CHAPTER 1

Turning Heterodoxy into Orthodoxy:
The Historical Transitions Manifested by the Boxer Incident of 1900

Between the Sino-Japanese War [in 1894–95] and the Hundred Days’ Reforms [in 1898], public opinion said Chinese scholarship was ‘useless’—an opinion that profoundly affected Court thinking. The Throne’s ultimate decision to rely on the Boxers in North China implied that it accepted the opinion that significant elements of orthodox (zhengtong 正统) thought were incapable of saving the empire and forced it to begin sifting through Chinese tradition for other resources. Ultimately, the Court sought strength and support from heterodoxy (yiduan 异端). Although a majority of the educated elite disagreed with adopting the methods of ‘strange things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings’ (guai li luan shen 怪力乱神) (i.e. the strange and supernatural), the Court’s decision brought about a process that would raise the marginal through a process of ‘orthodoxizing the heterodox.’ This transformative process began during the Taiping Rebellion [1850–1864] and ended in the New Culture Movement [1915–1919], but its impact continues to be felt today. The

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1 Translator’s Note: The Boxer movement began in Shandong province in the late 1890s in response to foreign imperialism and Christian missionary activity. The Boxers, or “Righteous and Harmonious Fists,” believed that spiritual possession, magical amulets, and other supernatural phenomena would help rid China of foreign influence. In Luo Zhitian’s argument, the Empress Dowager Cixi’s decision in the spring of 1900 to support the Boxers and use them against the foreign powers was a turn away from “orthodox” Confucian values in support of a supernatural “heterodoxy.”

2 Translator’s Note: Throughout this chapter, Luo Zhitian uses the phrases “strange things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings” and “what Confucius does not talk about” to describe the famous spiritual/supernatural practices of the Boxers and discuss the shifting categories of orthodoxy and heterodoxy during the Boxer Incident. Both phrases come from a single line in The Analects: “What Confucius does not talk about are strange things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings (子不语怪力乱神, vii.20).
Boxer Incident represents the most symbolic moment within this process. The Western tide, entering China as heterodoxy, would ultimately provide the support necessary for making marginal Chinese cultures orthodox. If the impact of the Western tide had not forced mainstream culture to recede, because it was unable to fend off invaders and alleviate poverty, it would have been difficult for indigenous heterodoxies to rise to the status of orthodoxy. This chapter is an examination of the Boxer Incident within the context of this long process of historical change that explains the paradoxical manner in which ‘the strange and supernatural’ that belonged to ‘what Confucius does not talk about’ (Zi bu yu 子不语) transitioned from heterodoxy to orthodoxy.

**Intellectual Competitors and Allies in Social Categorization**

In 1898, Zhang Zhidong 张之洞 (1837–1909) argued that most Chinese opposed religion: “scholars argue against it, foolish people join it, bad subjects take advantage of it, and secret societies, bandits, and roaming soldiers use it to cause trouble.” In general agreement, Zhang Taiyan offered a penetrating analysis of the cultural and historical reasons why modern Chinese commoners, scholars, and the state resisted religion. Zhang argued that the Chinese masses were not initially resistant to foreign religions:

Among the overseas religions, Buddhism came first during the Han dynasty, Islam followed in the Tang, and Christianity in the late Ming. Contemporaries looked up to them like jubilant peasants whose crops grow in times of severe drought. A few scholars considered them heterodox because they departed from the Way of Confucius, but this view did not represent the broader feeling in society . . . [Only in recent times] have there been incidents of resistance to the religion [because] missionaries with the support of the foreign powers cause trouble and oppress the common people. Chinese Christians use their religion to coerce their neighbors, which is the real reason for the reaction against Christianity.³

Although Chinese traditional society “respected the ancestors and revered the father,” Zhang argued,