

Popular Religiosity

Deities, Spirit Mediums, Ancestors, Ghosts, and Fengshui

(The Yue people of the Ou River [Wenzhou area] love to worship their gods; in their mountains and along their waterways are many unorthodox deity temples. These temples cast an image of grandeur and resoluteness.

Whoever displays strength and decisiveness, people will transform him into a god and call him “General.” When there is a contagious disease, they will make vows to repay the gods if they bring relief. They will make a god out of those rare clairvoyant people, and call him “Lord” something. If there is a matron whom they greatly respect, they will turn her into a goddess with the title of “Grandmother.” If there is a beautiful woman, they will make her a goddess and call her “Lady.”)

—陸龜蒙:《野廟碑》(唐) [Lu Guimeng, “Stele Inscription for a Temple in the Wilds” (Tang dynasty, ninth century)]

甌越間好事鬼, 山椒水濱多淫祀。其廟貌有雄而毅、黝而碩者, 則曰將軍; 有溫而願、晰而少者, 則曰某郎; 有媪而尊嚴者, 則曰姥; 有婦而容艷者, 則曰姑。

As this Tang dynasty quotation attests, the Wenzhou area has long been inhabited by people who worshipped all manner of deities and spirits, built countless temples to house them, and consulted with spirit mediums. The fact that travelers and locals alike have repeatedly made this observation in texts dating back to imperial times suggests that the intensity of popular religiosity in Wenzhou may have exceeded other parts of imperial China. Today, Wenzhou’s popular religious culture continues to be stronger and more tenacious than many other rural areas in China, with the possible exception of Fujian and Guangdong Provinces.

DEFINING CHINESE POPULAR RELIGION

Studies of Chinese popular religion (Fan and Chen 2016; Sangren 1987; Weller 1987) generally include practices such as deity worship, spirit possession,

divination and Chinese geomancy (*fengshui*, 風水), lunar calendar festivals, ancestor worship, placating of ghosts, funerary rituals, and pilgrimage. These ritual practices are all part of the everyday lives of peasant communities, so we could also think of popular religion as a “communal religion” that is a local way of life (W. Tam 2011). Indeed, this was the idea in late imperial times, when religious practices were grouped under the indigenous label of “local customs” (風俗) that were recorded in texts called “local gazetteers” (地方志). These texts included local geography, community customs and festivals, histories of local temples and lineages, hagiographies of deities and their miracles, and biographies of local notables and virtuous women.

In Western scholarship, few have tried to define Chinese popular religion, but John Lagerwey offered a provocative definition:

It is a machine for the production of gods who demonstrate their existence and their power by taking possession of people; in exchange for their blessings, they then require of the people, their bloody sacrifice. . . . [The gods] “attach themselves to the body” [*fushen*, 附身] of men and women, through whom they then speak. . . . This religion . . . has . . . its own officiants, gods, temples, faithful, and rituals—is that not enough to qualify as a religion? . . . I believe [popular religion] to be the bedrock of all Chinese religion, that on which the others build and over against which they define themselves. *It is essentially autonomous*; it is also by definition local. Possession and bloody sacrifice being its two basic features, it is to them that China’s “higher religions” had to react. (Lagerwey 1999: 167–168)

Lagerwey’s definition stresses three components: *spirit possession*, *animal sacrifice*, and *localism*. When we apply Lagerwey’s tripartite definition to contemporary rural Wenzhou, we find that Wenzhou’s religious culture today resonates well with spirit possession and localism, but less so with animal sacrifice.

I did not witness and seldom heard about animal sacrifice for deity temples in Wenzhou. The exception is in Cangnan County, where large-scale pig sacrifices have occurred in recent years, performed by immigrants from southern Fujian (Zhang C. 2016: 196–198, 206–210, 222–225). Most Daoist and all Buddhist temples in Wenzhou offer vegetarian fare to the gods and buddhas as well as to worshippers, in keeping with their long tradition of discouraging blood sacrifice. At the Heavenly Immortal Temple (天仙宮) to the local goddess Mother Lu in Pumen Village, Yong Zhong Township, in the 1990s, worshippers offered things like a pig’s head or raw hunks of fatty pork in wooden or bamboo “ritual containers” (禮盛), which are used to carry ritual gifts such as food for the gods and engagement presents (see figure 10.1). Back then, the

temple was a small, dilapidated local deity temple. After it was rebuilt and registered with the Daoist Association in 1996, these meat offerings tapered off. Later, when the temple organized celebrations of the god's birthday, the gathered worshippers were only served vegetarian meals. In Wenzhou, the Communist state has domesticated and toned down the bloody and effervescent features of sacrifice and spirit possession.

Lagerwey's definition of Chinese popular religion omits a fourth dimension: class and social status group. Popular religion is distinguished from the literate philosophical and meditational religious culture of the elites. In Wenzhou, where wealthy entrepreneurs of peasant backgrounds enthusiastically donate to deity temples and ancestor halls, it seems that educational levels, more than economic class, predict participation in popular religious culture. The more education people have attained, the more they aspire to enter mainstream Chinese urban secular culture. While some local elites, such as local cadres, might subscribe to the more respectable Buddhism, other social elites may become attracted to Christianity.

Beginning around 2005 in Wenzhou, I noticed a decline in the local use of the pejorative term "superstition" (迷信), in favor of a neutral term, "popular beliefs" (*minjian xinyang*, 民間信仰), which had been adopted by Chinese academics in the 1990s. Of course, there are occasional throwbacks: in the summer of 2014, I attended a lunch graced by the presence of a local official who still used the term "superstition." His young assistant quietly corrected him, murmuring deferentially, "Nowadays, we use the term 'popular beliefs.'" In local Wenzhou parlance, the phrase "worshipping gods and chanting scriptures" (拜經懺) is often used, and refers not only to popular religion but also to popular Daoism and Buddhism. This term describes a kind of religiosity where one approaches the gods to ask for favors, and salvation is sought by chanting sutras or hiring others to chant them.

According to Philip Clart (2014), in Mainland Chinese academic debates, the Chinese translation of *minjian zongjiao* (民間宗教) to the English academic term "popular religion" poses problems. The word "religion" now connotes the "sectarian" or millenarian "secret societies" of late imperial China, which now have negative connotations as rebellious movements. Gone are the days of Marxist-Leninist-Mao-Zedong Thought and their studies of peasant rebellions as progressive "class struggles"! In China the category of "religion" has also come to be associated with political unrest, such as global Islamism and the Catholic Church in 1980s Poland. Thus, in a strange about-face, just as the term "superstition" is subsiding, its counterpart, "religion," may now inspire more concern in China as a threat to the secular order.

I have also noticed a new term creeping into common usage in Wenzhou since about 2012, which can be translated as “belief customs” or “customary beliefs” (信俗). Here the term “customs” (*su*, 俗) reconnects with the late imperial Chinese category of “local customs” (風俗), which connotes the local and the routine. A Wenzhou scholar explained to me that this new term gets around the problem of having to acknowledge that local customs are a form of “religion,” which is “still a sensitive issue” (宗教還是很敏感) in China. Thus, “customary beliefs” serve to renormalize popular religion as a way of life or peasant culture, by invoking a historical category of Chinese civilization, reversing a century of modern labeling as “superstition.” This new term also tones down the dangerous force that is often associated by officialdom with religion, what Émile Durkheim called “collective effervescence,” the ritual suspension of everyday norms with intense outbreaks of religious passions and wild behavior (Durkheim [1912] 1995: 218–220).

However, the problem with using the phrases “popular beliefs” (民間信仰) or “customary beliefs” (信俗) to translate the notion of “popular religion” is the word “belief” (信). It introduces a Protestant slant on religion as primarily a mentalistic, doctrinal, and discursive practice, which Talal Asad (1993), in his important critique of Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion, pointed out is a problem when applied to non-Protestant traditions. Chinese popular religious traditions do not share this overriding emphasis on “belief,” doctrine, and textualism. Ritual actions are more important as modes of religious practice, a point that James Watson (1988) also made when he wrote that Chinese religiosities privileged “orthopraxy” over “orthodoxy.” Furthermore, while Buddhist and Daoist traditions *do* focus on scriptures, the main approach to sacred texts is not hermeneutical, to discursively analyze or interpret them, but to chant, absorb, and embody them through ritualized repetition.

Therefore, I propose the Chinese phrase “popular custom religion” (*minsu zongjiao*, 民俗宗教) to translate “popular religion” into Chinese. The “religion” part of the phrase avoids the demeaning modernist association with mere “superstition,” while also introducing the elements of divinity, sacrality, and transcendence that are missing in the indigenous notion of “folk customs.” The inclusion of “custom” (俗) reconnects with late imperial China and suggests that popular religion is still a whole way of life for the folk, who resist the modernist move to split religiosity off from “normal” secular life. Foregrounding the word “custom” may also decrease the sense of danger and rebellion that Chinese officialdom associates with the term “religion” (宗教) at the end of the phrase. The “popular” or “folk” (民) part of the term connects up with the notion of “folk civil society” (民間社會), to be addressed in chapter 9.

DIVERSITY, HYBRIDITY, AND “DIALOGIC TRANSCENDENCE”

We must also consider the relationship between popular religion and the “Three Teachings” (三教) of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, which are China’s established religious traditions, each with their highly literate cultures. Both Daoism and Buddhism had their own formal religious institutions, and Confucianism operated through the state institution, with its system of “cultural temples” (文廟) honoring Confucius, and the imperial examination system based on the study of the Confucian classics. With Song dynasty Neo-Confucianism, Confucian culture took what Peter Bol (2001, 2003) has called “a localist turn,” expressing itself through local lineages and their ancestor halls across the empire (Ebrey 1986, 1991). This localist turn meant that Confucian gentry were actively involved in funding, building, and sometimes running local temples and monasteries.

The Three Teachings have each sought to tame, control, “civilize” (化), and absorb popular religion into their own religious institutions. Both Daoism (Kleeman 2016: 14, 257–258) and Buddhism (von Glahn 2004: 144–145) discouraged blood sacrifice and spirit possession in popular religion. Both tolerated but sought to absorb the cults of local gods, by placing their own Daoist gods or Buddhas above local gods in a hierarchy of divine authority and efficacy, a process I call “hierarchical encompassment.” While Confucians had no problems with animal sacrifice in their ancestor rituals, in the *Analects* the Confucian attitude toward popular religion is clear:

樊遲問知，子曰：務民之義，敬鬼神而遠之，可謂知矣。（論語·雍也）

(Fan Chi asked Confucius about Wisdom, and the Master replied, “To work for the benefit of the people; to honor ghosts and deities, while keeping one’s distance from them. This can be called Wisdom.” [*Confucian Analects*, Yong Ye])

Late imperial Confucian culture did not refute the existence of ghosts and deities, but sought to moderate the common people’s otherworldly obsessions, dampen excessive religious devotion, and restrict ritual expenditures. Thus, long before modern times, the three established religious traditions had already worked to domesticate and integrate popular religious practices (Watson 1985), but had by no means fully succeeded. Chinese popular religion remained closely embedded into the myriad local cultures of China.

Scholarly works on Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism tend to present them with doctrinal and institutional boundaries, coherent identities, unique

histories, and discrete organizations. This tendency may be more a reflection of our own need for classification than the realities of popular practice. In Wenzhou, I found that the boundaries between popular religion, Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian religious cultures are often blurred, with much fluidity and interpenetration. Timothy Brook (1993) has highlighted the prominence of Chinese religious syncretism in late imperial China, showing how different religious teachings melded into a single body of religious practices. This process started in the Yuan dynasty, when it was explicitly called “the Three Teachings Combining into One” (三教合一). Under foreign Mongol rule, Confucian orthodoxy was relaxed during the Yuan, allowing for cross-fertilization between religions. Brook also noted that it was popular religion among the common people, rather than among elite gentry, where syncretism really took hold (see Hoskins 2015 on Vietnamese Caodai).

Although this book arranges these religious traditions into four chapters (popular religion, Daoism, Buddhism, and lineages as popular Confucianism), I must also stress that they are often interpenetrated and not mutually exclusive. The permeability of religious boundaries in Wenzhou can be seen in two ways. *First*, there is often a seepage of symbolic, mythological, and ritual elements from one religious tradition to another. Deities in Wenzhou are called the following terms interchangeably: “gods/goddesses” (*shen*, 神), “Daoist gods and immortals” (*shenxian*, 神仙), “Buddhas” (*fo*, 佛), and “bodhisattvas” (*pusa*, 菩薩). It is common to find statues of popular religion deities, Daoist, and Buddhist divinities together inside a single temple. Scriptures and ritual procedures from different religious traditions may also be mixed together: Buddhist scriptures may be chanted in Daoist temples, although usually not the reverse. I have participated in rural funerals where the ritualists first dress up as Daoists, then change into Buddhist robes. *Second*, membership and participation in religious associations and rituals is not exclusive, but multiple and overlapping. When a family faces an illness, it will seek out doctors of traditional Chinese medicine or Western biomedicine. When medicine fails, the family may seek help from a local shaman, communicate with an offended ancestor or god, offer incense and food to a favorite deity in a temple, exorcise a demon through a Daoist ritual, or ask Buddhist monks to chant sutras for the family. People might even try their luck with the Christian deity Jesus, for good measure.

Indeed, some people in Wenzhou seemed confused about religious boundaries. While visiting the home of a vegetable seller at the market in Wutian Town, she asked me whether Guanyin, the female-gendered Bodhisattva Avalokitésvara in China, was Daoist or Buddhist. She had reason to be confused, because this Buddhist divinity also appears in Daoist iconography and

pantheon. The Daoist god Great Heavenly Stem Divinity Who Rescues People from Hardship (太乙救苦天尊) resonates with the figure of Guanyin. Although he is portrayed as an old man, like Guanyin, he shows mercy and responds to human pleas for help. His image shows him sitting on the Buddhist symbol of the lotus and the green lion. The most important goddess worshipped in Wenzhou after Guanyin is Chen Jinggu (陳靖姑), discussed below. She is claimed by both popular religion and Daoism, but the circumstances of her birth have to do with Buddhism. Mother Chen was born of a drop of Guanyin's blood that flowed into a stream where her mother did the washing: that drop of blood brought her mother an immaculate conception.

In Wenzhou's religious hybridity, there is special intimacy between popular religion and Daoism: both engage in divine technologies to exorcise demons and communicate with gods. As chapter 6 shows, the modern state has pushed for deity temples of popular religion to register as Daoist temples and transform their religious identities and rituals into Daoist ones. By the new millennium, the Daoist Association had absorbed most deity temples in all Wenzhou counties except Cangnan, where in addition to Daoist and Buddhist Associations, there is also a Popular Religious Affairs Network Center (民間信仰聯絡處). Through interviews in 2016, I learned that it oversees 1,553 registered deity temples. The Cangnan Buddhist Association lists only 280 temples, and the Cangnan Daoist Association manages 80 (Xu and Xue 2005: 19). Thus, only in Cangnan has popular religion been allowed to maintain a separate identity, and work within its own institutional framework. This intimacy between popular religion, Daoism, and Buddhism in local religious culture is seen in this common saying: "Having a deity's head and a Buddhist tail" (神頭佛尾). This phrase refers to the nature of much religious worship, which is like a strange beast cobbled together from elements of different religious traditions.

A study carried out in twenty-one villages in Longwan District in 2008–2009 even made a note of local religious hybridity, in which popular religion is "combined with Daoism and Buddhism into one" (道佛合一) (*Zhengxie Wenzhou Shi Longwanqu Weiyuanhui* 2011: 38–39). This survey examined the distribution of different faiths in local households. Of a total of 10,009 households surveyed in Longwan District, 88 percent, or 8,809 households, followed the Buddhho-Daoist-popular religious tradition; 8 percent, or 815 households, described themselves as Protestants or "followers of the teachings of Jesus" (耶穌教徒); and only 4 percent, or 441 households, described themselves as Catholics (天主教徒).¹ Thus, Christians comprised 12 percent of households in Longwan. Startlingly, only *two* households described themselves as "atheist" (無神論), and one of them was said to belong to a "mentally ill" person, as if implying

that only such a person would be atheist. The whole tone of this extensive volume on local folk religions and customs is celebratory, a strikingly different tone from the derisive antisuperstition discourse of the 1990s.

In the following sections I discuss some different features of popular religion in Wenzhou: deity worship; spirit possession; ancestors, ghosts, and death rituals; and divination and *fengshui*.

Deities: Hagiographies and Geographical Spread

Deity worship forms the centerpiece of Chinese popular religion. When I first visited Wenzhou, I was bewildered by the huge pantheon of gods and goddesses, many of which I had never heard of before. While some gods represent forces of nature (mountains, constellations, thunder, etc.), most gods were once human beings and left historical records. Newly installed deity statues must undergo the ceremony of “opening the light” (開光), in which a Daoist priest dabs the eyes of statues of gods, and a Buddhist monk does the same to Buddha and Bodhisattva statues. This ritual divinely activates the statue, transforming it into a living receptacle of the god, who descends into the statue and can hear people’s prayers.

The cults of gods and ancestors both exhibit the Chinese penchant for recording histories, biographies, and genealogies. Since most gods were at one time human beings, there are written hagiographies (傳) providing the god’s birthplace and year of birth, and accounts of their childhood, occupation or political office, acts of self-sacrifice or self-cultivation, and miracles performed. Usually brief hagiographies are carved into temple stone steles, following a certain formulaic construction. For influential gods, there are long orally transmitted legends, many of them written down at some point by an educated gentry, and some have been transformed into operas and vernacular novels (Shahar 1996).

Many gods are represented like human officials in the imperial bureaucracy, wearing official waist rings and headdresses, sitting on official thrones flanked by attendants, and carried outside in palanquins in ritual procession, with assistants clearing the way. Gods are also thought to have different rankings; local gods are thought to be of lowly rank, just like local officials rank lower than prefectural, provincial, and national officials stationed in the capital, Beijing. Also like human officials, many gods enjoy local territorial jurisdiction. These tutelary gods are periodically brought out in ritual procession to inspect the boundaries and ensure that their human population is protected from demonic incursions into their territory. Scholars have called this bureaucratic ranking of gods in Chinese popular religion and

Daoism the “celestial bureaucracy” (Wolf 1974) or the “imperial metaphor” (Feuchtwang 2001). Other anthropologists have pointed out that not all gods fit into the celestial bureaucracy; there are many goddesses and vagabond gods who do not resemble officials (Weller and Shahar 1996). Nevertheless, this bureaucratic presentation of gods is so culturally entrenched that even many goddesses are shown in official guise, as female civil officials sitting at a desk with the accoutrements of office: writing brush, ink well, and seal of office.

A slightly lower category of celestial beings are Daoist “immortals” or “transcendants” (仙人), who are less effective than gods at working miracles and intervening in human affairs. Immortals keep their human forms and are said to never die. They are people who have led a life of self-cultivation (meditation, detachment from worldly desires, and dietary and exercise regimens) and virtuous conduct. This conduct allows them to “attain the Way” (得道) and immortality. They are ethereal beings, light of body, who ride the winds, clouds, waves, and storks, flitting about in carefree abandon.

While the dominant view of gods and immortals sees them as benign protectors, there is also an undercurrent of fear toward some gods, whose alter egos can be vindictive and punishing. There are malignant spirits, who are called by at least four terms: “demons” (臟), which means literally “vicious and dirty”; “baleful spirit” (煞神); “demonic spirits” (鬼邪); and, finally, “monsters and demons” (妖魔鬼怪). All these terms describe spirits who have sinister intentions toward human beings. In Daoist rituals, the priest sometimes adopts the role of exorcist, commanding spirit armies to defend the community from these marauders. Stephan Feuchtwang emphasized the understudied demonic quality of popular religion in Taiwan, contrasting the “more abstract and harmonized cosmos of imperial regulation” with a “military imperium . . . in which malign and aggressive forces fill the universe” (2001: 46). Richard von Glahn (2004) also wrote about the demonic in Chinese religious culture, such as the “mountain goblins” of Jiangxi and the cult of Wutong, as expressions of the fears of civilization against the “barbaric” frontiers.

In Wenzhou today, I found that most people subscribed to an image of benign and virtuous gods, which may reflect the historical context of religious revival after a long drought. As Daniel Overmyer (1997) observed, Chinese gods are very similar to Catholic saints: they were once human beings, people of rare virtue and selflessness who performed miracles, and a cult developed around them after their deaths, with religious festivals and sometimes pilgrimages. However, in China, the imperial state awarded honorific titles, or enfeoffed (封) certain gods, and promoted them to higher ranks (Hansen 1990),

and selectively inducted some gods into the imperial pantheon worshipped by imperial officials. With modernity, just as the radical Christian Reformation process of “purification” in Europe drew a hard line between humans and divine figures, abolishing the in-between saints, so also modern China’s exposure to Protestant discourse against “idolatry” (偶像崇拜) as “backward” resulted in the twentieth-century smashing of deity statues.

Many deity cults trace back to the vibrant commercializing era of the Song dynasty, when they often replaced Earth God cults and were spread along trade routes (Hansen 1990; Katz 1995). Deity temples who shared in the same cult of a particular deity were often linked to each other, forming a hierarchy of temples. The “ancestral temple” (祖廟) is the divine site where the god was born or ascended to Heaven, or where the first temple of the deity cult was established. Traditionally, “dividing incense” (分香) was a common way of establishing a new branch temple, by installing an urn of incense ash taken from the ancestral or older temple at a new temple site (Schipper 1990). The older the temple, the farther up in the hierarchy it belongs, and the more it tends to spawn new temples by dispersing its incense ash. Deity cults have different geographical ranges: the most prominent gods are known and worshipped across China; others are worshipped only in the southeastern coastal region of southern Zhejiang, Fujian, Jiangxi, and Guangdong Provinces; and still others are local deities who are only worshipped in the Wenzhou area.

Local Gods

The biographies of local gods are closely tied to the area: they were born and raised in Wenzhou, lived here, or they protect local places and provide a ritual focus.

Earth Gods (土地公)

Earth Gods are worshipped all over China, but because they often incarnate immortalized local persons who protect their local communities, they must be understood as local gods. The Earth God is a local tutelary spirit *par excellence*, for he presides over a limited territorial jurisdiction, protecting the human inhabitants within its boundaries. Theoretically, all Earth Gods were once a local person. However, over time most Earth Gods have lost their specific human names and identities. Statues of the Earth God generally show him as an elderly man with a white beard, sometimes accompanied by his wife, the Earth Goddess (土地娘娘). In Wenzhou, he can be found protecting agricultural fields, urban neighborhoods, temples or ancestor halls, bridges, or

restaurants or shops. The Earth God ranks at the bottom of the hierarchy of divinities. In chapter 9, I examine the etymology of the ancient term for Earth God, *she* (社), which has a “spirit” radical to the left, and the character “soil” to the right (Xu S. 1963: 7).

In Wenzhou, when new houses are built, one of the first things to be ritually installed by a Daoist priest, in the exact central point of the house, is the Earth God’s “central residence” (中堂府). This central point takes the form of a four-foot-long wooden post covered with Daoist talismanic writing to ward off evil spirits. The post is inserted through the house floor into the earth below, sticking up about two feet into the house. Friends told me that the top of the pole reaches up into Heaven and the bottom reaches down into Hell, anchoring the house and positioning its human inhabitants between the powerful worlds of the gods above, who protect the living, and the gods below, who administer and punish the souls of the deceased. The “central residence” protects the house and its inhabitants from wandering ghosts (鬼), demonic gods (煞), and evil spirits (邪氣).

In 1998, I discovered that the small Earth God shrines in Longwan District that had dotted the fields and village neighborhoods on my last visit in 1993 had all but disappeared, removed by the local government in a campaign to get rid of unsightly “superstitious” shrines. Wang Qinsheng, a diviner, told me that the local government especially targeted small shrines because they proliferate too easily and are difficult to control (不好管), compared with large temples. A week later, on an old street in Yongzhong Town, I rounded a corner and, to my delight, saw a brand-new Earth God shrine set into a low stone wall lining a canal. Like new bamboo shoots sprouting up quickly after a destructive storm, these Earth God shrines and small unregistered deity temples kept popping up again after campaigns to eliminate them. Despite the determined forces of state secularization, the sparks of religious effervescence stubbornly reignite.

Although Earth Gods rank higher than the Kitchen God, whose image is found in many rural Wenzhou kitchens, they do not have direct access to the court of the Jade Emperor, the highest deity in popular religion. As one ritual expert explained to me in 1993, “The Earth God doesn’t have direct access above. It’s just like you can give gifts to influence your village head, but he has no audience with the likes of Chairman Jiang Zemin. However, he can protect you, or you can appease him so that he won’t extort [*qiaozha*, 敲詐] from you.” The celestial bureaucracy parallels the human secular administration of the state, but it is more accessible: anyone can go to a temple, offer incense and food to a deity, and receive the deity’s assistance.



Figure 3.1. The Earth God and Earth Goddess, in a deity temple in Qianku Town, Cangnan County, 2014. Photo by the author.

City Gods (城隍爺)

City Gods also produce local community solidarity, but on a larger scale. The City God's jurisdiction in late imperial China was a whole walled town, usually a county or prefectural seat (Ying and Jiang 2008: 6–9). The City God was thought of as the equivalent of a town or prefecture's human magistrate, an official representing the imperial state. City God temples were the points at which state deity cults and popular religious worship overlapped (Zito 1987). On arriving at their new posts, the magistrates were expected to offer sacrifices to the local City God, their celestial counterpart. The local gentry and common folk also visited City God temples to pray for their families' well-being.

City God temples in Wenzhou were revived throughout the 1990s, and their interiors, which look like late imperial local government offices called *yamen*, have been restored, some with community opera stages. I visited the

City God temples in Ning Village (寧村), Longwan District; Jinxiang Town (金鄉鎮), Cangnan County; Kunyang Town (昆陽鎮), Pingyang County; and Yu-ao Village (魚熬村), Cangnan County, all of which used to be walled towns surrounded by moats. City God temples serve as a symbolic center of the town where public rituals and processions are held, bringing much of the town population together. City Gods were at one time human beings who made a contribution to a local area, but as with Earth Gods, many City Gods have lost their specific identities. To local people, the City God is a stern, official-like god who deploys his armed guardian gods to protect the population by exorcising the local area of demons and evil spirits (驅鬼邪) and punishing human evildoers. He is also involved in governing the Underworld (陰界) and overseeing the administering of punishments in Hell. That is why most City God temples are slightly scary places, displaying the accoutrements of a juridical law enforcement office, with mock late imperial-era weapons. Many temples display large images of the Ten Judges and their courts in Purgatory, where the souls of newly deceased people are punished for their sins. Some City God temples have revived the practice of carrying out the god seated on a sedan chair in annual ritual processions, where he inspects the community boundaries to rid the area of demons. In Wenzhou, all of the City God temples have been brought under the auspices of the local Daoist Association.

Mother Lu (盧氏娘娘)

A homegrown goddess worshipped only in Wenzhou, Mother Lu or “Celestial Immortal Sacred Mother” (天仙聖母) was born during the Tang dynasty. A local elder recounted her legend: Mother Lu and her mother were collecting firewood in the mountains when a ferocious tiger leaped onto the mother. Mother Lu begged the tiger to spare her mother’s life and take her instead. So the tiger let the older woman go and carried Mother Lu away up the mountain. Later, people reported seeing the tiger at the top of the mountain with Mother Lu on his back. Before descending down the other side, they turned back to look down at the village, and that was the last people saw of them. A book on gods and immortals of Eastern Ou adds another detail to the story of Mother Lu: as a baby, she would kneel down before her mother to nurse (Ying and Jiang 2008: 45). Even at that tender age, she exhibited a natural instinct for filial piety. For her many miracles in saving people in distress, emperors enfeoffed her with imperial titles. People today celebrate her every year on the fourteenth day of the second lunar month.

REGIONAL GODS

Lord Yang (楊府爺)

In this coastal area of typhoons and ocean flooding, it is not surprising that the most popular god is a native son, a maritime god (海神) who saves fishermen and sailors (Lin Y. 2011; Ying and Jiang 2008: 35–37). Lord Yang was a historical person named Yang Jingyi (楊精義) who lived in the Tang dynasty. His cult spread throughout the southeastern coastal area of southern Zhejiang, Fujian, and Taiwan.

Lord Yang lived in what is now Green Mountain Township (碧山鎮), Rui'an County in Wenzhou, when the imperial examinations were first systematized throughout the empire. Born into a long lineage of scholars, Yang scored first in the whole empire in the military imperial examinations (武狀元). At only twenty-six years old, he attained the highest imperial degree, *jinshi*, and was awarded an official post in Shanxi Province, serving for forty years. At age sixty-five, he tired of politics, quit his post, and returned home to retire in Wenzhou. He retreated as a hermit into the mountains to pursue Daoist self-cultivation, attained the Way, and became an immortal (得道成仙), living to 108 years. He ascended to Heaven in 752 CE, and people have honored his memory ever since.

A village elder in a temple to Lord Yang told me the following miracle tale. At the end of the Qing dynasty, a Wenzhou fisherman and his two sons were fishing off the coast when a sudden gale threatened to capsize their boat. As their mast broke off, all they could do was repeatedly call out “Lord Yang, save us!” Lord Yang’s visage appeared to them, calming their nerves, and soon the ferocious wind died down and they were able to return to shore. As a result of this miracle, the imperial court bestowed a new title on Lord Yang: “Sacred King of Prosperity and Protection” (福佑聖王).² Today some temples to Lord Yang display a wooden replica of a traditional Chinese junk, a symbol of the god who saves people from the raging waters.

On Chinese New Year’s Eve in 2012, two friends from Longgang Town in Cangnan County took me by taxi to the Jingtou Village Lord Yang Temple (鯨頭楊府廟), perhaps the most prominent one in all of Wenzhou. As we approached the temple at 1:30 AM, a light rain was falling and the roads were clogged with people and cars headed to the temple. My friend told me about the Wenzhou competition to be the one who lights the “first candle” (頭燈) of the New Year for Lord Yang, which brings good luck. When we finally got inside the temple an hour later, I was amazed at the huge crowd.

At the entrance, people were engaged in brisk sales of incense and candles, including huge candles taller than a person. Through the haze of incense,



Figure 3.2. Lord Yang in his Jingtou Village Temple, outside Longgang Town, 2012.
Photo by the author.

I could make out a central alcove and giant altar in the distance where the red-faced Lord Yang sat on his throne, framed by flashing red and green neon lights. People huddled around large metal incense burners, into which they inserted incense sticks after bowing three times to the gods. Near the main altar was a giant metal trough into which people threw piles of folded paper spirit money (冥幣) offerings, causing the fire inside to flare up suddenly and singe their hair. We sat amid twenty fortune-tellers who told the fortunes of a long line of people. I estimated there were three thousand people inside the temple at any given time that night. If each group of three thousand spent two hours there, about thirty-six thousand people visited the temple over the twenty-four-hour period of New Year's Day.

Mother Chen the Fourteenth (陳十四娘娘)

Mother Chen, whose human name was Chen Jinggu (陳靖姑), is the second-most-prominent god worshipped in the Wenzhou area, and her temples are



Figure 3.3. Crowds at 2 AM at Jingtou Village Lord Yang Temple, 2012. Photo by the author.

called Palaces of the Great Yin (太陰宮). She is also worshipped across southern Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong, Jiangxi Provinces, and Taiwan. The number fourteen refers to the date of her birth, the fourteenth day of the first lunar month in 766 CE (Ying and Jiang 2008: 39). She was born in the Tang dynasty in the village of Xiadu (下渡), outside Fuzhou City in Fujian Province, not far south of Cangnan County in Wenzhou. The prominence of her cult in Wenzhou reveals the historical settlement of Wenzhou by waves of migrants from Fujian. Her ancestral temple is located in the town of Gutian, in the mountains of northern Fujian, where she died and ascended to Heaven. Mother Chen is both a popular deity and a Daoist deity in the shamanistic and exorcistic Daoist Lu Mountain sect (閩山派). Brigitte Baptandier (2008) carried out a thorough examination of the Fujian text of her legend, *Tales of Subduing Demons in Linshui* (臨水平妖傳), in the Min (閩) culture of Fujian (Yu B. 2007). The Wenzhou legends of this goddess follow the main outline of the Fujian text but are localized to the Wenzhou area, with Wenzhou place-names, and

the ritual traditions also differ from those in Fujian (Lin Y. 2009: 184–221; Xu Hongtu 2005).

Mother Chen is especially popular among rural women, who beg her for help in fertility, childbirth, and family happiness (Ye and Ye 1992). Men also pray to Mother Chen for help in business success, eliminating disease, providing safety on the high seas, relieving droughts, and granting community peace and harmony. Mother Chen is said to have two sworn sisters, goddesses Lin Jiuniang (林九娘) and Li Sanniang (李三娘). She commands a divine army of two male generals, thirty-six female spirit soldiers (女陪神), and seventy-two “granny assistants” (婆神).

Innumerable Wenzhou legends and spinoff stories about Mother Chen have been handed down orally and recorded in popular novels, operas, verse, songs, and historical texts. I first learned of Mother Chen in June 1992 from Wang Qinsheng, a diviner and head of the Yingqiao Wang Lineage. Here is the story I recorded from him in 1993:

Mother Chen the Fourteenth is from Gutian, Fujian Province. She is a Song dynasty historical person. Her father Chen Chang was a Daoist exorcist-priest (法師) who was trained in the Maoshan branch (茅山派) [*sic*] of Daoist magical techniques, and he taught martial arts skills to her and her two brothers, Xiao Tong and Xiao Qing. One day, the local people begged her father to go to the mountains to kill the White Snake Demon. Since he was suffering from a back ailment, he had his two sons go instead. Unfortunately, Xiao Tong, the older son, was eaten by the snake, but the younger son managed to escape and get back home. Chen Jinggu was only seventeen years old, but that did not stop her from vowing to avenge her brother’s death. She went off to Lu Mountain (閩山) to improve her martial arts fighting skills under the instruction of the immortal Old Mother of Lu Mountain (閩山老母). On her way back home, she passed through Wenzhou, including Ping Yang County, all the way dispatching demons and monsters that were harming the people. Later she learned that the White Snake Demon was harassing people in Fujian, so she went to his mountain cave. She cut the White Snake into three sections, but the snake did not perish, and changed into a woman and escaped. One year, there was a great drought which caused the crops to wilt. At that time, Chen Jinggu was three months pregnant, but she decided to abort the baby (脫胎), utilize her Daoist magical powers (施法力) to bring rain for the people, and come back to finish her pregnancy. She was successful in bringing rain to the people. However, the sly White Snake Demon



Figures 3.4a and 3.4b.
Goddess Mother
Chen as Civil God
(*wen* 文) and as
Martial God (*wu* 武)
with sword. Photos
by the author.



disguised itself as Chen Jinggu and sneaked into her home, stole the baby, and devoured it. In a great rage, Chen Jinggu chased the snake demon to its cave in Gutian and sat astride the snake so that it could not leave the cave. In this way, she died saving the people, at only twenty-four years old. Before she died, she said, “When I become a goddess, I want to protect the life and health of all babies and destroy demons!” That is why women today beg her to help them conceive and give birth. Today her corpse still lies in Gutian, Fujian province.

In this story, the listener is transported back to ancient times when certain humans exhibited great heroism and could change into gods. This was the world of interchangeable human and divine agency, before the “purification” process of modernity insisted they be clearly separated. Mother Chen at first refused to marry the man that her parents chose for her (Pan E. 2001: 114), fleeing to Lu Mountain and apprenticing herself to the Daoist immortal Xu the Perfected Lord (許府真君) to learn Daoist magic and martial arts. In chapter 8, we will see how, although she is still worshipped within a patriarchal context where women pray to her to conceive a boy instead of a girl, Mother Chen’s bold exploits are ripe for future feminist reinterpretations and redeployments.

A theme not addressed in Wang Qingsheng’s story above is Mother Chen’s genealogical descent from the blood of the Buddhist goddess Guanyin. Two sources—Ye Dabing (葉大兵), a folklorist and former chief of the Bureau of Culture in Wenzhou City, in 1998; and two elders at the Cultural Relics Protection Office in Jinxiang Township, Cangnan County in July 2004—told very similar versions of one story. The Queen Mother of the West (西王母), who is also the mother of the Jade Emperor, holds a big birthday celebration, at which she invites all the gods, goddesses, and immortals to compete to move a giant column holding Heaven up above the Earth. Only the Bodhisattva Guanyin can move it with a flick of her fingers—but, in doing so, she cuts a finger and two drops of blood fall to earth, down into a well in Gutian County (in Fujian). Chen Jinggu’s mother drinks water from this well, and Guanyin’s blood impregnates her.

Here we have a matrilineal descent of goddesses, crossing the divide between Buddhism, Daoism, and popular religion.

In October 2001, I collected another Chen Jinggu oral legend from Gong Hongxin, a well-respected elderly doctor. We sat in bamboo chairs in his family-owned pharmacy in Ning Village in Longwan District, and I strained to understand his Wenzhou-accented Mandarin. As a child, he sat in rapt attention in a temple as a blind storyteller spun tales of the goddess’s exploits:

In Quanzhou, Fujian Province, Luoyang Bridge was being built. Magistrate Cai, the official in charge of the project, fell ill and ran out of funds to complete the bridge. The local wealthy families, like today's children of high officials, would not donate money to finish the bridge. Wanting to help, the Bodhisattva Guanyin disguised herself as a beautiful woman and sat on a boat next to the bridge. Many handsome young men came over to gaze on her beauty. She told them she would marry whoever could throw gold into her apron. They each tried their luck, and lots of gold fell into the river. Lü Dongbin (呂洞賓), one of the eight Daoist immortals, was jealous of Guanyin's fun and wanted to play a trick on her. Just then a young peddler, aged fifteen and poor, passed by. Said Lü Dongbin, "Would you like to have her as your wife?" The peddler had only three cents, but Lü told him to throw them all the same. Lü made them all stick to Guanyin's apron. In her anger at having to keep her promise to marry the man who could throw gold into her apron, Guanyin squeezed out blood from her fingernails, which landed in Gutian. Chen Jinggu's mother drank this blood and gave birth to her. Thus, Chen Jinggu is born of the blood of Guanyin.

In this tale, the gods are strangely human, with their petty rivalries and flights into rage. As with humans, it is important to trace the gods' genealogical descent lines, even if some gods are the products of divine virgin birth. Here we have a direct matrilineal line of descent from Guanyin, a powerful Buddhist mother goddess worshipped across China, to Mother Chen, a younger generation goddess. As direct descendant, Mother Chen inherits the considerable powers of Guanyin, as well as some of her characteristics: both are active female agents who resisted patriarchal marriage, and both are also known for their feminine compassion and capacity to relieve human distress.

In late imperial China, popular fiction and drama played important roles in spreading Chinese deity cults (DeBernardi 2006: 150; Shahar 1996). As a child, Wang Qinsheng heard many stories of this goddess and also read about her supernatural feats in a new text: (陳十四奇傳) (*Marvelous Tales of Chen the Fourteenth*), published by amateur folklorist Ye Zhongming (1985). I am grateful for the browned and dog-eared copy that he presented to me as a gift. Based on fieldwork among old "drum chant" (鼓詞) storytellers and village elders across Wenzhou, Ye Zhongming compiled this folk narrative of Mother Chen's exploits in the Wenzhou area.³ Mother Chen passes through actual places in the Wenzhou area, such as Qian Cang (Money Storage, 錢倉) and Ping Yang (平陽). After three decades of modern antireligious campaigns, the late imperial

tradition of a local educated person gathering and publishing vernacular tales of a deity has resumed.

From 1998 to 2002, Tang Zhendong, a Wenzhou native, also traveled through the Wenzhou countryside and recorded newer versions, which he published under the title *Wenzhou Drum Chant: Travels through the South* (溫州鼓詞南遊傳) (Lin Q. 2014; Tang 2008; Xu Y. 2001). In 2014, I was thrilled to chat for a whole day in a teahouse with Professor Lin Yixiu of Wenzhou University about the cult of Mother Chen and religious development in Wenzhou. He has published two excellent books on Mother Chen: a transcription of a complete fourteen-chapter drum chant that he recorded from a Wenzhou storyteller (Lin and Chen 2011), and a study of the Mother Chen cult in Cangnan County, with a list of her Great Yin Temples (Lin and Guo 2016).

Many older people in Wenzhou remember that as children they sat through public performances of “Wenzhou drum chants” (溫州鼓詞) in temples or public squares. Also called “chanting the Mother’s song” (唱娘娘詞), this chanting ritual is found only in the Wenzhou area. The verse is composed of seven characters per line and was sung ritually in the Wenzhou language before Liberation. “In the old days,” said Wang Qinsheng, “whenever a local community was beset by problems of disharmony and crisis, it would hire professional singers to stage the chanting of this text,” a cross between ritualized scripture recitation and storytelling. Two musical instruments provide rhythmic accompaniment to the chanting: a stringed instrument made of wood with ox tendons stretched over it, and bamboo hand clappers (快板). The chanting usually lasted seven days and seven nights and was believed to be effective in exorcising the demons (妖怪) who were causing the problems. In the Yong Qiang area of Wenzhou, this drum chant was sung three times in 1949, but subsequently was banned.

In January 2012, after waiting for twenty years, I had the good fortune to attend a drum chant performance in Xiayi Village, Longgang Township, Cangnan County. The opera stage in the temple was set up as the side of a mountain, with multiple levels of little papier-maché gods and demons that the goddess encounters in her adventures. The whole incredible scene was bathed in golden light. Paper paths connected different levels, and clusters of gods were grouped around paper temples. Mother Chen held pride of place at the mountaintop, and plates of fresh fruit were offered to her at the front of the stage. Over the seven days, the story of Mother Chen would move from one cluster of gods to another on the stage. On each side of the stage, two giant paper snakes, one white and one green (白蛇青蛇), wrapped themselves around tall poles. The audience in the packed hall was expected to participate



Figure 3.5. Wenzhou Drum Chant performance, Xiayi Village, Longgang Town, with paper White Snake Demon, 2012. Photo by the author.

in the ritual storytelling: at one point, they were each given incense sticks to take outside and invited to offer thanks to the goddess for saving human life. At the end of seven days, the ceremonial master approached the two giant paper snakes with a big knife, cut them down, and burned them. The ashes were thrown into a giant paper boat that was later pushed out to sea to exorcise the community.

EMPIREWIDE GODS

Empirewide gods refer to deities that are worshipped not only in Wenzhou or the southeastern coast, but across what was the Chinese empire or is the nation today. These areas include the interior, provinces such as Sichuan, Hubei, Hunan, and Jiangxi; the southwestern provinces, like Yunnan and Guizhou; and even northeastern Shaanxi, Shanxi, Hebei, and Shandong.

The Jade Emperor (玉皇大帝)

The Jade Emperor is the supreme deity of Chinese popular religion, ruling over all the other gods. His statues show him with an emperor's headdress, a rectangular mortar board from which thirteen strings of beads dangle in front of his face and behind his head. He sits on a throne, usually flanked by the Goddess Moon and the Sun God, and other deities who are his court assistants. His temples often feature images or carvings of dragons, symbols of sovereign power. He is said to have a wife (or mother), believed to be the Queen Mother of the West, and a nephew, who some believe to be the god Erlang (二郎神). He is thought of as the divine counterpart of the earthly emperor, with a court of divine ministers and assistants and a "celestial bureaucracy" (Wolf 1974) of hierarchically ranked official-like gods who all answer to him. In Wenzhou, people have told me that he is the celestial counterpart of the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, or the secretary-general of the United Nations, the leader of the world's government.

The hagiography of the Jade Emperor has been heavily infiltrated by the Daoist tradition, in which he also ranks in the upper echelon of the pantheon of gods, positioned just below the three highest Daoist deities, the Three Pure Ones (三清). He commands the "Three Worlds" (三界), understood as the cosmos and heavens above, the human world in the middle, and the Underworld (or "Yin World") below. Thus, the Jade Emperor rules over the vast cosmos and the forces of nature; the pantheon of all the other gods; human life and death, good and ill fortune, and longevity; and the souls in Purgatory and the gods and buddhas there who administer them.

As a divine sovereign, the Jade Emperor bestows and promotes life: he controls the rains, winds, and weather to ensure good crops and harvests; determines the number of newborns and descendants for each family; controls people's prosperity, good fortune, wealth, education, and longevity; rewards virtuous behavior; and shows his concern for "the illnesses and sufferings" of the human population by sending down assistants to report on humanity's well-being and to save people from storms, floods, and misfortune.

The Monkey Sage-King (齊天大聖)

The Monkey King or "Great Sage, Equal to Heaven" is one of the few Chinese gods who does *not* have a human genealogy. He is a divine monkey who has not only supernatural powers but also many humanlike weaknesses. His hagiography can be found in the classical vernacular novel *Journey to the West* (西遊記), written by Wu Cheng-en (吳承恩) in the Ming dynasty (Wu C. 2010).



Figure 3.6. Jade Emperor, Fengmen Daoist Temple, Yongzhong Township, 2012. Photo by the author.

In the novel, Monkey is called Sun Wukong (孫悟空), and his character presents a rare defiance of authority. Monkey's propensity for mischief provides comic relief and satirizes the portentous gods of popular religion; at the same time, Monkey is prone to arrogance and boastfulness. In Wenzhou there are many temples devoted to Monkey, including a prominent one in Lingxi Town, Cangnan County.

Although Monkey is basically good-hearted, his mischievous nature creates great headaches for the gods who try to control him. He snuck into Purgatory and destroyed the Register of Births and Deaths, much to the anger of King Yan Lo (閻羅王), the head god of Purgatory. Monkey also dived under the sea to the Pavilion of the Dragon King and stole his magical needle that quells the seas. Hoping to distract Monkey by making him feel important, the Jade Emperor called Monkey to Heaven to assign him to a celestial office—but when Monkey discovered that “Horse Warden” was a lowly rank, he left

Heaven in a rage and returned to Flower Fruit Mountain (花果山), where he awarded himself the title “Great Sage, Equal to Heaven” (Pan E. 2001: 87–88).

The Jade Emperor sent down his celestial army to capture Monkey, but they were beaten badly. Monkey soon offended all the other gods by pulling rank and ignoring their titles. Fearing the loss of order in Heaven, the Jade Emperor dispatched Monkey to guard the celestial Peach Orchard and get him out of the way. However, Monkey ate all the precious peaches that ripen only once every three thousand years, rudely disrupted the Queen Mother of the West’s divine peach party, drank the royal wine, and stole the God Laozi’s golden medicinal pill. Apoplectic, the Jade Emperor dispatched ten thousand celestial troops to seize Monkey, but Monkey beat them back, wielding his magical golden staff (金箍棒). Only when Bodhisattva Guanyin sent the God Erlang to join forces with Lord Laozi were they able to subdue Monkey. They threw Monkey into the Oven of the Eight Trigrams, but the fire only made Monkey stronger, and he escaped. Desperate, the Jade Emperor appealed for help from the Buddha Rulai of the Western Heaven. Rulai entrapped Monkey in the palm of his hand. When the Buddhist monk Tang Seng (唐僧) journeyed to the Western frontier to bring back Buddhist scriptures, Guanyin directed Monkey to protect him from dangers along the way, and they had many adventures. The story of the Monkey King is tied up with a narrative of how Buddhism encompasses the gods of popular religion and Daoism. These gods are helpless against Monkey, so it takes the power of the Buddhas, Guanyin, and Buddhist monk Tang Seng to finally control the strong-willed Monkey.

MODES OF DEITY WORSHIP

We now turn to a brief examination of the modes of deity worship and communication with deities. These can be summed up in the following categories: prayers and offerings, chanting of sutras or scriptures, doing penance, transmitting legends and miracles, and religious rituals and temple festivals: communal banquets and local operas.

Communication with the Gods: Prayers, Offerings, and Divine Response

A primary mode of deity worship is to engage in individual prayer with a chosen god, presenting a request or asking for the god’s advice or permission. When a person needs help, she will enter a temple and light incense and a candle for a chosen god. A villager once told me that the incense is like a mobile phone (*shouji*), and lighting it alerts the god that someone would like to talk to him. One must kneel down and *ketou* three times, knocking one’s

forehead on the floor or kneeling cushion. Offerings of fruit or other food to the god, periodic monetary donations to the temple, and the lighting of candles are sufficient.

If the request is more specific and hard to obtain, prayer assumes the form of “making an oath” (許願) for reciprocal exchange with the god. For example, if a woman wants help so that her husband will stop seeing another woman, she might make an oath specifying a monetary donation to the god’s temple; if an entrepreneur needs help gaining more customers for his business, he might promise to volunteer his labor toward temple construction. Volunteered labor is known as “beneficial work” (益工), and many temples rely on this help.

If the god grants the request, then one must “return the favor” (還願) or incur the god’s wrath and divine retributions. Many people purchase red felt pendants to hang in the temple, with gold Chinese characters singing the god’s praises and expressing gratitude. The number of red pendants hanging in a temple and the wealth of the temple from donations is a gauge of the god’s “divine efficacy” (靈驗). The god’s reputation for granting wishes quickly spreads by word of mouth. Thus, a god’s rise and fall in popularity depends on divine efficacy, an extrahuman force.

Chanting and Singing of Sutras

Those who are devout take time to chant sutras (經) to their favorite gods. For the most part, this activity is the domain of women. One frequently sees elderly women in the temples clutching their prayer beads (佛珠) and chanting for their own merit-making as well as for their family members. Since most old women are illiterate, they mainly chant simple texts, or just invoke the name of the Buddha Amitabha of the Western Paradise repeatedly: “O-mi-to-fo.”

Some devout women join “worship and penance groups” (拜懺團) attached to a temple or perform sutra-chanting services at Daoist or Buddhist temples. The word “penance” (*chan*, 懺) suggests that, through the labor of chanting scriptures, the chanter is repaying for her family’s sins and building up merit for the afterlife. I was told that the difference between a sutra (經) and a penance-song (懺) is that the former is chanted, while the latter is sung, and only in temples. These sutra-chanting troupes, made up of about ten to twelve middle-aged women, practice together in their spare time; those who are semiliterate memorize between twenty and forty sutras. Twice a month, on the first and fifteenth day, when their deity or Daoist temple holds a festival, they wear vestment robes and chant scriptures, interspersing the Daoist priest’s incantations and ritual dance steps with the graceful solemnity of their uplifting voices, singing the deity’s praises.

The troupes may also be hired by any family to assist a Daoist priest in performing a private ritual honoring a god, in hopes that the god will respond to a special request by the family. The sutra chanted depends on the nature of the request. People wishing to send their child to college will sing the sutra Precious Chant of Repentance for the Lord of Literature on High (太上文昌消劫行化寶懺). People who wish to dissolve sins chant the Precious Chant of Repentance to Dissolve Sins for the Jade Emperor on High (高上玉皇宥罪寶懺). People wishing to recover from illness chant the Precious Chant of Repentance for the God on High Who Prolongs Life and Prevents Disasters (太上歲德延生祛災度—靈華寶懺). For rituals performed to bring good luck for a woman's childbirth or new infant, the group may go to a temple to Mother Chen and sing the Precious Chant of the Celestial Immortal and Great Yin Who Prolongs Life and Promotes Progeny (天仙顯烈太陰廣生衍嗣寶懺).

Although these women receive a nominal payment for their services, the main reason women join these groups seems to be not financial need but the emotional satisfaction they derive from rendering a service to the gods. For example, Liu Lanfeng, a woman in her midfifties, told me that in addition to getting her out of the house, going to temples to chant in a troupe five or six times a month brings her close to the gods and makes it easier to gain their protection for her family. She views it as a good deed to help others win the gods' protection.

Liu Lanfeng also performs this chanting service in her home for others who lack the time or cannot read. She records her chanting on paper envelopes bearing images of different gods as well as tiny circles, which she dots with a red ink brush each time she chants a sutra for ten to fifteen minutes. When all the circles have been filled in, she seals the envelope. Each is worth six to ten hours' worth of chanting, and several hundred yuan. These envelopes are taken by the family and burned in the temple to move the gods to protect them.

Doing Penance and Mitigating Sins

Previous ethnographic studies have not stressed the importance of "sin" (罪) and "doing penance" (懺悔) in the modern practice of Chinese popular religion. I had associated notions of sin with Christianity but was struck by their importance in contemporary Wenzhou. These notions of sin and immorality are tied in with bodily illness; mathematical calculations of merit, demerit, and life span; notions of divine punishment in the afterlife; and ritual measures to mitigate the effects of sinning. These measures can be found in both Daoist and Buddhist traditions. The ancient Celestial Masters Daoist movement in Sichuan made a connection between ethical behavior and bodily

health and longevity. Rituals of confession were also medical approaches to healing in the Five Pecks of Rice movement (Kleeman 2016; Wang K. 1999: 17). Similarly, in the Buddhist tradition, the notion of sin is tied in with *karma* (the cause and effect of actions) and transmigration of the soul from one life to another: committing sins accumulates negative karma, which has consequences in one's afterlife or rebirth.

In rural Wenzhou, most people believe that after a person's death, the soul must travel down through Purgatory (地獄) and appear before the Ten Judges in the Yin World (陰界十大殿王) (Teiser 1994), gods who preside over the souls of the deceased. Headed by King Yan Lo (閻羅王), they consult records of the sins and good deeds of each soul brought before them. After balancing out the accumulated merits and demerits, each judge pronounces a sentence for crimes committed during the person's lifetime. Only after the punishment is administered is the soul released and sent on to the next judge. After serving sentences in all ten courts, the soul may be released into their next life, sent up to the Western Paradise and eternal happiness, or detained eternally to suffer the tortures of Hell. Sets of ten scroll paintings of the Ten Judges in their courts, administering grisly punishments, can be found in deity temples, in Daoist and Buddhist temples, and especially in City God Temples.

In the local religious imagination, sins and good deeds are quantifiable. If one commits a sin, doing penance prevents the accumulation of demerits and decreases punishments in the afterlife. At the Jinxiang City God Temple in 2004, a giant abacus hung above the main entrance; I was told that it stood for how the City God could calculate and balance out people's merits and demerits. One way of doing penance is to meditate and chant sutras, or to pay others to chant on one's behalf; another way is to donate money to a temple. One can also do another, more public penance by participating in a ritual procession. For example, in the Jinxiang Township City God ritual procession, people with an illness may donate money to do public penance for their sins. In late imperial fashion, they dress up as prisoners wearing cangues or sit in wooden cages pulled along by horses to show remorse, and thereby be cured of illness. All these penitential actions can "dissolve sins" (化罪).

Some people still practice the ancient Daoist penance ritual of marking the Geng Shen Day (庚申日) by collectively staying up through the night. The Geng Shen Day, which occurs six times per year, is calculated according to the ancient Chinese calendrical system of Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches (天干地支). Generally people only attend such meetings once a year. On Geng Shen Day in 2010, which fell on September 7 (lunar calendar: twenty-ninth day, seventh month), I was taken at one in the morning to a Buddhist temple

called Town Center Hall (鎮中堂) in Yongzhong Township (see figure 8.1). I was amazed to find about one thousand people crammed into the small temple, preparing to spend the whole night together sitting on wooden benches. The assembled crowd was composed mainly of middle-aged and elderly folk, in their forties to seventies, with about 80 percent women. The locals call this absolution ritual “narrating one’s sins and sitting through the night” (敘罪座夜), and it is an act of penance to atone for their sin of sexual intercourse, which led to “giving birth to boys and raising girls” (生男育女).

In a medieval text called “Observing the Geng Shen Day” (守庚申), we learn that in ancient Daoism, there was the religio-medical idea that the “Three Corpse Worms” (三尸蟲) reside in the upper, middle, and lower parts of the human body and record each sin of their host. On Geng Shen Day, when the host is asleep, they ascend to Heaven to report his transgressions to the “Heavenly Emperor” (天帝) (Kohn 1995a). Since they can only do this when their host is asleep, staying awake on this dangerous night prevents the worms from reporting one’s sins and shortening one’s life span. Today in Japan, this ritual is rapidly declining, mainly performed in rural areas and outlying islands (Kohn 1993, 1995a, 1995b). To find it resurfacing in Wenzhou, after the excesses of Chinese state secularization throughout the twentieth century, is a reminder that the deep cultural unconscious dies hard.

Transmitting Legends and Miracles of the Gods

Another way to honor the gods is to tell stories about them, especially to the younger generation. Their hagiographies include legends about their birth, parents, and childhood; their great deeds and self-sacrifices; their miracles; their attainment of immortality, the Way, or Enlightenment through self-cultivation; their interactions with other gods or Buddhas; and their ascent to Heaven. Accounts of dreams and sightings of gods keep the gods alive for people. In the early 1990s, I heard no accounts of recent miracles or god sightings, only about miracles in late imperial China. Increasingly in the new millennium, people feel more relaxed about recounting present-day encounters with gods or ghosts and being the beneficiary of a god’s healing powers.

In the 1980s, Wenzhou people mainly learned about the gods through orally transmitted tales. Later, old hagiographies of the gods were republished. More recently, there is greater interest in reading the biographies of local and regional gods and ancestors. This has led to an increasing number of publications by local Wenzhou writers. One example is the volume titled *Hagiographies of Gods and Immortals of Eastern Ou* (Ying and Jiang 2008), which was collected by two Wenzhou Daoist writers and self-published through a Hong

Kong press. For many people, the writing of hagiographies creates merit, just like erecting or funding a statue or temple to honor the gods.

Religious Rituals and Temple Festivals: Communal Banquets and Local Operas

Deity and Daoist temples hold several rituals each month, usually with at least one Daoist priest presiding. Regular communal feasts and rituals occur twice a month, on the first and fifteenth lunar days, when the local villagers or a town neighborhood gather to honor the tutelary god(s) of the area. Local villagers gather to make offerings to the gods and chat animatedly with each other over the communal lunch banquet. They sit ten to a round table, drink potent yellow grain alcohol in cups, and sample the large dishes of food brought out from the kitchen. Private families may also have a Daoist priest conduct a ritual, either in their homes or at the temple, to request help from a god. These private family rituals include exorcism rituals for an illness in the family, Daoist funerals, and rituals seeking blessings for an elderly parent. Depending on the nature of the request to the gods, different gods will be called down by the priest to receive offerings and enjoy the ritual performance. Most rituals are day long affairs, but large-scale communal rituals might last two or more days. Chinese law allows religious temples to conduct public rituals only inside temple walls; rituals or processions beyond the temple confines require a lengthy permit application process.

Large-scale rituals or temple festivals may occur on the birthday of the primary deity of the temple, an important lunar festival, or Daoist *jiao* (醮) ceremony that will bring blessings to the whole community. These festivals can last several days, with local peddlers and merchants setting up temporary stalls and sell their wares and food. These fairs can be noisy and boisterous, with jostling crowds and loud firecrackers.⁴ Local families will often take advantage of the festive atmosphere to throw banquets at their homes. Occasionally, larger temples may get official permission to do a ritual procession in which the resident god is carried out of the temple on a palanquin and makes the rounds of his territorial jurisdiction to dispatch demons.

Some temples have an opera stage in a courtyard where benches can be set up for a performance. Opera troupes generally perform “Ou Opera” (甬劇) in Wenzhounese; the subjects are standard opera stories dating from late imperial times. Opera is especially beloved by the elderly and children, who bring little bamboo chairs and wooden benches to watch for hours. The operas are not just for a human audience; they are presented as an offering of entertainment for the gods. At the beginning of each performance, there is a

ritual to welcome the gods from neighboring deity temples. Represented by their wooden name tablets or a miniature statue, and by an incense urn carrying ashes from their temple, they are seated along with the resident temple gods to enjoy the show. Afterward these divine guests are sent back to their own temples in a ritual called “completing reunion” (團圓). By 2008, in Longwan District alone, there were temple operas performed in every month of the year; most months saw an average of 17 operas, totaling 158 operas in one year (Longwan 2009: 185–187).

SHAMANISM AND SPIRIT POSSESSION

I define shamanism (*wushu*, 巫術) as a religious culture that revolves around gifted and respected holy women or men who have rare abilities to communicate with spirits or ancestors, go into trance or ecstatic states, travel to other divine realms, heal the sick, and divine the future (Eliade 1989; Lewis [1971] 2003; Teiser 1994). I use the term as the larger category that also includes spirit possession and ritual healing. Spirit mediums are people whose bodies get possessed by spirits who speak through them to communicate with the human world. Through mediums, people can ask questions of deities or ancestors, and find out why they have gotten ill or experienced misfortune, and what measures they may take for recovery. Ritual healers may or may not communicate with spirits, but they are able to heal the sick through ritual, writing Daoist talismans, and chanting spells.

Male shamans are called “sacred-men” or “deity-men” (*shenhan*, 神漢), while female ones are called “deity-women” (神婆), “woman of the Dao” (道姑), or “spiritually efficacious women” (*linggu*, 靈姑). I was advised to avoid the pejorative term “old shamaness” (*wupo*, 巫婆). There are also the terms “deity-child” or “deity-servant” (*shentong*, 神僮) and “servant-body” (僮身), which do not seem to be gender-specific. There is also a kind of vegetarian female shaman, called a “teacher-mother” (師娘). Most shamans have less formal education and speak mainly the local Wenzhou language. In spirit possession, when a medium’s body is shaking with the presence of the spirit inside, in local parlance it is called “coming on to the body” (上身) or “dancing like the body of a shaman” (跳僮身). Elsewhere in China, especially northern China, the phrase “dancing to the great deity” (跳大神) is used, but it is not favored in Wenzhou.

My friend Wang Qinsheng, an old diviner in Longwan District, told me that in the Yong Qiang (永強) area, he knows of only three male shamans, but there are over forty women shamans. There are many more in Pingyang and

Cangnan Counties in southern Wenzhou, and also in Yongjia County in the north, the less developed areas of Wenzhou. Elsewhere I have suggested that the reason for the female predominance is that men get sucked more easily into the secularized world of competitive capitalism, because they have more opportunities, so that more women's bodies remain sensitive and receptive to divine messages (M. Yang 2015).

Jin Xiulan, a middle-aged woman who belongs to a temple sutra-chanting group, told me that many shamans can be found in the villages. Many are sick or weak, but doctors or psychologists can find nothing wrong. These shamans get possessed by spirits and people ask them to help in communicating with their dead. In the villages, about 80 percent of the people believe in shamanic powers to connect with spirits and to heal sickness. According to Jin, there are both "real" and "fake" spirit mediums. Some are very effective and can really cure illness; others just pretend to be possessed in order to make money.

In January 2012 in Wenzhou, I interviewed Cao Jinling, whom I call the "reluctant spirit medium." "To be honest," said Cao, "I would rather have my health than have the gods come to me, but they chose me, and so I must comply." She lived with her husband and his parents in a modern apartment building in Kunyang Town, Pingyang County. Because of her continuous ill health, Cao did not work, and her two children were raised by her mother. At the age of forty-six, Cao had had only one year of schooling. She first became ill at age fifteen: her leg hurt, her whole body felt sore and weak, and she could not work. Over the years, she went to see one doctor after another, trying out both traditional Chinese medicine and Western biomedicine, but they all told her there was nothing wrong with her.

When she was thirty-five, Cao and her husband moved to Taiyuan in Shanxi Province in northern China to do business. There, far from home, she again fell seriously ill and started to become possessed. Cao's husband discovered that in Taiyuan there were local people who got possessed—but by their local gods, not Wenzhou gods. "I found out this thing is fairly common, so that made me feel relieved," he said. The couple even visited a few mediums in Taiyuan to find out their experiences and share stories.

Cao described the sensation of possession as "going crazy" (*fengle yiyang*, 瘋了一樣), or "like getting drunk." When she awoke from her possessed state, people described her as looking "crazy and unsteady" (*fengfeng diandian*, 瘋瘋癲癲). During her possession, her eyes were closed, as if sleeping, but her body was not shaking convulsively, nor did she have saliva or foam flowing out of her mouth. However, following each possession, she "hurt in her stomach and intestines," and since she started getting possessed, she has lost a lot

of weight. In her possessed state, people would talk with her and she would reply, in a strange, eerily low voice, that she was the goddess Mother Chen the Fourteenth. Sometimes a voice would also tell Cao that she was the goddess Li the Thirteenth, the “shamanic sister” (*tongmei*, 僮妹) of Mother Chen. Cao was also possessed by Mother Chen’s two brothers, Fatong and Faqing; and by the Earth God (*Tudigong*, 土地公), who often led the way (*yinglu*, 迎路) for the other gods who possessed her. Each time she woke up from being possessed, she felt exhausted and could not remember what she did or said while possessed. “I never wanted to be a shaman,” said Cao, “but for some reason, this is my fate.”

ANCESTOR WORSHIP, GHOSTS, AND DEATH RITUALS

Death does not stop communication between family members and kin, for it is the beginning of an ancestor’s new life and the traffic between the living and the dead. Ancestor worship is archaic, extending back at least to the Bronze Age and the invention of writing. During the Shang and Zhou dynasties, ancestors of the nobility were consulted with written questions scratched onto divination bones and tortoise shells, and precious bronze ritual vessels were cast to hold the meat and alcoholic beverage sacrifices to them. In Confucian culture, the sons and daughters of the deceased must spare little in honoring their parents with a lavish funeral. Indeed, in rural and small-town Wenzhou, funerals are sometimes more elaborate and expensive than weddings.

Elders and Ancestors

In the early 1990s, I discovered that although most families were no longer engaged in agriculture, this was still a peasant culture of respect for the elderly. I noted the interesting lack of a generation gap in the 1990s, compared with the urban China I knew (and what later developed in Wenzhou). Nor did I feel the oppressive weight of the old over the young, as portrayed in modernist literary or filmic representations of ossified patriarchal domination, as in the May Fourth-era novel *Family* (家) by Ba Jin ([1933] 1982). In the 1990s, different generations seemed to get along. Although the elderly in Wenzhou hold no formal positions in government office or local enterprises, their opinions and social influence had impact in local society. However, in the new millennium I have noticed more intergenerational conflict, especially between the youth of the “planned birth” generation and their parents.

Old people have been at the forefront of the revival of traditional culture and religious observances in the post-Mao era. They manage and staff such



Figure 3.7. Old People's Pavilion in Yongchang Township, Longwan District, 1993.
Photo by the author.

rural organizations as Old People's Associations, lineages, temple management committees, church organizations, the Daoist and Buddhist Associations, and so on. Old People's Associations (*laoren xiehui*, 老人協會), made up of retired village elders, are found in almost every village and have no precursor before Liberation. Most villages have built Old People's Pavilions (老人亭), with traditional upward-curving tiled roofs, located next to a waterway, where retired men get together to play *mahjiang* or watch Wenzhou opera on television. These associations often mount donation drives to build or restore temples and ancestor halls and local infrastructure. Their elderly members also help write local histories, recompile lineage genealogies, collect old legends and oral tales of the gods and ancestors, and negotiate contentious issues with local government officials. It is as if closeness to death and ancestorhood awards seniors leadership roles. Thus, the advancement of age in Wenzhou does not necessarily herald a retreat from society, but often, instead, a new kind of social engagement in an emerging grassroots civil society.

Funerals

Funerals are elaborate affairs that last at least one full day, and often several days. Families of the deceased may choose to put on a Buddhist or Daoist funeral, or something that combines both liturgies. It is not uncommon for funerary ritual experts to change from Buddhist to Daoist robes for different sections of the ceremony. The work of funerary rituals is encapsulated by the Chinese term “to seek release from” (超度) Purgatory or punishments in the afterlife. Purgatory, literally “underground prison” (地獄), is a detention center through which the souls of the deceased must travel and serve out their sentences of punishment for sins committed in their lifetimes before they can enter into their next life. The ritual experts lead the family members down into Purgatory in an effort to help the soul quickly gain release from its tortures and speed the deceased on her way to either the Western Paradise or to the next life in the transmigration of the soul. Basketloads of paper spirit money are burned so the deceased will have money to spend on her long journey. Paper clothing and a large replica house made of paper and bamboo sticks are burned for the deceased’s comfortable afterlife. Funerals involve elaborate banquets attended by dozens or hundreds of relatives, neighbors, friends, and local officials; often the guests are so numerous they must eat in shifts.

After the funeral, the coffin is carried in a public funeral procession, complete with a marching band, that winds through the streets to the burial ground, where the coffin is lowered into the tomb and sealed. In Wenzhou, tombs are shaped like giant sofas, their back and ridge looking like sofa armrests—indeed, people call them “sofa tombs” (*shafafen*). Of course, many participants at funerals do not really believe in the afterlife, Purgatory, and so forth, but their presence at the funeral is socially obligatory. As Roy Rappaport (1999: 107–131) wrote, participants do not have to *believe* in the words or intentions of rituals; as long as their bodies and voices perform the ritual steps, the ancient cultural codes and messages of the ritual are inculcated into their bodily habituses and conscious and unconscious structures.

During the lunar Qing Ming Festival honoring the dead, which usually falls around early April, the family makes a trip up to the burial site to sweep the tomb and clear it of the year’s accumulation of dirt, weeds, and debris. They bring incense, rice wine, and cooked food to offer the dead, bowing and kowtowing, and then have an outdoor picnic.

The Struggle over Earth Burials and Cremations

In the 1990s, I often came across empty wooden coffins stored under the eaves of rural people’s homes. As the elderly advance in age, they take great comfort

in knowing that their coffin is prepared and that a burial plot has already been selected and purchased for them. Back then, on certain streets in rural towns, every three or four shops was owned by coffin-makers or by those who created giant paper flower wreaths and miniature multistory paper-and-bamboo houses for funerals. The houses for the dead to enjoy in the afterlife could be very intricate, with miniature garages and paper cars, microwave ovens, and stereo systems, not to mention refrigerators, washing machines, and televisions. Death and its ritual business had clearly carved out an important niche market here.

Elaborate death rituals smack of overindulgence in the afterlife, and the Wenzhou Communist Party promoted cremation and criticized traditional funerals as “wasteful.” Reforming death rituals did not assume a high priority, however, until the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960) and the Smash the Four Olds campaign in the first three years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), which saw the greatest push for mandatory cremation (Whyte 1988). In the 1970s, the Wenzhou City government banned earth burials for all urban residents, but not rural ones. However, the law for urban Wenzhou residents was not properly enforced until 1987, when a new Office of Changing Habits and Simplifying Customs (移風易俗辦公室) was established (Zhang Zhichen 1998: 2278), charged with implementing the cremation policy for urban residents, simplifying funerary customs, and reducing “waste and extravagance” in funerary expenditures.

In the 1990s, I often came across a puzzling sight on rural roads: tricycle carts ferrying a human figure wrapped tightly inside thick bedding. Since they were completely covered, including their faces, I wondered if they were dead bodies. I was told that they were still alive, but barely. They were urban residents who were close to death in Wenzhou City hospitals, smuggled out of the hospital by family members to die in a relative’s home in the countryside. That way they could enjoy a proper funeral and earth burial at a secret plot in the rural areas. Had they died in an urban hospital, their bodies would have been whisked away by hospital staff for cremation, without enough time for a proper funeral.

In 2001, the ban on earth burials was extended further to include all peasants residing in rural areas. Thus, the lucrative coffin industry was demolished by administrative fiat. Since then, the Wenzhou government has continued to mount periodic campaigns to demolish or remove the family tombs dotting the hillsides. Tomb-makers, stonemasons, and *fengshui* (Chinese geomancy, 風水) masters have been adversely affected. The government ban on earth burials not only offended old people facing impending death; it also threatened the

Figure 3.8.
Yongzhong Township
government sign:
“Smash Feudal Su-
perstitious Thought;
Promote the New
Wind of Civilized
Funerals,” 1998.
Photo by the author.



well-being of family units. It is only by providing the dead with a good funeral send-off and resting place, sited propitiously according to *fengshui* principles, that they will become benevolent ancestors who look after their descendants.

I heard stories of old people organizing collective suicides on the eve of the 2001 ban on earth burials—as both an act of protest against the ban and a last-minute effort to enjoy a proper funeral. I was unable to verify them until 2008, when I met a young official, Mr. Luo, who had worked in an office in a Wenzhou county overseeing the cremation policy. When I confronted Luo with the stories of suicide, he tried to dodge the topic. His reaction, however, spoke volumes: he immediately stiffened uncomfortably and asked me where I had heard these stories and who had told them to me. I gave a vague answer, and he responded: “I’m sorry, I cannot talk about this topic with you; you’re a foreign national, after all. This is rather sensitive.”

Ghosts and Ghost Festival

Those who die violently or without descendants do not become benevolent ancestors, but restless “orphan souls and wild ghosts” (孤魂野鬼) who resentfully prey on the living. Ghosts (鬼) are also thought of as strangers who did not receive a proper funeral and burial, so they bear grudges against society. There is a mixture of fear and sympathy for ghosts, who have no one to remember them. Making offerings to these hungry ghosts is a way of expressing sympathy and care for them, as well as appeasing them in order to stem their wrath and ensure self-protection. The Festival of Ghosts (鬼節) takes place in the period around the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month. Families in Wenzhou present food offerings and incense on the streets outside their homes to wandering ghosts. Many pierce pomelos (Chinese grapefruit) with incense sticks and offer these lighted “incense balls” (香球) to ghosts, and some neighborhoods will set up long tables with food offerings.

Both Daoist and Buddhists celebrate this festival to the dead, but they call the festival by different names. For Daoists, it is called the Mid-Primordial Universal Salvation Festival (中元普渡), while Buddhists have their Ullambana Festival (盂蘭盆節). For Daoists, the year is divided into three sections, each with its festival day honoring one of the Daoist trio of gods, the “Three Officials and Great Emperors” (三官大帝). The Upper Primordial (上元) is the Heaven Official’s birthday; the Mid-Primordial (中元) is when the Earth Official descends to Earth; and the Lower Primordial (下元) commemorates the Water Official at the beginning of winter. During the Festival of Universal Salvation, Daoist priests perform rituals begging the Earth Official to absolve the sins of ghosts so that they can win release from their punishments in the afterlife.

The Buddhist Ullambana Festival’s (盂蘭盆法會) name comes from the Ullambana Sutra of Mahayana Buddhism, in which a disciple of Buddha Sakyamuni named Maudgalyāyana, or Mulian (目連) in Chinese, travels down to Purgatory and sees his mother suffering as a “hungry ghost” for her sins (Teiser 1988: 20–21, 43–56). He is agonized that she is condemned to see the food offered to her but be unable to eat anything. The Buddha advises him that on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, he and all filial persons must make food offerings in Ullambana basins to the *sangha*, or Buddhist monastic community, to win their ancestors’ release from their sins. Thus, this festival promotes filial devotion to ancestors and provides a time when hungry ghosts can enjoy some

satiation of their hunger. I witnessed the Ullambana Festival in the summer of 2008 in Jinxiang Town (金鄉鎮), Cangnang County. Parts of the town's old Ming dynasty wall and moat still remain, and local residents floated myriad candlelit paper lanterns on the moat to light the way for the orphan souls who visit Earth.

DIVINATION AND FENGSHUI

Divination (占卜)

Wenzhou people are avid pursuers of insight into their individual or family fortunes. Before they undertake an important life-changing decision or activity, they often seek divine guidance for their actions. Diviners also set the most auspicious date and time for starting important activities such as weddings, opening new stores, embarking on big trips, or lowering coffins into the ground for burial.

People call on professional diviners to peer into the future to guide action, to take precautions to avoid disaster, to prepare psychologically and accept what lies ahead, and to gain peace of mind. Secular people often mistake this eagerness to consult diviners as a passive acceptance of fate, or lack of agency in allowing higher divine forces to decide one's life. As I understand it, the reliance on divination bespeaks a reverence for the larger hidden and unknown forces that move the cosmos, and acceptance of the relative insignificance of human beings in these larger equations. It bespeaks a desire to align one's actions and life according to powerful patterns of divine nature and cosmos, and a wish to avoid violating whatever cosmic patterns the diviner is able to glean. Thus, to consult diviners is to take an active rather than passive stance—to peer into the unknown, anticipate future events, and plan appropriate actions. Professional diviners engage in “calculating with trigrams” (算卦). “Trigrams” (*gua*) refers to the eight trigrams (八卦), eight different combinations of six broken and unbroken lines found in *Yi Jing* divination, which dates back to the Zhou dynasty. Instead of the ancient milfoil stalks, today most diviners shake three coins in a turtle shell, then spill them out and read them.

Fengshui (Chinese Geomancy, 風水)

Another important ancient religious technology to ensure good fortune is Chinese geomancy or *fengshui*, literally “wind and water.” *Fengshui* masters are



Figure 3.9. Wang Qinsheng, compass in hand, surveying a public cemetery for a woman buying a tomb for her mother, Yaoxi Township, 2010. Photo by the author.

primarily hired to help people position tombs and residential homes in the surrounding landscape. Other constructions, such as temples, ancestor halls, and even factories, stores, and whole villages, may also require *fengshui* siting. A house positioned correctly and facing in the right direction will bring good fortune to the family residing within, and a correctly sited tomb will bring prosperity for generations to come. Manmade structures must be properly aligned with the geographical formations and bodies of water in the natural landscape, so as to ensure the smooth flow of *qi* (氣), or “primordial breath,” that runs through the veins of the earth.

Wang Qinsheng often took me out on his *fengshui* siting trips into the mountains, where tombs are still being quietly built. In the new millennium, we also visited new public cemeteries (公墓), where a company has carved out a whole hillside with endless rows of tightly packed tombs. The buyers still consult *fengshui* masters to choose the most auspiciously positioned tomb.