

The Murals of a Village Temple: Heaven, Earth, and People^{*}

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Abstract: The village temples in northern Shaanxi feature beautiful murals, painted by local artisans, which visualize deities in their exercise of power to help people. This study of murals in the village temple of Dang jia shan reveals that the heavenly world of the deities is closely related to the human world where a modest harvest on the arid loess plateau very much depends on the mercy of the deities who give orders of precipitation. [Keywords: China, popular religion, village temples, murals]

Dang jia shan, or the village of Dangs, is a typical small mountain village on the loess plateau in the northern part of Shaanxi province, China. (Figure 1) The village has thirty-four households living in hillside cave dwellings. (Figure 2) The villagers farm on the adjacent hills and valleys. Their harvests very much depend on the proper amount of rainfall during the crop-growing season. With too little rain, the crop will not grow; and with too much rain, the crop will be washed away in a quick flood. The village has a temple, which features beautiful murals. (Figures 3, 4) This paper examines the murals in this village temple as a means of providing an interpretation of the meanings of the world, as envisioned by the artisans and the local people who utilize the temple. Since Dang jia shan is a typical and ordinary village, it is representative of many of the villages on the loess plateau in terms of popular religious practice and local worldview.¹

The villagers' cave dwellings are built on a hill named Yushu liang, or the hill of elm trees. The village temple is located on top of the hill. It is the only freestanding, aboveground structure in the village, and it is the only building that faces the true south. The villagers believe that only temples can face directly south. The village temple has two stone tablets commemorating two past renovations. According to the first tablet, the temple was moved to the current location in 1827, after the old temple, located on a hill to the east of the village, had deteriorated after many years of enduring the elements. According to village folklore, a fox fetched the oracle stick from the old temple and dropped it at the current location; villagers took this occurrence as a hint from the deities and relocated the temple. No one in the village knows when the older temple was originally built. According to the second tablet, the relocated temple was badly damaged during the Cultural Revolution and the villagers renovated it in 1997. Village temples found throughout northern Shaanxi province were revived in the late 1990s after their destruction during the Cultural Revolution. Almost every village, regardless of its size, rebuilt or remodeled its temple, and the popular religious activities associated with such village temples have, in the years since, become very active.

The temple at Dang jia shan is built with field stones and bricks. The interior space is formed with a burrow vault. The opening is filled with wooden latticed windows and doors. A simple

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wood colonnade painted with decorative patterns protects the front of the building and gives the temple depth and dignity. (Figure 5) There are murals on the building's interior walls. Two posts decorated with sculpted dragons stand in front of the north wall, framing the mural. (Figure 6) The nameplate of the goddess and an incense burner are placed on a masonry platform in front of the north wall. The interior space of the temple is similar to the caves that the villagers live in. (Figure 7) The cave dwellings in the village have the same kind of vaulted ceiling and a masonry platform bed against the end wall. The masonry platform in the temple is rather like a shortened platform bed in a cave dwelling.

According to Dang Hongye, a very knowledgeable 74 year-old villager, the main goddess worshiped in the temple is the Holy Mother of the Ninth Heaven. (Figure 8) The goddess is believed by local religious specialists to be the mother of the five Dragon Kings of the cardinal points, who are in charge of precipitation. The mural on the north wall is a group portrait of the deities. (Figure 4) The Holy Mother sits on a throne at the center. The size of the figures signifies their relative importance; the Holy Mother is at least twice the size of the other figures, and the two attendants with the large long-handled fans are the smallest. The theme of the temple is written in a rectangle, right in front of the Holy Mother. It says: "great harvest of the five crops." The Dragon Kings are in human forms and wear robes in colors representative of their respective cardinal points in the Chinese five-element cosmological system: black, white, yellow, blue, and red. (Figure 9) To the left of the dragon kings is the Rain Master, handling a dragon with one hand and holding the rain vase with the other hand (Pan 2001:157-158). (Figure 10) On the opposite side is the Secretary of the Rain Department with brush and record book in his hands.² (Figure 11) The back row is composed of other deities. The easily identifiable ones are the local Earth God and his wife, (Figure 12) the Thunder God, (Figure 13) and the Lightning Goddess (Pan, 2001:261-263, 151, 154). (Figure 14) The figure with two pairs of eyes is called "Four-eye Heavenly God" by the villagers. (Figure 15) His upper eyes watch the heavens while the lower eyes watch the earth. He is the watcher of the world. Even the elders in the village could not identify the rest of the deities. The only people who, presumably, can identify all the deities are the artisans who painted the mural—Tian Huren and his nephew Tian Chunping from a village near Yulin city.³

The mural on the east wall depicts the Dragon Kings with their entourage coming out of their palaces. (Figure 16) They march above the clouds. The Secretary of the Rain Department carries an order in his hands. The order says that the Jade Emperor commands the five Dragon Kings to arrest the Fox Fairy and the Spirit of the Willow Tree who are causing disorder in the human world. There are two armored warriors to the left of the Dragon Kings. The warrior on the right has a mirror-like device shooting out a light beam to freeze the two demons, while the other warrior shoots the demons with arrows. Under the cloud, people are praying for rain and the rain is falling. The farmers working in the field are surprised by the rain and are running for cover. A villager carrying breakfast on his shoulder has broken the jar and millet soup is spilling out. This last small but dramatic detail demonstrates a realism that connects the mural to the daily life experience of the villagers. When it rains, the loess soil will turn very slippery and falling down on the mountain path is a common experience.

The mural on the west wall has a similar composition to that on the east wall; (Figure 17) it depicts the deities returning to their palaces. The two evil spirits are captured in cangues, yoke-like instruments of restriction and punishment. The order in the hands of the rain department's secretary requires that three inches of rain should fall, and that the Dragon Kings should make the wind harmonious and the rain properly regulated, so that the state is stable and the people are at ease. The people under the cloud are celebrating and showing their gratitude.

A separate small shrine for the Mountain God and Earth God is outside the main structure of the temple. (Figure 18) There are also murals in the shrine. The mural on the north wall is a portrait of the two gods sitting on chairs side by side. The Earth God is a silver-haired old gentleman, and the Mountain God is an armored warrior with a sword in his hand. (Figure 19) The murals on the sidewalls show a *yaksa* (a deity that will be discussed below) with a mace in his hand. He stands next to a tiger and a wolf. (Figure 20) The mural on the west wall has the tiger and the wolf chained. (Figure 21) Since the murals on the side walls are in sequence, they show the power of the deities in taming the dangerous wild beasts. Wild beasts have not been seen in the area for years, and they are not a threat to people's lives or livestock any more. The mural beasts symbolize the danger of living on the rugged terrain. The tiger and the wolf are the spirits of the mountain.

The village temple is a place where humans communicate with the deities and pray for their blessing. The murals visualize the existence of the deities who are invisible in people's daily lives. The images in the murals fill the blank in people's perception of a world ruled by supernatural powers. The imagination of the deities, however, is closely related to the life of the people on the loess plateau. Since the village is located in an arid region where the harvest depends on the proper rain fall, the essential theme of the murals is about rainfall. The rain is the dearest concern of the villagers.

The Holy Mother of the Ninth Heaven is a high-ranking Taoist goddess. She is believed to have helped the Yellow Emperor, the legendary common ancestor of the Chinese, to win his war against Chiyu, the legendary chief of a competing tribe. In formal Taoist practice, however, she is not related to the Dragon Kings (Ma 1996:120-127). The mother-and-son relationship must have been invented at a more popular level. This association may be seen as an introduction of human family values into the world of deities. According to the villagers, the establishment of the mother-and-son relationship gives the temple a higher status above those temples worshipping only the Dragon Kings. If the people of the neighboring village want to pray to a higher-level god, they can come to Dang jia shan. This is seen as giving more prestige to the village.

The order from the Jade Emperor written on the scroll held by the Secretary of the Rain Department reveals how the system of heaven and earth works. The worst threat to a good harvest is a drought. A drought is caused by demons that disrupt the order of the human world. The functions of the Dragon Kings and their associates are not only to deliver the needed rain but also to restore the disrupted order. The deities are watching the human world with the two eyes of the Four-eye God. This system reflects the traditional Chinese concept of a telepathic relationship between the human world and the heavenly world.

The murals depict the interaction between the human world and the imagined heavenly world

above the clouds. The sources of the religious ideas here are rather diverse. The formal division between Taoism and Buddhism does not really exist in the local popular religion. A common sense of pragmatism, driven by very practical needs, rules. The most obvious fusion of Taoist and Buddhist mythology is the invented relationship between the Holy Mother and the Dragon Kings. The Holy Mother is a well established Taoist deity. The concept of dragon kings was a Buddhist import that was seamlessly combined with the Chinese concept of dragon (Ma 1994:335-337). The mother-and-son relationship further enhanced this inter-religious marriage. Another example that shows clearly this pluralistic nature of the popular religion is the use of the image of the yaksa in the murals. The yaksa is a Buddhist import and it is originally related to the Dragon Kings.⁴ In the shrine of the Mountain God and Earth God, the yaksa is associated with the Taoist Mountain God as his deputy to control the wild beasts. The image of the yaksa is also used in the murals to represent the Spirit of the Willow Tree. This can be explained by the dual characters of the yaksa, as either a harmless nature god or an evil being that kills and eats travelers in the night (Ma 1994:390). It is interesting to notice that the image of the Rain Master in the murals is very much based on the model of the yaksa who has red hair, blue skin, and a tiger skin skirt. The horns on his head suggest a genetic relation with the dragons. Since the Rain Master has an origin in ancient Chinese shamanism dating to a period long before the introduction of Buddhism into China (Zhou 1992:104), its taking the form of a yaksa is again a result of cultural fusion.

The major concern of the villagers about rain and the growth of crops can be seen in the murals in more detail. In the mural on the east wall of the main shrine, each of the Dragon Kings has a bundle of young millet in their hands. This indicates the purpose of the mission; they will leave the green millet crop in the human world with the rainfall. The Earth God and his wife have large golden millet ears in their hands, symbolizing the good harvest in the fall. The god on the right holding a white colored chicken may be interpreted as a deity blessing the livestock of the villagers. Another god with a green face and a pointed mouth is performing pest control functions by holding a gourd to draw worms into it through magic force. (Figure 22) The entourage of the Dragon Kings can be seen as a full-service team prepared for the agricultural needs of the village.

People pray to the deities for a good harvest regularly during the year. They come to the temple as part of community events to pray in front of the murals. They deeply believe that the deities will respond to their prayers and give them the requested help. The artistic depiction of the world above the clouds helps to give people a sense of communication with the deities. Villagers also come to the village temple individually to pray to the deities for help with special needs in their families. One may ask for help with healthcare issues or with children's scores in college entrance examinations. When the prayers are answered, a red colored banner will be hung in front of the deities on the dragon posts. The writing on such a banner usually says "thanks for the gods' blessing." (Figure 6) The individual concerns of the villagers are not directly reflected in the murals that focus on the rainfall and harvest. However, since the Holy Mother ranks high in the heavenly world, and she has no specific responsibility, she is considered to be a generalist who can answer prayers of various concerns. If a villager feels it necessary to pray to a specific deity for a particular need, he or she will go to other temples.

The village temple in Dang jia shan does not exist by itself; it belongs to a larger community of

many villages with temples in the area. According to the old stone tablet dedicated to the relocation of the Dang jia shan temple, the temple belonged to the community headed by the temple in Jiu zhai village, a village about 10 kilometers from Dang jia shan. The villages in the community network have a variety of deities to meet the specific needs of the people. The distribution of the deities in the temples is believed to have been determined in conferences of community leaders.

For example, the village temple of Lao zhuang yan, 3 kilometers from Dang jia shan, is dedicated to the three sisters of Qiongxiao, Bixiao, and Yunxiao. The three sisters are in charge of childbirth from conception to delivery. A villager can pray in this temple for any childbirth-related concerns.

When the artisans painted the murals, they drew inspiration from their human experiences and passed human values to the deities. At the same time, they followed certain local artistic traditions that have been enhanced by traditional manuals known as *Shen pu*, or the model books of deities. Although rainfall is central to all the religious activities of the Dang jia shan village temple, maintaining the order of the world remains the most important concern of the deities. It reflects a belief in a harmonious relationship of people with Heaven and Earth that is fundamental to the Chinese cultural tradition. This study, limited by its scope, focuses on the murals in the village temple of Dang jia shan. To obtain a comprehensive understanding of the villagers' world in the local popular religious context, we will need to explore all the temples in the greater community.

Figures

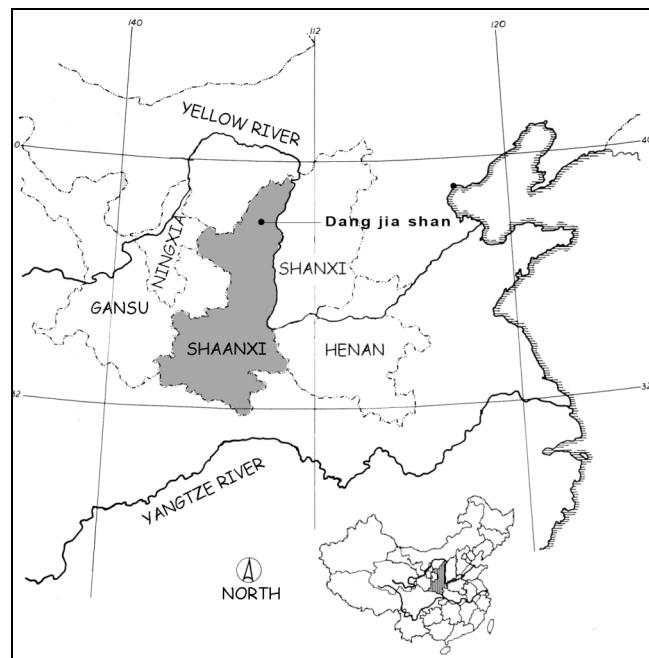


Figure 1. The village of Dang jia shan located within Shaanxi province, China. Map by the author, 2007.⁵



Figure 2. The village of Dang jia shan. Photograph by the author, 2007.



Figure 3. The village temple, Dang jia shan village, Shaanxi, China. Photograph by Jiang Lu, 2005.



Figure 4. The mural of the Dang jia shan village temple. Photograph by the author, 2005.

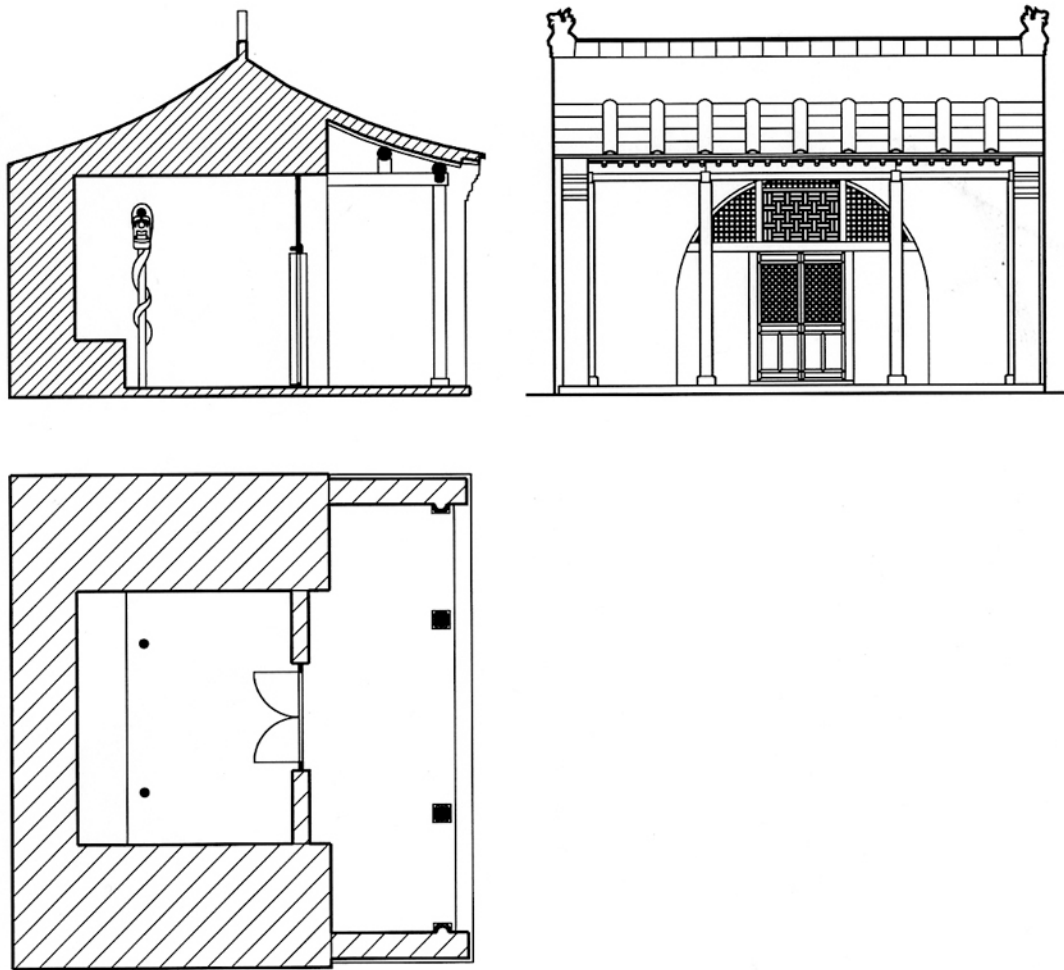


Figure 5. The village temple of Dang jia shan: plan, elevation, and section. Drawing by the author, 2005.



Figure 6. Posts decorated with dragons. Photograph by the author, 2005.



Figure 7. Interior of a cave dwelling. Photograph by Jiang Lu, 2005.



Figure 8. Holy Mother of the Ninth Heaven. Photograph by the author, 2005.



Figure 9. Dragon Kings of the cardinal points (from left): black/north, white/west, yellow/center, blue/east, and red/south. Photograph by the author, 2005.



Figure 10. Rain Master. Photograph by the author, 2005.



Figure 11. Secretary of the Rain Department. Photograph by the author, 2005.



Figure 12. Local earth god and his wife. Photograph by the author, 2005.



Figure 13. Thunder God. Photograph by the author, 2005.



Figure 14. Lightning Goddess. Photograph by the author, 2005.



Figure 15. (right) Four-eye Heavenly God. Photograph by the author, 2005.



Figure 16. Mural on the east wall: The coming of the Dragon Kings. Photograph by the author, 2005.



Figure 17. Mural on the west wall: The leaving of the Dragon Kings. Photograph by the author, 2005.



Figure 18. The shrine of Mountain God and Earth God. Photograph by the author, 2005.



Figure 19. The Earth God and the Mountain God. Photograph by the author, 2005.



Figure 20. Yaksa with wolf and tiger. Photograph by the author, 2005.



Figure 21. Yaksa with wolf and tiger. Photograph by the author, 2005.



Figure 22. (Detail) God of pest control and god with white chicken. Photograph by the author, 2005.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. For specialists, I offer the following contextual comments situating this study within the larger study of Chinese popular religion. The popular religion in northern Shaanxi province has hardly been studied for many reasons. Foremost, during the 20th century, since the revolution in 1949, the popular religion in that area was seen as superstition. Most of the village temples were destroyed during the Great Cultural Revolution, and the religious activities associated with them were stopped. No scholar dared to touch such a forbidden topic. Due to the late start of Chinese folklore studies as an academic discipline and the inaccessibility of the area during the civil war before the revolution, little scholarly investigation of the local popular religion was conducted. It was not until the 1990s that the popular religion revived and attracted scholarly interest. Adam Yuet Chau's study of the Temple of Black Dragon King in Yulin, about 40 kilometers from the village of Dang jia shan, is the most important relevant work on the northern Shaanxi popular religion (Chau 2005:236-278). It is a starting point for scholarly investigation in that area. Since the 1980s when China entered its reform era, Chinese scholars have been actively doing research on the popular religions of China. Their studies of deities in popular religions provide valuable references for this study. This study resulted from field research on the cultural tradition of the village Dang jia shan. An interdisciplinary approach based on architectural and folkloristic studies was used so as to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the human-environment relationship. In this study, the village temple was documented architecturally and the murals in the temple were photographed. The villagers were interviewed about the meanings of the murals and their activities in the temple. Since the villagers can only identify the major deities in the murals, sources from published books on the deities of Chinese popular religion were used to construct the theological framework. The texts in the mural, however, provide critical information about how the heavenly world and the human world interact.

2. The Secretary of the Rain Department looks very much like the secretary pictured in the Chinese version of the Buddhist Naraka (Pan 2001:255-257). The writing on the book that he is holding indicates that it is the record book of the Rain Department. The scroll shown in the murals on both the east and west walls also indicate that he is mainly concerned with rainfall, rather than the life and death of humans, and that he took orders from the Jade Emperor—the highest Taoist god. He is therefore identified as the Secretary of the Rain Department.

3. These artisans are reported to travel most of the time working for temples. They were not available for an interview.

4. Similar to the Dragon Kings, the yaksa belongs to another type of deity among the eight types of Buddhist deities (Ma 1994:387-389, 390). In Chinese popular belief, the yaskas serve the Dragon Kings as guards patrolling the sea.

5. All of the figures appearing in this article are also available in the online photograph sharing service flickr™. See: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/rainprayer/>, accessed April 13, 2008.

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