Local Communal Religion in Contemporary South-east China

Kenneth Dean

ABSTRACT This article demonstrates that the local communal religion of the villages of China, sometimes referred to as "popular religion," has revived with great force in contemporary South-east China. In some areas, the networks of village temples have formed a second tier of local government, providing services, raising funds, and mobilizing entire communities to participate in collective rituals. The article is based on fieldwork in 600 villages of Putian, Fujian, but also discusses developments elsewhere in South-east China. The article concludes that local communal religious rituals are significant arenas for the negotiation of modernity in contemporary China.

Ritual events of Chinese local communal religion are performed in tens of thousands of villages in contemporary South-east China. Nevertheless, local Chinese religion resists definition. Definitions of religion derived from Western critical traditions (including Marxism in China) focus on four features: religious doctrine, institutional organization, a hierarchical priesthood and rites that express particular beliefs. These features are not particularly useful for understanding local communal religion, or "popular religion," in China, which involves participation in communal rituals centred in temples dedicated to a variety of gods from a vast pantheon, many of local origin. In addition to participating in communal rites on important annual ceremonies such as Chinese New Year and Lantern Festival, or on the birthdays of the gods, individuals can go to village temples any time to worship the local gods by bowing and praying, proclaiming vows, making offerings of food and drink, and burning incense and spirit money. These acts are usually followed by divination of the god's response by dropping divining blocks or consulting divinatory poetry. The actions are performed with great sincerity, reverence and solemnity. The fact that the temples of the gods have been rebuilt and that local communal rites are being actively performed across South-east China despite the devastation of the Cultural Revolution is a remarkable testimony to the faith, courage and commitment of millions of Chinese villagers.

Communal rites of collective worship of gods in local temples require complex local organization. Temple committees, often selected on the basis of rotation or divination, raise funds from every participating family, organize processions to each household in the community, arrange for and participate in performances of special Buddhist, Daoist or "Confucian" rites by ritual specialists from these traditions, and sponsor the performance of Chinese operas. These ritual specialists are also called upon on special occasions to perform rites of passage, propitiation and affliction, and various prophyaltic rites. Specialists in geomancy, exor-

cism, dream interpretation and prognostication contribute their skills to local communal religion. Spirit mediums play a particularly important role in temple festivals, and in other aspects of local religion, providing an important channel of communication to the gods and the ancestors. In many communities in South-east China some aspects of lineage ritual have also been revived. Moreover, ancestors and gods are often worshipped in individual homes as well, with offerings of food, drink and incense. Many of the rituals of local communal religion are intense, chaotic and stimulating events, filled with the smoke of incense and the sound of firecrackers, the simultaneous performance of opera, rituals and processions, and the participation of crowds.

Such ritual events are difficult to characterize in terms of doctrine, although most would agree that in general the rites are intended to beseech the gods for blessings. Instead of hierarchical institutional organizations there is a complex network of local temples dedicated to a rich pantheon of gods. Rather than a hierarchical priesthood one finds local leaders rotating into positions of responsibility for the organization of localized communal rituals. Daoist, Buddhist or "Confucian" ritual specialists are for the most part hired from outside the village to perform particular rites. Local spirit mediums are often possessed by the gods of the village temples, and display their acts of prowess and speak words of power during the rites. But their acts and utterances are too diverse and specific to local circumstances to take the form of a doctrine or a set of particular beliefs.

Thus Chinese official definitions of religion do not apply readily to "popular religion" as it is practised by hundreds of millions of people in South-east China. Nevertheless, these definitions have prevailed at the level of policy, and this impasse has led to disastrous results. For almost a century, Chinese governments have attacked aspects of Chinese local religion as "feudal superstition." During the Cultural Revolution, most of these practices were banned, and most temples were impounded or destroyed. Many ritual specialists, whether Daoist, Buddhist, or specialists in divination or geomancy, were imprisoned or attacked, along with countless local spirit mediums, temple caretakers and lay devotees.[1] It is impossible in the scope of this article to begin to document the pain and suffering experienced by so many individuals and communities during this period, or the extraordinary acts of courage and devotion that enabled the survival and growth of local communal religion in China today.

Chinese scholars of "popular religion" in China have tended to write almost exclusively about what they term "secret societies" and "sectarian" groups, which have often been linked in official sources with peasant rebellion.[2] These scholars have rarely discussed the temples dedi-

1. See Pitman Potter's article in this issue of *The China Quarterly*.

2. See Ma Xisha and Han Bingfang, *Zhongguo minjian zongjiaoshi* (*History of Chinese Popular Religion*) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1992); but see also the massive new publication of ritual and theatrical texts, musical scores and first-hand accounts of rituals from the Chongqing region edited by Hu Tiancheng and Duan Ming, *Minjian jiyi yu yishixiju* (*Folk Sacrifice and Ceremony Drama*) (Guiyang: Guizhou minzu chubanshe, 1999).

cated to local gods that can be found in almost every village in South-east China. Little attention has been paid to the communal rituals that mobilize the entire population of rural villages. In fact, most so-called sectarian groups have been peaceful throughout their historical development, until forced into confrontation by official persecution.[3] Participation in these groups can best be understood as another level of voluntary involvement in a religious movement in addition to, or on top of, mandatory participation in communal village rituals. This is true despite the particular elements (special dress, diet or rites) used to differentiate the "sectarian" group from other religious groups in the community.

This article offers a preliminary survey of local religious practices in South-east China, an area of over 3,000 square miles with a population of several hundred million people. The *Language Atlas of China*[4] distinguishes approximately 51 dialects or sub-dialects in this region, which is made up of Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong, Jiangxi, Hunan and southern Anhui (Huizhou) provinces. The major dialect groups are Wu, Min, Keijia (Hakka) and Yue. Many of these dialect regions contain several distinct local cultures. Each local culture has its own historical dynamic, one expression of which can be seen in its own pantheon of hundreds of deities, many of local invention. Several minority groups, such as the She, Yao, Miao (Hmong) and Dan, add still more layers of cultural complexity to the region. The speakers of several sub-dialects of Hakka in the mountainous centre of South-east China are just the most prominent and one of the most recent of several waves of Han Chinese colonizers and immigrants who moved into the lands of the "hundred Bai Yue peoples" from Han times onwards.

There are still enormous holes in our knowledge of the local religious practices of this region. Maps of the distribution of the theatrical, musical and dance traditions of South-east China reveal complex patterns of trans-regional influences. Similar maps for the distribution of trans-regional cults dedicated to gods or ritual traditions do not yet exist. Worship of local gods can be compared with cults of the saints in medieval Europe or in parts of Catholic Europe today.[5] The term "cult" in this article is used in that sense, and carries no pejorative meaning. Many gods worshipped in village temples are deified local historical figures, although others are nature or astral gods. More than one god can be worshipped in a village temple and many villages have several temples, so the distribution of patterns of worship is difficult to document except on a very broad level. Thus, some gods are worshipped across China, such as Guanyin, Guandi and Tianhou (Mazu). Others are more

3. Daniel Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religion: Dissenting Sects in Late Traditional China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976). See also B.J. ter Haar *White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

4. S. Wurm *et al.* (eds.), *Language Atlas of China* (Hong Kong: Longman Group Ltd., 1988).

5. Daniel Overmyer, "Convergence: Chinese gods and Christian saints," *Qingfeng* Vol. 40, No. 1 (March 1997), pp. 1–14.

specific to certain regions of South-east China, such as Guangze zunwang, Sanping zushi, Dingguang fo and Xu Zhenjun. Some regional cults have historic ties of "incense division" between founding temples and branch temples. Others have looser networks, involving the circulation of god statues between temples. Still others involve patterns of convergence of processions from local temples to the founding temple or tomb of the god.

Ethnographic research into the temple festivals and communal rituals celebrated within these god cults has revealed the widespread distribution of Daoist ritual traditions in this area, including especially Zhengyi (Celestial Master Daoism) and variants of Lüshan Daoist ritual traditions. Various Buddhist ritual traditions (Pu'anjiao, Xianghua married monks and so on) are practised throughout this region, particularly for requiem services. Masters of ritual ceremony whose tradition may be linked to Confucian ritual texts for animal sacrifice provide liturgical guidance for sacrificial rites dedicated to local gods. Spirit mediums, male and female, are possessed by local gods or contact the souls of the dead. Many or all of these ritual specialists may take part in a temple festival. There are multiple liturgical frameworks at play in such rituals, further complicating the effort to specific their specific meaning. I have elsewhere suggested the concept of a syncretic field of Chinese religion to try to account for the multiplicity of frameworks and complexity of the interactions between villagers and ritual specialists in their ritual events.[6]

Most of the thousands of villages throughout the South-east Chinese region have one or more temples dedicated to community deities. A large number of these temples have been restored and village rituals have been celebrated in the past 20 years. The degree of activity of these temples and their village communities varies widely over the region. In the area where I have done fieldwork for over a decade, the Puxian region of coastal Fujian, a villager can attend 250 days of opera performed in temple festivals each year. A survey of lineages, cults and ritual activities in over 600 villages conducted in this region over the past six years reveals that, on average, the population of these villages is around 1,200 people, though some villages have more than 6,000 residents. There are 100 different surname groups, with the average village having 3.4 surnames, although some had 14 or more and 27 per cent were single-surname villages. The survey located 1,639 temples, an average of 2.7 per village, ranging from 18 in some villages down to just one in 36 per cent of villages. The 1,639 temples housed 6,960 god statues representing over 1,200 different deities. Each temple had an average of 4.3 gods, but some temples had as many as 31. The 600 villages are organized into 123 ritual alliances. Each village first holds its own procession of the gods in the

6. Kenneth Dean, *Lord of the Three in One: The Spread of a Cult in Southeast China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). On Lüshan Daoism in Fujian, see Ye Mingsheng, "Fujian sheng Longyan shi Dongxiao zhen Lüshanjiao guangji tan keyiben" ("The ritual texts of the Guangji altar of the Lüshan sect in Dongxiao town, Longyan municipality, Fujian") in Wang Chiu-kuei (ed.), *Zhongguo chuantong keyiben huibian* (*Collection of Traditional Chinese Ritual Texts*) (Taipei: Hsin Wen feng Publishing Co., 1996).

first lunar month, usually accompanied by a Daoist ritual in the temple and performances of opera on the stages set across an open courtyard from the temple. Then each village joins in a larger procession to the other villages of the ritual alliance. Several ritual alliances join into still larger processions, usually based within irrigation systems. These latter processions can involve over 100 villages and last up to a week. The remarkably dense network of local temple alliances and clusters of nested hierarchies of temples in this area has taken on many local administrative tasks, forming an unofficial second tier of local governance. The gap in traditions caused by the Cultural Revolution has to some extent been sutured, due in part to the willingness of retired Party members to participate in temple committees. Taking a long view, this restoration of temple networks is a continuation of the transfer of duties from the centre to the localities that one can trace back to the mid Ming, if not before. This was a process of the slow development of a degree of local autonomy at the local level. A crucial point this article hopes to raise is that in many parts of South-east China, the ritual events of Chinese popular religion are not remnants of a rapidly vanishing traditional past but are instead arenas for the active negotiation of the forces of modernity.[7]

Virtually every village in South-east China has a temple or a shrine to the local tutelary divinity, the god of the earth. In addition to this and temples to local, regional or empire-wide deities, many villages or their nearby mountains have Buddhist monasteries or nunneries, and occasional Daoist belvederes. Lay Buddhist or "sectarian" religious groups have temples in many villages as well. Christian churches can be found in a smaller percentage of villages. Most non-urban areas have access to a scattering of Daoist and other ritual specialists working out of their homes, as well as a wide variety of local spirit mediums. Voluntary religious associations have developed in several regions, with their own ritual traditions. Ritual specialists of many kinds, but especially Daoist priests or ritual masters, are often invited to perform rites on the birthdays of the local gods, and on other important occasions of individual and family life. Most active temples, and many of the village temples of South-east China are very active, have temple committees which organize communal rituals, raise and dispense funds, and stage operas, marionettes, puppets or films in front of the temple. Thus the experiential field

7. For further information on current religious practices in the Putian area, see Kenneth Dean, "Lineage and territoriality," *Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Sinology* (Taipei: Academia Sinica, forthcoming, 2003); K. Dean, "China's second government: regional ritual systems of the Putian plains," in *Shehui, minzu yu wenhua zhanyan guoji yantaohui lunwenji* (*Collected papers from the International Conference on Social, Ethnic and Cultural Transformation*) (Taipei: Centre for Chinese Studies, 2001), pp. 77–109; K. Dean and Zheng Zhenman, "Group initiation and exorcistic dance in the Xinghua Region," *Min-su ch'u-i* (*Folklore and Theater*) Vol. 85 (1993), pp. 105–195. For historical background on this region see K. Dean, "The transformation of the *she* altar in the late Ming and Qing in the Xinghua region," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie*, Vol. 10 (1998), pp. 19–75, and Kenneth Dean and Zheng Zhenman (eds.), *Epigraphical Materials on the History of Religion in Fujian: The Xinghua Region* (Fuzhou: Fujian People's Publishing House, 1995), *The Quanzhou Region* (3 vols.) (2003).

of Chinese local religion is extraordinarily diverse and complex, as each community organizes itself through its temples and their rituals. Chinese local religion may be "diffused" as opposed to "institutional," as C.K. Yang[8] argued, but at the village level it is extremely organized.

Despite the extraordinary vitality and contemporaneousness of local religion in certain areas of China, it is nevertheless essential to realize the extent of the devastation and decline of many communal practices since the turn of the 20th century. In many parts of South-east China, lineage halls remain in ruins. Temples dedicated to local gods have been abandoned and the god statues have been destroyed, or stolen and sold. Communal rituals are performed, if at all, on a miniscule scale. This deterioration is the result of a combination of pressures, including political suppression of popular and ritual specialists of all kinds, and economic pressures. Many South-east Chinese villages are emptying as workers flood illegally into the rapidly expanding urban areas in the Zhu (Pearl) River delta and along the Fujian and Zhejiang coast. In order to comprehend these different regional patterns of religious revival and decline, it is necessary to examine both historical factors that provide a virtual reservoir of local cultural resources, and contemporary socio-economic forces and political pressures.

In very broad terms, the greatest change to local religious practice in South-east China since 1949 has been the decline in most areas of the lineage as a centre for socio-economic and especially ritual life. This feature of local life was particularly pronounced in pre-Revolutionary Guangdong and Fujian, as noted by Maurice Freedman. Although in some areas lineage halls have been rebuilt and lineage rituals resumed, lineages no longer have the landholdings and financial assets they commanded in the past. What has survived, and revived since 1979 with a remarkable tenacity, are the temples of the local gods and their rites, whether conducted by local spirit mediums or by Daoist, Buddhist or lay ritual specialists. However, the government has kept up the ban on the Pudu festivals for feeding the hungry ghosts of the seventh lunar month. This festival in many ways balanced and corresponded with the rites for the lunar new year. The latter have been revived but the former are now very rarely practised on a large scale. In many areas of South-east China, Overseas Chinese or Taiwanese connections play a key role in the reinvention of tradition. These temple festivals depend on fluid capitalization rather than entrenched class-based landholdings.

The revival of religious activities began and spread most rapidly in coastal Fujian, where connections with Overseas Chinese and Taiwanese compatriots provided economic support and political cover. In the early 1980s many temples were being rebuilt. By the mid-1980s local temple festivals had revived, complete with ceremonies led by Daoist priests. By the end of the decade there was a high tide of religious activities, as temple networks and regional ritual alliances were re-established through

8. C.K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961).

the performance of collective processions and lengthy Daoist rituals at central temples. Regional opera troupes, puppet troupes and marionettists were performing more and more frequently. Daoist priests reassembled their collections of liturgical manuscripts by borrowing and copying from one another, but most lamented that much of the ritual tradition had been lost. Simplified rituals were performed, but increasingly there was a demand for the larger and more elaborate ones. This frenzy of activity settled down into a calmer steady state of ritual affairs by the mid-1990s. By the turn of the century, double-digit rates of economic growth led to massive urban "renewal," and most of the ancient sections of major cities like Quanzhou and Putian were torn down to make way for broader roads and apartment complexes. Nevertheless, even in these new high-rise developments, local temples to the earth god were being built alongside and in between rows of apartments.[9]

Certain key sites of local god cults remained under tight official control. A few were mummified into museums, with admission charges and no ritual activity allowed. Even these sites had a hard time containing the burning of incense and other signs of devotion. Many of the founding temples of local god cults in Fujian underwent an increasing de facto transfer of power to local devotees. This transfer was frequently facilitated by the involvement of retired Party officials in the temple committees. Some temples became so wealthy that they were able to establish scholarship funds, direct local infrastructure projects such as paving roads and laying down electricity, and dispense charity to beggars and impoverished families. They had become very significant cultural centres of village and town life. Officially sanctioned laorenhui (Old Folks Associations) were often based in them. They sponsored opera, cinema and rituals. Important collective decisions were reached within these cultural centres. Very careful accounts were kept of all donations, income and expenditures, and these were posted on a regular basis. The temples of the gods had returned to a central role in Chinese rural life. In the Fuzhou area, in some contrast to the Minnan and Puxian regions, major lineage halls were first re-established, and began playing an important role in local religion.

Other areas of South-east China lagged behind coastal Fujian. The Chaozhou region of Guangdong and the Wenzhou area of Zhejiang followed Fujian fairly closely in the process of rebuilding and reconsecrating temples, and reviving temple festivals and Daoist rites. The Zhu River delta saw a much more fragmented process of revival, often featuring the reconstruction of large temples that attracted individual worshippers in search of particularistic divine support. Inland provinces such as Jiangxi struggled with a strong legacy of conservative Maoism, because of the presence of revolutionary base areas and complex issues of provincial party politics. Poverty and out-migration seriously affected the process of religious revival. Moreover, there were periodic Party

9. See Kenneth Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

campaigns to limit the scope of the revival of local religion. These led to the establishment of more and more regulations, including the 1994 requirement to register temples as "officially approved sites of religious activity." Regulations outlawing spirit-possession, exorcism, fortune telling, geomancy "and other feudal activities" were also posted in many temples. Other regulations were put in place to guarantee financial accountability, in a fascinating imitation of similar legal processes in Taiwan from the 1950s to the 1980s. Some local officials clamped down hard on the boom in temple construction. On 12 December 2000, Agence France reported on the destruction (sometimes with dynamite) of 1,200 temples and churches in the Wenzhou region. The claim was made that these temples had not registered properly, but the ferocity of the official response indicates a fundamental concern over the weakening legitimacy of the Party.[10]

The different rates of religious revival of the many local cultures of South-east China clearly reflect differences in local economic and political conditions. However, even more significant may be the different historical trajectories of these distinct local cultures. Each developed its own potentialities, based on the complexity of local social groups and their interactions, the depth and variety of localized ritual traditions, and the role of local managerial elites in negotiating space for growth from officialdom. Thus in order to understand aspects of the range of local religious activity in contemporary China, one must compare the historical development of different local cultures. But before considering this issue, another general feature of contemporary Chinese religious life must be addressed.

Urban and Rural Splits

Urban and rural splits in cultural activities and expectations are pronounced in contemporary China, and have become more so over the past 20 years. Neighbourhood temples played an essential role in Chinese cities and towns in the pre-Revolutionary period,[11] but have since been completely destroyed in most areas. Children growing up in cities have

10. For Guangdong see Helen Siu, "Recycling ritual," in P. Link, R. Madsen and P. Pickowiez (eds.), *Unofficial China: Popular Culture and Thought in the People's Republic* (Boulder: Westview, 1990), pp. 121–137; for the Hakka areas of Jiangxi, Minxi and Yuebei see John Lagerwey, "Introduction" to each volume of his *Traditional Hakka Society Series* (Hong Kong: International Hakka Studies Association and the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1996–2002) 16 volumes to date, and his "A propos de la situation actuelle des pratiques religieuses traditionelles en Chine," in Catherine Clementin-Ohja (ed.), *Le renouveau religieuse en Asie* (Paris, EFEO, 1997), pp. 3–16. For Zhejiang see John Lagerwey and Lü Ch'ui-kuan, "Le taoïsme du district de Cangnan, Zhejiang," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (1992), pp. 19–55; Paul Katz, "Recent developments in the study of Chinese ritual dramas: an assessment of Xu Hongtu's research on Zhejiang," in Daniel Overmyer, (ed.), *Ethnography in China Today: A Critical Assessment of Methods and Results*. (Taipei: Yuan-Liou Pub. Co., 2002), pp. 199–229; and Mayfair Yang, "Putting global capitalism in its place: economic hybridity, bataille, and ritual expenditure," *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (2000).

11. See Susan Naquin, *Peking: Temples and City Life, 1400–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). See also Kristofer Schipper, "Neighborhood cult associations in

little or no access to the communal ritual events of Chinese local religion which played a formative role in earlier times and which continue to have a major impact on rural life. Rural religious activity has flourished in many parts of China, particularly along the south-east coast, and throughout the south, including in south-western areas with large "minority" populations, as well as in Sichuan. While modernization models in the past often uncritically included de-traditionalization or secularization as inevitable correlates of "progress," such conceptions have been severely criticized. Nevertheless, urban intellectuals in contemporary China once again feel cut off from rural culture, and have little integrated access to such activities. Thus the modes of analysis discussed in this article may provide a starting point for a discussion of cultural transformations and the potential for dialogue or interaction between urban and rural spheres.

Having drawn a sharp distinction between urban and rural cultural experience, it is important to note that cultural influences flow in both directions. Cinemas, television, video, karaoke, radio, dancehalls, telecommunications, commodities, advertising imagery, tourism, investment and technology flow from the urban centres into the rural towns and hinterlands. A flow of "floating labour" returns to the urban centres, and makes its own impact on urban culture. There is no clear dividing line between "urban" and "rural," despite an apparent cultural polarization.

Comparing Regional Cultures

Within Chinese studies to date, the most sophisticated model of inter-regional comparison was developed by G.W. Skinner. Skinner divided China into nine macroregions on the basis of geographic and economic criteria, and applied central place theory, core-periphery spatial analysis and diffusion theory to the Chinese data. In his most recent presentation of his ongoing research, he employs a composite index made up of nine variables to map central place hierarchies and core–periphery relations over the Lingnan macroregion based on 1990 data.[12] Skinner's model modifies formal location theory by taking into account the general features of large-scale drainage basins. His analysis integrates a vertical model of a nested hierarchy with a horizontal model of multiple core–peripheral relations, and demonstrates how technological changes are diffused down the hierarchy and outwards from cores to peripheries within the regional system treated by the intersection of these models.

Skinner's models have had a pronounced effect on Chinese studies. However, Naquin and Yu point out that temples are often "on the peripheries of regions, but their cachement areas could be much

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footnote continued

traditional China," in G.W. Skinner (ed.), *The City in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), pp. 651–676.

12. G. William Skinner, "The structure of Chinese history," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 44 (1985), pp. 271–292; "Differential development in Lingnan," in Thomas Lyons and Victor Nee (eds.), *The Economic Transformation of South China: Reform and Development in the Post-Mao Era* (Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1994), pp. 17–54.

greater."[13] Sangren argues that sacred sites outside the parameters of the marketing system can have an important impact on peasant cultural horizons.[14] Such sites are often the target of organized pilgrimages. In China, cultural horizons could expand to take in the five sacred mountains, the major Buddhist sacred sites, and a host of centres of local god cults and renowned temples. Sangren also raises fundamental questions about the assumptions linking a Western rational choice model of economically determined spatiality to Chinese cultural space. He critiques Skinner's approach by arguing that religious and cultural spatial systems (territorial cults, nested hierarchies of temples, pilgrimage circuits beyond the standard marketing area) determine regional or local cultural conceptions, rather than marketing systems. Faure and Siu also question the applicability of Skinner's model to local cultural systems.[15]

How useful are Skinner's conceptual models to the comparative analysis of regional cultural histories and ritual systems? The nested hierarchy of temples I have found in certain areas surveyed in Putian would appear to follow a central place vertical model. The core–periphery horizontal model could be applied to the sectarian religious movements in the area surveyed such as the Sanyijiao (Three in One) religious movement, in that hundreds of temples relate back to a central point. Diffusion models from high, central points (cult centres) to peripheral temples could be used to analyse division of incense networks that form by branching off at successive levels. However, it is difficult to locate stable positions for any element of an actual regional ritual system. Any individual may be involved in several different circuits, many of which would reach outside the most generalizable regional ritual system. Each village contains several temples dedicated to a group of gods. Each temple or even each god worshipped in the temple may act as a catalyst enabling involvement in a local circuit within a narrow regionally defined nested hierarchy, while at the same time establishing a pilgrimage relation to a more remote cult centre. Other temples or ancestral halls will connect certain groups, households or individuals to other spatial modes of organization such as the migration pattern of a lineage, or the localized network of a sectarian movement. Random changes or movements from one level or circuit to another are common in these open cultural systems.

Thomas Lyons has also used regional systems data and GIS desktop mapping systems to illustrate aspects of the economic geography of Fujian province, in particular changes in GDP and the diffusion of new crops from the mid-1980s to 1993.[16] However, there is a telling exclusion of cultural features in Lyon's work. The sole index of culture in his

13. Susan Naquin and Yu Chun-fang (eds.), *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 92.

14. P. Stevan Sangren, *History and Magical Power in a Chinese Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

15. David Faure and Helen Siu (eds), *Down to Earth: The Territorial Bond in South China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

16. Thomas Lyons, *Economic Geography of Fujian: A Sourcebook* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell East Asia Series, Vol. 82, 1996).

sourcebook is the number of cinemas in a particular area. Clearly, the implicit standard is a Western modernized lifestyle. What Skinner and Lyons do not address is the unique, specific, experiential and performative nature of local culture. One could devise a model that would rate the level of cultural complexity in different areas according to the number of temples per village, gods per temple, ritual events per year, or the number of theatrical productions or ritual specialists. But one would not be able to claim that a south Chinese coastal village has *more* culture than a northern Chinese village on the basis of such statistical comparisons. A more useful approach would be to combine surveys of religious practice with cultural historical research that would examine the processes of formation of the reservoir of cultural resources within any particular region.

The mapping of cultural features and the multiple regional ritual systems into which they are swept up reveals a rhizomatic labyrinth of circuits and levels of cultural identification within which groups, households and individuals move. Through local cultural practices, abstract space is transformed into meaningful place. The tracing of trans-regional flows of migration patterns, ritual traditions, performing arts traditions of music, song and dance reveal that no regional cultural system is complete in itself (no culture is a closed whole). Maps, flowcharts and diagrams can be developed for different phases in the local history of specific regions. Examining these features over time allows for the development of a topology of power in regional ritual systems.

The degree of cohesiveness of the temples, their managing committees and their village communities depends on many factors. Perhaps most important, although difficult to clarify, is the degree of local autonomy each local culture has achieved over a long historical process that can be traced back in some of these regions to the late Song, and in others to the mid-Ming or later. By local autonomy I mean not a separation from the state, but a tacit downwards distribution of responsibility over local issues to a managerial elite based in temples, lineages, literary societies and money-lending associations. This process took place differently in each region of South-east China. For each local culture of South-east China (Ningbo, Hangzhou, central Zhejiang, Wenzhou, Huizhou in Anhui, Mindong, Houguan, Puxian, Minbei, Quanzhang Minnan, Chaozhou, Huizhou in Guangdong, Hakka western Fujian and Gannan in Jiangxi, northern Jiangxi, northern Guangdong, the Zhu River delta, western Hunan, and the list goes on), one would like to compare the impact in different periods of Buddhist monastic estates, lineage formations, temple networks, regional ritual alliances, trans-regional Daoist and Buddhist ritual traditions, state cults and ritual policies, in addition to socio-economic factors of land-tenure, market networks, interregional and international trade, and the growth of merchant capitalism.

Another crucial factor distinguishing these regions is the degree of complexity of historically formed horizontal religious and communal networks and the numbers of ritually marked vertical levels between the state and the village. Horizontal networks were formed between temples

on the basis of division of incense from the founding temple of a cult, or the exchange of a god between temples and regions, or through regional ritual alliances marked by processions and shared rites. Difference in vertical links between regions of South-east China depends upon the degree of cohesiveness of each level from neighbourhood earth god shrine to village temples and upwards into a variety of nested hierarchies of temples, culminating in some instances at city-god temples, or their equivalents, marking a kind of hinge between popular and official cults, Confucian temples and shrines to local officials. In contrast to Skinner's models, which emphasize the vertical ties of market distribution and rational choices, the horizontal networks of Chinese popular religion provide a remarkably complex and wide range of alternative options, obligations and potentialities to their participants.

Prasenjit Duara based his influential notion of the cultural nexus of power upon a reading of Mantetsu documents on a group of villages in Northern China.[17] However, Duara does not provide a great deal of historical information on the process of formation of the cultural nexus of power he found embedded within and between temple networks, irrigation systems and local lineages. His study also implied that the cultural nexus of power suffered an irreparable rupture with the anti-religion campaigns and other modern reforms and abuses of the Republican era. Current developments challenge that assumption. A comparative analysis of potentially even more complex nexuses of power in South-east China may bring the issue of the historical development and the future potentiality of such networks into sharper focus.

New Sources for the Study of Chinese Local Religion

Although ethnographic research on minorities was supported by the state, especially in the South-western provinces, very little research on Han Chinese folklore, religion or culture was authorized from the Revolution until the early 1980s, when Departments of Anthropology were re-established in a few universities. But these departments often had a developmental anthropological focus, as figures such as Fei Xiaotong were drawn into policy debates on models of urban reform and developmental policies for townships and local marketing networks. Cultural anthropology has just begun to establish itself in China, with the large-scale translation of key theoretical texts.

Information on contemporary religious practice in China can now be obtained from several new sets of source materials on local religion that have recently been published. These include a series by the Central Art Institute on a province-by-province basis divided into ten different categories such as regional theatre, popular dance forms, folk music and sayings. Several of the relevant volumes for the South-eastern area

17. Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China: 1900–1942* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988). The objectivity of the Mantetsu research has been the subject of considerable controversy.

include tantalizing information on Daoist ritual dance, masked ritual theatre and ritual music.[18] These materials have been presented from a purely artistic point of view, and are thus divorced from their ritual performance contexts. A second set of publications includes Tanaka Issei's volumes on Chinese regional theatre in relation to lineage forms and market networks, and in particular his study of Chinese shamanistic theatre, which examines a variety of masked ritual theatre.[19] This form of theatre attracted the attention of Chinese researchers in the drama field, and has a nation-wide organization of researchers, directors and opera troupes. This resulted in several conferences, a spate of publications, and "salvage performances" of forms of regional Nuoxi (masked exorcistic theatre) and Mulian plays.[20]

More direct ethnographic material on religious practices in South-east China are available in 20 of the 80-volume series on Chinese ritual, theatre and folklore edited by Wang Ch'iu-kuei.[21] These studies include collections of materials on the history of regional ritual drama and other rites, edited and annotated scripts, and fieldwork reports on the performance of particular rituals or ritual dramas that were observed by the authors. For the most part written by specialists in theatre rather than anthropologists, these studies provide general introductions to the social contexts underlying the performances rather than detailed interpretations or analyses. Nevertheless, they often provide crucial documentation on the performance of rites and ritual dramas that would be otherwise unavailable. They include photographs of aspects of the rites, and provide facsimiles of the liturgical or theatrical manuscripts employed by the ritual specialists. Wang Ch'iu-kuei has also edited a series of detailed studies of single Daoist or Buddhist ritual specialists. These provide facsimiles of the ritual masters' entire working liturgical manuscript collections and contextualizes their work within their cultural environment. The materials can be compared with similar collections of Daoist texts from Taiwan, and with earlier liturgical texts included in the Daoist Canon. In this way, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of developments within Daoist liturgy in relation to popular cults across South China after the Ming dynasty.

18. Dong Zhenya (ed.), *Zhongguo minzu minjian wudao jicheng: Anhui juan* (*Compendium of Chinese Nationalities Popular Dance: Anhui Volume*) (2 vols.) (Beijing: Xinhua shuju, 1995); Li Jian (ed.), *Zhongguo minzu minjian wudao jicheng: Jiangxi juan* (*Compendium of Chinese Nationalities Popular Dance: Jiangxi Volume* (2 vols.) (Beijing: Xinhua shuju, 1992).

19. Tanaka Issei, *Chūgoku fukei engeki kenkyū* (*Research on Chinese Shamanistic Theatre*) (Tokyo: Tōkyō Daigaku Tōyō bunka kenkyūjo hōkoku, 1993).

20. Many of these sources are summarized in Wang Ch'iu-kuei (ed.), *Zhongguo nuoxi nuowenhua yanjiu tongxun* (*Research Newsletter on Chinese Exorcistic Drama and Chinese Exorcistic Culture*) (2 vols.) (Taipei: Shih Ho-cheng Folk Culture Foundation, 1992–93).

21. Wang Ch'iu-kuei (ed.), *Min-su ch'ü-i ts'ung-shu* (*Studies in Chinese Ritual, Theatre and Folklore*) (80 vols.) (Taipei: Shih Ho-cheng Folk Culture Foundation, 1993). Shorter field reports with up-to-date information on contemporary Chinese local religion are published in the journal *Min-su ch'ü-i* also published by the Shih Ho-cheng Folk Culture Foundation. For English-language reviews of many of the volumes in this and John Lagerwey's series, see Overmyer, *Ethnography in China Today*.

Another important set of ethnographic reports covering the Hakka regions of South-east China is John Lagerwey's *Traditional Hakka Society Series*. So far 19 volumes of essays documenting lineage society, temple festivals, ritual traditions, local cults, and local economic history of Western Fujian, North-west Guangdong and South-east Jiangxi have been published. These volumes are arranged on an area-by-area basis. They consist primarily of detailed essays written by elderly local intellectuals recalling the religious practices of the pre-Revolutionary period. In this sense they resemble the local literary and historical materials (*wenshi ziliao*) published by the Political Consultative Congresses of local governments, although the latter rarely touch on issues of religion or ritual. The *Traditional Hakka Society Series* therefore provides an invaluable baseline for a study of changes to practices in the present day. With new materials such as these becoming available, it becomes even more urgent to try to explain the divergent developments of the many different local cultures of South-east China, in order to expand current understanding of the future potential of Chinese local religion to survive and interact as a vital force within China's future.

Comparative Local Histories: Cultural Unification or Lines of Differentiation?

Recent studies of local cultural history in China seem to be haunted by the legacy of an earlier generation of Neo-Confucian studies. The basic premise of recent work in regional social and cultural history by Faure, Siu and Liu appears to be that South-east Chinese society evolved into an increasingly Confucian society, with the spread of Confucian ideals and Confucian institutions into families and lineages.[22] What is even more striking in this effort to document in local historical context the supposed Confucianization or gentrification of local society is that these Confucian ideals and ritual forms are believed to have largely replaced, overcome or superseded earlier forms of local culture. This is a developmental model of the evolution of Chinese culture, in which the end result is always the same, no matter which area is being discussed. The emperor always ends up in the village, the state in the family. The end result is the triumphant cultural unification of China. The only question remaining for historians is to determine when and where these processes took root. Faure and Liu suggest that integration with the state began in coastal Fujian in the Song dynasty through the enfeoffment of local gods by the court, while it was

22. Faure and Siu, *Down to Earth*; Ke Dawei (David Faure), "Guojia yu liyi: Song zhi Qing zhongye Zhujiang sanjiaozhou difang shehui de guojia rentong" ("State and rituals: the integration of local society into the Chinese state in the Pearl River Delta from Northern Song to mid-Qing"), *Zhongshan daxue xuebao (Journal of Sun Yatsen University: Social Science)*, Vol. 39, No. 5, General No. 161 (1999), pp. 65–72; Ke Dawei (David Faure) and Liu Zhiwei, "Zongzu yu difang shehui de guojiarentong: Ming Qing Huanan diqu fazhan de yishi xingtai jichu" ("Lineages and the integration of local society into the Chinese state: the ideological foundations of Southern Chinese regional development"), *Lishi yanjiu* (*Historical Research*), No. 3 (2000), pp. 3–14; D. Faure, "The emperor in the village: representing the state in south China," in J. P. McDermott (ed.), *State and Court Ritual in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 267–298.

the adoption of Confucian lineage forms that enabled the integration of the local society of the Zhu River delta of Guangdong with the Chinese state in the mid-Ming. The means may have been different, but the end result was the same – cultural integration.

Many of these scholars perceive this model of cultural unification as a more enlightened alternative to an even darker vision of Chinese state–society relations. Karl Wittfogel's notorious hydraulic empire model of a totalitarian Chinese imperial state was fleshed out in the 1960s by his student Hsiao Kung-ch'uan in the latter's study of ideological control in 19th-century rural China.[23] Hsiao outlined a variety of state institutions all designed to exercise control over the hearts and minds of the rural populace. But he was too good an institutional historian to avoid noting the decline of many of these institutions, leaving his readers with an ugly picture of a corrupted state apparatus desirous only of extracting taxes and torturing troublemakers. Historians working with somewhat broader social scientific concepts in the 1970s and 1980s began to dispute Wittfogel and Hsiao's vision of a rapacious totalitarian state. They pointed out a variety of semi-autonomous sectors, and attempted to outline the powers specific to local scholarly and merchant elites. Some examined the positive contributions of activist officials who attempted to mobilize both state institutions and local social forces to combat natural disasters, or to offset class conflicts or other sources of social disorder. Those historians dealing with long-term changes in particular locales drew upon cultural anthropological theories of cultural assimilation to explain the spread of Confucian ideals and rites. They pointed to what they saw as a model of empowerment fore-grounding the agency of local elites in their creative efforts to adapt the ideals and institutions of the state to local contexts.

Although these accounts are compelling, and in particular help to explain the shifting of ethnic identities in the Zhu River delta, I would like to suggest a different model of cultural transformation, one which might be described as neo-evolutionistic, or even better, as a creative involution model. Rather than seeing Confucian ideals and institutions overcoming local shamanic ritual traditions, or homogenizing multiple ethnicities, or hierarchizing gender relations, one can instead trace a series of unintended consequences of institutional reforms and local mutations as they became tangled in an ever more complex network of local and regional cults, localized and higher order lineages, segmentary societies, and voluntary associations. With a concept of these events as ever-accumulating, increasingly complex additional dimensions of a virtual plane of non-contradiction (or adding to a reservoir of cultural potential) one can more readily explore processes of "dephasing," in which seeming remnants of prior phases in the cultural history of a particular local culture, such as temple festivals, Daoist rituals, spirit possession and collective processions, continue to release their own different forms of temporality and spatiality in an ongoing negotiation

23. Hsiao Kung-ch'uan, *Rural Control in Nineteenth Century China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1960).

with the forces of modernity in contemporary South-east China. These local cultural systems have achieved a staggering complexity. The entire populations of hundreds of villages are mobilized in ritual events and processions, which draw upon their entire reservoir of cultural forms and practices through their specific forms of communal self-expression.

The "syncretic field of Chinese religion" is a concept I have elaborated to express the workings of the reservoir of cultural potential of local communal religion. This concept challenges both the form and content of earlier social-scientific/Confucianist models of a unified Chinese culture.[24] The syncretic field is a constantly self-differentiating field of potentiality stretched between polar attractors of Confucian *sheng* (hierarchical, ordering, centring power) and *ling* (immediate, localized, unpredicatable spiritual efficacy), marked by complex, hybrid forms of religious ritual and collective experimentation. The syncretic field has taken on very particular configurations and actualizations as it changes over time. Different phases will show distinct nodes of attraction (official temples and shrines, Neo-Confucian academies, Buddhist monasteries, ancestral hall rites, Daoist rituals, popular cults) in different relations to one another in different regions (official temples and shrines to officials, academies and shrines to literati, Buddhist ritual, ancestral rites, Daoist rituals, popular cults to a cross-section of community members). Any conceptualization of the current morphings of the syncretic field of Chinese popular religion would have to take into account CCP claims to enlightenment, rationality and reflexivity (counter-alienation) in relation to earlier polar attractors. The modern-state institutions and discourses (socialist as well as modernizing and capitalist) continue to generate great gaps and discontinuities in which local autonomous forms of collective desire and cultural experimentation, employing "pre-modern" modalities, continue to flourish.

In order to uncover instances of creative involution in the local history of Putian or any other local culture of South-east China, one can re-examine state institutions from a local perspective over time, to examine their local mutations and unintended consequences. When one traces the various lines of institutional change over time, one discovers the cracks that form as the lines give rise to blocks of becoming that move across state–society relations in unpredictable ways. In time Putian would become the most refined of all the districts in South-east China in its production of officials. It was also amongst the first regions to experiment with lineage forms of ancestral worship, a point noted with some concern by the leading Neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi (1130–1200), who sensed that developments in ancestral worship were rapidly getting out of control there. But rather than abandon past experience in a whole-scale conversion to Confucianism, the cultural resources of the Putian area continued to pile up new dimensions on the plane of

24. For further discussion of this concept, see Dean, *Lord of the Three in One*, and Edward L. Davis, *Society and the Supernatural in Song China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002).

non-contradiction. Successive state institutional initiatives encountered an incomprehensibly complex ground of local and trans-regional ritual traditions, cult networks, voluntary associations, kin and pseudo-kinship groups, regional alliances, and flows of capital, ideas, images and practices from throughout the Asian trading network.

One could point to several "blocks of becoming" in the creative involution of the ritual systems of the Putian irrigated plains. These include the unintended consequences of the empire-wide establishment in the early Ming of official altars of the soil. These altars were gradually incorporated into local god temples, only to proliferate and mutate into a self-organizing, complex network of interlinking temples claiming local legitimacy. Current ritual networks and territories can be traced back to these local mutations. Another unintended effect of state institutional reform of the household registration and taxation systems known as the Single Whip Reforms in the mid to late Ming and early Qing was the gradual downloading of many forms of local self-governance on to local elites, working within local and higher order lineages, regional ritual alliances, cult networks, and a host of other networks. These took over responsibility for the upkeep of much of the local infrastructure (irrigation, local education, social order, charity, ritual observances) when local government funding ran dry. Such shifts are the origins of the current spheres of local autonomy under construction by many villages in South-east China.

There were many other instances of such blocks of becoming in Putian local history. The success of the Confucian lineage form in the early to mid-Ming would give way to a much more complicated range of lineage and pseudo-lineage forms closer to joint-stock corporations. The rise of the Three in One religious movement as a viable alternative as well as a reduplicative local ritual system beginning in the late Ming is another example of creative involution in the Xinghua area of Putian and Xianyou.

These blocks of becoming were transversal modes of social change because they worked through and transformed other institutional dimensions of individual villagers' lives as well, including potentially their identities in belonging to different orders or kinds of lineages, ritual territories and cult networks, but also their official household registration and taxation or corvée responsibilities, and their access to or understanding of the state, official schooling, the civil service examinations and official positions. Similar effects can be observed in China today, when villagers state their address in terms that mix the revived ritual topography with official spatial categories. Thus villagers in Putian, Fujian state their address in the following categories: *zhen* (current official township), *li* (Ming-dynasty ritually differentiated sub-canton), *qijing* (current village ritual-alliance territory), *cun* (current village name), *miao* (village temple), and finally the *jiaoluo* (village neighbourhood) in which they live. Each of these spaces is seen as belonging to or encompassing the others.

The pre-suppositions of social scientific models of elite control over

village organizations in late imperial and contemporary times require some reconsideration. Communal self-organization is rooted in collective ritual processes that unfold within villages, temples and lineage halls. Collective rites express deep-seated communal values, rather than some outside imposed morality. In certain respects, leadership within the temple committees and lineage halls was more significant than the traditional marks of scholar-literati status. Scholar-literati could certainly be members, as could wealthy merchants. Individuals with official titles also were often included in the temple leadership, although usually when in retirement or on leave back in their home villages. However, membership in a temple committee is usually determined by rotation or by divination from within the group of all eligible villagers (usually male, but this too is changing), regardless of wealth or rank. Nevertheless, the powers associated with membership are substantial. Leadership at the local level means that whoever is capable of seizing on to, steering and articulating the flow of these shared values and the flow of the ritual event can attain a temporary leadership role. Thus membership in the local "elite" as defined by sociological criteria misses the remarkably fluid but nevertheless deeply flowing nature of the leadership of ritual events. These features of communal belonging, rotating leadership and collective decision-making continue to characterize Chinese local communal religion.

To conclude, I would argue that the interest of the newly available ethnographic material on local religious activity from South-east China lies in its diversity, rather than its similarity. Every region or local culture developed differently, attaining a degree of integration with the state (or having it imposed), while preserving their unique and singular qualities. On the other hand, no local culture developed in isolation from the state, or from trans-regional cultural flows, or trans-national flows of capital. The widespread evidence of the revival of local communal religion in many regions of China suggests that these cultural resources are again coming into play, enabling new responses to the forces of change.

Reflections on Ritual and Modernity in South-east China

I would like to raise a number of points about ritual and modernity in contemporary South-east China. I referred above to the temple networks of Putian as a second government – providing services to the locale but also collecting funds and mobilizing populations. This level of local governance and relative local autonomy has evolved slowly since the mid-Ming, and has shown an ability to respond to the retreat of the state from control over everyday life in contemporary China. The history of this gradual establishment of the institutions, techniques and practices of local autonomy is an important chapter in the socio-cultural development of China with many implications for the future.

First, the ritual events of Chinese local communal religion are embedded in historically complex processes of the construction of elaborate local systems of social organization and regional networks of temples.

Temple festivals and ritual alliances capture, deform and transduce lines of force traversing the spaces they create, whether these be forces of state, lineage or god cult territorialization, or capitalist, technological or cultural forces of deterritorialization. In other words, these singular ritual events and the changing spaces they produce and mobilize have been involved in a constantly changing confrontation with capital and different state and social formations for centuries.

The second point concerns the nature of everyday life in Putian. I suggest that ritual events in rural Fujian are intensifications of everyday relations, rather than moments figuring a mythological or cyclic temporality or plane of unification, which is how they are often conceived in the mode of the romantic peasant, or in terms of tradition versus modernity. Moreover, the ritual events of rural South-east China have not yet become commodified events. They are instead moments for the confrontation of the ever-new in the always the same. This includes the fascinating process of the self-reflective incorporation of new audio-visual and electronic technologies that increasingly permeate everyday life into ritual events, and the self-conscious appropriation of everyday political symbols within ritual. Images of Mao Zedong and the other fathers of the communist revolution are carried at the head of religious processions, while banners proclaim official slogans. Video documentation of religious festivals is paid for by temple committees and CD ROMs containing the latest innovations in ritual performance are exchanged between temples.

It is worth emphasizing the imperceptible intensification of everyday social relationality into ritual events. As mentioned above, ritual events in some particularly active and complex areas of South-east China can take place 250 days out of the year, all within an easy walk. Participation in these events is nearly total, with the exception of certain Christian families. The mobilization of the entire community to greater or lesser degrees on an everyday basis is one of the most significant features of these events.

It is difficult to locate precise frames or thresholds around ritual activity in current South-east China. In the everyday of Fujian rural ritual, time is twisted into a Möebius strip linking zones of indiscernability; at a certain level of intensity the everyday merges into the ritual event. Within ritual events multiple temporalities are brought to bear, including the reversal of forward-flowing time in Daoist meditation, the accessing within Daoist rites of the time of the prior heavens to replenish the latter heavens of actualized time, and the acceleration of cosmic cycles of time in the revelation and recitation of scripture. Space too is stretched. The body of the priest and the bodies of many participants are like multiple Möebius strips linking internal bodily spaces to planes of space, some actual spaces such as the intercorporeal spaces of the crowd, or the charged space of the temple, the courtyard or the procession, some drawn from the virtual and the imaginary such as multiple planes of inscription of cosmic forces. These planes of inscription of infinite semiotics are perhaps best illustrated in the indecipherable talisman, a figural morphing

of cosmic forces of a-signifying semiotics that has a direct impact on space, time and the body.

The third point is that these ritual events are moments of formation of fluid emergent community, of community as an ontological sense of collective experimentation, but that they also re-inscribe hierarchical, patriarchal and sometimes outright oppressive stratifications. The ritual event is the totality of the experience for all involved; there is no outer term of reference like society, and even the notion of community is open. Each ritual is a gamble requiring negotiation with local government and Party officials and complex mobilization of community desires and resources. Many ritual events are still restricted or prohibited, and organizers are always in some sense under threat. Every communal ritual performance is therefore both a potential disaster, and at the same time a step in the construction of a temporary autonomous zone. The successful completion of a communal ritual is cause for celebration at many levels.

The fourth point is that the ritual events of Chinese communal religion have been interpreted by some scholars as moments of collective sacrifice of excess in response to the impact of capitalism. This would entail interpreting them as key elements in a sacrificial general economy that strives to obviate or challenge or forestall capitalist relations. However, it is clear that the economies of scale of these events are quite specific, and after all, it is capitalism itself in Bataille's analysis that is engaged in an all-consuming self-sacrifice of excess. Moreover, if I am correct to argue that these ritual events can be seen as a form of creative involutionary feedback of local cultural forms upon local–state and local–capitalist relations, then it is important to see this as an evolving pattern of response and mutation, including to the forces and flows of capitalism. There are also issues of spatial scale at play. Local geographic features frame most ritual networks. An ecology of local power holds ritual networks back from direct confrontation with the state. Instead, the networks expand and become more complex within effective, appropriate levels and niches in the continually evolving, agonistic relation with state power.

Finally, I would like comment on the refusal of the participants in ritual events to engage in a dialogue with the discourses of modernization, such as debates on civil society or public spheres. Neither can these vital ritual events be confined within a discourse of "salvage ethnography" that would attempt to enshrine "Chinese tradition" as the obverse of modernity – a form of bad historicism.[25] This is not to say that they are lacking in discourses; on the contrary, proclamations, posters, banners, messages from the gods, extreme forms of calligraphy and Daoist talismans are visible everywhere, and the very ritual dances and processions inscribe intricate patterns of choreography into the heart of the community. The ritual discourse emphasizes deeply felt communal values and understandings of the efficacy of the gods. Beyond the semantic level,

25. Kenneth Dean, "Popular religion or civil society: disruptive communities and alternative conceptions," in T. Brook and B. Frolic (eds.), *Civil Society in China* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), pp. 172–195.

there is an infinite semiotics at play in these events that can be seen in the inscription of every possible surface and the evocation of many impossible surfaces (supernatural planes mobilized by incantation, mudras and talismans). There is a different notion of language underlying ritual events. The ritual event is communal self-expression, not an act of inter-subjective communication.

What the ritual events of the Fujian countryside are engaged in could be seen as the "dephasing" of ritual practices that re-emerge from the syncretic field (the plane of non-contradiction, the virtual reservoir of cultural forms of local knowledge) and release alternative temporalities and spatialities in a ceaseless negotiation with the forces of modernity. These concrete ritual practices developed over time, but they have accumulated within the reservoir of local cultural memory and can be brought to bear upon contemporary social configurations. Here "tradition" is not opposed to "modernity." Instead, seemingly "pre-modern" communal practices like spirit possession and Daoist ritual are brought to the surface of the positive unconscious of the local community in ways felt viscerally throughout a collectivity. A person who has grown up in South-east China over the past 30 years will have performed many different roles in ritual events, carrying lanterns, marching in procession, carrying the sedan chair of the gods, perhaps becoming possessed by the gods. Such people can expect to continue to expand their experience in relationship to the evolving community through these ritual events in the future as they take on roles in the temple committee, in fund-raising, or by developing more specialized forms of ritual expertise. Although individual experience expands in the communal self-expression of ritual events, neither of these terms is pre-determined or stable. The ritual events of South-east China mould temporary autonomous zones which are spaces of emergent community, which can only exist in movement and transformation.