

PART ONE

*Transformation of the Religious Field in China:
The Changing Role of the State*



Managing Chinese Religious Pluralism in Nineteenth-Century City God Temples

*Vincent Goossaert**

This chapter is not about globalization per se: it is about the Chinese socio-political system that was exposed to the modern process of globalization and how it was equipped to deal with increasingly numerous and diverging systems of value and religious practices in particular. Much has been written on the impact of Christianity, both during the early phase of Catholic missions and during the post-Opium war expansion—and a smaller but still very important body of scholarship has explored similar questions for Islam—and how these expanding global religions tested Chinese society's ability to accept and negotiate diversity. But, less research has looked at indigenous cultural resources for thinking about and managing religious diversity, that is, the intellectual and political tools for dealing with other ways of doing religion when one is confronted with them. I posit that the more usual interaction of local elites and officials with religious practices that are local but nonetheless foreign to their own cultural milieu help us understand their reaction to more exotic practices and faiths (Christian, Muslim, Marxist-atheist, New Age) when these appear in their local world as the (often undesired) result of processes of globalization. So, leaving nations, states and empires entirely aside, I would like to look here, through a case study, at how Chinese local society was dealing with religious diversity and plurality at a time when diversity and plurality were about to increase quite dramatically.

Late imperial China was obviously home to a plurality of religious beliefs, practices, and organizations. However, there is a difference between observable difference (plurality) and the explicit social and legal acceptance of such difference—pluralism. While pluralism in contemporary societies often means

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enthusiastic support on principle for a plurality of views and practices, I use the term here in a more restricted sense of the effective state recognition that different types of religious practice can be accommodated. Was late imperial religious plurality recognized and managed as pluralism in this sense? Scholars interested in the religious policies of the late imperial state have mostly taken a top-down approach, reading the empire-wide code and laws (distinctly less tolerant than actual practice), and looked at the most violent conflicts, around Christianity (and to a lesser extent, Islam) as well as the so-called 'sectarian' traditions. Seen in this light, the imperial regime does not seem to leave much room for pluralism, except the recognition granted to clerical Buddhism and Daoism as far as they remained confined to a separate domain. I propose here to set these aspects of central state policy-making and empire-wide repression campaigns aside, and to take a local view at local officials and how they dealt with 'ordinary' aspects of religious plurality that were not linked to foreign missionaries or bloody uprisings. In such contexts, where they acted under much lower pressure from the capital, I would like to ask whether local officials could engage with and manage local religious organizations and develop a basis for cooperation with them, thus setting a framework for accepting difference and establishing pluralism even of a limited kind.

From the perspective of local religion, which is our concern, religious plurality in late imperial China was not primarily a question of various religious traditions competing for the exclusive adhesion of people. Rather, it hinged on a plurality of religiosities, that is, ways and styles of practicing religion. By focusing on the plurality of religiosities, I consciously narrow the scope of religious plurality, largely excluding beliefs, in order to better focus on what seems to be the most contested and regulated aspects of religious difference. In particular, I am interested in the way local officials could accommodate congregational, devotional, and festive ways of practicing religion.¹ I argue the central state let many aspects of local religious life, such as temple life, remain under-regulated, so that late imperial society was characterized by an extremely large

1 I am taking inspiration here from Adam Chau (2011), who has proposed to analyze the whole Chinese religious world through five 'modalities of doing religion,' which we may also describe as five ideal-typical religiosities: discursive (text-based); relational/organizational (holding festivals, managing a temple), personal/cultivational, liturgical/ritual, and immediate/practical. These five modalities can be broadly related to social classes (religious styles proper to each class), and thus help us understand religious tensions within society (such as elite attempts at reforming 'popular' religious practices), but they can also be combined in each event and each person.

grey zone,² that is, a zone of religious practices characterized by under-determined rules, subject to changing local interpretation and jurisdiction, where choices between different religious options did not normally entail going out-law, but nonetheless necessitated some sort of accommodation and negotiation with local officials and other social actors. By under-regulation, I mean that the basic rules were very cursory, and practice was dictated by ad hoc local decisions—which may in certain cases produce large numbers of official texts of local validity in the form of litigation, proclamations, or officially approved contracts and bylaws. In this vast grey zone, the state gave itself the possibility to control any religious practice, but actually intervened rather little, letting most cults, rituals, and practices in a situation of under-regulation open to accommodation and negotiation.

Specifically, I propose to explore religious pluralism and the grey area in nineteenth-century China (the period for which I have the largest amount of documentation, and which immediately precedes the radical transformations of the twentieth century) by looking closely at how different social groups participated in a same cult, that of the City God (Chenghuang 城隍), and how local officials attempted to regulate their participation. I argue that the City God temples are a convincing example of a purposefully open arena of negotiation between local officials, local elites and various segments of the population, who were left to find common ground for their various religiosities and a *modus vivendi* with very little input from above. I have analyzed in a separate publication late Qing City God temples as being shared by six types of actors engaged in temple management and organizing festivals and rituals there: local officials, Daoist clerics (who were in residence in most City God temples by the late imperial period), *yamen* 衙門 staff, territorial communities such as incorporated neighborhoods, devotional voluntary associations attached to the temples, and elite organizations such as merchant guilds and gentry-run charitable halls.³ The outcome from the negotiations between these different actors was very different from one place to the next, and was also susceptible to evolve in time.

By looking at local negotiations over the City God cult, this article revisits old problems—religious unity and diversity, the relationship between ‘elite’

2 My notion of ‘grey zone’ is loosely inspired from Yang Fenggang’s model of the three markets, devised as a tool to analyze the contemporary religious situation in China. According to Yang (2006), religion can be classified into a red market of licit practices, among which people can safely choose; a grey market of semi-tolerated practices where choices are uneasy, and a black market of repressed practices.

3 Goossaert (forthcoming).

and ‘popular’ religion, state control over religion in China—but it endeavors to refine them by discarding inappropriate concepts such as ‘orthodoxy’ as identified with Confucianism, as opposed to ‘heterodoxy,’ in which historians still too often include Daoism and Buddhism. In addition, I also use newly-available or previously untapped sources, such as temple gazetteers and late imperial newspapers that provide a wealth of data on local religion and its interactions with the state.

1 The City God Temples as a Grey Area

From the beginning of the Ming dynasty, there was one City God temple (as well as two altars where the God was regularly worshipped) in each seat of an administrative entity (district, prefecture, province). Since these administrative seats had in theory to be enclosed by a wall, the god was named *Chenghuang zhi shen* 城隍之神, literally God of the Walls and Moats; the loose translation ‘City God’ has been widely preferred in English-language literature and is conveniently brief and evocative, but one should keep in mind that the god exerted his jurisdiction over the whole administrative territory, not only over the city at the center of this territory. Many townships (usually not walled) also built their own City God temple, so there could actually be several City God temples in one administrative entity, but there was only ever one within the walled City where the local official also had his *yamen*, often very close by, and where this official was involved.⁴

Scholars have long identified the City God cult and its temples as places where the different religious traditions of late imperial China interacted.⁵ Chinese scholars notably, have delineated a coherent City God culture in late imperial times that reverberated among the diverse social classes that took part in the cult.⁶ I build on this research to explore the dissenting voices in the cult and analyze the City God cult as an open space where people with differing

4 In cities that were prefectural and/or provincial seats (and, such large cities were often concurrently the administrative seat of two, or even three, districts, each with their own City God), there were several City Gods (one for each district, one for the prefecture, etc.). In some cases, these gods were all housed in the same temple; if not, it was usually the case that one of the various City God temples was larger and more active, and aggregated the other City Gods who came to join during the major festivals.

5 Feuchtwang (1977); Zito (1987); Johnson (1985).

6 Rong Zhen (2006); Zheng Tuyou and Wang Xiansen (1994); Zheng Tuyou and Liu Qiaolin (2005); Hamashima (1992).

religious worldviews and practices met and, willingly or reluctantly, defined a common ground on which to cooperate—or fight. The City God temples were not the only such places for cooperation and tension. Other cults were equally shared by officials, local elites, and local populations. For instance, the Guandi 關帝 and Tianhou 天后 cults were equally contested, with official and local versions engaged in complex games of imitation and differentiation.⁷ But, to a certain extent, these various versions were separate, as there existed different Guandi and Tianhou temples in each locale, some being closely if not exclusively dedicated to the official cult and others being managed by local organizations. What makes the City God cult particularly interesting for my purposes is that there was much less separation: officials, clerics, and local organizations had to share the very same temple. This resulted in higher interaction, for good or bad, and therefore a close study of the City God cults may revise our view of religious pluralism in late imperial times.

Let us begin with central state regulations on the cult. Although individual City Gods had been recognized by the state during earlier periods, the City God as a mandated cult in each administrative entity of the whole empire was introduced as a key piece of the sweeping religious reforms introduced by the first Ming 明 emperor.⁸ The practices of late Qing times broadly carried on the regulations first enacted during the 1370s, with only relatively minor modifications. Conceived as a nature spirit as opposed to a deceased human with a name and history, the City God received official sacrifices at times that were the same all over the empire. Along with spirits of Clouds, Rain, Wind, and Thunder, Local Rivers and Mountains, the City God received sacrifices on the altar for nature spirits on auspicious days of the second and eighth month. Besides, it was in charge of controlling the deceased of its jurisdiction, in particular the grievous and dangerous orphan souls (*ligui* 厲鬼). These souls were offered sacrifices three times a year (at Qingming 清明, on 7/15 and 10/1) at the *litan* 厲壇, another one of the open-air altars used for official sacrifices mandated by the Ming and Qing code, both located outside the walled city in each administrative seat.⁹ During this sacrifice, the tablet of the City God, placed at the center of the altar, was presiding over the sacrifice. The early Ming reforms had mandated village communities to also build their own *litan*, but these *litan* had been transformed into temples in most places by the Qing.

Ordinary people did not participate in the official sacrifices at these altars; rather the focus of the cult was the City God temple. In contrast to the sacrifices

7 See the classic studies by Duara (1988) and Watson (1985).

8 Taylor (1977).

9 Taylor (1997).

performed on the open-air altars, which are codified in great detail in the Qing code and regulations, the City God temples are rarely ever mentioned at all in those normative texts. Specifically, most occurrences of the term ‘Chenghuang’ in the electronic version of the 1908 edition of the legal compendium *Da Qing huidian shili* 大清會典事例 concern either the altar sacrifices, or the Du Chenghuangmiao 都城隍廟 in the capital city. The remaining few occurrences deal with cases of local officials praying in the City God temples in case of crisis; canonizations of a large number of local City Gods; and plans to build new shrines to the war dead within the City God temples.¹⁰

This brief outline shows that officials were in very frequent contact with the City God of their jurisdiction, and that they engaged with it/him in two different guises: one as generic nature spirit, invoked by a tablet on an altar, and the other as a human with an identity, revered as a statue in his temple. The first Ming emperor had banned statues in the City God temples, but this was later disregarded,¹¹ and by late Qing times, all City God temples housed a statue. Indeed the Imperial state even began to grant canonizations (individual titles to particularly miraculous City Gods) from the mid-fifteenth century onwards,¹² and a flurry of such canonizations took place during the 1860s and 1870s in the wake of the Taiping war, with many City Gods being rewarded for supporting the loyalist troops.¹³ Intellectuals continued to debate the nature of the City God (nature spirit or deceased human) in theological writings, but in practice, it appears clearly that, in his temple, he was considered as a deceased

10 *Da Qing huidian shili*, 440.999 (times of crisis), 444.26–29 (canonizations), and 451.95, 499.773 (the shrines to war dead and virtuous officials).

11 Guo Qitao (2003), p. 49. Wu Renshu (2000), p. 170, quoting the *Guangxu Taicang zhouzhi* 光緒太倉州志, discusses an early Qing incident where a local official banned the statue from going out in procession, a ban that went ignored as soon as that official had moved to another posting.

12 Wu Renshu (2000), 173.

13 *Da Qing huidian shili*, 444.26–29. These canonizations were much celebrated in local society: see, for instance, “Yingwei ruci 迎位入祠,” *Shenbao*, TZ12/7/20, discussing how in 1873 the Shanghai City God was honored by a new canonization (two more characters); on this occasion, a new temple was built near the tomb of Qin Yubo 秦裕伯 (considered locally albeit not officially as one of the two Shanghai City Gods) in the Pudong area, and his statue was taken there in procession from the City God temple. All references to *Shenbao* articles are given by the Chinese calendar (year/lunar month/day, with TZ for Tongzhi reign, and GX for Guangxu). “Yingpian zhisheng 迎匾誌盛,” *Dianshizhai huabao*, 行: 2 (published in 1896) has a description of the reception of a plaque inscribed by the emperor for the Shanghai City God; officials, Daoists and devotional associations are all involved in the celebration.

human with a name, a life story, and a specific birthday.¹⁴ In brief, historical evidence suggests that officials implicitly condoned local understandings of the City God as a local god.

The implicit picture that emerges from the normative sources is that City God temples were part of the list of officially mandated temples (the ‘register of sacrifices,’ *sidian* 祀典, that listed for each administrative entity the temples that local officials had to maintain, and the liturgy for the official cults there) but were left to local officials to deal with on their own terms. The compiler of a 1758 authoritative compendium of sacrificial regulations writes: “As for the City God temple, let the people organize their festivals there 聽民間祈賽. Local officials will just come and offer incense on each new and full moon days. In times when prayers for rain or clear skies are necessary, they will also come and offer incense there. Other than that, no sacrifice takes place in the City God temple.”¹⁵ The section on official sacrifices (*sidian*) of one 1888 City God temple gazetteer says that “sacrifices in the temple (as opposed to the open-air altars): only when the county magistrate arrives in office does he offer a sacrifice, and swear his oath to the god.”¹⁶ Here was a temple that local officials had to maintain and regularly visit, but where they did not perform sacrifices (at least in ordinary times) because the sacrifices to that god were performed elsewhere, and where they let local people organize their own rituals. This, I argue, is not neglect or incoherence, but a deliberate opening by the Qing central state of an under-regulated grey zone of accommodation with local society.

To sum up, local officials were expected to maintain the City God temple and to go there regularly: 1) on arrival to their new posting, to spend the first night fasting in the temple, and to swear on oath binding both the official and the City God to serve the people with honesty and help each other; 2) on the new and full moon of each month, to offer incense; 3) on the God’s birthday (set on 5/11 in many places, even though some City Gods had their own distinct birthday) to offer incense.¹⁷ These three ritual obligations, although not supported—as far as I know—by a formal regulation in Qing texts, were part of

14 Wu Renshu (2000), p. 175 n. 88, quotes an 1868 edict, to the effect that City Gods are not deceased humans, but that it is acceptable to let people treat them as such.

15 Tanmiao *sidian*, 3.3b.

16 Gaochun Chenghuangmiao zhi, 64.

17 For instance the gazetteer of the City God temple in Liling (Hunan) quotes the *Da Qing tongli* 大清通禮 as its source for the sacrifice to the City God, but while this source in its original context describes the sacrifice on the nature spirits altar on the second and eighth months, it is used here as a basis for a sacrifice in the temple on 5/11: *Chenghuangmiao suixiu si jishi, fanli*. 1a, 1.1a–9a.

the bureaucratic culture, and repeatedly mentioned in the official handbooks and other sources.¹⁸ In addition, in case of natural disasters (excessive rains, droughts, pests) and war, an all-too-frequent situation, official regulations mandated officials to pray at different shrines, including the City God temples, and historical records (including hundreds of *Shenbao* reports of prayers for rain), show that they routinely did so.

Beside prayers and sacrifices, officials routinely used the City God temples for other aspects of their governance. Because the City God temple was often the largest temple, and therefore the largest public space in the city, it was used for a variety of purposes, such as discussions with representatives of the local gentry, setting up tax-collection posts or kitchen soups and other charitable operations, organizing public trials, and punishing convicts in full view of the public. In many if not all of these endeavors, officials made it clear that they expected people's fear of the gods, and of the City God and his underlings in particular, to make these operations work smoothly. The City God temple was a key place for the officials' task of 'educating the people,' *jiaohua* 教化. Proclamations pertaining to *jiaohua* (bans on gambling, prostitution, 'excessive' festivals, litigation, etc.) were carved on stone and the steles erected within the City God temple. It was also one of the favored settings for the twice-monthly Reading of the Sacred Edicts.¹⁹

2 Cooperation and Conflict

The sustained involvement of local officials in City God temples has led scholars to describe these temples as 'official,' but this is only one part of the story. Daily activities there were dominated by resident Daoists (in the majority of City God temples that had Daoist managers), *yamen* staff that often congregated there, devotional associations that maintained the temple, and in some cases, gentry charitable halls based within the temple who set up free clinics, kitchen soups and morality book lectures. The various actors in City God temples had different views on the god and its cult—a well-known situation that has been discussed by many scholars for various cults. These views were reflected in various modes of discourse. The stele inscriptions tend to reflect

18 For a case of an official handbook discussing the oaths in the City God temples, see *Fuhui quanshu*, j. 24.

19 Mair (1985), pp. 352–53 quotes at length a description of the Sacred Edicts reading at the Shanghai City God temple in 1847; more laconic mentions are found in large numbers of local gazetteers.

the official and/or local elites views, and focus on governance and morality. The anecdotes and miracle stories usually focus on divine justice and retribution. Novels and theater, as well as Daoist liturgy, pay more attention to exorcism and the management of suffering souls. The City God temple gazetteers (of which there are a half-dozen easily accessible) vary, some being strongly Daoist, discussing the lineage and practices of the managing clerics, while others are more focused on the concerns of the officials, or the local gentry. Naturally, this reflects to a certain extent the personal inclination of writers and the constraints proper to each of the genres in which descriptions of the City God cult were consigned. But, it also reflects the balance of power struck between the various parties in each of the City God temples.

In actual practice, local officials, clerics, local elites, *yamen* staff, devotional associations and territorial communities had to negotiate and cooperate in managing the temple and its festivals. Clearly, the first three were more interested in the management of the temple itself (its financing, its organization) and the latter three in the festivals, and the processions in particular—reflecting their differing religiosities. We very rarely see a role for Daoists or gentry organizations in the City God procession, whereas we see them prominently in temple management; by contrast, devotional associations and territorial communities preferred being involved in processions and festivals. Officials and *yamen* staff, for their part, tended to be active on both sides.

In terms of financial and physical management of the temple, officials needed and sought the other parties' help. Unlike the big monasteries, urban temples such as the City God temples seem to have often not held much landed property, and therefore needed continuous financial input. In a number of cases, official land was earmarked for funding the official rituals; local officials also tried to use *yamen* fees from litigants to finance the City God temple.²⁰ These were often insufficient for maintaining the temple as a whole, however: hence the need to rely on elite organizations and fundraising, especially during major renovation projects. Many magistrates made it a point that they would be nominally the chief donor to any fundraising for restoring the City God temple. Indeed, in local gazetteers, most City God temples are listed as repaired by the magistrate, or some other local official. But they had to find support from other parties, notably the local elite, local shopkeepers,²¹ and Daoists as fundraisers. The sharing of power often resulted in complex contractual arrangements, with typical features being Daoists hired on a contract as managers of

20 "Xingxiu yimiao 興修邑廟," *Shenbao*, GX6/11/25 for Suzhou; *Gaochun Chenghuangmiao zhi*, 101–104.

21 "Juanzi xiumiao 捐資修廟," *Shenbao*, GX5/+3/25 for Ningbo.

ritual life and day-to-day operations, gentry groups managing endowments and repair funds, and *yamen* staff running the festival funds. When the other parties were too successful, the local official and/or the Daoists might lose control over the temple as a result, such as when gentry associations repaired and completely took over City God temples after the Taiping war.

In terms of festivals and ritual life too, the division of labor was never fixed,²² tensions occurred, and conflicts erupted, as we will see from cases of cooperation and conflicts pertaining to the most popular and festive aspects of the cult: the thrice-yearly processions and the other cults and rituals within the temple.

2.1 *The Three Processions, sanxunhui* 三巡會

Qing officials were as a rule wary of major temple festivals and processions. The bureaucratic literature is full of bans on these festivals, which were indeed forbidden by the Code. In some cases, officials tried to ban the processions outright, but pressure from local elites often forced them to reconsider and permit them with limitations. Indeed, in most cases, officials focused on limiting certain aspects of processions, rather than trying to prevent the procession to take place at all. They notably tried to have the opera and processions end at dusk, and to limit the participation of women. There are several strands of reasoning behind such a repressive approach. One is fear of disorder. Beyond the mere crowd-management aspects, with processions not infrequently resulting in cases of theft, or accidents (horses, an important feature of the processions, sometimes panicked and hurt spectators), officials were aware that festivals could turn into large-scale protests or even riots in time of social tension. Wu Renshu has documented how urban riots of all kinds (protests against corrupt officials, rent riots) from the sixteenth to eighteenth century often occurred during festivals, especially those of the bureaucratic gods such as the City God and Eastern Peak.²³ In such cases, protesters considered their action to be a just uprising against oppression, and made appeals to the gods that administered justice and supervised officials.

The City God processions have a lot in common with processions for other gods. But, in terms of regulation, they were unique. As the processions, notably the *sanxunhui*—the thrice-yearly processions of the god from his temple to the *litan*, and back—were aggregated to an official ritual (the sacrifice at the

²² Katz (2001) offers an analysis of the division of labor in temples management and procession in a contemporary case study that bears comparison with the present discussion of City God temples.

²³ Wu Renshu (2000).

litan), they could not be banned altogether. Whereas other large-scale processions in Jiangnan cities during the late Qing (such as the Marshal Wen 溫元帥 processions in Wenzhou and Hangzhou, or the Dutian 都天 processions in Yangzhou) had sometimes been suppressed (never for very long, but at least that made the threat of outright suppression credible), this was not the case for the City God. The one exception I know of is Beijing 北京, much more heavily policed than other cities, and where processions were less common; a 1888 report describes a grand City God procession there organized for the first time after twenty years of being banned.²⁴

So, outside of Beijing, the most extreme measures taken were to curtail the procession to the god in his sedan, insignia bearers, and nothing else. For instance, in 1877 the Ningbo 寧波 prefect, fearing trouble because of the large numbers of demobilized troops present in the city, curtailed the third yearly procession of the two City Gods (of the prefecture and county) to this bare minimum.²⁵ Such minimal City God processions were largely considered as emergency measures only. In Tianjin, because of the famine, and of a kitchen soup within the temple, local officials had curtailed the processions in 1878, but the following year, as the situation had improved, the temple Daoist managers and the leaders of the associations petitioned the prefect, who allowed the procession to take place as usual.²⁶ Only exceptionally committed officials attempted to curtail City God processions on the long term: in his highly confrontational tenures as Jiangsu 江蘇 governor (1879–80, 1881, 1885), Tan Junpei 譚鈞培 (1828–94), banned the Suzhou City Gods' procession from aggregating all the neighborhoods' Earth Gods who used to accompany them on a massive display of the local religious hierarchies and networks.²⁷ Very tellingly, a Ningbo prefect banning the procession of a local god in 1884 wrote in his public proclamation that, should an epidemic outbreak occur, then he might allow it again, but "only on a limited scale, like that allowed for the City God."²⁸ Thus, in spite of all the specific processional practices that they tried to fight, officials

24 "Saihui zhisheng 賽會志盛," *Shenbao*, GX14/5/11.

25 "Saihui jiancong 賽會減從," *Shenbao*, GX3/10/4.

26 "Jinren saihui 津人賽會," *Shenbao*, GX5/4/17.

27 "Jiehui jianse," *Shenbao*, GX6/3/6; "Caijin jiehui 裁禁節會," *Shenbao*, GX7/7/17; "Jinzhi saihui 禁止賽會," *Shenbao*, GX15/3/11. Other bans on penitents in the City God processions in Suzhou in Wang Liqi (1981), p. 169 (quoting the *Huizuan gongguoge* 匯纂功過格). On Tan Junpei, see Goossaert (2008), p. 232.

28 "Yongjin Dushenhui gaoshi 永禁都神會告示," *Shenbao*, GX9/4/8. This follows a pattern of festivals banned after the Taiping war, but reactivated when an epidemic outbreak caused public opinion to cry out for the procession to take place, and officials to give in.

still held the City God procession as a model of acceptable popular religion—if properly managed and patrolled.

As a result, late Qing local officials regulated the City God processions in much greater detail than other processions, which they often simply either ignored or tried to ban. Willingly or not, they had to come to terms with the *sanxunhui*. They did so according to their own religious interests and convictions: some let be and just performed their own prescribed part; others tried to really reform popular practices and preside over the whole procedure. The latter sort, echoing Ming-times utopian projects by local officials who attempted to take control over the whole local popular religion, is occasionally attested during the Qing. Lu Longqi 陸隴其 (1630–1693) organized in person the City God birthday (note that this was not an official sacrifice) by banning operas, and having the local population attend the sacrifice and subsequent reading of the Sacred Edicts.²⁹ But, less authoritarian approaches were more common: commenting on the Suzhou City God procession, one mid-nineteenth-century author remarks that “officials consider that this is part of the education of the masses through the gods (*shendao jiao su* 神道教俗), and therefore let it be done, and do not try to ban it.”³⁰ But they did enact countless interdictions banning the aspects that they found most objectionable. The *Shenbao* 申報, for instance, rarely failed to mention before each of the City God procession that the Shanghai magistrate banned a number of specific practices.³¹ The most frequent elements in the list being: 1) female penitents;³² 2) self-mutilators; 3) Heavenly tax collectors;³³ 4) people dressing up as runners for the Hell bureaucracy; 5) various forms of walking music bands (the reason for banning them is very unclear to me). Much less often, they insisted that the procession return to the temple and end by nightfall.³⁴

One well-documented aspect of this micromanagement of processions was the 1870s and 1880s Shanghai local officials’ (Shanghai magistrate, Daotai, and others) attempts to ban female penitents from the City God celebrations. The

29 Wang Liqi (1981), pp. 97–98, quoting the *Sanyutang wajji* 三魚堂外集.

30 Wujun suihua jili, 3.115.

31 For instance, “Xunli shijin 循例示禁,” *Shenbao*, GX13/9/28, “Lingjie yingshen 令节迎神,” *Shenbao*, GX16/10/1; “Jiehui lizhi 节会例志,” *Shenbao*, GX16/7/15. Other similar bans in Beijing in Wang Liqi (1981), p. 86 (quoting the *Yanjing suishi ji* 燕京歲時記).

32 On penitents and City Gods, see Katz (2008).

33 On the collection of Heavenly taxes (*jie tianxiang* 解天餉) by the City Gods, see Hamashima (2001), pp. 205–19 and Goossaert (2010).

34 Most descriptions suggest that they actually ended in the morning hours, and reports of other overt violations abound. In “Saihui zhilüe 賽會志略,” *Shenbao*, GX19/10/2, the journalist wonders if officials are going to do anything about the open violations.

ban was systematically re-published before each procession, but there seem to have been women in each procession, although sometimes so few as to suggest partial success in enforcement.³⁵ Officials sometimes arrested women, but they eventually released them, so the dissuasion effect was quite limited.³⁶

Behind the bans on various practices in the processions, such as penitents, was the question of the legality of the devotional associations that organized the processions and other celebrations around the City God. In Qing times, festivals and associations formed a large part of the grey zone of under-regulated, negotiated toleration. According to the Code, forming an association distinct from territorial or kin structures was illegal, but in practice most associations were actually tolerated. Local officials who wanted to clarify and enforce distinctions between officially tolerated associations and actively repressed ones had to resort to devices not found in law. A very interesting case is offered by a proclamation from Zhang Wuwei 張五緯, the prefect of Tianjin in 1811. Zhang was adjudicating a complaint filed by shopkeepers who had been drawn into a fight with members of an association parading with the City God procession, and raising money along the way. Zhang found out that this was a new association, just established by a man who wanted to thank the god for having cured his mother. Zhang decided to ban the association and all such new *ad hoc* associations, while allowing *old* associations (*lao hui* 老會) to go on taking part in future City God processions.³⁷ This makes sense of why processional associations in many places insisted on being called 'old associations' and recorded their history on stone,³⁸ and when possible in semi-official records such as temple gazetteers.³⁹ There was no difference in belief and practice between 'new' and 'old' associations, and no one suggested that there was one. Rather, presumably old associations had a history and a leadership that was able to negotiate an agreement with local officials.

35 "Qingming saihui 清明賽會," *Shenbao*, GX20/3/1 notes that among over a hundred penitents there were three or four women in spite of the ban.

36 Goossaert (2008).

37 Tanaka (1968), p. 5, quoting the *Jiangqiu gongji lu* 講求共濟錄.

38 For a case of a City God processional association erecting its stone inscription, see "Jiju Chenghuangmiao Puli shenghui bei 暨聚城隍廟普利勝會碑" (1884), *Wenzhou lidai beike erji*, 791–3. See also the analysis of the public nature of pilgrimage associations in Beijing in Naquin (2000).

39 Notably the Gaochun City God temple gazetteer (*Gaochun Chenghuangmiao zhi*) that described in loving detail the various associations (some of them processional) attached to the temple. I am not aware of any case of a City God association discussed in a local gazetteer.

If local officials wanted to enforce their regulations on the City God processions, they had to take part in them personally. Otherwise, enforcement resided primarily with the *yamen* runners, who certainly could be trusted not to report anything (or only because of personal reasons). The exact level of participation of officials in the City God processions is difficult to establish from extant descriptions. In a drawing included in an early nineteenth-century Japanese description of Qing customs, we see an official following the City God sedan going to the *litan*—note that this image has no penitent, nude women, self-mutilators and other of the more spectacular aspects of City God processions.⁴⁰ This suggests that the presence of the official either stopped such activity—or was supposed to. More tantalizing is a *Dianshizhai huabao* 點石齋畫報 illustration dated 1886 showing the 7/15 City God procession in Suzhou with one horse-riding official following the City God and various ghosts shows (including Hei wuchang and Bai wuchang, and ghostly generals).⁴¹ A 1948 description claims that in Qing times, the Shanghai magistrate's sedan immediately followed the god's sedan.⁴² So presumably, in some cases, officials fully participated in the processions. Other descriptions rather suggest that officials went separately to the *litan*, officiated there and then returned directly to the *yamen*, thus separating 'official' sacrifice and 'popular' procession.⁴³

2.2 *Cults and Festivals within the City God Temples*

Officials dealt with the City God Three processions in a wide variety of ways, from perfunctory ritual participation to serious engagement mixing repression and selective recognition of devotional associations. Officials were confronted with a similar choice during the City God's birthday. By law, they did not have to take part, but apparently they very often did, whether just by showing up briefly and burning incense (as they did for most temples inscribed in the local *sidian*) or more seriously. John Gray, describing 1870s Guangzhou 廣州, writes that local officials presented the City God with new silk clothes on each of his birthdays.⁴⁴ Officials may have made their own individual choices between these two options, but more likely, they were bound to a certain extent by 'custom' as dictated to them by the clerks of the office of rituals (*lifang* 禮房) of

40 *Qingsu jiwen*, pp. 504–5.

41 “Yulan zhisheng 孟蘭誌盛,” *Dianshizhai huabao*, 辛:42–43 (published in 1886).

42 *Shanghai Chenghuangmiao*, p. 28; this description also points out that the sedan during the procession entered within each of the *yamen* of the city.

43 “Zhongyuan jigu 中元祀孤,” *Shenbao*, GX14/7/16, re. Shanghai; “Wuzhong huijing 吳中會景,” *Shenbao*, GX20/7/22 re. Suzhou.

44 Gray (1878), pp. 118–19.

their *yamen*. Anecdotes and bureaucratic literature provide a good many cases of officials being told on arrival at their new posting that local custom required them to participate (in a highly codified manner) in a great many religious activities over and above official cults. Just saying ‘no’ put them in a situation of outright conflict with their own staff—not the choice of an official who looks forward to a smooth tenure.

Officials as a rule had no problem with clerical (Buddhist and Daoist) rituals—their objections were to popular celebrations and practices around the clerical rituals. So, it comes as little surprise that officials frequently invited Daoists to perform large-scale *jiao* 醮 offerings in the City God temples or, *jiao* were organized by gentry organizations or devotional associations, and officials came to pay a visit. For instance, the gazetteer of the Pingxiang 萍鄉 City God temple contains an official document dated 1898 where the gentry managers report to the magistrate that, according to his orders, they have collected money, repaired the temple, and staged a *jiao* and opera.⁴⁵ In time of crisis such as draughts, local officials were just supposed to pray at the City God temple, but sometimes organized a full *jiao*.⁴⁶ Also, besides the procession to the *litan*, local officials in many places paid for a salvation ritual to be performed by Daoists and/or Buddhists at the City God temple on the evening of 7/15. Some local officials went even further in cooperating with Daoists and territorial communities for the organization of *jiao* offerings. In Anxi 安溪 county (near Quanzhou 泉州, Fujian 福建), the magistrate offered to the City God temple commercial boats, the income of which were to pay for the yearly City God *jiao* organized by an alliance of the city’s four neighborhoods. In case future magistrates would not like this arrangement, his successor had the agreement carved on stone in 1812.⁴⁷

Some officials also felt comfortable with occasionally paying for opera to be performed in the City God temple, to thank the god for fair weather or other blessings.⁴⁸ This is noteworthy in a context where the top levels of bureaucracy attempted to separate officials from the realm of popular celebrations, and where local officials who had organized, or attended opera in temples

45 *Pingxiang Chenghuangmiao shanhouhui tuce*, pp. 31–37.

46 *Wushan Chenghuangmiao zhi*, 4:804–5 (several eighteenth-century cases).

47 “Qingxi Chenghuang zaochuan beiji 清溪城隍造船碑記,” and “Anxixian Chenghuangmiao shijinbei 安溪縣城隍廟示禁碑,” Zheng and Dean (2004), nos. 840–41. An earlier magistrate in the same county had paid in person for a new sedan and insignia for the god’s processions: “Chongxiu Chenghuangmiao beiji 重修城隍廟碑記,” Zheng and Dean (2004), no. 835.

48 “Yanxi choushen 演戲酬神,” *Shenbao*, GX15/10/9, concerning Shanghai.

were occasionally fined or demoted by the central state for having done so.⁴⁹ Interaction between local officials and popular religious organizations, which was frowned upon in other contexts, became permissible in the case of the City God.

Such permissiveness was put to a test when non-official cults were introduced in the City God temple, an extremely common occurrence as the largest of these temples were huge compounds with tens of independent shrines and hundreds of statues. The City God temples housed the various shrines built by the managing Daoists (when present), including those for the Jade emperor and the Eastern Peak; shrines to patron saints of the guilds built by the latter (such as the halls for medicine gods that often operated free clinics);⁵⁰ shrines to local gods brought in by the local associations; and shrines to local heroes built by members of the gentry. The coexistence and accommodation took sometimes a temporal aspect (when officials came for official sacrifice and left, and then popular celebration took place) and sometimes a spatial aspect, as mapped in the temple's various shrines.

The City God temples were, thus, official temples that housed large numbers of gods, many of which were not official at all. The cult of the City God's wife was not sanctioned by any official text, but was widely observed, notably among women, in open violation of the central state's ban on women in the temple.⁵¹ City God temples also housed large numbers of chthonic deities, such as the hellish officers in the hall of the Ten kings, who were apparently not considered heterodox by officials, but were not included in the *sidian* either, which did make a difference for the temple managers. For instance, the gazetteer of the City God temple in Liling clearly mentions that the Hall for the Ten Kings was built and managed by a local subscription, not by the gentry association that ran the temple as a whole.⁵²

Officials themselves admitted that the City God played the exorcistic role of controlling the dangerous demons (*ligui*) some of which were the loyalist soldiers who died for the empire (Zhu Yuanzhang's soldiers, or later victims of civil wars, discussed in a great many stories about the origins of the City Gods). They did not recognize explicitly the subaltern exorcistic deities that

49 Wang Liqi (1981), pp. 78–79, and many others passages in this rich compendium.

50 This was the case notably in the City God temples of Hangzhou 杭州 and Shanghai 上海.

51 For instance, on the birthday of the Shanghai City God's wife on 3/28, newly-wed women went to clean the temple and perform a penitential ritual: "Chengxiang saihui 城鄉賽會," *Shenbao*, GX5/3/28.

52 *Chenghuangmiao suixiu si jishi*, 46. This temple housed many other gods not included in the *sidian*.

did the actual job of seizing and controlling demons, but they surely admitted that there were such deities. Locals in turn considered that placing such deities under the jurisdiction of the City God conferred them with official recognition, like the Wuchang 五猖 of southern Anhui 安徽, whom Guo Qitao has shown developed a thriving cult under the shadow of the City God and other official cults.⁵³ In short, by engaging with the City God temple and festivals, while letting a space for devotional associations and other groups to perform their rituals and house their cults within the City God temple, some local officials consciously legitimized these associations and cults.

3 Making Sense of the Pluralism in City God Temples

The abundant sources on the City God cult and the high level of interaction between its various actors allow us to use this case study to address religious pluralism and unity in late imperial China. Many different groups took part in the cult and they exhibited divergent religiosities—some festive and ecstatic; some very hierarchical and bureaucratic; some text-based, procedural; some very performance-oriented; and some very organizational. There was thus a religious plurality at work. Among these groups, there was some peaceful co-existence. There were also tensions: local officials expelling clerics, or restraining neighborhood communities and devotional associations with the help of police forces; gentry and clerical elites in open confrontation for control over the temple. And finally there was also cooperation, such as when local officials chose to participate in processions and in *jiao* offerings together with local associations. Such cooperation, based on acknowledging other ways of participating in the cult, turned the objective plurality into pluralism (plurality as entrenched in common values and in laws) to a rather limited extent, to be sure, but to a much larger extent than we would surmise from reading central state regulations. Local officials expressed such acknowledgment in ad hoc decisions, such as when they formally approved (and sometimes amended) the temple regulations (published in the temple gazetteers) that resulted from negotiations between local elites, clerics and other parties, or enacted proclamations that banned certain practices while allowing (explicitly or implicitly) others, as for instance the bans on ‘new’ processional associations, or on female penitents.

53 Guo Qitao (2003) shows that subaltern exorcistic deities were linked to the City God in a variety of sources, including Daoist liturgical texts, opera scripts, and painted pantheons.

An important part of the literature on this issue has been framed by the debate introduced by James Watson, who argued that the late imperial state did not interfere with beliefs, but regulated ritual practices (by setting examples to be imitated rather than imposed) and therefore achieved a rather high degree of cultural uniformity. Other scholars have attempted to nuance this claim by showing that apparently similar 'orthodox' or 'orthoprax' cults were interpreted and understood in widely diverging ways; among them, Michael Szonyi has been most radical, showing that processes of unification—local religious practices becoming more like China-wide high culture—were all appearance and no substance, just thin veils of orthodoxy (a name, a title) over what continued to be solidly unorthodox local practices.⁵⁴

The City God case would at first seem to support the 'Watson thesis' of a strong cultural standardization based on ritual orthopraxy throughout China, with religious pluralism being thus relegated to the secondary status of explaining the variation in details of performance in each place. Indeed, this cult was arguably one of the most impressive late imperial state attempts at remolding popular religion by adopting exorcistic rituals and taking on itself the care of wandering ghosts: with the *litan* and City God temple rituals, the state engaged local populations to appease dangerous ghosts under its own authority. Yet, on closer inspection, the City God cult exhibits all of the elements put forward by those scholars who have questioned the standardization thesis. There was 'heteroprax standardization,' (standardization *against* the state's wishes) to use Donald Sutton's phrase,⁵⁵ such as the City God penitents, all over China, in spite of local officials' suspicion and occasional repression. Local elites used the City God's orthodox status to advance their own practices (such as spirit-writing) and even in some cases privatize the temple as their own. Moreover, I fully agree with Paul Katz⁵⁶ that clerics, in this case Daoists, contributed as much as local officials to creating a more or less coherent City God cult over the whole Qing empire.

Research by those exploring the 'cultural standardization' hypothesis (whether to prove or disprove it) has tended to focus on local cults' lore and rituals, and the way such lore and rituals conformed or not with official standards. What they have not much explored are the processes of explicit negotiations between advocates of reform and standardization on the one hand (local officials and some gentry activists), and local practices on the other. Local officials' attempts at micromanaging the City God processions (even if

⁵⁴ Szonyi (2007).

⁵⁵ Sutton (2007).

⁵⁶ Katz (2007).

they turned out to be largely unsuccessful) belie the idea that the state dictated the structure of popular religion but not its content. Of course, the City God temples are not typical: they were the locus of one of the most intense state interaction and negotiation with local practices. Most cults, especially in rural areas, were largely ignored by officialdom. But my point is, in some significant cases, negotiation was a key feature of the management of religious pluralism. Even though it is true that the Qing state relied to a large extent on ritual in its task of reforming and civilizing the people, Qing officials never shied away from disciplinary projects or from enacting detailed regulations: there was both ritual (orthopraxy) *and* law enforcement in Qing religious policies. But, the abundant laws and regulations left very large under-regulated zones in which local officials and local leaders could negotiate. The City God cults are one such case. Local officials recognized that there were diverse local religious cultures that largely crossed the barrier between licit and illicit, and that they had to come to terms with them.

Rather than the simple effect of top-down sacrificial regulations, local officials' involvement in the City God temples was a complex combination of bureaucratic and local custom, and personal choice; it varied greatly depending both on the larger political context and on their own attitudes. They could choose to fully engage with the local City God celebrations, often in a reformist way, trying to ban the more unpleasant aspects of the procession; or to simply play their required parts in the larger cult, and let other parties do as they liked. But they could not ignore City God practices, as they did for most other cults. Since this was the only procession in which they participated, and the temple they visited most often, City God festivals were the best occasion for local officials to see for themselves what local religious culture looked like. And they reacted in different ways to what they saw.

Even more interesting, the City God cult does not present the simple picture of a confrontation between local officials and local religious groups. It presents a much more complicated picture of many different social groups contesting the very open and powerful resources (symbolical, political and economical) of the City God. Local officials were not always dominant in these relationships; in some cases they even appear to have been quite marginal. Rarely was one party able to control the whole cult on its own. Officials naturally sided with the gentry, but not systematically; they also often sided with elite Daoists, with whom they shared a lot in terms of religiosity, but there are also cases of officials evicting Daoists from City God temples to increase their own control. Officials systematically criticized *yamen* staff, but likely were beholden to them and needed their local knowledge and connections with religious leaders in order to enforce their decisions. The *yamen* staff, in turn, worked in close

cooperation with the territorial leaders and neighborhood constables. So what local officials allowed in the City God temple, and the degree to which they engaged with it (coming to the temple for the birthday, paying for opera, following the procession between temple and *litan*) was all part of these games of alliance and negotiation. Negotiation was not necessarily a sign of weakness, and the best available way to enforce as much restriction as possible; some officials chose to take active parts in City God celebrations when they did not absolutely have to. As a result, there was plurality everywhere, but only pluralism in certain places: fundamentalist officials did not leave room for pluralism, but those officials who themselves organized *jiao* offerings and took part in the procession along with a host of devotional associations did create local pluralism.

This picture of locally negotiated space for pluralism changes abruptly with the reforms of the last decade of the Qing and the Republican period. Officials (as well as yamen staff) retreat from temples; as early as the spring of 1912, some officials even launch assaults on City God temples that had just lost their official status.⁵⁷ Territorial communities lost their state-sanctioned status and most of their resources; elite Daoists lost their elite status and were sidelined in temple life. From contested shared spaces, City God temples (at least those that were not entirely destroyed or taken over by secular institutions) now became controlled by one party, usually guilds. Even though this period was marked by greater freedom for Christianity and other “foreign” religions and for previously banned devotional (so-called “sectarian”) traditions, it was also characterized by a lessening of the space for pluralism within local society. This is one of the many paradoxes of the story of globalization, modernity and religious pluralism.

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57 Goossaert and Palmer (2011), p. 59.

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