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Gods and Spirits Under the Red Banner: The Socialist Syncretism of a Brigade Secretary (1958-1984)

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The Socialist Syncretism of a Brigade Secretary (1958-1984)

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by

Luxiao Shi

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Gods and Spirits Under the Red Banner:

The Socialist Syncretism of a Brigade Secretary (1958-1984)

by

Luxiao Shi

Master of Arts in East Asian Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Andrea S. Goldman, Chair

In this project, I explore the life of my grandfather, Zhang Mingde, who served as a village cadre in Hebei Province for over three decades, witnessing profound changes under socialism. While he dutifully implemented the state's agenda, he also maintained a distinct spiritual worldview, blending folk religion, Daoism, and Buddhism. His writings reveal a man who claimed to be a committed communist but credited his achievements to his faith. This study uncovers the concept of "socialist syncretism," presenting a complex cultural landscape where local beliefs coexisted with, and sometimes enhanced, the state's goals. Relying on personal records, oral histories, and local archives, I argue that while the socialist state sought to eradicate local religious beliefs, the villagers' adaptable belief system played a crucial role in maintaining the harmonious community idealized by the state. This project seeks to deepen our understanding of how ordinary people experienced and navigated radical historical changes.

The thesis of Luxiao Shi is approved.

Michael Sanford Berry

William Marotti

Andrea S. Goldman, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

For my grandparents, whose boundless love filled my childhood with joy and wonder.

Table of Contents

Dramatis Personae

Laoye: My grandfather, Zhang Mingde, the central figure of this thesis. He served as a cadre in Susi Village, Hebei Province for over three decades.

Laolao: My grandmother, Laoye's wife, whose life and experiences provide critical context to the family's narrative.

Mother-in-law: My grandfather's mother-in-law, a significant influence in Laoye's life, shaping his personal and spiritual worldview.

Grandma: My grandfather's grandmother-in-law, another key figure in the familial and communal dynamics explored in this thesis.

(Note: Except for Laoye, all names are pseudonyms used to protect the privacy of those involved.)

Acknowledgement

First and foremost, I owe a heartfelt thanks to my grandfather, who not only kept meticulous records but also generously shared his stories with me. His tales were the spark that ignited this thesis. And to my grandmother, though she is no longer with us, her presence is deeply felt in every memory of childhood joy she gifted me. From endless card games to the soap operas we watched together, my grandparents filled my childhood with so much laughter. A special shout-out goes to my parents, who not only supported my humanities adventure abroad with the kind of financial backing usually reserved for launching small businesses, but also played detective to help me dig up interviews and track down my grandfather's records. Their belief in my academic journey has been unwavering.

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Introduction

Exploring the Narratives of a Brigade Secretary[1]

I grew up listening to my maternal grandfather's bedtime stories. At that time, he seemed like a typical grandfather to me; he had a peculiar cooking style, a quick temper, and a penchant for retelling heroic tales from the *The Water Margin* 水滸傳, a Chinese historical novel depicting Song dynasty outlaws in rebellion against the government. His bedtime stories lacked the enchantment of magic and fairies, so they were not appealing to a four-year-old girl, but I could sense his enthusiasm as a storyteller. Following my maternal grandmother's passing, he embarked upon writing his memoir, seemingly driven by the passage of time and the desire to preserve intangible memories. During that time, my mother stumbled upon his extensive writings hidden in the old family house, which contain thirty-five notebooks of meeting minutes and some financial records from when he was the brigade accountant in the People's Republic of China (PRC). To our surprise, although we knew he liked to keep a meticulous record of his daily purchases, we had no idea he had maintained such meticulous documentation of this period. Recognizing their value, my mother championed the publication of his meeting minutes into two thick volumes. [2]

[1] In this research, I primarily refer to the role of "Brigade Secretary," a title directly relevant to my grandfather's experiences. He began his career as the brigade accountant and later ascended to the position of Brigade Secretary, playing a pivotal role in the collective agricultural system of the high socialist era. However, following the introduction of the Household Responsibility System, the brigade structure ceased to exist, leading to significant administrative and structural changes. Despite these changes, my grandfather continued his leadership role, transitioning to the position of Village Party Secretary. This shift marked a change in title and context. My study focuses on the period of high socialism, hence the use of "Brigade Secretary" is more aligned with the historical context and my research's specific emphasis on that era.

[2] This set of volumes was published by the China Contemporary History Research Center at East China Normal University under the title, *Meeting Minutes of a Village Party Secretary* (Yige cun zhishu de gongzuo biji) 一個村支書的工作筆記. It chronicles my grandfather's experiences from his time as the Brigade Secretary (1965-1992) and comprises nearly one million words of working notes. China Contemporary History Research Center at East China

One year during the Spring Festival, he presented our family with his completed memoir. While we believed we knew his stories well, upon casually flipping through the pages, I uncovered a treasure trove of extremely detailed accounts of past events and a comprehensive spiritual world that I had not previously known. For example, he documented the construction of a temple in 1963, during a period when the state's stringent anti-superstitious policies made such construction nearly impossible. He recounted:

> The temple's construction was not allowed, and several times, the leaders of the commune came and asked us to demolish it. After they left, we continued to build it, undergoing several cycles of building and demolition. Eventually, it was completed. We did not place any deities inside; instead, we preserved the temple under the name of a storage room.[3]

The villagers continued to use the temple for almost fifty years. His other detailed descriptions of various incidents encountered during the temple's construction also exceeded my expectations.

The numerous records in my grandfather's memoir reshaped my understanding of an "imagined" high socialist era characterized by top-down coercion. The narratives here, as grassroots archives, constructed both by an ordinary person's memories and historical records, offer fascinating insights into the history of the Mao years. We can see the intricate power dynamics that played out in Chinese society during this period, marked by the local people's struggle to maintain a fine balance between tradition and revolution, continuity and rupture. We can also uncover the delicate power structures within individual villages and even single families

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Normal University, *Yige cunzhishu de gongzuo biji* 一個村支書的工作筆記 [Meeting Minutes of a Village Party Secretary](Shanghai: Dongfang chubanshe, 2012).

[3] Zhang Mingde, *The Memoir*, unpublished manuscript, 2013, 15.

during tumultuous years, reflecting the deep-seated sentiments held by people. Although the stories comprise trivial details and personal opinions, they also contain "more diversity and variety in behavior, outlook, and viewpoints" than studies on political and social systems.[4] These narratives go beyond the mere recitation of events. They offer a way of "constructing—or of deconstructing—a world of experience," through which historians can make sense of the possible perspectives on history and people navigate through the past. [5] Particularly for incidents that have been remembered and historically distorted, the details gathered can shed light on the physical and emotional remnants of these events, and help us understand how communities have tried to recover, commemorate, and move forward.[6] In this project, I take this one rural village (as revealed through my grandfather's records) as a microcosm of complex history, wherein the local cadres and ordinary villagers grappled with the coexistence of secret religious beliefs and the state's revolutionary agenda. This dynamic shaped, to invoke the phrase of Prasenjit Duara, the "cultural nexus of power" in village life under high socialism in unique and multifaceted ways.[7] Additionally, family practices within this context introduced further complexities, particularly in terms of gender dynamics, enriching the cultural milieu of the village. Exploration of these narratives beyond official historical archives sheds light on the reach of the state, the

[4] Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, introduction, in *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 2.

[5] Jacques Rancière, Introduction, in *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 10.

[6] Tobie Meyer-Fong, *What Remains: Coming to Terms with Civil War in 19th Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

[7] The "cultural nexus of power," a concept proposed by historian Prasenjit Duara in *Culture, Power, and the State*, provides a new way to examine the state-society relationship in late imperial and twentieth-century China (mainly rural north China). Generally, the cultural nexus of power serves as a framework for determining access to power and resources within a local society. I engage with Duara's concept in this project and aim to discuss the continuity of the traditional village bonds and the rupture brought by the revolution. Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900-1942* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

persistence of tradition, the transformation of rural society, ultimately revealing the intricate interplay within both the public and private realms.

Personal narratives, like other historical sources, have their own limitations. However, following Sigrid Schmalzer's perspective, we should not be intimidated or constrained by the inherent "biases" they may contain. Instead, bias can be intriguing, as it provides insights into the priorities and concerns of the individuals under study. Embracing a layered approach to source analysis is crucial, allowing us to delve deeper into what the creators of these sources intended their audiences to understand. By actively engaging with such sources and elaborating the contexts in which they were produced and circulated, personal narratives can provide a more comprehensive understanding of historical events and the people who lived through them.[8] This narrative underscores the significance of personal records, often aligned with the microhistory approach, as they illuminate individual experiences within the broader historical landscape.

A Microhistorical Approach: Unraveling a Chinese Village through One Individual's Story

Microhistory as a methodology in historical scholarship has a long and compelling history. Early proponents, such as Carlo Ginzburg and Natalie Zemon Davis, delve into a single, seemingly minor event that eventually provides profound insights into larger historical, social, and cultural contexts.[9] In the context of the People's Republic of China (PRC), historians have increasingly moved away from the traditional top-down approach when examining Chinese politics and

[8] Sigrid Schmalzer, "Beyond Bias: Critical Analysis and Layered Reading of Mao-Era Sources," *Positions: Asia Critique* 29, no. 4 (2021): 759–82, https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-9286688, 760.

[9] In Carlo Ginzburg's work, *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976), Ginzburg examines the life and beliefs of a 16th-century Italian miller named Menocchio to understand the cultural and social climate. *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983), written by Natalie Zemon Davis, tells the captivating story of a 16th-century French peasant named Martin Guerre and the subsequent legal trial and social upheaval that followed his mysterious return to his village after a long absence. She explores themes such as marriage, gender, identity, and social relationships during this period.

society. This shift is marked by a growing recognition of the importance of exploring history from the grassroots level. Scholars have realized that in a world where historical accounts often prioritize great leaders and famous figures, understanding the everyday lives of individuals allows for a more nuanced comprehension of historical dynamics, as it captures the complexities that are often lost when focusing solely on collective narratives or major political events. [10] It is significant to humanize historical narratives by uncovering diverse perspectives, analyzing agency and choices, and establishing personal and emotional connections to the past.

Among the numerous studies on Chinese villages, the approach taken by recent scholars consistently shares a common thread: the use of personal records or oral narratives as central lenses through which to reveal the intricate web of political, social, and cultural transformations within these communities. One of the most compelling examples of this methodology is found in Henrietta Harrison's *The Man Awakened from Dreams*. Harrison transports us to late 19th- and early 20th-century China through the life of Liu Dapeng, who navigated the tumultuous years of China's modernization process. By engaging with Liu's personal struggles, readers can reconfigure their understanding of the transformative socio-political changes that China underwent in the twentieth century, an era often simplified in broader historical narratives.

Transitioning to the broader landscape under the PRC period, a diverse range of studies dissects the impact of socialism on the microcosms of village life. *Chinese Village, Socialist State* provides an in-depth analysis of the detailed life trajectories of the peasants in a North China village during the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Communist Revolution. Notably, the authors of this book spend much time depicting the collective group leader, "Boss Geng" (Geng

[10] Harrison, *The Man Awakened from Dreams: One Man's Life in a North China Village, 1857-1942* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 7-8.

Changsuo). The narratives around Geng and his relatives effectively capture the nuances of land reform and the tensions the process of revolution generated with longstanding cultural practices, offering a rich and comprehensive exploration of China's socialist rural transformation. In a similar vein, Shumin Huang conducted immersive oral history research to present a sophisticated Party Secretary Ye Wende, thereby revealing the fabric of rural life. Through Secretary Ye's narrative, he witnesses the madness and hatred present in the distorted logic of the Communist Revolution in the history of the founding of the nation.[11] Ye's own understanding of the political culture not only brings insights that help to comprehend the logic of the revolution, but also enables the understandings of the impact of political and economic movements on individual lives.

Moreover, oral history, with its emphasis on personal narratives and testimonies, allows scholars to delve into the intricate and often private aspects of life that are not typically captured in official records or traditional historical narratives. This approach is especially useful for exploring themes of gender and intimacy within families. Through the voices of women in works such as Gail Hershatter's *The Gender of Memory*, we gain insights into women's unrecognized economic contributions and the dual burdens of balancing collective fieldwork and domestic labor that they faced post-1949. [12] Hershatter collected stories from women in Shaanxi to provide a complex and nuanced reality contrary to the official class-based narrative of suffering and Communist liberation. Such stories, often structured around personal milestones rather than political events, provide rich details that were excluded from the powerful new state discourse.

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[11] Huang Shu-min, *Spiral Road: Change in a Chinese Village through the Eyes of a Communist Party Leader* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 45.

[12] Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 62.

Personal conversations also help to examine the space in families to better understand the impacts of socialist transformation on individuals. Yunxiang Yan's research in *Private Life Under Socialism* focuses on excavating life stories of villagers, aiming to explore areas that have been overlooked in the private realm, such as "emotionality, desire, intimacy, privacy, conjugality, individuality, and new forms of sociality."[13] Similarly, Jie Li's *Shanghai Homes* employs oral narratives with family elders and neighbors to weave a tapestry of everyday life, juxtaposing historical events with family dynamics, neighborhood interactions, and the social fabric of life in Shanghai. Li's exploration of the personal spaces and intimate relationships provides a multidimensional view of history, illustrating how the PRC state encroached into private life and intertwined with broader societal changes.

In each case, these scholars employ individual narratives (or prosopography) to shed light on the overarching historical processes they seek to explore. Building on this foundation, my research centers around my grandfather's meticulously documented meeting minutes and well-maintained personal records of his spiritual world over several decades. These records, though personal and subjective, enrich the broader historical narrative by adding a layer of grassroots experience. This project aims to examine how personal beliefs and state ideologies interacted in practice. Furthermore, this project will supplement prevailing assumptions regarding the efficacy and extent of Maoist social engineering in rural China. Although the state's educational efforts managed to shape villagers' perceptions of the social world by using the label of "class" and revolutionary morality, certain aspects, such as personal beliefs, remained hidden within those

[13] Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949-1999* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 8.

villagers' social networks. Interestingly, it was these suppressed beliefs that, paradoxically, contributed to the realization of the socialist ethos.

To be sure, studying one individual may create a distorted or idealized portrayal. Individuals who are chosen for study are often exceptional in some way, and their lives are shaped by intersecting identities, such as gender, class, and religious affiliation. Maintaining critical objectivity and fostering reflexivity are equally essential in addressing this issue. While I acknowledge the limitations of my grandfather's own perspectives, his narratives serve as a valuable "palimpsest," following Jie Li's usage, that reflects the transformation of the beliefs and spiritual world of villagers under the strict scrutiny of the socialist regime. Personal narratives never offer any definite "truth" but provide complex witnessing. Hershatter emphasizes their potential by proposing the concept of the "good-enough story," by which she means that the narrative is available to "reinterpretation, and does not necessarily provide a complete understanding of the past, but instead surprises and engenders thought, unspooling in different directions depending on which thread the listener picks up."[14] My own ethnography with family members, and one-on-one conversations with my grandfather's former colleagues and close relatives, are also significant since they enable the research to "check oral narratives against the written record and against each other." [15] The discrepancies can not only tell us how the narrators saw the world and experienced history, but also fill in absent perspectives, such as the gendering of religious practices, in different accounts of the past. Through analysis and interpretation, such research can make the most of all the lively and unique narratives to present the complexity of the history.

[14] Hershatter, *Gender of Memory*, 10.

[15] Jie Li, *Shanghai Homes: Palimpsests of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 6.

"A Socialist Syncretism": Religious Practice and Belief in the PRC

Conceptualizing Syncretism

In the study of twentieth-century Chinese religion, particularly during the high socialist era, a nuanced understanding of the term "religion" is essential. The study of Chinese religion more generally has revealed a multifaceted tapestry that is distinct from Western religious traditions. Stephen Feuchtwang, in *Popular Religion in China*, posits that popular religion in late imperial China exhibited a combination of elements from Buddhism, Daoism, and imperial cults, yet it did not align exclusively with any of these. This notion challenges the concept of religion as a singular entity, suggesting instead a complex, category-defying phenomenon. Xiaofei Kang furthers this understanding by contrasting late imperial Chinese religion with the institutional and doctrinal frameworks typical of Judeo-Christian traditions. She highlights the absence of a singular almighty God and a structured clerical hierarchy, instead emphasizing a religious life rooted in cosmological beliefs in *qi* and *yin-yang*. These beliefs underpinned an organic universe wherein the physical and spiritual realms were in constant interplay.[16] Chau similarly observes the concept of magical efficacy (*ling*), where deities miraculously respond to the requests of worshipers. These responses are socially constructed, manifesting through activities such as temple building, festival organization, and other communal efforts.[17]

Since Chinese religion lacks a single canonical text serving as a source of authority, it does not possess a unified formal theology. Instead, communities and religious specialists often

[16] Xiaofei Kang, *Enchanted Revolution: Ghosts, Shamans, and Gender Politics in Chinese Communist Propaganda, 1942-1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 204.

[17] Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 2.

share common cosmological ideas, which are interpreted in various ways.[18] Daniel L. Overmyer challenges conventional wisdom about Chinese religions, particularly C. K. Yang's dichotomy between "institutional" and "diffused" religious traditions. Overmyer observes that this dichotomy is based on Western sectarian conceptualizations that prove of little relevance for understanding Chinese society. He points out that Chinese communal religious traditions are institutionalized both spatially—in temples, shrines, and altars supported by community donations—and temporally, through the transmission of beliefs and liturgical traditions across generations. Overmyer's research enriches this understanding by presenting evidence from northern China, highlighting the significance of local ritual and belief traditions not only for their intrinsic value but also as foundations for traditional Chinese ideas, values, and social relationships.[19]

Religion, as it is understood in the volume, *Making Religion, Making the State*, is a construct developed through the process of modern state formation.[20] In my research, I prefer to use the term "belief" rather than "religion." This choice reflects the complexity of my grandfather's spiritual world, which is an intricate blend of folk religions, socialist ideologies, and habituated family moralities.[21] This mix of family and state agendas, personal desires, and work influences culminates in a multifaceted web of perceptions and practices. I use the phrase

[18] David A. Palmer and Vincent Goossaert, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 20.

[19] Overmyer, *Local Religion in North China*, 5.

[20] Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L.Wank, eds., *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 5-6.

[21] For example, my grandfather's beliefs represent a melding of various religious traditions, shaped significantly by his upbringing in a diverse religious environment. His paternal grandmother was Catholic, while his wife and mother-in-law both possessed what were considered spiritual "powers." Influenced by traditional values like filial piety, he also revered protective deities such as "Sanhuanggu" (三皇姑) and "Hexiangu" (何仙姑), which have origins in Buddhism and Daoism respectively. I will discuss this complex system of beliefs in the third chapter.

"socialist syncretism" to conceptualize the fusion of these diverse influences. This approach allows me to explore not only the realm of religion but also the broader domain of political culture, as well as secret belief networks that operated beneath the radar of state power.

In a Western religious context, syncretism has been understood as a form of resistance to power, as a means to preserve indigenous gods in the clothing of the gods of the dominant culture. It involves the negotiation and interaction of new elements within a specific group, often leading to fears of "contamination" or "interpenetration" of a known life form. [22] In the case of the socialist state, there was a desire for a "pure" form of socialist ideology, but the persistence of traditional practices allowed for no such uniformity, highlighting the dynamic nature of religion as an ongoing process of cultural adaptation and mixing.

Historically, the mixing of Chinese beliefs predates the modern period. Cynthia Brokaw's exploration of Chinese morality books during the Ming-Qing transition (16th- early 18th c.) provides a detailed analysis of how belief systems were shaped by historical contexts. Utilizing "ledgers of merit and demerit," which list good and bad deeds with corresponding merit or demerit points, Brokaw examines elite responses to traumatic change. These ledgers, which originally served as guides to salvation for twelfth-century Daoists and Buddhists, became popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, adapted by the literati as aids in the struggle for official status.[23] The tradition of morality books reflects common thinking and practices as articulated by local moral authorities and their audiences.[24]

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[22] Anita Maria Leopold, and Jeppe Sinding Jensen. *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*. Routledge, 2004, 4-10.

[23] Cynthia Joanne Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991)

[24] Palmer and Goossaert, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, 21.

Another instance of syncretism within the late imperial Chinese context is found in the genre of baojuan (寶卷), or "precious scrolls," produced mainly by popular religious sects with Buddhist orientations during the Ming and Qing dynasties. These texts, which include new cosmogonies of both the creation and demise of the world, represent an evolutionary development from the earlier Buddhist vernacular narratives. Serving as both popular entertainment and a medium for religious propagation, these scrolls illustrate the deep historical roots of syncretic practices in Chinese religious culture.[25]

Timothy Brook further expands upon the concept of syncretism, critically analyzing whether the traditional Western understanding of the term adequately captures the nature of religious practices in China. According to Brook, Chinese religious syncretism was less about blending into a homogeneous whole and more about fostering mutual accommodation and interaction among distinct traditions. He also delves into the role of popular religion and its impact on formal religious doctrines, suggesting that at the popular level, the distinctions among the Three Teachings—Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism—were less significant. He introduces the concept of "joint worship," where deities from different religious traditions are venerated together. Brook argues that this practice reflects a form of practical syncretism focused more on communal harmony and collective worship than on doctrinal unity.[26]

Building on this notion, socialist syncretism in my study reflects the pragmatic mentalities of villagers. Unified texts and rituals are relatively less observed, instead, village religious lives are mainly based on various interpretations of canonical notions according to

[25] Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Donald S. Lopez Jr., eds., *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 173.

[26] Timothy Brook, "Rethinking Syncretism: The Unity of the Three Teachings and Their Joint Worship in Late-Imperial China," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 21, no. 1 (1993): 13–44, https://doi.org/10.1179/073776993805307448.

individual understandings. The syncretism manifests as a symbiotic existence between socialist education and the villagers' complex religious beliefs and practices. This relationship illustrates the coexistence, integration, and even reinforcement of traditional spiritual practices with political ideology, thereby shaping a unique cultural and social fabric within the community. I explore this dynamic further in the following chapters.

Excavating Beliefs Under Socialism

Despite the burgeoning interest in the study of modern Chinese religion since the end of Mao's rule, the Mao years remain the least studied period. [27] Most research has focused on the eras before 1949 and after 1978, likely due to limited historical archives. However, studies on pre-modern Chinese religions still provide valuable analytical scopes through which to understand the complex and heterogenous practices of religions across different societal levels. Scholars have noticed a tendency for successive regimes to tighten control over religious life, which was traceable to the politics surrounding festivals in Jiangnan from the post-Taiping years through the Republican period. The emergence of the party-state under the KMT introduced significant changes in the governance of religion. New government agencies staffed by members with less religious expertise replaced the previous hierarchical religious administration with the mediation of Buddhist and Daoist officials. However, the impact of these modern state campaigns varied across geography: metropolises and areas close to political centers were more affected, whereas radical state intervention proved less effective in rural and ethnic communities, especially those

[27] Xiaoxuan Wang, *Maoism and Grassroots Religion: The Communist Revolution and the Reinvention of Religious Life in China* ((New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 3.

on the peripheries of state control.[28] Other scholars have emphasized the dynamic interplay between religion, society, and the state in shaping cultural and political landscapes, particularly emphasizing how religion serves as a signifier of modernity and national sovereignty.[29] As values and symbols transformed across social boundaries, they reflected the state's influence on governance. Moreover, a detailed examination of Chinese villages by David Johnson reveals a diverse array of belief systems among the ordinary populace, highlighting the absence of uniformity in religious practices. [30]

In *Making Religion, Making the State*, the authors point out a tendency to study state and religion through a framework of antagonism and conflict.[31] Scholars of PRC history, in contrast, have highlighted the complex dynamics between the state and religion. Despite the Chinese government's efforts to control religious practices, religious beliefs continued to significantly influence village life and peasant behavior. This period was marked by a lack of uniformity in religious policy, characterized by a mix of suppression and limited tolerance. [32]

Xiaoxuan Wang examines state policy and highlights the complex stance of the PRC Constitution, which guarantees religious freedom while the government simultaneously takes measures to repress religious activities. The central government refrained from launching a national campaign against "superstition," a term that was central to the Republican era's

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[28] Paul Katz, and Vincent Goossaert. *The Fifty Years That Changed Chinese Religion, 1898–1948* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 20-25.

[29] Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), 6.

[30] David G. Johnson, *Spectacle and Sacrifice: The Ritual Foundations of Village Life in North China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), 9.

[31] Ashiwa and Wank, *Making Religion, Making the State*, 4.

[32] Xiaoxuan Wang, "The Dilemma of Implementation: The State and Religion in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1990." In *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism*, edited by Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, 259–78 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c84chm.13.

religious policy architecture.[33] Additionally, revolution played a significant role in shaping the religious landscape, further complicating the relationship between religion and politics. As Kang outlines in *Enchanted Revolution*, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) navigated a fine line between suppressing traditional religion and strategically employing its elements for revolutionary purposes. This dynamic was further complicated by the incorporation of gendered language and symbolism from traditional religion into revolutionary rhetoric, suggesting an intricate interplay between religion, gender, and politics.[34] The interaction of the state's revolutionary agenda with religion is further explored in Denise Ho's *Curating Revolution*, which details the antisuperstition campaign of 1955, showing how religious beliefs and practices were assimilated into new political ideologies by the CCP.[35] Madsen's discussion of the "moral revolution" emphasizes the profound impact of political ideologies on religious practices and beliefs.[36] The importance of supernatural beliefs in fostering local communication and solidarity, as discussed in S. A. Smith's "Talking Toads and Chinless Ghosts," highlights how these beliefs, merging supernatural and secular elements, reflect a political consciousness influenced by both religious cosmology and communist policies.[37]

Complementing the studies of religion in North China, DuBois confronts the idea of religious timelessness within rural societies. He exposes the profound shaping of local religious practices by historical forces, including political and social transformations. DuBois illustrates

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[33] Xiaoxuan Wang, *Maoism and Grassroots Religion: The Communist Revolution and the Reinvention of Religious Life in China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 11.

[34] Kang, *Enchanted Revolution*, 2.

[35] Denise Y. Ho, *Curating Revolution: Politics on Display in Mao's China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018),132.

[36] Richard Madsen, *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984),67.

[37] Steve A. Smith, "Talking Toads and Chinless Ghosts: The Politics of 'Superstitious' Rumors in the People's Republic of China, 1961–1965," *American Historical Review* 111, no. 2 (April 2006): 405–427.

that despite state efforts to diminish or regulate local religions, these practices persist as a dynamic element of rural community life. They continually adapt to changing external circumstances while retaining profound local importance. [38] DuBois's understanding forms the foundation for my research in rural northern China, where I explore how the dynamics of "socialist syncretism" continue to shape local communities and their traditions.

In conclusion, the study of Chinese religion during the high socialist era in rural China unveils a landscape where religion, politics, and social life were deeply intertwined. This period was marked by a distinctive blend of religious beliefs and practices, influenced by political ideologies and local socio-cultural dynamics, offering a unique perspective on the intersection of religion and revolution. In my research, following in the same vein of understanding modern Chinese religion, I employ Clifford Geertz's method of "thick description" to create a comprehensive and nuanced portrait of my grandfather's life and his spiritual world.[39] This approach goes beyond mere reliance on institutional archives. Instead, it not only involves gathering detailed narratives about his actions and events in his life, but also delves into the emotions, thoughts, and motivations that underpinned these moments. To truly understand my grandfather's journey, I contextualize his experiences by examining the historical events, cultural practices, and social norms that influenced him. This means interpreting the deeper meanings and symbols in his beliefs to unearth insights about his values and his interpretation of the world around him. Recognizing my subjective lens as his grandchild, I also reflect on how my

[38] DuBois, *The Sacred Village*, 10.

[39] In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz posits the concept of "thick description," which embodies the intellectual endeavor of scholars in structuring inference and implications. Geertz argues for an interpretive approach to cultural study, emphasizing the importance of understanding the "webs of significance." This interpretive method, as opposed to a solely observational one, allows for a deeper comprehension of the meanings and contexts behind cultural actions and symbols. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

relationship with him, and my own perspectives, shape the way I view and narrate his story. In addition, I seek multiple perspectives from others who knew him or are familiar with his era to add depth and diversity to my understanding. The resulting narrative does not just chronicle his life but provides a rich exploration of the complex system of socialist syncretism, which blends longstanding religious beliefs and practices with socialist principles. This synthesis illustrates how local adaptations could coexist with, and even enhance, overarching political agendas, offering insights into the cultural landscapes of socialist transformations.

Thesis Organization

This study utilizes personal records and oral history to offer a vivid glimpse into the multifaceted spiritual world of my grandfather and the cultural landscape in Susi Village located in Hebei Province in North China. Chapter One delves into the realm of "Believers in the Village," where it explores the spiritual landscape that shaped the collective consciousness of the community. This segment offers a glimpse into the continuity and ruptures in religious beliefs and practices within Susi Village. A key focus of the chapter is on the village's believers, illustrating how religious beliefs are deeply intertwined with family life, worship activities, and the tradition of opera. Additionally, it examines the profound impact of state policies on rural religious practices and spiritual life, particularly the shifts initiated by the anti-superstition campaigns and socialist transformations starting in the 1950s. Although the Communist Party intrusively entered both the public and private realm of rural inhabitants' lives, certain beliefs and customs were secretly preserved and performed. Even without any rituals or statues of gods, villagers still managed to retain their personal bonds to the deities or spiritual customs through family rituals, constructing

temples, and performing village operas. They laid the groundwork for a syncretism that blends grassroots beliefs with the top-down inculcated socialist ethos.

Chapter Two, "Village Affairs," following my grandfather's career from a higher profile position in township government back to the village, recounts a poignant incident involving him centered around allegations of embezzlement during the "Five Types of Activities (Five-Anti)" campaign in 1961. It showcases the entanglement of personal conflicts, desires, and spiritual beliefs within the complex web of rural political power. This section also explores the "socialist syncretism" system in a rural village, focusing on the interplay between socialist education and traditional beliefs. Despite government opposition to cultural and religious practices, villagers, particularly socialist cadres, navigate these tensions through community events like opera, creating symbiotic relationships within the community that reinforce moral values and strengthen communal ties.

Chapter Three centers on "Family Affairs." It examines the significant role religion played in my grandfather's family, particularly examining the role of gender in shaping socialist syncretism. By examining hidden beliefs, dreams, and the roles of women in the private (as well as increasingly public) sphere, this analysis highlights how gender shaped the interplay between old and new ideologies. I show that the evolving dynamics do not fall into rigid dichotomies, but rather exhibit fluid, adaptable beliefs and practices across different eras. In conclusion, this study traces the ongoing influence of socialist syncretism, reflecting on ethnographic research and power dynamics within both village and family life. It explores how these factors continue to shape the heritage and memory of the village's past, demonstrating the enduring impact of intertwined ideological and cultural identities on community cohesion and historical consciousness.

Chapter 1 Believers in the Village

Chapter One delves into the intricate spiritual landscape of Susi Village (蘇寺村), a small village in Hebei province in Northern China, and also my grandfather's hometown. The chapter begins by setting the scene, introducing Susi Village's geographical and cultural environment, and exploring the religious practices in North China, which is crucial for understanding the local belief system and its pervasive influence on the village culture.

A key focus of the chapter is on the village's believers, illustrating how religious beliefs are deeply intertwined with family life, worship activities, and the tradition of opera. Additionally, it examines the impact of state policies on rural religious practices and spiritual life, particularly the shifts and limitations brought about by the anti-superstition campaigns and socialist transformations starting in the 1950s. Despite the intrusive ideology of the Communist Party entering both the public and private lives of rural inhabitants through various forms of propaganda—such as film screenings, political meetings, and class struggle gatherings—certain beliefs and customs were secretly preserved and performed. Even without any rituals or statues of gods, villagers still managed to retain their personal bonds to the deities or spiritual customs through family rituals, constructing temples, and performing village operas. They laid the groundwork for a syncretism that blends long-standing beliefs with the newly imposed socialist ethos. This fusion reflects the intrusive government policies as well as a resilient adaptation to the sweeping transformations that reshaped rural China during the socialist era.

Given Susi Village's tiny size, it barely has any written records in county gazetteers. With the exception of a few official documents from the County Municipal Archive, this chapter

reconstructs the history of everyday life during the high-socialist period primarily through personal records from my grandfather and oral stories shared by villagers I interviewed.

The Village

Susi Village, a modest yet captivating locale in Northern China, is scarcely documented in historical texts. The little that is known about this village is from a few brief mentions in the *Chicheng County Gazetteer*. The village is nestled in the mountains of Hebei Province, within the jurisdiction of Ciyingzi Township, Chicheng County (赤城縣, 茨營子鄉). Chicheng County was once part of Chahar Province until its dissolution in 1952. Following the dissolution, Chahar Province was restructured, leading to the integration of Chicheng County into Hebei Province and the formation of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.[1] This historical context sets Susi Village apart from the focus of many scholarly studies on Northern China, which predominantly concentrate on the central or southern plains of Hebei Province.

In contrast to the widely researched areas like Duara's six case villages in *Culture, Power, and the State* and Wugong Village, as explored *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, Susi Village and Chicheng County have received relatively little attention.[2] Wugong Village in Raoyang County, in particular, has gained significant focus due to its renowned party leader Geng Changsuo and its early adoption of collectivization practices. However, Chicheng County,

[1] Hebei Sheng Chicheng Xian Difangzhi Bianzuan Weiyuanhui Bangongshi 河北赤城縣地方誌編纂委員會辦公室 [Hebei Province Chicheng County Gazetteer Compilation Committee Office], ed., *Chicheng xianzhi* 赤城縣誌 [Chicheng County Gazetteer], (Beijing: Gaige chubanshe, 1992), 18.

[2] In Duara's research, the six villages under examination, while spread across a geographical range extending from the outskirts of Beijing to the northwestern Shandong Province, are all situated on the North China plain. This consistent geographical characteristic is significant, as the plain terrain likely contributed to the settlement of more lineages in these villages. Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900-1942* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 11-13.

nestled in the mountains, lacks such notable figures or events. The most recognition it has received was probably through Zhang Yimou's 1999 film *Not One Less* (一個都不能少), which was set in Chicheng County and highlighted the stark disparities between rural and urban education. Through this portrayal, Chicheng has come to represent the less-developed, rural experience of China.

Susi Village itself is a relatively obscure entity within this lesser-known county. It encompasses six natural villages spanning 38,375 mu (equivalent to 25 square kilometers), which include residential land, arable land, roads, rivers, forest land, and grasslands. Influenced by this natural geography, the people of Susi Village primarily rely on agriculture and products grown in forested area. [3] The village is home to around 8,000 mu of forest land, with an additional 20,000 mu of barren slopes, providing abundant forest resources. Villagers often forage for wild vegetables, dig for medicinal herbs, and raise poultry and livestock to supplement their household needs.[4] During the famine period from 1959 to 1961, the availability of wild vegetables and animals in the mountains helped sustain the people, and compared to some villages, not as many people died of starvation here.[5] In addition, Susi is positioned 2.5 kilometers northeast of the township government. The village's name has historical roots, tied to a temple within its bounds and an official surnamed Su who once resided there. [6]

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[3] *Chicheng xianzhi* [Chicheng County Gazetteer],70.

[4] These figures are based on my grandfather's recollections, as there were no official records of exact land use percentages. While they may not be entirely accurate, they do highlight the abundance of forest resources, which proved life-saving during the famine.

[5] A chart provided by my grandfather recorded the deaths of 10 people in 1960, and he implied that not all of them died from starvation. Although I do not have the death figures for neighboring villages, Wugong Village, in *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, which the authors described as not suffering as badly as its neighbors, saw "a dozen elderly villagers die prematurely." In comparison, the death toll in Susi can be regarded as relatively mild. Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 241-247.

[6] In Chinese, "Su" (蘇) is a surname and "si"(寺) means temple.

The social fabric of Susi Village is characterized by a diverse tapestry of surnames, suggesting a variety of family lines. Notable families such as the Zhangs and Lis do exist, but they do not dominate the village's social structure. Brothers from these families chose to live separately, maintaining independence rather than forming alliances or factions. Moreover, the village's current demographic is overwhelmingly categorized as Han Chinese, accounting for 97% of the population.[7] This homogeneity is notable, with very few households originating from outside the area. Duara recognized the potential for lineages in North China; however, Susi Village does not neatly fit into his loosely defined category of lineage, as it lacks any kind of "corporate groups."[8]

The absence of large clans or lineages resulted in fewer divisions among households. The village experienced little "competitive or reactive violence" since they lacked kinship rivalries and the influence of large secret societies or religious sects, as explored in Elizabeth Perry's study on rural violence.[9] My grandfather describes the village as being inhabited by straightforward farmers, almost none of whom were "sneaky and deceitful" people. Although some individuals might have seized the opportunity to settle old scores, each political movement within the village unfolded with relative moderation.

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[7] China Contemporary History Research Center at East China Normal University, *Yige cunzhishu de gongzuo biji* 一個村支書的工作筆記 [Meeting Minutes of a Village Party Secretary], (Shanghai: Dongfang chubanshe, 2012), 2.

It is interesting to note that the village, to the best of my knowledge, was historically situated within the territory of Chahar, a region where different dynasties and ethnic groups interacted. In this village, certain surnames, such as "Bao," are prevalent. These surnames are typically associated with the Mongolian population, indicating a blend of ethnic heritages. Despite this, the majority of the village's inhabitants identify themselves as ethnically Han, even though their ancestors may have originally come from different ethnic backgrounds.

[8] Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State*, 87.

[9] Elizabeth J. Perry, "Rural Violence in Socialist China," *The China Quarterly* 103 (1985): 415, https://www.jstor.org/stable/653965.

Laoye[10]

My grandfather, Zhang Mingde (張明德), was born in 1937, in an old courtyard in Susi Village. Although he grew up during an age marked by the tumult of war, he did not experience much direct atrocity. In 1943, the Japanese forces occupied Heihechuan, the northeastern part of Hebei province, and coerced the scattered local populace into confined settlements. His village thus merged with the nearby Goumen Village. In Goumen, a towering stone wall, running north to south, was built. This large enclosure was fortified with watchtowers, featuring two levels and a wooden intermediate floor. The upper levels of these towers had small openings for firearms and observation. The main gate on the western wall was exceptionally large, approximately four to five meters in width when closed. Near the northern end of the eastern wall, a smaller corner gate was constructed, narrow enough only for pedestrian use. This gate provided crucial access for the inhabitants of northern villages, facilitating their return to their fields. This small gate was shut early in the evening, compelling those with ox carts to use the larger main gate.

Laoye was quite young during this period and his memories of constructing the enclosure are vague. According to his father, the villagers were mandated to work on the enclosure during daytime and could only attend to their personal housing at night. Their family home was thus constructed during these nocturnal hours. When they were relocated into the enclosure, he was about six or seven years old, only capable of carrying some pillows. His family, consisting of seven members, included his grandmother, parents, a blind uncle, and two younger brothers.

[10] Laoye, in Chinese, means maternal grandfather, and Laolao is the common term for maternal grandmother. In northern China, people commonly use these terms. In this thesis, I will use “my grandfather” and “my grandmother” when analyzing historical incidents. However, to convey a more intimate tone in personal descriptions, I will use “Laoye” and “Laolao.”

After relocating into the enclosure, he attended a private school there. His teachers were Wu Dexu from his own village and Teacher Di from Dongwankou Village, located approximately two miles away. Under Japanese occupation, despite the external influences and challenges, the village maintained its dedication to traditional Chinese education. This is exemplified by the continued teaching of classical Chinese texts. In the autumn of 1945, while engrossed in his studies, he needed to use the restroom. After obtaining a pass from his teacher, he ventured out and witnessed many people dismantling the enclosure. An unknown individual shouted, "Kids, come help tear down the enclosure! We are the Eighth Route Army. The people are liberated!" Confused and frightened, he hastily returned to the classroom, pretending he had a stomachache and lay down on the kang.[11]

Following the Japanese retreat, the villagers rapidly returned to their original homes. Post-Japanese departure, the Communist Party assumed direct control over the area. Under the new government's supervision, a primary school was established in the village. During this period, Laoye became the leader of the children's group at school, actively involved in many political activities. Land reform commenced early in their region, with the division of crops in 1946 and land redistribution in 1947.[12] During this reform, his children's group took part in driving away the livestock of wealthy peasants and participated in the interrogation of landlords. The focus was not on academics, instead, the children were encouraged to partake in political movements.

[11] The *kang* is a traditional bed with heating and ventilating function in rural areas of northern China.

[12] It is not uncommon for this region to have initiated land reform early, as many areas in northern China experienced Japanese occupation followed by Communist-led resistance, leading to political and economic reforms before 1949, as mentioned in *Fanshen* and *Chinese Village, Socialist State*. William Hinton, *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966).

Prior to the establishment of the PRC, except for the two years under Japanese rule, Laoye's father served as the village head. After 1949, his father continued in a similar role within the village. As a result, household tasks such as chopping wood and fetching water fell to Laoye. As a child, he particularly enjoyed chopping firewood. At the age of eleven or twelve, he would take an ox cart into the mountains to gather wood. His mother would accompany him, engaging in her sewing at the base of the mountain. They would return home in the afternoon with the cart loaded with about eight or nine hundred pounds of wood.

Even after the end of the war, his family still lived a very frugal life. In the winter of 1950, his father sent him to study at a new primary school in the area. He struggled during the first year since he had not attended many courses when he studied at the school before 1949. Determined to improve, he worked hard and became the top student the next year. In July 1952, when he graduated, someone in his school district came to ask whether he wanted to continue studies or start working. At that time, his two younger brothers had already enrolled in school, and since his father, as a village cadre, had no other income and could not afford to support continued education for all of them, Laoye chose to work.

Laoye began his career as a teacher, dedicating a year to education before marrying his future wife, my grandmother. In 1954, he was appointed as the secretary of Susi Village. His active engagement in his duties led to a promotion, and he began working in the township. In 1956, he joined the Communist Party. At that time, the township was staffed with over 20 cadres, a number comparable to present-day staffing levels. As a full-time state cadre, he devoted himself to his work, earning continuous commendation from both the county and township

authorities and participating in several county-level advanced representative meetings. His dedication and performance led to his nomination as an exceptional worker.[13]

The Beliefs within Families

During the Ming and Qing periods, northern China saw significant activity from popular religious sects, each with its own "organizational structure, leaders, deities, rituals, beliefs, and scripture texts." [14] Unlike villages in southern China, where strong lineages maintained shrines and cross-village organizations, Susi Village consists of families with different surnames living in a small community, making such institutions less prominent. The beliefs of the residents of Susi Village are primarily manifested in family and village traditions. In the households of Susi, the gods worshipped are a blend of folk religion, including animal fairies and Bodhisattvas. There is also belief in and respect for the God of Wealth, the Door God, and the Kitchen God. The most basic practices associated with worship of these gods include incense burning, offering sacrifices, and praying for blessings during festivals and in daily life. These ritual activities have a long history.[15]

Besides the ritual of worshipping gods, another manifestation of family belief in gods is "inviting a spirit medium (*qing xiang tou* 請香頭)." In his study of Hebei villages, Thomas DuBois observed spirit-mediums who heal through the power of fox spirits. These mediums are

[13] Zhang Mingde, *The Memoir*, unpublished manuscript, 2013, 3-4.

[14] Daniel L. Overmyer, *Local Religion in North China in the Twentieth Century: The Structure and Organization of Community Rituals and Beliefs* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 15.

[15] Telephone interview with villager Yang Guihao, September 23, 2023.

highly sought after, with most villages having at least one, and some having as many as ten. Villagers say, "there is no such thing as a village without a xiangtou."[16]

When a spirit medium visited a home, they would give specific explanations and solutions based on the spiritual information they had. For example, if someone had harmed a fox's den or killed a snake coiled on a beam, these were considered offenses against "small fairies" with spiritual attributes, and it was necessary to quickly steam buns for offering and pray at the site for forgiveness. Or, if someone was perfunctory in praying to the gods or spoke disrespectfully in daily life, they were to correct their behavior promptly.[17]

The "spirit mediums" in the village are mostly women. Their behavior differs from those who practice divination and fortune-telling for profit. They live among the villagers, offering help to those in need with their "divine" language outside of their daily labor and housework, without seeking return. Out of gratitude, the families who invite them might offer a meal or gifts like fruits and vegetables. Because of their not-for-profit nature and transmission of kindness, the spirit mediums have gained widespread trust among the villagers and were not criticized even during political campaigns. The observation in Chen Village, as noted by Anita Chan and Richard Madsen, presents a different facet of local religious practices compared to Susi Village. In Chen Village, the villagers also prefer to seek treatment from elderly women healers. However, their favorite remedies were mixing incense ash with water, and burning paper strips as part of their treatment for which they charge a fee. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese Communist Party continued its wartime cultural policies, which included the prohibition of "feudal" superstitious activities. During political movements such as the Four

[16] Thomas David DuBois, *The Sacred Village: Social Change and Religious Life in Rural North China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 67.

[17] Interview with Yang Guihao, September 23, 2023.

Clean-Ups, these individuals were not as fortunate. They were brought onto the stage for public criticism and coerced into confessing that they were frauds preying upon the community.[18]

In Susi Village, however, the enforcement of regulating superstitious activities was not strict, with some villagers still setting up shrines, incense burners, and offering tables in the main rooms. For instance, during the collectivization period, the spirit mediums of Susi Village never disappeared. The villagers still remember several notable mediums from different production teams in the area. Despite continuous guidance from higher authorities to "not believe in gods or ghosts, and seek doctors for illnesses," villagers would often quietly seek mediums for unexpected accidents or when feeling that things were not going well in life. Similarly, in rural Cang County in Hebei, most village and local authorities turned a blind eye to the existence of spirit mediums. As fellow villagers, they were realistic about them and recognized them as "friends and neighbors, rather than an abstract social phenomenon."[19]

Even during the early period of the Cultural Revolution and the "Destroy the Four Olds" campaign, when incense burners, statues, and memorial tablets were either destroyed or hidden, the bolder and more devout families secretly conducted rituals and prayers, such as setting up a small table in their yard at noon for simple kneeling and incense burning or conducting such obeisances at night. Worshippers had to wait until nightfall to perform their rituals, and they would stealthily make offerings during the Chinese New Year, using only two pounds of white flour. Everyone participated and kept each other's activities secret to avoid being reported. After secretly setting off firecrackers in the morning, the villagers trusted each other and went back to

[18] Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, Jonathan Unger, *Chen Village Under Mao and Deng* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 80.

[19] DuBois, *The Sacred Village*, 83.

their normal lives.[20] Some villagers mentioned that during the time when Mao Zedong's portraits and quotations were revered, while paying respects, thoughts would inadvertently drift from Mao to the deities.[21] The pragmatic concerns of village authorities and the persistence of villagers' beliefs contributed to the lingering effects of various family traditions, which became the root of socialist syncretism.

Temples in the Village

Chinese local religion encompasses both family and public worship of deities and ancestors on home altars. It also includes large-scale rituals involving the entire village or township community, particularly during the birthdays of gods or to seek protection from droughts, epidemics, and other disasters. Temple worship is a fundamental aspect of village beliefs.[22]

In Susi Village, temples have existed since the Ming Dynasty. However, villagers can only recall the location and appearance of the village temples since the 1930s. Due to the village's mountainous location, almost every residential area has a temple for burning incense and making offerings. Since Susi Village is the "administrative center" of the village—the location of the brigade office—interviewees remember the most about the Susi Temple. The temple, located next to the brigade office, had a hall about 3 meters high, which covered about 10 square meters, and housed numerous deities. In the last row stood nearly two-meter-tall statues of a white-faced mountain god, a red-faced Hu god (a personified god for safety), and a black-faced Dragon King, with smaller statues in front and behind the offering table. Among

[20] Interview with Que Dewen, Feburary 7, 2024.

[21] Telephone interview with Mu Lanle, January 7, 2024.

[22] Overmyer, *Local Religion in North China*, 93.

these gods, villagers particularly remember the "settling down" and divine power of the *Great King* (da wang ye 大王爺). My grandfather describes from his memory:

> The "Great King" worshipped in the temple is very efficacious and highly respected among the people. According to the elderly, this "Great King" was originally from Shanxi and made a bet with a wealthy man named Mi Wanliang. Mi Wanliang boasted, "Even if it doesn't rain for three years, I won't starve." The Great King then caused a heavy rain that washed away Mi Wanliang's wealth, and Mi had to borrow grain to survive. The Great King, having violated the heavenly rule, escaped to Susi Village by hiding in the axle of a merchant's ox cart. Originally, people built a small temple at Gou Men (not far from Susi Village), which was also a resting place for the Great King and often manifested miracles. Later, when a temple was built in Susi, the Great King was invited in.[23]

Due to the dry climate in this region, the deities and rituals worshipped by the villagers highlight the practical nature of local community rites and their deep connections to geographical and social contexts.[24] During droughts, the villagers of Susi would pray to the Great King in the temple, and people from dozens of miles away would also come to worship and make offerings. Occasionally, villagers from other areas would take the statue of the Great King for a few days to hold ceremonies before returning it. This shared belief in the Great King fostered a sense of "divine kinship," with people from distant villages considering themselves relatives when they met villagers from Susi.

[23] Zhang, *The Memoir*, 29.

[24] Overmyer, *Local Religion in North China*, 18.

In modern Chinese history, temples faced significant challenges, particularly during the late Qing's modernization efforts and throughout the Republican era. This period marked a pronounced shift against religious institutions. Notably, Duara's historical accounts highlight this turbulent era, recording how temples were often repurposed for secular uses, and their properties were seized for funding state activities.[25] Rebecca Nedostup documents the stages of temple confiscation in the Nationalist era, revealing a complex picture as temples existed as cultural, economic, and legal institutions, blurring the lines between religion and superstition. [26] This legacy of the challenging conditions of defining and regulating temple activities continued into the PRC era.

Amidst this widespread turmoil, Susi Village presents a unique case of resilience. Its remote location and the fluctuating jurisdictional control allowed its temple to survive these widespread reforms.[27] Remarkably, during the 1960s, the villagers of Susi even took efforts to restore their ancient temple under the guise of repairing a school. During its repair, the deities that were originally housed in the temple were discreetly relocated in the neighboring village of Shuigou. However, during the "Destroy the Four Olds" campaign of the Cultural Revolution, gods and deities were often desecrated. The Dragon King statue, for instance, was hidden in a stone cave by the villagers, who would check annually to ensure it was not damaged. The cave was located far away and high up, requiring young villagers to carry the statue on their backs to hide it.[28] The Red Guards, unable to locate the larger shrines, destroyed smaller statues they

[25] Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State*, 149.

[26] Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), 69.

[27] Before 1949, the village experienced shifting control among the Japanese, the Nationalists, and the Communists.

[28] Interview with Que Dewen, February 7, 2024.

found. It is said that when the statues were being smashed, the commune members present were so upset that they shed tears. One of the female Red Guards, who was particularly enthusiastic in smashing the statues, was soon divorced by her in-laws. The villagers believe that none of the fervent young revolutionaries who smashed the statues had a smooth life afterwards; they attributed it to retribution.[29] Even though the revolutionary spirit and the propaganda of atheism tried to invade people's lives, villagers firmly believed in the retribution narrative, leading to a mixed morality that relied on the framework of class struggle but was within spiritual guidance.

Village Opera

Opera serves as a vital part of spiritual culture in rural China. David Johnson has drawn attention to rural ritual opera, emphasizing its significance as a representation of the rich and diverse religious practices embedded in the countryside. He notes that the farmers had "wide latitude in creating their own rituals and raised the money to pay for them."[30] This is exemplified by the practices in Susi Village, where the local community not only cherishes but also actively sustains its operatic traditions.

Although it is hard to trace back the exact time when opera became a tradition in Susi Village, in the villagers' memories, Susi already had a long history of "Stilt Walking" (Gaoqiao 高蹺) performance as an entertainment. In the Republican Era, some villagers began learning drum music and martial arts to perform at weddings and funerals. They invited professional artists to guide them, and gradually formed a village opera troupe in 1942. The tune was similar

[29] A telephone conversation with my grandfather, November 25, 2023.

[30] David Johnson, *The Stage in the Temple: Ritual Opera in Village Shanxi* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2022), 2.

to Hebei Bangzi (河北梆子), one of the regional Chinese opera genres. At the beginning, troupe members had to borrow costumes from nearby villages. However, the opera enthusiasts were not satisfied with this situation, so they initiated a fundraising campaign. Except for a few very poor families who could not afford to contribute, and a few individuals who did not wish to donate, most households in Susi Village loved opera and contributed money. Even people from neighboring villages like Gangou contributed.[31]

The opera excerpts performed by the troupe were very popular among the farmers. The relative isolation of the rural community led people to cherish the self-entertainment activities during agricultural off-seasons or festivals. At the same time, performing opera was also seen as a form of worship, offering blessings and safety for the villagers. For the convenience of performing opera and worshiping, the opera stage was built directly opposite the temple.

Looking at the repertoire, before the establishment of PRC, the main performances in Susi Village were plays about historical figures including emperors, generals, and beauties. The themes of gods, spirits, and ghosts were also prominent. In the early 1950s, the Ministry of Culture issued prohibitions on certain plays marked by "feudal superstition."[32] Even though far away from central government control, local performers feared the criticism from political movements, so they eliminated many ghost elements from their plays. Yet the worship of gods by performing "God Plays" (唱神戲) before the official opening of the opera continued up until the Cultural Revolution. These "God Plays" had to be performed by males in deity costumes and involved roles like the Great Heavenly Official and the Three Immortals, each reciting

[31] Telephone interview with Gao Guiyou and Zhang Guiyuan, who were opera singers from the troupe during that period, November 5, 2023.

[32] "Guanyu zhengdun he jiaqiang Hebei Sheng xiju shiye de jidian yijian chugao," 關於整頓和加強河北省戲劇事業的幾點意見初稿 ["Opinions on Rectifying and Strengthening the Drama Career in Hebei Province Draft"], December 1, 1952, Chicheng Municipal Archive: 21-1-2-13.

auspicious words. A typical play constituted one act and lasted about four to five minutes and usually was performed twice. At this time, the opera troupe in Susi, unlike some others that paid wages, consisted of members who performed purely out of interest and passion, without earning any compensation until the 1980s. During festival seasons, villagers would sometimes offer meals and donations in various forms, such as potatoes, rice cakes, tofu, cabbage, and millet, to show their appreciation.[33]

The opera troupe in Susi Village was deeply loved by villagers for its functions of entertainment, education, and religious significance. Despite many restrictions in the cultural policies issued by the government and the calls to create "modern contents for the masses," Susi continued its traditional operas as entertainment activities until the rupture brought by the Cultural Revolution. Villagers recalled:

> During the Spring Festival between 1966 and 1967, revolutionary opera such as "The Old Couple Study Mao's Selected Works" and "Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy" were performed, but people didn't like to watch them. On the Mid-Autumn Festival of 1967, the village had to attract members to watch the operas by performing small local tunes like "Little Cowherd" first, but as soon as the revolutionary operas began, everyone scattered.[34]

The operas staged in the village are a vivid embodiment of the community's spiritual knowledge, illustrating the principles of rewarding goodness and punishing evil. These performances are more than mere entertainment; they are pivotal elements of the villagers'

[33] Interview with Yang Guihao, September 23, 2023.

[34] Interview with Gao Fuping and Zhang Fujiang, November 5, 2023.

educational framework, filled with moral lessons and ethical values. Additionally, these operas provide a platform for the subtle negotiation of political regulation and norms within the existing rural culture. Although the state actively employed various methods—such as employing projectionists to screen films and holding political meetings—to mobilize the masses and disseminate socialist knowledge, traditional knowledge production methods continued to influence the villagers' worldview, resulting in a blend of both.

The Limits of Anti-Superstition

In the first decade of the Republic of China, the concept of "superstition" became a focal point for intellectuals, revolutionaries, and state-builders. It was employed as a critical tool against certain aspects of traditional belief systems, which were seen as obstacles to the state's modernization efforts. This term was not just a cultural issue but also a significant political concern, especially for the cadres of the Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party in the 1920s. During the Nanjing decade, the Nationalists' definition of religion as a problem of modernity and governance placed religion under an administrative framework, engendering conflicts and dilemma when combating "superstition."[35] In the northern countryside of China, the term "superstition" gained prominence in the context of rural militias, which were religiously inspired and loosely organized. These militias emerged in response to the oppressive actions of militarist groups and showed a remarkable capacity to form larger alliances.[36]

[35] Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes,* 16-18.

[36] Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini, and Nicholas Loubere, eds. *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2019), 270.

The discourse on superstition in China also reflected the classification of religious beliefs. Starting from the Republican era, the modern state's obsession with categorization and planning revealed significant political implications.[37] The state, while viewing all religious beliefs as forms of superstition, distinguished between those associated with major historical traditions, such as Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity, and individual folk practices. The former, termed "religious superstition," were allowed limited expression within a state-monitored institutional framework. This approach, though legal, marked such activities as suspect, with participation by Party members and cadres being discouraged or prohibited. The latter, simply labeled as "superstition," included practices like ancestor worship within the household, magical healing, and exorcism, which always was associated with negative images and values. These were often considered challenging to comprehensively control.[38]

The case was similar under the Communist regime. A notable publication in the anti-superstition campaign was Hu Qiaomu's article, "Outline on Against Superstition," in *China Youth* magazine in 1940.[39] This piece stood out for its straightforward and accessible approach. Hu's article used simple language to elucidate the nature of superstition, highlighting its opposition to scientific thought. He argued that while science recognizes underlying principles in the world and human life, superstition attributes these to the whims of gods, spirits, fate, and souls, relying on religious rituals and magic for predictions and interventions. He contended that superstition is flawed both in reason and fact, and with the advancement of science, it is destined to diminish.

[37] Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes,* 20.

[38] Ann S. Anagnost, "Politics and Magic in Contemporary China," *Modern China*, no. 1 (1987): 43-44.

[39] Hu was a prominent Chinese Communist theorist and politician. He was known for his significant influence in the realm of ideology and propaganda.

The central discourse of anti-superstition was the scientific outlook of the atheism to which the CCP was committed. However, the call for atheism faced significant dilemmas, with defects in both theory and practice, and ultimately did not yield the envision outcomes. Despite nearly twenty years of anti-superstition campaigns, an article in *People's Daily*—reflecting Party ideology—failed to offer an alternative theory beyond what Hu proposed in the 1940s. It relied solely on the concept of class struggle to explain why people believed in spiritual practices, repeating the old narrative of science versus superstition.[40] The campaign against superstition was not entirely successful because it overlooked the fact that one reason for sustaining belief was the appeal to a power greater than the Communist Party, which had disappointed the people in many ways.[41] This likely explains why, in many rural areas, the explanatory power of atheism proved inadequate.

In practice, the CCP ideology advocated for the elimination of all superstitions. However, for pragmatic reasons, religion and superstition might be tolerated to some extent. According to Yang, if the social order was stable, the Communist Party's religious policy became more lax, adopting an enlightened form of atheism. Under threats to social order, atheism became more militant, as seen immediately following the Communist takeover and during subsequent periods of social unrest.[42] Xiaofei Kang notes that the CCP's atheism, influenced by the Soviet model, created blind spots in propaganda. For example, ghost stories were often used by the CCP, and cultural workers sometimes performed superstitious acts on stage to attract audiences, both

[40] Ya Hanzhang 牙含章, "Guanyu zongjiao mixin wenti," 關於宗教迷信問題 ["On the Issue of Religious Superstition"], *People's Daily*, August 8, 1963, 5. https://cn.govopendata.com/renminribao/1963/8/8/5/.

[41] Denise Y. Ho, *Curating Revolution: Politics on Display in Mao's China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018),133.

[42] Fenggang Yang, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 33.

intentionally and subconsciously. Their personal engagement with religious culture also shaped how the Party instilled new knowledge among the rural masses.[43] Similarly, Denise Ho provides cases of anti-superstition exhibitions that inadvertently reinforced superstitious elements. These beliefs persisted and were more complex than propaganda suggested. [44]

In addition to the inherent dilemma, the limitation of state control was another issue. In Susi Village, cadres recalled that no comprehensive anti-superstition campaigns were carried out before the Cultural Revolution. They rarely discussed the issue of superstition in meetings.[45] The vicissitude of state control allowed traditional beliefs to persist, and some cadres themselves were believers.

The limitations of anti-superstition efforts included theoretical ambiguities and the inability to comprehensively control religious practices, which allowed space for socialist syncretism. Jie Li has discovered that the sweeping narrative during the socialist era—revolutionary spirit—invoked in writing, films, and social practices, came to include values such as "selflessness, sacrifice, courage, discipline, honesty, and frugality," which were linked to a voluntaristic ideology. This amalgamation of ideology incorporated many of the moral and spiritual beliefs held by villagers, which emphasized similar values.[46] Consequently, this ideology never fully detached from the villagers' beliefs. Villagers did not find it strange to incorporate various forms of knowledge into their belief systems, as these did not necessarily contradict revolutionary goals but rather complemented them.

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[43] Xiaofei Kang, *Enchanted Revolution: Ghosts, Shamans, and Gender Politics in Chinese Communist Propaganda, 1942-1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 194-196.

[44] Ho, *Curating Revolution*,132-133.

[45] From the six cadres I interviewed, none reported having conducted a comprehensive anti-superstition campaign during the 1950s to 1960s.

[46] Jie Li, *Cinematic Guerrillas: Propaganda, Projectionists, and Audiences in Socialist China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), 18-19.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a detailed exploration of the intricate spiritual landscape of Susi Village by setting the geographical and cultural scene and examining the significant influence of local belief systems on village culture. Under the rapid socialist transformation, religious practices served not only as a form of communal resistance but also as an arena for exercising power and disseminating local culture.

During periods of repression, elaborate temples and statues were often replaced by secret home altars and small carved statuettes, while long chants accompanied by bells and drums could be reduced to a few muffled murmurs. [47] Despite these constraints, the villagers maintained their beliefs through family rituals, temple gatherings, and opera. Some of the culture in these practices collided with the political meetings and propaganda of the state, creating a picture of coexistence rather than the sharp conflict suggested by the state's narrative of science versus superstition. This coexistence highlights the limitations of state control and the persistence of rural culture, resulting in a form of socialist syncretism that represents the intersection of politics, religious beliefs, and rural culture. In the following chapters, I will examine village cases to unpack how socialist syncretism operated within the "cultural nexus of power" in rural politics and explore the dynamics introduced by various factors, including personal interests and power networks, religious morality, and, last but not least, gender.

[47] Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Stanford University Press, 2006), 7-8.

Chapter 2 Village Matters

Chapter 2 aims to present the political and cultural dynamics of Susi Village during the socialist era, illustrating the interplay between rural governance, spiritual beliefs, and personal aspirations. Utilizing personal records, archives, and oral history, the chapter begins in 1958, tracing my grandfather's career journey. His encounters with unexplainable illnesses, influenced by his spiritually gifted grandmother-in-law, eventually led to a significant shift in his life—from a promising political career in the county to his permanent return to village life.

Following my grandfather's career back to the village, the chapter recounts a poignant incident involving him, centered around allegations of embezzlement during the Five Types of Activities (Five-Anti)" campaign in 1961. Family members used their spiritual beliefs to navigate through fierce situations, co-opting socialist culture to fulfill their own interests. It highlights the entanglement of personal conflicts, desires, and spiritual beliefs within the complex web of rural political power. This section aims to provide an analytical lens for understanding the rural culture, personal beliefs under socialism, and the dynamics of power in a village.

The narrative then shifts to exploring the political and popular culture within the village, particularly focusing on the role of socialist cadres. These cadres were integral parts of a nexus of power within the village, serving as a node in a network of religious knowledge. They influenced both the flow of culture and the exercise of power.[1] One section examines how the rural leaders and villagers' enduring beliefs, alongside the imposed socialist education, fostered a

[1] Thomas David DuBois, *The Sacred Village: Social Change and Religious Life in Rural North China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 84-85.

dual belief system within the community, which also created a dilemma regarding how to combat superstition. This is vividly depicted through cultural activities like opera, which simultaneously served as a medium for state propaganda and a source of communal joy and bonding. The chapter also addresses the challenges that village drama troupes faced in adhering to state guidelines, alongside the villagers' efforts to preserve their cultural and religious practices, such as repairing the opera stage and temple, despite government opposition.

Socialist ideology, which emphasized selflessness, integrity, and the need to "serve the people," had a significant impact on the villagers, especially the rural cadres. However, it was their devotion to personal beliefs that played a more decisive role in shaping the village's political landscape during tumultuous years. This combination of beliefs, which I characterize as "socialist syncretism," often led to the formation of tight-knit communities where individuals supported each other and avoided excesses during political campaigns. Even under the suppression of religious practices, these communities strove to uphold and strengthen the moral values they cherished. Furthermore, socialist cadres created a nexus that played a significant role in the dissemination and maintenance of this syncretism. The relationship between communist and religious beliefs in these communities was not a dichotomy but rather symbiotic, as many villagers found ways to integrate both sets of beliefs into their lives, reinforcing a complex tapestry of moral and ideological commitment.

A Mysterious Incident

In 1954, Laoye got married and he applied to join the Communist Party the next year. His career trajectory took a promising turn in 1956 when seven townships amalgamated into one large township. He was responsible for handling the daily affairs of both the Party Committee and the

Township Government, and sometimes he was also sent to work in other villages. His performance in this newly formed township was so exemplary that many people expected him to earn a position within the county government. However, just as his political career took off, he encountered a strange illness that he could never understand.

In 1958, his mother-in-law needed to build a house in Susi Village, so the craftsmen were fed at his house, and his grandmother-in-law (referred to hereafter as "Grandma") and mother-in-law stayed with them. He often returned home and became well-acquainted with Grandma. Grandma was, in fact, a remarkable and mysterious person. Laoye was unaware of her spiritual gifts. She neither burned incense, nor did she perform any ritualistic practices like spirit possession. But she could take anyone's pulse and diagnose their illness with incredible accuracy.

One day, she suggested that Laoye should not be an official anymore and should return to the village. His mother-in-law said, "It's not the end of the year yet! Keep working." But Grandma insisted, "No, you must come back." After a while, he started to fall ill, feeling uncomfortable every day, not wanting to eat, feeling weak all over, and it kept getting worse. When it was very bad, his eyes would blur, and his head would feel dizzy. When he went home, he would feel better, but as soon as he went back to the office, the illness would return. Laoye recorded details of his illness:

> In the spring of 1958, I was particularly ill. People from our village saw me in the township and said I looked terrible. The township head was worried when he saw me and said that while work was important, life was more so, and urged me to stop working and seek medical attention immediately. One day, I was walking back home from the township with my body feeling heavy. The closer I got to

home, the lighter my illness felt, and once home, I didn't feel too bad. The next day, I went with two neighbors to Shuigou Village to pick wild vegetables. I sweated a lot but didn't feel sick. A few days later, I went to see two doctors, who both said I wasn't ill.

In the summer, I went for a meeting with Zhao, the Party Secretary of the township. Since there was no transportation, we had to walk. Not far from home, I invited the secretary to have lunch at my house before continuing. He waited elsewhere. Because my mother-in-law's house was under construction, I went home for a bowl of fried cakes. By the time we reached Dongwankou, I suddenly collapsed, falling unconscious. People fed me medicine and gave me injections, but I was unaware. The next morning, when I woke up and went to see Director Deng of the office, he said, "You're finally awake. You scared us last night." I proposed to Zhao and Director Deng that I needed to resign. Zhao knew about my previous applications. They had discussed it and decided to transfer me to the county people's committee office. I was even more anxious and repeatedly requested to resign. Zhao said, "This is the revolution." I replied, "For the revolution, but if I lose my life, how can I continue the revolution?" Later, Zhao took out a notebook, recorded my request, and said he would discuss it with Director Meng, as I was still young and capable. He told me to get well first.[2]

After returning to the township, Laoye went to a health clinic for treatment. After a few days of Chinese medicine, the doctors let him return to work, believing he was not really sick. At that time, medical treatment was publicly funded, so he did not pay for the medicine. He

[2] Zhang Mingde, *The Memoir*, unpublished manuscript, 2013, 12-13.

proposed that if they did not approve his resignation, he would take Chinese medicine every day. After nearly a month, the notice came. He immediately returned to the township, and in half a day, completed the handover procedures since he had already organized all types of documents. Some directors from other county department wanted him in their department but he insisted on leaving. On June 19, 1958, he completed all the documents required and was ready to leave the township office. After finishing, the director Wang from Personnel Department said, “Go home and get well. Once you’re healthy, come see me, and I will arrange something for you immediately.”

That day never came. He went home and stayed in the village until his retirement in 1992. As he got home that day, Grandma told him, “Now I can rest easy.” After resigning, he did not experience the illness again, never even once needing to buy a painkiller.

Even with permission to return to the village, it may have been difficult for a young and promising cadre to relinquish his career opportunities to go back to the village. When asked about his choice, Laoye gave a forthright answer: “Yes, working in the township would have been better. But I went back home because Grandma said so. Staying in the village was also good for me. You know, I never questioned her words. I did not find it odd since I believed in these things from an early age. If I had worked in the township or the county, I might not be here today.”

This series of events is difficult to rationalize. However, it led Laoye to develop a deeper respect for and belief in the wisdom of the women in his family, particularly in their spiritual practices. These practices became the foundation for the socialist syncretism he incorporated into his management of village affairs. A more detailed analysis of their “abilities” and influences will be provided in the third chapter.

Intricate Desires

In 1958, Susi Village was integrated into the Wafanggou Brigade. Beginning his new career in the village, Laoye dedicated himself to serving as the accountant for his production team. As part of his duties, Laoye was responsible for collecting funds from the brigade, money earned by villagers for selling grass for livestock, and ensuring its distribution among the commune members. His role required meticulousness in recording transactions, a habit that proved lifesaving, especially considering his prior conflict with the brigade secretary, Wang Wengong, whom Laoye described as "lacking competence and fairness." During his tenure as the production team accountant, Laoye often found himself at odds with Wang, leading to several disputes. Despite other cadres' fear of Wang, Laoye, steadfast in his principles, often clashed with him, becoming a "thorn in his side."[3] For example, in the allocation of surplus food rations among the various production teams, the brigade selectively targeted the Susi team for additional contributions, neglecting adjustments for other teams. Laoye, together with the team secretary, recognized that complying with these demands would lead to starvation within their own team. United in their conviction, they made a bold decision to refuse Wang's order, prioritizing their community members over the brigade's directive. However, this resulted in allegations of embezzlement during the "Five-Anti" campaign.

The year 1961 marked a critical period in China, especially in the wake of the Great Leap Forward. The nation grappled with severe economic challenges and a devastating famine. In response, the government initiated corrective measures, including the "Five-Anti" campaign, aimed at addressing the excesses and mistakes of the previous years. However, the campaign did

[3] Zhang, *The Memoir*, 15-16.

not reflect the mistakes made by the central government; instead, it believed that the local level cadres had been infiltrated by anti-revolutionaries. This stance significantly influenced its execution and focus. The campaign had a particular impact in rural areas like Susi, where it targeted corruption and other malpractice within the local administrative and production teams. Although the political acrimony was comparatively mild in Susi Village, with villagers holding the belief that extreme behaviors would ultimately lead to moral retribution, the temptation for those in positions of power to exploit political movements for personal gain still existed.

During the 1961 campaign, Laoye was accused of misappropriating grass funds. Fortunately, the investigation was thorough, and people from the county work team visited each village to gather evidence. It was only after records showed that commune members in Yazigou had received over 600 yuan that he was cleared of suspicion. Laoye's meticulous nature played a crucial role in his exoneration. "I am a meticulous person," Laoye said:

> For instance, whenever an animal like a cow or sheep died, or when dealing with grain, I always had the handlers create documents and submit both the documents and the money to the brigade. I kept a ledger, which I still have. Whoever received or paid money in the brigade had to sign it. I always suspected that the brigade accountant Li Mao and the financial officer Han Dengju were problematic, so I was extra cautious. I believed that good deeds are rewarded, and evil deeds have their retribution.[4]

For Wang Wengong, who previously had personal issues with my grandfather, focusing on corruption during the campaign was a strategic move. Cadres in the production teams,

[4] Interview with my grandfather, January 13, 2024.

including accountants, were not well-compensated, creating the potential for graft.[5] While petty corruption was a minor irritant in some villages, the consequences of unaccountable power secretly commanding resources could be disastrous elsewhere.[6] The keepers of the warehouse and accountants like my grandfather could have easily taken advantage of their positions. Yet, my grandfather's integrity and the comprehensive records he maintained shielded him from false accusations.

But the political movement had just started. Back in the winter of 1960, a notable incident occurred within Susi that significantly influenced subsequent political events. Li Wenbin, who was somewhat mentality unstable and responsible for taking care of the sheep in the production team, frequently reported discrepancies in the sheep count, with the number of missing sheep varying each day. This inconsistency and lack of clarity regarding the exact number of lost sheep became a matter of concern.

The situation escalated when this issue of the missing sheep was formally reported up the chain of command, first to the brigade, then to the People's Commune, and eventually reaching the county level. This matter did not just stay within the confines of resource management but took on a political dimension, particularly due to the involvement of Wang Wengong.

Wang Wengong seized upon this incident. He used it as a pretext to put the village under intense scrutiny during the "Five-Anti" campaign in 1961. It was this confluence of circumstances – the unresolved issue of the missing sheep and Wang's animosity – that led to the campaign being particularly fervent in the village. The campaign's fervor was fueled not just by

[5] Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, Jonathan Unger, *Chen Village Under Mao and Deng* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 35.

[6] Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 224.

its overarching political objectives, but also by local dynamics and disputes, illustrating how personal conflicts and local issues could intertwine with larger political movements in rural China during that era. This blend of local dynamics and larger political movements, as Jie Li notes in *Shanghai Homes*, exemplifies how, under Mao, the line between public and private affairs blurred. Public actions were often deeply influenced by personal conflicts, illustrating how political movements could have varied and profound impacts on individuals.[7]

The "Five-Anti" campaign was intense. After the work team entered the village, all the cadres were removed from their positions. They actively encouraged villagers to speak out and refused to leave until the sheep theft case was resolved. The county work team, including occasional visitors, comprised 28 members. Among them were Hu Qingchun, the Chief of the County Public Security Bureau, and Liu Jinchang, the head of the County's Agricultural Bureau. The commune secretary Liu Yuan was also present. Meetings were held day and night, pressuring everyone to report and denounce the alleged "crimes" of others.

Laoye had been exonerated from his grass funds embezzlement case, however, the issue regarding the sheep theft still was unresolved. The work team adopted various strategies, such as letting children ride on bicycles in the village courtyard. Any child who could identify a sheep thief was promised one fen and a ride on the bicycle.[8] Many children got a ride, except for Laoye's cousin, the daughter of his uncle Zhang Wenguang. The work team then persuaded her to speak, and she said, "My dad and my brother (referring to Laoye) and Gao Guiyou slaughtered sheep with a kitchen knife." She then received one fen and finally got the chance to ride on the bicycle. This accusation further implicated Laoye and his uncle, who had been a public security

[7] Jie Li, *Shanghai Homes: Palimpsests of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 19.

[8] The smallest unit in Chinese currency, equal to 0.01 yuan.

officer since 1949, in the sheep theft case. Laoye's uncle was so distressed that he attempted suicide but survived.[9]

To bring Laoye down, his brother-in-law Gao Xiangcai was also implicated. In Laoye's words, Gao was an honest man with a "rich peasant" background. He remembered once during a struggle session, Gao was pushed back and forth so hard that his head hit a large jar and broke it, though thankfully he was not seriously injured. Gao's family was poor, and his son could not afford clothes for his wedding, so he borrowed some from Laoye's family. He put the clothes in a bag, but people said he was carrying sheepskins and chased him to his home, searching his entire house.

Laoye faced multiple rounds of interrogation, and some work team members fiercely accused him of being stubborn and failing to confess to the crime. In the spring of 1961, during the plowing season, one evening the commune secretary, Liu Yuan, called upon him again to discuss the unresolved sheep theft case. Laoye insisted he had not stolen any sheep and did not know who had. He still recalled that night in great detail:

> They persuaded me to confess. I told them, "I am a Communist Party member, and not confessing my problems would be deceiving the party. There are no secrets that time doesn't reveal." No matter what he said, I repeated the same thing. I even asked him what I should say, and he advised me to be honest. The conversation went back and forth like this. Finally, he said to say whatever I wanted. At that moment, there was a table in the room with many blank papers, and a young cadre of the commune was ready to record. I said I was ready to talk. When Liu Yuan heard this, he moved closer to me. I said someone wanted to eat

[9] Zhang, *The Memoir*, 19.

> mutton and insisted I steal and slaughter a sheep, but I hadn't even taken a single sheep hair. He asked who it was, and I angrily said, "Liu Yuan." He got so angry that he went outside to use the bathroom. Then Liu came back in and said, "It seems that you're tired from farming, go home and rest. We'll come to your house tomorrow to solve the sheep case, and we won't involve anyone else but you." I said, "My house is at the east end, facing south. Whenever you want to find me, I'll be there." The conversation that night lasted no more than half an hour, and I went home. They never approached me again.[10]

After the "Five-Anti" campaign, Laoye heard rumors that there were indeed sheep thieves, yet the higher authorities did not pursue the matter further. During the Cultural Revolution, some individuals confessed to stealing sheep from several villages, but not from Susi.

The sheep theft incident, involving multiple individuals, instilled a pervasive sense of fear among many families, anxious about being arbitrarily implicated. Originating from a minor event, it escalated due to personal vendettas. Throughout each stage, personal motives and biases influenced judgments, steering the situation in unpredictable directions. Fortunately, there were no fatalities, yet the damage inflicted was significant and lasting.

This incident also highlights the complex interplay of spiritual beliefs in shaping community responses. During the "Five-Anti" campaign, there were interesting incidents that transpired within families, particularly those of Laoye's household. Laolao, Peng Shuqin, at that time had a routine of informing her husband whenever he was called in for questioning. After his departure, she would sleep, and upon his return, she would wake up to inquire about the

[10] Zhang, *The Memoir*, 20-21.

interrogation. Strikingly, my grandfather's experiences always matched her predictions, bolstering his confidence during questioning.

Laolao also consoled her father-in-law when he and his colleagues were accused of stealing grain. As You Changgui was appointed as the storage keeper, a discrepancy in the inventory showed a loss of over a thousand pounds of corn. You led others to believe that Laolao's father-in-law stole and distributed the corn within his own family. He was forced to pay 100 yuan to settle the matter. However, she assured him that they would recover this money. This assurance came true when they sold plums from their garden, precisely earning back the amount they had paid. She believed that making baseless accusations was morally wrong, and interestingly, years later, both You Changgui and his wife suffered tragic fates.

After the campaign, Laolao ceased making such comments. In a climate of fear and uncertainty, spiritual beliefs often served as a coping mechanism, providing solace or a sense of justice beyond the tangible realm. The intensity of socialist campaigns frequently left little space for reflection or response, yet the beliefs shaped how guilt and innocence were perceived, sometimes even influencing the direction of events. Under these circumstances, personal belief transformed from a mere background presence to a dynamic agent, actively shaping how individuals interpreted and navigated the difficulties.

In an earlier time and context, Cynthia Brokaw has explored similar themes in her study on Chinese morality books from the 16th through the early 18th centuries. She uses "ledgers of merit and demerit"—morality books that listed good and bad deeds with corresponding merit or demerit points—to analyze elite responses to the disruptive changes during the Ming-Qing

transition.[11] In Susi, only a few villagers had access to traditional education, unlike the educated elites. Those who did study primarily focused on Confucian classics such as *The Analects* and *The Mencius*, and some engaged with practical texts like *Liuyan zazi* (六言雜字 Miscellaneous six-character mnemonics), which introduces farming tools through teaching students to recognize and learn to write the characters.[12] Despite their lack of education, the villagers' pragmatic approach to religion also emerged in response to societal transformations, treating various beliefs as utilitarian instruments for achieving both material and moral benefits. While villagers tended to adopt moral visions that aligned with their interests, as Madsen indicates, they arrived at these visions by employing the forms of discourse available in their culture. Under certain circumstances, villagers may have been persuaded that the logic of their moral discourse compelled them to take stands that contradicted their immediate socioeconomic interests.[13]

However, during the socialist era, villagers were not mere passive receivers of the complicated discourse and socialist ethos. Instead, they could incorporate their spiritual knowledge to co-opt state appeals, reorganizing their beliefs and filling the void where the state failed to provide explanations during harsh difficulties. Moreover, within their community, the pragmatic spirituality aligned with the dominant socialist anti-corruption ethos, enhancing it through a profound fear of divine retribution. A commitment to ethical integrity was supplanted by the pursuit of virtuous deeds in the eyes of the divine, and worries about corruption gave way to fear of divine punishment. Thus, in this reflection of socialist syncretism, these villagers mirrored broader societal shifts towards morality and spirituality as responses to changing times.

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[11] Cynthia Brokaw, *Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 2-5.

[12] Interview with Gao Guiyou, former production team leader, February 8, 2024.

[13] Richard Madsen, *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 246.

The Village

Socialist Cadres

Mao Zedong, as early as 1938, highlighted the crucial role of cadres in shaping political outcomes, stating, "Cadres are a decisive factor, once the political line is determined."[14] This principle finds echo in rural governance, where the implementation of national policies and the efficacies of various movements heavily depend on grassroots cadres. Yunxiang Yan, in his observations from research in a Northwestern China village, noted how different local cadres could lead to divergent destinies for their villages. It is these local governments, represented by village and township officials, that are the true executors of national policies, making these policies relevant only when they have tangible impacts on the lives of villagers.[15]

In *The Spiral Road*, Shu-min Huang emphasizes that while the central government establishes the structures of policy, the responsibility for achieving these goals falls upon local governments, down to the county, township, and village levels. Each level has the autonomy to determine the most effective methods for policy implementation.[16]

Richard Madsen, through his field research in Chen Village, identified four distinct types of grassroots political leaders based on their various political standings and power resources: the "Communist gentry," the "Communist rebel," the "moralistic revolutionary," and the "pragmatic technocrat."[17] These classifications do not quite fit Susi Village, which lacked the robust kinship

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[14] Mao Zedong, "The Role of the Chinese Communist Party in the National War" (October 1938), in *Selected Works*, Vol. II, 202. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/red-book/ch29.htm

[15]Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949-1999* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 29-31.

[16] Huang Shu-min, *The Spiral Road: Change in a Chinese Village through the Eyes of a Communist Party Leader* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), 182-190.

[17] Madsen, *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village*, 245.

networks that are characteristic of Chen Village. Chen Village is often described as a "single big family" or "federation of families" in southern China.[18] Nonetheless, it is insightful to consider these typologies in discussing the unique political practices of cadres in Susi Village, underscoring the nuanced and idiosyncratic nature of local governance in rural China.

In Susi Village, the cadres predominantly came from peasant backgrounds, rather than from revolutionary zealots or local gentry. In villages like Wugong in north China, personal ties with authorities and intravillage reorganization into larger work units created a complex social dynamic, which allowed revolutionary opportunists to thrive.[19] Most of the individuals in Susi, however, were neither landlords nor the most marginalized peasants. They had limited educational opportunities but managed to complete middle school and receive specialized training. For instance, those cadres who had experience as accountants recall using the abacus as a calculator, a practice that some even continue to this day. From my interviews, they stand out for their exceptional memories, capable of recalling dates and intricate details of past events.

Yan, in his analysis of the cadres in Xiajia village, argues that the legacy of the land reform campaign in the post-PRC era transformed poverty into a form of symbolic capital within the new social order. He observed that during the 1950s and 1960s, village cadres often maximized state policies due to their ideological commitment to the revolutionary cause. In contrast, the pragmatic leaders of the 1970s and early 1980s struck a balance between fulfilling state demands and addressing local needs.[20] In Susi Village, however, there was a ready mix of these two types of cadres. According to interviews with former brigade accountants and production team leaders, there was a clear emphasis on adhering to state policies without

[18] Madsen, *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village*, 250.

[19] Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, 224-225.

[20] Yan, *Private Life under Socialism,* 30.

allowing private interests to interfere, particularly concerning grain distribution. However, some team leaders were more flexible and concerned that strict adherence to state grain quotas could lead to starvation. Thus, such leaders took the risk of concealing production for private distribution to ensure that villagers had enough to eat.[21]

After the establishment of the People's Commune system in the countryside, the rural situation became more turbulent with the collectivization of agriculture. The state, recognizing the vital role of rural cadres in the socialist transformation, took steps to ensure their behavior aligned with the new socialist ideals. Instruments such as the "Model Charter for Advanced Agricultural Cooperatives" and the "Regulations for Work in Rural People's Communes" were introduced.[22] These regulations called for the establishment of political instructors in production teams. The purpose was to extend ideological and political work to the fields and embed socialist ethical ideals, such as "selflessness, integrity, and class struggle" deep in the hearts of farmers. To encourage agricultural production, the state created labor models who, in publicity, were portrayed as enduring suffering, attending to the welfare of others, and self-sacrificing for the collective.[23] The state also implemented stringent regulations at the rural level to ensure proper grain extraction. In villages like Susi, large-scale corruption was feared since team leaders and accountants underwent strict audits.[24] Despite these measures, challenges persisted. Many grassroots cadres succumbed to corruption, undermining the collective ethos. This led to

[21] Interviews with Qi, Gao, Fan, Que, February 2024.

[22] "Gaoji Nongye Hezuoshe Shifan Zhangcheng" 高級農業合作社示範章程, 1956. And "Nongcun Renmin Gongshe Gongzuo Tiaoli (Cao'an)" 農村人民公社工作條例（草案），1961.

[23] Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 211.

[24] Interview with former brigade accountant, Que Dewen, Feburary 7, 2024.

continuous efforts by the Party to rectify these issues, although they were never completely resolved.

Still, the training of socialist cadres was rigorously emphasized during meetings. As a famous quip puts it, "The Nationalist Party had many taxes, the Communist Party has many meetings" (Guomindang shui duo, gongchandang hui duo 國民黨稅多，共產黨會多). This phrase indicates the time investments or ideological commitments required under the Communist regime, particularly in the form of frequent and lengthy meetings. According to the minutes recorded by my grandfather, they typically began with attendees being briefed on new policies or government documents, setting a tone of ideological education and alignment. Yunxiang Yan's observations further illustrate this dynamic: "Ever since the land reform campaign, meetings and public rallies had become part of village life, whether the villagers liked them or not. In addition to political meetings related to seemingly endless national campaigns, there were also regular commune meetings to address production and distribution issues in the collectives. Many villagers also belonged to party-sponsored organizations, such as the Youth League, the Women's Association, the village militia, and the Association of Poor Peasants, which held their own meetings and activities. For party members, there were additional regular party meetings and study lessons."[25]

Former rural cadres, reflecting on their experiences, noted that these meetings were not just administrative but also educational, serving as a crucial medium for disseminating, for instance, Mao Zedong Thought and other ideological teachings. This process of ideological training was intended to mold cadres into effective disseminators of Communist principles at the grassroots level. However, the impact of this indoctrination varied significantly among

[25] Yan, *Private Life under Socialism*, 30.

individuals. While some cadres developed a keen interest in Mao Zedong Thought, embracing and propagating these ideas with enthusiasm, others might have been less affected or engaged, demonstrating the diverse ways in which political education could influence individuals.[26]

The governance in Susi Village experienced a shift after 1965, following its transition to an independent brigade and a change in leadership. The new brigade secretary, my grandfather, known for his strict style and spiritual beliefs, played a crucial role in reducing unfair and corrupt practices.[27] According to the existing meeting minutes from March 1967 to December 1984, the management of collective production in Susi brigade was well-organized. In addition to following the general regulations and systems set by the higher-level government, there was often a more specific management adapted to local conditions. In areas closely related to the interests of commune members and the relationship between officials and peasants, there were detailed institutional rules and regulations. These covered various aspects such as fixed grain rations and state procurement, care for the vulnerable, rural education and cooperative medical care, as well as cadre subsidies and rewards. They were frequently discussed in the records of tens of thousands of words from those meetings.

This transformation in Susi Village reflects a broader theme observed during this era, since it was attributed not just to the stricter enforcement by higher authorities but also to a growing belief among the cadres that dishonesty would have negative repercussions. The promotion of public interests over private ones and the education of class consciousness were emphasized not only during campaign periods but also in daily production and life. However,

[26] Interviews with former cadres, February 2024.

[27] I will elaborate more on how he was chosen for this position in the next chapter.

this approach, while effective in certain respects, did not completely replace the inherent ethics from long-standing belief systems among the rural people.

Cadres as Believers

In the Susi brigade, traditional beliefs and values occasionally integrated with the newly promoted socialist norms, creating the new socialist syncretism. This hybrid cultural approach, as mentioned before, helped villagers navigate the difficulties and challenges of adapting to societal changes. The original folk beliefs, even when overshadowed by the "public" or "collective" narrative of socialism, persisted, blending moral concepts such us, "there is a spirit three feet above one's head, and those who are greedy and take more than their share will meet retribution" (舉頭三尺有神明，貪吃多占遭報應) into the socialist ethos. This coexistence of ideologies underlines the dual belief systems that continued to exist within rural society, where concepts of good and evil deeds remained central to community values.

During the socialist transformation, the residents of Susi brigade navigated a complex landscape of belief systems. On the one hand, the state agenda vigorously promoted socialist education, emphasizing the importance of prioritizing state benefits over private concerns. As observed by Madsen in his commentary on revolutionary moralities, villagers were encouraged to set aside immediate self-interests for long-term village improvement, yet selfishness certainly persisted.[28] This push towards socialist ethics often relied more on moral suasion, as legal enforcement was always ambiguous and inconsistent. Personal beliefs, religious or spiritual, served to fill the void left by the state's doctrinal focus, creating a quasi-public space that redirected attention from mundane concerns towards communal contributions.

[28] Madsen, *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village*, 158.

In terms of community building, cultural activities like opera played a significant role in the complex syncretism. From the party's perspective, operas were a potent tool for policy dissemination and mass education, serving as a potential cultural vanguard. For the villagers, operas were a source of joy and community bonding, cutting across age groups and drawing in even those who typically shunned village meetings. The emotional power of these performances, often depicting themes of good versus evil, loyalty, and karmic justice, resonated deeply with the villagers, subtly reinforcing the socialist "for the greater good" ethos while drawing from traditional narratives of gods and spirits. Maggie Greene notices the presence of theatrical ghosts from 1949 to 1963, and the questions they raise about reforms and the pervasiveness of socialist culture. Cultural workers grappled with integrating popular, yet ideologically ambiguous, stories. Ghosts served various purposes, from educational devices and symbols of feudal beliefs to promoters of fatalism.[29] Xiaofei Kang also discusses the cultural influence of ghost stories and traditional beliefs on propaganda using the example of "The White-Haired Girl," a model opera from the Cultural Revolution that intertwined traditional ghost narratives with socialist themes. She argues that the CCP's use of religious resources was not solely instrumental but also involved conscious and unconscious efforts, which impacted both propaganda and the general public's perception.[30]

In the early 1960s, the Hebei Provincial Ministry of Culture further standardized village drama troupes and introduced "five prohibitions": no performing "bad" plays (usually referring to the plays that contained reactionary, licentious, superstitious, and feudal elements) or ghost

[29] Maggie Greene, *Resisting Spirits: Drama Reform and Cultural Transformation in the People's Republic of China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019), 4.

[30] Kang, *Enchanted Revolution: Ghosts, Shamans, and Gender Politics in Chinese Communist Propaganda, 1942-1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 196.

plays; no ticket sales or commercial performances in other forms; no purchasing of old costumes or props; no spending money to hire teachers or actors; and no interference with production.[31] Even under the state guidelines, village drama troupes frequently "broke rules and overstepped boundaries." As recorded in the archives, some rural production brigades organized opera artists to perform "bad" plays and rarely staged contemporary dramas that served the socialist education cause. According to the report, they preferred to perform ancient plays, focusing on lively and bustling scenes without regard to political significance. A few cadres and actors were still unclear about the appropriate content for modern plays, showing a fondness for stories of emperors and beauties. When some troupes did perform new-style plays at communes, some commune and brigade cadres obstructed them in various ways, pushing the actors to instead perform the old repertoires.[32]

Under the growing political pressure, the drama troupe in Susi brigade basically followed the rules, but the passions for opera and places for worship never disappeared from the villagers' minds. Furthermore, the village cadres were not only proponents but also personally invested in the organization of opera performances. In late spring 1963, Susi experienced a severe drought. People proposed rebuilding the opera stage and sought an auspicious day to start work. As my grandfather recalled:

> After lunch, we held a meeting with the leaders of three teams. I remember more than 20 people attended, and everyone agreed to do the repair. We didn't have

[31] Hebei Provincial Ministry of Culture, "Hebei Sheng Wenhua Ju gei Quansheng Nongcun Yeyu Jutuan de Yifengxin" 河北省文化局給全省農村業餘劇團的一封信["A Letter to the Rural Amateur Theatrical Troupes of the Entire Province"], November 1, 1963. Zhangjiakou Municipal Archives: Permanent Volume, 79-1-238.

[32] Zhangjiakou Department of Culture and Education. "Guanyu Zhuanye Jutuan da gao Geminghua da yan Xiandai xi Qingkuang de Baogao" 关于专业剧团大搞革命化大演现代戏情况的报告 [Report on the Professional Troupes' Major Endeavors in Revolutionizing and Performing Modern Plays], February 12, 1965. Zhangjiakou Municipal Archives: Long-term Files, 79-2-91.

ropes or wooden poles, but the commune members offered them willingly. I remember a woman steaming buns for offerings, someone went to buy incense, and many people prayed at the temple, saying if it rained, we would start work the next day. After praying, when I got home, my wife asked me to plant some celery seedlings in the garden. At that time, a layer of red clouds appeared in the sky. Before I could finish planting, a heavy rain really came, lasting through the night. The ground was soaked. The next day, all the commune members spontaneously gathered at the opera stage. Someone suggested we should ask other teams to participate since the opera stage belonged to the whole brigade. After consultation, all the villages agreed to help with the repair. When we returned from the consulting, the old opera stage had already been dismantled.

The next day, the brigade secretary Zhang Baozhai called a meeting with the leaders of ten production teams, all agreeing to repair it as a brigade project. A construction committee was established, and I was appointed as the accountant, responsible for managing materials, labor, and meals for the craftsmen. The enthusiasm of the villagers was high, and the work was done quickly, completing the opera stage in just a few months.[33]

After finishing the opera stage, Susi Brigade continued to repair the temple. Unlike the opera stage, repairing the temple was deemed superstitious at the time, and the commune did not allow it, with leaders coming several times to order the dismantling of the repaired sections. After the authorities left, villagers immediately resumed the work. After several demolitions, the villagers finally completed the temple, but they did not place any statues inside, merely

[33] Zhang, *The Memoir*, 21-22.

identifying the building as a storeroom. The villagers then made high tables and stools for the opera performances, with the help of two local carpenters. After everything was ready, they invited the "Dongmao Commune Troupe" to perform a play.[34]

In Susi, the act of "serving the gods" played a notable role in fostering community cohesion and solidarity among villagers. Rural cadres ensured that critical decisions encompassing funding, purchasing costumes, hiring opera masters, paying performers, and managing the specific arrangements of plays—both locally and externally—were reflective of the villagers' preferences.[35] These matters were deliberated and finalized by the brigade's two committees. Additionally, the "cooperative" spirit manifested in these activities aligned well with the collectivist concept of "serving the people." This fusion of efforts, both from public and private interests, may have served as a fundamental force molding the socialist community's societal structure. The effectiveness of the resulting "socialist syncretism" is evident in how diverse beliefs and practices were harmoniously integrated.

Nevertheless, the Party was not always willing to tolerate the continuation of personal beliefs, particularly when such beliefs pertained to folk traditions that were (and still are) categorized as superstitions. The dilemma of suppressing superstition was palpable. According to Xiaoxuan Wang's observations in Ruian during the 1960s, village cadres' engagement in religious and other traditional practices increased. These cadres, who had become more central to village affairs post-collectivization, often displayed equivocal attitudes towards such practices.

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[34] That autumn was a bountiful harvest year. It has been almost fifty years since the opera stage and temple were repaired, and my grandfather has kept the related accounts all this time.

[35] One notable example of this dedication was when the people in charge of buying costumes for the drama troupe took their task very seriously. They believed their work was important not only for the community but also as an offering to the gods. This belief made them even more committed to their task. To save as much money as possible for the brigade, they made simple choices. They ate cheap food and stayed with family members instead of paying for a place to stay. All these efforts were to ensure they could spend more money on the costumes for the troupe. From a telephone conversation with Mu Lanle, who once was responsible for purchasing costumes, January 7, 2024.

This situation led to an ironic scenario wherein the very individuals responsible for enforcing anti-superstition policies were also among those engaging in the practices that the state sought to eliminate.[36]

The situation was similar in Susi. Here, the brigade secretary, who was entrusted with leading the community, firmly believed in and followed a complex set of beliefs that integrated elements of Buddhism and local folk traditions. This belief system, while potentially contributing to organizing the brigade effectively, was in direct conflict with the state's stance against such practices. Consequently, the contradictions underscore the challenges faced by local leaders in balancing their personal beliefs and the directives of the state. Not only did the secretary hold these beliefs, but other local cadres also clung to their religious roots despite political indoctrination. An ex-production team leader fondly remembered the community's trust in the temple's power, especially to summon rain. Respecting the Dragon King of the temple in Gan Gou with a seat of honor (上首) during operas was a long-held custom. He recounted, "One performance, they placed the Dragon King's statue lower than it should have been, and that's when a hailstorm came without warning. Another time, someone stepped on the Dragon King statue's shoulder while hanging a banner. The poor guy suffered terrible stomach pains until he made amends at the temple with incense." These narratives underline the enduring interplay between the cadres' political training and their abiding spiritual heritage, a delicate balancing act of tradition and governance in the countryside's social tapestry.

In *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, we observe the case of Fierce Zhang Duan, who emerged to keep villagers in line with state ideologies. Under his influence, class enemy labels

[36] Xiaoxuan Wang, "The Dilemma of Implementation: The State and Religion in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1990," in *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism*, edited by Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, 270.

could be pinned on anyone who opposed what the state defined as the only road to communism. Drawing attention to state-imposed disasters was perceived as an attack on socialism, so cries of hunger and despair were suppressed.[37] The situation in Wugong was much fiercer than in Susi. In my grandfather's meeting minutes, it is evident that they were willing to deploy people with a good class background. However, the struggle against class enemies was not prominent, with a primary focus on daily production. Although it is hard to attribute Susi's relatively more flexible situation entirely to their religious beliefs, the explanation is complex. The different cultural nexus of power in Wugong—a model village tied to pleasing authority and various revolutionary forces within the village—contrasted with Susi, where things were simpler due to its relatively remote location.

The cultural nexus of power in Susi Village can be seen in how relationships were based upon both personal and moral appreciations and beliefs. My grandfather, serving as brigade secretary from 1965, was a significant node in these personal networks of power. Morality and personal beliefs played significant roles in his decisions. After his tenure as brigade secretary, he carefully chose his production team leaders, selecting production team leaders who fit his vision. Although he did not tell me directly, his expressions and interviews with his colleagues made it clear that he endorsed individuals with a certain level of education (interestingly, many started as accountants), integrity, and loyalty. Those he selected were also loyal believers with strong spiritual convictions. He helped to maintain the stability of the socialist syncretism in Susi Village.

[37] Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, 213.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the interplay between traditional beliefs and socialist doctrines in Susi Village demonstrates that these ideologies were not mutually exclusive but rather merged to create a unique socialist syncretism. This syncretism helped maintain a harmonious community that aligned with the ideals to which the state itself aspired. The blend of personal, moral, and spiritual beliefs with socialist values formed a complex cultural landscape, showcasing the ability of local adaptations to coexist with, and even complement, broad political agendas.

This dynamic created a circle of power where the limitations of the state allowed space for socialist syncretism to flourish. Rural cadres utilized this cultural power to craft ideal politics within the village, selecting individuals who shared their vision and beliefs. This approach not only reinforced the syncretism within the power nexus but also strengthened the community's resilience and cohesion during tumultuous times. The case of Susi Village thus provides a valuable lens for understanding how local practices and beliefs could adapt to and integrate with overarching state ideologies, resulting in a nuanced political and cultural environment.

Chapter 3 Family Affairs

At the village level, various incidents illuminate how religious beliefs were circulated and had impacts on villagers, suggesting the workings of "socialist syncretism," which can be regarded as a pragmatic approach to spirituality under socialism. This syncretism emerged as a unique blend of older beliefs/practices and socialist principles, influencing rural leaders' fairness in governance during intense political campaigns. Within the more intimate confines of the family sphere, clandestine spiritual practices reveal a distinct, personal aspect of such beliefs. These hidden activities and beliefs form an unconscious realm relatively untouched by socialist ideologies. The intimate exploration of belief resonates with Jie Li's depiction of Shanghai alleys in *Shanghai Homes* as "fruitful sites for understanding the long-term human impact of modern Chinese history's vicissitudes"[1] On a more personal level, it also aligns with Cho's examination of Korean diaspora families in her work, where suppressed family histories and the silence surrounding them lay the groundwork for unresolved historical issues.[2] This adds a poignant layer to our understanding of how private, often suppressed, aspects of family life contribute to broader social dynamics. The spiritual lives embedded in family affairs provide valuable insights into the personal facets of "socialist syncretism."

The chapter also examines the role of gender in shaping socialist syncretism. Historical narratives, such as those in Kang's *Enchanted Revolution*, show that Mao Zedong's peasant revolution was cast as a youthful, masculine force, whereas religion and superstition were often

[1] Jie Li, *Shanghai Homes: Palimpsests of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 4.

[2] Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 7-10.

associated with women and older men, groups Mao deemed "backward."[3] Similarly, *Red Revolution, Green Revolution* suggests that discussions around gender were more reflective of actual social and cultural patterns than those around class struggle during the 1960s, indicating that while class labels might have become insufficient, gender continued to play a critical role in organizing social structures. [4] This gendered portrayal extends to the private memories of village women, who, as Gail Hershatter has noted, place the household at the center of their narratives, emphasizing the domestic work largely absent from official documents of the collective period.[5]

My work takes a somewhat different angle on the gendering of private life under socialism, focusing not on women's experiences directly, but through the lens of one man's narrative. This perspective highlights the often-overlooked role women play in shaping beliefs and societal norms from behind the scenes. It uncovers how women's influence and contributions, though frequently unrecognized, are integral to the fabric of familial structures, as well as to guiding the realm of beliefs and traditions within their communities. Additionally, the discrepancies and limitations inherent in one man's viewpoint can further enrich our understanding of gender dynamics and hierarchies.

Explored in this chapter are stories centered around my grandfather's interactions with three influential women in his life as chronicled in his memoir. These women, each wielding distinct spiritual influences, guided him through his professional challenges and provided consolation during the tumultuous Cultural Revolution. This familial dynamic not only

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[3] Xiaofei Kang, *Enchanted Revolution: Ghosts, Shamans, and Gender Politics in Chinese Communist Propaganda, 1942-1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 12.

[4] Sigrid Schmalzer, *Red Revolution, Green Revolution: Scientific Farming in Socialist China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 119-120.

[5] Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 268.

highlights the gender complexities and nuanced empowerment hidden in a society aspiring to gender equality under the slogan "women hold up half the sky," but also illustrates how spiritual beliefs served as guidance and sanctuary for the family during catastrophic times. By examining hidden beliefs and the roles of women in the private sphere, this analysis highlights how gender considerations add to the interplay between tradition and new ideologies in a system that does not fall into rigid dichotomies but rather comprises elements of a fluid, adaptable belief system across different eras.

Marriage Stories

Laoye's marriage story began when he was just 15, teaching at a school in 1953. During this time, a relative named Shi Huaiyan approached him with a proposal to introduce him to a girl named Dong Dehui. He recalled meeting her several times at school, where she was a student and he a teacher. He decided to wait and discuss the matter with his parents when he returned home. At the time, he had been transferred to an elementary school far from his village and lived there. Without giving it much thought, he went about his work and life until one day he returned home to a surprising revelation: he was engaged to Dong Dehui. He recounted:

> One day I went home to visit my family, and my parents told me, "Shi Huaiyan said you agreed to marry Dong Dehui from Wafanggou. We've already decided while you were away." Isn't this absurd? I wasn't even present, and my parents didn't ask for my opinion—they arranged my engagement.[6]

[6] Telephone Interview with my grandfather, November 21, 2023.

Upon his return, the neighbor's grandmother informed his mother that the chosen daughter-in-law was not good-looking and incapable of doing any housework, deeming her unqualified. She offered to help find a more suitable match, suggesting the daughter of the Peng family in Yaozigou. This girl was described as good-looking, good-natured, smart, and skilled at sewing. The proposal was appealing, but the Peng family had reservations due to my grandfather's existing engagement and his family's lack of property. The grandmother persisted, and advised a quick dissolution of the current engagement if they wanted Peng's daughter.

"A farm family's need for labor and a mother-in-law's need for kitchen help are reasons given for a marriage."[7] Combined with Laoye's marriage story, this narrative highlights the values villagers placed on marriage, where women were expected to be attractive and proficient in household chores. When asked why he was not satisfied with Dong, my grandfather candidly admitted that he found Peng's daughter, who later became my grandmother, "prettier than Dong Dehui" and added, "Dong was also taller than me; I didn't like that."

After breaking off the engagement with Dong Dehui, Laoye became engaged to my grandmother, Peng Shuqin, in the fall and married her the following spring. Their marriage was not exactly revolutionary in terms of free choice, as they had only met once before. In the 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party's Marriage Law aimed to encourage citizens to make their own marriage decisions, but its impact was ambiguous. For most rural families, marriages were a blend of arranged and free choice since the state, deeply preoccupied with class struggle and production, did not vigorously enforce marriage reforms at that time.[8] Parents typically arranged

[7] Margery Wolf, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985), 141

[8] Neil J. Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family: Politics, Love, and Divorce in Urban and Rural China, 1949-1968* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 227.

matches based on economic parity, yet young people had some autonomy if they found the match undesirable. I have often wondered if my grandmother ever expressed dissatisfaction with her marriage, particularly since she did not go to my grandfather's house initially; her brother acted on her behalf until the wedding. Despite this arrangement, she demonstrated agency in her personal affairs. After the marriage, she insisted on continuing her education, advancing directly to the fourth grade due to her good grades at school.[9]

Laoye's life underwent little change after marriage. He left his teaching position and assumed the role of township secretary, earning 15 yuan per month. His responsibilities were relatively light, consisting primarily of gatekeeping and occasional clerical work, which was preferable to the physically demanding labor of farming. In contrast, women had limited access to such lighter employment opportunities. According to Laoye, prior to the 1956 township annexation, all clerical positions were occupied by men. It was only after the merger of several townships that a woman was appointed, and her responsibilities were confined to the affairs of the Women's Federation. Likewise, Jacob Eyferth examines the material lives of rural women and finds that rural women were expected to work full-time in agriculture. In addition, they had to dedicate one-third to one-half of their waking hours to tasks such as spinning, sewing, and weaving to ensure their families were decently clothed according to modest standards. Women were often judged by neighbors and relatives based on their family's clothing. Furthermore, they might also work for the extended household under the supervision of their mothers-in-law.[10] Margery Wolf also notes from her interviews with women in the 1980s that rural women were (and still are) expected to do far more than women of previous generations. They had almost

[9] Telephone Interview with my grandfather, November 17, 2023.

[10] Jacob Eyferth, "Liberation from the Loom? Rural Women, Textile Work, and Revolution in North China," *Maoism at the Grassroots*, 2015, pp. 131-153, https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674287211-005, 137.

entirely taken over the agricultural activities of the commune, thereby freeing men to work in the more lucrative factories.[11]

Laolao's life changed drastically after she dropped out of school due to pregnancy. She took on the majority of the household chores, including cooking, cleaning, and childcare, with some assistance from her mother-in-law. Laoye rarely engaged in housework, focusing instead on some physical tasks such as repairing the vegetable garden.[12] Laolao also shouldered the burden of fieldwork. Once her children grew up, she worked outside the home, engaging in farming and pig rearing, earning equal work points as men due to her efficiency.[13]

Gender division was pronounced during the socialist era, a fact often overlooked in historical accounts. The socialist liberation discourse, while progressive, acted as a double-edged sword. It granted women rights and opportunities but simultaneously restrained them in other ways. [14] The Chinese Communist Party's promotion of family reform was not purely altruistic; it sought to align family stability with revolutionary goals, using it as a means to enhance productive efficiency.[15] Despite revolutionary agendas, rural areas, where 80% of the population resided, grappled with the persistence of traditional practices that impeded social change.[16]

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[11] Wolf, *Revolution Postponed*, 138.

[12] Interview with my mother and aunt, Feburary 9, 2024.

[13] This contrasts with the narrative in *The Gender of Memory*, which indicates that women received fewer work points for performing the same tasks as men. Interestingly, when I interviewed a woman who did farming work during that time, she recalled that she did the same job as men but received fewer work points. She was quite reserved during the conversation, yet she expressed a hint of dissatisfaction about receiving less for the same work. Although my grandfather has a good memory, the discrepancy here is intriguing: who is more likely to be mistaken in their recollection?

[14] Xiaoping Cong, Marriage, *Law and Gender in Revolutionary China, 1940-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 3.

[15] Judith Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 185.

[16] Wolf, *Revolution Postponed*, 79.

However, women found alternative ways to assert their agency and power within families. In this project's case, they carried and upheld beliefs to exert their influence.

Three Women

On the front page of his memoir, Laoye wrote a dedication to three women: his grandmother-in-law (whom I refer to as "Grandma"), his mother-in-law, and his wife. In large characters, he recorded, "I now recall these three people: The most remarkable person, the most insightful person, and the person with the most noble character. They are the people I will never forget in my life."[17]

In the memoir of his years before the 1990s, Laoye rarely recorded detailed family matters. It was only after his retirement that he began to include narratives about his children. The first half of his memoir primarily focused on family affairs involving a few key women, whom he recorded in detail and from whom he sought spiritual help.

The first years of marriage were challenging for my grandparents. Initially, they lived with Laoye's family, and everything seemed fine. However, things took a negative turn when my grandfather used money he had earned from cutting oats to buy fabric for clothes for Laolao. His mother was upset, believing that all earnings from such work should go to the family. This incident marked the beginning of a difficult period. The situation worsened when Laoye's second younger brother secretly undermined him, telling their mother that my grandfather was not earning enough to support his own family and that he was not working hard enough. This caused

[17] The original text here is: 通过实践，我在回忆起，这三位是：太了不起的人，非常有远见的人，非常高贵的人，思想最纯粹的人。她们的一生是我最最难忘之人。

their mother to resent Laolao. Laoye recalls this clearly. During one argument between him and Laolao, his mother said, “If you don’t want her, just divorce her. We can sell our family’s milk cow to get you another wife.” Tensions escalated further, leading to my grandparents being forced to move out of the main family home. They faced harsh living conditions, confined to a small room on the side, which was barely habitable.

In 1955, amidst these struggles, Laoye decided to apply for military service, seeking a way to improve their circumstances. During this period, he became estranged from his own family and began spending more time with my grandmother’s family, finding solace and support there.

In the daily lives of my grandparents, the women played a significant role, possessing a unique “power” to perceive the world and exert their influence. Their insights and actions often provided crucial support in navigating the challenges they faced and had a great impact on my grandfather’s life choices. When he applied for the military, three people from Susi Village underwent the physical examination, and he was the only one who passed. After a successful political review, he was selected as a candidate. He attended a township meeting in Dongwankou District, where the district secretary informed him, “You applied for military service this year, passed the physical exam, and your political review was also good. It has been decided that you will be drafted. On behalf of the district committee, I approve you as a probationary party member. Your organizational relationship will be transferred to the army when you enlist.” Laoye agreed.

When he returned home, his mother-in-law was present. During dinner, he asked Laolao, “Will you be happy if I join the army?” She responded, “Go ahead, being a soldier is great.” He said, “Don’t cry when I leave.” She replied, “Joining the army is a good thing, why would I

cry?" His mother-in-law overheard the conversation and asked, "Is it true that you're joining the army?" He repeated what the district secretary had said. Upon hearing this, Laolao started to cry. The atmosphere was heavy, and they did not eat well that evening.

After nightfall, he heard his mother-in-law snoring and talking in her sleep on the bed: "He can't join the army. If he leaves, there will be no one to take care of his young wife. We must find a way to change this." She repeated this three or four times. Laoye and Laolao could not fall asleep and heard it clearly. Finally, his mother-in-law said, "I said he can't go, so he can't go. Even if it's difficult, we must find a way to change it." Eventually, they both fell asleep.

The next morning after breakfast, Laoye went to the township office to hand over the documents. As he entered, a stranger asked if he was from the township. He said yes. The stranger handed him an urgent letter from Dongwankou sent by the district. It stated that he should not hand over his documents because there was a change in the draft. Later, he learned that his spot in the military was given to Mi Yanliang from Heidaying Village. Many years later, my grandfather met Mi Yanliang at the entrance of their village. Mi Yanliang joked, "You didn't go. I went to be the soldier in your place." [18]

This incident demonstrates how dreams, perhaps as a form of spiritual practice, provided women with a means to exert influence in family matters despite lacking formal power and resources. Similar sentiments can be seen in the "talking toads" rumors studied by S.A. Smith. Smith's article examines superstitious rumors as reflections of the social and political climate of the early 1960s. One rumor involved talking toads that explicitly cried out, "Disaster will be averted only if young married women bake toads made from 2.5 jin of flour and give them to their mothers and the old folks to eat." The message emphasized the importance of the young

[18] Zhang, *The Memoir*, 35.

caring for the elderly. These rumors reveal the anxieties, fears, and coping mechanisms of Chinese peasants and workers amidst widespread social uncertainty and crisis in a famine-ravaged country. [19]

In the case of my grandfather's family, the mother-in-law's fear that his military service would deplete the family's labor and resources highlights a familial dynamic. Her resistance was not merely a reflection of discord but was also deeply rooted in the socio-economic realities of their time. The potential of losing a crucial source of labor, especially during a period marked by uncertain political campaigns and limited resources, posed a threat to the family's survival. The sudden change in the military draft could be interpreted as either a coincidence or a mystery, yet it also underscores the unpredictable nature of life during that period. In such uncertain times, the role of women in the family was consolidated through their engagement in spiritual practices, which helped to maintain family cohesion and survival.

A more prominent example was from the "power" of Grandma. In Chapter Two, I recounted Laoye's mysterious retirement from the county, showcasing the significant influence of Grandma. Despite not burning incense or practicing shamanistic rituals, she had an extraordinary ability to diagnose illnesses with great accuracy. For physical ailments, she prescribed folk remedies; for mysterious ailments, she provided guidance on how to settle the spirit, which often proved effective. In Laoye's memoir, he vividly recalled her sayings starting from 1958, which still baffle and impress him today. Despite being an old lady from the mountains who seldom left her home and had little outside knowledge, her insights were intriguing and remarkable: "There will come a time when clothes are available but there will be

[19] S.A. Smith, "Talking Toads and Chinless Ghosts: The Politics of 'Superstitious' Rumors in the People's Republic of China, 1961–1965," *American Historical Review* 111, no. 2 (2006): 408-411.

no one to wear them, roads are open but no one to walk them. One-third of the population *will* survive. The most important thing will be life; without life, wealth means nothing."[20]

This was around the peak of the Great Leap Forward when Susi Village had implemented public canteens to provide free meals to all villagers. However, shortly after, the village faced severe grain shortages in the following years, leading to several deaths from starvation. It was also the year Grandma persuaded Laoye to resign from his township job rather than potentially continue working in the county. Her reasoning stemmed from a deep concern for family stability: she feared that if he continued his job in the county, it might lead to a divorce with my grandmother. She likely sensed that the counterintuitive policies of the time could lead to negative outcomes. Alternatively, she might have heard rumors from neighboring villages suggesting that the situation was not as optimistic as it seemed. While her exact thoughts behind her prognostications remain a mystery, her advice highlighted her profound understanding of the societal changes and upheavals. Moreover, as Laoye's mother-in-law, they both valued familial bonds during turbulent times.[21]

Grandma also had great observations about the political affairs in her community. In the spring of 1965, Chicheng county and commune officials visited the Susi brigade. A few days later, they initiated a restructuring of the brigade, instructing Susi to select a new brigade secretary under the age of 30 who was educated. Upon returning to the village, the visiting cadre, Zhang Zhichao, convened party members for a discussion. Among the party members, only

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[20] Zhang, *The Memoir*, 11-12.

[21] Her other prophetic words also included: "In the future, families will be separated in different directions and unable to reunite. Some people will live in high-rise buildings with electric lights and telephones, and they will be able to watch performances from home… During that time, the South will suffer from severe storms and flooding."

"Lin Biao is a traitor with broom-like eyebrows. He may be powerful now, but his end will come soon."

"Taiwan will be peacefully liberated. There are many great gods and generals there, so there must be no war."

Laoye met the commune's criteria, so they chose him. At the time, Laoye was firmly opposed to becoming a Communist Party cadre due to a previous false accusation targeting him.

The day after the meeting, Laoye went to the home where Grandma was staying. When he arrived, he had not even had time to drink the water he poured for himself before Grandma asked him why he was there. He said he hadn't seen her for a long time and missed her, so he came to visit. She said, "No, you refused to become an official, so you came to me. He denied it, but she insisted she was right. After dinner, they talked until midnight. The next day, as he was about to leave, she told him that refusing the position absolutely would not work. She insisted that he must take the position: "You must take this position. You must raise this red flag with all your heart. I see you taking it within five to ten days."

On the sixth day after the meeting, commune cadre Li Wen held a party meeting. On the night of March 20, the party members voted unanimously for Laoye to be the brigade secretary. He became angry and spoke at length, criticizing the party and its cadres. He recalled yelling at the other party members, "I said to them: 'What? The Communist Party is worse than the Kuomintang. The Party's cadres are blind, unable to distinguish between good and bad people. People like Wang Wengong persecute and retaliate against me. Serving the Communist Party is out of the question.'" Li Wen openly said that the commune leaders had selected him and added, "You have suffered in previous movements, and it's natural to be angry. If you don't take the position, I'll kneel until you do." The other Party members also persuaded him. Under such circumstances, he accepted the position on March 21, 1965. [22]

This incident further illustrates Grandma's vision and insight into political affairs, showcasing her ability to influence decisions and foresee outcomes. Despite being an illiterate

[22] Zhang, *The Memoir*, 27-29.

rural woman, she did not confine herself to her domestic circumstances and possessed significant consciousness of matters within both the private and public realms. It is important to note that those lacking in literacy were not a single homogeneous social group. Many illiterate women could become the foundation of the structure of dominance, and the most important reservoirs of traditional folk culture in its various regional versions. These women played crucial roles in maintaining and transmitting cultural and moral values within their families and communities.[23] Historically, women in Susi Village did not have the same access to traditional Confucian education as men. However, they still acquired knowledge and information through their families. After the Communist Party took over the area, the school curriculum shifted significantly towards political education, with a strong emphasis on class struggle.[24] This transformation meant that women, particularly those who received their education after 1949, became quite familiar with political slogans and the new societal norms. As Laoye recalled, Laolao also possessed a wide range of wisdom. She "would mainly advise on kindness, respecting elders, how to handle household chores, how to do brigade work, and even matters of the state; there was nothing she wouldn't talk about."[25]

Another example is my grandfather's breaking off of the engagement with Dong Dehui. Their case was settled in the district level after Dong had accused a local cadre of "violating marriage freedom" because she did not want the engagement to end. Diamant observes that rural family instability (such as divorce) was minimal after 1953 due to the state's emphasis on class

[23] David Johnson, "Communication, Class, and Consciousness," in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 66-67.

[24] My grandfather recalled being the leader of a local children's group: "At that time, we child members were very active. Education in school wasn't focused on teaching; every day we practiced beating the 'bully whip' and performing *yangge*, urging us to actively participate in the movements."

[25] Zhang, *The Memoir*, 26.

struggle and production over marriage reform; this pattern may have been prevalent in Susi Village as well.[26] However, local women had already been educated about marriage concepts and were already acquainted with the concept of "freedom of marriage" and used this knowledge to negotiate for their own interests and rights.

Women during the initial years of the anti-superstition campaign were often targeted as disseminators of backward beliefs. Although the exact mechanisms of their "power" remain unclear, they utilized mediums such as prophetic dreams to gain influence in situations where political and material resources were lacking. Furthermore, they leveraged their roles within the family to provide advice and consolation during tumultuous political campaigns. Their perspectives, complementing the political discourses familiarized by male cadres, collectively formed a socialist syncretism that helped families and communities navigate uncertainties, which I will explore in the next section.

Political Campaigns

In 1961, during the Five-Anti Campaign, Laoye was targeted in an embezzlement case, and his uncle Zhang Wenguang was also implicated. After a criticism meeting, Laolao asked him about Uncle Zhang's zodiac sign. When he replied that it was the same as his, the Ox, she recounted a dream: "In the cattle pen, there was a small red ox and a big black ox. Someone opened the door and let the small red ox out. The big black ox was anxious, trying to get out but couldn't, and eventually fell, lying in the pen with wide-open eyes. This dream isn't good. The small red ox is you, and the big black ox might be your uncle. He must not get into trouble." That night, Uncle

[26] Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family*, 226.

Zhang tragically slit his throat. Following this, she told Laoye, “I won’t let others touch even a single hair on your head. If there’s a mistake, Heaven will correct it.”

Whenever a political gathering took place, she would tell Laoye in great detail what would be discussed that day. After he left, she would go to sleep, whether it was daytime or nighttime. When he returned, she would wake up and ask him about the meeting, and her predictions were always accurate. This allowed my grandfather to respond to issues with confidence.[27]

From the Five-Anti Campaign in 1961 until the dissolution of the People’s Communes, communal life in Susi Village was relatively stable. Despite movements such as the Four Cleanups and the Cultural Revolution, the purges were carried out in an orderly manner without excessive conflict. Villagers believed that the conduct of such movements depended on the locality and the people involved. In places where people lacked a sense of faith and community, personal vendettas could easily be pursued under the guise of these campaigns, leading to chaos. In Susi, even during political movements, actions were guided by conscience, serving as deterrence rather than persecution.

During the Cultural Revolution, a Red Guard organization formed in the village, consisting of young adults.[28] Due to my grandfather’s reputation for integrity, they could not find opportunities to attack him. If they attempted to take action, elders would step in, reprimanding the young Red Guards and defending the brigade secretary’s fairness and competence.

[27] Zhang, *The Memoir*, 23.

[28] There were also Red Guards who traveled from other counties for *chuanlian* (inter-county networking). Villagers disliked them because they targeted the deity statues in the temple, which were precious to the locals. By the end of 1967, most of the outside Red Guards had left.

A major factional rift arose from personal grievances involving Yang and Xue, relatives of my grandfather. Yang's agitation began with my grandfather's father, who was the village head back then and did not assist Yang in seeking personal gain from the impoverished landlord Wu. Consequently, Yang blamed the brigade secretary. Yang and his wife conspired with Xue, who had been criticized by my grandfather, to force him to step down and hand over the brigade's official seal.

Upon learning this, the commune members held a large meeting, forming the "Battle Team through Wind and Rain" (經風雨戰鬥團) to oppose the faction. Yang's background was exposed: he was not originally a Yang but a Chen, adopted by the Yang family. His biological father was a landlord, his adoptive father a temple keeper, and his adoptive mother had an illicit relationship with the impoverished landlord Wu. Early in the Cultural Revolution, Yang had actively participated in public struggles against the local school principal. Yang suddenly became a key target for rectification. On March 7 and June 10, 1968, Susi Brigade held expanded meetings of the Revolutionary Committee to assess Yang and his wife. They were placed under round-the-clock supervision. Yang later admitted his faults to my grandfather and begged for mercy.[29]

At a critical moment, Laolao, again, played a pivotal role guiding and advising the family: it's a movement, do not blame others, heaven will distinguish the good from the bad; resolving hatred with kindness and helping others out of difficulty will build their own prestige. Laoye advised Yang to reflect on the movement and write down his mistakes. He even helped revise Yang's self-criticism, which was read aloud by himself at a mass meeting, allowing Yang to save face. The meeting minutes recorded that Yang's problem was reviewed, and everyone

[29] Zhang, *The Memoir*, 45-47.

forgave him. His class status remained that of a poor peasant. The Cultural Revolution struggle in Susi Brigade concluded without further major factionalism or disturbances.

During political gatherings, everyone in the village was forced to attend such meetings, nevertheless, villagers generally refrained from excesses. One interviewee recalled an incident where a man was publicly denounced for the superstitious behavior of practicing exorcism. He was made to stand on a tall chair while people criticized him, but when he fell to the ground, the public denunciation ceased. Villagers also circulated a story about a cadre in a nearby village who had been harsh on the villagers since the land reform. One day, he was struck by lightning while herding sheep.[30] To villagers, this was a sign of karmic justice. Villagers mixed retribution rhetoric with the chanting of revolutionary slogans, seemingly finding no contradiction in the syncretism in play. Although the state constantly emphasized the negative effects of "superstitions," it failed to provide alternative channels for dealing with unexpected and precarious social situations.

Women played a vital, though often unacknowledged, role in managing the anxieties and uncertainties of these campaigns, as well as in guiding behaviors in workplaces. Laolao would get sick if Laoye accepted gifts from work.[31] She emphasized caution and meticulousness in public service, echoing the socialist ethos of "serving the people." However, her practices were rooted in personal beliefs and "superstitious" practices, which although not recognized by the state, worked effectively for the villagers and, especially, my grandfather. She frequently reminded him, "Do you think you are the one actually acting as a cadre? In reality, it is I who am

[30] Interview with Fan, a normal villager in Susi, February 7, 2024.

[31] A conversation with my mother, February 12, 2024.

doing it. I am the one telling you what to do in every situation. Without me, nothing would go smoothly for you."[32]

Laolao also forbade Laoye from eating in the brigade, saying that eating there meant "eating more and taking more," (多吃多佔) because the brigade members did not get any chance to eat there. On one occasion, when officials from the county visited, the brigade prepared a meal for them. Laoye excused himself, saying he needed to go home, but the officials insisted that he stay and eat with them. That evening, one of the officials walked with Laoye to his house. When Laolao saw him staying for dinner, she said that what he was doing was inappropriate and even criticized the official. Later, when the official chatted with Laoye about this incident, he said, "No wonder you speak with such firmness and dare to say anything. Even when you eat in the brigade, your wife keeps you in check. It's clear that you've never taken a penny from the brigade for personal use."[33]

In this case, "eating more and taking more" is a Chinese phrase that refers to using power or improper methods to seize state or collective interests and gain additional income. This phrase frequently appeared in Communist Party regulations, serving as a warning to cadres not to exploit national resources. Surprisingly, my grandmother was quite familiar with the state's agenda. This knowledge likely stemmed from her conversations with my grandfather, as well as insights acquired through her education and conversations with others. She used this popular phrase from Party regulations to scrutinize her own family's actions. She also instilled this principle deeply in her children. My aunt and my mother often recalled being taught not to take

[32] Zhang, *The Memoir,* 133.

[33] Zhang, *The Memoir*, 138-139.

anything from the public or from others for granted.[34] This principle, while rooted in her personal beliefs, closely aligned with the state's agenda, which reflects the complicated cultural landscape within the community and the intricate socialist syncretism at work.

The Family and Women Brokers

During the Cultural Revolution, villages across China experienced varying degrees of upheaval. Local leaders acted as the gatekeepers of the revolution's reach and intensity within their communities. Without detailed guidelines and policies from the central government, the implementation of revolutionary fervor rested in the hands of such individuals. Their personal judgments and interpretations of revolutionary goals determined how state policies were locally expressed, leading to significant variations from one place to another. In some areas, intense violence and social strife marked this period, but in others, like Susi Village, the impact was relatively subdued.[35] This relative peace in Susi can be attributed to its "cultural nexus of power," which relied both on the discretion of local cadres and the shared beliefs within the community. The new socialist syncretism played a significant role in shaping this nexus, when "the measure [was] in the individual's hands," as my grandfather remarked. Meanwhile, rural cadres integrated the "state effect" into village politics, a concept Hershatter explores through the example of women cadres, drawing on the work of Timothy Mitchell. This concept emphasizes that the state is not merely an external force imposing its will, but rather a constructed

[34] A conversation with my mother and aunt, February 12, 2024.

[35] Yang Su, "Mass Killings in the Cultural Revolution: A Study of Three Provinces," in *The Cultural Revolution as History*, ed. Joseph W. Esherick, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Andrew G. Walder (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006),96-98.

framework that seems to stand apart from individuals, shaping and containing their lives.[36] By leveraging the intricate dynamics of socialist syncretism, they played a key role in reorganizing the local political and spiritual culture, creating a unique power structure that aligned with the state's ideals while also served their own interests.

Prasenjit Duara's observations on the effectiveness of state regimes in 20th-century China provide insights into the roles of brokers within village communities. He identifies two types, predatory brokers and protective brokers.[37] In the case of Susi Village, political movement team leaders or Red Guards from different regions acted similarly to brokers; they could be predatory "power brokers," seeking personal gain amid political struggle; alternatively, within the communities, local cadres frequently also served as "protective brokers," safeguarding longstanding values and practices while managing the state's socialist mandates. Their operations were crucial in determining how the revolution unfolded locally.

Women, in particular, served as informal brokers, stepping in to fill the void left by state policies and managing local affairs. Despite their significant contributions, their involvement often went unrecognized and left out of state-generated documents. Women played a vital role in maintaining social cohesion and stability during the revolution and collectivization. They not only exerted some of the "state effect" within the domestic sphere, but also skillfully co-opted state rhetoric to serve their own interests. In many instances in this study, they discreetly deployed their spiritual abilities to ensure their families' stability, all the while also securing their own sense of purpose. My grandfather's mother-in-law, who was widowed when my grandmother was just eight years old, faced immense hardships raising her children alone. This

[36] Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory*, 68.

[37] Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State,* 51-57.

responsibility granted women more autonomy within their households, but they also suffered from a lack of labor resources. Such struggles likely contributed to their deep-seated fear of family instability.

It was challenging to discern whether my grandfather was fully aware of the complex and discreet dynamics in his interactions with the women in his life. He describes the women with high praise, yet this may stem from the dedication and sacrifices those women made: their constant nurturing and caring for their families. Surprisingly, he rarely addresses his father, who served as the head of the village until 1959. Interestingly, he often attributed the most significant influences in his life to the spiritual powers he perceived in the women around him. He believed that the divine, manifested through these women, was the true source of his guidance and transformation. In his memoir, he listed those who had helped him navigate various phases of his life. Notably, he felt that He Xiangu (何仙姑), a Daoist deity, had overseen his nearly thirty-year career as a cadre.

He recorded that these protective deities orchestrated not only his destiny but also the well-being of his family. Specifically, he believed that:

Sanhuanggu (三皇姑), a goddess of loyalty, filial piety, and moral integrity, who protected local communities, guided Grandma.[38]

[38] Sanhuanggu is identified as Princess Nanyang, the daughter of Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty. Over time, Sanhuanggu's status was officially recognized and sanctioned by the imperial court, transforming her from a regional deity to a state-recognized figure of worship. This belief has been widespread in North China since the Song Dynasty. See Zhao Qian 趙倩, "Chuanshuo yu shehui: wan Qing sanhuanggu chuanshuo de zhonggou yu zhengtonghua 傳說與社會：晚清三皇姑傳說的重構與正統化 [Legend and Society: The Reconstruction and Legitimization of the Late Qing Legend of Sanhuanggu]," *Minsu yanjiu* 民俗研究, no. 5 (2022), accessed May 22, 2024, http://www.pacilution.com/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=12927.

Taohua nü (桃花女 the woman of the peach blossom), a multifaceted figure symbolizing beauty, love, and mystical power guided his mother-in-law.[39]

He Xiangu (何仙姑), one of the Eight Immortals in Daoism, is revered as a protective and benevolent deity. She is often associated with themes of longevity and health. Laoye believed He Xiangu watched over Laolao.

This perspective reveals a complex spiritual picture of my grandfather, where the women's influence was seen as an extension of divine or supernatural forces, rather than solely their own actions and decisions. This view reduces their agency, attributing their contributions to "higher" powers rather than recognizing them as equals. Furthermore, in interviewing close relatives, my aunt revealed the love affairs he had during his career. She remains angry about it, complaining that my grandfather left all the housework to my grandmother, which gave her too much of a burden. These incidents complicate the picture, especially since his colleagues remember him for his integrity and ability to manage conflicts and agricultural production successfully. The fact that he rarely mentions his father, despite his father's significant role, could suggest a perception of masculinity during this era, where male authority was increasingly tied to loyalty to the Communist Party rather than personal or familial relationships.[40] It may also

[39] Taohua nü is often depicted as a stunningly beautiful woman, symbolized by the peach blossom in Chinese culture, a longstanding motif within Chinese literature and art. Taohua nü is also known as a master of mystical arts, challenging oppressive figures and aiding those in distress. Notably, she is portrayed in various folk stories as confronting Zhou Gong, who is regarded as the patriarch of fortune-telling due to his association with the ancient texts *Zhou Li* and *Zhou Yi*. Taohua nü's tales highlight her use of both traditional magical abilities and her exceptional beauty to overcome adversaries and protect her community. See Xie Xia 谢霞, "Faguo Hanxuejia Dai Wenchen: Taohua Nü Po Zhou Gong, Guanyin Bian Gui Wang 法國漢學家戴文琛：桃花女破周公，觀音變鬼王 [French Sinologist Vincent Durand-Dastès: The Woman of Peach Blossom Defeats Zhou Gong, Guanyin Transforms into the Ghost King]," *The Paper*, June 27, 2017, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1718071.

[40] Derek Hird, "Masculinities in China," in *Routledge Handbook of East Asian Gender Studies*, ed. Jieyu Liu and Junko Yamashita (London: Routledge, 2019), 356.

reflect a sense of pride and a lingering traditional view of masculinity that resisted fully acknowledging women's achievements.

This deeper understanding aligns with Gail Hershatter's assertion that women experienced a different revolution than men.[41] The women I interviewed were silent, hard-working, and not expressive, carrying a lot of pain from the heavy work (both fieldwork and childbearing) of their younger years. The men I interviewed, on the other hand, were all assertive. These interviews also reshaped my understanding of socialist cadres in rural areas: they were not revolutionary enthusiasts exploiting their class label for personal gain (at least in this village). Instead, they shared common characteristics: they have good memories, they were articulate, and they were aware of the state's political agendas.

Reflecting on my grandfather's writings and the oral histories of his colleagues, I wonder if I have relied too much on male-dominated narratives to understand female experiences. It is crucial not to take gender categories for granted, as these women did not necessarily see their roles in terms of gendered divisions; they acted based on their own perceptions of their circumstances. Their actions defy simple labels of "agency" or "oppression."

In this family, the three influential women each navigated their roles and wielded power in distinct ways. For instance, my grandmother, who was deeply involved in my grandfather's work and familiar with the state regulations and policies, never openly expressed a desire to hold a formal position in the brigade. Despite her meticulous care for the family and extensive knowledge, she chose not to become a woman cadre, unlike some of the women depicted in Gail Hershatter's accounts. Instead, she found her strength and influence within the confines of her domestic sphere.

[41] Gail Hershatter, "Disquiet in the House of Gender," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71, no. 4 (2012): 878.

Margery Wolf, through her observation in a Taiwanese village, found that a woman's sense of self "is highly dependent on the meaning given to the individual by others." This self-identity, shaped by others' perceptions, often leaves women without a clear independent image of themselves. It is a crisis of identity that can only be resolved by gradually acquiring new ways to view and define oneself. My grandmother and other women in our family likely went through this process, using their spiritual "power" to carve out their places and establish their identities within the family. Unlike Mrs. Tan in Wolf's *A Thrice-Told Tale*, who, as an outsider, lost her identity by being neither dangerous nor useful and was largely ignored, the women in my family actively fought for their identities. [42] They refused to live solely under the perceptions of others. They did not limit themselves to household matters; instead, they freely expressed their views on political affairs, much like the men typically did. They did not think less of their own opinions simply because they were women. Yet, they also dutifully fulfilled the societal roles expected of them, never entirely escaping the scrutiny and comparisons placed upon them.

These women, I argue, were (and still are) integral to the fabric of socialist syncretism. Their contributions and identities can be glimpsed, albeit obliquely, through the stories told by the men around them.

Conclusion

The Confucian moralists shaped both the family's role in society and the norms of gender difference by dividing the spheres of life into the inner (nei) and outer (wai). These terms not only defined distinct spaces but also suggested a complementary relationship between them.

[42] Margery Wolf, *A Thrice-Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992),112-115.

Traditionally, most economic production, education, worship, and ritual activities occurred within the home or on family farms.[43] However, during the socialist era, the state blurred the boundaries between inner and outer spheres, along with the gender divisions. Women gained more decision-making power within families and increased social influence, utilizing socialist syncretism to impact village politics, though in a more subtle manner. Conversely, socialist syncretism also drew upon the virtues and scrutiny associated with women within the family. The evolving power dynamics within the family revealed hidden beliefs and the often-unrecognized contributions of women, meanwhile shaping the political and cultural landscape of the village.

[43] Charlotte Furth, *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China's Medical History, 960-1665* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 6.

Conclusion

I always spent several months in Susi Village during the summers as a child. My parents would send me to my grandparents' place to free themselves from parenting duties and, of course, more significantly, give me a chance to live close to the natural beauties that were scarce in the big city. With the mountains, small creeks, forests and no sights of skyscrapers, Susi Village used to be my playground. The village was a maze to a seven-year-old, an enchanting labyrinth. I was passionate about finding the secret routes between the houses and the small forest (which seemed colossal through the eyes of a child). Countless adventures awaited me. I wandered around, calling out for friends and picking flowers to make earrings along the road. After rainy days, in the aftermath of the showers, I entered the forest with my uncle and cousins, who had also temporarily escaped the city to take shelter in the countryside, to pick the flourishing mushrooms. We screamed at the giant spiders, plucking out the largest mushrooms we could find and then discarding them later because they might be poisonous. As twilight descended, there was not much light on the street. I could see the fireflies and the starry night in late August. One of the most breathtaking night skies I have ever seen was in my grandparents' backyards where the Milky Way unfurled across the sky, a celestial spectacle so close, so vivid, it seemed I could reach out to touch it with my fingers.

Now, years later, I rarely visit the village. It has become a shrinking community, mirroring countless others in a rapidly urbanizing China. Each time I have returned, the village has felt increasingly confined. The once vibrant streets are now quiet, with people either leaving or passing away. Even my grandfather, who had lived in this village for nearly seven decades,

has finally left and rarely returns. It is hard to imagine that he once managed the lives and daily grievances of over a thousand people for thirty years.

I attempted to approach this project with scholarly objectivity, yet the memories of my childhood inevitably have colored the past with warmth and sympathy. I prefer to believe that, during the tumultuous political movements, the villagers chose to help each other rather than trample on others for personal advantage. Perhaps, in the future, someone may find my interpretations and narratives problematic, but that is the nature of historical narration. It is always subject to negotiation and reconstruction, which is what makes it so fascinating.

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As I continued my conversations with my grandfather, I gradually noticed something I had never quite recognized before: a distinct pattern in his recollection of the past. He was always definite and confident about his version of events, unconsciously invalidating other possible accounts, as he considered himself the one who "knew the firsthand incidents." From the beginning of this project, I followed his words and memoir accordingly, believing in the accuracy of his memories. However, after nearly a year of investigation, I started to notice the blocks of silences in his narrative. The omissions in his storytelling were just as telling as what he chose to highlight. These gaps revealed underlying biases and priorities, shedding light on unspoken aspects of the narrative.

Perhaps this selective recollection could be called a form of power. When I asked him about the Women's Federation work in the village, he provided names and roles from the 1950s. Yet, the meeting minutes had clear records of those women's names and their positions from 1945 to 1986. His recollections were not quite right about their positions. While this could be a minor mistake—since nobody has a perfect memory—other historical accounts related to

political movements and his interactions with authorities were more accurate when cross-referenced with records. It seems those stories were more "exciting" to him, filled with heroic tales of fighting against authority and grandiose narratives of power struggles and conflicts. The people who worked with him were his "brothers" who stood by him, believing in and praising his management of village affairs. Women in his workplace, on the other hand, were underpaid and neglected, rarely becoming the center of his stories. In his eyes, the woman who led the Women's Federation from 1950s to 1970s was illiterate and just a good farmer who could lead the women in the fields. He did not acknowledge her role in disseminating policies and resolving family issues in the village. She may not have done these tasks historically, but is it possible that male workers dismissed her capabilities and denied her participation in the activities? Or perhaps she did her work, but no one noticed? Even if the women cadres were "just good farmers," rural development in the socialist era cannot be fully understood without considering the crucial role of women's labor. Women's contributions shifted the traditional gendered division of labor, which impacted both men and women, facilitating the movement of men from agriculture into construction, rural industry, and technical supervisory roles. [1] Women's involvement in agriculture played a vital role in sustaining and advancing production.

We can never know for sure since those women have all passed away, taking their secrets and achievements with them. It is a shame to not be able to bring their voices to light. Focusing on the story of one man, whose life is woven into a larger historical context, "gives color, texture, and nuance often lost in sweeping grand narratives."[2] Yet, from another lens, it highlights the neglect of other crucial perspectives. As Jie Li mentions in her accounts of the

[1] Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 210.

[2] Jie Li, *Shanghai Homes: Palimpsests of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 4.

women in Shanghai alleyways, oral narratives, especially retellings, may not be "accurate about the lives they describe, but they reflect how these lives are remembered and made meaningful, both by the women themselves and by those who knew them."[3] The absence of certain voices, particularly female perspectives, suggests a broader social and cultural dynamic. These missing elements and the clear construction of masculine storytelling are crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of the socialist past.

In *The Gender of Memory*, Hershatter recorded that women had blurred memories of decades in which political changes were overshadowed by the demands of burgeoning families, whereas men, both in her book and in the Susi Village I have studied, had clear memories of the revolution and political affairs.[4] Margery Wolf's considerations in her book, *A Thrice-Told Tale*, resonate here. She explores how a feminist anthropologist can construct new and less false stories with sensitivity to power. She illustrates this dynamic by presenting three different texts about the same set of events: a short story, a copy of field notes, and an anthropological analysis, each offering a distinct perspective, the juxtaposition of which bring back "muted discourses" to representation with a fully reflexive approach.[5]

In this project, my grandfather's records, both written and oral, provide a rich tapestry of the political and spiritual landscape of villagers living under high socialism. The story of one man, especially someone who managed significant "equity," offers unique insights. As the granddaughter of the major narrator, I had the privilege of noticing the underlying context of my

[3] Li, *Shanghai Homes*, 164.

[4] Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory*, 268.

[5] Margery Wolf, *A Thrice-Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 118-123.

grandfather's words. The intimacy we shared in my childhood helped me navigate his extraordinary yet immense memories. But I also had to undergo a process of defamiliarization and refamiliarization, critically analyzing his accounts and recognizing the biases and omissions that shaped his narrative. This dual perspective has allowed me to see both the power and limitations of his storytelling. In addition, my interviews with his colleagues were influenced by their awareness of my relationship as his granddaughter, potentially leading them to exclude some criticisms they might have had. Writing about a family member and their history requires a nuanced and multifaceted approach. This involves not only reconstructing the historical events themselves but also interpreting and contextualizing those events within a broader narrative framework.

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The complexities of understanding historical narratives, especially those of individual accounts, present both challenges and opportunities. It is meaningful to understand religious questions within a macro social context, an open system where all elements constantly interact with each other and their broader social, political, and economic environment.[6] However, despite the potential limitations of a one-man account, my grandfather's narratives can unveil significant themes that might otherwise remain obscured in broader historical accounts. These personal perspectives often bring to light the intricate ways in which state policies intersect with local realities. This is particularly evident in the context of religion in China's revolutionary and socialist period. Rebecca Nedostup, in her study of religion during the Nationalist Era, highlights a critical observation about the nation-state's role in modern Chinese historiography. Often

[6] David A. Palmer and Vincent Goossaert, *The Religion Question in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 8.

portrayed as an abstract and dominant force, the nation-state remains vague and elusive when examined through the lens of everyday life and experiences.[7] This observation is crucial in understanding how state policies and ideologies were implemented and interpreted at the grassroots level. The grand narratives of state power and control often overshadow the local adaptations and resistances that shape the lived experiences of ordinary people.

One of the significant themes that emerges from this local perspective in my study is the concept of socialist syncretism. This phenomenon refers to the blending of socialist ideologies with long-standing local religious practices. The history of local religion in China is marked by a remarkable continuity and adaptability, which persisted even during the intense revolutionary period. Before the establishment of the PRC, people already demonstrated a flexible interpretation of orthodoxy, adapting religious practices to suit their changing circumstances. This adaptability continued under the socialist regime, where local religious traditions were neither entirely abandoned nor wholly subsumed by state ideology. Instead, there was a strategic synthesis of traditional and modern themes, resulting in a complex and often contradictory cultural landscape. In Chen Village studied by Madsen, for instance, different villagers employed various paradigms to interpret Mao Zedong's writings, tailoring their understandings to fit their specific needs and circumstances.[8]

Susi Village stands out as a unique example where spiritual beliefs and socialist ideologies coexisted harmoniously and mutually reinforced each other. Unlike other regions, especially those with deep-rooted lineage-based conflict, Susi Village experienced less strife among its inhabitants. This relative harmony can be attributed to the villagers' distinctive

[7] Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), 16-18.

[8] Richard Madsen, *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 17-23.

approach to integrating and adapting their religious practices within the socialist framework. Local spiritual beliefs did not contradict the socialist ethos but rather complemented it. From the cadres to the villagers, there was a pervasive fear of retribution and a collective commitment to virtuous behavior, which echoed the socialist morality for the "collective good." It is "public" in form, yet it may not align with the ideological orientation toward the greater good of the "imagined community" of the nation, state, or any larger collective.[9] Instead of serving a broader societal good, this spiritual regulation is driven by fear, habit, pragmatic concerns, self-discipline, and morality. While it may not consciously aim to promote the "greater good," it fosters a sense of caring for oneself and others, ultimately encouraging harmonious living within a community. This symbiotic relationship exists even to the present day. One elder I interviewed exemplified this by incorporating Buddhism with Mao Zedong Thought, blending the "Learn from Leifeng" ethos with Buddhist teachings about helping others.[10]

Understanding these dynamics requires moving beyond the simplistic dichotomy of state versus local society. Instead, it involves recognizing the fluid and negotiated nature of power and ideology. The state, while powerful, was not an all-encompassing monolith capable of uniformly imposing its will. With its ambiguous regulation on superstition and the quasi-religious undertones of the revolutionary spirit, the state inadvertently left ample space for villagers to develop their own spirituality.[11] Local communities, with their deep-rooted traditions and adaptive strategies, constantly shaped the implementation and impact of state policies. In the

[9] Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Stanford University Press, 2006),11.

[10] Interestingly, he learned this through Chinese TikTok, indicating that the audience for such integrated teachings may extend beyond just one region.

[11] Jie Li, *Cinematic Guerrillas: Propaganda, Projectionists, and Audiences in Socialist China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), 16.

case of Susi Village, cadres from the county government's investigation team, while carrying out state policies, often had the opportunity to leverage their own desires and personal conflicts, potentially twisting the outcomes of political campaigns. Similarly, rural cadres and villagers utilized various political movements for their own gain. As key players in the rural "cultural nexus of power," they integrated local beliefs into the political system, using and extending power through personal networks and spiritual beliefs. This process created a cycle where beliefs were disseminated, strengthened, and reinforced through the practice of socialist syncretism. Additionally, as explored in the third chapter, women played a crucial role as brokers, not only promoting the "state effect" and religious virtue to scrutinize families but also advancing their own interests. This added another layer of complexity to the interactions between state and local forces, as well as the social power within the village.

Adding to the narratives of the village past, Mark Rifkin, who studies native history in the United States, provides a perspective that is particularly relevant to rural villagers under high socialism. He cautions against the danger of studying native experience within settler temporal frameworks, emphasizing the importance of recognizing different temporalities.[12] Similarly, in Hershatter's study, her concept "campaign time" illustrates the dynamic nature of state-initiated campaigns. The focus of history often remains on the campaign goals rather than on their inconsistent execution or unforeseen social impacts. State-initiated campaigns are generally depicted as uniform, overshadowing the different temporalities and uneven effectiveness of their implementation. [13] Moreover, the gendered division reconfigures our understanding of campaign time, making it possible to comprehend the different temporalities experienced by women.

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[12] Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 34.

[13] Hershatter, *Gender of Memory, 24-26.*

These temporalities do not have just one variation and are a critical part of understanding socialist syncretism. In Susi Village, the daily lives of the people, especially their religious practices, were shaped by party initiatives, sometimes forcing them to comply with state goals in anti-superstitious campaigns. However, the diverse implementation and the persistent nature of rural traditions complicated this process. If we follow the state narratives and policies, we may overlook the villagers' own temporality, where they seamlessly integrated spiritual practices into the socialist framework. Under the red banner, they secretly repaired temples, organized village dramas, and worshiped their sacred deities, weaving a tapestry of resilience and faith that endured amidst the sweeping tides of political change.

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