

# 7

## Popular Religion

### In this chapter

This chapter surveys the rich plethora of beliefs and practices that are subsumed within the broad category of Chinese popular religion. While sometimes denigrated by proponents of the great religious traditions such as Confucianism and Christianity, or summarily dismissed by disbelieving secularists as old-fashioned superstitions, these often local manifestations of popular piety have over the centuries constituted a vibrant, widely diffused, and immensely significant part of Chinese religious life.

### Main Topics

- General contours and basic character of popular religion.
- Prevalence of syncretic tendencies.
- Teachings and movements that highlight the unity of the three teachings.
- The supernatural realm and the various beings that populate it.
- Worship of local gods.
- Organization of the celestial pantheon.
- Worship of Guandi and Mazu.
- Utilitarian character of popular religion.
- Proliferation of messianic movements, heterodox sects, and secret societies.



## Contours and Character of Popular Religion

**W**e already noted some of the problems linked with attempts to narrowly define Chinese traditions such as Confucianism and Daoism, or to clearly delineate their boundaries. We also observed the Chinese tendency to often blur the lines of demarcation that separate the three teachings, which for most of Chinese history were each fairly open to interreligious interaction and syncretic adaptation. Throughout Chinese religious history there has also been a pervasive predisposition to construct multifaceted and open-ended religious identities, which allow individuals and communities to engage in a range of spiritual practices or worship deities linked with more than one religion. Such flexible attitudes towards religious categorization, affiliation, and identity formation contrast with the exclusivist identification with single religion—typically narrowly defined in terms of particular scripture(s), creeds, and institutions—that is characteristic of monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Within the broad context of Chinese religious culture, these kinds of ecumenical and syncretic predispositions are further brought into focus when we look at the constellations of beliefs and practices that are grouped together under the category of popular religion. The category itself is largely a scholarly creation, introduced heuristically as a way of classifying a broad range of prevalent ideas, beliefs, and practices that are not officially part of any of the orthodox traditions, primarily represented by the three teachings (which in more recent eras can be further expanded to include Christianity and Islam). Because of its vagueness and broadness, the utility of popular religion as a distinct category is sometimes questioned or disputed by some scholars. Nonetheless, it is an important and useful category, as the beliefs and practices subsumed into it were/are widely diffused among the Chinese people and must be taken into account in order to arrive at a balanced and comprehensive understanding of Chinese religious and social life, in all its complexity and diversity. Accordingly, pre-modern Chinese religion is increasingly discussed in terms of four main traditions, namely popular religion and the three institutionalized religions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism.

Popular religion is notoriously difficult to pigeonhole or circumscribe, as it evades scholarly efforts to define it with great precision and certitude. To a large extent, that is due to its diffused character and the lack of fixed doctrinal and institutional cores. Unlike the large institutionalized religions, traditionally popular religion did not have any canon, although there are certain “scriptures” that can be ascribed to the category of popular religion. It also did not have an integrated collection of beliefs or a coherent system of tenets, nor a church that safeguards doctrinal orthodoxy. There is no way one could formally join or become an adherent of popular religion, so naturally the notion of conformity to dogma and the threat of excommunication do not play any part in it.

Being largely grounded in local religious and social practice, popular religion does not have ecclesiastical hierarchies or professional clergy, even though they are certain types of ritual specialists who officiate at particular rites or observances. That makes popular religious beliefs and practices highly adaptable and responsive to local conditions, which accounts for the fact that there are many modulations and inconsistencies in terms of how they are applied on the ground. Accordingly, popular religion is characterized by abundant variety and preponderance of local or regional variations. There is thus no single model that can be used to understand the whole range of popular Chinese conceptions and engagements with the supernatural realm and the divine beings that populate it. As an integral part of Chinese culture, popular religion provides a multifaceted system of models and symbolic resources that individuals or groups can use for a variety of purposes and situation, as they navigate the ebbs and flows of their lives. On the other hand, notwithstanding its grounding in the family and the local community, popular religion also encompassed key values and outlooks that are characteristic of Chinese civilization in general.

The beliefs and practices included within the category of popular religion are frequently interpreted primarily in terms of the roles they play in ordering and animating the religious and social lives of the common people. However, it is historically inaccurate to deny or gloss over the elites' involvement in popular religion, as has been done by scholars who emphasize rigid (and often imaginary) lines of demarcation between the supposedly rational worldviews and sensible ritual observances of the literati on one side, and the vile superstitions of the unenlightened masses on another (for an example, see Chan 1953). Most of the sources of information about popular religion during the pre-modern period were written by literati, so they reflect elite concerns and perspectives. While some members of the literati elites criticized aspects of popular beliefs and practices—and at times campaigned to change or abolish them—throughout Chinese history people from all backgrounds and walks of life, from peasants to emperors, participated in the rituals and observances of popular religion.

The broad range of understandings and attitudes towards popular beliefs and practices reflect different variables, including class, status, education, and gender; there is also always room for expressions of individual idiosyncrasies and predilections. The constellations of symbols, myths, and rituals included into popular religion are malleable to varied interpretations and modifications, even as they are all parts of a common religious culture. Therefore, popular religion constitutes a rich substratum of religiosity that is shared by most Chinese people and reflects prevalent norms, values, and worldviews. Throughout history two of its key functions have been preservation of normative values and validation of a hegemonic sociopolitical order. However, as we will see, at the times popular religion also performed destabilizing roles and was used by various historical actors to challenge the status quo. In light of that and given China's established political culture, it should not come as a great surprise to learn that in traditional China some of the gods of popular religion were granted ritual titles and were incor-

porated into the official pantheon, or that the state was frequently involved in issues related to popular cultic worship.

## Syncretism

One of the enduring features of popular religion is its tendency towards syncretism. Syncretism refers to processes of borrowing, combining, or adapting elements derived from diverse sources. The notion of syncretism often carries negative connotations, especially when the study of religion is undertaken on the basis of limited Western perspectives. In such usage, the label of syncretism denotes prejudiced characterization of the religion of some (usually non-Westerner and traditional) society or group as a befuddling and superficial *mélange* of disparate elements that lack theological integrity. That is obviously not the way the concept of syncretism is used here. Overall, its usage is less problematic when applied to the Chinese context, given the predominant tendency to look at religions as not being mutually exclusive or antithetical. Syncretism is a basic component of interreligious interaction and to some degree it is found in all religions, notwithstanding the ahistorical claims of individual religious traditions that they are pure and unique, representing god-given dispensations free from external accretions or influences.

Within the Chinese framework, elements of syncretism are evident in each of the three teachings, especially in their popular manifestations. The tendency towards syncretism increases as the focus of attention moves towards the margins of each tradition, away from the orthodox formulations of the priestly and intellectual elites. Nonetheless, the Chinese openness or penchant for syncretic blending of diverse beliefs and practices is most readily discernable in popular religion. While the syncretism of popular religion has elicited recurring criticisms, voiced by native intellectuals and foreign missionaries and scholars alike, a more positive approach might be to look at it as a mark of religious creativity and cultural open-mindedness, influenced by healthy aversion to dogmatism and rejection of exclusivism. While throughout Chinese history proponents of syncretism often functioned as agents of religious tolerance, it should also be noted that at times some of them adopted rigid attitudes and sectarian agendas.

Most of the elements that were adapted and absorbed into popular religion can be traced to one of the three teachings. For instance, much of popular morality reflects the pervasive influence of Confucian ethical norms and principles. That includes the virtue of filial piety, as well as a general moral ethos that promotes good traits such as honesty and fairness. Copious elements of Buddhist influence are observable in popular beliefs about hells and the afterlife (which are modulated by the insertion of Daoist elements), as well as in prevalent ideas about merit and karmic recompense. That goes together with the inclusion of Buddhist deities as objects of worship in popular religion. It is not uncommon for popular Chinese temples to have special areas set aside for Buddhist deities—which typically include popular Buddhas, bodhisattvas

such as Guanyin, and sages such as Bodhidharma—with their shrines arranged in a manner similar to what one finds in Buddhist monasteries or temples.

The influences or correlations between Daoism and popular religion are even more extensive than those of Buddhism and Confucianism. They cover most aspects of popular religion, from the arrangement of the pantheon to the structure of key rites and other prevalent modes of worship. Even at the institutional level, Daoist priests are often employed to officiate at rites performed at popular temples, especially in Taiwan and other parts of South China. That makes the lines of demarcation between popular religion and Daoism especially blurred. Consequently, at times the two are lumped together into a single category, as is evident in the official demographic data concerning religious affiliation compiled in contemporary Taiwan and Singapore.

Often elements of each of the three teachings are seamlessly interwoven into specific paradigms of popular belief or practice. Cases in point are the notions about conventional morality and supernatural retribution integrated into the various ledgers of merit and demerit that proliferated in late imperial China (see box quote). The ledgers were meant to provide concrete guidance on how to lead virtuous life and accumulate merit, which led to tangible rewards in this or future lives. They provided templates for keeping score of one's virtuous and evil deeds, with the final balance pointing to the nature of karmic recompense or supernatural retribution that awaited the individual. The eclectic mixing of disparate elements, evident in the individual articles of merit and demerit included in the ledgers, illustrates how values and ideas derived from Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist sources were integrated together into popular conceptions of morality.

### **Yuan Huang's (1533–1606) articles of merit and demerit**

Count as hundred merits: (1) rescuing a person from death; (2) preserving a woman's chastity; and (3) preventing someone from drowning a child or having an abortion.

Count as fifty merits: (1) arranging for the adoption of a heir; (2) raising an orphan; (3) burying someone who has no one to take care of his or her remains; (4) and preventing a person from becoming a vagabond.

Count as ten demerits: (1) ostracizing a virtuous person; (2) recommending a bad person for employment; (3) having contact with a woman who has lost her chastity; (4) keeping a deadly weapon.

Excerpts adapted from Cynthia Brokaw's translation, in Lopez 1996: 432, 434

The syncretic tendencies of popular religion are on visual display when one enters local Chinese temples, such as [Thian Hock Keng Temple](#) in Singapore or Tin Hau Temple in Hong Kong, which, at some level, can be described as spiritual supermarkets of sorts. In places such as these, besides worshipping or praying to popular deities such as Mazu (see below), the devotees also have the option of doing the same in front of the statues of Buddhist deities such as Guanyin, Daoist immortals such as Lü Dongbin, or even the great sage Confucius himself.

## Unity of the Three Teachings

Deliberate or conscious forms of syncretism, observable at different junctures in Chinese religious history, are especially well represented in the various attempts to highlight the unity or convergence of the three teachings. Within such interpretative schemes, the three main religious systems of China are deemed to be essentially alike, as conveyed by the popular notion of “unity of the three teachings” (*sanjiao heyi*) and its variations. The three teachings simply represent different modalities of an essential truth or reality, and in the final analysis they are subsumed into a larger organic unity. Sometimes these perspectives are elaborated from within the outlook of one of the three great teachings, and in such cases the clerics or writers in question tend to prioritize their own religion. A good example of that is the inclusion of Confucianism and Daoism in some of the Buddhist doctrinal taxonomies devised during the Tang era, in which they were allocated to the lowest categories, below the most basic Buddhist doctrines.

At times these kinds of syncretic themes and ideals were given concrete doctrinal and institutional forms, as evident in the rise of religions movements based on the idea of the harmony and unity of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. A good example of that from the late imperial period—that continues into the present time—is the Three-in-one Teaching (Sanyi jiao). Initiated by Lin Zhaoen (1517–1598) in the sixteenth century, the Three-in-one Teaching became a distinct sectarian movement that claimed to unite the three teachings, albeit in a somewhat selective manner. Lin Zhaoen was born in a gentry family and received classical education, but decided not to pursue official career and instead dedicate himself to a quest for spiritual enlightenment. Initially he sought to revive and popularize Confucianism, which he felt has been reduced to a sterile intellectual discipline geared towards success in the official examinations. He promoted Confucian teachings that centered on the pursuit of sagehood, expressing them in a distinctly religious idiom and selectively combining them with elements derived from other traditions, namely Daoist internal alchemy and Buddhist teachings about mental cultivation, especially those of the Chan school. In a way, he amalgamated the theoretical scaffolding of Confucianism with the practical techniques of Buddhism and Daoism.

In their early form, the Three-in-one teachings emphasized the process of spiritual cultivation and had a distinctly contemplative orientation, although over time in its sectarian expressions

the movement developed a range of popular cultic practices that operated at the level of local communities. As a sectarian movement, it developed a distinct organization, with its own sacred texts, initiations, moral precepts, and liturgies. While in the eighteenth century the Three-in-one Teaching was proclaimed heresy and was proscribed by the Qing government, it managed to survive and continues to flourish to this day, especially in Southeast China and among the Chinese diasporas in Southeast Asia. Over time, Lin Zhaoen became apotheosized and he is still widely worshipped by the followers of the sect he initiated.

### **Lin Zhaoen on the unity of the three teachings and the brotherhood of their followers**

[Zhang Zai's] "Western Inscription" states: "All people are my bothers and sisters." Therefore, if one takes the actual birth parents as one's parents, then those born of the same parents are one's brothers. If one takes heaven and earth as one's parents, then all those born of heaven and earth are also one's brothers. As for Buddhists and Daoists, can any of them live outside of heaven and earth? If they cannot live outside of heaven and earth, what are they if not people born of the womb of the same mother, what are they if not our brothers.

Translation adapted from Berling 1980: 217.

Other modern examples of popular religious movements or sects with manifest syncretic tendencies include Falun gong (Practice of the Dharma Wheel) and [Yiguan dao](#) (The Way of Unity, often transcribed as I-kuan tao). Falun gong gained notoriety after the Chinese government proscribed it in 1999, which was followed by ongoing persecution of its followers that continues to this day (see chapter 10). Its program of spiritual cultivation revolves around *qigong* exercises, although its texts also deal with ethical issues and other religious topics. While the teachings of Yiguan dao include a myth of origin that link it with mythical figures such as the Yellow Emperor and ancient sages such as Confucius and the Buddha, in its modern configuration the growth of this movement is essentially a twentieth century religious phenomenon. After the Communist takeover in 1949 the main locus of its activity moved to Taiwan, where recent surveys put the number of Yiguan dao followers to close to a million. There are also branch centers in other parts of the world, including the United States. The practices of Yiguan dao devotees include observance of moral precepts, largely derived from Confucianism, participation in initiation ceremonies, performance of daily liturgies, practice of vegetarianism, and chanting of scriptures.

## Ancestors and Ghosts

Much of popular religious practice in China revolves around the supplication and worship of various divine or supernatural beings. From early on, the Chinese have lived in a complex world populated by all sort of invisible and mysterious beings, some of them perceived as being kind and helpful, but others coming across as demonic and dangerous. Scholars often classify the numerous divinities and uncanny creatures that populate the spiritual realm of popular religion into three broad categories: gods (*shen*), ancestors (*zu*), and ghosts (*gui*). While the beings included into these categories possess different powers and attributes that separate them from ordinary people, they are all subject to uniform cosmic processes and partake of the same underlying reality.

Ontologically speaking, all beings, commonplace and supernatural, share the same substance. In the final analysis, they are different modulations of *qi*, the basic stuff or element out of which all beings and things are made. The concept of *qi* is intricate and multifaceted, encompassing mind and matter, spirit and energy. Accordingly, the supernatural and mundane worlds, as well as the realms of the dead and the living, are not radically disjoined. The living and the dead are believed to be connected and to influence each other, and the same principle applies to the human relationship with the gods.

Beliefs about the existence of supernatural or mysterious beings are based on the notion that, at some level, the soul or spirit of a person can survive the moment of physical death. Such conception of the soul and the afterlife is grounded in ancient cosmological schemes central to Chinese thought, which postulate fundamental order and unity in the universe. Customarily, Chinese believe in the existence of two kinds of soul: earthly soul (*po*), linked with the *yin* element, and heavenly soul (*hun*), linked with the *yang* element. Upon death the earthly soul—associated with darkness, sensuality, and corporality—moves downward towards the earth and can be transformed into a ghost. On the other hand, the heavenly soul—associated with brightness, intelligence, and spirituality—travels upwards and can be reborn as a god or an ancestor. Despite their apparent differences, there are therefore striking similarities between the ancestors and the gods, even though the gods are believed to be in possession of greater numinous power, and their influence purportedly extends beyond the confines of individual families. It is also possible for an ancestor to transform himself or herself into a god (but also into a demon). Accordingly, the two classes of supernatural beings, gods and ancestors, are usually worshiped in a similar manner.

At their core, the practices of popular religion center on the family (here understood in a broader sense than the nuclear family) and the local community. The veneration of ancestors, sometimes dubbed the “cult of the dead,” reflects the pervasive influence of the kinship system on Chinese social and religious life. It has very long history, going back all the way to the dawn of Chinese civilization (see chapter 1). Ancestor worship is simply a ritualized extension

of the virtue of filial piety that goes beyond one's immediate parents. By such ritual means, the living are able to convey their feelings of respect, as well as establish links and channels of communication with deceased members of the ancestral lineage, as they solicit their blessings or approval, and try to avoid their wrath or censure.

The spirits of the ancestors are traditionally symbolized and commemorated by means of ancestral tablets, on which their names are inscribed. Within individual homes the ancestral tablets are placed at special altars or shrines. In cases of wealthier households, there might be separate ancestral halls, or even whole ancestral temples (see figure 7.1). Often ancestral tablets are also placed at a local temple, which might be a Buddhist or a Daoist establishment. Within the altar area the tablets are frequently accompanied with statues or paintings of popular deities such as Guandi, Mazu, or Guanyin. Offering incense and paying respects at the ancestral shrine are integral parts of the domestic routine of many Chinese households. On special occasions there are more elaborate rites and sacrifices, which usually involve the offering of food and incense.



*Figure 7.1.* Entrance to the ancestral temple of the Chen family, Guangzhou

Generally the ghosts do not receive the same reverence and devotion that is afforded to the gods and the ancestors. Ghosts are essentially the numinous spirits of dead people that roam around and infiltrate the world of the living. They are scary and haunting presences, which are best avoided or kept at bay. Many ghosts supposedly possess evil predispositions or are prone to mischief, while others are simply lonely or unhappy spirits that occupy marginal positions outside of established social frameworks. Sometimes they might assume alluring forms, such as those of beautiful women, but even in such instances they still harbor potential danger.

The best way to appease the ghosts and avoid being haunted or troubled by them, according to popular belief, is to make them offerings and show them respect. A popular class of ghosts is the hungry ghosts (*egui*), whose origins go back to Buddhist mythology and cosmology. These pitiful beings are depicted as being very ugly and utterly destitute, always troubled by unquenchable thirst and hunger. The popular ghost festival (*zhongyuan*), held in the seventh lunar month on the full moon day, is an occasion when offerings are made to these creatures—especially to ancestors who have been reborn as ghosts—in order to alleviate their suffering. There are also more explicitly Buddhist and Daoist variations on the same theme, and the same festival is also celebrated in Korea and Japan.

## Worship of Local Gods

Some of the gods of popular religion have zoomorphic origins, while others trace their identity to archaic embodiments of natural forces and phenomena, such as wind or rain, mountains or rivers, stars or other celestial objects. However, overwhelmingly in China the gods assume anthropomorphic forms. Like people in many other cultures, the Chinese construed the gods in their own image. Many of the gods even have their own biographies and birthdays, while a number of them trace their origins to historical persons, who over the centuries became apotheosized and imparted with numinous powers. Moreover, occasionally the gods' personas and functions changed over time, while certain gods lost their popularity and quietly disappeared into the dustbin of history, having outlived their usefulness. Although many of the gods have local or regional influence, some of them enjoy wide acclaim and are revered throughout the Chinese world.

In popular religion the basic forms of relationship and patterns of interaction between humans and supernatural beings are based on the principle of reciprocity. That implies a system of mutual obligations: while human beings venerate and pray to the gods with the hope of receiving their help and harnessing some of their numinous power, the gods also rely on the offerings and sacrifices of the faithful. The gods' very status and authority as divine beings is dependent on the worship and respect they elicit from their devotees. That status must be continuously safeguarded and substantiated, primarily by the gods' ability to efficaciously respond to the supplications of the faithful, which among other things includes manifestations of miraculous

events and divine grace. Such circumstances make the gods and other divinities eminently malleable to adaptation in response to changing socioreligious predicaments, which accounts for the astounding diversity and local variations within popular religion.

Different gods have disparate powers and spheres of authority, and they occupy different levels of distance from the people that worship them. There is typically an inverse relationship between an individual god's power and his or her remoteness from potential worshipers. The highest and most powerful gods are frequently perceived as being too remote or aloof to be approached directly. Conversely, the gods that possess more limited powers and spheres of influence are also the ones that are most accessible and responsive to felt religious needs, as they are situated closest to the main places where everyday worship takes place: the family and the local community. Prime example of a god that is closely linked with the family is the stove god (*zaoshen*, also referred to as the kitchen god).

As his name indicates, the [stove god](#) is said to reside in the kitchen area of the home. He performs the function of a god of the whole household, and each family has its own stove god. The belief in this god is very ancient, probably going back to the time of Confucius. He is most prominent among the domestic gods that look over the home and the family. Other members of this group are the door gods, usually represented as a pair, whose images are posted on the outside doors to ward off evil and protect the home and its occupants (see figure 7.2). The primary role of the stove god is to watch over all happenings in the household and keep detailed records of the deeds of all family members. Once a year, just before the lunar New Year, he ascends



Figure 7.2. Image of a door god, ancestral temple of the Chen family, Guangzhou

to heaven to give report on the meritorious activities and transgressions of each member of the family to the Jade Emperor, the supreme deity and the head of the celestial bureaucracy (see next section).

In the home the stove god is represented by a pictorial image (that sometimes also features his wife), which is placed above or near the stove. In recognition of its sanctity, the area around the god's likeness is expected to be kept neat and pure. In front of the god's image offerings are made and ritual observances are performed by members of the family, especially on the god's birthday and during the year-ending celebrations, when he makes his reporting trip to heaven. The rites performed before the god's ascent to heaven are especially important. They are meant to secure good fortune and ensure that his report does not contain any unfavorable accounts of family misbehavior, a hope symbolized by the smearing of sweet paste over the mouth of the god's image. The rites performed on such occasions include elements that are part and parcel of popular Chinese ritual: offerings of candles, incense, and food, the perfor-



Figure 7.3. Local shrine dedicated to the earth god, Singapore

mance of ceremonial bows, the making of supplications, and (at the end of the year) the burning of the god's paper image. A new paper image of the god is then installed on New Year day, when the god supposedly returns from his journey to heaven.

As we move away from the confines of the home and the family, we encounter other gods with different roles and realms of jurisdiction. At the level of the local community, they are best represented by the earth god (*tudi gong*). Every village or residential area has its own earth god, who is closely involved in the life of the community. Depicted in the guise of an elderly official, his abode is an unpretentious local shrine (see figure 7.3). Small shrines dedicated to him are also in-

stalled in front of or inside individual homes and local business, often close to the ground, or in larger temples dedicated to other gods. From there the earth god allegedly oversees the affairs of the local community and is closely involved in the lives of its residents. He performs a protective function and the local people approach him with all sorts of entreaties and requests for blessings. Moreover, the earth god is integrated into the celestial bureaucracy, occupying a humble position at the bottom of the hierarchy, analogous to that of a village chieftain, who answers directly to the local magistrate.

## Celestial Bureaucracy

Besides the extended family, the bureaucratic system of government is one of the most enduring and important institutions in Chinese history. The influence of the imperial bureaucracy traditionally extended to virtually all aspects of everyday life, but also beyond that, since the supernatural world was also assumed to be populated and run by bureaucratic figures. One of the distinguishing aspects of popular religion, also observable in Daoism, is the influence of the bureaucratic metaphor on the constitution of its pantheon, in which the various gods corresponds to government officials. The impact of the bureaucratic model is evident throughout popular religion, including its iconography and architecture, as well as its rituals and festivals. Although the primary bureaucratic model is essential for understanding popular religion, we also have to be aware of its limitations, since not all popular divinities—the ubiquitous three stellar gods (see box), for instance—can be neatly fitted into it. Some gods occupy places outside of the bureaucratic paradigm, with their own independent sources of power and authority. Consequently, individuals can approach such gods directly, instead of going via official bureaucratic channels.

### **The three stellar gods (*sanxing*)**

- God of good fortune (*fu*)
- God of prosperity (*lu*)
- God of longevity (*shou*)

Like its earthly counterpart, the celestial bureaucracy is structured hierarchically, with each of its members occupying a specific place and performing circumscribed functions. The whole bureaucratic structure is based on established rules and procedures, and written records are

carefully kept by appropriate officials. At the apex of the celestial bureaucratic edifice is the Jade Emperor (Yuhuang or Yudi). His position corresponds to that of the Chinese emperor, who is perceived as the human son of heaven. Like the stove god noted above, the gods that fill the lower ranks of the bureaucracy all answer back to him, according to proper bureaucratic channels and procedures.

The Jade Emperor is said to preside over a sprawling bureaucratic apparatus that is divided into various sections and departments, each with distinct administrative function. For example, there are the officials that oversee the purgatories. These are located in the underworld and are places where the spirits of the dead are judged and undergo punishments for their earthly transgressions. The officials of the netherworld are said to be led by Yanluo (or Yanwang), the god of the death, who is also chief judge that impartially dispenses justice to the deceased. This bureaucratic god is a Chinese variation of Yama, the Buddhist deity that presides over the hells, which are often depicted as being ten in number.

While the Jade Emperor is regarded as a supreme deity with great power, he is also seen as being aloof and far removed from people's everyday concerns, as is the case with the living emperor. Consequently, people direct their invocations and requests for help to his celestial officials, especially those with local jurisdiction, who are purportedly more in touch with the situation on the ground. Within these strictures, individual gods are able to grant favors and respond to prayers only within the confines of their power and authority, which are clearly defined. Since the gods are believed to resemble government officials, they are usually represented as such, as can be seen from the numerous paintings and images that depict them. By extension, they are treated in a manner similar to the ways in which the common people deal with their worldly counterparts in the imperial bureaucracy. That includes the making of formal requests and petitions, as well as the offering of gifts in exchange for favors, or put differently, the giving of bribes. Similarly, the temples that function as the gods' abodes are modeled on governmental offices and residences, while the structure of the rituals performed in them evoke formal governmental and courtly ceremonies.

A prime example of celestial bureaucrat is the city god (*chenghuang shen*, lit. "god of walls and moats"). He occupies higher position in the celestial bureaucracy than the earth god, who is under his authority. Each urban area has its own city god, housed in a temple dedicated to him, just as each jurisdiction has a local official—a county magistrate in pre-modern times—to administer it. The god assumes the appearance of local official and is responsible for safeguarding peace, public safety, justice, and prosperity in his area. The symbolic persona of the city god embodies a range of outstanding qualities that are (publicly) admired by the Chinese literati and are associated with exemplary civil service, such as honesty, loyalty, and dedication to public duty.

At special occasion the statue of the city god, accompanied with his celestial entourage, is taken on a public procession around the city. That event symbolizes the god's official circuit of his

dominion, which corresponds to the formal inspection tours undertaken by local magistrates and other government officials. In addition to the performance of appropriate ritual observances, these processions are usually filled with pageantry and serve as important social occasions, bringing together the whole community in festive celebration. They also function as entertainment venues, featuring acrobatic and musical performances, firecrackers, and the like.



Figure 7.4. Temple of the city god of Taipei

Customarily rituals and prayers for protection from baneful influences or procurement of mundane benefits are directed to the city god not only by the common townsfolk, but also by the local magistrate and other officials. In pre-modern times the city god was integrated into the official cult, serving as a visible symbol of the symbiotic relationship between the earthly and celestial bureaucracies. The parallel structuring of the two bureaucratic paradigms implies the bestowal of supernatural sanction onto existing social values and political institutions, exemplified by the bureaucratic system of imperial China. In light of that, it should not come as a surprise that the imperial state was involved in the structuring of the official pantheon. At various times imperial governments manipulated the status of particular gods, bestowing them different titles and rearranging their place in (and out) of the official pantheon. But the celestial bureaucracy proved more durable than the various Chinese governments, as it outlasted vari-

ous dynasties. It even survived the collapse of the imperial system, as belief and veneration of its gods continues to shape the religious lives of millions of Chinese.

## Two Popular Deities: Guandi and Mazu

While for reasons of space we cannot go over many more of the numerous gods that inhabit the popular pantheon, we might glean further insights into the processes that led to the exaltation of certain divinities and the functions they perform by looking at a couple of noteworthy examples. The two widely worshiped divinities described below, Guandi and Mazu, a male and a female, cover a range of attributes that popular religion ascribes to its gods and goddesses. They are also instructive in regard to the range of adulations and supplications the faithful direct towards the varied embodiments of divine power and authority.

Guandi is best known as the powerful god of war, who is widely worshiped across China and among the Chinese diasporas (see figure 7.5). His origins go back to a famous historical person, Guan Yu (160–219 CE). A legendary general who lived during the late Han dynasty and



Figure 7.5. Large statue of Guandi, Guanlin Temple, Henan

the era of Three Kingdoms (220–265), Guan Yu was celebrated by posterity for his martial prowess and exemplary moral qualities, especially his bravery and loyalty. Gradually he was apotheosized into a martial deity, conventionally depicted as an imposing warrior figure with red face, whose primary roles are the granting of protection and the safeguarding of righteousness. Because of those characteristics, he assumed the role of patron deity of soldiers and policeman.

Over the centuries different emperors bestowed imperial titles on Guandi and he became incorporated into the official pantheon. He also came to assume a number of different guises and functions, including those of a patron saint of commerce and protector of businessmen. Popular versions of the god were also incorporated into the Buddhist and Daoist pantheons. In the Buddhist contexts, he is depicted as a Bodhisattva and protector of the Buddhist teachings, while in Daoism he is known as a guardian deity and subduer of demons. There are numerous temples dedicated to Guandi, some build on a grand scale and under imperial auspices, which befits his official status of a “sagely emperor” (see figure 7.6).



Figure 7.6. Entrance to Guanlin Temple, dedicated to Guandi, in the vicinity of Luoyang, Henan

Originally Mazu was worshiped by fisherman and sailors along the southeast coast of China as goddess of the sea. According to popular legend, at first she was also a historical person, although in this case an obscure one: a woman known as Lin Moniang (Lin the Silent Girl), who lived during the tenth century. She was a sailor's daughter, born in a coastal town in Fujian province. The legend describes her as a pious girl that led virtuous life, although she refused to marry, as required by custom. She died young, but before that she developed mystical powers that helped sailors in her area to weather storms and reach harbor safely. Consequently, the local people began to worship her and eventual she was transformed into a compassionate deity with broad appeal, often perceived as having a motherly character. She is often depicted as feminine savior figure, somewhat reminiscent of Guanyin.



Figure 7.7. Temple of Mazu, Tainan, Taiwan

Besides her role as patron goddess of fisherman and sailors, Mazu is also revered as a local protector, extending her help to all those in danger or need. The people of Fujian also worship her as their ancestral goddess. Like Guandi, she was included in the official pantheon and given a number of imperial titles, the best-known of which is Tianhou (Heavenly Consort), which is often used as her primary appellation and appears in the names of temples dedicated

to her. Mazu is widely worshiped in the southeastern provinces, especially Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong, and Taiwan, where there are many temples dedicated to her; there are also Mazu temples in other parts of China, including the Northeast (e.g. in Tianjin and Qingdao). She is also popular in much of Southeast Asia (esp. in Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore, but also in Thailand). More recently her worship has spread to other parts of the world where there are sizable communities of Chinese immigrants, including the United States, where we find Mazu temples in [Los Angeles](#) and San Francisco.

## Ritual Sacrifice, Divination, and other Utilitarian Practices

One of the fundamental features of popular religious practices and observances is their utilitarian character. Generally speaking, popular religion is not principally concerned with profound insights into timeless metaphysical truths, realizations of subtle meditative states, or insightful reflections on recondite doctrines. Likewise, transcendence of the phenomenal realm and other issues that loom large in elite Buddhism and Daoism are not pressing concerns within the context of popular religion, if they enter the picture at all. Instead, the main objectives of the vast majority of worshipers are unabashedly pragmatic and geared towards the procurement of this-worldly benefits. The ritual sacrifices and supplications directed towards the various gods and other divinities, which constitute principal modes of pious behavior, aptly illustrate the utilitarian character and pragmatic orientation of popular religion.

In general, the reasons for worshiping different gods and offering them sacrifices are eminently pragmatic, even prosaic. The same pragmatism is evident in the contents of the supplications directed towards the gods, which typically accompany various kinds of ritual acts. They are primarily concerned with avoiding the various misfortunes that befall human beings and with enhancing the quality of earthly life: procuring blessings, wealth, good health, long life, happiness, and worldly success. The invocations of supernatural beings and the efforts to tap into the unique powers ascribed to them are therefore primarily geared towards gaining greater control over human life, at the level of the individual, the family, or the local community.

The people's relationship with the gods implies mutual dependency, being primarily structured in terms of a system of quid pro quo exchanges between the two groups. The local people are responsible for building and maintaining the shrines and temples that serve as abodes of individual gods. The people are also expected to show respects and make sacrifices to the gods. Among other things, that involves the performance of various ritual acts such as bows, invocations, and chants, as well as the making of ceremonial offerings of incense, candles, fruits, and other food items. In return, the gods are expected to procure practical benefits for the individuals and the communities that worship them, and to be responsive to the supplications directed

towards them. If any party violates the implicit terms of this contract, the other party is free to neglect its obligations. That means the gods can withdraw their blessings, or even show their displeasure by bringing misfortune to those who have slighted them. On the other hand, the worshipers can also stop paying respect and making offerings when a particular god is perceived to have lost his efficacy, or has failed to properly use his supernatural powers to bestow anticipated boons.

In China people are traditionally free to worship or pray at the local temple at any time, in accord with their individual needs and predilections. As previously noted in the discussion of the city god, there are also numerous festivals or birthday celebrations for the various gods, when the whole community gathers together for public rituals and celebrations. Typically these are festive affairs, although at times they also include dramatic acts of self-mutilation. Often popular rituals also incorporate symbolic burning of celestial money—available in dollar denomination in Chinese stores in the United States—and paper replicas of desirable items for the afterlife, including models of houses, which are disposed into special incinerators located in the temple precincts. The same pragmatic orientation also carries over into other practices associated with popular religion, such as divination, mediumship, exorcism, and geomancy.

Like in many other cultures, the Chinese practice of divination is concerned with the use of assorted techniques to determine the hidden meaning of specific happenings or ascertain causal relationships among disparate events. The practice of divination underscores basic human anxieties about making sense of present predicaments, deciphering the unfolding of future events, and gaining control over the unseen forces that affect human life. Much of it is based on a common desire to anticipate or foresee the future, which imparts a sense of security and control over one's life. There are many techniques used in China for divination purposes, including almanacs that give auspicious and inauspicious times for all kinds of activities (e.g. getting married or starting a journey), palmistry, dream interpretation, physiognomy, and other kinds of fortunetelling.

Perhaps the most common forms of divination practice in China are the uses of divination blocks and [oracle sticks](#), which are widely performed not only at popular places of worship but also at Buddhist and Daoist temples. The divination blocks come as a pair, both of them shaped like crescent moons, flat on one side and round on the other. The oracle sticks are made out of bamboo and are placed together in a round container that is shaken, typically in front of a deity, until one of the sticks comes out. Often the two techniques are combined with the use of divination slips, each of them with a number that corresponds to one of the sticks. The divination slips relay terse and cryptic messages that supposedly shed light on the pertinent situation or appropriate course of action brought up by the supplicant. For instance, supplicants might pose question about their relationships with other persons, job prospects, or dealings with sickness and other adversities.

The use of spirit mediums can also be regarded as a popular form of divination, through which the patrons seek guidance from various gods or ancestors. The [spirit mediums](#) are shamanic figures—that can be either male or female—that have mastered the arts of spirit possession or communication with the divine. They are supposedly able to enter trances by employing particular techniques, during which they communicate with certain divinities, or channel information from the spiritual realm by identifying with particular spirits, usually in response to specific questions posed by their clients or patrons. In effect, the medium is purportedly able to connect and become spokesperson for a particular deity. Often the medium speaks in tongues or resorts to spirit writing, in order to communicate the information imparted by the deity. Some mediums are also believed to be able to commune with the dead.

In contrast to the positive spiritual communication associated with mediumship, the priests or ritual specialists that perform exorcisms are concerned with neutralizing pestilences and banishing the baneful influences of bothersome ghosts or spirits. Typically the offending presence of demonic entities, which might infest either a person or a place, is brought to an end by carefully choreographed sequences of ritual acts, which include dancelike movements and incantations. The undesirable forces of disorder are thus banished away, via skilled ritual manipulation and engagement with the forces of order, primarily represented by various gods. Often exorcisms function as healing rituals, being meant to combat specific deceases, and they are also performed by Daoist priests.

The ancient technique of geomancy (*fengshui*, lit. “wind and water”) is traditionally understood as a means for harnessing and balancing the unseen forces and energies that infuse specific spots or landscapes. Variousy described as ancient art or pseudoscience, geomancy is widely practiced as a method for selecting suitable sites for graveyards, family dwellings, temples, and public edifices. Geomantic principles—which take into account the manifestations of various *yin* and *yang* forces within the environment (graphically represented as a tiger and a dragon), along with the natural flows and circulations of *qi*—are also integrated in the architectural designs of specific sites and buildings, a procedure that is commonly applied to this day. Customarily the expert use of geomantic knowledge is utilized in order to bringing about harmony between humans, the natural environment, and the unseen powers, integrating them all together into a larger cosmic scheme.

## Millenarian Movements, Heterodox Sects, and Secret Societies

With its pantheon and the rest of the spiritual realm replicating the structures and institutions of the human world, throughout Chinese history two of the central roles of popular religion were reinforcement of conventional values and legitimization of the prevalent socioreligious

order. On the other hand, frequently popular religious beliefs and practices also functioned as agents of change, especially when they were employed by groups or movements that sought to challenge or even demolish the status quo. Prime examples of that are the various millenarian or messianic movements and “heterodox sects” that flourished throughout Chinese history. Usually these kinds of movements recruited among commoners or members of marginal groups in Chinese society, but at times they forcefully erupted onto the sociopolitical scene and altered the course of history.

Even as they adopted diverse ideological orientations and social agendas, the various millenarian groups shared common anticipation of wide-ranging social and political transformation, initiated or supported by a supernatural agency. The impending transformation was understood in terms of the realization of particular socioreligious utopia that corresponded to a divinely sanctioned prototype. These processes of social and religious change—which were usually imbued with a larger cosmic sense of purpose—were linked with the destruction of decadent values and institutions associated with the old order. The remnants of the old order were to be replaced with the enlightened mores of a new dispensation. Often the followers of such movements felt the need to hasten the coming of a new age by violent overthrow of established political authority. That is one of the prime reasons why successive Chinese governments, all the way to the present, have been highly weary and suspicious of religious groups or teachings that espouse millenarian or messianic ideas. Often such worries have led to the active pursuit of public policies aimed at control or repression of millenarian groups and heterodox sects, a recent example of which is the suppression of Falun gong.

We already encountered instances of Chinese millenarianism in the discursion of the early history of Daoism as an organized religion, exemplified by the Yellow Turbans movement and their utopian belief in the advent of a new age of great peace (see chapter 3). Later we will also consider the Taiping movement in the nineteenth century, which drew inspiration from Christianity (see chapter 9). There were also Buddhist-inspired forms of millenarianism, many of which revolved around belief in the imminent coming of Maitreya, the future Buddha, which was supposed to lead to a profound transformation of the established world order. These movements are related to the broad category of heretical sects (and teachings), whose deviation from established orthodoxies is based on their rejection of shared cultural premises and prevalent societal norms, which in the course of Chinese history often led them to collision courses with the government. Often these movements are linked with a particular religious tradition—thereby being labeled as Daoist, Buddhist, or Christian—but in general they exhibit syncretic tendencies and are rejected by the mainstream religious establishments.

Well-known examples of popular millenarian movements are the White Lotus Teaching (Bailian jiao) and its offshoots, which over the centuries were involved in several insurrections against the central government. The first emperor of the Ming dynasty started as member of a religious group with millenarian expectations centered on the Maitreya cult that rebelled against the Mongol Yuan dynasty. Moreover, an important White Lotus rebellion took

place during the mid-Qing period (1796–1803) and was violently crushed by the Manchu government. The use of a prominent Buddhist symbol in the name of the White Lotus Teaching points to its origins as a popular movement that emerged within the context of lay Buddhism of the late Song and Yuan eras (namely the thirteenth century). The early followers of White Lotus teachings promoted vegetarianism, performed devotional practices (largely of the Pure Land variety), engaged in pious works, and believed in the advent of Buddha Maitreya. Later the White Lotus Teaching developed into a syncretic movement that encompassed a number of sectarian groups, some of them with seditious tendencies.

Generally the designation White Lotus Teaching is used in a loose sense—as a sweeping label, often with vague connotations—to refer to a range of groups, typically with millenarian or rebellious tendencies, even though such groups espoused a variety of beliefs and had disparate organizational structures. In the process of their development, religious groups subsumed with the movement absorbed a number of popular beliefs and practices, although in general millenarian ideas centered on the Maitreya myth remained an essential part of their worldview. An example of syncretic addition is the worship of a powerful female deity known as Eternal Mother (Wusheng Laomu), who assumes a central role in key mythical narratives produced by advocates of the White Lotus Teaching, included in sectarian scriptures collectively known as “previous volumes” (*baojuan*) (for more on the White Lotus movement, see Haar 1992).

Another noteworthy feature of popular religious life in China, often linked with the millenarian movements and heterodox sects, is the formation of various secret societies. While these are voluntary groups that initially grew out of mutual aid associations, typically they assume clandestine character and have exclusive membership. In effect, they function as fraternal organizations that provide their members with a sense of identity and affiliation, outside of their normal kinship ties and the prevalent societal frameworks. New members are accepted after formal initiations, enjoined to keep oaths of secrecy, and expected to demonstrate unquestioning allegiance to the group. Consequently, the secret societies have clear lines of demarcation that separate insiders from outsiders, in contrast to the situation that usually obtains in Chinese religion.

The organizing principles and rituals of these groups are varied, and might incorporate a range of Buddhist, Daoist, or popular religious elements. In the course of Chinese history, often groups of this kind have manifested revolutionary or rebellious proclivities, and they have also been associated with illegal activities. For instance, during the seventeenth century the influential Triad Society (*Sanhe hui*)—originally known as the Heaven and Earth Society (*Tiandi hui*)—was involved in insurgent efforts to overthrow the newly-established Manchu regime of the Qing dynasty and restore the native Ming dynasty. The society was also involved in the Republican revolution and the overthrow of the Qing dynasty in 1911, but it gradually morphed into a notorious element of organized crime. Because of such history and association, secret societies are viewed with suspicion by governmental authorities, in China and elsewhere.

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## Key Points

- The broad category of popular religion, while defying narrow definitions and clear-cut characterizations, covers a broad range of widely diffused beliefs and practices that are very important parts of Chinese religious and social life.
- The prevalent tendency towards syncretism, observable across the whole spectrum of beliefs and practices subsumed within the category of popular religion, typically involves incorporation of copious elements derived from each of the three teachings.
- On occasion the adoption of syncretism was a deliberate act and was given concrete theoretical or institutional forms by various proponents of the notion of unity among the three teachings, as evidenced in the formation of the Three-in-one Teaching.
- Popular religion situates human beings into a multifaceted world that is also populated by various kinds of supernatural and mysterious beings, which are usually classified into three general categories: gods, ancestors, and ghosts.
- Obtaining supernatural protection and blessing for the family and the local community are central concerns in popular religion, as evidenced by the widespread worship of domestic and local gods, represented by the stove god and the earth god.
- One of the distinctive features of popular religion is the use of the bureaucratic metaphor in the construction of its pantheon, with the gods occupying specific places within a hierarchically structured celestial bureaucracy, all of them performing restricted functions that correspond to those of government officials.
- Popular gods such as Guandi and Mazu exemplify the ways in which historical persons were apotheosized and integrated into the official pantheon, and the varied roles and functions they assumed in the course of their divine existence.
- An essential feature of popular religious practices such as ritual sacrifice, divination, and exorcism is their utilitarian character or pragmatic orientation, with the vast majority of worshipers being concerned with procuring this-worldly benefits and gaining greater control over their lives.
- At times elements of popular religion functioned as agents of change, especially in the context of millenarian movements, heterodox sects, and secret societies that rejected mainstream values and challenged the sociopolitical status quo.

## Discussion Questions

1. Compare and contrast the attitudes towards the supernatural realm and the construction of religious identity in Chinese popular religion with those characteristic of monotheistic religions such as Christianity and Islam.

2. What earthly models were used in the fashioning of the divine pantheon, and what such parallels tell us about the basic character of Chinese civilization?
3. What are the primary or typical governmental responses to the teachings and activities of millenarian groups or movements, and what are the historical examples and considerations that shape such responses?

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