CHAPTER TEN

CONCLUSIONS: RITUAL AND MODERNITY

This chapter draws on the history and descriptions of ritual events on the Putian plains provided above to develop theoretical implications for the study of ritual in general. The discussion covers topics such as the nature of space and time in these rituals, the multiple liturgical frameworks at play in a single ritual, and the multiple points of view that co-exist within any such complex ritual event. The complexity of the experience of these ritual events calls for a new approach to issues of subjectivity and agency. This chapter therefore introduces a micro-sociological mode of analysis to examine questions such as ritual change and ritual process in terms other than formations of identity. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the relationship of ritual to modernity, and an overview of the implications of the rise of the “ritual power formation” in the Putian plains for the study of local history in China.

*Hybrid space, hybrid time*

The ritual events of the Putian plain occur in a hybrid space, which mixes administrative territories of past and present dynasties with the locally-created spaces of the ritual alliances. Daoist documents, printed prayer forms, and local participants in ritual events give their addresses in terms that mix spatial layers of the past imperial system and modern administrative terms with the current spaces of the ritual alliances. People are identified on these documents as “Mr. or Madame X, of Fujian Province, Putian county, X (imperial) sub-canton, X ritual alliance, X village, X temple, and X shê-altar”. Given this mixed space-time continuum of ritual, it comes as no surprise that the space of the temple can be transformed into a Land of the Way by the installation of a portable Daoist altar. During the Daoist rites (and the same processes apply to Buddhist and Three in One rites) the ritual specialists visualize a transformation of the space of the altar and the temple into a charged cosmic space, stretching in all directions, and filled with the cosmological forces of their respective ritual traditions. For the Daoist
masters these include the astral deities of the Daoist stellar courts, the emblematic animals of the four directions, and the spirit generals and their hosts of spirit soldiers who assist the Daoist ritual master in driving away demonic influences and clearing the way for the cosmic renewal brought about by the recitation of the scriptures of the Way and the inner voyage of the chief ritual master to the Daoist heavens to memorialize on behalf of the community. In one rite of the Daoist ritual tradition, the ritual masters run around eight tables marked with the hexagrams of the Book of Changes formed out of piles of rice. In the center is the Yinyang symbol. The rite is a deconstruction of the organized cosmos in a return to the undifferentiated Dao, and a re-commencement of the cosmos. After invoking the powers of each direction, the ritual masters unmake the hexagrams, ending with the merging of Yin and Yang symbols. At this point, the younger ritual masters leap over the tables while waving flags and banners attracting the gods to the spectacle. The conclusion of the Daoist rites involves the sending off a paper messenger mounted on a paper horse, bearing a written memorial. These figures are “transformed by flames” into the ever-present invisible realm of the gods.

In the processions of the gods, the village space is re-energized and purified by the god’s tour of inspection. The god visits each household to “carry out the Dao”, bringing renewed cosmic powers to bear on the health and prosperity of the household members. Spirit mediums possessed by the gods also inhabit a hybrid space—striding between this world and the world of the gods. This being-outside themselves (exstasis, ecstasy) enables the mediums to undergo feats of endurance of pain—walking barefoot across glowing coals, standing in the shooting flames of a large Roman Candle bare-chested, or striking themselves with maces until blood runs freely down their backs as they are carried in sedan chairs around the village boundaries. The special space of mediumistic trance is traced in the collective dance patterns of the Tanban Altar Associates of the northern irrigated plain, who draw out elaborate cosmological patterns as they run after the mediums in trance.

At a larger spatial level, the networks of regional alliance are traced by moving lines of god processions and linked lantern processions. Close examination of the routes followed by these processions and the networks that they form allow us to see how powerfully the ecological environment shapes the parameters of the networks and the vectors of movement that trace it out. Most of the alliances are inscribed within