

# **The Cult of the Silkworm Mother as a Core of Local Community Religion in a North China Village: Field Study in Zhiwuying, Boading, Hebei**

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**ABSTRACT** This article deals with an example of local community religion in north China, the activities of a woman spirit-medium in a small village in Hebei province. This woman is believed to represent an ancient goddess, the Silkworm Mother (*Cangu nainai*), to whom people turn for healing illnesses not cured by Western or Chinese medicine. This study shows that local popular religion is very much alive in contemporary China.

In the year 2000, a research team of Daniel Overmyer from the University of British Columbia, Hou Jie from Nankai University and I launched a project for the study of temple festivals in rural north China. Its aim was to try to make sense of north Chinese rural communities by looking at the various symbolic practices by which the peasants traditionally and contemporarily express their value systems and seek to preserve and improve their lives.

Local religious practices and beliefs carried out by ordinary people in their daily life have long been the quantitative mainstream of the history of Chinese religions, and a fundamental support for traditional society, culture and moral values. Unfortunately, this significant part of Chinese culture has been ignored for a long time by academic studies. In the 20th century, Chinese popular religious practices and beliefs were criticized by scholars and destroyed by wars and political movement. Despite the best efforts of a half-century of communist propaganda against religion and the violent destruction of temples and statues during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), devotion to local deities continues to thrive in China. Temples are being rebuilt; the sale of incense sticks and paper money is once again big business; and mediums who represent these gods are to be found everywhere. Popular religion is alive and well-developed in the rural areas of mainland China. Our research aimed to find out what makes popular religious practices revive, and what is the pattern of local people's religious practices?

According to a survey by Daniel Overmyer, in the last ten years Chinese scholars have produced a substantial number of studies of the religious traditions of ordinary people, and excellent fieldwork investigations have been carried out in some areas by Chinese scholars in collaboration with European, Canadian and US colleagues, and published in Hong Kong or Taiwan. However, the studies published in China have so far involved little fieldwork, except among minority peoples, and

collaborative fieldwork has been done primarily in the south-eastern provinces of Fujian and Guangdong. With a few important exceptions such fieldwork has not been carried out in north China, the traditional centre of Chinese culture and government administration. Some of the northern villages we studied are in counties studied in the 1930s, particularly those in Ding county, concerning which substantial volumes were published by Sidney Gamble and Li Jinghan.<sup>1</sup> In the Ding xian (Ting Hsien) experimental district in western Hebei there was an average of seven temples per village in 1882, and this number was only slightly lower when a militantly secularizing magistrate arrived in 1914; thereafter the number declined sharply.<sup>2</sup> Six of Sidney Gamble's "sample villages" in Hebei, surveyed in the early 1930s, had a total of 38 temples, with 15 in one village alone. Gamble had "no reports" on temples in another five sample villages, suggesting that his investigators reported only the larger temples.<sup>3</sup> More recent studies of village life in north China have focused primarily on political, social and economic factors, without much attention to religious traditions. Important exceptions are studies of northern pilgrimages and death rituals by Susan Naquin, and of local religion in Shanxi province by David Johnson. Richard Madsen has recently published a book on Chinese Catholics that also includes material on north China communities.<sup>4</sup> R. David Arkush published in 1995 a book on north Chinese folk materials and popular mentality. Luo Hongguan studied the temple rituals in a village from northern Shanxi province in 1998.

This project on temple festivals in north China involved fieldwork in Baoding, Langfang, Handan, Xingtai and Shijiazhuang in Hebei province. In 2000, we went to a small village, named Zhiwuying, located in Xushui county in the Baoding area. There I unexpectedly met a local spirit-medium, an old lady, Mrs Wu, Silkworm Mother (*Cangu nainai*). According to local belief, Mrs Wu is believed to be an incarnation of the Silkworm Mother goddess. The devotees of this popular form of religiousness seek a personal and direct access to a divine power that can heal their various ills. Lay leaders figure prominently in popular religion, as opposed to the professional leaders of institutional religion. At times these lay leaders become mediums or shamans who mediate the efficacious power of the gods to ordinary folk.

Many different local communities, operating largely on their own, have produced Chinese gods. It is well known that some of the gods worshipped by ordinary people in traditional Chinese society and its continuations are deified spirits of local humans believed to have the power to respond to prayers and petitions. This power is manifested in healing,

1. D. Overmyer, "From 'feudal superstition' to 'popular beliefs': new directions in mainland Chinese studies of Chinese popular religion," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie*, No. 12 (2001).

2. Sidney D. Gamble, *Ting Hsien: A North China Rural Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968), reprint of the 1954 ed., pp. 405–407.

3. Sidney D. Gamble, *North China Villages: Social, Political, and Economic Activities Before 1933* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), p. 119.

4. Richard Madsen, *China's Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

protection and support, and in advice and moral teachings among villagers. The gods are believed to have independent power in their own right. Their beneficent and moral dimensions are widely developed in local society. These gods are believed to dwell in temples, represented by images and by human beings. Because they are powerful in popular culture, they are widely accepted and believed in by ordinary people. Meanwhile, their power not only exists in temples and images, but is also transferred to their representatives (mediums). Mediums are recognized as temporary manifestations of gods with divine power to help people solve difficulties and answer questions.

This study is based on fieldwork in Zhiwuying village in the Baoding area of Hebei province. It is in Dawangdian township in Xushui county, 100 miles south of Beijing. In this small village, the religious situation is different from the religious practices of south-east China. There are no big temples and ancestral shrines. There is no one big lineage that plays an important role in the village's business, but many small lineages. In the south, according to the fieldwork reports of John Lagerwey, temple festivals are the most important and complex manifestations of community religion; preparations for them can involve hiring an opera or puppet troupe, arranging for rituals to be conducted by Daoist priests or Buddhist monks, erecting sheds for operas and offerings, preparing food and many other activities. It is important to note that religious activities are organized by lay people from influential families, not priests, since lineage tradition is very powerful in southern communities.<sup>5</sup>

In the summer of 2000, we were told that there was a new Guanyin temple in Zhiwuying village. It was a small temple built among houses in the village, but it was locked and a village resident told us that an old lady living just behind the temple kept the key. We went to see her to ask for the key. She was sitting on the *kang* (clay bed) and appeared to be blind, but she recognized that we were not her neighbours, and even asked whether there was a foreigner with us since Professor Overmyer was with us. At first she refused to give the key to the head of the township who was with us as she seemed to feel that he was not a good worshipper. Finally, I talked with her in a gentle and peaceful way, and she gave the key to me. I found there was a small and shabby altar in her room with some offerings, incense and candles. On the top of this small altar there was a dirty red curtain. I lifted the curtain, to find that there was a paper picture with a female god and several smaller figures with Chinese characters saying "all the gods are here" (*quan shen luozuo*). In a brief talk with the old lady, Mrs Wu, I learned that this room is the local worship and healing centre of the Silkworm Mother goddess. So I decided to come back to learn more about the cult of the goddess. In 2000 and 2001, I returned twice and stayed in the village. I was able to stay in

5. See Fang Xuejia (ed.), *Meizhou Heyuan diqu de cunluo wenhua* (Village Religion and Culture in Northeastern Guangdong) (Hong Kong: Traditional Hakka Society Series, Vol. 5, 1997).

Mrs Wu's home watching her communicate with the people seeking help and healing those in need. I interviewed believers from the village and outside it, and also unbelievers from the village. I even visited believers' homes to see the sacred place where they communicated with and worshipped the Silkworm Mother.

This report discusses how Mrs Wu found herself "called" to serve as the medium of the ancient god-figure known as the Silkworm Mother, and how this popular belief has developed in the past 20 years in Zhiwuying village and influenced other villages. The cult of the Silkworm Mother has deep historical roots and was but one of the many religious devotions that were violently suppressed during the Cultural Revolution. Today this worship is once again thriving.

This report shows that local popular religion is very much alive in contemporary China, as well as the specific role of mediums in this style of religiousness. It also indicates how communities and individuals turn to these religious practices in their search for meaning and their moral concerns. Their beliefs have the power to push the development of popular religion in folk society, to help in the fight for survival and dealing with relationships with others in daily life. The basic features of Chinese local popular religion seem to be indestructible. The cult of the Silkworm Mother is a visible expression of people's interests, and public worship in it represented the periodic mustering of the community for the demonstration of common beliefs and common interests.

To move from the meagre and formulaic descriptions of religious and calendarical festival provided by local chronicles (*difangzhi*) to accounts based on fieldwork, filled with vivid details about elaborate rituals and colourful customs that are not even mentioned in printed sources, is to move into a new world. However, it is important to realize that the informants here are providing descriptions that reveal what a local popular religion is really like.

#### *The Cult of the Silkworm Mother and Religious Tradition in Zhiwuying Village*

The function of community integration is especially apparent in cults of sufficient general importance to stimulate the religious interest of the entire community. Leading among such cults are those dedicated to deities of elements of nature, which have always dominated the consciousness of the peasant population.<sup>6</sup> The cult of the Silkworm Mother is an old tradition among ordinary people in the Baoding area. As a female deity, the Silkworm Mother's status in the Baoding area is similar to that of the Goddess of Taishan in Shandong.

According to numerous historical documents, worship of the Silkworm Mother was very popular in local society, and spread out among different

6. C.K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967), pp. 60–70.

areas, such as Hebei, Jiangsu, Sichuan and Zhejiang.<sup>7</sup> Silk production was a traditional industry in China, and women were the major producers. In common with other folk gods and goddess, tales of the silkworm mother are found in different areas, with different versions and stories, but the practices and rituals were quite similar. The original responsibility of the Silkworm Mother was to protect the silk industry. She dwelled in temples, and also in households. Worship of the Silkworm Mother became broader because she was believed to have more and more sacred power to protect people and meet their many needs, beyond silk production, so that even though the silk industry declined in some areas, the cult of the Silkworm Mother did not fade away. People may not be very clear about the tales and myths related to the Silkworm Mother, but this kind of folk belief is deeply rooted in popular culture. This is what is happening in Zhiwuying village.

From my interviews with villagers, I learned that there are different stories about the Silkworm Mother's identity. In Chinese religious tradition, the spirits of humans could be deified because of their good deeds, courage and strength in life. The Silkworm Mother had just the above characteristics. For local believers, she was not a fictitious figure but a real human being who had lived in this area many years ago. It is said that the Silkworm Mother was born ten thousand years ago in Balizhuang, Rongcheng, a village near Zhiwuying. Her family was named Yang. People believed that the Silkworm Mother helped to solve various difficulties and problems. She had the ability to possess shamans, perform cures, send sons and work miracles, which made her more accessible and appealing than other gods. Above all, the Silkworm Mother is a local god; she is identified as a neighbour by villagers.

So, people not only celebrated her birthday at a temple festival on the 20th of the first lunar month, but another special day is also celebrated according to the local tradition. The ninth day of the ninth month is the time for married women to return to visit their parents. Since the Silkworm Mother was a young girl from Balizhuang, Rongcheng, many believers in that area make a pilgrimage trip to the temple located there, as well as to the main Silkworm Mother temple on West Mountain 50 kilometres away.

The cult of the Silkworm Mother is part of local religious activities in Zhiwuying village. Historically, there were more than ten temples in this village, including Tudi (Earth God) Temple, Sanyue Temple and Laoye Temple. They were destroyed several times, in the Sino-Japanese War, the Land Reform Movement and the Cultural Revolution. In recent years, some temples have been rebuilt by villagers. Most donations came from fund-raising for the Silkworm Mother, showing that she still has a very strong influence among villagers.

The cult of the Silkworm Mother is an old tradition in this area; however it ceased during the Cultural Revolution but was revived in the

7. Li Qiao, *Zhongguo hangye shen chongbai (Trade God Worship In China)* (Overseas Chinese Press, 1990).

late 1970s. How did this happen? It was because of a woman named Mrs Wu, who is believed to be the incarnation of the Silkworm Mother with divine power to help people.

*The Story of the Incarnation of the Silkworm Mother, Mrs Wu*

Villagers' beliefs and customs are based on the needs of pre-modern agricultural village life. Chinese gods are numerous and specialized; in the household, for example, there are deities of the gate, door, kitchen stove, marital bed, well and latrine, as well as ancestral tablets and images of more powerful gods on the household altar. People believe that the divine power of deities not only exists in temples and shrines, but also can be attached to human beings. Mediums commonly claimed to be possessed by deities with divine power, so, sometimes the mediums were thought of as the deity itself. This happened in Zhiwuying village. Mrs Wu, now an old woman, claimed that she was possessed by the Silkworm Mother 20 years ago after long suffering from serious pain in her legs. Now, villagers call her the Silkworm Mother.

She was an ordinary woman, no different from her female neighbours, and has two sons and three daughters. Her husband died when she was 50 and she had no intention of being a medium at that time. She says that she did not practise any religion: "I was too poor to believe in god." However, she knew about the cult of the Silkworm Mother from her childhood. She also knew something of the history of the Silkworm Mother, but like many other villagers, she was not much concerned about it. She took it for granted. In her view, the Silkworm Mother was born ten thousand years ago.

In 1977, when Mrs Wu was sixty, she had serious pain in her legs. She could not move or even dress herself and medicines did not heal her. After suffering for two months, one night she had strange dream. There were a lot of people with costumes and weapons, but she was not afraid. One man said: "We have looked for you for many years, now finally we have got you." They pulled her outside. The next day, she continued to experience this strange dream. It seemed that she did not fall into a sound sleep, because she saw mountains and rivers very clearly where she had never been before. There were several gods talking to her, including the Queen Mother of West, the Silkworm Mother and the Horse King. She was asked to report her life history. She told them her own history from when she was ten years old, including about her family members. She answered many questions, such as the name of her relatives, whether they did bad things, and so on. She said that it was amazing that she even knew her great grandfather's name, which she had not known before. The Silkworm Mother told her that she had been noticed for many years, and exhorted her to do good deeds and manage the affairs of her family. In the end, she was asked to hang up a picture of all the gods (*quan shen*). She did not understand, so she did not take it seriously. Unfortunately, she suffered the pain in her legs at that night, so she promised that she would hang up the picture of all the gods if the pain left.

The next morning, she bought a big sheet of red paper. She took it to her parents' family and asked her brother to write "all the gods are here." Her brother was very angry when he learned the story from her. He said: "Everyone has dreams, don't take it seriously. I don't have pen. I don't have ink. You are already too old, don't think about becoming a medium. It is very troublesome." She became angry too, "OK. I won't ask you any more." Unexpectedly, she said loudly to her brother just as if she were announcing a big decision to the world: "I am the Silkworm Mother, I am coming here to heal people who have disease. Nobody can stop me. If he wants to stop me, he will be blamed." Her brother was extremely surprised, then he wrote for her on the red paper, "all the gods are here."

However, Mrs Wu had never had medical training so she dared not treat people. She doubted whether she was able to cure illness. This lack of confidence lasted for quite a long time. At that time, nobody knew she was the incarnation of the Silkworm Mother. One day, when she was at a clinic for her leg pain, the doctor said to her, "you don't have to continue your treatment, you are recovered already." Then, he took her out and said to her secretly, "you are a god now, you are a god now." He did not say what god she was. Later, this doctor sent one of his relatives to Mrs Wu to receive treatment for pain in her arms, which acupuncture did not help. Mrs Wu did not know how to treat it, until, suddenly, she felt power coming into her arms, so she massaged the patient. Fortunately, this patient got better. Mrs Wu was very surprised with herself: "How do I have such power? Why do my hands know how to treat patients?" Since then, for more than 20 years, she has had a reputation among the devotees of the Silkworm Mother in the village. People called her the Silkworm Mother.

Because of her popularity, Mrs Wu or the Silkworm Mother is recognized not only by people living in Zhiwuying village, but also those from nearby villages and some from remote places. Mrs Wu has been a very important figure for stimulating the cult of the Silkworm Mother in Zhiwuying and other villages near by. Both her physical treatment and her spiritual assistance to ordinary people from her motherly personality mean that the Silkworm Mother is becoming an important regional deity worshipped by individuals and organized groups in this area.

#### *The Interaction Between the Silkworm Mother and Believers*

Most people come to Mrs Wu with physical problems; some of them have psychological problems, manifested physically. Before they see her they have already tried medical treatment from both Western and Chinese doctors. She says: "People come to me with strange illnesses. They don't know those are not really strange illnesses, but from ghosts, ancestors or supernatural beings (*shi gui*, *shi zuxian*, *xianjia nongde*). So hospitals have nothing to do with this kind of patient."

In Chinese tradition, there are two types of illness. One is physical problems that can be treated by a medical doctor. The other is

getting in trouble with the nether world for which one needs the help of gods. Normally, when people are sick, they go to see a doctor. After the failure of a doctor's treatment, they will go to mediums. Villagers in Zhiwuying know that Mrs Wu is an ordinary woman, nothing special, so why do they believe in her sacred power to cure disease? Because they believe that Mrs Wu is now a representative of The Silkworm Mother: "The cult of the Silkworm Mother is inherited from our ancestors, which is same with the cult of the Taishan Immortal Mother and the Taishan Old Ancestor." As with other popular gods, the Silkworm Mother has legitimacy from local culture. So, Mrs Wu is playing the role of a semi-human being and deity in village life. As she says: "The Silkworm Mother saves China, helps peasants and guards the country, so she is a god with sacred power. With sacred power, I can heal any disease. Otherwise I am not divine. I won't come with sacred power without the help of Silkworm Mother. There is only one god lasting thousands and thousands of years, thousands and ten of thousands of years, which is the Silkworm Mother."

Mrs Wu does not touch her patients but checks the causes of disease by "asking about the case history" (*wen'an*) and "solving the case" (*po'an*). Usually, she sits on the bed and closes her eyes in meditation style. She asks patients or their relatives to tell her the situation. She states that the treatment depends on whether the Ancestor God (*laozushen*; it does not refer to any particular god, similar to Old Heaven *laotian*) is willing to help. If the Ancestor God helps, the patients will recover soon; otherwise they will be in serious trouble. Usually, she tells the patients or their relatives how to worship the Silkworm Mother at home, by burning incense, asking for medicines, making vows and so on. People follow her suggestion and commands, because they believe that the Silkworm Mother gives them guidance with the aid of Mrs Wu. For example, they may believe that medicine comes from the Silkworm Mother. If they prepare a bowl of water and put it on the table in the direction of the Silkworm Mother and then ask the Silkworm Mother to give them the medicines they need, they believe the medicines for healing their disease will be put into their bowl of water. Then, they drink it.

*Case studies: case 1:* Mrs Li is about 50 years old. Two years ago, she had a strange problem with her back. Medicines from the hospital did not help. She almost gave up hope. Then she went to see a medium, an old lady in her village, but her pain was still not reduced. She then went to see Mrs Wu. Mrs Wu's explanation of her suffering was that she did not worship the real Buddha, but a false one. The old lady Mrs Li had gone to see was a horse-monkey demon (*mahoujing*). This surprised Mrs Li. Both the old lady and Mrs Wu were neighbours, why was one demon and one a god? However, it did not take Mrs Li much time to convert to worship the cult of the Silkworm Mother by going to see Mrs Wu. But she did not recover immediately. After several days she went to Mrs Wu again, and said: "Silkworm Mother, I followed your directions to pray every night. Why has the disease not stopped?" Mrs Wu was quiet for a



moment, and sang with the music of Hebei opera. She told Mrs Li that there must be some unclean stuff close to the altar of the Silkworm Mother which were making the Silkworm Mother unwilling to help. Mrs Li ran home and found that there was a knife, steelyard hook and steelyard, used by her husband for selling pork. She suddenly realized why she suffered from bad illness: "My Heaven (God), the Silkworm Mother really knows everything." For her, the cult of the Silkworm Mother and Mrs Wu became the same thing. After a certain period of worshipping the Silkworm Mother, she recovered. Now she is the one of the most active devotees of the Cult of the Silkworm Mother; she goes to visit Mrs Wu almost every day.

During her treatment, Mrs Li followed the Mrs Wu's directions. She prayed to the Silkworm Mother every night to ask for medicines. She put a piece of white paper in front of the altar where she was burning incense. She prayed, "Silkworm Mother, save me and help me." Finally, some white powder appeared on the paper, which she believed to be medicine provided by the Silkworm Mother. Sometimes, she put out a bowl with water to ask for medicine. She believed that the medicine came into the water after her prayers. So she drank it twice a day.

*Case 2:* Mrs Wang, over 30 years old, is from Xiaoxicun, a nearby village. She had a bad headache. After the failure of hospital treatment, she went to see Mrs Wu. Mrs Wu did not ask the cause of disease, but about her relationship with her parents-in-law. She said to Mrs Wang: "You don't have any physical problem. You are not filial, and you treat your parents-in-law badly. So the Silkworm Mother is punishing you." She demonstrated her point by burning a candle in front of the picture of Silkworm Mother. First, the candle light was very even, but when Mrs Wu repeated that Mrs Wang was not filial, the candle flared up. Mrs Wu told Mrs Wang the fire showed the Silkworm Mother testing her. It was a big surprise for Mrs Wang. She believed that God knew about her behaviour. She accepted this explanation of her pain and corrected her attitude and behaviour towards her parents-in-law. Soon, when Mrs Wang came to visit Mrs Wu again, she looked healthy and in a good mood.

*Case 3:* One day, when I observed Mrs Wu at her home, a sister and brother of a Zhang family came. They said loudly "Silkworm Mother, please tell us how our mother can recover as soon as possible." Their mother was in a hospital after surgery. They did not tell Mrs Wu her exact sickness, but asked for her help. Mrs Wu did not ask them any questions, but she sang Heibei opera music. From her singing, people knew that she was trying to search for the causes of disease. After keeping quiet for a while, she said "Tell me the truth. Did you move the stones and bricks from temples or graves when you built your house? Did you kill any snakes?" The brother answered: "We did get some stones and bricks from a river bed. I did not think we stole bricks from temples or graves." Mrs Wu continued singing. "A flood burst the Dragon King

temple, where the stones and bricks were from. Once you tell the truth, the Silkworm Mother can help you to investigate your mother's sickness. If you don't tell the truth, it is impossible to know the cause of disease." The brother said: "We probably got some bricks from temples. I remember that my elder brother threw a snake from his house, but I am not sure whether the snake was dead or not." Mrs Wu asked, "where did your brother throw the snake?" The brother answered, "he threw it into a ditch."

After a while, Mrs Wu sang: "If you want your mother get better, you must worship the Silkworm Mother." The sister said: "Yes, yes, we will. Tell us how to worship and how to burn the incense." Mrs Wu said: "You must promise to worship the Silkworm Mother after she recovers, don't forget to go to West Mountain to worship the Silkworm Mother. You pray toward the West where the Silkworm Mother is in your yard. Now your mother is in the hospital, you fix the time at 9 pm every evening. Prepare a bowl of water for your mother, when you pray at home. After praying, serve your mother the water, this water has the sacred power of the Silkworm Mother. Leave 20 *yuan* to buy candles and incense for the Silkworm Mother. Because it is not enough that your own family prays I will pray for you too in order to get more power." The sister and brother left feeling very satisfied.

The above cases show that Mrs Wu is a folk medium, playing a very important role in village society, mostly because the cult of the Silkworm Mother is still influential among ordinary people. For ordinary folk what counts is the goddess's efficacious power manifested in aid and healing. What really counts is community support of the cult.

According to medical anthropological studies every medical treatment system has its own structure of the causes of disease. The reason for the existence of folk medical treatments in modern society is that these treatments pay attention to the illness and the relevant social elements of illness. Physical problems are not the only causes of disease, which can also be caused by the relationship of the patient with others and immoral behaviour.<sup>8</sup> Mediums, like local doctors, are familiar with people's problems and beliefs, so they can explain the causes of disease which are supported by their patients' belief in the existence of sacred power. Normally, people go to see both folk doctors and medical doctors for both Western and Chinese treatment.

Mrs Wu has been a folk doctor healing people for more than 20 years, and has a very good reputation. Of course, people treat her not as an old country lady but as the Silkworm Mother. We can say that the cult of the Silkworm Mother goes beyond folk medicine. The cult of the Silkworm Mother, represented by Mrs Wu, is supported by popular culture and ordinary people. It demonstrates the kind of order and logic which has been accepted by the people for many years, including moral concern, balance between nature and human beings, and worship of ancestor gods. Mrs Wu's treatment is never simple medical service in the village,

8. See Zhang Xun, *Disease and Culture* (Daoxiang Press, 1994).

because she is a symbol of popular religion. Chinese gods are expressions of the concern of ordinary people to have personal and direct access to divine power in their own local areas. Vows to gods are contracts between them and their devotees for which no clerical intermediaries are necessary.

### *The Influence of the Cult of the Silkworm Mother*

In China, popular religious activities with lay leaders have been active in local society, characterized by their own forms of organizations, activities, ritual and belief. Symbols of local divine power who were also once human are believed to sympathize with and respond to their worshippers; they are present in their shrines, represented by images, and also by mediums. To the ordinary people, a deep understanding of religious doctrines and myths is not really necessary. What is most important to them is whether the gods they are praying to are *ling*, have efficacious divine power; are they able to respond effectively to prayers and petitions? These divine symbols take on special roles beyond that of community patron, including the healing of specific diseases, help with childbirth, and the support of occupations and professions.

Twenty years ago Mrs Wu was an ordinary woman without special ability; she even once suffered family abuse from her husband. But after a period of difficult experience, she believed she was possessed by a deity, and now represents the Silkworm Mother. From this perspective, Mrs Wu is not treated as a simple country woman, but as a divine medium. This divine power is not available to other people in the community. So, for more than 20 years, Mrs Wu has been the only one with this particular function. When I asked her whether she had disciples and whether she intended to teach others her skill, she replied: "No. It is impossible for common people to learn it. One needs the help of gods." Even her daughter and daughter-in-law cannot obtain this power.

Mrs Wu has power from people's belief in the cult of the Silkworm Mother, and has established her reputation in the local area for healing specific diseases and solving people's frustrating problems. She told me: "At first, I did not want to do this, because I didn't want to have a bad name among neighbours. If I could not help them, people would be angry. It would be terrible." The Silkworm Mother's reputation is the same as Mrs Wu's. As more and more people get help from Mrs Wu, they believe that the cult of The Silkworm Mother is *ling*. So efficacious divine power makes the cult of the Silkworm Mother become more and more influential. People now come to see Mrs Wu from distant places, such as Beijing Shijiazhuang and other cities. Those people testify that they have benefited from worshipping the Silkworm Mother and spread the good news about Mrs Wu, which has made the cult of the Silkworm Mother more and more popular. On the ninth day of the ninth lunar month in 2001, about 150 people gathered in Mrs Wu's house to make a pilgrimage to the Silkworm Mother Temple located on West Mountain 200 miles away.

At present there are no religious associations in Zhiwuying village, but this does not mean that people do not take part in religious activities and rituals. The cult of the Silkworm Mother in Zhiwuying village demonstrates that there are demands in local society for religious belief and rituals. Villagers pool their resources in order to contribute to rebuilding temples. I have heard that several temples have been built or rebuilt with the power of the Silkworm Mother in recent years. In Zhiwuying village, there is also a brand new Guanyin temple. A new Silkworm Mother temple has been built in Yang village near the place where the Silkworm Mother was born; in addition the Silkworm Mother temple on West Mountain has been rebuilt, and other religious sites are being constructed. Temple festivals also take place for the cult of the Silkworm Mother. These are lively affairs lasting several days that include offerings in temples, and the performance of operas or puppet-plays, with many villagers worshipping.

Now the question is, to whom do these religious establishments belong and who controls their assets? Where does the money come from to construct and maintain the buildings, purchase the images and ritual paraphernalia, pay for the incense and candles, and support the resident clerics, if any? From my interview information, most donations for rebuilding temples have come from the devotees of the cult of the Silkworm Mother. In some cases, Mrs Wu plays the key role in organizing people to take part in the temple festivals.

Mrs Wu does not ask people to give her extra money. She asks for a very limited amount for the costs of candle and incense. Ten years ago, only 0.20 *yuan* per visit was requested; now, it is 2.00 *yuan* per visit. However, she asks the patients to promise not only to offer the Silkworm Mother daily worship, but also to donate money to temple building in the Silkworm Mother's name. If people try to leave her extra money, she always refuses to accept it. She says: "Don't give me money, you should appreciate the Silkworm Mother, she helps you. So whenever or wherever, the Silkworm Mother builds a temple, you can make your contribution." In Chinese tradition, there is no merit greater than that of establishing a temple. So most people are willing to contribute money or labour in order to accumulate merit.

These religious activities and practices spread from Zhiwuying village to other villages in the Boading area. What is the attitude of village cadres towards the cult of the Silkworm Mother and the rebuilding of temples, organized by Mrs Wu? In interviews residents indicate that there is no controversy between Mrs Wu and village cadres. The power of village administration is weaker since peasants have more freedom to choose their life styles and mode of production. The leaders of Zhiwuying did not stop the development of the cult of the Silkworm Mother, most importantly because Mrs Wu as the representative of the Silkworm Mother is an old lady. She is thought to be superstitious (*shenshen guigui*), but it is not big deal. Village leaders did not interrupt temple rebuilding. Mrs Wu says, "we did not ask money from the village, so they have no reason to stop us." However, she is not satisfied with

village leaders' inactive attitude towards temple rebuilding. She has some more ambitious plans, which can't be completed without strong support from village cadres. It reminds of me the cult of the patriarch Han in Beiqi village in Ding county which is supported by village leaders, who helped with getting a religious association licence and money to rebuild the temples and run temple festivals.

I would like to suggest that there are different local models in China for religious development between south and north. The development of popular religion depends on the situation. It may have a medium as the core of a popular cult in the village with weak village leaders; or it may be organized by strong village leaders or powerful lineages. However, no matter which model exists, popular religious development definitely has support from ordinary people.

### *Conclusion*

This report is from the first stage of fieldwork. We are still carrying out studies on popular beliefs in rural areas in north China. I would like to conclude by making the following points.

First, although we have many reasons to believe that villagers are intensely conservative, especially where ritual and religion are concerned, I still doubt that contemporary Chinese popular religion is merely a revival of tradition. Popular religion is also an expression of the social conditions of modern life. Social dislocation generates new spiritual questions; greater economic comfort evokes new questions of meaning. The traditional Chinese/Confucian world view was severely challenged early in the 20th century, first by modernization efforts that opened China to Western political and scientific models, and later by Marxism. Most social theory would predict that, under these pressures of modernization, the persuasiveness of a traditional world view necessarily diminishes, even to the point of bankruptcy. Yet research among peasants in Zhiwuying village demonstrates that the traditional world view of Chinese religiousness, associated with fate, *fengshui*, Chinese medicine and so on, appears far from bankrupt.

Secondly, scholars have used the term of "folk Buddhism" to show that Buddhist ideas and symbols are almost totally subsumed by the concerns of village religion. Nevertheless, "folk Buddhism" is getting more diffused in the Zhiwuying village. People are not much concerned about the origins of the gods they worship. They seemed take them for granted. So the discourse of Mrs Wu and her followers is of mixed popular religious beliefs. When they talked about a sectarian Eternal Mother (*wu sheng lao mu*) they did not know her origins. Another example is that Mrs Wu's followers recited the "Book of Buddha," though in fact that paragraph is from a popular sectarian scripture.

Finally, popular religious belief as social capital functions not only to provide possible means to heal people's disease, but also to frame people's moral concerns. Since people still worship and fear ancestors, ghosts and spirits, they have a sense that human efforts cannot

succeed without divine approval and support. With the help of folk belief, people are confident that through divination and rituals these superhuman powers can be known and dealt with; they believe that they can discover whether or not a problem is being caused by an angry ancestor, and why; when a sacrifice should be performed, and with what offerings. It is possible to draw a richly detailed picture of village symbolic life and religious practices from ethnographic reports from fieldwork.