CHAPTER FOURTEEN
FROM PARTY BUREAUCRAT TO RITUAL EXPERT: THE ROLE OF THE OFFICIATOR IN CHINESE FUNERAL CEREMONIES

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Previous studies have shown that local communal religion in villages has revived with great force in contemporary China. In some areas, the practice of rituals has the entire community participating, and it becomes a political, economic, and symbolic resource as well as a resource-generator (Dean, 2003).1 Though some scholars express different views (Vermander, 2009),2 they all observe and agree that local religious rituals are significant arenas for the negotiation of modernity in contemporary China. The attitude of local cadres towards popular religion and their participation in it thus play a significant role in the revival of Chinese local religion. It is important to re-evaluate and recognise the significant involvement of local cadres in the ritual process of contemporary funerals. This constitutes a reintegration of the state into the ways of Chinese tradition, as well as a new articulation of those traditions.

In this paper I will refer to the village of Shagou in Eastern China as a case study to investigate the administrative structure of funeral ceremonies, focusing on the role of the funeral officiator (Naquin and Watson, 1988).3 I will look into the question of whom or what the officiator represents in funeral rituals and how this satisfies the expectations of tradition,

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2 Benoit Vermander argues that ‘revival’ and ‘exit’ taken as a twofold phenomenon facilitate an understanding of the evolving and often disputed nature of China’s religious sphere throughout history as well as the socio-political stage that the country is entering.

3 Previous studies have shown that regional variations of practice in Chinese funerary ceremonies have much to do with the specialists of funerary rites. Their knowledge of funeral rites and their personal understanding and illustration of them has, to a great extent, shaped the rites as what they have been throughout, at least, the recent history of China.
the political demands of the state regarding the conduct of funerals, as well as villagers’ personal interests in their funerary affairs. I will argue that the funeral process is not at any stage a passive reflection of the life of the community. Every ritual or task performed during the funeral process serves to redefine people’s lives, temporarily or permanently within both the family and community.

Background

Traditionally, an adult male, called *Li xiansheng* (礼先生) (Ebrey, 1991), is invited to officiate at the funeral on the family’s behalf when a death occurs in Shangou. Throughout Shagou’s history, different members of the community have taken up this role at different times, and the person enjoyed absolute power regarding the funeral process. The family entrusted the funeral to the appointee and gave him total control of events. Guided by tradition, the officiator could decide on whatever was necessary for the funeral proceedings, and the family had to comply with his decision. Under no circumstances could members of the family contravene the officiator’s arrangements for the funeral process.

In local people’s eyes, serving as funeral officiator was a mark of high social status. In Shagou, therefore, not everyone could become or act as a funeral officiator and the people who actually did so were highly regarded. Traditionally, only two kinds of person could be appointed in this role: ritual professionals, and lay people who were considered to be well-educated, sensible and capable. People described the latter as non-professional (*feizhuanye*).