

## Modalities of Doing Religion

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The previous chapters of this book presented a panoramic view of religious practices and ideas in different social contexts: large cities, rural villages, and regions inhabited by ethnic minorities. With the exception of some ethnic groups that overwhelmingly adhere to a single world religion such as Buddhism, Islam, or Christianity, the religious culture of the vast majority of Chinese defies easy categorizations and does not present itself as a neatly organized system. The great variety of practices and ideas, which appear in endless combinations and permutations, can be bewildering and confusing. One way of simplifying the picture is to look at how, in the long history of religious development in China, different ways of “doing religion” evolved and cohered into relatively easy-to-identify styles or “modalities.” These are relatively well-defined forms that different people can adopt and combine to deal with different concerns in life; however, the contents within these forms can vary widely. These modalities of “doing religion” are as follows:

1. Discursive/scriptural, involving mostly the composition and use of texts
2. Personal-cultivational, involving a long-term interest in cultivating and transforming oneself
3. Liturgical, involving elaborate ritual procedures conducted by ritual specialists
4. Immediate-practical, aiming at quick results using simple ritual or magical techniques
5. Relational, emphasizing the relationship between humans and deities (or ancestors) as well as among humans in religious practices

These modalities are frameworks for religious practice and action. They both restrain and enable people to express their religious imagination in words, images, sculptural and architectural forms, and actions. At any one time in any corner of the vast late imperial Chinese empire—and to a great extent today as well—all of these modalities were available to be adopted by individuals or social groups, though

factors such as class, gender, literacy level, accidents of birth and residence, position within different social networks, and temperament might channel some people toward certain modalities and not others. Most peasants in China have traditionally adopted a combination of the relational and the immediate-practical modalities into their religiosity; sometimes they adopt the liturgical modality and hire religious specialists when the occasion requires them, such as funerals and communal exorcisms. Illiteracy and lack of leisure would preclude them from most of the discursive and personal-cultivational modalities. The traditional educated elite tended to adopt a combination of the discursive and the personal-cultivational modalities, but they too often needed the service of the liturgical specialists.

This modalities framework focuses our attention on the ways in which people “do religion” rather than their religious conceptions, which can vary widely and in ways that defy any explanation; there are many flukes and accidents in the history of evolution and interaction of religious ideas, and people’s social experience and social structure do not always determine the contours of their religious imagination. Studying people’s religious conceptions is important, but it yields a bewildering diversity; on the other hand, there are only a limited number of forms (modalities) that permeate the Chinese religious landscape. The varieties of Chinese religious life have resulted from the elaboration of differences within these forms as well as the different configurations of various forms. The great variety in the symbolic contents of the Chinese religious world, as well as the limited number of forms (modalities) and their lasting stability and versatility, are both great achievements in the history of world religions.

A focus on form is of course not to say that studying the contents within the modalities is not important; far from it. But it is crucial to recognize the dialectic and mutually constituting relationship between form and content in any domain of sociocultural productions. Unless we understand the ways in which different religious practices belong to different modalities of doing religion, we will not fully appreciate the actual significance of these various practices. If we see a particular society’s religious culture as consisting of a particular configuration of various modalities of doing religion, then one of the first tasks is to identify the contours of these modalities. In the following sections, I shall illustrate each modality of doing religion found in Chinese religious culture with one or two paradigmatic religious practices that exemplify each modality. One thing I need to emphasize, however, is that these modalities are more or less ideal types, and that they often overlap.

### **The Discursive/Scriptural Modality**

People are attracted to this modality because of the allure of Confucian, Buddhist, Daoist and other “great texts” (classics, sutras, scriptures, etc.). This modality often requires a high level of literacy and a penchant for philosophical and “theological” thinking. Key practices within this modality include compiling and editing scriptures or discoursing about the Way, or preaching, and its paradigmatic forms include reading, thinking about, discussing, debating, composing, translating, and

commenting on religious texts. Also included in this modality is the composing of morality books using spirit writing and Chan/Zen masters' exegesis on *gong'an*, or dharma riddles.

The products of this modality are usually textual (or at least eventually appearing in textual forms) that range from a single religious tract to a whole set of scriptures and liturgical texts (e.g., the so-called Buddhist Canon or Daoist Canon compiled under imperial patronage). These texts form the basis of the classical "religious studies" approach to studying Chinese religions, which was derived from Western religious/theological exegetical traditions. Because of this textual bias, for a long time Chinese religious practices were understood in the West as exclusively this textually transmitted esoteric knowledge or, in the context of New Age or Orientalist consumption of exotic texts, "Oriental wisdoms."

Following are excerpts from what is perhaps the most widely published Chinese religious text, the *Tractate of the Most High One on Actions and Consequences*, which warns the reader about the operation of cosmic recompense described in chapter 1.

Besides following the advice contained in the text, one could attain religious merit simply by reading and rereading it, or by ritually chanting it, and also by printing it and having it offered for free distribution. For centuries, it has been published and distributed in millions and millions of copies by myriads of temples and

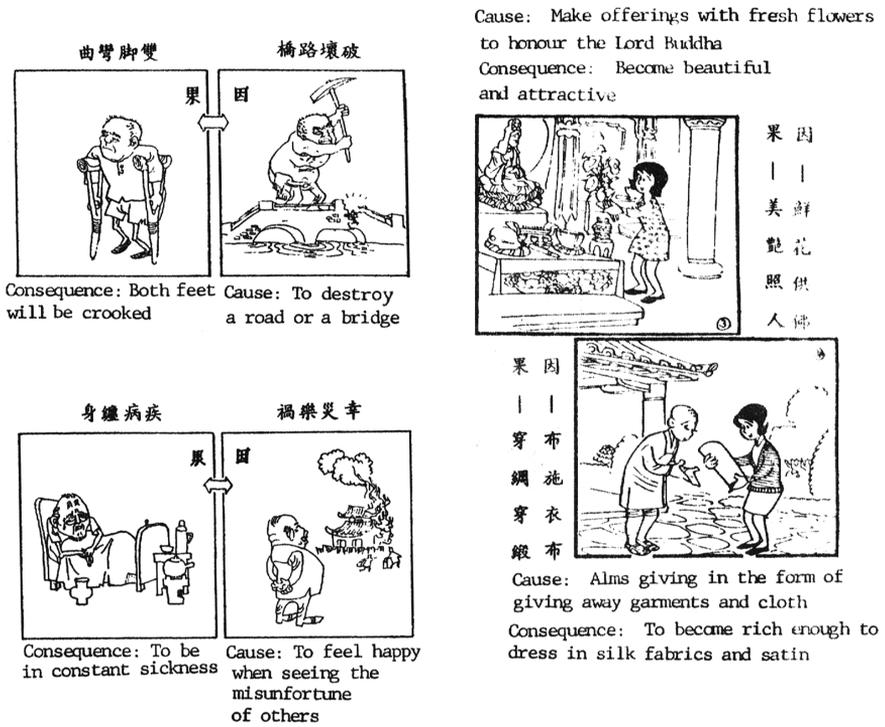


FIGURE 4.1 A comic book on cosmic recompense, distributed in a Hong Kong temple. (Photo David Palmer)

devotees, and it (or similar morality books) can typically be picked up today at any Chinese temple or vegetarian restaurant.<sup>1</sup> The author of the text is unknown, and it was likely produced through a spirit-writing séance several centuries ago.

*Chapter I: The Workings of Good and Evil*

The most high one says: “Disasters and blessings have no entry gates of their own; they are summoned by people. The effects of good and evil are like shadows following their forms.”

And so heaven and earth have spirits who record crimes, and in proportion to the severity of their crimes, they shorten human lives appropriately. Because of this not only may a person’s life be cut short, but he also becomes poor or destitute, his calamities are many; People all hate him; punishments and disasters follow him. Good fortune avoids him while evil stars persecute him. And when his span of years is complete, he dies. (. . .)

*Chapter II: How to Be Good*

Follow the right path, and retreat from the wrong one. Do not follow evil paths, nor sin in secret. Accumulate merit, show a compassionate heart in all things. Be loyal, filial, friendly, and brotherly; by correcting yourself, transform others. Pity orphans and be compassionate to widows, respect the elderly and be kind to the young. Do not even injure insects, grasses, and trees. Be saddened by other people’s misfortunes and delight in their good fortune. Help those in need and rescue those in danger. Regard the gains of others as though they were your own. And regard the failings of others as your own failings. Do not expose other people’s weaknesses, nor boast of your own strengths. Condemn evil and promote virtue, renounce much and accept little. Suffer humiliation without resentment; receive benefits as though startled. Extend help, but do not request compensation, help others without later regrets.

*Chapter III: What Happens To Good People*

When a person is known as virtuous, people all praise him. Heaven’s Way protects him, happiness and wealth follow him, All evil forces stay away from him; gods guard him. Whatever he does is successful, and he can aspire to join the gods and immortals. He who would become a heavenly immortal must perform 1,300 good deeds. He who would become an earthly immortal must perform 300 good deeds.

*Chapter IV: The Crimes of the Wicked*

But sometimes there is someone who behaves without righteousness, and moves against rationality, who mistakes evil for ability, and inflicts injury on others, who secretly defames the virtuous, and behind their backs slanders his ruler or his parents, who ignores those born before him, and disobeys his

masters, who deceives the unknowing, and bears false witness against his fellow students, who lies, calumniates, deceives, and practices deceit, who exposes the failings of clan elders, who exercises power but not compassion, who is cruel, irrational, and self-willed, who does not distinguish right from wrong, and turns his back on those whom he should befriend, who oppresses those below him and claims their merit for himself, but cringes before those above him to win their favor, who has no feeling for favors received, but is tireless in remembering resentment, who makes light of heaven's ordinary people, but agitates and disturbs the empire's order . . .

*Chapter V: The Fate of the Wicked*

For crimes such as these, the masters of fate, depending upon the gravity of the offence, cut short a person's life by twelve years or by a hundred days. And after that the person dies. And if at death there still remain unpunished crimes, the bad luck is visited upon children and grandchildren.

And for all those who have wrongfully seized the property of others, they must compensate for it with their wives and children and other family members, even unto death. Those who do not die are inflicted with disasters of water, fire, theft, loss of goods, disease, slander, and more until it offsets their unlawful appropriations. . . .

*Chapter VI: Hope for Those Who Repent*

When a person's heart is moved by goodness, although the goodness has not yet been achieved, nevertheless felicitous spirits are already following him. But when a person's heart is moved by evil, although the evil has not yet been achieved, nevertheless spirits of misfortune are already following him. A person who formerly did bad things but afterward repents and does no more evil, and continues in good behavior, then gradually he must obtain good fortune and happiness. This is called "changing disaster into good fortune."

Therefore a joyous man speaks what is good, thinks what is good, and does what is good; each day he does these three things, and in three years Heaven will bequeath to him good fortune. But an unlucky man is he who speaks what is evil, thinks what is evil, and does what is evil; each day he does these three things, and in three years Heaven will strike him with misfortune. Why would we not be diligent in following this?<sup>2</sup>

### **The Personal-Cultivational Modality**

Practices such as meditation, *qigong*, internal or outer alchemy, the cultivation of the "Daoist body,"<sup>3</sup> personal or group sutra chanting, the morning and evening

recitation sessions in a Buddhist monastery, merit-conscious charitable acts (e.g., volunteering to accumulate karmic merit), and keeping a merit/demerit ledger<sup>4</sup> belong to this modality. This modality presupposes a long-term interest in cultivating and transforming oneself (whether Buddhist, Daoist, or Confucian). The goals of this transformation and cultivation are different in each religious tradition: to become an immortal in Daoism, to be reincarnated into a better life or to achieve nirvana in Buddhism, and to become a man of virtue or to be closer to sagehood in Confucianism. But the shared element is the concern with one's own ontological status and destiny, something akin to a Foucaultian "care of the self."<sup>5</sup> In other words, the practices in this modality provide "technologies of the self."

Within this modality of doing religion there are both elite and popular forms. For many, working on scriptures itself constitutes a form of self-cultivation. However, ordinary and even illiterate people can pursue personal-cultivational goals without esoteric knowledge or high literacy or much religious training. For example, illiterate peasants can practice self-cultivation by chanting "precious scrolls," which are in metered rhymes and often memorized.<sup>6</sup> The simplest self-cultivation technique is the repeated utterance of the mantra *namo amitufo* (*namo amitabha*) thousands of times a day.

Charismatic movements sometimes precipitate out of these personal-cultivational pursuits. The modern *qigong* movement also exemplifies the personal-cultivational modality of doing religion.<sup>7</sup> When Falun Gong practitioners let the dharma wheel rotate in their lower abdomen day in and day out as instructed by their master Li Hongzhi, they are engaged in the personal-cultivational modality of doing religion. The key concepts in this modality are "to cultivate" (*xiu*) and "to craft" (*lian*).<sup>8</sup>

#### EXEMPLARY FORM: NEW AGE SPIRIT CULTIVATORS IN TAIWAN

Spirit mediumism has been a prominent aspect of Taiwanese religious life.<sup>9</sup> Spirit mediums are people who have succumbed to divine calling and agreed to be possessed by various kinds of deities in order to serve these deities and to help people with their problems. Their mode of operation typically belongs to the immediate-practical modality of doing religion (discussed later). But in the past few decades a new form of spirit mediumism emerged in Taiwan that has gained popularity. Ordinary people ranging from teenagers to the elderly, many more women than men, would gather in temples or other social spaces to get possessed by deities and to cultivate their own spirits. These people call themselves *lingji* (spirit mediums), though it is more appropriate to call them spirit cultivators to differentiate them from the better-known traditional spirit mediums, because the goal of their practice is to get in touch with one's "original spirit" and to cultivate this spirit to reach higher and higher forms of spiritual accomplishment. Not belonging to any formal religious organization (e.g., temple cult or sectarian group), these spirit cultivators gather in fluid, informal groups to meditate, seek to be possessed by deities such as the Taiwanese goddess Mazu, the Bodhisattva Guanyin, the Living Buddha Jigong, or

even the Christian God, Virgin Mary, and Mao Zedong. Upon being possessed, the spirit cultivators will start burping, singing, chanting (speaking in stylized “heavenly language”), gesturing (e.g., with Buddhist mudras), and dancing, with various styles depending on the possessing deity and individual practitioner. The higher the level one is at, the wider the range of possessing deities will be. The ultimate goal of cultivating one’s original spirit is to reach personal happiness, to reduce suffering, and to help build a harmonious and peaceful world. Unlike the traditional spirit medium, who typically works for a clientele and charges a fee, these spirit cultivators engage in these spiritual pursuits mostly for their own benefit (even given the professed purpose of benefiting the world at large). Self-consciously syncretic in nature, this innovative spirit-cultivation practice echoes the New Age practice of channeling found in the West and the many *qigong* innovations in mainland China.

### The Liturgical Modality

The characteristic form of the language of the two Testaments [in Christianity] is history . . . ; the characteristic form of the language of the Covenant of Orthodox Unity [of Daoism] is ritual.

—John Lagerwey<sup>10</sup>

Ritual-events are machines that gather individual and social forces into specific configurations, activating distinct ways of perceiving, sensing, and knowing.

—Kenneth Dean<sup>11</sup>

This modality includes practices such as imperial state rituals (e.g., the Grand Sacrifice),<sup>12</sup> the Confucian rites, the Daoist rites of fasting and offering, exorcism (e.g., a Nuo ritual drama), sutra chanting rites, Daoist or Buddhist rituals for the universal salvation of souls, the Buddhist grand water and land dharma assemblies, and funeral rituals. Compared to the personal-cultivational modality, practices in this modality aim at more immediate transformations of reality conducted in complex and highly symbolic forms, and are commissioned by and conducted for collective groups—be they families, clans, villages or neighborhoods, temple communities, or the state. This is the modality of the religious specialists (monks, Daoist priests, fengshui masters, Confucian ritual masters, spirit mediums, exorcist-dancers, etc.) and often involves esoteric knowledge and elaborate ritual procedures.<sup>13</sup>

#### EXEMPLARY FORM: THE DAOIST RITUAL OF OFFERING OR COSMIC RENEWAL (JIAO)

The ritual of offering or cosmic renewal is an exorcistic liturgical service conducted for the living by Daoist priests (see chapter 2). It is commissioned by communities

or households on periodic cycles, or at the completion of a building or renovating a temple. Its purpose is to purify and renew the space or the temple of a community by driving away the demons. A typical *jiao* lasts for three days, but it can also be extended to five days or even longer.

In a *jiao* witnessed by the Daoist scholar Kristofer Schipper in 1969 to consecrate the renovation of the temple of Xuejia town in Taiwan, five lay members of the temple board of directors (who were all local notables and businessmen) were selected by throwing divination blocks (see chapter 2), to represent the community during the ritual service. The five directors were locked inside the temple with the Daoist priests for the entire duration of the liturgical service, which lasted five days and five nights, while outside the temple other priests conducted public rites for the masses. Priests and their acolytes conducted most of the ritual procedures inside the temple, while the directors stood quietly, and knelt when required. At the beginning of the service, the priests and acolytes entered the sacred precincts, conducting sword dances and sprinkling holy water around in the four cardinal directions. The directors were then instructed to kneel, to inhale vapor from a bowl of vinegar into which a piece of hot iron had been dipped, and then to step over the vinegar and a pot of incense, and to march in procession around the ritual space. Suddenly, firecrackers exploded and filled the temple with smoke, and a masked demon surged into the sacred space, while the horns and percussive instruments produced a deafening noise. The demon jumped around frenetically, peering into all corners of the temple, until he saw the incense pot and grabbed it, and seemed about to flee with it. At this point the head Daoist priest appeared, holding his sword and his bowl of holy water. He gulped some water and spat it onto the demon, jabbed at it with his sword, and the two engaged in mock combat, attacking, pursuing, and dodging and stabbing, until, finally, the exhausted demon dropped the incense pot. At that point the priest blocked his way and “beheaded” the demon by removing its mask. The priest then began a triumphal dance, limping around and symbolically “sealing” the sacred space, and then “buried” the demon (i.e., the mask) in a secret rite in the northeast corner of the temple, called the “demon’s gate.”<sup>14</sup>

This was only the beginning act of the *jiao*, which lasted several days. The scholar of Daoist ritual John Lagerwey provides a meticulously timed sequence of ritual actions during the three-day *jiao* he observed November 19–22, 1980 in Taidong, Taiwan.<sup>15</sup> Within each named segment there are numerous complex ritual manipulations by different members of the Daoist troupe hired for the occasion. The basic program is as follows:

#### Preliminary Rituals (the Night before Day One)

1. Firing the oil to drive away dirt (21:05–21:40; 35 minutes)
2. Starting up the drum (23:03–23:14; 11 minutes)

#### Day One

3. Announcement (6:20–7:50; 1 hour and 30 minutes)
4. Invocation (7:52–8:49; 57 minutes)
5. Flag-raising (10:03–10:22; 19 minutes)

6. Noon offering (11:31–12:35; 1 hour and 4 minutes)
7. Division of the lamps (21:27–22:37; 1 hour and 10 minutes)

#### Day Two

8. Land of the way (6:28–8:18; 1 hour and 50 minutes)
9. Noon offering (11:36–12:53; 1 hour and 17 minutes)
10. Floating the water lamps (16:00–16:30; 30 minutes)
11. Invocation of the masters and saints (16:55–17:40; 45 minutes)
12. Sealing the altar (20:32–21:28; 56 minutes)
13. Nocturnal invocation (22:33–22:52; 19 minutes)

#### Day Three

14. Renewed invocation (6:43–7:52; 1 hour and 9 minutes)
15. Scripture recitation (8:30–8:50; 20 minutes)
16. Presentation of the memorial (9:30–10:26; 54 minutes)
17. Noon offering (11:00–11:30; 30 minutes)
18. Orthodox offering (16:30–17:44; 1 hour and 14 minutes)
19. Universal salvation (18:50–21:00; 2 hours and 10 minutes)

Each segment of the *jiao* consists of complex liturgical manipulations involving hand gestures, bodily moves (including dances), texts, talismans, swords, seals, scrolls, scriptures, costumes, and even tables and chairs. And the liturgical complexity of this modality often requires multiple ritualists for the job. For example, a large ritual occasion such as a *jiao* often requires more than a dozen ritualists, some in charge of the core liturgical work while others serve as ritual musicians.

There may be some occasions when a very large ritual event production would require the simultaneous service of dozens and sometimes even over a hundred Daoist priests. In Hong Kong, the Daoist community has had a long tradition of conducting large-scale “ritual congregations” or “dharma assemblies” to petition for blessings and to expel evil influences. For example, in 1997 the Hong Kong Daoist Association organized a “Ritual Congregation to Celebrate the Return of Hong Kong’s Sovereignty to China and to Petition for Blessings.” The service lasted for seven days and seven nights, and the Three Pure rites, the core of the entire service, were simultaneously recited by 250 Daoists, setting a record for the territory in terms of the scale of the event production. In the spring of 2003, during the height of the SARS epidemic in Hong Kong, the Daoist Association combined forces with sixteen different Daoist temples and altars to stage a “calamity-dispelling, misfortune-absolving, and blessing-petitioning ritual congregation” on behalf of the entire Hong Kong population. Again the service lasted seven days and seven nights, and 80,000 talismans to dispel plagues and ensure safety were distributed to people. The venue of this large service was on a soccer field in front of the famous Che Kung Temple in Shatin, the New Territories. One prominent Daoist temple was in charge of the main altar on each of the seven days, and an enormous number of scriptures were recited and chanted.<sup>16</sup>

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 BOX 4.1 The 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics as Ritual Event
 

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Most premodern states had a very rich ceremonial system. The kings and queens in the West had their colorful court rituals (often fused with religious rituals; e.g., coronation, royal marriages and funerals), and the emperors in dynastic China also had an elaborate system of rites based on the long-standing Confucian understanding of the importance of a set of correct, patterned behavior on certain occasions. During late imperial times these imperial rituals were codified into five different categories: auspicious (e.g., state sacrifices); felicitous (e.g., marriages, festivals); martial (e.g., celebrating military victory); hosting (e.g., hosting foreign visitors); and inauspicious (e.g., funerals, disasters).

The emergence of the modern state saw the parallel processes of the disappearance of many premodern rituals and the appearance of new ones. There is a tendency toward the spectacularization of public rituals, the exemplary cases being Soviet processions and Nazi rallies. The modern Olympic Games have become the ultimate occasion for state ritual manipulations. Having wished to host the Olympics for decades, China finally was awarded host country status for the 2008 Summer Olympics. The symbolic meaning of this status is tremendous: it proves that China has finally come out of the shadow of its Maoist past and been fully recognized by the global community.

But the massive scale and heavy symbolic weight of the Olympics presented great challenges to the Chinese state. Because of its multifaceted nature, the Olympics is a state-orchestrated ritual event that incorporates elements from four out of the five old imperial rites: auspicious, felicitous, martial, and hosting. The Chinese state was anxious to make sure that everything went according to plan, the same way that imperial ritualists were anxious to ensure properly patterned ritual behavior on ritual occasions. But the international nature of the Olympics greatly complicated the process. Different actors with their own agendas have made the symbolically rich Olympic rituals subject to different interpretations and contestations. When Tibetan independence activists disrupted the international Olympic torch relay in several countries, many Chinese were angered and feared that the disruption would have inauspicious consequences for the Olympic Games. But the opening ceremonies were the grandest and most spectacular in Olympic history, and the games were a success—not to a small measure thanks to the Chinese government’s understanding and orchestration of the games as a grand ritual.

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### **The Immediate-Practical Modality**

Practices in this modality also aim at immediate results but compared to those in the liturgical modality they are more direct and involve shorter and simpler procedures. There is minimal ritual elaboration. Examples include divination (oracle rod, moon-shaped divination blocks, divination sticks, coins, etc.), getting divine medicine from a deity, using talismans (e.g., ingestion of talismanic water), consulting a spirit

medium, calling back a stray soul, begging for rain, ritual cursing, or simply offering incense. Because of its simplicity and low cost, this modality is the most frequently used by the common people (peasants, petty urbanites). The key concepts in this modality are efficacy (or miraculous power) and “to beseech for help.”

EXEMPLARY FORM: “BEATING THE MEAN PERSON”: RITUAL OF CURSING AND SPELLBINDING ONE’S ENEMY<sup>17</sup>

“Beating the mean person” is a form of sorcery common among the Cantonese and Tewchownese.<sup>18</sup> In its simplest form, a person who thinks that someone is bothering or hurting him or her can make a small cutout paper figure with the alleged enemy’s name written on it (the enemy is the “mean person”), go out to the sidewalk after dark, invoke the power of a deity (with incense and offerings), and then beat savagely on the paper figure using a worn shoe or sandal while loudly cursing the enemy (not unlike practices involving voodoo dolls). The hope is that the enemy will be subdued and will no longer harm the person in question. A typical curse would go like this (loosely translated from the original Cantonese with an attempt to rhyme as in the original):

Beat your bloody head, so that you will never get ahead;  
 Beat your bloody mouth, so that your breath can’t come out;  
 Beat your bloody hand, so that you will always have a lousy hand [at gambling];  
 Beat your bloody feet, so that your shoes will never fit;  
 Beat your bloody lungs, so that you will be stung and hung; . . .



FIGURE 4.2 Hiring an old woman to “beat the mean person” under the Gooseneck Bridge, Hong Kong. (Xie Guanghui/CTPphoto/FOTOE)

Though apparently quite common in the past and done by anyone with a grudge (because it is such a simple practice), nowadays in urban Hong Kong people who want to beat the mean person would hire a “specialist” (usually an old lady) to do it. The most famous place for beating the mean person is at the “Goose Neck Bridge” (the Gan Bridge in Cantonese), a dark place underneath the highway overpass between Causeway Bay and Wanchai. One can request and pay for the beating of a mean person any time of the year, even though in the spring, on the day of the “awakening of the insects” (March 6 or 7 each year), the need for a generalized anti-mean-people prophylactic treatment is the greatest and so is the effectiveness of such a treatment (similar to getting an immunization shot). On this day the site overflows with people requesting such sessions, and more “specialists” show up to meet the high demand. The cost of a “quick and dirty” session is around 50 Hong Kong dollars on an ordinary day, but more on the “Awakening of the Insects” Day.<sup>19</sup>

#### EXEMPLARY FORM: CONSULTING A DIVINATION ROLLER

The Chinese have developed divination techniques since antiquity. The oracle bones from more than 3,000 years ago are the best known (see chapter 9). The other well-known divination method is drawing divination lots, in which a worshipper with a particular problem goes to a temple, burns incense in front of the deity, and then shakes a box of divination sticks until one “jumps” out. He or she then consults the corresponding divination poem or message for the divine message and inspiration (see chapter 2). Here I will describe another divination method, which is widespread in north China.

The method involves the use of an oracle roller. And our example comes from the Black Dragon King Temple in northern Shaanxi province, where I conducted fieldwork in the 1990s. The roller is a short, fat length of wood with eight segments along its sides (so the two ends are octagon-shaped). It is about ten inches long, and a little thicker in the middle than at the ends. Each segment has a different four-character message inscribed in the wood. The consultee with a particular problem holds this roller in both palms and rolls it horizontally in a wooden tray about twelve inches wide and twenty-two inches long. When the roller stops, the characters on the top segment are the message Black Dragon King wants to communicate to the consultee. The eight four-character messages are as follows:

- Extremely auspicious
- Not so good
- Not clear how you would thank me for the help
- Go home soon if traveling
- Not in accordance with god’s ways
- Pray with a sincere heart

- Bring the medicine with magical water
- Will get well after taking the medicine

The simplest application of this oracle is to ask a yes or no question. For example: “My brother and I are planning to take a trip to Inner Mongolia to sell some clothes. Your Highness the Dragon King, do you think we will make some good money? If yes, give us “extremely auspicious”; if no, give us “not so good.” Then the consultee rolls the roller. If the god’s answer is “Not sure how you would thank me for the help,” the consultee either puts more money in the donation box or makes a vow, promising that he will bring a certain amount of incense money if he makes money on the trip with the Dragon King’s blessing. Sometimes the consultee promises 10% of his profit or even higher. It is like entering into a partnership with the Dragon King. If the answer is “Not in accordance with god’s ways,” the consultee needs to reflect on whether his business plan is going to break the law or offend the god. Other yes or no questions can be: “Will I be married soon?”; “Will Grandma get better or not?”; “Will I get a promotion?”; and so forth.

The reference to medicine and magical water on the oracle roller indicates that this roller is the medicine oracle, most often used when consultees want to request the god’s divine intervention in treating their own or their family members’ illnesses. The Dragon King has another roller that is used only when, on increasingly rare occasions, there are requests for rain. It is called the rain oracle. On it the two medicine-related messages on the medicine roller are replaced by two rain-related messages: “will rain today” and “will rain within three days.”



FIGURE 4.3 *Worshippers burning incense Baxian Temple, Xi'an. (Photo David Palmer)*

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 BOX 4.2 Burning Incense
 

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The first thing that a Chinese person does when approaching a deity or spirit is to burn sticks of incense. Hawkers and shops sell incense and spirit money in front of every temple, and worshipers don't buy incense by the stick but rather by the bundle (though sometimes there are giant, person-tall incense sticks that one can buy by the stick). Normally one needs to put only three sticks of incense in the incense pot in front of a deity (though there are also those who light up the whole bundle at the same time), so many worshippers would leave the rest of the incense with the temple keeper so that he can keep the incense burning even when there are no worshippers. Other times the worshipper does need so many sticks of incense because there are often many deities enshrined in each temple and each should be offered incense. Most worshippers burn incense the way they do out of custom and without reflection, and they might not be able to tell an outsider what incense burning means exactly. But an investigator could venture some interpretations from its usage.

Burning incense is a sign of respect for the deity, and the fragrance of the incense is supposed to please the deity (the same Chinese word means both incense and fragrance). Typically the worshipper raises the incense sticks with both hands toward the deity statue in a gesture of respect before planting them into the incense pot; many murmur prayers or words of gratitude while holding the incense. Many worshippers bring offerings of fruits, meat, and other items to arrange on tables, and sometimes burning incense sticks are stuck onto these offerings as if the fragrance of the incense also transports the spiritual essence of the offerings up to the deities. Incense is also offered to ancestors and ghosts.

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### The Relational Modality

Chinese society is a hotbed of associational assemblages.

—Kenneth Dean<sup>20</sup>

This modality emphasizes the relationship between humans and deities (or ancestors) as well as relationships among worshippers. Examples are building temples, making offerings (i.e., feeding ancestors, deities, and ghosts), taking vows, spreading miracle stories (i.e., testifying to the deities' efficacy), celebrating deities' birthdays at temple festivals, going on pilgrimage, imperial mountain journeys, establishing religious communities, and forming affiliations between temples and cult communities. This modality also emphasizes sociality, the bringing together of people through ritual events and festivals. Obviously the other modalities all exhibit relational and sociality aspects, but the making and maintaining of relations and the production and consumption of sociality seem to be at the foundation of those practices that I have grouped under this modality. The key concepts in this modality are "social comings and goings" and social relations, or connectedness.<sup>21</sup>

EXEMPLARY FORM: THE “DIVISION OF INCENSE” IDIOM  
AND GOING ON PILGRIMAGE TO “ANCESTRAL TEMPLES”

In southeastern coastal China and Taiwan, one of the most common ways of establishing a new temple is to go to an already established temple and to “divide” the incense and efficacy of the enshrined deity. This involves making a new statue of the deity, infusing this new statue with the incense fragrance of the older one, scooping up some incense ashes from the older temple’s incense burner, lighting a lamp using the older temple’s oil lamp fire, and bringing all these back to the new temple building to enshrine the new statue. From this moment on, the new temple and its enshrined statue will have an affiliation with the older temple that puts the new temple in a subordinate position. Even though the deity enshrined in the two temples is the same deity, each has its own power supported by a body of miracle lore testifying to its efficacy. And each statue is named after the place in which the temple is situated—for example, Mazu of Dajia, Mazu of Lugang.

In order to sustain and renew the power of the new statue, the new statue has to visit the “parent” temple periodically to recharge its power, thus necessitating periodic pilgrimage of members of the newer temple community to the older temple. These pilgrimages are called incense-presenting trips. Similarly, members of the older temple community organize periodic pilgrimages to *their* “parent” temple to recharge the power of *their* deity statue. Over time such relations of affiliation extended both vertically and horizontally (in a fashion resembling a pyramid) and can form an intricate and dense network of dozens if not hundreds of “higher” and “lower” temples and “brotherly” (or “mother-daughter”) temples. Important temples with high claims of efficacy and a large number of affiliate temples would assert regional supremacy and become regional centres of pilgrimage, but the most important pilgrimage is always the one that centres on the so-called “ancestral temple,” where all the other temples and their statues have been derived through varying degrees of direct connection.

The Mazu (Heavenly Empress; also known as Tianhou) temple pilgrimage network in Taiwan is the most famous and best studied among the incense-division temple networks.<sup>22</sup> The ancestral temple for the Mazu cult is on Meizhou Island in Fujian because that was where the apotheosized girl Lin Moniang first manifested her power and was worshipped. But because of Taiwan’s geographical status as an island far from the Fujian coast, Taiwan’s cultural and political separation from the mainland during the Japanese colonial period and the postcolonial period from the 1940s until now, and many other factors, the first Mazu temple in Taiwan assumed a quasi-ancestral temple status over the years. Even though there have been disputes between different temples over which is the first Mazu temple in Taiwan, for a long time it was the Chaotiangong in Beigang to which Mazu worshippers from all over the island converged annually to pay respect and to recharge their own Mazu statues’ power. But what is interesting about these pilgrimage trips in terms of the relational modality of doing religion is that these pilgrims not only converge on Chaotiangong, but visit many other temples along

the way, sometimes up to dozens, and not all of them Mazu temples, thus establishing relationships with members of various communities.

#### EXEMPLARY FORM: NEW MORALITY-BOOK COMMUNITIES

Reform-era China has witnessed the revitalization of Buddhist monastic life centered around the rebuilding of monasteries and temples, the growth of the number of monks, and the increased liveliness of rituals.<sup>23</sup> The printing and free distribution of morality books have also come back. These are Buddhist-themed booklets piled up at the entrances of monasteries for anyone to pick up for free. Many lay Buddhists sponsor the printing and distribution of these morality books as a means to accumulate karmic merit, and this practice has been around for more than a thousand years. There is, however, a new development in the courtyards of some of these monasteries. Some lay Buddhists come to the monasteries to preach their own understandings of the sutras in the courtyards and distribute their own morality books, which are sometimes books they have written. Other visitors gather around them to seek wisdom or just to see what they have to say. The monastic clerics tolerate them at best and try to keep them far away from the main halls where worshippers attend the dharma rituals, but some of these lay preachers are quite charismatic and develop followings of their own. Many admirers gather around these lay preachers on a regular basis in monastery courtyards, but they also go to the home of the lay preachers to discuss sutra teachings and share their insights with one another, forming a loosely connected but nevertheless real community brought together by a common religious pursuit. It is interesting to note that with this example, we witness the coming together of three modalities of doing religion: the discursive/scriptural modality (i.e., the writing of morality books), the self-cultivational modality (i.e., accumulating merit through printing and distributing morality books and developing one's "Buddhahood"), and the relational modality (i.e., new communities developed around lay Buddhist preachers).

### Conclusion

Identifying the different modalities of doing religion can serve as a first step in examining Chinese religious practices in a new light. Scholars of Chinese religion have long followed the Three Teachings model of identifying and understanding Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. But these "religions" are half reality and half reification. The neat and tidy categories quickly break down and become meaningless when we look at people's practices on the ground, where they don't care which deity belongs to which religion or which religious tradition inspired which morality book. What happens on the ground "religiously" is very much a congruence of local customs, historical accidents, social environment, personal temperaments, and configurations of modalities of doing religion.

## Notes

1. Daniel L. Overmyer's *Precious Volumes: An Introduction to Chinese Sectarian Scriptures from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999) presents extensive examples of the discursive/scriptural modality of doing religion among sectarians in late imperial China. Terry F. Kleeman's *A God's Own Tale: The Book of Transformations of Wenchang, the Divine Lord of Zitong* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) is a study and annotated translation of a Daoist morality book that narrates the legends of the deity Wenchang, patron saint of the literati during the late imperial times. The morality book was produced through the method of spirit writing, where supposedly the deity himself possessed the stylus that wrote the stories.
2. Translation by David Jordan, reproduced with permission from <http://anthro.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan/scriptorium/tayshanq/tayshanq00.html>, accessed December 22, 2008.
3. See Kristofer Schipper's classic study *The Taoist Body*, trans. Karen C. Duval (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
4. See Cynthia J. Brokaw's *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991) on the invention and use of such a method in Song dynasty China.
5. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3: The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1988).
6. Overmyer, *Precious Volumes*, passim.
7. Consult David A. Palmer's *Qigong Fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) for a sociological analysis of this phenomenal movement.
8. See Kristofer Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, on the cosmological justifications behind Daoist personal cultivation. Practicing *qigong* is mostly a personal-cultivational practice, though the large-scale *qigong* movement in China in the 1980s and 1990s grew out of a particular political and institutional environment.
9. This section is based on Alison R. Marshall, "Moving the Spirit on Taiwan: New Age Lingji Performance," in *Journal of Chinese Religions* 31 (2003): 81–99.
10. For a detailed historical and symbolic study of Daoist liturgical performance, consult John Lagerwey's *Taoist Ritual in Chinese Society and History* (New York: Macmillan; 1987). More on the same theme by Catherine Bell, "Ritualization of Texts and Textualization of Rituals in the Codification of Taoist Liturgy," in *History of Religions* 27 (1988): 366–392.
11. Kenneth Dean, *Lord of the Three in One: The Spread of a Cult in Southeast China* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 9.
12. Angela Zito, *Of Body and Brush: Grand Sacrifice as Text/Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), shows the relationship between the performance of imperial court rituals and their textualization by court ritualists, thus demonstrating the close relationship between the discursive and liturgical modalities.
13. Lagerwey, *Taoist Ritual*, passim.
14. Kristofer Schipper, "Comment on crée un lieu saint local," in Schipper, *La religion de la Chine: la tradition vivante* (Paris: Fayard, 2008), 305–327.
15. Lagerwey, *Taoist Ritual*, passim.

16. All information in this paragraph derived from Yau Chi On, “Xianggang daojiao songwen qifu fahui ji qi biwen jingwen” [The Hong Kong Daoist Ritual of Prayer to Expel Epidemics and Its Exorcistic Scriptures], in *Huanan yanjiu ziliao zhongxin tongxun* [Bulletin of the South China Research Centre] no. 32 (2003).

17. For more detailed studies on the “beating the mean person” ritual, consult Chiao Chien’s “‘Beating the Petty Person’: A Ritual of the Hong Kong Chinese,” *Special Issue on Anthropological Studies of China, New Asia Academic Bulletin* 6 (1986): 211–218 and a research report on the website <http://www.cciv.cityu.edu.hk/website-2006-2007-a/?redirect=/~cciv/product/fest/gano/index.php> (Chinese Civilization Centre, City University of Hong Kong; in Chinese), accessed on 25 April, 2011.

18. The information in this section is based on various websites on the practice of beating the mean person, especially one provided by the Chinese Civilization Centre at the City University of Hong Kong, which includes an audio segment of a professional old lady’s beating the mean person curse (see note 17 for web link).

19. See the online article in note 17 for details of the session.

20. Kenneth Dean, *Lord of the Three in One*, 34.

21. Adam Yuet Chau’s *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006) is particularly useful in explaining the importance of the immediate-practical and relational modalities of doing religion, which are prominent in most agrarian deity cults.

22. Steven Sangren, *Chinese Sociologics: An Anthropological Account of the Role of Alienation in Social Reproduction*, London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology, Volume 72 (London: Athlone Press, 2000).

23. Here I am relying on the work by the anthropologist Gareth Fisher, “Morality Books and the Re-Growth of Lay Buddhism in China,” in Adam Yuet Chau, ed., *Religion in Contemporary China: Revitalization and Innovation* (London: Routledge, 2011). Fisher conducted fieldwork in a number of major monasteries in north China in the early 2000s.