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Religious Revival among the Zhuang People in China: Practising “Superstition” and Standardizing a Zhuang Religion

KAO Ya-ning

Abstract: This paper examines two cases of Zhuang religious revival involving multiple actors. It shows how consideration of “superstition” (迷信, *mixin*) places some religious practice outside the institutional framework when discussing the modern concept of religion in China. In this paper, I particularly focus on two main dimensions of religious revival among the Zhuang people. The first is a grassroots dimension that involves the revival of a so-called “superstitious” cult in which Zhuang people along the Sino-Vietnamese border carry out shamanic rituals to make offerings to a powerful chief-turned-deity, Nong Zhigao, and his wife. The second dimension is a top-down dynamic and involves a series of projects conducted by Zhuang officials, scholars and business persons, which aim to standardize a Zhuang religion, known as Mo religion. These two cases of religious revival demonstrate the varied strategies utilized by different actors in response to government policies regarding religion in China.

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Keywords: China, “superstition”, religious revival, Zhuang people, Nong Zhigao, Buluotuo

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Introduction

The first time I went to China (in the winter of 1998) and observed rituals carried out among the Zhuang people in Jingxi, Guangxi, I was told, “We are doing superstition.” I soon discovered – through conversations in Mandarin with Zhuang people – that in China carrying out rituals is generally translated as “performing” or “conducting superstition” (搞迷信, *gao mixin*). A few years later, I asked a Zhuang female ritual practitioner, “What is superstition?” She replied, “Any activities that involve burning incense are superstition.” This term has a negative connotation in China, where those associated with it are considered “backwards” or “uneducated”. I was therefore puzzled by the open (although perhaps ironic) and unembarrassed use of the term to describe practices now openly performed in Jingxi.

In Zhuang rural areas, *memoed* (末婆, *mopo*, female shaman; see below) and *daogong* (道公, Daoist priest) had different reactions to the government’s stance on Falun Gong. By the time I had gained the trust of Daogong Xu, the government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) had started to ban Falun Gong practices, publically labelling them as “superstition”. The mass media repeatedly reported how Falun Gong practitioners regretted carrying out this “evil” practice. Although Falun Gong is a form of *qigong* (气功, healing mediation) only loosely related to religious practice, the government labelled it as a *xiejiao* (邪教, evil cult) and started to carry out an “anti-evil cults” campaign in 1999. The state’s aim was to suppress other religious practices suspected of stirring up anti-government sentiment. Some ritual practitioners whose practices in no way related to *qigong* but were nonetheless defined by the state as “superstition” were concerned by this issue and took steps to protect themselves; others seemed unfazed by the campaign. For example, Daogong Xu initially promised to lend me his ritual texts but rescinded the offer after he heard that the local government might seek to confiscate ritual materials. He instead hid his texts in a remote cavern to prevent them from being destroyed. Memoed Bei, with whom I cooperated for a long time, had a different reaction. I told her that Xu had hidden his texts and asked her, “Are you afraid that the government might come to catch you?” She immediately replied, “I am not at all afraid and have nothing to be confiscated.”

These two differing reactions to state policy demonstrate that local Zhuang people make both distinctions and correlations between the “superstition” they are practising and the “superstitious” practices of this “evil cult” the government is seeking to suppress. Memoed Bei did not see her ritual practice as being related to the “superstition” targeted by the anti-evil cult campaign. Conversely, Daogong Xu did see a connection between the campaign and his own ritual practice and acted accordingly. These varied understandings also bring about different reactions to government policy regarding “illegal” ritual practices and the revival of popular religion. This multiplicity is key to understanding religious practice and its revival in China today. In this paper, I describe two cases of religious revival among the Zhuang people in Guangxi. The two cases demonstrate that different people adopt different strategies to revive religious practices. One strategy, employed by the general public, is to openly practise “superstitious” activities. Another strategy – used by county officials, business persons and scholars – is to make efforts to standardize a single form of Zhuang religion. In the first case, while both Zhuang people and the government identify rituals conducted by female shaman as “superstition”, each operates under a different understanding of what that identity means. In the second case, county officials, business persons and scholars seek to identify Mo religion as an independent religion and locate it outside the category of “superstitious” practice.

Many studies, on both institutional and popular religions, seek to explain the phenomena of religious revival in China and Taiwan (Ashiwa and Wank 2009; Chau 2005, 2006, 2011; Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Katz 1995, 1999; Kipnis 2001; Kuah-Pearce 2006; Li 2011; Overmyer 2009; Poon 2011; Sangren 1987; Weller 1987; Yang 2012; Yang 2004, 2008). Scholars of different disciplines (including anthropology, history, sociology and religion) have taken varied approaches and developed different analytical frameworks to comprehend the survival, revival, innovation and change that have been taking place in China’s religious landscape over the last century.

Yang Fenggang (2012) adopts a politico-economic approach and has developed the concept of red, grey and black religious markets to explain why religions in China have found the space to survive and be revived within the context of state regulation of religion under communist rule. The red religious market refers to state-sanctioned religions, such as Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Protestantism and Dao-

ism. The black religious market refers to those practices officially prohibited by the government, such as underground Catholic activities. The grey religious market refers to all activities that fall into the ambiguous zone in between the red and the black markets. He concludes that the state prohibition on the expansion of red market activities has resulted in the increase of activities within the grey and black markets. In other words, government restriction placed on official religions led to an increase in unofficial religious practices.

Goossaert and Palmer (2011) take an ecological approach to comprehend China's religious landscape and suggest both economic and political elements affect changes over time. Covering the period from the late nineteenth century to the present, their work utilizes both extensive historical sources and rich ethnographic materials on religions across the Chinese cultural sphere. Through these examples, the authors explore the lessening of state control on religion, the dynamics of globalization and the growing prosperity of the Chinese world (Goossaert and Palmer 2011: 241–242). They predict three possible futures of religion in China:

- 1) The state may offer religious freedom and autonomy to religious communities.
- 2) The state may reassert its authority to divide orthodoxy from heterodoxy.
- 3) The state may adopt certain essential features of religion as part of its civilizing project (Goossaert and Palmer 2011: 396–400).

Much scholarly attention has been given to the relationship between state-sanctioned religion and the reactions of multiple actors. Ashiwa and Wank (2009) propose an institutional framework that considers the roles of multiple actors in developing a modern concept of religion within the modern Chinese state. Their theoretical approach goes beyond the dichotomous focus on religion as either under the state's control or against state control and instead examines both religion and the state within the context of complex and dynamic interactions between multiple actors – interactions which may include competition, adaptation and even cooperation. This approach regards religion not just as an individual belief but also as a concept, and it aims to explore how this concept of religion was and continues to be developed by both individual actors and state bureaucratic legal structures. Adam Chau's (2005, 2006) work on popular religion in a con-

temporary northern province in China also considers multiple actors and offers a good example of how to elaborate the institutional framework. His meticulous fieldwork reveals how local state agents and agencies legitimated a local popular religious cult by joining a state-sanctioned religious association.

Chau also summarizes two main strategies that local actors use when “doing religion” in China to negotiate with the party-state as a means to obtain the state’s legitimation (Chau 2011: 6–7). The first strategy is to come under the umbrella of one of the five officially recognized religions. The second strategy is to adapt religious activities and disguise them and other “superstitious elements” so that they are understood as local “cultural heritage”. This second strategy works in tandem with the first to offer another channel to legitimate religious activities. Religious activities or local cults will be protected if they are identified by the local government and approved by the central government as “cultural heritage”, either tangible or intangible. Once this happens, these activities no longer fall under the authority of the Religious Affairs Bureau, but rather under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture (see Goossaert and Palmer 2011: 342–344).

In Chau’s edited book, authors adopt a dynamic, processual and site-specific understanding of “tradition” (Chau 2011: 3). In the various examples explored, social actors make and remake traditions – particularly religious traditions – in response to their specific social contexts. Chau argues that the human sciences typically regard tradition as the sum total of customary practices from a static and mechanical perspective. He also offers two alternative definitions of “tradition”:

- 1) Tradition is equated with the notion of backwardness in all modernist regimes.
- 2) Tradition is a device that connects the present to the past.

Chau states that the second definition of “tradition” and the instrumental uses of tradition demonstrated in Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992) are less useful in understanding the revival of tradition in China. As Chau explains, there are three conditions that make the revitalization and innovation of culture and tradition possible among communities in contemporary China:

- 1) Available elements of tradition (e.g. symbols, rituals, knowledge, texts, paraphernalia and other material culture, ritual specialists, methods of transmission and networks)
- 2) Active religious practitioners and ordinary people
- 3) A suitable political and economic environment

Chau argues that all three elements have to meet for revitalization and innovation to occur (Chau 2011: 3–4).

Studies of Chinese religion or Chinese religious revival do not always engage with the discussion of tradition, while research on religious revival among Chinese ethnic minorities often connects to the theme of revival of cultural and religious practices. Moreover, religious practices are often treated as a significant part of the traditions of Chinese ethnic minorities. Studies of religion and ritual practices among ethnic minorities have often focused on those groups for whom religion acts as an important marker of their ethnic identity. This includes research on Islam among Chinese Muslims and the Hui people (Gladney 1996, 2003; McCarthy 2005), Tibetan Buddhism among Tibetans (see Huber 2002; Makley 2007, 2010) and Theravada Buddhism among the Dai people (McCarthy 2010). Also researched are ethnic people who have converted to Christianity, such as the Miao (see Diamond 1996; Tapp 1989); those who practise a sanctioned religion which has taken on characteristics of its own, such as Yao Daoism (see Lemoine 1982; Litzinger 1995, 2000); and those groups that have developed religious practice into a standardized form like the Dongba religion of the Naxi people (see Chao 1996; McKhann 2010).

The Zhuang are the most populous ethnic minority in China with over 18 million people. English-language literature on the Zhuang people and Zhuang religion, however, is sparse compared to studies on other ethnic groups in China. This body of English-language research on Zhuang religion includes David Holm's (2003, 2004) analysis of ritual texts and the Zhuang writing system. It also consists of James Wilkerson's (2007) investigation into the relationship between state-sanctioned Daoism and local ritual practice. While there are many volumes in Chinese literature on Zhuang religion, they focus primarily on ritual practice as folk religion and culture. For instance, the Chinese-language monograph entitled *Zhuang Folk Religion and Culture* describes how Zhuang religion is affected by Chinese Daoism and Buddhism (Yu 2003).

The present paper seeks not only to enrich the English-language literature on religious revival among ethnic groups in China, but also to fill a gap in Ashiwa and Wank's (2009) modernist framework of religion, which regards "religion" as a constructed category and its definition as 'individual belief' arising from modern state formation" (Ashiwa and Wank 2009: 5). In other words, they see religion in relation to the modern state. Such an institutional framework can only explain beliefs and rituals that are somehow associated with a modernist framework of "religion" or official religions. It thus fails to consider other religious practices that parallel the institutional framework, as many instances of "superstition" do. As the authors themselves note, there are numerous beliefs and rituals outside the modernist framework of "religion" that are enacted as part of the daily lives of people and ritual of communities (Ashiwa and Wank 2009: 7).

By adopting the multiple actors approach as an example of such practices, this paper demonstrates how "superstition" modifies the institutional framework itself. In the two cases explored here, we see multiple actors – including men and women, officials, scholars, business persons, ritual practitioners and participants – all involved in Zhuang religious revival. In contemporary Zhuang society, some actors keep a distance from or perhaps do not understand the modernist framework of "religion"; instead, they carry out religious practice according to their own understanding of "superstition". At the same time, others are familiar with the modernist framework and actively seek to place their religious practice within it. The first case in this paper elaborates religious practice excluded from the modernist framework; in contrast, the second case describes religious practice taking place within the modernist framework. The kind of actor and the category of religious practice are complementary, and a complete understanding of religious revival in China requires consideration of both.

One Coin, Two Sides: "Superstition" and Religion

Stephan Feuchtwang's research draws on Chinese-language sources and gives a clear definition of "religion", as opposed to "superstition", in the PRC context:

"Religion" (*zongjiao*) in contemporary China statements usually refers to the major religions of the world. "Superstition" (*mixin*), on

the other hand, is a derogatory reference to lists of activities which always, when they are given, include various kinds of fortune-telling, or “fatalism”, spirit-possession, “witches”, and “sorcerers”, festivals, the worship of gods and placation of ghosts and building small temples (Feuchtwang 1989: 45).

However, “superstition” is not a new concept developed by the PRC and it must be considered along with the definition of religion in the formation of a modern Chinese state. “Superstition” as commonly used today refers to those religious practices not belonging to sanctioned religions. However, as Poon (2011: 34) points out, both “superstition” and *yinsi* (淫祠, a term used in imperial times to refer to any improper cults or rites conducted by what was considered to be improper persons) were fluid terms, whose definitions depended on the user’s political and cultural disposition and interests. The religion–superstition dichotomy is similar to the orthodoxy–heterodoxy dichotomy in imperial China. The Chinese imperial court distinguished orthodox rites from heterodox ones as far back as the Eastern Han dynasty (AD 25–220) (Sutton 2004). Thus, the line between “superstition” and religion has always been ambiguous.

Since the late Qing dynasty (1644–1912), the concept of “superstition” has appeared frequently in Chinese media in a context where-in officials and intellectuals have attempted to promote a popular understanding of evolution and rational (i.e. “scientific”) knowledge over “superstition”. Eradicating “superstition” was seen as a strategy to reform and civilize common people and as a necessary step in building a strong modern state. In the early twentieth century the term “superstition” referred to any worship that lacked a scientific basis and included worship practices from imperial times, such as ancestor worship and sacrifices to Heaven (Poon 2011: 27–35). The Republican government only recognized five organized religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism), and all other folk religious practices were classified as “superstition”. During this time, there was a debate between different groups of officials regarding the standards of how to maintain or remove shrines and temples (Nedostup 2009: 79–87). In order to promote modernization, many temples were transformed into public schools; temple property was used to house educational institutions from as early as the May Fourth Movement (1915–1921). Between 1928 and 1930, the Nationalist government forcefully carried out a programme aimed at

eradicating “superstition”. Laws were established banning “superstition professions” (e.g. diviners, spirit mediums and faith healers) and trade in “superstitious items” (e.g. ritual offerings and spirit money). Various scholars regard the Nationalist government’s plan to wipe out “superstitious activity” to have failed (Goossaert and Palmer 2011: 63; Nedostup 2009) because state agents and the Kuomintang (KMT), or Guomindang, party members were divided on how best to implement the anti-superstition campaign. While acknowledging regional variations, Poon (2011: 147) argues that the anti-superstition campaign did change the religious and cultural landscape of urban Guangzhou between 1900 and 1937.

After 1949 the communist government not only sought to eradicate “superstition”, but also assumed the role of manager of religious institutions – although the official regulations and policies towards religion have continued to change over time. As during the previous regime, only Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism are considered “religions” in the PRC. Yang Fenggang (2012) describes the changes in the regulation of religion over time and distinguishes four distinct periods over a stretch of 60 years. The third period (1966–1979) witnessed the strictest regulation because “all religious venues were closed down, and religion was banned” (Yang 2012: 63). The fourth period (1979–2009) was marked by limited government tolerance of religious groups, although the regulation of religious institutions again gradually increased over time (Yang 2012: 63). Therefore, although the PRC has relaxed its policies on religion since the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee in 1978, the regulatory system for religion remains strong. For example, despite the 1982 PRC Constitution affirming the freedom of religious belief, people are only free to have or not have religious belief; it does not mean that people are free to carry out “superstitious” activities. Religions other than the five officially recognized by the PRC are considered potentially subversive. This idea is clearly expressed in the official summary of CCP policy on religion published in 1982 – known as “Document 19” (Potter 2003: 13) – which states that the PRC government punishes religious believers who are considered to “endanger the society and public interests” (Potter 2003: 16). Moreover, the PRC has acted in keeping with its position, as can be seen in the aforementioned example: after the highly publicized protest by Falun Gong practitioners in April

1999, the government labelled this *qigong* movement an “evil cult” and actively sought to eliminate it (Ownby 2008; Zhu 2004).

In regards to national minorities, PRC administrative organizations and speeches given by leaders display a conceived correlation between religion and nationality in governing China as a multinational state. For example, the State Council’s director of Religious Affairs, Ye Xiaowen, identified 12 minorities that can be classified as Buddhist and 10 that can be classified as Islamic (Sutton and Kang 2009: 196). The Religious Affairs Bureau, the CCP’s United Front Work Department and the Public Security Department are the main organizations in charge of religion, and they all operate separately. However, within provincial, city and county governments, the administration of religion and nationalities is conducted in the same department or commission.

The Zhuang, the most populous nationality minority in China, is not one of the 22 minorities that have been classified as Buddhist or Islamic and thus do not have a clearly defined religion. Regardless of this, the Zhuang people – like other national minorities – have revived their religious practices in the post-Mao era. While the PRC government claims ultimate authority in distinguishing between “superstition” and “religion” and carries out policies accordingly (as I will show), the Zhuang people react differently to state policies and operate under a different set of interpretations.

Zhuang Religion and Zhuang Ritual Specialists

In *Collections of Materials on Primitive Religion of Each Ethnic Group in China*, the religion of the Zhuang (based on ancestor worship and nature worship) is considered to have been influenced by Chinese Daoism and Chinese Buddhism since the end of the Western Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 8) (Lü and He 1996: 472–476). Chinese-language scholars divide the Zhuang religion into several categories according to the ritual specialist involved in particular religious activities. The categories include *shigongjiao* (师公教), *mojiao* (麽教), *daogongjiao* (道公教) and *wujiao* (巫教). *Shigongjiao* refers to the religion of ritual masters and involves ritual specialists called *shigong* (师公) who practise masked dancing and worship the Three Primordials – the generals Tang, Ge and Zhou (Yang 2007). The *Mojiao* or Mo religion is associated with *mogong* (麽公, vernacular ritual specialists) who are

able to transcribe and read manuscripts written in Zhuang characters and who are said to make offerings to a mythic god, Buluotuo, and goddess, Muliujia (Huang 2006). *Daogongjiao* or Zhuang Daoism integrates Daoism and indigenous ritual practices that occur in Zhuang areas (Xu 2007). The ritual specialists associated with these practices are the *daogong*. The *Wujiao* or *Wu* religion is also referred to as “shamanism” and entails spirit mediums and direct communication between the living and the spirit worlds (Ling 1993). The ritual practitioners of *Wujiao* are the *memoed* (female) and *gemoed* (male).

Zhuang villagers and ritual specialists carry out numerous rites in households, villages and multi-village alliances. These include rites of passage for individuals, festivals and rituals for averting disasters. Some require a particular ritual specialist, such as a *mogong*, to perform a ritual for an ancestral cult (Holm 2003) or a *memoed* for a rite concerning children’s growth (Kao 2002, 2011). Rituals organized by a multi-village alliance and held in temples require the cooperation of several different ritual specialists. For example, when making offerings to local deities in a rite held once every three years, villagers in Pingjiang Valley, Jingxi, Guangxi, usually hired both Daoist priests and a female spirit medium (Wilkerson 2007).

In south-western Guangxi – specifically the three counties of Jingxi, Debao and Napo, where this research was conducted – there are three kinds of ritual specialists among the Zhuang people: (1) *daogong*, (2) *mogong* and (3) *memoed* (also called 末婆, *mopo*) and *gemoed*. Both *daogong* and *mogong* are exclusively male. The fact that there are no female *daogong* or *mogong* in Zhuang society in Jingxi reflects imperial incorporation policies of the border areas, which permitted a limited number of men to go to school and learn Chinese characters but excluded women. Today, *daogong* make use of Chinese texts, which they chant in a south-western Mandarin dialect. *Mogong* have books written in Zhuang script and conduct rituals in the Yang dialect of the Zhuang language. Because *daogong* can read both Chinese and Zhuang characters (the Zhuang characters are based on Chinese characters), they now double as *mogong*. *Memoed* and *gemoed* (female and male shamans), however, do not have books. Their practice falls within a completely oral tradition and they build their rituals on what and who they encounter on spiritual journeys in the company of spiritual soldiers and horses (*beengma* in the Zhuang language) and dead ritual masters (*ba* in the Zhuang language).

In Zhuang culture, each individual is understood as having 12 spirits. If too many of these 12 spirits leave the body, that person may become sick or even die. Therefore, people rely on ritual specialists to take care of their various spirits at different stages of life when spirits are easily affected. The Zhuang people in Jingxi distinguish rituals into “grand” and “small” categories. The rituals in the small category require only one kind of ritual specialist. *Daogong*, *mogong* and *memoed* or *gemoed* are all able to conduct small rituals – for example, for the well-being of children and old people, the collection of people’s lost souls or dispelling bad spirits from a household.

Conversely, grand rituals require multiple ritual specialists. For example, when an individual household’s ancestors ask for a grand sacrifice or when a new house is completed, *daogong* and *memoed* or *gemoed* together conduct a rite whereby a pig is sacrificed for the ancestors. During community rites for the completion of a temple or community rites that take place once every three years, both *daogong* and *memoed* or *gemoed* are invited to carry out a grand ritual and to make offerings to community deities. In the initiation ceremony for an apprentice *daogong*, a *memoed* or *gemoed*, the apprentice’s ritual masters and at least one presiding *daogong* are needed to hold the ceremony. In the annual ritual intended to renew the ritual specialist’s power – no matter what kind of ritual specialist they are – the specialist’s household invites every kind of ritual specialist to come and carry out the ritual.

Some rituals require a specific ritual specialist. For example, only *daogong* are able to carry out a funeral and the required series of rites for the dead. However, if the funeral being held is for a ritual specialist of any type, *daogong*, *mogong* and *memoed* or *gemoed* all attend and carry out the rituals together.

Even though *daogong*, *mogong* and *memoed* or *gemoed* are all needed to collaborate in grand rituals, competition exists among them in conducting many small rituals, especially if a village supports more than one ritual specialist. For instance, the two *memoed* in Big Village where I conducted my research, Memoed Fragrance and Memoed Beauty, never got along well. Big Village carried out a ritual in the village temple of the god of agriculture every year, and the two *memoed* took turns carrying out the rites. They never made appearances at each other’s rituals. In Big Village, they have different villagers as supporters. *Daogong*, *mogong* and *memoed* or *gemoed* usually only work

with other ritual practitioners they are familiar with and seldom change their partners. Once villagers decide to support specific ritual specialists, they remain loyal and show them proper respect by not interfering in such competition between specialists.

Memoeds and *gemoeds* often deal with the spirits of the living, manage the spirits of people who have experienced a bad death (for instance, those who died from accidents) and mediate between the living and their ancestors or deities. Most importantly, they are able to deliver fermented wine to ancestors, deceased ritual masters, gods and goddesses. Because the *memoeds* and *gemoeds* are able to mediate between human beings and the spirits, numerous family or community members always sit beside them during household or communal rituals to listen carefully to what the ancestors or deities have to say.

Memoeds and *gemoeds* play a more central role in Zhuang society than do most spirit mediums in Han society in southern China (Cai 2001; Zhan 1998; Zhong 1994; Wolf 1990). *Memoeds* and *gemoeds* in Zhuang society can access more kinds of spirits than other ritual specialists – including gods, goddesses, ancestors, souls (*kevaen* or *vuen* in the Zhuang Language) and ghosts – and can perform both household and communal rituals. They invite deities without assistance from *daogong* or *mogong*. When possessed, they converse with their audiences without interpreters. Through their mouths, the gods, goddesses and ancestors make pronouncements that are sometimes cast as dialogues between ritual participants and spirits. The proclamations made under these circumstances are taken seriously. For example, during one ceremony, the stove god of my host family complained that the brother-in-law had cooked dog and beef in the house. After such a complaint, he never did so in the home again. In another example, a small statue of Chairman Mao that had been placed in the room housing the family altar was moved to the balcony after through a *memoed*, a deity explained that Chairman Mao dealt with national affairs and should not be in the home. Apart from family affairs, the pronouncements of community gods made during rituals are often the motivation for temple reconstruction.

Case One: Conducting “Superstition” – The Nong Zhigao Cult

In China, there are numerous local cults at various levels of the community; Zhuang communities are no exception. In Guangxi, many temples or shrines dedicated to a local chieftain are built at the head of villages or in fields. One example is the shrines dedicated to the Cen *tusi* (土司, local chieftain) clan, which are built everywhere in western Guangxi. The Cen *tusi* clan was the most powerful in the area from the Yuan dynasty through to the early Qing dynasty. Another example is certain temples dedicated to specific historical figures that became deities – Cen Tianbao, for example, was honoured with a temple built in a field outside the village where he fell from a horse and died.

Among numerous local chieftains in western Guangxi and eastern Yunnan, where the densest populations of Zhuang people live, Nong Zhigao is arguably the most important historical figure. Nong Zhigao was a chieftain of the Nong clan, which settled along the Sino-Vietnamese border in the first half of the eleventh century. Nong Zhigao established his second kingdom, the Southern Heavenly Kingdom, in Ande in 1049 and his third in Yongzhou (today's Nanning) in 1053. He waged a series of rebellions against both the Vietnamese Kingdom and the Song Empire and succeeded in taking some of the most important Song cities along the West River, reaching as far as Guangzhou in 1053. However, Nong Zhigao failed to enter the city of Guangzhou and returned to Yongzhou. Eventually, he and his troops were defeated at Kunlun Pass near Yongzhou in the first month of 1054 and he, his family and troops fled west to Yunnan. Some documents record that Nong Zhigao's head was chopped off by the Dali king and sent to the Song emperor Renzong as a gift, while other sources claim that he fled further west and disappeared.

In imperial Chinese history, Nong Zhigao has been described as a southern barbarian and rebel. Nevertheless, this official interpretation did not prohibit local people from paying respect to their powerful leader. After the PRC was established in 1949, Nong Zhigao's rebellions were re-evaluated in official documentation; he is now interpreted as a Zhuang hero rather than a barbarian or rebel. Likewise, those rituals that would have been carried out privately or se-

cretly before the re-evaluation are now being revised and performed in public.

The people along the Sino-Vietnamese border pay respect to Nong Zhigao in various activities. In Cao Bang, a northern Vietnamese province that was Nong Zhigao's home prefecture, three of the temples dedicated to his cult remain active today (Anderson 2007: 173–179). In several Chinese villages in Maguan, Yunnan province, the day Nong Zhigao and his troops passed through around 1,000 years ago is commemorated each year with a ritual including the sacrifice of a pig or cow (Luo 2012). In Ayong, Guangnan, Yunnan, members of the Nong clan make offerings to their hero ancestor in a village temple during the Tomb Sweeping Festival, and other villagers do so on the day Nong Zhigao died (Interview 1 2007). In the town of Ande in Jingxi, Guangxi, Nong Zhigao is worshipped as a guardian spirit of the forest. According to legend, his wife *Yalun* – the *lun* goddess (Kao 2009) whose name refers to the *lun* song genre popular in south-western Guangxi – always accompanies him. In fact, people in Ande are not only familiar with this song genre but also believe that Nong Zhigao's wife lived in the Ande area and was known for singing this type of song.

On 10 March 2005, the Zhuang people in Ande organized the Festival to Commemorate the National Hero Nong Zhigao (纪念民族英雄侬智高活动节, *jìnián mínzú yìnxìng Nong Zhigao buodong jie*; hereafter, the Nong Zhigao Festival). The motivation to hold this festival was to promote Ande and raise money for a Nong Zhigao memorial hall to attract tourists. The festival organizers said that they were reviving a tradition; however, because the details of how the annual offering to Nong Zhigao had been carried out in Ande before the Cultural Revolution had not been recorded, the festival was actually organized according to the recollections of elders and the input of festival organizers. The festival initially intended to exclude any “superstitious” activity, but – as I found out – two *memoed* rituals held before the official ceremony added a “superstitious” flavour.

Activities of the Nong Zhigao Cult in Ande in 2005

On 7 March 2005, three days before the Nong Zhigao Festival, I walked into Ande High School to watch a rehearsal of the performances included in the festival programme. The routines I saw consisted of lion and dragon dancing, which are also performed during Chi-

nese New Year. Unexpectedly, after the rehearsal, several men in town told me privately that Memoed Beauty from Big Village would be conducting rituals in conjunction with the festival. This contradicted local residents' claims that the Nong Zhigao Festival would exclude any "superstitious" activities (e.g. rituals conducted by a *memoed* or by a *daogong*). Knowing that I observed Memoed Fragrance wherever she was invited to conduct rituals and that Memoed Beauty was considered the best *memoed* in Ande, they suggested that I observe the rituals.

Two days later (9 March), in the early morning, Memoed Beauty and women from the Six Flags village alliance gathered in a huge dark cavern near Zhaoyang Pass. Carrying a mat for Memoed Beauty to sit on, chairs for themselves and offerings for the spirits, the women were excited and breathless as they climbed the hill leading to the cavern. The ritual inside the cavern began with Memoed Beauty sitting on the mat and chanting to summon spirits. The women surrounded her and listened as she chanted and sang. Her singing echoed in the huge karst cavern. The women met again later that same afternoon in front of the Nong Zhigao temple in the Yamen Forest where Memoed Beauty carried out a longer ritual to deliver wine to Nong Zhigao and other deities of Ande Valley.

Each of the two rituals served a specific function. The first legitimated the activity as the revival of an established "tradition" because elders in Ande recalled that the Nong Zhigao commemorative ceremony in the past began by inviting the *lun* goddess in the cavern. The second sought the blessing of the deities in Ande to ensure the commemorative festival would be successful by conducting a private ritual before a public grand activity. Without such precautions, it was believed that accidents or misfortunes would be likely to occur. These rituals are examples of the strategies adopted by locals to revive traditional Zhuang religious practice. Participants considered the rituals conducted by the *memoed* on the eve of the Nong Zhigao Festival to be an essential practice.

I will not describe the two rituals in detail but instead take three excerpts from Nong Zhigao's speech and a decision made between the *lun* goddess and ritual participants to illustrate how, through the *memoed*, the spirits commented on the ongoing ritual and the festival planned for the next day. (For full transcription of Nong Zhigao's comments, see Kao 2009: 339–363).

Excerpts from Nong Zhigao's Speech

As demonstrated below, Nong Zhigao's comments on the ritual and the festival made through Memoed Beauty achieved three things. First, they legitimized the ritual by saying that it was created in ancient times (Nong Zhigao Comment I). Second, they contrasted old people's traditional practice with young people's entertainment (Nong Zhigao Comment II). Third, they spoke of the need to hide yin but display yang (Nong Zhigao Comment III).

Nong Zhigao Comment I

The elders are really intelligent
 They came forward throwing in their energy
 Vying to outdo each other in their efforts
 and really made Nong Zhigao's rebellion stand tall
 Nong Zhigao
 Now
 In the past, they called it Forest of the Chieftain's Yamen
 And now everyone says "rebellion"
 Commemorating Nong Zhigao's rebellion
 Ah, yin and yang are based on the same principle
 Ah, one inside and one outside
 From ancient times onwards, older generations created this, really
 When you have food to eat do not forget your ancestors
 Indeed, when you have clothes to wear do not forget the ancestor's
 kindness
 It is said every village should seek them out
 Go along every road and invite them
 The villages below and the slopes above, Six Flags and Four Villages
 The whole market and the entire street of shops

In this comment, through Memoed Beauty, Nong Zhigao complimented the elders for carrying out this ritual related to his rebellion. Then he mentioned the name of the place in which the ritual was being conducted: Forest of the Chieftain's Yamen, as it was previously known. He also acknowledged that the purpose of the ritual was to commemorate his rebellion. He then said, "The yin and yang are based on the same principle". *Daogong* also have such a phrase in their ritual texts. We do not really know what the principle refers to, but

according to the eleventh line, yin and yang refers to inside and outside. Memoed Beauty explained in a later interview that yin refers to rituals that involve the dead and yang refers to rituals that involve the living (Interview 2 2005).

The Zhuang people do not have a single term meaning “tradition”, but Nong Zhigao’s comment clearly revealed that the practice of inviting ancestors (and making offerings to them) as thanks for having food to eat and clothes to wear was created in ancient times. He further referred to seeking spirits in every village, place, street and market.

The second of Nong Zhigao’s comments mentioned that his commemoration required entertainment and again emphasized that yin and yang are based on the same principle.

Nong Zhigao Comment II

Ah nevertheless, commemoration,
 commemoration requires entertainment
 According to what was said just now,
 yin and yang are based on the same principle
 Yin divides, yang divides

Nong Zhigao’s third comment is taken from a conversation with ritual participants on the issue of yin and yang.

Nong Zhigao Comment III

Nong Zhigao:	The centre and the region support us Ah, we will have a corner tomorrow
Ritual participants:	Indeed, we will have a corner People will come from every place tomorrow
Nong Zhigao:	Come from every place, come on every road But we are yin and so we first hide, so Oh yin must, yin must first hide away We, however, are opening the eyes of the yang But we need the yang to open their eyes

The first line is very political. Nong Zhigao said that central and local governments supported the commemorative festival to Nong Zhigao,

although the ritual in question was actually a “superstitious” activity in the eyes of the government. He said, “We will have a corner tomorrow”. We do not know exactly what “a corner” means based on this single line, but the ritual participants’ response (“Indeed, we will have a corner; people will come from every place”) makes it clear: Many people will come to Ande and thus come to know Ande.

Nong Zhigao made a further comment on yin and yang. Nong Zhigao classified himself as yin by saying, “we are yin so we have to hide”. This means that the ritual, as well as the spirits and humans involved in the ritual, are categorized as yin. He continued to define yang by saying, “we need the yang to open their eyes”. In other words, the yin had to hide but the yang had to appear during the public ceremony.

Nong Zhigao’s comments display a strategy used by Zhuang people in Ande to deal with the PRC government’s policy on religion. The *memoed*’s ritual is a typical “superstitious” activity, but local people see it as necessary to ensure a successful public ceremony. An indigenous solution is to have a private “superstitious” ritual before the public commemorative ceremony. From the perspective of local people and in terms of local classification of ritual types, the “superstitious” ritual is a private ritual for Ande people and is not open to outsiders. Nong Zhigao’s comments confirmed that the ritual they were performing that day was created in ancient times. Therefore, current ritual participants are not the creators of this “superstitious” activity; they are merely following a “tradition” that has been set by their ancestors. Yin and yang, as well as inside and outside, are metaphors of the local private ritual and the public festival. Elders organize the *memoed*’s yin rituals that deal with local spirits to assure a successful festival the next day. Young people plan to have yang entertainment to attract guests from the outside to the festival. Although Nong Zhigao expressed that yin would hide and yang would appear, yin and yang or private ritual and public ceremony are seemingly not clearly separated.

Inviting the *Lun* Goddess

Immediately following Nong Zhigao’s speech, ritual participants asked Memoed Beauty to invite the *lun* goddess to attend the Nong Zhigao Festival. One of key organizers of the two rituals, Mother Xian, aged over 70 and a good singer, performed *lun* songs with the

lun goddess. The antiphonal songs continued for over 40 minutes. Mother Xian, representing other ritual participants, encouraged the *lun* goddess to appear in the ceremony the next day through singing. The *lun* goddess initially refused because she was afraid that her appearance was not beautiful and her voice was not good enough. Eventually, Mother Xian convinced her to attend the festivities the next day. As in the official festivities, the *lun* goddess and *lun* singing were recognized as important aspects of Ande's traditional festival; therefore, they were a part of this revival. However, her "revival" did not mean she was expected by official organizers to show up at the next day's ceremony or publicly appear in a spirit form as invited by the ritual participants. Festival organizers had instead chosen two middle-aged folk singers to perform lyrics prepared in advance of the festival, and arrangements had been made for a painting of the *lun* goddess to be erected in her cavern. Nevertheless, the *lun* goddess possessed Memoed Beauty the following day and participated in the festival as a singer, although her presence was unknown to those who had not participated in the previous day's ritual. The process was dramatic and full of politics.

As mentioned above, elders' recollections of the traditional Nong Zhigao Festival as it was held before the 1950s claim that the official festival begins in the cavern of the *lun* goddess. Because one of the slogans of the Nong Zhigao Festival is to revive tradition, there was no other option but to begin the day's activities in this cavern. On the morning of 10 March, the day of the Nong Zhigao Festival, Memoed Beauty suddenly blacked out while feeding chickens. She took off running towards the cavern and did not greet anyone she encountered on her way. She later described how both her hands were still stained with chicken food when she regained consciousness. Seeing her run, some of the ritual participants of the previous day followed her, unable to keep up. The huge gathering of official performance groups was also on its way to the cavern, where the procession initiating the official festival would begin.

When they arrived at the cavern, Memoed Beauty was sitting on a rock in a dark corner of the cavern. Awakened by loud music, she descended carefully down to the ground. There she met several old women, most of whom had joined in the rituals the previous day. As the official proceedings of the festival began at the mouth of the cave, Memoed Beauty and Mother Xian sang *lun* antiphonal songs inside

the cavern, ignoring the lion dance and loud music outside. As the procession made its way down the mountainside, the *lun* goddess placed herself ahead of the two middle-aged folk signers as they were being photographed by the press. The yin (the *lun* goddess), which had been hiding for over 50 years, had appeared in public with confidence.

I witnessed the re-emergence of the Nong Zhigao Cult in Ande in 2005 and have since heard about its subsequent activities. Every year, the same *memoed* (Memoed Beauty) leads Six Flag villagers and Ande town residents through the same sequence of events. In 2005 I could sense that some of the ceremonies had to be improvised, but their repetition in the following years has incorporated them into an established repertoire. Memoed Beauty is now hired annually to conduct rituals and make offerings to the spirits of Nong Zhigao and the *lun* goddess. Currently, the local people are certain that these ceremonies have always been their “tradition”.

Case Two: Standardizing a Zhuang Religion – Mo Religion

As described above, in March of 2005 women and *memoed* in Ande, Jingxi, conducted two rituals which were a demonstration of the most “superstitious” category of religious practice as defined by the PRC government. One month later in Tianyang, the Buluotuo Song Festival was held in honour of the Zhuang apical ancestor Buluotuo and his companion Muliujia, a female deity. This festival featured a different kind of ritual specialist, a *mogong*. The Buluotuo Song Festival was the outcome of a long process which sought to develop Mo religion in accordance with the Chinese government’s definition of “religion”. Primarily carried out by male government officials, business persons and scholars, this process entailed mythmaking, standardization, the removal of “superstitious” elements from religious practice and the seeking of legitimization in scholarly circles; it represents an alternative strategy for reviving Zhuang religion.

From Texts to Religion

Promoting the practice of *mogong* ritual specialists as a Zhuang religion can be traced back to projects dedicated to collecting and collating

texts on Grandpa Luotuo (洛陀公公, *luotuogonggong*) in 1958 and *mogong* ritual texts in the 1980s. In 1986 an office in charge of collecting, collating, editing and publishing ancient texts of minority nationalities in Guangxi (广西壮族自治区少数民族古籍整理出版规划领导小组及办公室, *Guangxi zhuangzu zizhibiqu shaoshu minzu guji zibengli chubanshui lingdao xiaozu ji bangongshi*; hereafter, Guangxi Ancient Manuscript Office) was formally established. Researchers started to collect and translate old texts in written Zhuang, such as *mogong* texts and song booklets.

The characters used in these texts are known as *gu zhuang zi* (古壮字, ancient Zhuang characters), or *swandip* in Zhuang, referring to “uncooked” letters” (Holm 2004: 13). Based on Chinese characters and very ancient, this Zhuang script is rarely used today – with the exception of a few groups (Holm 2003, 2004, 2008). The policies and projects involving Zhuang texts and the meaning of Zhuang characters demonstrate an ideology that values literacy and civilization. The display of the *mogong*’s scriptures shows that some ethnic groups in China, such as the Zhuang people, had accepted and adopted Chinese characters and even used them to develop their own literature. Thus, even though the Zhuang as a group are not considered to be completely civilized, Zhuang character texts – transcribed and recited generation after generation by *mogong* – demonstrate a degree of civilization.

Several selected collections of *mogong* texts were published in 1991 and 2004, such as *The Baeu Rodo Scriptures – An Annotated Translation* (Zhang 1991, 2004). The idea behind such anthologies is to create a standard Zhuang canon. In 2004, the eight-volume *Photographic Reproduction of Buluotuo Mogong Scriptures of the Zhuang: An Annotated Translation* was published to correct the methodological shortcomings of the 1991 version (Zhang 2004). On 20 May 2006, the State Council of the PRC approved the status of *mogong* texts as level one intangible cultural heritage.

Government officials, business persons and journalists were the first group involved in reporting and promoting Ganzhuang Mountain as the birthplace of the Zhuang people’s apical ancestor, Buluotuo (Longcheng Youhun 2011). In 2006, a Zhuang writer, Gu Di, visited the Baise Basin and discovered Ganzhuang Mountain to be the birthplace of Buluotuo. He shared his finding with various journalists and Peng Yang, president of the Nanning Institute of

International Folk Song and Art (南宁国际民歌艺术研究院, *Nanning guoji minge yishu yanjiu yuan*, hereafter Nanning Art Company), which is not a research institute but rather a company that sells cultural products and designs culture activities. He proposed the promotion of Ganzhuang Mountain as a site for cultural tourism and convinced the government to fund his proposal.

However, the Zhuang academic circle was not entirely convinced of the validity of Gu Di's "discovery". Thus in order to obtain the assessment of scholars, the Tianyang government and Nanning Art Company organized three academic meetings on Buloutuo between August and September 2002. The first meeting on 8 August involved only a few scholars based in Nanning, government officials from Tianyang and Baise, and many journalists. The second meeting in early September invited a few famous Zhuang scholars from the Central University for Nationalities – such as Liang Tingwang and Huang Fengxian (the university's former and current vice president, respectively) – and many other professors and researchers based in Guangxi. They supported Gu Di's discovery and the development of Ganzhuang Mountain. The last meeting involved one significant Zhuang politician, Zhang Shengzhen, who was previously the vice president of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. In addition, several key members of the Association of Zhuang Studies in Guangxi (hereafter, Guangxi Zhuang Association) were in attendance. The presence of these scholars confirmed Gu Di's discovery and signalled their backing of the Tianyang government and Nanning Art Company's proposal.

The Tianyang government established a committee to lead the development of Buluotuo culture and tourism and signed contracts with Nanning Art Company and the Guangxi Zhuang Association to prepare for the first song festival in Ganzhuang Mountain. Within a year and due to the cooperation of the three parties (i.e. government, Nanning Art Company and Guangxi Zhuang Association), the first song festival in Ganzhuang Mountain was successfully held from 8 to 10 April 2003. Since then, the festival has been held annually, attracting not only national and international tourists but also scholars. This festival is considered a success, both economically (having produced 15 million CNY in revenue in 2006) and culturally (for having successfully introduced Zhuang folk culture to a wider audience).

Scholars who attended the meetings and participated in short-term fieldwork published books on Buluotuo to legitimate the festival, such as *Search for Buluotuo: Investigation and Research on Buluotuo in Ganzhuang Mountain, Tianyang, Guangxi* (Qin 2004). The eight contributors to *Search for Buluotuo* all confirmed Ganzhuang Mountain as the birthplace of Buluotuo. The successful festival also encouraged scholars to carry out more research on Buluotuo belief and further standardize *mo* practices as a Zhuang religion, presently termed “Mo religion”. Mo religion is not a new concept or category of Zhuang religion. Definitions of “Mo religion” and “mo practitioners” (*mogong*) have appeared in encyclopaedias compiled by Lü and He (1996: 591) and Pan and Qin (1993: 338). However, the government-supported festival is new, as too are the recruitment of *mogong* and the public display of *mogong* texts in public spaces; these are legitimized by scholars who have published books on *mo* practitioners, texts and rituals. It was after the initial festival that Mo religion developed a firm position as a representative of Zhuang religion. Articles and monographs on Mo religion and culture, or Buluotuo belief, began to flourish in the early part of the twenty-first century (Qin 2011; Xu 2010; Liao 2009; Shi 2008; Huang 2006; He 2005; Mo 2005; Liang 2004; Cen 2003).

Several authors have been working towards achieving recognition of Mo practice as an independent religion particular to the Zhuang people. In assessing the status of the rituals practised, scholars apply the criteria that define other organized world religions – criteria that include an elaborate system of theology, scriptures, professional clergy and fixed religious sites. For example, Huang Quiqiu, who worked in the Guangxi Ancient Manuscripts Office, has been heavily involved in the collecting and collating of *mogong* texts. Huang also published the first Chinese book on the Mo culture of the Zhuang, in which he argues that Mo religion has its own doctrines, systematic religious scriptures, standard rituals and ritual practitioners (Huang 2006: 15–23). The criteria of organized religions also include having a founder of the religion. For Mo religion, Buluotuo and Muliujia are cited as the highest deities and unique to the religion. Shi Guoqin, who observed the process of mythmaking of Buluotuo, also identifies Buluotuo belief as the key concept of Mo religion. He applies Huang’s framework to explain *mo* practitioners’ customs as a religion (Shi 2008: 14–22). In examining the rituals, texts and organi-

zations of *mogong*, scholars have been able to confirm that the Mo religion is specifically Zhuang and meets the definition of a religion.

The Buluotuo Song Festival

The following description is from my field notes.

From 14 to 16 April 2005, I carried out a “pilgrimage” to Ganzhuang Mountain, Tianyang, and joined in the Buluotuo Song Festival. My friend Lu Xiaoqin and I conducted individual fieldwork in Jingxi and we did not want to miss this magnificent festival held close by in Ganzhuang Mountain. We settled down in a local household in the Zhuang village of Naguan, near the mountain, on the evening of 14 April. We found that the festival did not play a big role in the daily lives of the villagers. Our hosts, Mr and Mrs Huang, returned home very late from working in the fields and seemed unconcerned with the festival. After having a simple dinner with the couple, Xiaoqin and I visited the fairgrounds where the ceremony and other festival events were held. We saw a huge gate decorated with the typical Zhuang “totem” frogs. There were also some patterns modelled on those found in cliff paintings, such as small human figures that looked like warriors, generals and chiefs. Behind the gate was an open area where a temporary altar, including Buluotuo’s statue and a huge incense burner, was set. Behind the statue was a wide pathway connecting the fairgrounds to the mountain. Several big colourful balloons were flying in the sky. Street vendors were making their last preparations and members of the festival committee were hanging decorations. If an outsider had arrived on the scene knowing nothing about Buluotuo, this area would have seemed like a big playground.

On the morning of 15 April (the second day) we climbed the mountain. On our way to there, we saw many middle-aged male and female performers singing. We visited two temples on the mountain. One located midway up the mountain was clearly a Guanyin temple, as I saw Guanyin’s statues inside. The temple is officially named *muliujia miao* (姆六甲庙, Muliujia Temple), perhaps because in *mogong*’s texts the mythic god Buluotuo is paired with the mythic goddess Muliujia. The other temple was located on the top of the mountain and is named *buluotuo miao* (布洛陀庙, Buluotuo Temple). It looked as if it had recently been rebuilt, which meant I was unable to identify what kind of temple it had been in the past. Several girls wearing the

recently redesigned version of “traditional” clothes were selling embroidered balls – the latter of which were made in Jiuzhou, Jingxi.

We returned to the fairgrounds from the mountain and saw that the lion dance was to be the first event of the opening ceremony. Even though Tianyang is famous for its lion dancing, such performances can be seen in most festivals throughout China. After the ceremony, we roamed among the street vendors. A female vendor, sitting behind a table surrounded by a group of old people, drew our attention. On the table were a bowl of rice with incense sticks, a picture of Muliujia and Buluotuo, and a roll of red cloth. I asked the vendor what she was selling. She said if I bought incense sticks, she would ask Muliujia and Buluotuo to bless me. I bought a bunch of incense sticks and put 2 CNY on the table. She sang a prayer for me. After the ritual, we interviewed her and were not surprised to discover she was a ritual specialist from the neighbouring county of Bama (Anonymous 1 2005).

In the afternoon, the Fourth Conference on Zhuang Studies was held at the Tianyang county seat. The conference opened with speeches from several renowned officials and scholars, after which all participants took a group photo. This was followed by a banquet. All individual research presentations, however, were cancelled due to a lack of time.

Lu Xiaoqin and I left the restaurant where the banquet was held and instead ate rice noodles in a nearby market and went to a hair salon to get our hair washed. The hairdressers in the salon laughed at us for having wasted our money to travel all that way to participate in an invented festival. They added that the government had been marketing products with “Buluotuo” as a brand name. We teased them that if we had not come, we would not have been their customers. We encouraged them to design a “Buluotuo” hairstyle to attract tourists.

The main ceremony was held in the fairgrounds on 16 April (the eighth day of the third lunar month), a day villagers make offerings to the deities of Ganzhuang Mountain. A group of men and women burnt huge incense sticks to show their respect to the apical ancestor, whose statue was erected behind the burner. Villagers from neighbouring areas carried plenty of offerings and waited for hours for the guests to arrive. The ceremony could not proceed until the previous vice president of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and other

officials and scholars had arrived, gave speeches, paid their respects and burnt incense sticks. Several young girls were holding multiple volumes of the official *Photographic Reproduction of the Buluotuo Mogong Scriptures of the Zhuang*. As part of the festival programme, a group of *mogong*, dressed in their costumes, gave a short public performance. In the crowd, I saw a lady dressed in red. Someone in the audience told me that she was a *wupo* (巫婆), a general term used in Chinese to refer to a female shaman. The ceremony ended with the playing of bronze drums.

Remaining programme events varied, but the performance of “Buluotuo holy music” on stage contrasted sharply with the antiphonal songs sung in fields surrounding the fairgrounds. Musicians played traditional Zhuang instruments in the form of an orchestra and attracted journalists and guests. In contrast, middle- and old-aged singers gathered in the fields surrounding the fairgrounds – with or without government invitations – and sang together. This singing started on 15 April and continued non-stop for the following two days, attracting numerous audiences. A central square in the county seat also drew singers including a group of ladies from Jingxi, to whom we listened for a while. We then accepted a Zhuang scholar’s invitation to join him and his students at a KTV bar. Our pilgrimage ended in a rather odd way: a mix of modern entertainment and traditional singing activities.

Multiple Actors in Zhuang Religious Revival

The two cases presented here not only describe the different strategies used by multiple actors to revive Zhuang religion, but also demonstrate that not all religious activity falls within the institutional framework developed by Ashiwa and Wank (2009). The first case of “superstition” falls outside, and in fact parallels, the institutional framework. *Memoed* rituals, which the government identifies as a “superstitious” practice, are kept at a distance from official religion. Even though the *lun* goddess participated in the government-approved ceremony of the Nong Zhigao Festival, it was done not to seek legitimacy but rather in spite of the institutional framework. Locals in Ande Valley who are enthusiastic about the *memoed*’s rituals show no interest in joining any religious association, as described in Chau’s (2005) case in North China province. However, they definitely play a

key role in the revival of this religious tradition. This reveals that although locals (particularly local women) are the key actors in keeping Zhuang religious practices alive, continuous and even innovative, they express the least amount of concern about seeking legitimization of their practices in the state-sanctioned paradigm. In contrast, the second case explored here echoes the institutional framework. Officials, scholars and business persons were keen to select and standardize a religious practice to be recognized as the state-legitimated Zhuang religion, even though Mo religion is still not included under the umbrella of one of the five officially recognized religions.

The multiple actors (e.g. men, women, the central government, the local people, ritual practitioners and ritual participants) all contribute to Zhuang religious revival as well as Zhuang ethnic revival. The Nong Zhigao Festival and the Buluotuo Song Festival that I observed in 2005 both demonstrated how ordinary rural residents, city-based officials, business persons and scholars chose different strategies to respond to government policies not only on religion but also on national minorities. The commemorative festival to Nong Zhigao in Ande took place within a broader context in which Nong Zhigao's image had been successfully transformed from that of a southern barbarian rebel into that of a Zhuang hero (Kao 2013). This change in image is related to the PRC's policy of encouraging Zhuang historians to write their own history. The Buluotuo Song Festival is an achievement of a government policy that promoted the collection, study and publication of *mogong* texts as well as the revival of traditional song festivals. The policy promotes literacy among minority groups, which conforms to the concept of a civilizing project (Harrell 1995). In addition, the Buluotuo Festival responds to government policy and local government interest in developing ethnic tourism (Oakes 1998; Oakes and Sutton 2010).

Even though actors involved in the two festivals used opposite approaches (i.e. grassroots or top-down) we sense that “superstitious” activities and “superstitious” practitioners make religious revivals possible as they interact with government-supported or -approved ceremonies. Prior to the Nong Zhigao Festival, Nong Zhigao's speech and the *lun* goddess's singing predicted that “superstitious” elements would be inserted into the official ceremony. The organizers sought to avoid any “superstitious” activities from taking place, but spirit possession still occurred. Guests and journalists did

not know about the attendance of the *lun* goddess at the Nong Zhigao Festival, but ritual participants were completely aware. In the Buluotuo ceremony, a group of *mogongs* “performed” or, to be more precise, displayed a ritual to the audience. A group of young girls carried the eight volumes of Buluotuo texts and presented them to the audience on stage. A shaman dressed in red appeared in the crowd. I did not carry out a further interview with her and do not know whether there were any “superstitious” practices carried out before the Buluotuo Song Festival. However, the shaman in the crowd and the female ritual specialist offering blessings were obviously not members of a government-approved clergy.

The two cases demonstrate that, under certain conditions, both central and local governments will tolerate both sanctioned and “superstitious” activities of ethnic groups. As Oakes and Sutton (2010: 7) point out, the Chinese government regards indigenous religions of Daoism and popular Buddhism to be less threatening than Christianity, Islam or Tibetan Buddhism. Therefore, central and local governments allow the display of, and even encourage the transformation of, local “cults” into local “customs” or “culture” that can be harnessed to attract tourists or worshippers. A premise in Nong Zhigao’s case is that Nong Zhigao is now recognized as a national hero who deserves people’s respect. A premise in Buluotuo’s case is that the *mogong* texts have been recognized as ancient scriptures, and Buluotuo has been identified as the Zhuang apical ancestor. The manuscript’s materiality means it can be more easily manipulated. The standardization process produces a single text that can be considered orthodox once the materials have been collected, studied, approved by scholars, recognized by the Chinese government and listed as being of cultural heritage. The display of *mogong* texts demonstrates that the Zhuang people have a long history of creating and using their own character script and a long tradition of religious scriptures. The script was created no later than the Tang dynasty (AD 618–907) and borrowed Chinese characters to produce a writing system for the Zhuang language (Holm 2013). *Mogongs* received Chinese education, learning and subsequently using Chinese characters to record their knowledge (Zhang 1991). However, now that selected religious scriptures have been published through the processes described above and common people have also received Chinese education, *mogongs*’ authority in creating religious scriptures may be under threat.

The more oral a ritual performance is, the more instantaneous it is considered to be. The more instantaneous it is, the more interactive it is with local social and religious life. Oral ritual performances can immediately reflect social context and make changes according to it. We have seen this in the examples of different deities' comments about cooking dog meat in the house and the placement of Chairman Mao's statue. In contrast to the *mogong*-written texts or Daogong Xu's texts (mentioned at the beginning) – which are tangible objects that can easily be confiscated and destroyed – the *memoed*'s oral performance is spontaneous and hard to record. Local people unfamiliar with the *memoed*'s chanting may claim that it is nonsense. However, as we saw in the first case, Memoed Beauty – in the role of Nong Zhigao – legitimated a “superstitious” ritual by claiming that the central and local governments supported the participants. The oral characteristics make the *memoed*'s performance more creative, powerful and critical.

The two Zhuang cases of religious tradition revival meet the three conditions (traditional elements, active people and suitable environment) proposed by Chau (2011); I regard the second condition to be the most important element in Zhuang society. Ritual specialists and the locals who support them make many contributions to religious revival. The number of *mogongs* has decreased in Jingxi, but rituals conducted by *memoed* and *daogong* continue to flourish. Ultimately, a complete understanding of Zhuang religious revival cannot be achieved without *memoed* documentation or indigenous engagement.

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Contents

The Entanglement between Science and Politics

Editorial

- Karsten GIESE
Editorial 3

Introduction

- Sascha KLOTZBÜCHER
Western-Chinese Academic Collaboration in the Social Sciences 7

Analyses

- Heike HOLBIG
Shifting Ideologies of Research Funding: The CPC's National Planning Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences 13
- Doris FISCHER
The Impact of Changing Incentives in China on International Cooperation in Social Science Research on China 33
- Josef Gregory MAHONEY
Changes in International Research Cooperation in China: Positive Perspectives 47
- Sascha KLOTZBÜCHER
“Embedded Research” in Collaborative Fieldwork 65
- Christian GÖBEL
Let's Not Go There: Coping with (Pre-) Selection Bias in Collaborative Field Research 87

Research Articles

- **KAO Ya-ning**
**Religious Revival among the Zhuang People in China:
Practising “Superstition” and Standardizing a Zhuang
Religion** 107
 - Olivia KRAEF
Of Canons and Commodities: The Cultural Predicaments of
Nuosu-Yi “Bimo Culture” 145
 - Martin SAXER
Re-Fusing Ethnicity and Religion: An Experiment on
Tibetan Grounds 181
- Contributors 205