common across the Chinese countryside. Put bluntly, it's a theory that addresses the differences between institutionalized religions often seen championed by the state and the commonplace non-institutionalized religious traditions as seen across the Chinese countryside. This theory has been the target of praise as well as criticism. One of its most often quoted strong points is its usefulness in debunking "the widespread belief or myth of the irreligious nature of the Chinese culture, a misperception created by elitist intellectuals in modern times" (Fengyang Yang, 2012, p 34). It has also been praised for its attempt to accommodate the prevalence of supernaturally-oriented practice throughout the society as well as showing how the state in imperial times would coopt the worship of deities into its system of imperial control (Lang & Yang, 2011, p 7). On the other hand its drawbacks have also been made clear too. Its treatment of religious elements in traditional social life as *a* religion comparable to institutional religion is often quoted as a source of confusion rather than clarity and it has faced accusations of treating Chinese everyday religious practice as static or fossilized (Fengyang Yang, 2012, p 34). Furthermore, it can be argued that by drawing the lines of opposition between institutionalized and non-institutionalized it can give a misleading impression of the practices termed diffused religion as something essentially chaotic and disorganized (Lang & Yang, 2011, p 7).

While this criticism must not be forgotten neither must the accomplishments of Yang be forgotten. "For Yang it was critical to resolve the issue of the vagueness of Chinese religion, and he ultimately did just that. Through his theory of "diffused" religion, Yang constructed a concept of Chinese religion that both satisfied Western academic standards and provided the basis for the academic study of Chinese folk beliefs within the field of religious studies (Lang & Yang, 2011, p 101)." While Yang might have set out from the basis of a Western understanding of institutional religion prior to his understanding of China's "diffused" religion his contributions are still considerable and provide an insightful description of the non-institutional belief system of China. Also, another argument in favor of looking at this theory is the simple fact that the *majority* of my interview subjects from among the Chinese

academic circles (see chapter on methodology) took the initiative to bring up this theory as relevant to the topic during the interview, something that clearly implies that it is considered relevant to the topic by people with knowledge of the religious situation in China.

The second theory I see as highly relevant to my thesis is the theory of *The Red, Black and Gray markets of religion in China* (from here on referred to as *the triple marked theory*) put forward by Fengyang Yang. (See Yang, 2012 chapter 5 and Yang 2009) This theory approaches the topic of state sanctioned institutionalized religious practice versus non-state, non-institutionalized sanctioned religious practice from another angle than the theory of diffused religion. While the theory of diffused religion concerns itself chiefly with the difference between centralized & institutionalized religion versus the less organized “diffused” practices, the triple market theory concerns itself chiefly with the matter of state sanctioned versus non-state sanctioned practices. However, it does not address it in such a binary manner as this. Rather it applies a triple approach to the matter: Simply put, the religious practices and adherents approved by the state are referred to as the red marked, the ones opposed by the state are referred to as the black marked and all the ones in between the red and black, occupying a rather unclear and ambiguous position, is referred to as the grey marked. This gray market of religion includes not only illegal practices of legally sanctioned religious individuals and organizations but also technically religious practices that are carried out in the name of culture, science, politics, etc. Also central to this theory is three propositions by the author. These are (simplified): 1) That a black marked will appear in the face of restrictions, 2) suppression of the black market will lead to the appearance of the gray marked and 3), the more restrictions and regulations the more the grey marked will grow. In short, under heavy regulation, black and gray markets are inevitable, and “the more restrictive and suppressive the regulation, the larger the gray market of religion necessarily becomes.

This theory is useful to me for several reasons. Firstly, its non-binary approach to the matter allows for less simplification and more complexity. Secondly, its focus on the relationship between expressions of faith and the state is a very useful approach

when looking at a phenomenon that is in a legally ambiguous zone. Thus it should in theory complement well with the more institutionally focused theory of diffused religion. Still, useful as it might be its utility is limited as state relations is only a minor element of this thesis.



(All images utilized in this thesis acquired by the baidu.com internet search engine)

Methodology

When drawing up my plans for this thesis project I decided early on that I wanted to focus primarily (but not exclusively) on qualitative research methods, a limited number of in depth interviews supported by a variety of written sources such as academic literature, newspaper articles and suchlike. The reason for this is obvious, qualitative research methods goes very well in hand with small field studies such as the one I was planning.

From the beginning I had no desire to write a purely theoretical paper, I desired to go into the field and gather data at the scene firsthand. However, this is a method not without its risks. The subject I had decided to investigate was obviously a bit sensitive, as someone once told me: “Anything related to subjects such as politics and religion becomes sensitive when it’s a foreigner asking questions about it.” I was aware that when arriving in the field I might very well not be welcome and perhaps even plainly rejected. Still, such risks must be accepted.

A twofold approach to the subject was decided. In addition to fieldwork at the temple my Chinese supervisor had introduced me too I would also supplement my research with a number of expert interviews. The reasoning behind this being that if I could find the right people they might very well not only provide me with information that I might struggle to find in written form but also their own reflections and experiences on the topic. The latter being highly useful for helping me understand and analyze what data I acquired through my fieldwork at the temple as well as to bridge the gap between what I find in the field and what I read about in my heap of gathered background literature.

The five (four Chinese and one American) expert interviews I successfully scheduled was with two long time researchers of Chinese religion, one theologian with nearly fifty years of experience with administration of religious affairs in China, a representative of the Anti-Evil Cult association and a professor of Asian politics with particular competence on the subject of leader cults within communism. As a matter of

principle all the interviews were conducted anonymously with all records to be deleted upon completion of thesis. Several of my interviewees didn't see the need for this approach but saw no problem with it either. The nicknames they have been given in this paper were chosen at random.

Name	Occupation	Information	Origin
Liu	Professor	Researcher of Chinese Religion	Beijing
Sun	Professor	Researcher of Chinese Religion	Beijing
Cao	Theologian	Nanjing Theological Faculty	Nanjing
Dong	Researcher	Representative of The Anti-Evil Cult Association	Zhejiang
Yuan	Professor	Professor of International Politics	USA

My plans for the fieldwork at the Hong En temple (红恩寺) in Mianyang were by necessity rather vague. As I was unable to contact the temple's administration beforehand and make an appointment I was aware that I would have to be prepared to carry out rapid improvisations when in the field if necessary. I knew who I wanted to talk to, I had the name of the founder of the temple and knew he was supposed to be living in the area still. I also desired to talk to those carrying out the daily management (if there were any), any visitors willing to talk, any of the local residents and if possible a representative of the local government (the last one was discouraged by my supervisor but I never completely abandoned the idea, and by pure chance I succeeded in a fashion). The only question was if they would be available/willing. I made my interview guidelines, made sure I had the necessary tools (a working recording device as well as pen and paper) and reminded myself that fieldwork is like going on a fishing trip (Heimer & Thøgersen, 2006, p 28). You can plan and prepare as much as you want but at the end of the day you have no idea what kind of fish will bite on the hook. It

might be the type you were looking for, it might be a very different but still quite tasty fish, and sometimes you hardly catch anything worth cooking.

Preparations & Expectations:

I decided early on that I would rely primarily on unstructured interviews for my fieldwork, making simple interview guides that were nothing more than a list of subjects I wanted to bring up in the conversation. While this was quick and easy to write I was well aware that I would be putting myself at the mercy of my interview subjects whims. Ideally letting them talk to their hearts content and, in case of complications (such as the conversation going way off topic), merely hoping to guide the conversation back on track.

For the expert interviews I agonized for quite some time about making the necessary phone calls. It was my first time contacting people in such a formal fashion and I had doubts about myself possessing the necessary language skills needed to ensure clear communication. In the end I did successfully man up and spend an afternoon making phone calls. All of those calls had the identical conclusion of: “Sure thing, call me when you get here and then we set the time.” While the informality was reassuring the lack of an actual clear appointment was a little bit terrifying. At this time I was ignorant of this being a common practice, thus proving that ignorance is not necessarily bliss.

I found it rather hard to carry out satisfactory preparations for my visit to Mianyang. The reason for this being that the information I had on the field was frighteningly insufficient. I had the name of the temple, the county it was located in and the name of the builder. That was it. No phone numbers, no email, no precise address, nothing. This meant I would have to rely on going to Mianyang without any guarantee that I would even find the temple I was seeking. Even more frightening, I only had a week scheduled, what if they were unwilling to open to a complete stranger showing up unannounced at their door asking all kinds of odd questions. Attempts were made to get into contact with anyone that could assist me in contacting my intended interviewees but to no avail. It was only the week before departure that I

managed to be introduced to an old classmate of a previous language partner that was working in the same city. This gentleman proved invaluable in assisting me in locating the temple and getting introduced to its founder. Looking back I do believe I might very well have managed on my own, but it cannot be guaranteed.

Results:

The expert interviews were for the most part a success. To my relief all of those I had made appointments with came through and allocated time to meet with me when I called them with the following message: “I have arrived, do you have some time to spare any of the coming days?” In the end the length of the interviews ranged between 30 minutes and 1.5 hours, giving me plenty of material to go through. To my joy most of them seemed to rather enjoy talking about their fields of expertise and experiences, barely needing any goading from me at all. All were recorded (naturally with the consent of the subject) but in one case I learned the hard way that if you turn off the recorder *before* pressing save the entire recording is lost.

The temple in Mianyang proved far easier to locate than I had feared. My local assistant had done extensive preparations in anticipation of my arrival and it took us less than 15 minutes to find the neighborhood housing the temple and then merely another hour to locate the temple itself. Here we were unfortunately greeted by a closed door. The temple was closed and no one was home. Luckily, the local old aunts were rather intrigued by the concept of a foreigner that could speak and started making phone calls on our behalf. Thus, to my joy, we were introduced to the very man that had built the temple. An 80+ gentleman that still held to wearing what we in the west call the Mao suit, a military cap and a normal wristwatch that had been “MacGyver’ed” into a pocket watch. He gave us a 15 minutes tour of the temple as well as giving brief but informative answers to any questions we had for him.

Over the course of my remaining stay in Mianyang I returned to the site repeatedly, chatting with the locals on the subject of the temple and to arrange a meeting with the daily manager, the son of the previously mentioned founder. However, as we were just about to sit down for a chat when the local party

representative showed up in a rather flashy car (I assume someone had called him and told him of the weird foreigner). He carefully inspected my student ID before deciding that he also needed to see my passport. After making sure all the information matched and the visa was valid he questioned me a bit to make sure that I was indeed a student carrying out fieldwork and not a foreign journalist. Then he gave me strict instructions that I shouldn't take any pictures nor make any recordings, and that what was in the temple was not an expression of superstition but rather an expression of heartfelt respect (心里尊重). As a safety measure I took great care to nod and confirm that I understood (明白. 知道了. 明白. 啊, 明白了, 对, 对, 知道.) Then he unceremoniously returned to his car and drove off. While this placed a slight damper on the mood for the following conversation it was still a very successful one. My subject gladly told me of the temple, the visitors, his own reflections on questions of faith as well as about his personal life, right down to his daily martial arts training routines.

Name	Occupation	Information	Origin
Zhao	Retired	Founder of Hong'En Temple	Mianyang
Zhang	Retired	Daily Manager of Hong'En Temple	Mianyang
Guan	Party Cadre	Local Party Representative	Mianyang

As with the expert interviews these interviews were also conducted anonymously and the nicknames given have no relation to the person.

The Temple

The fieldwork at Hong'en Temple (红恩寺), located at the outskirts of Mianyang in Sichuan, was carried out in the space between February 19, 2014 date and February 25, 2014. It included three visits to the site carried out at 21, 23, and 24 of February with three interviews and one guided tour by the founder himself.

The precise age of the temple is not known. Some sources date it back to the 17 century (Joe, 2012) while the founder himself dated it to “sometime during the Qing dynasty (1644 - 1912)”. During the Cultural Revolution it was closed down before eventually being demolished. In 1996 the remains of the temple were bought by Zhao who paid for the reconstruction mostly with money he and his wife (now deceased) had saved up from pig farming as well as their pensions (Lai, 2011, Joe, 2012 and Xueshan). However, when I interviewed him he took care to point out that they had not been alone in the project but described it as more of a local fundraiser, achieving economic support from neighbors as well as the village committee. However, he conceded that the money gathered this way had been far less than desired and the brunt of the expense had come from his own savings. Upon the 1996 reconstruction Zhao also added large portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao as well as a golden bust of Mao to the new main hall. And in 2003, using donated money (he declined to elaborate on where the money had come from), he added statues of Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Zhu De to the central hall (Joe, 2012) as well as plaques with communist slogans painted by famous artists.

The family of Zhao owns the temple and carries out daily management and maintenance themselves. Outside of the holidays the temple remains closed as they have experienced problems with thefts in the past. However, if requested by potential visitors they maintain that they always open up. They also operate a small shop located right outside the temple gates that provides religious commodities like Incense, Spirit Money and Butter Lamps as well as some daily commodities like soda and snacks.

The Layout of the Temple:

The temple consists of three buildings, for simplicity nicknamed The Old Hall, Main Hall and the Central Hall.



The Old Hall is located to the right of the entrance, where the main building of the old temple stood before the Cultural Revolution. It is technically not a proper hall anymore but rather a shelter for burning of incense and storage.

The Main Hall is the biggest of the three buildings and possesses the highest number of deities. It is located to the left of the entrance and houses 9 deities (the majority Taoist deities according to Zhang), 4 guardian statues, 5 paintings of communist heroes, a bust of Chairman Mao, a tape recorder playing Buddhist chants and a large amount of colorful banners.



The Central Hall is located directly opposite the entrance. It houses seven statues and 4 guardian spirits. Of the seven statues four depicts Taoist deities



(Caishen, Guan Yu, Laozi and a fourth whose name Zhao could not quite recall) and three communist heroes (Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Zhu De). While close to the Main Hall in size it is still noticeably more Spartan in its decoration.

The temple is named Hong'en Temple, literally translated as "Red Kindness Temple". The name is intriguing as the first character in the name, 红, means red, a color often associated with communism. As the temple houses communist heroes it would be considered natural to consider the possibility that the color red have been specifically chosen for the name due to this association. Yet, this might not be the case. When questioned about the subject Zhao responded that he could not quite remember but pointed out that the temple predated him by several centuries and he had merely restored it. None of the other locals questioned had any information to provide on the origin of the name, nor has any other information on this point been unearthed as of yet.



Findings

Divinity

Arguably the most interesting question addressed in this thesis is the one concerning the potential divinity attributed to the Chairman in these temples. Do the people there see his inclusion amongst the deities as a secular ritual act intended to honor him or as confirmation of actual divine status? This question was one of central inquiry during the fieldwork in Mianyang and the answers received confirmed that this is a subject that cannot be answered briefly.

The answers received when this topic was addressed demonstrated several different approaches to the topic. One that was repeatedly encountered, especially during the fieldwork in Mianyang, was to plainly reject the notion that inclusion of Chairman Mao in temples being a display of superstition. Rather, it was presented as a chiefly secular tradition. Zhang, the daily manager stressed this repeatedly:

Zhang: *They are not worshipped as gods, this is just an expression of heartfelt respect. Thus, this has nothing to do with such things as superstition or faith. Those that come here merely desire to express their heartfelt gratitude, not to pray to them as they do to the deities.*

Rather than a perceived harmful superstitious practice this was a practice that should be seen as a traditional secular respect for the heroes that had played decisive roles in the shaping of the nation. This was a display of traditional cultural practices that from the viewpoint of the common Chinese peasants and workers was quite natural:

Zhang: *I know that many foreigners are not fond of the Chairman, but our perspective is quite different on these matters. To us these are heroes, so it's right to honor them.*

He furthermore made it clear that he was not merely putting forth his own viewpoints on these matters but that he was speaking for the common people frequenting the temple as well. While their treatment of the statues of the revolutionary heroes did not differ noticeably from that of the statues of the gods he insisted they were not carrying out acts of religious practice:

Zhang: *Yes, when people come here they use a lot of the same motions and practices towards those three (Zhou, Mao, Zhu) as they do towards the gods here. This is because they wish to honor them in the same manner, not because they believe that those three are gods themselves.*

The founder of the temple, Zhao, in general agreed with Zhao on the rejection of the temples nature being anything but secular. He too emphasized that this was a non-religious way of honoring heroes and that it was something positive for society, not related to faith or belief, nor motivated by desire for selfish gain:

Zhao: *“When drinking water you should remember the person that dug the well.”(吃水不忘挖井人) A lot of people do not understand (what this temple is all about). They think this is all about turning a profit. But in fact I'm just performing a public service!*

The local party representative, Guan, was also a strict promoter of the secular approach to the topic. Although my conversation with him was brief (see methodology) he had one point to make that he wanted me to keep in mind:

Guan: *“This temple is not a superstitious place, this is just the common people wanting to honor the heroes of the nation.”*

On one hand all the local authority figures on the temple had agreed that this was not something to be associated with religious practice. However, conversations with local residents that frequented the temple provided a different interpretation. Although none of them desired to be the subject of a formal interview, far less being recorded, they were all quite willing to discuss the subject in informal tones. In these conversations most of the people asked had no hesitation with stating in a rather matter of fact tone that Mao had ascended to godhood long ago (毛主席早已经成了神) in the same manner as other great heroes. Chinese newspapers writing about this temple have succeeded in securing the very same opinion from temple visitors years ago (Lai, 2011). The difference in received answers between personage holding positions of responsibility and those of the common people seen here is interesting and will be addressed further in the section on politics.

The attribution of supernatural powers to historical personage is not something new within Chinese religious tradition, some of the earliest sources we have on the subject features blurry lines when it comes to separating humans and deities. Taoists immortals are born as normal humans but end up defying death, Buddhist saints transcends death. (Cheng, 1995, p 111 and 2) Even famous historical characters like Guan Yu that were in no way known for their piety were not only deified after their death but also received widespread popularity amongst the people (Cheng, 1995, p 53). What is interesting to note though is the time between death and deification. Guan Yu died 280 AD and was officially deified in the Sui Dynasty around 592 AD (Cheng, 1995, p 56). That is more than a 300 year gap (Although it is not unrealistic to assume

that worship of Guan Yu predated the official deification). Mao Zedong on the other hand is reported to having had supernatural properties attributed to him during his lifetime! “in North China, for instance, he was often described as a turtle spirit, whose power came from his possession of secret mantras and esoteric mantras, and who scared away all evil spirits (Goossaert & Palmer, 2011, p 189). Buddhist clergy have also been observed to attribute religious characteristics to Chairman Mao. In this context he has been described as a bodhisattva that did not oppose Buddhist teachings but rather sought to guide people to the dharma by cleansing Buddhism of its harmful supernatural elements (Fisher, 2011, p 357).

Religious rituals and practice

Unlike Zhang, Zhao did not claim that his personal secular approach towards the temple was one that was representative of that of others frequenting the temple. Rather, he openly acknowledged that many people frequenting the temple did so specifically in order to perform rituals acts toward the idol of the Chairman.

Interpreter: *When the common people come here do any of them they worship the Chairman?*

Zhao: *Of course, how would there not be?*

Interpreter: *Do they have any special methods or rituals for this worship?*

Zhao: *Loads of different methods. All kinds (No common pattern).*

Zhao explained that the eclectic approach of many of the visitors would occasionally cause confusion among visitors from afar about what was the correct way of showing proper reverence to the three heroes. In those cases he would often be invited to advise and instruct them in appropriate techniques. When that happened he

would usually go for the simple approach, although he would occasionally have to adapt a bit to what the visitor desired.

Zhang explained that community rituals are one of the most important functions of the temple. Not only would it serve as a gathering point for the local community during the holidays, it was also a place parents would bring their children at set ages to conduct rituals to guarantee the wellbeing of their children.

Zhang: *Everyone comes here, when their children reach 1, 6 and 15 years of age. The parents will bring them here to worship the gods... Yes, they will also conduct the rites towards the Chairman and the other two. All the idols in the temple.*

As earlier stated by Zhang carrying out ritual acts based on religious tradition does not necessarily imply an attribution of supernatural aspects upon the target, but could be explained as merely symbolic gestures intended to convey respect. Zhao did not reject nor confirm this interpretation but instead offered an alternate answer. His approach to the question was that he did not possess the authority to decide what the individuals visiting the temple thought for themselves, in his opinion this was their private matter and not something he should stick his nose in. Yet he also presented the opinion that many coming there desired more than a mere ritual act towards a statue:

Zhao: *It's all in the heart (of the worshipper)... If they have any pressing matter or troubles they can bring them forward when worshipping the Chairman. They don't need to say it out loud... He can't respond to you off course, he's just a statue.*

The fact that he specifically points out people bringing up pressing matters and problems when carrying out the ritual worship is one that must be given attention. It would not be unreasonable to claim that if people saw the rites as merely symbolic acts

then it would be odd for them to during the rites bring forth wishes and problems that an inanimate statue would not be able to help them with. This assessment may however be countered with the claim that to bring forth problems and grievances is a common component of these rituals (Kleinman, 2011, p 265) and to go through the rites without bringing forth grievances would make the ritual incomplete.

The practice of ritual worship of deities in the hope of receiving blessings are commonly found in religions around the world, and as discussed earlier the deification of ordinary human beings are not something new in Chinese religious tradition.

Sun: *Guan Yu is estimated to be received ritual worship from more than 300 million people all over the world. Such rituals are extremely common. For example, the common people in Fujian Province, for example in the city of Quanzhou, every single day they start by offering a small ritual sacrifice to the spirits.*

Popularity

A common question raised when this topic is addressed is the one concerning the extent. How many people participate in worship of Mao and other revolutionary heroes? How widespread is it? And for how long has it been around?

While the national scope and history of the tradition was beyond the fieldwork in Mianyang the local circumstances was a topic of inquiry that was given due attention. One thing that was addressed was the question if the temple was a solely local affair or if it attracted visitors from afar. The response to this was that while being mainly dominated by the local community visitors from afar were in significant numbers too:

Zhang: *Yes, we do get visitors from afar. A lot of people come here to worship and pay their respects. Not sure how many but quite a lot, more than a thousand I reckon... We've had academics like you here before. (...) And journalists, but we usually turn those away.*

Zhang: *Everyone in this neighborhood comes here during the holidays. It's very convenient for them as it's right here. I don't know of anyone local that do not come here. All the locals support us.*

Both Zhang and Zhao gave two primary reasons for why visitors chose to come to this temple. The first one was that it was a matter of convenience as well as community for many of the locals. For those in the neighborhood this temple was not only the closest one but also the one where they would meet with all their relatives and friends. Practicality and social relationships made the temple attractive to the local community. The second reason was the content of the temple, namely the three statues of Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Zhu De. These would not only attract curious people such as tourists, journalists and academics but would also draw sincere worshippers from afar that came there for the express reason of worshipping these three heroes. This was a by no means strange Zhang explained, people always seek out the religious sites with the specialization that they desire. If anyone in the local community had a desire to pray for fertility they would most likely travel to the much larger Buddhist temple dedicated to Guanyin on the other side of Mianyang. While they did have a statue of Guanyin at the temple it was obvious that people that wanted to worship Guanyin specifically travelled to a temple dedicated to her as she would be much more likely to bless them there. As there were no other temples with a statue of the Chairman that Zhang knew about it was perfectly natural that they would draw visitors from afar. While he did not address what specialty the Chairman might possess (as he preferred to emphasize the non-religious nature of the temple) other sources (Sun & Anonymous) have attributed it to security and protection.

As the temple was a small one, relatively unknown and privately run, visitor numbers would usually be low on the weekdays, leading to them often not opening the gates before people came knocking and calling for them. This was however not anything special they pointed out. Out here in the countryside, they explained, this was quite normal practice as daily opened gates would lead to a need for a permanent local employee to keep guard, a both expensive and unnecessary solution.

Zhang: *We open up during holidays and special occasions and such. On normal days such as this we mostly keep the door closed (because if the door is open someone must keep watch to deter thieves).*

Zhao: *People often come here. They just need to call for me and I will open the gates for them.*

Visitor numbers would peak around the public holiday as well as religious holidays and in these periods of time they would be spending all their waking hours at the temple. This would include keeping the gates open, maintaining order and cleanliness, trying to greet everyone in person, if need instruct people on how to carry out the rituals and selling incense and other necessary goods (for negligible profits) used by the visitors.

Zhao: *During the spring festival and the other holidays this place is packed, especially with the old ladies, everybody want to burn incense and worship him (The Chairman).*

Unfortunately for my research, it turned out no statistics were being kept on the numbers of visitors:

Eirik: *Then how many do you calculate come here annually?*

Zhao: *We keep no statistics on this matter, (but it's quite a lot). In the time period before the New Year this place is constantly packed with visitors.*

Zhao went on to explain that most public temples in China demand entrance fees, and can thus easily keep statistics on numbers of visitors simply by looking at the number of tickets sold. The Hong'en Temple however, had never made use of any such means he pointed out. This was a matter of performing a public service and not of profit and thus the common people should not be forced to pay for entering a place belonging to the common masses. The side effect that statistics on visitor number became impossible to keep, while unfortunate, was gladly accepted. Zhao argued that this in fact a good thing as a lack of official regulations such as keeping statistics kept the communal atmosphere relaxed and personal. This meant that they were free to run the temple in the informal, non-bureaucratic manner the locals preferred. He acknowledged that this was probably not ideal for researchers, such as myself, but that pleasing everybody has always been impossible anyways.

While the fieldwork in Mianyang did not yield hard numbers on the subject of the popularity of the Chairman as an idol of worship it still provided much useful information. Firstly that it is by no means a purely local phenomenon as (according to Zhang and Zhao) there are a fair number of people journeying to this temple from afar with the express purpose of worshiping the Chairman. Secondly that the temple serves communal purposes for the local village that uses it for social gatherings and as a unifying place of worship.

A religious reverence of the Chairman is by no means a new phenomenon. Not only has academics at length documented the quasi-religious approach that was taken during the Cultural Revolution (see Palmer 2007, Goossaert & Palmer 2011 and Meihui Yang 2008 for more on this). In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution the religious approach to the revolutionary heroes became in fact even more blatantly

religiously themed. Most of the experts I interviewed on this would go on at length about this.

Sun: *It is not only the Chairman that receives such worship, he's just the most famous one. In Fujian there are sites where cemeteries dedicated to those that fell in the civil war got turned into temples almost at once the Cultural Revolution ended. People go on pilgrimage there to pray to the revolutionary martyrs for blessings and healing. There is nothing new about this.*

Another researcher told me about his own fieldwork in Hunan where he had studied the local veneration of Mao at great length. According to him there were hundreds of small temples there dedicated to the Chairman scattered across the entire countryside (personal correspondence) in Hunan and to a lesser degree in other parts of rural China too.

Zhao: *During the Cultural Revolution all superstition was to be smashed and buried. But afterwards it all rose up again. People would receive holy messages in their dreams (托梦) to rebuild temples. It's like the vampires you see in modern television nowadays, they come back from the dead.*

Still, the scale of the phenomenon must not be overestimated either. Half of the experts I interviewed admitted to having very little prior knowledge on this particular phenomenon. One was rather astonished upon hearing of it:

Cao: *Mao Zedong in temples as a god? I've never heard of this. Really? That's sounds really strange. I assume the government is opposed to it... I can't really help you on this subject as I've never earlier heard of it...*

This must however not be taken to imply that the scale of the phenomenon is so low that it is beneath notice, nor that there is a lack of knowledge among researchers. As one of them pointed out to me it's not necessarily a matter of the phenomenon either being too small to be worthy of notice or that research/desire for research upon it is lacking. As he saw it the situation was rather one of there being such an overwhelming amount and variation of religious expressions and rituals across China that it was impossible to give proper attention to them all.

Dong: *There are plenty of practices across the countryside that appears strange to us. It's because the peasants are a bit backward and superstitious, so they do all kinds of strange rituals that might benefit them. It's impossible to keep records of them all.*

Thus he argued, it was natural that the main attention would be devoted towards the biggest denominations, noticeable trends and those smaller groups that did a good job of drawing attention to themselves (intentionally or unintentionally).

It is also to be noted that veneration of the Chairman is by no means something only to be observed in temples. In fact temples are probably among the rarest expression of such practice as it requires large investments of money, maintenance and at least some degree of official approval to be allowed to operate lawfully. A far more common approach can be observed in the daily lives of ordinary people. A taxi ride anywhere in China will often let the traveler observe the presence of Buddhist amulets hanging from the mirror or figurines placed on the dashboard. While not as common as those who chose symbols from mainstream religions such as Buddhism, many taxi drivers chose to have amulets or figures of Mao Zedong in their cars rather than Guanyin. To many drivers these symbols fulfill the very same functions. To some people these are primarily statements meant to display the driver's personal beliefs or sentiments to other people. To other they serve as protective charms, lowering the

chance of perishing in traffic accidents. A survey from 2008 found that more than 11,5 percent of the Chinese population keeps statues and other busts of the Chairman in their homes (Li, 2009, p 90), only beaten by ancestral tablets (12,1%) and a noticeably higher number than that of Buddhism (9,9%) and other religious denominations(all below 9%). While this numbers certainly sound impressive they do not take into account what meaning people attach to these items. Certainly the number of people that attaches religious value to their ancestral tablets and Taoist amulets is higher than that of those who do the same to the figure of the Chairman standing on the shelf.

For those that consider Mao Zedong a divinity such an approach is infinitely more economical, convenient and it carries no danger for complications with the state. Historically the later one of these certainly played a key part. One often encountered example is how many people would place photographs of Mao Zedong right where the traditional ancestral tablets would have been placed. In this manner they would be free to conduct their ancestral rites without fear of repercussion (Goossaert & Palmer, 2011, p 184).

Political Aspects

A question of great interest to me before the fieldwork was begun was how controversial this topic was. It is commonly held that any question asked by a foreigner in China by definition becomes politically sensitive. While this statement is a tad overblown there is a core of truth to it. Fortunately, as discussed in the methodology chapter this fear turned out to be mostly unfounded. Yet, my initial insecurity in regards to the topic was not entirely unfounded either.

Zhang: *(on question about opposition to the temple) Oh yes, a lot have been opposing us (有, 有很多反对的) ... Monks (in particular) and such, lots of different people have been negative.*

While making it clear that the temple had always enjoyed good relationships with the Party, the village administration and the local community both Zhao and Zhang acknowledged that there had been opposition. According to their narrative this opposition was attributed to personally incensed individuals rather than any select groups. According to Zhang Buddhist monks (僧人, *sēngrén*) had been overrepresented in this opposition as they regarded this practice as bordering on the heretical. This was partially the reason why Zhang or Zhao would find themselves taking the leading role during group rituals that a hired monk would usually fill. Yet, Zhang wrote this off as a minor issue since hiring a monk was expensive, inconvenient and not really necessary anyways.

In general I was given two answers to the question of controversy. On one hand most of the people I talked too declined to be formally interviewed and were opposed to any sort of photographs taken or recordings being made:

Zhang: *Please don't photograph anything or record anything. We don't want any of that.*

Zhang: *We have also had some journalists here but we don't want them to come here, this is a bit sensitive you understand. So don't take any pictures.*

Guan: *You are welcome to visit but do not take any pictures or make any recordings.*

However, there was also evidence to the contrary of the above statements. It is very easy to find pictures of the interior of the temple on Baidu and other Chinese search engines, also interviews given to newspapers is easy to come across (see Zhang 2012 and Lai 2011). Furthermore, both the founder and the manager took care to point out that their relationship with the Communist Party was a harmonious one and had been so all along:

Zhang: *The local party representative comes here too. There's no problem with that. We haven't had any particular problems with the party, they know this isn't superstition.*

Zhao: *Thus, there has been no opposition. We have had support from everybody (local people, village administration, The Party), and I have merely been given the honor of leading the van (打头阵). (...) Everybody backs us.*

Seeing this contradiction between wanting to avoid public attention and enjoying a harmonious relationship with the Party it becomes tempting to draw the conclusion that too much public attention might have a not too positive effect on the relationship with the Party. Historical cases for this are many, the case of the Qigong craze is an often used example that I will go into later.

Interpretation of findings

Much interesting material and viewpoints had been encountered during my fieldwork. Probably one of the most fascinating was the insistence from all those in positions of responsibility that everything that I had encountered here was no more than an expression of traditional culture and in no way related to questions of religion or superstition. It all became more interesting when Zhao used western religions as a source of comparison to the local veneration of communist heroes:

Eirik: If a person did a lot of good a lot of people would think it right to revere him, for example in Hangzhou we have Yue Fei...

Zhao: Yes! If a person did a lot of good for the people, contributed a lot, the people would desire him to continue blessing them (even after he's dead). Muhammad was just like this, just like Jehovah. Like

in Christianity, when they left Egypt and underwent all those tribulations they persisted and ended up establishing Judaism. You westerners have all those religions from the Middle East teaching that all people should be brothers, opposing feudalism and oppression. It's just like Maoism that helped us liberate our country. So our reverence of Mao is comparable to that of your religious icons.

What was fascinating with this approach was namely the fact that the comparison between western religion and communism is drawn from their social function. Namely their perceived identical role in liberating the common masses from systematic oppression. This comparison was drawn repeatedly. I would here venture to make use of something I discussed in the section on theory, namely the traditional views on the difference between religion and superstition. As previously stated religion is a word with positive connotations while superstition is a word with negative connotation. These are often seen in their perceived social role. Religion is often seen as something that benefit society, for example with teachings on morality, promotion of charity and providing a sense of unity and order. Superstition is often interpreted as lacking morality, leads to needless waste of money and bringing disorder and division.

Cao: *The difference between religion and superstition is in the intentions. People teach religion to promote good teachings and do good deeds. Superstition on the other hand is something people use for their own gain. (...)There is not really a need for there to be opposition between religion and science. They deal with completely different things, they can be of benefit to us in different aspects of our lives.*

As the label of being a superstitious practice is one that would potentially be disastrous to a small temple such as this, and the label of being a proper religion is rather unattainable due to their controversial practice, the desire to avoid the issue

altogether becomes understandable. Thus presenting the temple as a nonreligious site becomes a cynical but understandable calculated choice.

Another less cynical interpretation would be to argue that honoring the Chairman in a unconventional fashion cannot be labeled a superstition on the basis of the worshippers in no way doing any sort of harm to anyone, let alone society. In fact it can easily be argued that providing all the positive benefits that a conventional temple would have provided. Seen from this angle their place within the Grey Marked of Religion becomes plain to see. While perhaps not state approved they have no reason to fear opposition from the government as long as they do not provoke it. It must also be noted that often the government officials take an active role in finding ways to avoid dealing with the problem of defining religion and superstition. “In some provinces, local officials have solved the problem of *feudal superstition* by renaming some aspects of folk religion. Now, it is *non-material cultural heritage*. (Madsen, 2010)” This certainly sounds familiar from my own encounter with the local party representative in Mianyang who made it very clear that there was nothing superstitious about the temple.

A comparison here can be drawn to the Qigong craze in Chinese society that ended in the 90'. Many of these groups made heavy use of religious language and symbolism but their leadership in most cases followed a strict line of presenting themselves as nothing but a set of healthy exercises with a firm basis in medical science. And for the most part they were left alone by the state as long as they did not attract too much attention. It was not until the militant activism and the rather cultic tendencies of groups such as Falun Gong the Party saw the need to reaffirm its dominant position and impose strict regulations (Palmer, 2007).

The similarities between the inclusion of communist heroes in temples and the traditional practice of city gods are quite striking. People of upright morality who cared for the common people would have temples erected for them after their death as a display of gratitude for their selfless dedication. Sometimes these temples would be built after enough public pressure from the masses, and in other cases people with

enough money would literally buy temples for themselves from corrupt officials (Cheng, 1995, p 46). This is only one out of many examples of normal human beings transcending to divinity in traditional Chinese religious practice. During the Imperial times the Chinese state held the final privilege of appointing the city gods. In fact, it was seen as a natural that the emperor, ruling on heavens mandate, dealt with administration of the deities that were employed on earth (Feuchtwang, 2001, p 76). As the modern Chinese state bases itself on scientific atheism the appointing of people to the position of city god is not a practice that has been taken up by the state (some theocratic responsibilities have been retained though, in 1991 reincarnation became subject to state regulation (Goossaert & Palmer, 2012, p 365)). But this does not mean that the symbolic meaning has left the public mind. To many people, especially in the countryside, the traditional cosmology still holds sway. And the association of a human being having his effigy placed in a temple being a confirmation of his virtue is by no means lost.

Dong: *This is by no means strange (...) Because this is a matter of people appraising Mao Zedong. He had a great impact on Chinese development and society. Among the masses his popularity is great and they wish to honor him.*

Some academics have argued that the reason behind such veneration of Mao is due to lacking knowledge of history. Namely that people are suffering from “cultural amnesia” and are mixing selectively positive images from the past with their personal opinions and traditional attitudes (Fisher, 2011, p 359). Gareth Fisher argues such in his article “Religion as Repertoire” where he focuses chiefly on Buddhist preachers who use communist expressions and phrases to justify traditional Buddhist teachings. While such an approach to the topic cannot be ignored I do believe Fisher is a tad too negative as he focuses on cooptation of ideology by people who apparently don’t adhere to it personally. These criteria do simply not fit the man that built Hong’en Temple as he is old enough to have received decorations during the Korean War and

cannot conceivably make any profit from the temple compared to the amount of money he spent building it.

Conclusion

During the Cultural Revolution an untold number of temples were demolished by well-meaning youths seeking to stamp out perceived feudal superstition and bring about a better world. The Chairman was revered as the sun of the entire nation and received praise and love bordering on the religious (Hansen & Thøgersen, 2008, p 193):

Cao: Back then people also worshiped the chairman in a way. There would be parades, people would read his words almost as a bible, people would dance the Mao dance and declare Mao Zedong wansui! But there were no altars in temples, that would not have been accepted.

Cao: I think the enormous growth of religion (after the Cultural Revolution) is because it is something that is in people's hearts. You can shut down buildings and send people to work in the countryside but you cannot extinguish what is in people's hearts! It's like if you push a ball under water, the moment you let go it will bounce high into the air. That's what happened to religion under the Cultural Revolution.

After the end of the Cultural Revolution China saw an unprecedented massive upswing in temple construction, hundreds of temples appeared almost overnight. According to some estimates literally millions of temples have been constructed or re-constructed across rural China and the pace seems to still be accelerating (Madsen, 2010). Many of these incorporate old tradition and customs alongside modern technologies like cameras and recorders playing Buddhist sutras 24-7. As this unexpected growth is nearly impossible to regulate some groups take up practices that are deemed heretical and harmful to society:

Cao: *Cults are a big problem in contemporary China. Here in the Nanjing area there are more than 10 major ones. The Eastern Lightning group is maybe the worst one... The entire country got them. (...) These cults often have supernatural leaders, like the little brother of Jesus or Jesus reincarnated as a girl.*

While cults and cultic movements might very well pose a serious problem to Chinese society it must not be forgotten that the vast number of unorthodox practices should not be labelled as such. Places such as the Hong'en Temple may carry out an unusual method of honoring important communist heroes such as Mao Zedong, but while appearing rather odd to an outsider it is very hard to pinpoint any actual negative impact on society. Instead (if we are to take their testimonies at face value) they fulfill many of the same positive roles that conventional religions fulfill, such as promotion of morality, protection of traditional customs and providing a sense of community.

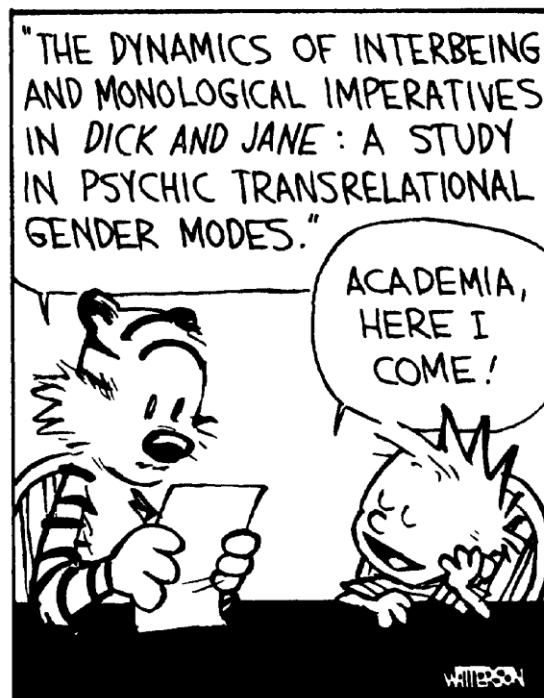
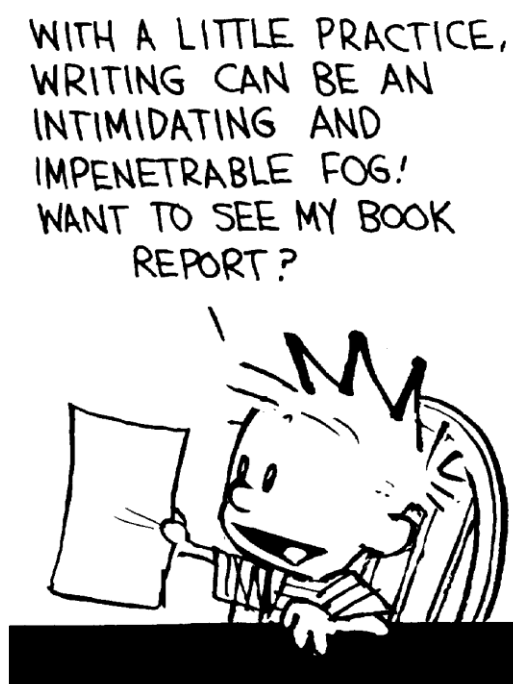
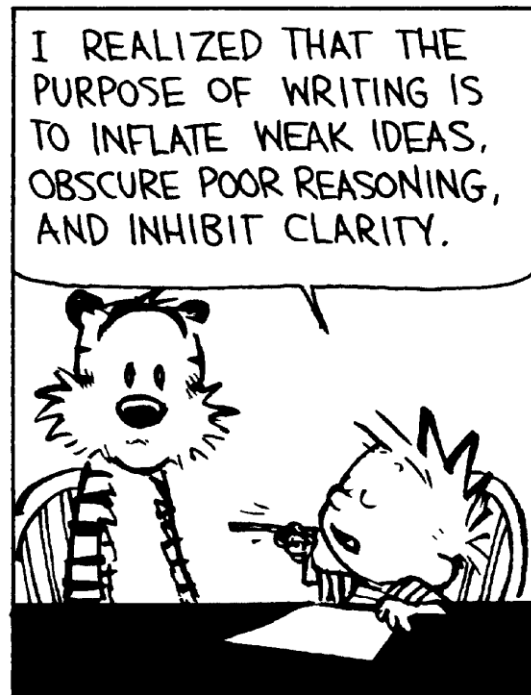
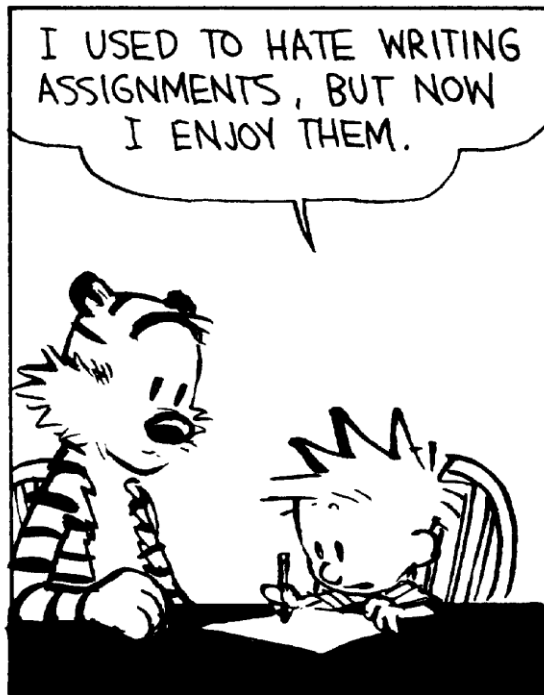
To many Chinese people Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Zhu De are important heroes whose hard work brought progress and safety to the people. Throughout Chinese history such people have been honored by having their likeness placed in temples alongside the deities. While in traditional cosmology they were literally elevated to the power of godhood in the modern secularized world the preferred approach is one of symbolic elevation. As being labeled a superstitious group would be undesirable the reasoning behind rejecting any sort of spiritual label becomes thus the clearer.

Cao: *There is not really a need for there to be opposition between religion and science. They deal with completely different things, they can be of benefit to us in different aspects of our lives. I think they can harmoniously coexist.*

I conclude that the inclusion of the Chairman among the deities in a Chinese temple can be understood as to a certain degree being a continuation of the philosophy that lay behind the tradition of city gods and the elevation of mortal humans to the ranks of gods. A wish to honor and broadcast the virtue of this person as well as making your gratitude publicly known to all that might observe it. While this tradition has its root in religion the modern version of it does not wish to be seen as such. In the study I carried out the spiritual label was firmly rejected by the subjects of study, as potentially being labeled superstitious was something that was neither in their interest nor in the Party's interest. In fact, has been argued to be in the favor of the researcher as well. The approach of studying Chinese Religion not as religion but as a cultural expression has been argued by famous Chinese researcher such as Yang Fenggang who argues that "its ideological incorrectness becomes unimportant and its scientific incorrectness obscured, eliminating two key criticisms by both militant and enlightened atheism (Yang, 2012, p 55).

My field study only compromised a single temple and cannot be argued to be representative of any general phenomenon as regional variation in ethnicity, culture and religion throughout China is immense. Still I argue that my work has produced interesting results and that the results obtained during the fieldwork all fit very well in with both my theories as well as what I've come across in my reading on the subject. My fieldwork was also a most fascinating experience where I had the opportunity travelling to faraway places, observe local customs first hand and meet with people with experiences, outlooks and viewpoints highly different from my own. This being said, I am perfectly aware that I have only scratched the surface of the topic and that more research must be carried out before we can draw any certain conclusions on the topic. In these situations it is important to remember the words of The Master:

Confucius: *"Real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance."*



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