



**Adam Yuet Chau. *Miraculous Response:
Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China***

Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006. xv + 317 pages. Maps, figures, table, photographs. Cloth, US\$63.00 ISBN 0-8047-5160-9.

THERE HAVE been a number of general works and many articles on Chinese popular religion in post-Mao China, but there are rather few ethnographic works. Adam Chau's book stands out as an exception that fills this gap. This makes the book much welcomed by scholars who are interested in the study of popular religion in China. The subtitle "doing popular religion" reflects the author's approach, which does not focus on religious conceptions.

The book is about the revival of the Black Dragon King Temple in Shaanbei in northern Shaanxi Province. The coverage of the book is indicated by the author's view that the revival of popular religious institutions "illustrates the coming together of many social forces: the political ambition of local activists, the regulatory and paternalistic interventions of local state agencies, the economic interests of temples, merchants, and related specialists (including folk musicians and opera performers), the collective religiosity and fun-seeking spirit of the worshippers, and the increasingly frequent translocal linkages between social actors in local communities and outside actors" (2). Chau describes these in ten chapters. Following the introduction, Shaanbei history, society and culture is described in Chapter Two.

Chapter Three describes the popular religious landscape. We learn that at least two temple festivals are staged each year during the Chinese New Year and on the deity's birthday. Interesting to note is the report that there are temple-like structures dedicated to Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and General Zhu De. There is prohibition against burning incense at these sites, and Chau points out that this hints at the existence of worship. There is also the belief in the spirit/god of Berthune, that is, the Canadian Communist doctor Norman Bertune who died on the battlefield in the northwest. It is noteworthy that Shaanbei people generally do not conduct any rite for the *zhongyuan* festival (in the seventh moon), which is popularly observed in Fujian and Guangdong as well as in Taiwan and among the Chinese in Southeast Asia.

Chapter Four discusses Shaanbei people's religiosity and religious habitus and focuses on the ways people "do religion." Chapter Five provides the ethnography of Heilongdawang, the Black Dragon King, and the temple. The description of the deity's and temple's legends and histories provides discussion of the network of villages associated with the temple, and the temporal (temple's organization and leadership) and magical (efficacy of the deity) power. "Doing religion" is further described in Chapter Six on magical efficacy and divine benevolence. Some of the methods of divination are similar to those in other places in China, such as the use

of numbered bamboo sticks. Here, Chau includes an interesting description of the use of an oracle roller (102–103). The organization of the temple is described, too. Chapter Seven describes the social organization of popular religious activities, and Chau discusses the “event production” of funerals and temple festivals. Chapter Eight discusses the “fun” aspects—the sociality—of event production, be that weddings, funerals, or temple festivals.

The roles of the temple boss and the local elite are described in Chapter Nine. This leads to a description of the local political culture, discussing the articulation of temple politics and village politics as well as village factionalism. Chapter Eleven is on the local state and the politics of legitimization. I find the explanation of the permissiveness of the local state interesting, that is, “the local cadres’ possible fear of the consequences of offending deities” (218). Other than this fear, anthropologists studying Chinese popular religion in southern Fujian (TAN 2006) have noted that the local cadres were more sympathetic to local religious practices mainly because they were part of the local communities.

Chapter Twelve is the conclusion, which highlights the main points discussed. In particular, Chau points out that a temple is not only a site of “both individual and communal worship,” but also “a political, economic, and symbolic resource and resource-generator” (243). Local leaders involved in the temple can derive various kinds of economic and symbolic benefits, including gaining prestige and the opportunity to establish networks. In fact a temple provides a way for local persons to gain elite status by becoming its leaders. In its concern with economic growth, Chao observes (as do some other researchers) that the local government’s attitude towards popular religion is more relaxed, thus enabling the revival of Chinese popular religion.

Overall this is a good ethnography that provides a comprehensive description of the revival of Chinese popular religion in contemporary China. This is also a readable book that is well illustrated with photographs and a comprehensive list of Chinese characters.

REFERENCE

- TAN, Chee-Beng, ed.
2006 *Southern Fujian: Reproduction of Traditions in Post-Mao China*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.

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