

Chapter 5

Cultural Interpretations

The complex encounter between two cultures is not understandable only in terms of the analysis and comparisons of their respective cosmologies. Cosmology, using an expression of Durkheim, is a “Collective Representation”. In Durkheim’s view, Sacred Collective representations help in the process to order and make sense of the world, and they can also express and interpret social relationships. the sacred is created through rituals, and what is deemed sacred is what morally binds individuals to society. This moral bond then becomes a cognitive bond that shapes the categories we use to understand the social world¹. These collective mental representations offer a coherent explanation of the origin, evolution, and eventual fate of the universe from a religious perspective. Nevertheless, they are embedded within a larger symbolic system called culture. Within a specific culture, religion with its cosmology and sacred symbols plays a very important role. At least, in Taiwan, is possible to assert that the conception of the world made by the complex cosmology, which underlies the practices of popular religion, it is in some ways regarded as the dominant symbolic power. This is very important because the influence of this cosmology is felt in many aspects of the everyday life of people.

Among the rites for the ancestors, the symbolic meaning of the tablets of the ancestors, take up an important part. In fact, within the tablets resides one of the ancestor’s souls, for this reason, the tablets are never moved and people are careful not to touch them so as not to irritate the ancestor. Furthermore, behind the tablet, very often the genealogy of the family is listed. By putting the ancestor tablet on the altar, people symbolically unify the ancestors and honor the family lineage. Incense is lit before the altar daily, significant announcements are made before them, and offerings

1. Emile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse. Le système totémique en Australie* [in Français], 1968, cinquième édition (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1912), 19, accessed March 8, 2022, http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/Durkheim_emile/formes_vie_religieuse/formes_vie_religieuse.html.

such as favorite foods, beverages, and spirit money are given bi-monthly and on special occasions, such as Qingming Festival and Zhong Yuan Festival. Many people believe that ancestors exist as supernatural spirits and these spirits would respond to secular requests from worship². Since the soul of the deceased is believed to dwell in the ancestor tablet, this makes the tablets an important symbol. If it is possible to consider ancestor worship and all related practices as a religious system³, I believe it is possible to consider the tablets of the ancestors as important sacred symbols. As Geertz pointed out⁴, the function of sacred symbols is to synthesize the ethos of people; these symbols certainly have the ability to mold the worldview of people, introducing the believer to a type of specific sets of dispositions. I would say that the dispositions created by these sacred symbols coexist with other dispositions dictated by practical activities linked to the social environment, the political system, the financial situation, and (last but not least in Taiwan) the effect of the so-called process of globalization.

5.1 The same service to the dead as to the living 事死如事生

Inside the complex and – at least for those in the West – very different conceptions of the world, man and spirits (ancestors, ghosts, or deities) physically share the same living space, the same living time, and share the same human preoccupations or bodily needs. As Francis Hsu noted in his *Under the Ancestors' Shadow*, “the attitude of the living toward the dead and that of the living are functionally one. The relationship of the living with the dead is essentially modeled upon that of the living with the living. In glorifying the dead, it is both idealized and it sets the standard and pattern for kinship relationship.”⁵.

As we saw above, there is a Chinese proverb that says, “The same service to the dead as to the living; to the absent as to the present” (*shisi ru shisheng* 事死如事生). In some ways, the necessities of ancestors' worship give parents an additional imperative to have sons in order to perform the rites and thus secure eternal life for their parents and grandparents. “There are three things which are unfilial,” says Mencius, “and to have no posterity is the greatest of them” (*Buxiao yousan, wuhou weida* 不孝有三，無後為大)⁶. Thus, we can say that all those who already left, who presently live in, and who will in the future live in this world all share the same

2. Anning Hu, “Ancestor Worship in Contemporary China: An Empirical Investigation,” Publisher: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, *China Review* 16, no. 1 (2016): 173.

3. Batairwa, *Meaning and Controversy within Chinese Ancestor Religion*.

4. Geertz, “The interpretation of cultures.”

5. Hsu, *Under the Ancestors' Shadow*, 245.

6. James Legge, *The works of Mencius* [in Chinese and English] (New York: Dover Publications, 1970).

lifetime and the same existential world. In other words, all these categories live in one eternal present. Because of the complex interrelations between these categories, the bounds between the people who are living and those who have died (whatever kind of being they have become: an ancestor, a ghost or a divinity) are very strong and real for Taiwanese people. One of the consequences of this situation is that in the Taiwanese world, to talk exclusively in terms of “natural” and “supernatural”, as we are used to in Western terms, it is at least reductive. As I mentioned in previous chapters (see chapter 2), I believe that culture cannot be considered as a structure, I prefer to consider it as a public system of meanings embodied in symbols, symbols that share dynamic and creative relationships. Religious symbols are embodied in these symbolic systems, and share these attributes.

By directly analyzing religious symbols, it is possible to try to understand how some Taiwanese Catholics still use symbolic values originating from the popular religion to interpret the Catholic religion, and how these symbols are re-used and “re-semantized” by the Catholic believers and priests.

The study of the reverence for ancestors’ phenomenon brings us to understand how Taiwanese people consider the world of the afterlife. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, anthropologists commonly make a clear distinction between three classes of supernatural beings: gods, ancestors, and ghosts. These studies often put these entities in relationship with the bureaucratic structures of the former Chinese empire⁷ where the gods are metaphorically representing the imperial bureaucrats, the ancestors represent important local characters, and where the ghosts, according to the society’s change⁸, are considered as brigands or beggars. Yet, according to my experience in Taiwan, there could be a more basic way to define and divide these three categories of supernatural beings. Firstly, the dead who are worshiped by their own descendants are considered ancestors. Secondly, those who do not have descendants to worship them will become ghosts. Lastly, the dead who are worshiped by a multitude of people, not only by their own families, are considered gods. I personally believe that this somewhat simple division could represent a point of view that Taiwanese people share in order to define supernatural beings. Thus, as far as Taiwanese Catholic people are concerned, this kind of division is still present and especially meaningful.

The relationships between supernatural beings and those who are still living are, for many Taiwanese people, physical and direct. The dead and the living share the same time and the same living space and, perhaps most importantly, the same bodily needs.

In order to introduce how the concept of the afterlife depicted by the Taiwanese traditional culture influences the vision and the actions of some

7. Wolf, “Gods, ghosts, and ancestors”; Ahern, *Chinese ritual and politics.*; Feuchtwang, “Domestic and communal worship in Taiwan”; Feuchtwang, *The Imperial Metaphor.*

8. Weller, *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion.*

Catholic believers, I am going, to introduce and analyze some concrete examples that I encountered during my fieldwork. I will keep the traditional Taiwanese after-world categories of gods, ancestors, and ghosts as a guideline to the reader, to make them understand how this structure still influences the religious approach of many of Catholic faithful I interviewed.

However, before introducing these categories and the material I collected, I believe it is necessary to introduce first some of the main concepts that form the cosmology of the Taiwanese popular religion.

5.2 The Concept of Time

The concept of time is particularly important because the two different ways to conceive religious phenomena offered by Catholicism and by the Taiwanese traditional popular beliefs encompass two different conceptions of time. For believers of popular religion, in contrast to Catholics, there are not many fixed or cyclical dates on which a believer must go to the temple in the current year. Usually, people go to the temple in order to solve specific needs related to bad luck, illness, school exams, and so on. This is probably related to another concept, the concept of *Ling* (靈), which I will present in the following pages.

There are certainly some dates, during the year when Popular Religion practitioners go to the temple such as during lunar new year celebrations, or during ghost offerings on the fifteenth day of the eighth month of the lunar calendar (The Ghost Festival, also known as the *Zhongyuan* Festival 中元節). But there is no regular or weekly celebration like Mass. In the following section, both the lunar calendar (Chinese traditional calendar) and the Gregorian calendar (Western traditional calendar) will be mentioned, the latter being particularly relevant in defining the relationship with the liturgical calendar (the Catholic Church's way to look at the time).

5.2.1 Lunar Calendar

The Chinese calendar is based on Chinese astrology, due to the close connection between Geomancy, horoscope, Astrology and Astronomy, and the difficulty in determining exactly where one begins and the other ends. The Yin and Yang, and the five elements, together with the eight diagrams *bagua* (八卦), enter largely into Chinese astrological calculation. In the calculation of a fortunate time to undertake any given enterprise, a favorable combination of eight horoscope characters is identified. These eight characters are the four pairs of characters representing the year, month, day, and hour. The characters denoting the year are those of the Twelve Branches (*shierdizhi* 十二地支) and Celestial Stems (*shitiangan* 十天干) in the Chinese cycle (Cycle of sixty *huaaji* 花甲子). Those denoting the month are the combination of Branches and Stems assigned to that month

(*yuejinquanbei* 月令全備), referring to the epoch in the annual cycle. Those denoting the day are the combinations of Branches and Stems assigned in the lunar calendar to that day, referring to the epoch in the lunar monthly cycle. Those denoting the hour are the combination of Branches and Stems representing that hour, referring to the epoch in the daily solar cycle.

By considering the mutual affinities of these eight characters as referred to as the Yin and Yang, Five elements, etc., the good or bad auspices of any undertaking may be determined. The same system applies to birth, death, marriage, and in fortune-telling. The eighty cyclical characters (*bazi* 八字), pertaining to the time of the birth, are communicated between betrothed persons and occasionally between intimate friends or sworn brothers.

Chinese calendars consist of full directions as to omens and portents, and what undertakings can best be carried out on each particular day, all worked out by the rules of Astrology. This is very important because in practice these things can inhibit a marriage between two people, anticipate or delay the birth of a child, etc. It seems, as Geertz wrote, that with this kind of calendar “they don’t tell you what time it is; they tell you what kind of time it is”⁹. This phenomenon, in my opinion, is critical. As we saw above, there are only a few occasions when it is crucial to go to the temple in the year, probably only during the Chinese New Year or on the occasion of a particular god’s “birthday”. Otherwise, people go to the temple when they feel a specific need (bad luck, exams, etc.). As we saw above, according to this behavior – in a the Western view – the conception of time and the common conception of religion are just matters of practicality; there is nothing transcendental or mystical in these representations.

The result is that a person will often go to the temple when the need for divine intervention is greater. The frequency of visits will decrease when everyday life goes on without hitches or particular problems.

5.2.2 Gregorian Solar Calendar and Liturgical Time

The concept of the Gregorian Solar calendar refers to the Western way to calculate and measure time. In Taiwan, as almost everywhere else in the world, this way designates the daily schedule (time to wake up, to work, to have lunch, to go back home, etc.). Other than this, it provides a weekly concept of time: from Monday to Friday (or more often until Saturday), one has to work, while the weekend – or sometimes Sunday only – is time for rest and relaxation. In this regard, Taiwan follows this international standard. This vision of time is embodied already a liturgical meaning: it is the Church’s concept of time. “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day, he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.” (Genesis 2). God worked for six days and on the seventh day, he took a rest. Just like a common

9. Geertz, “The interpretation of cultures,” 393.

worker. This vision is at the base of the modern, Western conception of time. Why do I consider this to be so important? Because the liturgical time stretches on a full year, with the same specific and recurrent festivities – Christmas, Easter, etc. However, there is another shorter cycle of time, which stretches over a week, and which culminates at the Sunday Mass.

Here, Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of "habitus", and the other concept of "practical activities", allows comprehension and to account for the importance of this Catholic conception of time¹⁰. In Bourdieu's view, ritual practices such as "invocations" originate from some collective torments. Invocations are expressed in a collective language, like music. Therefore, in these practices are embodied all the intentions, hopes, and requests expressed by symbolic words and symbolic gestures. Words and gestures, which realized the meaning of the world without changing it. To this definition of ritual practices, try to link Bourdieu's concept of "habitus", which is the key in order to understanding "cultural reproduction". The habitus is able to generate regular ways of conduct, which can influence social life. In this way, ritual practices can be seen as a habitus, a regular way to express symbolic words and gestures that give meaning to the world without changing it. It is therefore through the performance of daily or constant practices linked to these invocations that the habitus of the faithful is created and preserved, and it is through this habitus that the faithful give "new" - Catholics - meaning to the experiences of his life. As Richard Madsen argues, today Chinese folk-Catholicism shows similar characteristics to folk-Buddhism. "For most rural Catholics, most of the time, the faith is completely melted with the structures of family and village life. One becomes a Catholic by being born in a Catholic family in a Catholic village, not by making any faith commitment to a doctrine of universal salvation. Such Catholics seem indistinguishable in terms of mentality, morality, and lifestyle from non-Christian villagers, the only major difference being the performance of different rituals to mark important events in the life cycle"¹¹, and again, "Many complicated ties do connect village-level Catholic communities throughout China with one another and with the universal Catholic Church. First, local communities all share a common, distinctive time framework. They celebrate festivals according to a common liturgical calendar"¹². According to this analysis, it can be asserted that the faith of the believers expresses itself through some habits, the sharing of a common experience of time, as well as a common calendar.

As above-mentioned, the most important and representative rite in the Catholic Church is the celebration of the Mass. Generally, in Taipei city,

10. Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques*.

11. Richard Madsen, "Catholicism as Chinese Folk Religion," in *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future*, ed. Stephen Uhalley and Xiaoxin Wu (New York: Routledge, 2001), 73.

12. Richard Madsen, *China's Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society* [in en] (University of California Press, 1998), ISBN: 9780520213265.

almost all the parishes perform this type of celebration every day, but the most important one is of course the Mass that takes place on Sunday. This Mass is the one in which everyone of the faithful should participate.

It is first necessary to introduce a particular custom that is quite common in every Catholic church all over the world. Every believer can offer a Mass in order to pray for his own needs or for his ancestors; this means that within the rite of the Mass the priest will pray specifically for the needs of the believer who offered the Mass. Usually, the believer gives a free donation of money. In the Resurrection church, a red envelope containing a certain amount of money is given – before the beginning of the Mass – to the priest. The particular prayer's request or the name of the ancestor is written on the envelope.

In the Resurrection church, the Mass was celebrated only on Sunday, but some believers went every day to the nearby St. Teresa church, a church built by the C.I.C.M. Missionaries, which in that period was administered by the same parish priest, Father Martin. Going every day to the church, I had the opportunity to meet several parishioners who attended the Mass only once over a period of two or three years. Every visit was linked to urgent needs: a request for healing for a sick person, help with their child's university entrance examination, requests to ease the tense ties within a family, and many other needs.

Mister Lin was a sixty-year-old parishioner. In more than four years, I met him only three times. He was the owner of a noodles market stand near Longshan night market, one of the most famous in Taipei. The first time I met him was during the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) crisis, the respiratory disease that spread in some Asian countries, between November 2002 and July 2003. At that time, he was understandably in trouble because of that disease (as most of the population in the old district of Wanhua) because the night market was closed for a long time. He offered the Mass asking for the end of the disease. After the disease ceased, I went several times to the night market. I naturally met him there, and he told me that he was not going to Mass because he was very busy. I did not meet Mister Lin at the church again until four years later. At that time, his wife was in the hospital because of heart surgery, in this case, he came to the Sunday Mass in order to offer a Mass for his wife's health, and pray for a good outcome of the surgery and her entire stay at the hospital. After the surgery, he returned one more time to the church to offer another mass in order to thank God for the fast recovery of his wife from the surgery.

Another case is about an old woman who was very worried about her son. She did not frequently attend the Mass, but on some occasions, she came to the St. Teresa church in order to offer a Mass for her son. The other parishioners told me about her family problems. Nevertheless, not only old people behave this way toward church activities.

The case of a particular young person is very interesting. The individual in question received his undergraduate degree and went to the Church to

express his gratitude to God, and at the same time to ask His help for his forth-coming military service. He offered the Mass for two consecutive Sundays. Despite the fact that he lived very near to the church and he was studying in Taipei, those were the only two times I saw him at the Mass.

Sometimes believers I had never seen before came to the church and offered a Mass for their ancestors, sometimes on the occasion of a death anniversary, but sometimes only to pray for them, to wish them peace and eternal life. However, the range of motives for these offerings includes requests to find a job, God's help because the pressure at work was too much, or generic prayers for their health (*shentijiankan* 身體健康).

Most of the examples I cited above concern people who came to the church only to offer a Mass in order to solve their problems. These situations represent a clear contrast that arises from the different ways to understand and live the Chinese cultural conception of time. This conception of course bases itself on principles of Cosmology, and especially on the practical way to experience the religious construction of time of this Cosmology. These believers live their faith as their neighbors do or as their schoolmates do: by going to church only when they feel particular needs or to thank God for an unexpected fortune. By living within an environment of popular religion, Catholics, after their baptism, will still maintain their previous patterns of conduct. Those who have been baptized at an early childhood age tend to follow the common social pattern of conduct toward religious behavior. And Because they are not involved in practical activities like the Holy Mass, it becomes very hard for these people to understand and be involved in Catholic Cosmology.

In this way, it is possible to understand the effort that the Catholic Church put into the teaching of practical concepts like the daily prayer of the Holy Rosary, which allows believers to meditate weekly on the mystery of the birth of Jesus, his death, and resurrection. In the same way, it is possible to understand why the week of Catholic people is structured to emphasize the weekend: on Friday – traditionally considered as the day on which Jesus died – believers are advised not to eat meat as a form of penitence, and on Sunday all the Church celebrates the resurrection of Christ. The hope is that these everyday practices would bring believers to model their lifestyle – and their daily activities – on the Catholic Cosmological structures.

5.3 The Concept of *Ling* 靈

As we noted above, one of the fundamental concepts that regulate the relationships between the various deities and the worshipers is the concept of *Ling*. The choice of a deity and of a temple are generally made to match the function of the deity to some specific need: if this god satisfies my urgent situations or helps me solve my problems, I will continue to go to him, and

otherwise, I will change deity and temple. Here are some examples of how this conception can influence the conduct of Catholic people.

During the time of my fieldwork, I participated in a Bible study group. Generally, this kind of study group is composed of believers who want to study in depth the Holy Bible with the help of a priest or a nun, and with the aim to increase their knowledge of Sacred Scriptures.

In this Bible study group, I met Mrs. Chen. She was a fifty-year-old married woman who lived in Taipei. She was baptized and continued to attend the Mass or the other activities of the Church. She told me that she was the only person in her family who believed in Jesus, her husband and her child was involved in the practices of popular religion. Mrs. Chen told me a very interesting story about her son. As is common among the young Taiwanese, he went to consult the temple's fortuneteller, the *Suanming* 算命 to ask some questions about his studies. After the fortune-teller responded, he asked something about his mother. But at this point the fortune-teller said that his mother already belonged to Jesus, so he did not have any power over her. When the son came home, he immediately told his mother: "your Jesus is really strong!" (*ni yesu zhen lihai* 你耶穌真厲害). Surprised by this statement Mrs. Chen questioned her son, and discovered what the fortune-teller previously told her son. Commenting on this fact, Mrs. Chen said that she was already sure that Jesus is stronger because He is more *Ling*, which means He really answers her prayers.

A nun once told me that she had witnessed an interesting episode. She was working in a Catholic store near Taipei's main station, selling books and religious objects. Once a young man and his mother came inside the store looking for some sacred images. While examining different objects, the young boy asked the nun which object was the most powerful (*shenme dongxi bijiao ling* 什麼東西比較靈?). This kind of term is not used among Catholics but is very common among the believers of the Taiwanese popular religion. Curious, the nun asked the cause of this question, and the boy answered that some nights before he dreamed of his grandmother who passed away not long ago. The grandmother told the nephew in dreams that in the place where she now was, there was no Buddha or Guanyin, but there was only a man on the cross. So, the grandmother has recommended the nephew forget all the popular religious practices and look for that particular symbol: a man on the cross.

Li Chonghao is a young man who joined the guitar activity group of the Resurrection church. Every Sunday he and two or three other youths played the guitar during the Sunday Mass. He told me that his grandmother (all of his family members were Catholics) told him that for any problems he had to go to the Holy Rosary church because the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Holy Rosary church was very *ling*. He felt this was very strange because, as he asked me, "isn't the Blessed Virgin Mary the same in every part of the world? Why must I go to the Holy Rosary church to pray the Blessed Virgin Mary?" The Holy Rosary church is another church administrated by

the C.I.C.M. Congregation, and it is located in the Wanhua district. The Holy Rosary church is the biggest church in the Wanhua district, and many people attend the Sunday Mass there.

In the same district of Wanhua is the above-mentioned St. Teresa Church. St. Teresa was nominated by the Pope as the patron saint of Taiwan, and one of the first Sanctuaries dedicated to Saint Teresa in Taiwan was the Church in Wanhua (小德蘭朝聖地). For this reason, on the annual celebration of Saint Teresa, many Catholics come from all over Taiwan in order to honor this saint. The celebrations stretch over a full week and the priest told me that in that week there are believers who make an offer of over 80,000 new Taiwanese dollars and this is for each day of the celebration¹³. The priest told me that the first time he saw such a significant donation, he could not believe it. However, as a believer explained to me, such a phenomenon happens because people think that this saint is very Ling. This is one of the reasons why many Taiwanese Catholic women choose the name Teresa when they are baptized.

Another phenomenon that in my view originates from this concept of ling is the fact that particularly after their baptism – especially if the baptism is received at the adult age – people are inclined to have many questions about their new faith and about the right way to practice and experience it. Questions often concern theological and intellectual doubts, practical problems that arise because of the contrast between the new faith and their “old” lifestyle, issues related to life in the family or at their workplace, at school, and so on. A priest once told me that people, especially if freshly baptized, often ask many questions, and if the priest’s answers do not completely satisfy them, believers will go to consult another priest until they find answers that satisfy them. In my view, this is a type of custom that derives from the fact that believers, even though they are already baptized, still use the cultural system within which they were born, but adapt it to their new condition of Catholics.

5.3.1 Chinese *Ling* and Christian Miracles

This concept of supernatural power, Ling, is in some ways linked to the Catholic concept of miracles. In the case of miracles, the believers, just as with the concept of Ling, ask the help of God – but in the Catholic tradition the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary and other saints – to solve a difficult which appears humanly unsolvable. In this case, after the successful resolution of the initial problem, the believer’s faith is consolidated and gets stronger. In fact, these types of miracle-working events have implications not only for the Catholic religion but for the so-called Taiwanese New Religion; Jochim in his article about the study of the religion of the Yellow Emperor (*Xuanyuanjiao* 軒轅教) stresses that a cult of healing developed within the religion as a result of certain healing “miracles” in the

13. Approximately 2400 euros.

early 1970s¹⁴. As the author points out, the involvement of religion in the most famous cases of “miracle” was almost accidental. The case is that of an elderly man named Luo A-fu, who had a stroke that left him half-paralyzed. A devoted grandson found a flyer being distributed by religious people in the area, burned it, and put the ashes in the tea for his grandfather to drink.

When Luo Afu began to recover, his grandson attributed this to the efficacy of the Yellow Emperor and frequently took his grandfather to the Taipei Holy Palace of the Yellow Emperor to worship and drink “sacred water” (*jingcha* 敬茶, “tea offered in respect [and blessed by the Yellow Emperor]”). The result, in their minds, was the complete recovery of Luo A-fu, followed by his years of service to the temple as a volunteer helper. News of this event was largely responsible for mass conversions (of reportedly more than 1,000 people) that subsequently occurred in Guandu (關渡) and Danshui (淡水)¹⁵. Although in the doctrinal writing of the founder of the religion Wang Hansheng (王寒生) there is no special mention of faith healing, even for him it has become an accepted dimension of the religion¹⁶. In this case, it seems to me that Taiwanese people use their own cosmology, which is part of a specific cultural context, to understand and interpret this new religion, using in this particular case the concept of *ling*, and this even though the founder himself did not stress it before the Luo A-fu miracle.

According to Lozada, Catholic, and non-Catholic Chinese villagers attribute similar kinds of good luck and unusual experiences to the supernatural. Catholics attribute them to God, non-Catholics to ancestors, or perhaps to Bodhisattva¹⁷.

Similarly, the fact that many believers I interviewed started to explain their experience of faith by telling me about an episode that according to them is indubitably a miracle and more important proof of the truthful nature of their religion.

Mister Gao was a seventy-year-old man. He had been converted at the age of eighteen, while his wife came from a traditional Catholic family. One of his daughters became a nun, another daughter was a very active parishioner at the Resurrection church. He liked to talk to me about miracles because he felt these were real facts of significant importance. Yet for him, the priest sometimes did not pay enough attention to these experiences.

Mister Gao told me about a lot of miracles that occurred to some old parishioners. One of them concerned an old woman who was a farmer. She was very poor, and one day she bought a bag of fertilizer, only one because she did not have more money. On the way home, the weather started to change and she distinctly heard the sound of the rain behind her. She

14. Christian Jochim, “Flowers, Fruit, and Incense Only: Elite versus Popular in Taiwan’s Religion of the Yellow Emperor,” *Modern China* 16, no. 1 (January 1990): 14.

15. Zhou, Yonglan 周用蘭, “從社會人類學的觀點看臺灣一個新興宗教：軒轅教” (國立台灣大學考古人類學系學士論文, National Taiwan University, 1972), 27–30.

16. Jochim, “Flowers, Fruit, and Incense Only,” 15.

17. Eriberto P. Lozada, *God Aboveground: Catholic Church, Postsocialist State, and Transnational Processes in a Chinese Village* (Stanford University Press, 2001), 95.

started to pray to the Blessed Virgin Mary because that bag of fertilizer was the only one that she could buy, and if the fertilizer would get wet, it would start dissolving and she would lose her money and all capacity to fertilize her field. She started to run as fast as she could, continuously hearing the sound of the rain and at the same time reciting the Holy Rosary. When she arrived near the village, she met a young man, and with his help reached home without being caught by the rain. Once at home, she discovered that the rain was following her all the time, but it inexplicably did not catch her. The old woman explained this fact as a miracle made by the Blessed Virgin Mary who she had prayed continuously on her way home.

Another miracle told to me by Mister Gao was also related to a poor woman. She bought a cabbage, but because it was treated with poisonous chemicals when the family members ate it, all of them got sick and a son who died. The only person who did not have any kind of problem was that woman, even though she had eaten that poisonous cabbage. She was persuaded that the cause of this was the direct intervention of God because she was the only Catholic in the family.

As Mister Gao told me, the priest did not pay too much attention to these stories, because he maintained that the faith of believers cannot depend only on miracles or on divine manifestations.

According to Madsen, believers consider God as the author of these miracles, usually through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and this without asking the opinion of a priest or following any ecclesiastical rule¹⁸. In agreement with what Madsen argued above, Lozada sustains that God grants these miracles, usually through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, without going through any priest or following any ecclesiastical rule. The only necessary condition is that the individual believer sincerely seeks God's help. The miracles are independent of any human effort. Sometimes, miracles manifest themselves in the form of a direct call by God to serve the Church, without the believers needing the approval of official Catholic Church authority¹⁹. Nevertheless, for most believers, these extraordinary experiences confirm and strengthen their faith.

18. Madsen, *China's Catholics*, 94.

19. Lozada, *God Aboveground*, 94.