CHAPTER THREE

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION

As indicated in the Introduction, the order and organization of north China community rituals were rooted in that of the families and communities themselves, which were organized as much as possible for their mutual survival, survival that depended on cooperation and leadership. Water and good land were usually scarce, and disease, bandits and political disorder were often a threat, so people had to focus on what seemed to further their security. Until well into the twentieth century, this task was carried out in villages that were largely self governing, with leaders selected by the local people themselves who served as intermediaries between them and the county government. County magistrates and their limited number of assistants were responsible for tens of thousands of people living in hundreds of villages, so they welcomed such local cooperation. In addition to assisting in collecting their own taxes, people were responsible for organizing their own associations for crop watching and protection from bandits, irrigation and the expenses of weddings and funerals. Village mediators dealt with all kinds of local disputes, including those involving accidental deaths; everything short of murder and suspected rebellion against government authority. It was in this context that villagers built temples for protective deities and organized festivals to support them and petition their aid. What we call religion was here, as elsewhere, an aspect of a larger effort for individual and community survival, for which planning and organization were essential.

After a brief discussion of village governance, this chapter discusses the types and activities of the leaders of community-wide rituals as a kind of sub-set of that governance focused on trying to gain access to what people believed was another dimension of effective power. This discussion proceeds by geographical areas, beginning with Hebei, then moving to Shanxi, Shandong and beyond. Of course there is unavoidable overlap among the categories of festival leaders, the rituals they organized and the beliefs associated with them, but in this book these
topics are discussed in separate chapters in the interest of clarity for those of us looking on from the outside.\textsuperscript{1}

Huaiyin Li has written a detailed study of village governance in north China based primarily on research concerning Huailu County in Hebei from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Li notes that “...a simple peasant in pre-Revolutionary China had little contact with government officials. Unless involved in a lawsuit or criminal case, he never visited the office of the county magistrate, the lowest level-appointee of the regular bureaucracy who oversaw hundreds of villages and an average of 250,000 people.” However, “...the villages were not totally out of the government’s reach... In fact, during most of imperial times, the state was able to extract enough taxes to meet its normal needs and maintain social order in most of the country. What made this possible was a wide variety of informal institutions in local communities that grew out of the interaction between government demands and local initiatives to carry out day-to-day governmental functions.”\textsuperscript{2}

During the Ming and Qing periods the government promoted systems of local community self-monitoring and defense called \textit{baojia}, translated by Hucker as “Security Groups and Tithings,” that were responsible as well for collecting local taxes. In the Qing period, this system co-existed with the Ming-style \textit{lijia} ‘Community Self Monitoring System’, being especially responsible for local police and militia work. Ten households constituted a ‘Registration Unit’ (\textit{pai}), ten such units constituted a ‘Tithing’ (\textit{jia}), and ten Tithings constituted a ‘Security Group’ in theory encompassing 1,000 households, ideally, in a cohesive, natural geographic area.\textsuperscript{3}

By the late nineteenth century this system no longer functioned, but its focus on community self-management remained. In this period, “What prevailed in local communities was a form of voluntary cooperation among villagers who shouldered administrative tasks that had been performed by the \textit{baojia} and \textit{lijia} personnel. The key position in the cooperation was the \textit{xiangdi}, who acted as an intermediary between the county \textit{yamen} [office] and his village. Chosen from local dwellers

\textsuperscript{1} Some of the material in this chapter was published in my (2006) “Ritual Leaders in North China Local Communities in the Twentieth Century: a Report on Research in Progress”. \textit{Min-su ch’ü-i} 153: 203–263.