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Religious diversity and patrimonialization
A case study of the Nianli Festival in Leizhou Peninsula, China

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Abstract:

With the emergence of the neologism ‘intangible cultural heritage’ in 2003 and the adoption of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of the People’s Republic of China in 2011 various popular religious practices in China which used to be considered as feudal superstitions started to be recognized as examples of cultural heritage worthy of protection. If we examine the concept of religious diversity at a local level in contemporary China, the process of a ‘patrimonialization’ of popular religious practices that reflect the dynamic relationships which can be detected across diverse discourses, multiple stakeholders and cultural policies in different arenas could offer us a new perspective on religious practices to explore. In this article I offer an analysis, based on fieldwork conducted between 2013 and 2016 on the Leizhou Peninsula in southern China’s Guangdong Province, of the varying degrees of acceptance, accommodation and resistance prompted by the actualization of popular religious practices in this era of patrimonialization.

Keywords: religious diversity, patrimonialization, Nianli, Leizhou Peninsula

As a religiously diverse country, alongside the five officially recognized religions, namely Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam, popular religion has long been an integral part of Chinese religious life. Having undergone phases of suppression and resurgence since the early twentieth century, today, and as of 2003, various popular religious practices are now free of the label ‘superstition’ and are recognized as items of protected cultural heritage as a consequence of a rapidly expanding and far-reaching ‘heritage movement’ (Peng 2008, Gong 2013) in China.

This study serves as part of my doctoral dissertation on the patrimonialization of popular religion in China, which seeks to document, examine and critically evaluate the empirical changes that Chinese popular religion has been undergoing during this process of patrimonialization.

This article provides a preliminary overview of the popular religious landscape during the era of patrimonialization in the Leizhou Peninsula¹ (the southernmost part of Guangdong Province) in

¹ This study is based on research materials collected between February and April in 2013, 2015 and 2016 in the prefecture-level city of Zhanjiang, as well as its county-level city of Leizhou on the Leizhou Peninsula at the southwestern end of the Guangdong Province. I use a geographical category, Leizhou Peninsula, not an administrative division, to circumscribe the area of this study in order to avoid the interference of the existing official PRC

southern China. Leizhou Peninsula is administratively comprised of two prefecture-level cities; Zhanjiang and Maoming. In Zhanjiang, there are four districts, three county-level cities, two counties, two economic and technological development zones and one tourism demonstration zone². As the most important coastal region in the southwest of Guangdong Province, the Leizhou Peninsula is currently accelerating its transition from an agriculture-based economy into one driven by clusters of major industries such as ship- building, petrochemicals and steelmaking.

The popular religious landscape in contemporary Leizhou

When travelling in Leizhou, much like everywhere else in Guangdong Province, it is not difficult to notice the intensity of popular religious activities: small shrines abundant with offerings can be spotted everywhere; at the entrance of a village, under the big banyan tree, beside the pond, and near the back door of the house. On special days dedicated to local deities, visitors are likely to run into a local woman who may well be on her way to the village temple or ancestral hall, holding a tray or a basket, full of offerings and a string of firecrackers. Inside the temple, crowds of divinatory stick enquirers wait patiently for interpretations from professional soothsayers-in- residence. At the end of day, the ground is covered with a thick layer of shreds of paper, which looks like a red carpet, formed from the remains of firecrackers. Usually, the general survey of religious compositions by the local authorities doesn't interfere with the activities of the followers of popular religions.

As we attempt to outline the current-day popular religious landscape on the Leizhou Peninsula, a description of the traditional local Nianli festival, the most significant and influential annual event in the region, might be an effective means of gaining an understanding of the richness of local popular religious life.

As with most of the local folk traditions in China, it's difficult to precisely trace the origins of Nianli. The earliest known official record referring to the festival is from the *General Chronology of Guangdong* of the Ming Dynasty (Huang 1557/1997). In Chinese, Nianli could literally be translated as 'annual routine', which reflects its cycle of celebration. The schedule and programme of activities of each village may vary according to the vagaries of local history and the complexity of the composition of the pantheon. Even though local scholars haven't been able to reach a consensus regarding its origins and nature, we could describe Nianli, in general terms at least, as a festive period/process that involves singing, dancing, theatre, feasting, oral traditions and storytelling, displays of craftsmanship, sports and other entertainment forms. Essentially, all these activities serve the same purpose; to 'bless and pray for the community' by appealing to the local deities and the ancestors, according to its associations with the lineage.

The Lantern Festival is held on the 15th day of the first month in the Chinese lunar calendar, marking the end of the Chinese New Year festivities. As the Lantern Festival approached in February 2016, the majority of migrant workers were returning to the city from their home towns

administrative division based on the distinct cultural feature of each selected village characterized by different local history, language (dialect) and custom.

² The districts are Chikan, Potou, Xiashan and Mazhang; the county-level cities are Leizhou, Lianjiang and Wuchuan; the counties are Xuwen and Suixi. The economic and technological development zones are Zhanjiang and Fenyong Gaoxin and the tourism demonstration zone is South tri-island tourism demonstration zone.

in the rural areas, while the younger generation from the Leizhou Peninsula were heading back to their villages to join the Nianli celebrations, for the reason that most villages in Leizhou County mark the festival between the 10th day and the end of the first month in the Chinese lunar calendar. If you visit the village on just this occasion, you will find that the younger generation has been making an active contribution. On 17 February 2016, the first day of the two-day territorial parade of the Thunder Ancestor, organized by four Chen-surname villages, young men from the villages gathered in the temple of the Thunder Ancestor early in the morning to prepare the deities for their annual journey. They carefully moved three colorful wooden deity statues, namely Leizu the 'Thunder Ancestor', Leishou the 'Thunder God', and Liguang, the 'General Li', to the sedans. Instructed by the elders of the Chen lineage association, they tightly fastened the idols with sedans so that they would not drop during the parade. Eighteen young men had been chosen to carry those three sedans. At the same time, two groups of villagers were standing by to provide back-up. It is a long journey that lasts at least six to seven hours, walking through almost every main street, stopping at each temple and ancestral hall in those four villages.

The order of the procession is pre-determined: the first deity will be General Li, which is called the 'Third God' by locals, followed by the Thunder God, also known as the 'Second God'. The last deity, the Thunder Ancestor, is called the 'First God', and is accorded the highest reverence. On arrival in the last village, the procession marks the end of the first day of the parade. The tired young men will put the sedans inside the ancestral hall and stay overnight. The route of the second day's parade is limited to downtown Leizhou County.

According to the parade's organizer, Chen Xinlian, the director of the Chen lineage association, about 500 villagers participated in the event this year. Apart from professionals such as the band musicians, villagers aged from 15 to 40 made up the majority of the procession volunteers. The young women (minors and unmarried) are usually assigned to hold the paper dolls or the eight treasures flags, but they are not allowed to enter the temples on that day. During the parade, I kept close to the procession in an effort to verify the order and appellation of the deities. To my surprise, three young men holding the second sedan with the 'Thunder God' couldn't answer me when I asked: who is the deity on this sedan? They told me 'we call him the Second God, but we are not sure about his name'. After the event, I had a chance to talk with Chen Fuxing, who is regarded as a person of higher status among members of Chen clan in all four villages as well as a ritual expert-in-residence at the temple of the Thunder Ancestor. He told me: 'more and more young people come to the temple with their parents. It's good sign even though they might not follow the dress code. They should have worn clothes with a collar. And the women shouldn't have been allowed to enter the temple during a special occasion in honour of the deities. But, currently, the most important thing is that they are willing to come and take an active part in our ceremonies'.

In the village of Leizhou, both the temple and the ancestral hall are easily identifiable by their architectural style and brand new renovation work. Like most of the cases observed in Guangdong Province, all the public expenditure on popular religious activities, including the temple's rebuilding or renovation, is self-financed by the village.

A local official, who oversees the restoration and renovation of ancient buildings listed as 'historic sites' in Leizhou, expressed his concerns about these newly renovated temples during our interview. For example, instead of being satisfied with restoring the historic building to its original condition, villagers have felt free to build a new temple in sumptuous style. According to this official, the

conflicting approaches of the local bureau and villagers to the restoration of the temple are not easy to reconcile. According to ‘the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics ... Immovable cultural relics, may, depending on their historical, artistic and scientific value, be designated as sites to be protected for their historical and cultural value’. However, the villagers would rather decline the honour of the temple, the most sacred place in the village, being listed as an ‘historic site’ and instead prefer to build a glorious new temple according to their own will and with their own money. The official told me that in order to avoid intervention from local government, some villages were even secretly completing all the restoration work in a very short time without notifying anyone.

Adam Yuet Chau (2013: 141) points out that ‘religious diversity as a concept is alien to most Chinese people, since their approach to religion is primarily instrumental and occasion-based (what can be called an ‘efficacy-based religiosity’) rather than ‘confessionally-based’. For him, ‘this diversity is more evident as different modalities of doing religion’. Since the resurgence of popular religious practices in rural China began in the early 1980s there have been a large number of discussions, as well as studies produced, to explain this social phenomenon by focusing on an analysis of the revived religious practices which reflect the state-society relations from multiple aspects: relations between social structures, cultural traditions and the engagement of different actors (such as local state agents and local elites) under the process of the interactions between local knowledge and national ideology (Guo 2000; Chau 2005, 2006; Wang 2000; Feuchtwang 2001). Several scholars (Anagnost 1994; Dean 1997; Jing 1998, 2000; Chau 2005) argue that the ‘return of popular religion during the reform era signals the strength of local communities to resist the state’.

In this article, I propose that we examine the concept of religious diversity by analysing the varying degrees of accommodation and resistance triggered by the actualization of popular religious practices.

The patrimonialization of popular religious activity in Leizhou

Ever since China became a signatory of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereinafter referred as the Convention), drafted and adopted by UNESCO, it seems that popular religion has finally regained the institutional significance which has been pursued for a long time. Under the auspices of this new international instrument dealing with cultural heritage, the local popular religious tradition is classified as an intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and the relations of various stakeholders involved in this process are consequently redefined. The immediate acceptance of the neologism ICH, followed by an ‘enthusiasm for the label of ICH’ quickly turned into a top-down ‘heritage movement’. At the state level, the mechanism of an inter-ministerial joint conference for the safeguarding of ICH³ was established in 2005, after which, in 2008, the State Council established a Department for ICH, which oversees the management and

³ The inter-ministerial joint conference consists of 14 departments including the Ministry of Culture, the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Science and Technology, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, the State Ethnic Affairs commission, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-rural Development, the Ministry of Commerce, the National Tourism Administration, the State Administration of Religious Affairs, the State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

safeguarding of items of national ICH within the Ministry of Culture. At the provincial and prefectural levels, special divisions in the cultural administrative departments are established, or relevant functions are added to existing divisions. According to the 'Opinion of the General Office of the State Council on Strengthening the Protection of the ICH of Our Country' (General Office of the State Council 2005), China established a four-level inventory system (the national, provincial, prefectural and county levels respectively) in 2005. Between 2006 and 2014, four batches of a national inventory of ICH, including 1,519 items, have been published. At the local level, the numbers of the ICH tags granted to cultural elements both testifies to and demonstrates the extent of their efforts and achievements in safeguarding ICH⁴.

However, for the bearers and the communities involved, in what ways do all the credits and benefits (political, cultural and economic) brought about by this new title change the local tradition they have been engaging in? And what are their own recognitions, interpretations and responses to these changes in their daily lives?

The Convention, aimed at preserving and promoting cultural diversity, has been drafted and adopted by UNESCO. According to the Convention, under article 16, at a global level, a representative list of the 'Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity' is being established, 'in order to ensure better visibility of the intangible cultural heritage and awareness of its significance, and to encourage dialogue which respects cultural diversity'.

At the national level, the Convention, under article 12, also proposes that in order 'to ensure identification with a view to safeguarding, each State party shall draw up, in a manner geared to its own situation, one or more inventories of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory'. Regardless of whether it is an international representative list or a national inventory, the measures adopted by UNESCO aim to avoid the risk of possible future losses of cultural diversity. However, this approach creates a paradoxical situation; 'how can these intangible cultural heritage classifications maintain their objectiveness in reaching a global-level agreement while simultaneously respecting indigenous logic?' The cultural diversity embodied by such classifications among different manifestations of ICH, 'in the view of the actual operational level, leave a large latitude for each member state to have its own interpretations to this international standard cultural framework' (Tornatore 2011).

This is notably applicable to the case of the patrimonialization of popular religion in China. If we compare the domains of the ICH delimited by the UNESCO Convention to China's national inventory, we will find that for the former, the boundaries⁵ between these domains are fluid and could vary from community to community. For the latter, ten categories are more specific:

⁴ According to the *Glossary of Intangible Cultural Heritage* (van Zanten 2002), a 'bearer' is defined as 'a member of a community who recognizes, reproduces, transmits, transforms, creates and forms a certain culture in and for a community. A bearer can, in addition, play one or more of the following roles: practitioner, creator and custodian.'

⁵ As proposed by the Convention, there are five broad domains in which ICH is manifested: 1) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; 2) performing arts; 3) social practices, rituals and festive events; 4) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; 5) traditional craftsmanship.

1) folk literature; 2) traditional music; 3) traditional dance; 4) traditional opera; 5) *quyi*⁶; 6) traditional sport, entertainment and acrobatics; 7) traditional fine arts; 8) traditional handicrafts; 9) traditional Chinese medicine; 10) folk customs.

Among all of the 39 cultural elements from China listed in UNESCO's representative list of the ICH, there is only one element, 'Mazu belief and customs', granted the ICH label in 2009, that is directly related to Chinese popular religion. When we examine four batches of China's vast national inventory of ICH published between 2006 and 2014, there are around 150 elements that refer to popular religion. The names of these elements include such keywords as *xinsu*, 'belief and custom'; *miaohui*, 'temple festival'; *denghui*, 'lantern festival'; *jidian*, 'rite or ceremony'; *jie*, 'festival'; *shehuo*, 'blessing of spring'.

In a recent work entitled *Popular Belief in Contemporary China: A Discourse Analysis*, its author 'followed Foucault in understanding discourse as a mass of enunciations which belong to a system of formation the historically changing rules of which govern that which is sayable in the present day' in her analysis of popular beliefs in contemporary China (Gaenssbauer 2015: 12). Here, I would like to pick up this thread to examine the divergences on the names of the popular religious activities adopted by official national inventory and its practitioners in the village.

Currently there are eight elements from the Leizhou Peninsula which have been listed on China's national inventory of ICH, among which half are related to popular religion. The eight elements are: dance of lion, dance of dragon, dance of Nuo, sculpture of stone dog, opera of Lei, Cantonese opera, song of Leizhou and float decorating. To take the Nuo as an example, it is practised in the village as a ritual of exorcism to purify and bless the living space and articles of daily use. During my fieldwork between February and April 2016 on the Leizhou Peninsula, I have observed several practices of Nuo in three different villages. Nuo, under the name of Zhanjiang Nuowu, 'the dance of Nuo in Zhanjiang', was listed in the national inventory under category III, 'traditional dance', in 2008. It seems that, since it has been given the label of an ICH, the function of Nuo as a religious practice has been reduced.

A scholar of local folk culture, Zhu Weiguo, explained that it could be seen to be a strategy leading to a successful ICH nomination. As the previous director of Zhanjiang's popular arts centre, one of his duties was to prepare the documents for the ICH nomination. To avoid the intense competition of certain 'popular' categories, he didn't choose the category of 'folk custom' for Nuo, but went for 'traditional dance'. The director of the local cultural centre told me that it is difficult to trace the genealogy of local deities in order to analyse the social functions and meanings of the practices without professional guidance from experts. Normally, before submitting the application documents for nomination as an ICH, the local scholars prefer to consult the 'authoritative experts' on ICH, such as members of the National Experts Committee of Safeguarding ICH or the Committee of Evaluation of the National Representative List of ICH⁷. For example, the category for local popular beliefs concerning stone dogs in the nomination documents was changed from 'folk custom' to 'traditional fine arts' in line with a suggestion from a prestigious professor in folk

⁶ The general term for a Chinese folk art form that includes ballad singing, storytelling, comic dialogues, clapper talks, cross talks, etc.

⁷ The committee is composed of officials from the national cultural administration and experts from various disciplines, with term of 4 years.

cultural studies from the National Experts Committee for Safeguarding the ICH. Subsequently, the element ‘beliefs concerning stone dogs’ was listed under name of ‘Stone sculpture: stone dogs in Leizhou’ and was categorized under the ‘Traditional fine arts’ in 2008.

For the local authorities, the patrimonialization of Nuo could be considered to be a success story. Meanwhile, organizers of popular religious activities no longer need to be concerned about any interruption or restraining order coming from the local authority.

During the Parade of the Thunder Ancestor, a banner or plaque bearing the slogan ‘Carry out the intangible cultural heritage law’ is placed at the forefront of the procession of local deities. Actually, by reviewing all the political slogans that correspond to different eras marked by distinctive political characteristics which are being inserted into such an ancient local tradition, we could almost catch a glimpse and understanding of how local communities accommodate themselves to varying circumstances in order to obtain legitimacy for popular religious practices.

Based on the processions for local deities that I have observed, the most common keywords mentioned in these kinds of slogans include: ‘preserving intangible cultural heritage’, ‘building a harmonious society’, ‘promoting traditional culture’, ‘protecting historical sites’, ‘integrating tourism resources’. Even an image of Mao Zedong may sometimes be carried at the front of the procession⁸. Such political symbols, which are supposed to appear only in public spaces as representations of national political ideology, are nowadays being incorporated into religious rituals. Sometimes, the presence of such political state symbols might have a magical effect, transforming the nature of the popular religious activities (Gao 2000: 312). The organizer of the Parade of the Thunder Ancestor, Chen Xinlian⁹, still remembers an experience he had in the late 1990s of a procession breaking through the roadblocks set by the local police for uninterrupted continuation of annual procession. Today, under the protection of the ICH Law, what he needs to do is just to send a notification indicating the date, the time, the route, and the number of the participants of the procession to the local police only two days in advance. For him, during the parade, banners or plaques with these slogans act as protective talismans which have the power to establish the legality of this local tradition and protect it from interruption.

Multiple identities and diversified resistances

The ritual known as ‘Climbing the Ladder of Blades’ which takes place in a Chen-surname village in the district of Mazhang was listed in Guangdong’s provincial inventory in 2007. I met its current bearer, Chen Richang, on the first day¹⁰ of their celebration of Nianli in 2013. At that time, wearing the red badge which designated him ‘chief director’ in the public square of the village, he was commanding the villagers to ‘erect the ladder’, which was done by almost all the adult males of the village. This is the most impressive and breathtaking episode of this ritual. During its realization, all the boys aged 11 to 12 selected to participate in this challenge climbed this 18-metre-long ladder, composed of 36 sharp blades, until the ladder was completely erected. At that

⁸ According to the observation of the parade of deities in Dongshan Xu of Donghai island in Zhanjiang during Nianli Festival on March 2015.

⁹ This interview was conducted on 16.2.2016 in the temple of Thunder Ancestor (*leizu ci*) in the town of Baisha.

¹⁰ The date of Nianli in Qilin village is the 11th and 12th days in the 2nd month in Chinese lunar calendar.

particular moment, we had a concrete image of how the solidarity and cooperation of a traditional community is realized by means of a popular religious activity.

Today, besides having newly acquired the role of director of this particular ICH tradition, Chen Richang occupies the position of head of an association for the elderly¹¹ in the village. Born to a Taoist priest's family in 1934, Chen Richang didn't follow the family tradition of the last three generations to become a Taoist priest. Instead, he decided to join the Chinese Communist Party in 1961 and became the village Party secretary until his retirement in 1994. The following year, the ritual of 'Climbing the ladder of blades' officially returned to the village after a long absence following the Cultural Revolution. At that time, Chen Richang became the veritable ritual expert thanks to prestige of his previous position and the knowledge he had acquired of the rituals of his family.

In the village committee's office, Chen Richang showed me an illustration, which had according to him been drawn by a village ancestor to record the ritual's procedure¹². He assured me that the only change they had made to this ritual was an abandonment of the 'procession of the ladder' through the town centre. This was not because of any intervention from the local authority or the police, but for the sake of performers and practitioners, as the ladder is too heavy to carry around for three hours.

In actual fact, for Chen Richang, the position of bearer of the ICH hasn't brought about any obvious changes in his life. Even his income remains the same as before. He disclosed that he hasn't received any of the government allowance that would normally be his due as the bearer of a national ICH. He told me that he didn't plan to ask for it since the ritual could be held every year with sufficient financial support from the village.

We could easily find a number of cases where 'patrimonialized' local traditions have been reduced to leisure activities for the entertainment of tourists in China. Like the other version of the ritual of 'climbing the ladder of blades' in the ethnically Miao village in Guizhou Province, the villagers have become the professional actors for making this performance with a daily schedule. What are the differences between these two versions of the ritual?

The popularity of Nianli in Leizhou has transformed it into a particularly impressive cultural landmark as well as an important tourist attraction. The local tourist office has been trying to develop some elements of ICH related to popular religion for the benefit of the local tourism industry. Unfortunately, most of these efforts have ended in failure. The director of the marketing development section in the tourism office shared a frustrating experience with me¹³. 'Arrow piercing' is considered to be a procedure to verify the possession or blessed status of the practitioner by local deities. Arrow piercing can be seen to be widely practised as part of the Nianli Festival today. Usually, when the practitioners show themselves in the village there is a tangible and rapid rise in the emotional tone amongst the villagers; according to the practitioners, no one can precisely

¹¹ The association, based on lineage structure in the village, is composed of the elders (most of them are over 80 years old in this case), elected by the villagers. The principal function of the association today is to organize, supervise and direct the popular religious rituals during Nianli Festival and any other important occasion.

¹² This interview was conducted on 4.3.2015.

¹³ The interview was conducted on 2.3.2015.

predict the moment it will begin. Since its nomination for Zhanjiang's prefectural-level list of ICH in 2009, along with other elements of ICH, arrow piercing has been presented on several occasions as a performance, as in the case of a gala for the ICH. Everything was going well until an accident happened. An arrow-piercing practitioner was invited to perform for the opening of a seaside resort, and when it was his turn to start the 'performance', he refused to do so because he felt he was not 'ready' yet. The organizer of the event didn't want to keep others waiting and insisted that the performer start immediately. However, during the presentation, the practitioner was severely bleeding. A conflict between exogenous and indigenous logics was being illuminated here. According to the logic of the practitioner, the right time had not come yet. I have consulted a few ritual experts in the Leizhou Peninsula area to see what 'the right time' exactly means for them. They basically express the common consensus that 'it's the time that the deities have arrived'.

The occurrence of this accident is the consequence of attempts to integrate an indigenous logic into a standard cultural policy. However, this makes me wonder where the resistance exactly came from in this case. Based on my observations, no matter who from amongst the local community groups or other individuals is involved, their responses to this new cultural policy in the context of patrimonialization are fairly cooperative. Nevertheless, there still exists a bottom line here. One of the proofs demonstrating the cooperative attitude by local communities is their participation in the ICH gala, organized by the local government. Usually prior to the gala all the 'performances' will be put through a trial run in front of the local experts. Subsequently there may be requests to make adaptations in order to meet the needs of the audiences. One of the young practitioners of the Nuo from Xianpai village, Chen Lai¹⁴, told me that their movements in the gala dance became more sophisticated and attractive, having been adapted by professional choreographers. Nevertheless, he has never thought about bringing this new dance 'move' back to the rituals in the village. As a younger-generation (born in 1994) bearer of the local tradition, he could clearly distinguish the meanings of these two spheres of activity and understand what is appropriate in the public sphere as opposed to the private one. This brings us back to the question of the 'mechanism of popular religion'. From the Maoist era to the reform era in the 1980s and up to the present day, the practice of popular religion has been displaying the various aspects of a reaction mechanism. Today, when we look at the process of a patrimonialization of popular religion in China, although it can be conceded that the intensified territorial (horizontal) competition has had an effect in certain cases, the influence lasts just until nomination as an ICH has succeeded. Once the decision of who will win the laurel is made, people will return to the villages to practice the religious activities the way they were before and life still goes on as usual.

¹⁴ The interview is conducted on 5th March, 2016 in village of Xianpai.

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