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Introduction

Some characteristic features of what we call ritual behavior are repetition, constant form over time, and exact specification of what participants should do or say. One or more of these features is usually present when animal ethologists, psychologists, anthropologists, or ordinary people use the term: for example, ethologists call attention to the stereotyping and fixity of form of 'ritualized' animal signals (Cullen 1972: 116); psychologists describe the 'ritualistic' repetitive behavior of neurotics (Mather 1970: 316); anthropologists analyze traditional and often unchanging 'rituals' accompanying birth, marriage and death; and any of us might speak of invariant 'ritual' routines, such as for getting out of bed in the morning or for saluting the flag. I shall use this broad definition in this book, focusing, in anthropological fashion, on those rituals that are patterned according to social custom and that involve more than one person in a social group at the same or different times.

My argument is based on Chinese material: in time I emphasize present-day Taiwan, and the latter part of the last imperial dynasty, the Ch'ing; in space I emphasize northern Taiwan and Fukien Province on the southeast coast of China, the original province (200 years ago) of the Chinese who settled most of northern Taiwan. The first-hand field data I include come from Ch'inan, a village in northern Taiwan, and nearby market towns, especially San-hsia.

As Wolf (1974a) and Feuchtwang (1974b) have shown, the three major categories of spirits in Taiwan, as in late Ch'ing China – gods (*sin*), ancestors (*kong-ma*), and ghosts (*kui*) – mirror the three social categories of government officials, kinsmen, and strangers.[1] All three sorts of spirits are regarded as persons: indeed they are all thought to have been living humans, who passed into one spiritual status or another after death. Being persons, each is believed to act on the basis of human-like reasons or motives suitable to his personal history and present status.

In the following Chapters, I pay closest attention to gods, the elites of the spiritual world. The kinds of eminence gods can display closely resemble the kinds of eminence living people can display. Gods can be famed as soldiers, as scholars, as doctors, or (especially goddesses) as paragons of virtue. Despite the

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wide range of ways gods and goddesses can display their eminence, nearly all of them resemble bureaucratic officials. *Ma-co*, formerly a virtuous young girl, and *Co-su-kong*, formerly an official, both have temples whose architecture resembles a magistrate's yamen, subordinates who are called soldiers or runners, and processions that are organized after the fashion of magistrates' tours (see fig. 1 below). Even more to the point, most gods are thought to occupy the positions they do as a result of appointment or promotion within the spiritual bureaucracy on the basis of merit. This excerpt from the transcript of a spirit writing seance describes the process in the words of a god in central Taiwan:

> My name is *Yen Lung*: I am a man of *Wan-an* who lived in the Ming dynasty. As a youth I went to the house of a master, and there studied both military and literary arts. At the age of 23 I came down out of the mountains as a knight errant, striking down the unjust, supporting virtue, and eradicating evil. I kept at these pursuits for 39 years. One day when I was 62 years old, I became involved in a fight with twenty-odd ruffians in order to save a young girl. Although I succeeded in saving her, I was grievously wounded, and not long afterward, medicine being of no effect, I died. In the underworld, the King of Hell graciously ushered me into the 'Gathering Place of the Good' (*Chü-Shan-So*), where I remained for five years. At the end of this period, I was enfeoffed as an Earth God. Later on I was promoted to be 'His highness Hsueh (*Hsueh Fu Ch'ien Sui*) . . .
>
> Five years ago I was promoted to take over the position of Kuan Kung in this temple, which post I now occupy (Seaman 1974: 56).

As a spiritual official, a god is said to interact with other spirits, commanding lower-ranked gods and ghosts, and reporting to higher gods. A god can also interact with human civilians and officials, preventing injustice or aiding in administration of the empire (also at times mistakenly perpetuating injustice or bungling administration of the empire). The nature of gods as spiritual officials can be no more vividly summed up than by MacGowan's description of a young man who brought a petition before the image of a City God, beseeching the god to clear him of an unjust charge of theft and to expose the guilty person.

> He took his stand in front of the idol, and the (images of) secretaries, with pens in their hands, seemed to put on a strained look of attention as the young fellow produced a roll of paper and began to read the statement he had drawn up. It was diffuse and wordy, as most of such documents are, but the main facts were quite plain.
>
> Two young men were assistants in a shop in the city. Some little time before, the master of the shop, without telling either of them, concealed in a chosen place a sum of one hundred dollars, which he wished to have in readiness in order to pay for certain goods he had purchased. The previous day, when he went to get the money on the presentation of the bill, he found to his horror that it had disappeared. He had told no one of this secret hoard, not even his wife; and therefore he felt convinced that in some way or other one of his two assistants had discovered his hiding-place. For some reason his suspicions became aroused against the man who was now detailing his grievances, and who was appealing to the god to set in motion all the tremendous forces at his command, not only

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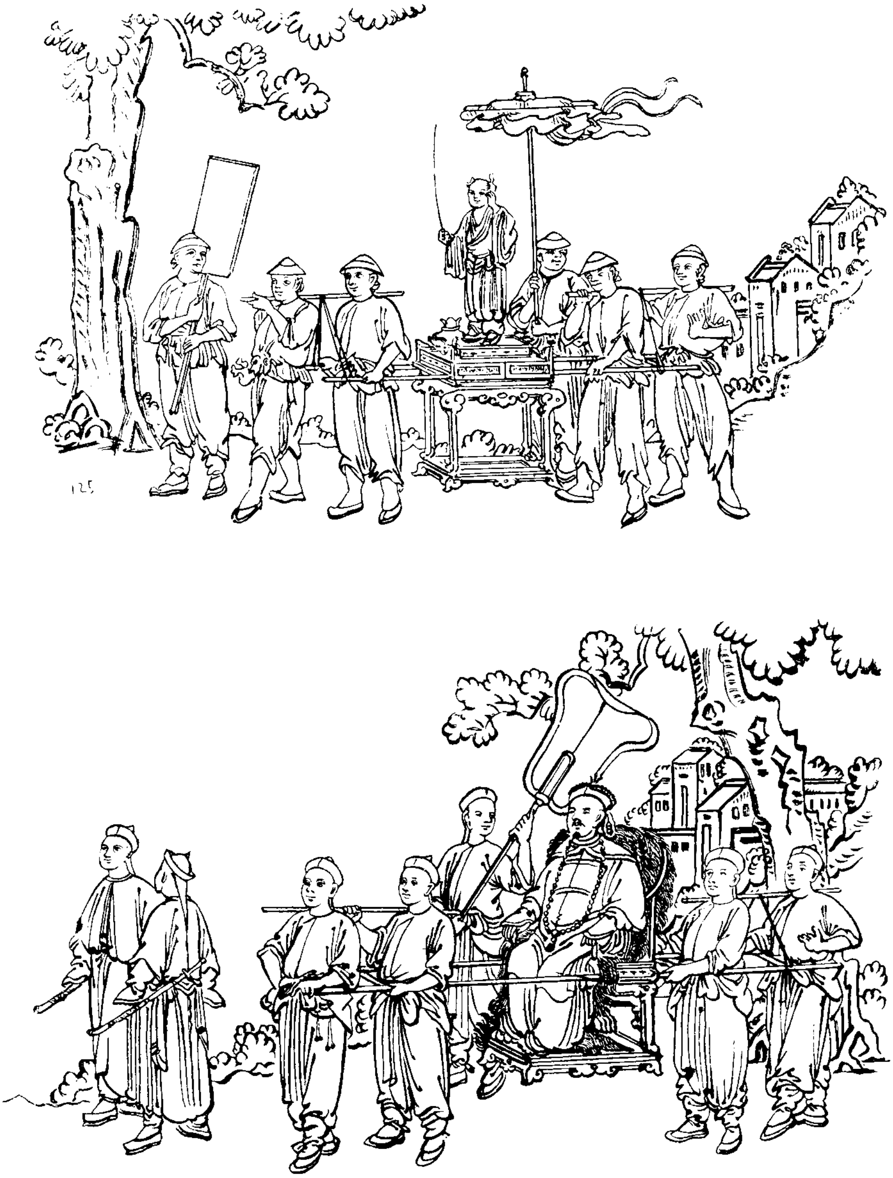

1 and 2 A god and a magistrate carried in procession

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> to proclaim his innocence but also to bring condign punishment to the real culprit.
>
> The scene was a weird and fascinating one, and became most exciting as the young man neared the end of his appeal. He called upon the god to hurl all the pains and penalities in his unseen armoury against the man who had really stolen the money.
>
> 'Let his life be one long torture,' he cried with uplifted hands. 'May every enterprise in which he engages end in disaster; may his father and mother die, and let him be left desolate; may a subtle and incurable disease lay its grip upon him; may misfortune pursue him in every shape and form; may he become a beggar with ulcered legs and sit on the roadside and beseech the passers-by, in sunshine and in storm, for a few cash that will just help to keep him alive; may he never have a son to perpetuate his name or to make offerings to his spirit in the Land of Shadows; may madness seize upon him so that his reason shall fly and he shall be a source of terror to his fellow-men; and finally, may a tragic and horrible death bring his life to a sudden end, even as I bring to an end the life of this white cock that I have brought with me.'
>
> As he uttered these last words he grasped a chopper, and with one sharp and vicious blow cut off the head of the struggling animal, which wildly fluttered its wings in the agonies of death, whilst its life-blood poured out in a stream on the ground.
>
> He then took his petition, and advancing close up to the secretaries, who seemed for the moment to gaze down upon him with a look of sympathy on their faces, he set fire to it and burned it to ashes. In this way it passed into the hands of the god, who would speedily set in motion unseen machinery to bring down upon the head of the guilty one the judgments which had just been invoked (1910: 139–40).

Soon thereafter it was said that the guilty man's beautiful sister was drowned, his family's farm was destroyed by flood, and he himself went mad.

The argument of this book is divided into three parts. In Part I I discuss what vocabulary we should use in describing Chinese ritual, concluding in Chapter 1 that it is crucial to distinguish those rituals that involve interpersonal communication from those that do not. In Chapters 2 and 3 I draw on two case-studies of Chinese rituals that involve interpersonal communications with non-human beings (often spirits), comparing the ways people attempt to control non-human beings through ritual action to the ways they attempt to control other people in ordinary life through political action. The comparison reveals many startling similarities: I argue that certain rituals can be analyzed as if they were forms of political activity, and that, as a consequence, the specialized vocabulary we have developed for describing interactions with spirits can, for certain purposes, be abandoned.

In Part II I take up some formal features of Chinese ritual, which include constitutive rules and restricted codes. These features will be examined in terms of Chinese divination, and then used to discuss the mechanism and form of change in Chinese ritual. In Chapter 4 I examine a number of forms of Chinese divination, arguing that divination involving interpersonal communication works by means of prearranged codes based on constitutive rules. This chapter thus

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combines the distinction between interpersonal and non-interpersonal ritual introduced in Chapters 1–3 and the notion of constitutive rules. Two results emerge. First, having delineated the roughly bounded class of interpersonal divination, we will be able to specify some of its formal features. Second, we will see that some forms of Chinese divination are direct manipulations of systems of knowledge, whereas others are codes by means of which one can get access to the gods' superior understanding of systems of knowledge. Divination comes, then, in at least two radically different forms.

In Chapter 5 I suggest that the formal features of Chinese divination – and more generally Chinese ritual – bear importantly on the process of change in ritual. The mechanisms of change in 'closed practices', where conventions must be upheld unless they are deliberately changed outside the context of the practice, will appear very different from the mechanisms in 'open practices' where change can occur in an ongoing way during the practice itself.

Part III brings the lines of argument in Part I and Part II together. I start from the thesis of Part I, that acts intended to control Chinese spirits often parallel whatever acts are believed most effectively to control other people in everyday life. This is another way of saying that interactions with spirits will often be modeled on political processes. I then pose the question: whose ends are served by these parallels between ritual and politics? Two answers emerge. First (outlined in Chapter 6), some formal features of communication with spirits as described in Part II make them amenable to the ends of those *in* formal positions of authority in the Chinese state. Among other things, I evaluate recent claims that the arbitrariness and predictability of rituals make them useful to established authorities. Second (outlined in Chapter 7), other features of communication with spirits (as described in Parts I and II) make them amenable to the ends of those *outside* formal positions of authority. This contention rests on an examination of the kind of information about politics that is contained in Chinese ritual acts, information that includes exact details about how the political system works as well as useful strategies for dealing with it, and on an examination of the simplification inherent in restricted codes. I argue that the simplification common in Chinese rituals makes them analogous to learning games: when people carry out rituals modeled on political processes, they may be learning about politics itself. Finally, I speculate about the reasons why Chinese ritual has survived, in form if not in content, despite fundamental changes in the political order in both Taiwan and the People's Republic.

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PART I

Interpersonal communication

1

Interpersonal versus non-interpersonal transaction

In this chapter I argue that in order correctly to convey the sense that a Chinese ritual has for the performer, one must often distinguish actions that involve interpersonal transaction from those that do not. One source for this distinction is R.R. Marett, who sets off mechanical causation from personal or quasi-personal agency (1909: 50). My conclusion – that a distinction of this kind is essential if a description is to convey the sense a Chinese ritual act has for the performer – is implicit in Marett's work, especially in his argument with Sir James Frazer over the distinction between magic and religion. Objecting to Frazer's claim that magic involves mechanical causation, Marett contended (as I will below) that much of what we label 'magic' is interpersonal: 'A magical transaction ought, hardly if at all less naturally than a religious transaction, to assume the garb of an affair between persons' (1909: 51–2).

Another source for this distinction is Hart and Honoré's study of British and American law (1959), in which they distinguish 'interpersonal transactions' from 'natural causes' in this way: interpersonal transactions, but not natural causes, 'involve the notion of one person intentionally providing another with a reason for doing something and so rendering it eligible in his eyes' (p. 54). For example, one might offer bribes or rewards, or make threats or demands, to give another person a reason for performing some action. The appropriateness of this distinction in the Chinese case is brought out forcibly by a distinction that Taiwanese themselves make between illness from 'within the body' and illness from 'being hit' (*chiong-tau*). Illness 'within the body' is caused by an imbalance in 'hot' and 'cold' or an excess of some substance (poison or 'breath'). Illness from 'being hit' is caused by a ghost, earth spirit, or other agent. The crucial distinguishing factor is whether an *agent* is involved: 'being hit' involves an agent and 'within the body' does not. It is for this reason that gods, who influence, order, exhort, and control other *agents*, are called in when illness is caused by 'being hit'. But when a god determines that an illness is caused 'within the body', he will usually refer it to a Chinese-style or western-style doctor, unless the god himself happens to be a skillful doctor. Sometimes people will bemoan the fact that an illness is 'within the body': 'if only it were "being hit" the gods would be

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able to do something.' Doing something about an agent who 'hits' is an example of interpersonal transaction; doing something about a substance 'within the body' is not.

In basing an analysis of ritual acts on this distinction, one would identify two distinct groups or categories: On the one hand, persons, person-like beings, spirits, animals, forces, objects, etc., who are thought to behave something like people do. They might be persuadable, controllable, enticeable, banishable; they might have intentions, goals, hopes, desires; they might be angry, sad, pleased, charmed, irritated; they might hurt, help, hinder, wreak vengeance, exact revenge. On the other hand, one would identify anything else in the social universe that people feel does not respond as a person would, and to which they would not attribute person-like behavior. Almost inevitably one would be describing a very wide range, in which there might be no sharp break at all along the way, but a gradual shading from fully fledged people on the one end, through quasi-human beings and spirits, to completely non-human entities on the other.

In the Chinese case one could describe in great detail the mode of interaction felt to be appropriate for gods, ancestors, ghosts, affines, landlords, neighbors, officials, and kinsmen of various sorts. One could also describe how rice-seed, rain-water, trees, animals, and a myriad of other things should be dealt with in a myriad of contexts. One would find a cluster of cases for whom the entire range of human approaches and responses would be felt to be appropriate as well as a cluster of cases for which this mode of interaction would not be felt appropriate at all. High officials, kinsmen, friends, neighbors, and most spirits are approached and respond in a largely human manner, though their characters differ. Some animals might be described as possessing only a few human-like characteristics and most other things – seed, tools, fertilizer, building materials, or plants – are not felt to be person-like at all. They are things only, and are not amenable to person-like treatment.[1]

In drawing up configurations of this kind, one would have to be sensitive to the presence of 'as-if' speech, in which objects felt to be entirely non-person-like are referred to as if they were persons. For example, we 'curse' machines and 'name' boats. Such things can happen in other societies as well and it is merely an empirical question in each case whether this is happening. One would presumably settle it by asking further: do machines *hear* our curses? Do boats have *preferences* for certain names? In this way one could eventually sort out what is said merely as a manner of speech and what is said because of the qualities genuinely imputed to spirits and things.

Let us consider how an analysis that began by sorting out roughly bounded classes of interpersonal transactions could be brought to bear on ritual acts in the Chinese case. As we will see in coming chapters, Chinese ritual acts directed to spirits take their logic from everyday interactions. They are not intended as 'naturally causal' and so they cannot be analyzed as such. For example, they should not be thought to produce the sort of causal effect produced when rice

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seedlings are irrigated. Instead, some are intended to have the sort of effects produced when a government office issues an order forbidding vehicular travel on a certain pathway. On the one hand, the order, issued by the appropriate body, in and of itself makes the regulation come into effect. This kind of effect is what Austin identified in performative utterances (1962: 5–6) and what Skorupski has recently discussed under the heading 'operative acts' (1976: 93).[2] On the other hand, the order gives people a reason for acting one way rather than another: they may or may not comply, depending on the inconvenience involved, the amount of surveillance likely, the sanctions applied and so on. As Chinese see it, the potency of ritual acts performed in this manner, as of government edicts, depends entirely on the power and authority relations involved. Chinese gods have power and authority over ghosts because of the positions they each have in a bureaucratic system. People can tap that power and authority if they directly implore the gods to act, obtain orders (charms) written and sealed on the gods' behalf, or hire a Taoist priest to act as the gods' emmisary. This potency might be called 'bureaucratic efficacy'.

Acts that are straightforward verbal or written orders can obviously be analyzed as interpersonal transactions, as can all attempts to persuade spirits by offering them things or showing them deference. But in Chinese ritual, less obvious cases can also be analyzed in an interactional mode. For example, sometimes ritual acts presuppose that the gods are able to respond intelligently to demonstrations of actions that people desire them to take. The man in the confrontation with the City God described above (pp. 2–4) killed a cock, explicitly and forcefully demonstrating to the god just what he hoped would happen to the guilty person. Justus Doolittle gives us an example of a similar kind from Fukien. When a child contracts smallpox,

> on the third day after the pustules have begun to appear, it is a universal custom for one of the family to go to a baking establishment and procure ten small bits of Chinese yeast. These are steamed in the usual vessel for steaming rice belonging to the family. They soon begin to swell, and become several times larger than they were before steaming. These are then removed from the steamer and placed before the picture of the goddess, or whatever represents her majesty. The design of this operation is to cause her to exert her influence to have the pustules redden, fill up, and swell out, in resemblance of the swelling out of the balls of yeast when steamed (1966: I, 154–5).

On the fourteenth day, some black beans are roasted and presented to the goddess. Then the beans, which are thought to resemble the scars left by smallpox, are placed on the child's head and allowed to roll off (pp. 155–6). It seems clear that these acts are demonstrations to the goddess of what everyone hopes will happen: the pustules will first swell up just as the bits of yeast do; and they will then dry out and go away just as the beans do.

In time of drought, people use several sorts of demonstration to communicate to the gods their need for rain. In Doolittle's account of practices in Fukien,

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the image of the Dragon King, 'Giver of Rain', is processed through city streets. In the procession,

> one man carries a load of water in two buckets suspended from a pole laid across his shoulder. He holds in one hand a green branch of a shrub or bamboo with leaves, which he occasionally dips in the water, and then sprinkles the water dripping from the leaves around on the ground crying out, as he does so, 'The rain comes, the rain comes' (Doolittle 1966: II, 117).

Doolittle does not say explicitly that people intend these actions to show the god what they desire, though they might well. However, he does say that, in the case of extreme drought, they use another means to move the gods to action. An image of a god who is considered especially efficacious is

> carried into the open court connected with the treasurer's office or with some other high mandarin establishment, and left there, exposed to the rays of the hot sun for a time. It is imagined that the divinity, thus exposed, becoming very dry and parched by this process, will feel the need of rain, and be led to expedite its falling from the heavens (1966: II, 119).

Sometimes props, like water or bits of yeast and beans, are manipulated to instruct the gods; at other times props are manipulated to deceive them. Arthur Smith tells us that 'the custom prevails in many parts of China, upon occasion of the spread of some fatal epidemic like cholera, at the beginning of the sixth or seventh moon to hold a New-Year's celebration. This is with a view to deceiving the god of the pestilence, who will be surprised to find that he is wrong in his calculations as to the time of year, and will depart, allowing the plague to cease. This practice is so well understood that the phrase "autumnal second month" is understood to be a periphrasis for "never" ' (1894: 304). Because most gods would be thought too wise to be fooled by duplicity, such ruses are usually reserved for less powerful, evilly disposed spirits like ghosts. One can deter ghosts from doing harm to a child by taking measures to convince them the child is not worth taking: giving it away in pseudo-adoption, shaving its head in the style of a monk, calling it uncomplimentary names, or concealing its good looks with a mask (Doolittle 1966: II, 229, 316).

We can analyze another sort of act as a specialized kind of communication with the gods. Consider two practices reported by early travellers in China.

> A person who swears falsely before the gods that he is innocent of charges brought against him consoles himself by means of an observance called Kai-yune. To check all the evil consequences which the gods may permit to overtake him, the perjurer writes on each corner of a clay tile the four following characters: Peng, Sew, Nga, Kai. He then places the tile on an altar in honour of the gods of the earth and rice fields. When several days have elapsed, he returns to the altar, and breaks the tile with a hammer. By this simple and ridiculous ceremony, he is supposed to avert all impending calamities (Gray 1878: II, 41–2).

> It is very important that only 'good words' be said at New Year time. Children are specially warned not to use words of ill-omen, like 'demon', 'death', 'coffin',