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Folk Temples and the Chinese Religious Economy

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Temples and the Religious Economy*

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Abstract

Temples in China participate in the competition for believers and are active players in the religious economy. The managers of the most successful new temples engage in strategic decision making about marketing, promotion, innovation, and public activities to increase the visibility and appeal of their temples. We illustrate with examples and data from our studies of eight new temples to the deity Wong Tai Sin (Huang Daxian) in Guangdong and Zhejiang between the late 1980s and 2004.

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Temples attract more worshippers than any other public religious sites in China. A large and popular temple in Guangzhou, for example, has accommodated more than 60,000 worshippers during the course of a single worship day—the first day of the Lunar New Year—and some other temples are equally crowded and busy at such times. Although temples are subject to many state regulations and are constrained by these regulations, they provide most of the god-worship activities that were available in premodern China. During the past twenty years, thousands of temples have been renovated or rebuilt, and hundreds of new temples have been constructed, attracting millions of citizens to these traditional forms of worship. Devoted to deities from Buddhism, Daoism, and Chinese popular religion, these temples appear to be an important part of the emerging religious economy in China. Can we analyze these temples using the religious economy model that has been outlined in the work of Rodney Stark and other theorists (Stark and Bainbridge 1987; Stark and Finke 2000)?

When the religious economy model directs our attention to the producers of religious goods and services, it tells us that these producers try to address the needs of their intended constituencies, adapting their services as conditions change or as competition with other suppliers increases. It also tells us that the consumers of religious goods and services compare various suppliers and choose the ones that seem to give them the best return on their investment of time, energy, and resources relative to their goals, needs, and current knowledge.

When the model focuses on the full range of suppliers and consumers, it tells us to expect that unless a monopoly is rigorously enforced by the state, there will be competition, variations in the ability to attract and hold adherents, periodic innovation, occasional copying, and a variety of strategies to market or promote religious goods. Some suppliers may have no ambition to succeed beyond a narrow niche in the religious market and may even isolate themselves from that market. Others try to gain as many adherents as possible and adopt strategies designed to achieve that goal in competition with other groups with similar ambitions.

If the religious economy paradigm is useful for studying competition among temples in a religious market in China, we would expect to see the following:

1. People who are interested in temple worship can visit and compare temples, choosing to worship at those that most suit their needs.¹

¹ Under some conditions, there might be no choices among local temples, for example, when a village maintains only one temple and there are no other easily accessible temples for that kind of worship. There are also small ethnoreligious enclaves that are able to support only one temple for that ethnic group and in which ethnic membership virtually requires worship in that particular setting and forbids visiting other religious sites, even if they are locally available and nonexclusive.

2. Temples vary in their success or failure in attracting worshippers on the basis of these choices by worshippers.
3. Temple managers adapt their services and the features of their temples to what they perceive to be local preferences about temple worship and occasionally add or enhance features that are not already well developed in other nearby temples.
4. The existence of more temples in a district will lead to more worship, other things being equal: That is, where there are a number of different temples for a variety of deities, with a variety of religious services, more people will visit temples than will do so in a district that has only one temple with a more limited range of deities or religious services, even if the total size of temple area is comparable in the two districts. (This is a key prediction of the religious economy model.)
5. Revenue from worshippers is the major form of temple income and is directly related to the success of a temple in meeting worshippers' needs. (Otherwise, the organization that manages a temple does not have to pay any attention to the religious market, since the organization gains its revenues from other sources, and we would not expect to see evidence that temples really compete with each other.)

Of course, temple worship in a polytheistic culture is a nonexclusive form of religious activity, and temples cannot bind worshippers to a particular temple to the exclusion of worship at other temples. In this sense, temple worship is unlike the kind of religious activity and religion adherence associated with the exclusivistic religions that have formed the main testing ground for the religious economy model in North America and Europe. However, this makes the religious economy model even more applicable to temple worship than to worship in exclusivistic religions. We pause to explain this point further.

Many urban and suburban settings in Asia provide a number of temples, shrines, and worship sites for a variety of deities; and in a polytheistic milieu, there is no enforced prohibition against worshippers making their own individual choices. Hence, in temple worship in which a number of temples are available, as in the secular economy in which a number of producers are available, worshippers can visit, compare, and choose which temples to revisit on the basis of their experiences at each temple. Although people in some rural areas are mainly committed to a particular temple cult (see, e.g., Dean 1993, 1998), no temples try to prevent them from visiting other temples or making such comparisons, because it would be impossible to do so. Where a number of temples are available, worshippers may alter their temple worship on the basis of relatively small differences in outcomes or in worship experiences.

In exclusivist religions, by contrast, it might require quite large differences in the specifically religious outcomes or benefits to motivate a change from one church or sect to another. This is because an individual has probably invested a

great deal in the social relationships within a church or sect, and this is part of the reason for the individual's commitment to that group (i.e., the loss of this social capital becomes a part of the calculus of costs in leaving such a group). It is also notable that churches and sects usually require a considerable investment in learning texts and rituals.

In temple worship, there is little or no social network that entangles the individual within a particular temple sect, and there is little need to learn complex texts or rituals (and hence to relearn them when switching to another temple). Hence, switching is easier between temples than between churches and sects. Of course, this depends on the availability of a variety of temples within one's district.²

To summarize, temple worship in an environment where a number of temples are available might be more amenable to analysis using the religious economy paradigm than is worship in more exclusivist religious groups in which individuals must invest much more in the group as the cost of belonging.

There are other features of an active religious market that might or might not occur: promotion or advertising by temples, to attract visitors; copying of the innovations of other temples that seem to be successful; "market research" by temple managers to better assess the needs and interests of visitors and worshippers. We can document a local religious economy even if promotion or advertising, copying of other temples' successful innovations, and market research do not occur. But if evidence of such practices is observed, this greatly strengthens the case for using this model to understand the activities of those who build and operate temples.

Of course, the competition among suppliers is not the only dynamic feature of religious or secular economies. For example, suppliers and consumers in both the religious and secular economies can be greatly affected by interventions from the state.³ But here, our main focus is on the religious market. We now turn to a

² Village religious festivals, however, are also social productions that utilize social capital and organizational expertise to achieve goals that include prestige maintenance and economic support or aggrandizement. Thus, religion is only one dimension of temple-related activity. A village temple and temple-related activity cannot be comprehended by using *only* an analysis of religious motivations (see in particular Chau 2004 for further analysis of this feature of village temple festivals).

³ In the religious economy, as in the secular economy, state rulers might favor one enterprise over others for reasons of mutual benefit; hence that enterprise might prosper as long as the leaders remain in power. In the religious economy, as in the secular economy, a firm's leaders can be penalized or imprisoned for violating rules or annoying the rulers. Some religious enterprises, like some secular enterprises, seek deregulation in order to facilitate their expansion into new niches or new services, but others might try to induce the state to grant a monopoly and suppress competitors. In both economies, a framework of enforceable rules operates in the background, largely invisible in normal times. All of these processes can occur in the interactions between the temple economy and the state.

consideration of temples as “firms” in the religious market and then illustrate from some of our research on temples in China.

TEMPLES AS FIRMS

How would an economist view a temple? First, we observe that it offers religious goods and services from a building that can be described in terms of location, size, design, and the variety of services and goods that is available on-site. Hence a temple is like a retail outlet. A small temple in a neighborhood is comparable to a local specialty shop: It can survive with a trickle of local patrons and a few staff. A large temple with several buildings and many different god-statues in different parts of the complex, and with courtyards, gardens, ponds, and so on, is like a shopping mall or a large “religious supermarket.” The size of a temple, of course, is usually related to the size of its intended constituency. A large temple must draw visitors from a large area to attract enough patrons to pay for the costs of building and operating it.

How do shopping mall developers strategize about building and operating shopping malls to obtain the largest flow of visitors and revenue? The key to a successful mall is that it is well located in relation to prospective consumers and is bigger, grander, and more diverse, in terms of the goods and services offered, than any nearby malls. Location near major transportation routes is essential, since the success of the mall depends on people getting there without difficulty. Shopping mall developers often use a statistical model of the local market to assess the prospects for a new mall in a particular location. Called the “retail gravity” model, it focuses on the relative sizes of existing malls and their locations in relation to large concentrations of consumers. It predicts that a new mall can draw patrons away from existing stores and malls if it is well located in relation to the population and is grander than its competitors. Location is the key factor.

Do we find, among temples, an important location factor? Do temple builders take account of this factor in placing their temples, or do well-located temples (whatever the reasons they were built on particular sites) do better than poorly located temples? Do temple builders or temple managers also alter and customize their temples as a result of competition among temples?

In our research in China between 1987 and 2004, we observed nearly all of the conditions and processes that would lead to the conclusion that the builders and managers of some temples participate actively and consciously in the religious economy and attempt to develop the features of their temples to increase their appeal to their intended constituencies in the religious market. We have observed market-oriented temple construction, strategic decision making about the promotion of a temple, copying of innovations from other temples, successes and failures among temples as a result of these decisions, and attempts to change the

mix of religious goods, services, and promotion in response to the competition among temples and other sites for visitors. We have also observed worshippers visiting several temples and deciding which temples to patronize on the basis of their experiences at each temple.

Our research has been mainly devoted to the study of temples to one particular deity in two provinces, but we think that our conclusions may also be applicable for major temples in other provinces.

WONG TAI SIN (HUANG DAXIAN) TEMPLES IN CHINA

To illustrate the usefulness of the religious economy model for the study of temples and temple-based religion in China, we will use some results from our study of temples to the deity Wong Tai Sin (Huang Daxian)⁴ in Guangdong and Zhejiang.

According to legends that have been incorporated into the literature of Daoism⁵ since the 4th century C.E., Wong Tai Sin was a hermit who attained immortality through Daoist self-cultivation in the Jinhua region of what is now Zhejiang province and was subsequently worshipped in that region for more than a thousand years. The last temple to Wong Tai Sin in Jinhua was destroyed only in the late 1950s, submerged under a reservoir. More than a thousand years after it had begun in Zhejiang, a new version of the sect appeared in Guangdong, in the 1890s, with a somewhat different character, amid a wave of plagues and political turmoil. The sect was established in Guangdong through spirit-writing about these events and their implications, with messages from the gods about the ongoing turmoil and troubles as well as about the ways in which the Guangdong believers should deal with these crises (Lang and Ragvald 1998).

During the Republican period after 1911, folk religion temples were suppressed in some areas, and the chaotic political and economic environment induced many religious practitioners to move to Hong Kong. The worship of this deity was transferred to Hong Kong early in the Republican era by the founder of the Guangzhou temple and eventually flourished in the colony (Lang and Ragvald 1993). By the 1960s, all of the Wong Tai Sin temples in Guangdong and Zhejiang had been destroyed, and no Wong Tai Sin temples apparently survived anywhere in the coastal provinces.

As it became possible to rebuild temples after the end of the Cultural Revolution, and especially with accelerating economic development in the 1980s

⁴ *Wong Tai Sin* is the most common Hong Kong transliteration of the god's name, from Cantonese. *Huang Daxian* is the pinyin transliteration.

⁵ *Daoism* (practiced by *Daoists*) was commonly written as *Taoism* (practiced by *Taoists*) in many English-language writings on religions in China. We use *Dao* here, to follow the pinyin and the more common use of this pinyin transliteration in recent academic writings on religions in China.

and 1990s, many temples were rebuilt throughout mainland China, including a number of new Wong Tai Sin temples in both provinces. Lang and Ragvald have been studying these temples since the 1980s. During the course of our research on the main Hong Kong temple to the deity, we looked at the origins of the Hong Kong version of the sect in Guangdong and Zhejiang, the two provinces where the sect had been most active before 1949 (Lang and Ragvald 1993).

Starting in the late 1980s, we began to notice and study the revival of the worship of this deity in a number of locations. At least nine new Wong Tai Sin temples and one major shrine were built in Guangdong and Zhejiang between the late 1980s and 1999. Lang and Ragvald (between 1987 and 2001) and Lang and Selina Chan (from 2000 to 2004) visited all of these temples repeatedly, conducting interviews with worshippers, priests, officials, and temple managers. From this research, we can begin to describe the reasons why these temples were built, the reasons why some of them have been much more successful than others, and the ways in which some of them have been modified to try to increase their appeal or profitability.

First, we should classify these temples and clarify the focus of this analysis. The temples range in size from a small peasant temple, not much bigger than a hut, in a rural village, to midsize rural temples, to grand god-palaces in rural, suburban, and urban locations (see Table 1 on the following page). The smallest temples can survive on the patronage of a trickle of local clients and employ at most only a temple-keeper and a fortune-teller. The largest of these temples employs more than eighty staff member, and must attract a substantial number of worshippers from a wide area around the temple to pay the temple's operating costs.

In this chapter, we will discuss mainly the large temples (Temples E, F, G, and H in Table 1), since they are most concerned with strategic decision making, have absorbed the largest investments, provide the most graphic illustrations of success and failure, and produce the largest variety and intensity of innovations in their attempts to succeed in the religious market. However, the smaller temples sometimes preserve forms of religious belief and behavior that are lost or hidden in the larger temples, as we will note in the last part of the article, and they occupy distinctive niches in the religious economy.

COMPETITION, INNOVATION, AND PROMOTION

In this section, we will discuss the motives and calculations that are involved in building the large temples, attempts to increase the flow of visitors later through innovations within a temple, and various kinds of promotion and marketing in the surrounding communities. We will conclude with an analysis of the reasons why some of these temples were much more successful than others within the local religious market.

Table 1: New Wong Tai Sin (Huang Daxian) Temples in Guangdong and Zhejiang, China, 1989–2004

	Date, Location	Size	Founders or Initiators	Patrons	Success/Failure
A	1989: Xinhui, Guangdong	Midsized, rural	Wealthy Hong Kong-based believer (from Xinhui)	Local people from the city, villages	Moderate success; appears to attract enough visitors to cover costs and generate some revenues for local charity and education
B	1990: Rengang village, Guangdong	Small village temple	Villagers	Villagers	Moderate support from villagers, but insufficient for aggrandizement of the temple
C	1991: Jinhua, Zhejiang	Midsized, rural, tourist temple	Jinhua government and businesspeople	Tourists, mainly from China	Moderate success; the site is near the famous Double-Dragon Cave, the main tourist attraction on the mountain
D	1993: Jinhua (near site of Qing-era temple), Zhejiang	Midsized village temple	Villagers	Villagers, a few local tourists	Few visitors, but enough to sustain the temple-keeper and fortune-teller
E	1995: Lanxi, near Jinhua, Zhejiang	Very large, suburban	Initially, villagers; taken over and expanded by the city government	Villagers, local urbanites, tourists	Notable failure relative to the size of the temple, the cost of the land and buildings, and the expectations of the founders
F	1996: Jinhua (near top of mountain), Zhejiang	Very large, rural	City government, in league with local business sponsors	Tourists, some local urbanites, villagers	Marginal; below the expectations of the founders
G	1998: Jinhua (on hilltop above temple D), Zhejiang	Midsized, rural	Hong Kong-based Taiwanese entrepreneur	Villagers, local and regional tourists, Taiwanese groups	Successful enough (financial backing from the wealthy founder continues)
H	1999: Guangzhou, Guangdong	Very large, urban	Fangcun government, then a Hong Kong-based entrepreneur	People from Guangzhou and the Pearl River Delta	Most successful of all the temples; some decline after the first year

Temples are designed for the worship of gods, but they are also frequently designed and located to appeal to potential visitors and patrons. Some temples that have been renovated since the 1980s sit on the same site and occupy some of the same buildings as in the imperial period before 1911. (Many were built during the Qing, and a few were built during the Ming or earlier.) We will not discuss these temples here. Instead, we focus on new temples that have been built since the 1980s. One reason is that the people who initiated these projects can still be interviewed, or, if not, their intentions can still be recovered from existing documents or from conversations with current managers of those temples. Hence we can reconstruct the logic of building the temples in those locations at that time. Since we have been visiting most of these temples since shortly after they were built, we have also been able to follow some of the changes in the mix of religious features and activities as the managers have attempted to make them more appealing. This is much more difficult to do for temples that were built during the Ming and Qing periods.

Temples as Investments

Why were these temples built? Many of the new temples in China were intended to promote economic development by attracting tourists from among overseas Chinese in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. In our sample of temples, we found that this motivation was expressed by agents who were involved in the planning or construction of six of the eight temples (Temples C through H). All of these temples were built at or near the sites of earlier, now destroyed temples to this deity that had existed in Jinhua, in what is now Zhejiang province, for most of the past thousand years and in Guangdong since the 1890s. The builders of these temples believed that worshippers of this deity, particularly those from Hong Kong, would be interested in making pilgrimages to new temples built on these historic sites. In the case of Jinhua, the Daoist legends about the hermit saint later known as Wong Tai Sin claimed that he had lived and become immortal in Jinhua in the 4th century C.E.; hence local entrepreneurs believed that this local history of the saint gave the area a deep pool of religious capital that could be exploited to attract tourists.

The largest of those temples were very costly, and local government-affiliated units borrowed millions or tens of millions of renminbi for these projects from local banks, in some cases with contributions from local business groups. The local governments and businesses expected to achieve long-term net gains from these projects through construction, temple revenues from visitors, and spending by tourists in the districts surrounding the temples. In some cases, they also hoped that overseas Chinese would come for the temple but stay to invest and create jobs in the region.

This kind of motivation was especially common among local officials during the 1990s, when many towns and counties in China were searching for ways to stimulate economic development using whatever local resources they could exploit to attract investment and generate revenue. The central government in the 1990s under Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin was politically repressive but was simultaneously supporting and encouraging the coastal provinces to be creative in their economic development efforts, using their own resources. Rebuilding a temple to a famous Daoist immortal and promoting the deified person's historical connection to the district was an obvious way to try to generate tourist income. But this was only one of the motivations of the various parties who collaborated in the building of these temples.

Some local groups that supported these projects also wished to revive local cultural history and to use these revived historical sites as a basis for local cultural self-assertion (see also Jing 1996). This was especially true for some local intellectuals and retired cadres, who found a role for themselves in the genesis and promotion of these projects by researching and documenting this cultural history. For example, in the town of Lanxi, a group of local intellectuals met regularly, starting in the late 1980s, to exchange ideas and findings from their investigations into the historical accounts of the Daoist saint immortalized as Wong Tai Sin after one of them discovered the connection between this deity—during his earthly life—and a suburban village next to their town. Their historical research and articles were eventually used by local officials to justify the construction of a major temple to the deity (Temple E) near the village.

Other local people wanted to revive worship of a reputedly efficacious deity and saw an opportunity to do so under the slogan of economic development. That is, they had essentially religious motives but were able to use the language of economic development to propose and support the reconstruction of temples, since this kind of language fit more easily into the mainstream discourse of the contemporary Chinese political system in the 1990s.

We think it unnecessary to claim that all of the motives for building temples are religious. In the history of other civilizations, churches, mosques, temples, and shrines have apparently been built with a variety of secular motives in addition to the religious reasons for building them, and the anticipation of revenue and desire for local economic and cultural aggrandizement appear to be common motives.⁶

⁶ We could offer many examples. All major pilgrimage sites are also sites of business and enterprise. In Europe during the Middle Ages, the deliberate use of relics to attract pilgrims for economic reasons was common. The Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca was also an occasion for business transactions and for profit (Peters 1994), and the resistance to Muhammad's revelations by his tribe, the Quraish, was evidently motivated in part by the fear that his determined monotheism would undercut the economic returns from the pre-Islamic pilgrimages to Mecca that were already a well-established tradition by the 7th century C.E.

In any case, the developers of these temples were not motivated only or even mainly by piety. Nor did they ignore the likely longer-term returns on their investments in these temples. The construction of these temples was intended as a strategic investment in local economic development. But to make such temples successful and produce returns on the huge expenses involved in building the biggest of these temples, they had to be designed, located, and promoted to draw visitors and generate revenue.

Location

To draw worshippers, a temple must offer attractive goods and services and be accessible. A remote temple in the mountains that requires a long and tiresome journey can attract worshippers only if there are some extraordinary rewards from visiting the site. The site might be prominent in the historical and cultural literature of the society because famous religious specialists lived there, or it might be the setting for extraordinary events in the religious history of the region, such as miracles or revelations. Or the site might be famous because of its extraordinary beauty—on top of a mountain, for example, overlooking ravines and gorges, surrounded by mists. Such sites, which have been the destinations of Asian pilgrims for millennia, can prosper without being in a convenient location. The Shaolin temple in Henan is a good example of a temple that draws a steady stream of visitors (most of them arriving in tour buses) because of its historic significance and its uniqueness as a famous center for martial arts training. Some Buddhist and Daoist monasteries in the mountains are able to attract visitors for similar reasons.

But for new temples, which do not already have such a reputation, location is very important. To be successful, a large and costly temple should be sited near a large population of potential visitors, and access to the site should be convenient for people who might wish to visit.

In our study, the four large Wong Tai Sin temples differed greatly on this vital factor. Temple E, near Lanxi in Zhejiang, was built in 1995 in a suburban location near a small town and cannot be reached by public transportation such as buses, trains, or subways. The builders hoped to draw tourists from the region and overseas on the basis of the temple's main claim to fame: The nearby village was, according to legend, the birthplace of the Daoist who eventually achieved immortality and become Wong Tai Sin. But there is little in Lanxi besides this temple to attract tourists, it is quite inconvenient for outsiders to reach the site, and it has no extraordinary features except a large bronze statue of the deity. It was doomed to failure, and indeed, it has been a great disappointment to the local government, which supported its construction and commandeered the land for the temple from the village. (Below, we outline some of the innovations adopted by the managers to try to increase the flow of visitors in the face of this failure.)

Temple F, also in Jinhua, was built for the same reasons near the top of the mountain in 1996. It was a very large and very expensive project. The local government had to build a road up the mountain to allow visitors to reach the site and had to compensate the villagers for the land. But as with Temple E, there is no extraordinary historical or cultural feature at the site sufficient to draw a stream of visitors, and a casual or curious visitor must make a long, tedious, and somewhat dangerous journey by taxi or car on a narrow, winding road up the mountain. This temple has failed to attract enough visitors to pay off the debts that were incurred in building it or even to cover the full costs of running the temple. Local officials considered building a cable car line from the base of the mountain up to the site of the temple to increase the flow of visitors and revenue but gave it up as too costly. Eventually, the temple was sold to a private Zhejiang firm involved in construction, tourism, and other industries; that company now covers the deficits in running the temple and contemplates how to try to make it a success in the future.

Temple G is somewhat better located. Built in 1998, it is in a rural area near a village, but at the base of Jinhua Mountain rather than near the summit. The roads in the area are well paved, except for the dirt road to the village and the site of the temple, which runs about 800 meters from the main road. The temple overlooks a reservoir, and the location is quite scenic. It is also not far from Jinhua City, which is much larger than Lanxi. The location, however, would not be very appealing to visitors if the site had not been improved greatly to provide a more satisfying experience than the urban temples in the area and if transportation to the site had not been upgraded. The builder, a Hong Kong-based Taiwanese entrepreneur, paved the dirt road from the main road, installed a large parking lot for buses next to the temple, added a public park with various attractions next to the temple, and engaged in a program of promotion that greatly enhanced the visibility of the temple (see below). These measures have made this temple, alone among the Jinhua Wong Tai Sin temples, a relatively successful enterprise.

The best-located of all the temples is Temple H, which opened in 1999. It is in a suburb of Guangzhou, with more than six million people living within five kilometers of the temple. Many of these Guangzhou residents are aware of this deity, since many of them watch Hong Kong television (Zhu and Ke 2001), and broadcasts during the Lunar New Year period always devote some attention to the huge crowds at the Hong Kong Wong Tai Sin temple during the first day of the Lunar New Year. In addition, there is a new subway in Guangzhou that runs to the district in which the temple is located and has a subway stop about 300 meters from the temple. Thus it is quite convenient for residents to get to the temple from many parts of Guangzhou.

The temple also has some religious capital to increase its appeal, since it is on the site of the first major temple to this deity in Guangdong, built in the 1890s and destroyed in the 1930s.

The local government initiated the project, bought the land from the local peasants, and started construction but ran out of money. Eventually, they persuaded a Hong Kong-based entrepreneur who was active in construction projects in that part of Guangzhou to take over the project and complete the construction with his own funds. He realized the potential of the site and built the temple on a grander scale than was the original intention of the local government. In planning the project, he spent months visiting temples all over China to look for good ideas and useful designs. The resulting temple, which opened in 1999, has been highly successful, attracting visitors from all over the city (arriving by bus and subway) and from other towns in the nearby Pearl River Delta (arriving mostly on tour buses). This temple has also been promoted in the region as part of the builder's marketing strategies, and this promotion is one of the reasons for its great success. We now turn to a discussion and some examples of the marketing and promotion of a major temple.

Promotion and Innovation

The temple that was most desperately in need of innovation to increase its appeal to visitors was the Lanxi temple (Temple E). We visited this temple repeatedly between 1996 and 2003 and noted very few visitors in the years after it was opened in 1995. The temple managers had hired a number of Daoist priestesses from Hangzhou, along with a priest, but the few visitors did not provide enough revenue to support the enterprise, and the priestesses claimed that they had not been paid for months. They became so disaffected with the poor management and the trickle of worshippers that they all left the temple after a year of service. The residents of the village next to the temple also mostly stopped worshipping at the temple; instead, they installed a statue of the deity in their own village temple to bring the worship activities more fully under their own control. Once the priestesses left and the villagers had their own impressive new statue of the deity in their village temple, they had little incentive to visit the large main temple just outside the village, even though it required only five minutes walk for a visit. The temple managers first tried to rescue the temple by subleasing it to the priest, hoping that he would find a way to make it more attractive. However this priest, who possessed a motorcycle and a cell phone, was more interested in providing religious services to fee-paying clients outside the temple and spent most of his time elsewhere. The experiment in leasing the temple to him was not a success.

Noting, however, that a group of the village women were particularly devout and that they were patronizing a local spirit-medium who claimed to be able to speak with the voice and words of Wong Tai Sin, the managers decided to try to get these women back to the temple. As a concession, they allowed this spirit-medium to use an office inside the temple as a base for her consultations with

worshippers, as we discovered during a recent visit. They also installed statues of three Buddhist deities, since the temple managers were aware that some worshippers in the area were devotees of these deities. This “supermarket of deities” approach is typical in many popular religion temples in this region. But we were able to confirm that in this case, the deities were added explicitly to increase the temple’s drawing power in the local religious market. These innovations made the temple marginally more attractive but have not been sufficient to attract more than a small number of new worshippers.

Other temple managers have been much more successful in promoting their temples and in adding appealing features. As was noted above, Temple G, built by a Taiwanese entrepreneur in Jinhushan, was located in a rural area, but the entrepreneur who built the temple also advertised it through pamphlets and posters distributed in nearby markets. In addition, she organized a program of special medical services for poor and elderly villagers in the county and used these services to further increase the local profile and visibility of the temple in the district. She also upgraded the area around the temple as a public park, with gardens, walkways, craft shops, and activities for children. Finally, she installed a traditional orchestra in the temple to play Chinese instrumental music every day for visitors. As the temple gradually became more popular, a local bus company that operated occasional buses to the site added more frequent bus service with larger buses. With these aggressive measures in upgrading the appeal of the site, facilitating access to it by paving the road and installing the parking lot, and building goodwill in the district through charitable services and public events to commemorate these services, the builder has managed to turn an obscure rural site into a successful temple enterprise that attracts streams of worshippers and visitors from the city, especially on weekends.

At Temple H, the very successful Guangzhou temple, the builder also decided to use advertising to try to attract more visitors to the temple. Before the Lunar New Year in 2000, his company placed 30-second ads about the temple on Hong Kong television stations and print ads in two Guangzhou newspapers. The company also conducted a survey of worshippers at the temple to find out how worshippers had learned about the temple. On the basis of the results of the survey, the temple managers changed the advertising campaign for the 2001 Lunar New Year period, placing newspaper ads only in the *Guangzhou Daily*. From the survey, they had learned that most visitors to the temple had seen the ads in this newspaper; hence this was the most cost-effective way to reach potential worshippers.

As an example of how a newspaper ad is used to promote visits to a temple, we provide some details from the advertisement in the *Guangzhou Daily* published on January 24 (the first day of the Lunar New Year) in 2001. The ad is entitled “Wong Tai Sin Temple” and includes a picture of the site. Under the title are the following lines:

During the Spring Festival, the temple is a good place to visit, with many things to see and many things to do; lion dancers welcome the New Year, and the God of Wealth welcomes guests. There are many good things here to bring you wealth [sic!]. New scenery has been added, such as millions-of-years-old oddly-shaped stones, a pool where you can free fish and turtles [to accumulate merit], a God of Wealth Hall, a Confucius Holy Hall, a Guan Gung Hall and a Guan Yin Hall [Guan Gung is a famous deified historical figure; Guan Yin is the popular Chinese-Buddhist Goddess of Mercy] ... all in a special park-like design. ... There is free incense available with purchase of a ticket for entry to the temple [for those who don't want to buy incense], and visitors purchasing the entry-ticket can get a coupon for a second free entry later.

The ad concludes with information on hours of operation and detailed instructions on how to get to the temple by bus or by subway. The ad does not say anything about religious doctrines, organized worship or ceremonies, the presence of Daoist priests, or involvement of the temple in charitable services. None of these things are as important, from the point of view of the temple managers, as the themes listed in the ad.

The advertisement also shows that the temple managers marketed the temple according to the standards of modern business advertising. They stressed utility (getting wealthy), the variety of goods available (the chance to worship a number of well-known deities in addition to the principal deity, Wong Tai Sin), aesthetic enjoyment (interesting scenes, a pleasant environment), and convenience (easy to reach by public transportation). Advertisements for a new shopping mall could be analyzed by using precisely the same categories. The long business experience of the Hong Kong-based builder of the temple in a capitalist environment clearly shaped the way the temple was marketed.

Like the Taiwanese entrepreneur who made Temple G such a success, despite a rural location, the builder of the Guangzhou temple added further attractions to the site, including some unusual animal-shaped stones from Guangxi, gardens and trees, and, most recently, a stage on a plaza immediately behind the temple for cultural performances for visitors on special occasions. He had observed a smaller version of such a stage at a temple in Shanghai during his travels to see how temples were built elsewhere and decided to install one at his temple, but he built it on a larger scale, with his own modifications to increase its usability for community events.

The builder also commissioned a company in Foshan to produce ceramic versions of the characters in the Dao De Jing, the Daoist canon, and when the Foshan company finally perfected the technology to do this after a year of experimentation, he installed the complete Dao De Jing in ceramic characters on a wall next to the main temple.

Finally, he had inherited the remaining pieces of the original temple, built in 1899 and destroyed in the 1930s, and after storing these pieces for several years, he installed them in an attractive garden next to the performance stage, where the relics were displayed as part of a demonstration of the temple's significance and cultural capital.

To summarize, large new temples are not passive operations in which temple-keepers sit in a building and wait for visitors. The managers of the most successful of these temples actively promote them in the surrounding districts with advertising (newspaper and television ads, pamphlets, and posters) and programs of activities that are at least partly designed to increase the visibility and reputation of the temple in the community. They also add features to the temple that are designed to attract more visitors, usually after comparing the features of other big temples, and they change their own temple's mix of activities and features according to their perceptions of what is most likely to be appealing, within the constraints set by the government.

Of course, government constraints limit some of these activities. The Guangzhou temple might be one of the few that has been allowed to advertise its services in a newspaper, and promotional activities must be done carefully and with the compliance of local officials. Compliance and goodwill are facilitated when a temple provides substantial funds for local charitable and other activities, as at the most successful of these enterprises (Temples G and H).

All of the above examples and analysis refer to the supply-side activities of the temple builders or temple managers. Ideally, we should also study the activities, interests, and choices of the consumers. It is possible, with a suitable approach or the right introductions, to talk to temple-keepers, temple builders, temple managers, and temple staff. It is more difficult to talk to visitors and worshippers beyond casual conversations at these temples, and it has been nearly impossible to conduct any kind of random survey of temple worshippers among the population in the districts surrounding these temples. However, it is possible to do useful research on religious consumers and temple visitors at some of these locations. To illustrate, we provide some data from a survey at one of these temples.

RESEARCH ON VISITORS TO A LARGE AND SUCCESSFUL TEMPLE

Since there are no membership lists for temples, it is not possible to sample worshippers on the basis of lists. It is also not feasible to sample worshippers through random sampling of the population, by telephone surveys, or by in-person interviews, at least in mainland China. However, it is possible to study worshippers arriving at a temple. We have done such research at the Guangzhou temple, and the data allow us to begin to answer some important questions.

Our method was to talk to worshippers inside or just outside the temple compound as they arrived but before they began their worship activities. We conducted this kind of research during the Spring Festival at the Guangzhou temple.⁷ On that day, we estimated, on the basis of periodic timed counts of worshippers ascending the steps to the main platform in front of the temple, that about 60,000 people visited the temple on the first day of the New Year. Our research assistants—two university students—worked from 9:30 A.M. to about noon, interviewing 131 people and producing data on 198 visitors. (Many people arrived in small groups, with friends or family members, so it was possible to interview one person in some groups and obtain data on the other members of the group.) The interviews were conducted in Cantonese or in Mandarin, depending on the preference of the interviewee.

These data do not come from a random sample, since some worshippers would not agree to be interviewed and willingness to be interviewed was probably related to other important characteristics of these individuals. However, we managed to get interviews with people in every age category of adults, and the data also allow us to draw some conclusions about the frequency of temple visits and the residential locations of worshippers. To illustrate how such research can be used to answer important questions, we outline some of the results in this article.

Our first question was about residence (for mainland Chinese, the location of the household registration, or *hukou*). We knew that the builders of the temple had hoped to draw Hong Kong worshippers to the temple, since Wong Tai Sin is very well known in Hong Kong and tourists are prepared to travel in China to interesting destinations. We also wanted to know the extent to which the temple had begun to appeal to Guangzhou urbanites and whether that appeal was mainly confined to the district around the temple (Fangcun) or whether the temple was also drawing visitors from other parts of Guangzhou. The data in Table 2 indicate that most visitors—more than three out of four—come from Guangzhou, and about half of those come from the district around the temple. Only a small proportion of the visitors come from Hong Kong. (Our finding of only a few Hong Kong visitors is an underestimate; tour buses occasionally arrive from Hong Kong and Shenzhen carrying groups of Hong Kong visitors, producing a temporary small surge of Hong Kong visitors, but we did not observe many such visitors on our several visits to the temple.) This result is quite important: It rules out the hypothesis that most visitors are already familiar with the deity through previous active worship at the Hong Kong temple. It also suggests that the temple is not purely a neighborhood or district temple but draws worshippers from across the city.

⁷ Lang used two university students (Sophie Wong and Erica Lau) to conduct this survey during a visit to the temple by Lang and Ragvald in 2001.

Table 2: Original Residence of Visitors to the Temple

	%	<i>N</i>
1. Guangzhou*	77%	153
2. Other provinces [†]	16%	31
3. Pearl River Delta	6%	11
4. Hong Kong [‡]	2%	3
Total:	100%	198

*Includes 34% (68) who said “Fangcun,” “live near,” and “pass near” the temple.
[†]Most “other provinces” respondents reside in Guangzhou for work-related reasons.
[‡]The figure for Hong Kong is probably too low. When tour buses arrive from Hong Kong or Shenzhen, there is a temporary surge in Hong Kong visitors. Our sampling missed these surges.

The 16% of visitors who said that they came from other provinces appeared to be mostly migrants living in Guangzhou for work or business reasons. It is likely that some of them visit the temple seeking help with problems that are particularly acute for migrants and that some of them will attribute their successes, in their struggles as migrants to help from this deity. Indeed, this was one of the reasons for the success of the Hong Kong temple: its appeal to insecure migrants living near the temple in the 1950s and 1960s (Lang and Ragvald 1993). Further research on these Guangzhou migrants and their religious activities and needs would be valuable and would give us a better understanding of this portion of the visitors to the Guangzhou Wong Tai Sin temple. We also expect that some of the migrants who achieve success in Guangzhou will eventually carry the worship of this deity back to their home provinces, seeding this sect into other cities in mainland China. (Previously, it was the economic successes of the Hong Kong temple and of Hong Kong worshippers that seeded the cult into Guangdong and Zhejiang. Further spread of the cult in the mainland is now likely to occur as a result of the experience of migrants with the new Guangzhou temple.)

Second, we wanted to know whether the temple’s advertising and promotion, described above, had led to a rise in the number of first-time visitors. So we asked how many times visitors on the first day of the New Year had previously visited the temple. The responses are not likely to be precise, except for first-time visitors, and we have data only for the people who were interviewed (not those accompanying them). The results in Table 3 show that one third of the interviewees were first-time visitors, about one third had visited several times, and the rest had visited the temple repeatedly in the past. If these data were based on a reasonable sample of the 60,000 visitors on the first day of the Chinese New Year, we could estimate, very roughly, that 20,000 people visited the temple for the first time on that day,

while 40,000 of the worshippers had visited the temple previously. If the last three categories, 36% of the total, represent frequent visitors, we guess that more than 20,000 of the people who came to the temple at the New Year festival had made the temple a regular part of their religious activities in the two years since it had opened in the city in 1999.

Table 3: Number of Times Visiting the Temple

	%	N
First time*	32%	39
2–3 time	33%	41
4–6 times	20%	24
7+ times	7%	8
“Many times” [†]	9%	11
Total:	100%	123
*January 24, 2001.		
†“Many times” includes “1st and 15th of each month.”		

Third, we recorded the age and sex of the 198 people in the groups that we surveyed in the study. We can use these data to answer some important questions. First, it has commonly been observed that women visit temples more than men do in Hong Kong and other parts of “greater China” and that middle-aged and elderly women are more commonly found at temples than are young women. Hence, determining the age and sex distributions among the worshippers at the Guangzhou temple allows us to say whether the temple is attracting men as well as women and young as well as middle-aged and elderly visitors. The data in Table 4 suggest that there are indeed more women than men at the temple but that worshippers represent all ages, including those in the 20–29 and 30–39 age categories for both men and women. We were not surprised by the age distribution of female worshippers, including a substantial minority of women over age 65.

The biggest surprise was that 51% of the men appeared to be in the age bracket 30–39. Some were accompanying a wife or girlfriend, but others arrived alone or with male friends. From research on the Wong Tai Sin temple in Hong Kong, we know that worshippers ask about current problems, dilemmas, and troubles and that they seek peace of mind through consulting the deity by divination for predications or advice. We expect that the help or reassurance against the insecurities of work, business, and careers in market-economy Guangzhou make up a substantial part of the appeal of a temple visit for both men and women. Our data suggest that middle-aged men might be especially pressured in this environment. Perhaps they are also attracted by the idea that Wong Tai Sin is a god of wealth and that he has helped Hong Kong people to achieve the

economic successes that have been envied for so many years by their Guangzhou-based compatriots. But further interviews with these men and women would be needed to determine whether the expectations, hopes, and needs of these urbanites are similar to those of the urbanites who have made the Hong Kong Wong Tai Sin temple such a great success.

Table 4: Temple Visitors by Age and Sex

Age (years)*	Females: 54%	<i>N</i>	Males: 46%	<i>N</i>	Total	<i>N</i>
16–19	4%	4	—	—	2%	
20–29	30%	31	15%	13	23%	
30–39	29%	30	51%	45	39%	
40–49	18%	19	14%	12	16%	
50–59	5%	5	16%	14	10%	
60+	15%	16	5%	4	10%	
Total:	100%	105	100%	88	100%	193

*Age estimated by the interviewers.

We should also note that in the Hong Kong Wong Tai Sin temple, businessmen often appear at the temple during the New Year period to thank the deity for a prosperous and successful year but do not often visit at other times of the year. The unexpectedly large proportion of male visitors in the 30–39 age group at this Guangzhou temple on the first day of the Spring Festival in 2001 might not be typical for other periods.

To conclude this section on our survey of worshippers at a large Guangzhou temple: We have determined that the temple has succeeded in attracting many new (first-time) worshippers and that within two years, between its opening in 1999 and our survey in 2001, it had established itself in the religious worship of tens of thousands of Guangzhou citizens. Although many of them come from the district around the temple, it is not only a district temple and has attracted urbanites from across the city. We also know that it has attracted large numbers of male and female worshippers in all adult age categories, including a large number of middle-aged men. While this might seem to be an unsurprising or mundane result, it does rule out the hypothesis that it is mainly elderly women or tourists who patronize folk religion temples in a modernizing Chinese metropolis such as Guangzhou. The appeal of these temples is much wider.

Finally, we have demonstrated that such research is possible and that it can answer important questions, even though each interview might last only a few minutes as visitors are entering or leaving the temple. Of course, this kind of survey is possible because this temple attracts such a large number of visitors

during a festival. It would be highly inefficient to try to do such research among the trickle of worshippers who visit some of the other temples in our study or some of the small rural or suburban temples that are patronized mainly by people from the neighborhood.

RELIGIOUS SERVICES AND RELIGIOUS SPECIALISTS

Before we conclude, we should note that all the major temples we have discussed have, or had, Daoist priests or priestesses in residence. However, although Wong Tai Sin is supposedly a Daoist immortal, we have barely mentioned these Daoist specialists in our account of the reasons why these temples succeed or fail. What is the role of Daoism and Daoist specialists in these temples? We offer an outline based on our experience, observations, and interviews at these large temples.

First, it must be noted that much of what worshippers do at such temples does not require or benefit from the presence of Daoist clergy. Worshippers bow to the deity or to several deities at a temple, ask for help or advice, make offerings, perhaps donate money or buy religious icons or paraphernalia from shops next to the temple, and leave. None of these activities require or are mediated by professional clergy. Worshippers can petition the deity directly, without doctrinal or ritual guidance from specialists.

Outside mainland China, worshippers at many temples also commonly ask for advice or predictions using a set of fortune-poems (*qian*) at the temple, by shaking a container of numbered bamboo slips until one of the slips falls to the ground. (The procedure is called *qiu qian*, or “seek [the deity’s answers through] fortune-poems.” The number on the slip corresponds to the number of one of the fortune-poems, and the poem provides the god’s answer to the worshipper’s question or problem. Professional fortune-poem explainers provide explanations of the meaning of the poem, in relation to the worshipper’s problems, for a fee. (For an account of how this works in the Hong Kong Wong Tai Sin Temple, see Chapter 6 of Lang and Ragvald 1993). These fortune-poem explainers are not clergy, and this service can now be obtained in or near many smaller temples in China, although it is officially considered to be feudal superstition.

So worshippers can bow before the deity, petition for advice or help, receive the deity’s answers (in the form of fortune-poems), and seek explanations of those allusive answers without resorting to the services of a Daoist. So what is the role and significance of Daoist clergy in these large temples? From our observations, the priests play two main roles in such temples.

First, the priests perform daily rituals before the altar to the principal deity on a schedule that is determined by agreement with the temple’s managers. These rituals might have little to do with the deity and are based on Daoist texts and performances that are available within the sects and ritual traditions of

contemporary Daoism. Worshippers, according to our observations, pay no attention to the specific content of these rituals, which involve chanting obscure texts that are uninteresting to most ordinary worshippers. However, the Daoists wear colorful robes; engage in coordinated chanting, singing, and bowing before the altar; and sometimes accompany these performances with percussion instruments. Thus they provide periodic solemn spectacles for the visitors, adding to the temple's veneer of religious observance with ceremonies that are at least superficially impressive.

In addition to the regular performances, visitors can commission a special ceremony by the priests for their personal benefit as they seek the favor of the deity for their own needs. The money earned from such special ceremonies will usually be split between the priests and the temple's general accounts, according to an agreed-upon formula.⁸ But few visitors seek (or can afford) such services. In some temples, some priests are also available for personal consultations, usually outside of the regular activities at the temple and as a private and unofficial arrangement.

In any case, the priests do not actually manage these temples, but instead are paid by the temple management to perform rituals according to the schedule. The head priests are also sometimes expected to meet and brief important religious visitors and government officials and must provide annual reports on their religious activities. The rest of their time may be taken up with reading, study, training, some temple maintenance, or outside practice.⁹

The second important function of these clergy is to legitimize the temple by associating it with an officially recognized religion and a religious organization that is properly registered with the state. Thus the Daoist clergy at a temple are supposed to be registered with a branch of the official Daoist Association, to which they report. There is little doubt that some temple managers consider the priests to be an expensive item in the temple's staffing budget, relative to their contributions to the temple's activities and success, but they cannot avoid paying for these priests from temple income because this is the only way to gain the necessary legitimacy with the state for a large temple. However, complaints about these clergy can be heard among some temple managers. The manager of one temple found that the priests in that temple, although well-paid, could not even manage to perform the chants in unison. The manager hired a music instructor to teach them how to do it and noted the irony that a secular manager was teaching priests how to sing.

⁸ However, there is obviously room for disputes over the division of these performance fees between the priests and the temple's management, and such disputes might be quite common.

⁹ To earn additional income, some temple-based priests provide services to selected worshippers outside the temple and keep the resulting fees. The temple managers might be unable to prevent or control such outside practice. For the priests, however, such activities take them outside the temple—an undoubtedly welcome diversion from temple boredom—and provide a way to extend their networks as well as to increase their income.

The methods of recruitment and the certification of Daoist priests, and hence the quality of their religious instruction and religious understanding, appear to us to be highly variable. In Zhejiang, for instance, it seems that priests and priestesses have considerable freedom to move between temples and that some of them can gain the qualifications to serve as a priest in a temple with minimal or no formal training. One of the priests whom we interviewed had grown up in a poor village and first entered a temple with only a letter of introduction from his local residence committee, stamped by the local police to indicate that he did not have a criminal record. He stayed in a number of temples for various periods, eventually settling in Temple G in Jinhua after discovering that the conditions were much better there than at other temples in the region. Despite his lack of formal training, however, he seemed to us to be a sincere seeker of esoteric knowledge and of immortality (a classic Daoist preoccupation). Other Daoist priests in other temples appear to include refugees from the harsh life of some poor villages in north China or from the fierce competition and insecurity of unskilled labor in the cities.

In other parts of southern China, the head priests at major temples are appointed by the local Daoist Association, which may also get a share of the annual payment to the temple's priests. This payment to the priests usually goes to the head priest, who allocates it among his subordinates and who may also select his subordinates from among candidates for positions at the temple.¹⁰ The head priest thus has considerable power among the priests.

However, the priests are a kind of world within a world in the temple—an enclave of expertise in ritual activities who have little impact on the overall success of the temple in attracting worshippers. No doubt the situation is different in some temples in Shanghai and elsewhere that are more directly controlled and managed by the priests. But in the temples that we have observed, the priests are not the real shapers of the temple's fate or the source of the temple's attractiveness to believers; they are more like bit players in a drama that is under the direction of the officials, temple managers, or entrepreneurs who are the real sources of decision making and of innovation.

As the religio-entrepreneurial abilities of the priests develop, they might increasingly take the initiative within as well as outside of temples. But the Daoist priests and priestesses whom we have seen in Guangdong and Zhejiang do not yet seem able to develop their own independent sources of funds for temple building

¹⁰ For example, at Temple F (see Table 1) near the top of Jinhushan, candidates can arrive at any time from other temples, sometimes unannounced, and are allowed to stay for a few days while the head priest assesses them (impressionistically rather than through formal evaluation) in regard to their personal qualities and abilities. At Temple E in Lanxi, however, the priestesses were recruited from a Hangzhou temple through a contract arranged through the Daoist Association, and at Temple G, the priests are screened and selected by the entrepreneur who runs the temple and who has managed to acquire her own Daoist credentials. Thus there are a variety of ways in which priests are screened and appointed, even within this small sample of temples in two provinces.

and for innovation; and for the success of temples at which they serve, they are still dependent on the initiatives and funds of the skillful entrepreneurs who now manage all but one of these major temples. Therefore we have largely ignored these Daoists in our account of the success and failure of these temples. They are not entirely irrelevant, but it seems that they have little real impact.

VILLAGE TEMPLES

We have confined our analysis to the large temples because they are highly visible to everyone and because their successes (and failures) can be spectacular. However, the most vivid and interesting religious phenomena often occur not within these large public temples, but in the small rural or village temples. Although we do not intend to offer a detailed analysis here, we wish to indicate briefly how these smaller temples operate in relation to the religious market and how the activities in these temples both extend and challenge the reach of the religious economy model.

First, we should note that in regard to supervision or regulation by the state, these rural and village temples often appear to operate below the radar of formal state scrutiny and control. One can observe phenomena at some of these smaller temples that would be considered intolerable if they occurred at most major urban temples. For example, fortune-telling is common inside the smaller temples, spirit-mediums are possessed by deities and deliver greetings and oracles, and animal sacrifices are conducted as part of the ceremonies at some special events.

For many of these events, local officials know what is happening but choose not to interfere. In some cases, they know that they can do little—except to antagonize villagers—if they try to ban or interrupt events that have attracted the support of a large fraction of people in the village. In one village in Guangdong, for instance, local cadres, faced with the imminent opening of an unregistered and thus illegal temple, scheduled a study trip to Macau so that they would not be present when the new shrine was inaugurated (Aijmer and Ho 2000:233). In some areas, cadres have closed or even demolished illegal rural temples. We think that this is exceptional rather than typical.

The intensity that accompanies some of the events at these smaller rural temples is much greater than what is typically observed in the grand urban temples. To give an example: In one village near Lanxi, we observed the eye-dotting ceremony for a new and expensive statue to a deity that had just been installed in the village temple. The villagers had collected funds for several days of opera performances to coincide with the event and had hired an opera troupe from the province. The members of the opera company were housed and fed within the village during the several days of performances and took some of their meals in the village temple. The eye-dotting ceremony (which brings down the spirit of the deity into the statue) was held before 6:00 on a cold December morning. But inside

the temple, the atmosphere was intense and joyful. A chicken was sacrificed, and its blood dripped into a basin of water, which was then sprinkled over the worshippers. A local spirit-medium was present who is periodically possessed by the deity, offering advice and remedies. (Indeed, the deity possessed her during one of our visits to the temple, and the god greeted us in a gruff voice and welcomed us, “the visitors from afar.”)

These kinds of events are very important for understanding the state of Chinese popular religion in the countryside. Although they cannot normally be observed in the large urban temples, they must be included among the variety of religious activities and services that make up the religious market.

In a village where there is only one temple, with no comparable temples nearby offering a similar mix of activities, can we speak of pluralism, competition, innovation, and success or failure? There is no general answer to that question. But it is frequently the case that a variety of religious options is available to worshippers, and the people who offer those services, or design the sites at which the services are offered, often take careful note of the competition and innovate when they see a way to do so that will attract the people whom they wish to serve.

For example, the village temple where we observed the eye-dotting ceremony sits within ten minutes’ walk of a much larger suburban temple, in Lanxi (Temple E), which was languishing with few visitors. As we mentioned above, the managers of that larger temple installed three Buddhist statues in the temple and invited the spirit-medium to conduct her consultations from an office in the temple in their attempts to draw worshippers from the village and the nearby communities back to the main temple. The fact that this has not been notably successful does not undermine our contention that in this particular setting, there is some pluralism, competition among the providers of religious services, innovation resulting from this competition, and evidence that religious consumers are aware of these options and choose among them according to their own preferences and needs.

The other smaller temples in our sample are also in competition with nearby temples, and whether the temple managers compete actively or instead passively wait for worshippers to decide the fate of their temples by either visiting or bypassing them, they occupy a niche in the religious market for smaller temples that draw worshippers mainly from local districts.

For example, Temple A, built on a scenic mountain in southeastern Guangdong in 1989 by a Hong Kong-based believer, sits near several other temples on the same mountain. All of those temples are designed to appeal to tourists and weekend visitors from the nearby town and the surrounding villages. The temple is not large enough to be a major attraction on its own, but many visitors to the mountain also have relatives in Hong Kong and are aware of the deity Wong Tai Sin. The temple is intended to draw some of them to worship as they visit the mountain for recreation or spiritual nourishment. We could theorize a

temple niche within the religious market for tourists visiting mountains and other scenic spots who are also willing to worship deities during such visits.

The calculations and strategies that we have observed in the most successful of the large temples can also be observed among some managers of these midsize temples. The man who founded Temple A on the mountain near his ancestral village also carefully cultivates his relationships with local cadres and officials, donates some of the temple revenue to local schools and other local organizations, promotes the temple carefully in the district, and decorates it for maximum appeal, within his resources.

We could imagine the religious market for temples as comprising several levels, the higher-level temples being intended to draw visitors from a wide area with their outstanding and diverse features, while the small village temples are intended only to draw a trickle of local patrons from the neighborhood and are sustained by such moderate patronage because the costs of running those small temples are very low. Midsize temples such as Temple A, on the mountain, occupy an intermediate position and compete with other nearby midsize temples. They may also draw patrons away from smaller nearby village temples.

Finally, we should note one other feature of some of the small village temples, which constitutes a kind of cultural capital that could be exploited in the future if their managers become aware of it. We have observed that several of these village temples have preserved an earlier version of the cult of this deity, which existed before the great success of one version of the cult of Wong Tai Sin in Hong Kong. This earlier version of the cult involves two deities: the person who achieved immortality and came to be known as Wong Tai Sin and his brother, also surnamed Wong, who is not venerated in the Hong Kong version of the cult and has been forgotten in Hong Kong. The two-saints version of the cult of Wong Tai Sin (i.e., venerating both Wong and his brother) once existed in village temples in both Guangdong and Zhejiang. Those temples were destroyed by the 1960s, and the statues of the deities were smashed or discarded during the Cultural Revolution. But the villagers remembered, and in the 1990s, when they found that they could revive the cult in their villages without repression, they resurrected the two-saints version of the cult in Temples B and D. All the other temples to Wong Tai Sin in mainland China reflect the Hong Kong version of the cult, that is, the version that was brought from Guangzhou to Hong Kong in 1915 (see Chapter 3 of Lang and Ragvald 1993).

These two small village temples thus preserve this original iconography, but the temple-keepers seem unaware that their temples are like museums, windows into the past and an earlier version of this cult. Hence, these small village temples have a historical value that is not captured by variables such as size, the number of visitors, or the flow of donations. Thus they attract anthropologists and historians as well as peasants. But alas, only the peasants are reliable patrons.

CONCLUSIONS

The religious economy model can be usefully applied to the study of temples in Chinese societies. These temples are not passive shrines, but active players. The successes and failures among new temples can be at least partly understood by looking at such factors as location, promotion, innovation, and successful adaptation to the religious interests of potential visitors and worshippers. It should be added that the two most successful temples in our study are operated by entrepreneurs who are also very successful in secular enterprises and who have used some of the same kinds of calculations and strategies in their successful religious enterprises.

Research at a successful temple on a festival day, when large numbers of people visit the temple, helps to provide a picture of these worshippers in regard to age, sex, residential location, and frequency of visiting the temple. We have shown that the Guangzhou temple has attracted worshippers from all ages and both sexes and from areas far beyond the immediate neighborhood of the temple and that the temple's advertising and promotion attract a substantial number of new worshippers while also drawing previous worshippers back for repeat visits.

We have not investigated as many of the smaller suburban or village temples, but outside of the major cities, these smaller temples also serve the religious market and may compete with each other and with the larger temples, albeit more subtly, as worshippers seek the best experiences and outcomes in their search for supernatural aid, social support, and psychological rewards. Because these smaller temples are less easily controlled, they provide some experiences and services that are not available at the large urban temples. Some of these phenomena can be observed *only* in these smaller temples. Thus their relative obscurity, compared to the grand urban temples, is one of their principal advantages.

Our conclusions, however, are based on only a small sample of temples devoted to one particular deity in two coastal provinces. Further research on the significance and impact of other temples in the religious economy in other provinces and cities of China will help to expand and no doubt modify the preliminary view described in this article.

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