CHAPTER SIX

BELIEFS AND VALUES

Introductory Comments

Some of the beliefs and values that accompany the ritual activities discussed in this book are noted in other chapters; here I discuss this topic in more detail. After a brief introduction to implicit values embedded in family life and ethical principles to be observed by the people, values that are promoted in locally-available official sources, this chapter moves to a discussion of the personal beliefs of worshipers as the context of the explicit goals of temple festivals. Such beliefs can be expressed directly or implied from what people do in their rituals. There follows a discussion of beliefs and legends about the gods and the values held to be supported by them, and moral values expressed in the operas and folk tales performed or recited at festivals. Additional evidence about such values in operas is provided in an Appendix at the end of this chapter. Finally, I provide passages from local ritual leaders expressing the explicit goals of festivals in honor of the gods. Community rituals have many functions, but the beliefs of those who participate in them provide direct evidence of what they consciously intend by doing so. Rituals are of course a matter of habit and tradition, but they are also expressions of what people think and hope.

The Yuan period Book of Agriculture (Nongshu), published in the period 1312–1314, includes a good, idealized statement of north China rural community values: “In northern villages many join together in cultivating (lit. ‘hoeing’) associations formed of ten families. They first cultivate the fields of one family, with that family providing drink and food. The rest take turns, so that within ten days the fields of all the families have been hoed. So, they lead each other and do their work happily with no stealing or laziness. If there is a family with illness, they join their efforts to help them. So, there are no uncultivated fields, and abundant harvests for all.”

The implicit values embedded in family economic life in rural Shandong and Hebei in the twentieth century are well summarized by Ramon H. Meyers:
The household, guided by the male head, must be regarded as the basic economic decision-making unit... The household’s primary objective was to earn as much income as possible through farm labor and other resources or by work in crafts, trades and other employments. The income was intended to preserve a line of descendants giving homage to their ancestors, carrying out the prescribed ritual related to festivals, marriages and funerals, and achieving status for the household. Ancestor worship provided a set of working principles on which the rural family patterned its way of life, adopted goals to pursue, and formed basic values and attitudes toward life. The customs and institutions concerning child rearing, marriage, household economy, wealth inheritance, and religious rites that evolved and modified slowly over time reflected an intense desire by the family to live as a collective, harmonious working unit seeking to augment its wealth and provide security for its progeny...Children were taught that hard work and frugality were closely related with the accumulation of wealth. They were reared not to accept their lot in life and always remain poor, but to strive and achieve the same status and wealth of the rich families of the village.1

Local official sources, such as the Local History of Xushui County, in Hebei sought to encourage these family values and extend them to the rest of the community. Here we find ‘verses to exhort the world’ (Quan shi ge) that advocate filial piety, care for parents and reverence for ancestors, obedience, cooperation among brothers and village families, and school attendance by boys, because “the smart go to school; the stupid are farmers and merchants.” The repeated exhortations here begin with “I urge you, good common people...” (quan er hao min) to be friendly with neighbors, be frugal and avoid waste, abstain from gambling, immoral sexual behavior, violence and law suits, and care for yourselves (Xushui zhi, 1932 edition, 6: 337–341; this exhortation is attributed to “an old history”).

At the national level this emphasis on cooperation and mutual care among villagers was emphasized in compilations of social regulations published and distributed by the state, as in the Collected Statutes of the Great Ming, published in 1503 and 1587. In this text, village men are expected to meet regularly to recite an oath, which reads:

All of us men of the same village will obey and maintain the rules of propriety and the law. We will not use force to oppress the weak. Those

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