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Hybridising *Minjian* Religion in South China: Participants, Rituals, and Architecture

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Abstract: This study focuses on the ongoing hybridisation of *minjian* (folk or popular, literally "among the people") religious activities in rural areas of south China. It demonstrates recent changes in religious hybridisation through extensive fieldwork in two villages. It also investigates intellectual debate on the concept of *minjian* religion and presents the relationship between state power and the religious revival in contemporary Chinese society. It then draws on fieldwork data to examine the hybrid nature of Chinese *minjian* religion from three aspects: the diversification of participants, the performative hybridisation of rituals, and the blending of spatial layouts. The main argument is that the revival of *minjian* religion involves the hybridisation of mystical and secular elements and of traditional and modern elements through the complex interactions between rural communities and official authorities.

Keywords: folk religion; *minjian* religion; state power; Chinese society; religious ritual

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1. Introduction

A recent study exploring the landscape of *minjian* 民间 (folk or popular, literally "among the people") religion in contemporary China offered a quantitative portrait of its popularity, diffuseness, and diversity (Zhang et al. 2021). Finding that about 70% of the Chinese population are believers in *minjian* religion, this study verified that *minjian* religion is the mainstream in the Chinese religious market. This argument aligns with other ethnographic studies that have identified the mainstream status of *minjian* religion in China (e.g., Feuchtwang 2001; Freedman 1974; Wong 2011). Zürcher (1980) studied religions in imperial China and likened China's "three teachings" (*sanjiao* 三教)—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism—to three pyramid-shaped peaks with the common base of *minjian* religion. Despite being regarded as "superstition" in modern China, particularly under the atheist ideology of the Communist regime since 1949, *minjian* religion has survived and remains popular among many people. In reform-era China, the Chinese authorities have adopted a more tolerant attitude towards religious practices and beliefs, and *minjian* religion has been vigorously restored and re-adopted across the country (Yang 2012, p. 138).

Although *minjian* religion endures in contemporary China, we lack a deep understanding of its nature. In the present study, we propose that the concept of hybridity would help grasp the nature of Chinese *minjian* religion and that *minjian* religious practices in today's China are experiencing an ongoing hybridisation process. What we mean by 'hybridity' refers to the mixed character of Chinese *minjian* religion due to its syncretising heterogeneous religious elements such as activities, practices, rituals, beliefs, doctrines, ideas, and participants. Accordingly, 'hybridisation' means the process of generating, maintaining, or

consolidating the hybridity of *minjian* religion through amalgamating different religious types and varieties.

There are several crucial challenges preventing us from understanding the hybrid nature of Chinese *minjian* religion. The first is how to understand the concept of *minjian* religion. Common English translations are "folk religion" or "popular religion", but "*minjian*" does not imply the inherent tension between folk/popular religion and elite religion present in Western intellectual history (Palmer 2019). How to understand the Chinese term '*minjian*' out of the '*minjian* religion' compared with its English translations? Other relevant questions include: Can Chinese *minjian* religion be counted as a religion? How to redefine 'religion' when moving away from the Western definition pattern? Addressing these questions, we must be cautious about conceptual nuances, which would contribute to revealing the hybrid features of Chinese *minjian* religion. Second, *minjian* religious practices and activities are being revived not in the name of religion per se but in the name of the preservation of cultural heritage (Yang 2012, p. 88). How should this phenomenon and its impact on the characterisation of *minjian* religion be understood in the context of China today? In other words, how does it influence the revived hybridisation of *minjian* religious activities?

This study aims to answer the above two clusters of questions based on recent fieldwork that examined emerging *minjian* religious practices in rural areas of Guangdong province. The main argument is that Chinese *minjian* religious activities are undergoing a hybridisation process embodied in three aspects: diversified participants, blended ritual performance, and a combined spatial layout. We do not imply that the hybridisation of *minjian* religion is limited to these three aspects, but the fieldwork data suggest that these aspects are the most salient. It is noted that these three aspects reflect the syncretism of Chinese *minjian* religion in general, featuring the amalgamation of elements from Daoism, Buddhism, and other traditional religious beliefs (Zhang et al. 2021). Nevertheless, the present study seeks to reveal something more complicating regarding the continuing hybridisation of *minjian* religion in terms of the current Chinese political and social circumstances. Specifically, although China is undergoing a rapid process of secularisation due to the modernising dynamics, this process does not negate the deification and spiritualisation in people's religious life (Sun 2013). In other words, the coexisting secularisation and deification of modern life may have complicated the hybridisation of Chinese people's religious practices and activities. Moreover, imposing ideological and political restrictions on religions, the Chinese authorities have to be very careful to address the potential discrepancies or even conflicts between religious beliefs and the atheist belief system of Communism and take precautions against religious groups that may become rivals or threaten the power (Yang 2012). Through exploration of these three aspects of participants, rituals, and architectures, we emphasise that the religious hybridisation is the outcome of the complex interactions between local rural communities and official authorities.

In the following sections, we first investigate intellectual debate on the concept of *minjian* religion and then discuss how state power has affected the revival of *minjian* religion in contemporary China. In so doing, we aim to reveal the conceptual hybridity of Chinese *minjian* religion and to lay a theoretical foundation for the empirical results. We subsequently detail the research setting and methods and present three evidence-based findings regarding the recent hybridisation of *minjian* religion in terms of religious participants, ritual performance, and spatial layout, based on the data analysis. Finally, we provide concluding remarks.

2. Conceptual Debate on the Hybridity of Chinese *Minjian* Religion

The hybrid nature of Chinese *minjian* religion is well reflected by the ongoing intellectual debates about the terminological implications. Two interrelated questions are relevant here: Is Chinese *minjian* religion truly a religion? If so, how should "*minjian*" be understood? Regarding the first question, Palmer (2019, p. 156) offered a confirmative answer in a recent essay:

In the past two decades, much research has unpacked how, throughout the twentieth century, the dominant discourse in both China and the West did not recognize this realm (*minjian* religion) as "religion" but as "superstition". By now, the consensus, at least in academia, is to include it within the category of religion.

Whether *minjian* religion should be regarded as a religion depends on the definition of religion. Scholars of Chinese religion have reached the consensus that the conventional Western definition does not include the particularities of Chinese religious practices and thus is inadequate to explain the revival of Chinese *minjian* religion (Yang 2012). The Western definition of religion refers to "a tradition that consists of certain authoritative doctrines, leaders, institutional systems, and behavioural guidelines" (Wong 2011, p. 154). Religions that meet this definition are categorised as "institutional religions" (Yang 1961) and include Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, and Islam. However, Chinese *minjian* religion cannot be classified as an institutional religion because it does not contain any of these elements. Notwithstanding, Chinese *minjian* religion does include the worship of ancestors or supernatural forces, mystical rituals, and spiritual experiences, all of which are religious activities. Here we see the syncretic nature of Chinese *minjian* religion. Moreover, a language problem has complicated the situation: the Chinese term *zongjiao* 宗教, the usual translation of "religion", was borrowed from a Japanese translation from European languages, and its meaning was altered during the importation (Yang 2019, p. 3). Thus, *zongjiao* is not part of Chinese people's everyday language.

To understand the hybridity of Chinese *minjian* religion, scholars must address the conceptual challenges by using "more sophisticated concepts, perhaps including Chinese-language concepts without direct translations, to capture some of the nuances and varieties of Chinese religious thought and practice" (Lang and Yang 2011, p. 19). For example, Yang (1961) proposed the term "diffused religion" to categorise the various cultural religious beliefs and practices beyond the conventionally defined institutional religions. Diffused religion does not involve "any systematically doctrine, authoritative scripture, or strictly organised institution" (Li 1998, p. 169, cited from Wong 2011). In this sense, we can regard *minjian* religion as "diffused religion". Zhang et al. (2021) argued that the term "diffused religion" emphasises the diffusive nature of *minjian* religion, as "it is highly mixed with everyday life, without significant differentiation" (p. 578). Yang and Hu (2012) conceptualised three types of *minjian* religion to demonstrate its complexity and diversity: the communal, the sectarian, and the individual.[1] Wong (2011) proposed defining Chinese *minjian* religion by combining belief content and attitudinal characteristics to reflect its hybridity and complexity. In this sense, *minjian* religion is understood "as a religious tradition that contained a system of beliefs [. . .], of which its followers would hold these beliefs and perform the related ritualistic practices with a folk religious attitude" (Wong 2011, p. 164).

Scholars have commonly identified *minjian* religion as a redefined or reclassified religion, and the hybridity of Chinese *minjian* religion is also reflected by the local meanings of *minjian*. Again, Palmer (2019) articulated the nuances between "folk religion" or "popular religion" and the Chinese "*minjian* religion". In Western knowledge history, folk religion is understood as the religious expression of lower folk culture, which stands in contrast to the higher elite culture; thus, a dichotomous perspective has been used to differentiate folk religion from elite religion. Palmer (2019) argued that such dichotomies can be easily found in China "between the higher and lower, the center and the periphery, the orthodox and the heterodox, between which there are no fixed boundaries and in which there is a constant exchange and circulation of religious practices, ideas, and people between the two" (p. 157). However, the categorisation of religions in China into "elite religions" and "folk religions" would lead to the "wrong conclusion that folk religion was passively derived from or deeply influenced by those elite religions, while in reality it was actually the one that had influenced the elite religions" (Wong 2011, p. 157).

This binary framework of folk religion vs. elite religion dominated ethnographic studies on Chinese religion until the 1970s, when scholars recognised the permeability and hybridity of the social/political elite and folk religious beliefs and practices

(Yang and Hu 2012). In this sense, the term "*minjian* religion" seems to reflect this feature accurately. *Minjian* refers to "varying degrees of unofficial, self-funded, and grassroots behavior" and to the field "outside the system" (*tizhi wai* 体制外) of official work units (Palmer 2019, pp. 157–58). Sociocultural elites "inside the system" (*thizhi nei* 体制内) can participate in activities and relationships "outside the system". Palmer (2019) indicated that *minjian* "suggests a sociological meaning that is not tied to the dichotomies between popular and elite" and that "*minjian* relations can take place between people at any location within the social system", whether they are elite intellectuals, peasants, middle-class consumers, or migrant labourers (p. 158). He suggested taking the term "*minjian* religion" not as a mere translation of the English "folk religion" but as categories with their own meanings to enrich the discussion of Chinese religion (Palmer 2019, p. 158). Following Palmer's suggestion, this study adopts the term "*minjian* religion" throughout not only to avoid the inherent tension between folk religion and elite religion but also to retain its implications to evoke "the horizontal relationships between people within the interstices of a hierarchical structure" (Palmer 2019, p. 158). In this study, "*minjian* religious activities" refer to a hybrid series of rural community-based festivals, ceremonies, rituals, and everyday practices that involve village clans, the public, government forces, and social organisations and that include ancestor worship, belief in supernatural forces, and moral cultivation.

3. State Power and the Revived Hybridisation of *Minjian* Religion in the 2000s

The hybridisation of *minjian* religion has become increasingly salient in China's religious revival since the 2000s. As mentioned, the widespread revival of *minjian* religious practices and activities in the past two decades has occurred not for the sake of religion but in the name of cultural preservation. This phenomenon complicates the hybridisation of *minjian* religious activities because it involves the power of the socialist regime in shaping the *minjian* religious landscape. Yang (2012) pointed out the challenges faced by the Chinese government in regulating the *minjian* religion. *Minjian* religious activities are often informal or implicit, and participants claim that they are culturally based, so they "arguably fall outside the boundaries of religious regulation" (Yang 2012, p. 89). The last two decades have seen the Chinese state take a more active role in promoting the revival of *minjian* religious hybridisation for political, economic, and cultural reasons. First, out of political considerations, the socialist regime has relaxed social conditions, allowing the revival of traditional religious beliefs and practices among ethnic minority groups or the entire Chinese ethnic peoples (Billioud and Thoraval 2008, 2015).[2] Second, many local authorities support religious revivals because they want to attract overseas Chinese investments and business. However, bureaus at different levels may have different orientations and priorities; for example, although local governments may be eager to promote economic development, the central government seeks to uphold its atheist ideology (Yang 2012, p. 104). Third, many *minjian* religious practices were rejuvenated in the form of "intangible cultural heritage" (*feiwuzhi wenhua yichan* 非物质文化遗产) when Chinese authorities called for their preservation in the early 2000s (Chan 2019; Walton 2018). Additionally, the state power becomes more tolerant of *minjian* religious groups and their activities because they may support local authorities in providing public goods (Tsai 2007) and maintaining social stability (Tao 2015).

How should the revived hybridisation of *minjian* religion in contemporary China be understood? Some scholars have interpreted the general religious revival as evidence of the inefficiency of secularisation theory in China (Sun 2013; Yang 2012). Yang (2012) also argued that when formal, institutional religious activities are restricted, individuals may turn to more informal, implicit forms of religion, such as *minjian* religion and other forms of spirituality (p. 104). Moreover, in his early observation of revived *minjian* religion in China's Pearl River Delta, Law (2005) suggested that China's drastic economic development "may not lead to total disenchantment with beliefs concerning magic in the cosmos"; rather, *minjian* religion may serve "as a countervailing re-embedding force from the local cultural context, leading to the coexistence of the world of enchantments and the modern world"

(p. 90). This point is of special significance, as it highlights the combination of deifying and secularising elements in the revival of *minjian* religion. This hybridisation perspective echoes Dean (2011), who indicated that contemporary Chinese officials and intellectuals recognise "the advancement of secularisation among the urban population" and are open to religious activities (p. 147).

4. Research Setting and Methods

This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork in two villages, anonymised as Village A and Village B, located in Guangdong province in southern China. We selected the two villages for the purpose of comparing them in terms of the three aspects of ritual participants, religious performance, and spatial layout. Village A is in the Pearl River Delta region, which is the central economic zone of the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area (*dawanqu* 大湾区). Benefiting from economic reform since the late 1970s, the Pearl River Delta has become one of the most developed areas in China. Village B is located in the west of Guangdong province and has relatively disadvantageous conditions for economic development. We consider the economy as a main sampling criterion because, according to Weberian predictions, economic development causes disenchantment with mystical beliefs (Law 2005). Despite economic disparities, both villages have experienced rapid urbanisation, which damaged local religious rituals and architecture. In the 21st century, residents of the two villages have witnessed the revival of *minjian* religious rituals and the restoration of traditional structures through the work of local communities, authorities, and social groups. In addition, the two villages belong to the same vernacular region of Cantonese and share common elements of *minjian* religious tradition. Villagers retain lineage-based relationships and maintain the pedigrees of clans (*zupu* 族谱). The main clan lineages are Family Ou in Village A and Family Gan in Village B.

The first fieldwork in these two villages was conducted in 2013, when one of this study's authors joined a research team to collect materials on the villages' religious activities, rituals, performance, and vernacular languages. The early fieldwork was compiled in a Chinese book published in 2015. For the present study, we primarily use fieldwork data collected in 2019, when Village A held an elaborate Hanlin[3] Cultural Festival and Village B performed a lantern parade, an annual folk event; both events contributed to the revival of local religiosity by preserving local traditional culture and boosting local tourism. Furthermore, in the last few years, the local authorities and villagers have been proactive in raising funds to repair and rebuild ancestral halls, temples, and memorial archways. These recent changes have significance for an exploration of the shifting religious hybridisation in southern China's rural areas.

The fieldwork data were collected through participant observations and informal interviews. We observed the Hanlin Cultural Festival in Village A and the lantern parade in Village B, and we surveyed the two villages' cultural landscapes and residential structures. We also conducted informal interviews with participants in these folk events, including local villagers, government officers, and visitors from outside. Observations were made, and interviews were conducted in Mandarin, which most of the participants spoke fluently. As Mandarin speakers, the research investigators did not require a translator or interpreter during the fieldwork.

In the next sections, we draw on the fieldwork data and present three aspects of the ongoing hybridisation of *minjian* religion in contemporary south China: ritual participants, ritual performance, and spatial layout.

5. Hybridisation of Ritual Participants: From Traditional Clans to Modern Communities

As the label of "superstition" has been gradually eliminated, *minjian* religious rituals in China have been transformed through the interweaving of social forces and local authorities to reflect traditional cultural revival. The refashioning of *minjian* religion in rural areas is relevant to the resurgence of blood-based clans, which has had a significant political and social influence on the new religious hybridisation (Yang 2012). Village clans have provided

the institutional conditions for the revival of *minjian* religious activities (Dean 2011), and the religious vitality of the rural population has contributed to collective cohesion and group solidarity (Gao and Ma 2011). Yang and Hu (2012) referred to the local community-based religious beliefs and activities as "communal folk religion". Ritual practices include the worship of ancestors and local deities (Freedman 1974; Feuchtwang 2001; Wong 2011), and its communities have rebuilt clan temples (*zongci* 宗祠 or *citang* 祠堂) (Chen 2018) and reinvented festive programmes (Chan 2019).

Our examination of religious folklore in rural south China reveals the ongoing hybridisation of local blood-based clans and communal ritual practices, but with some new developments. The Han Chinese people live in clans in the rural areas of Guangdong province; most natural villages feature only a single surname or a few surnames. For many years, these clan communities have played major roles as organisers, participants, and beneficiaries in local folklore activities. Concomitantly, the extent to which a villager is involved in religious rituals is affected by the extent to which he or she belongs to a certain clan. For example, the distinction between "having a share" (*youfen* 有份) and "having no share" (*meifen* 没份) in ancestral worship suggests that clan identity determines a person's eligibility to take part in such activities and how much he or she is under divine protection. As the clan population multiplies and the village area grows, the radius of dedication to the ancestral temple expands, but the ritual practices remain within a relatively stable and independent clan community.

However, something new but pivotal has happened in the last two decades. With the acceleration of urbanisation, rural religious participants in Guangdong province have begun to hybridise, going beyond the traditional boundaries of their blood-based clan communities to include new emerging participants. This change can be described as a transition from static rural communal relationships to a dynamic network that transcends lineages and geographical boundaries. Local authorities have strengthened their role in guiding and managing *minjian* religious folklore; social organisations such as those focusing on cultural communication and creative design have become co-organisers, and the public has been invited to participate in these local activities. These three new subjects, along with the original clan-based villagers and committees, coexist in the ritual events, blurring the boundaries between the village clans and society.

Drawing on the fieldwork data from the two villages, we present two events to illustrate the above hybridisation of participants in *minjian* religious activities. The first is the Hanlin Cultural Festival in Village A. This festival originally took place annually on Confucius' birthday, 28 September, but was moved to the National Day holiday (1 to 7 October) to attract more visitors and boost local tourism. This event attracts not only villagers working outside the area to return to participate but also residents from distant towns and cities. According to the observations of the 2019 festival, the organising bodies were the *Village Committee for Tourism Development and Construction Management* and the *Village Association for Hanlin Cultural Festival*. These two official organisers, accredited by the local government, were responsible for planning, coordination, management, and security. This shows the reinforced role of local organisations in leading and regulating the folklore event. Through this approach, the event catered to a larger audience and, to a certain extent, overcame the limitation of the clan-based community. The increase in the number of participants was reflected in the activities: apart from the award ceremony, which was only for the village youth, the festival organised many experiential activities for the public, including cultural performances, a parade, and a group lunch called the Hanlin Banquet. This finding is consistent with that of Lang and Yang (2011), who argued that many Chinese festivals are only partly religious, also offering "sensation, and sociality, and the enjoyments of music, ritual, and group performance" (p. 14). Recognising that religion is only part of the cultural apparatus, as illustrated by Village A's folk festival, we go further to reveal the hybridisation of participants and argue that this development implies an integration of the locality into "higher-level and broader social and political fields of engagement, interaction, and identity" (Lang and Yang 2011, p. 13).

This refashioned sociality is also found in the second example, Village B's annual lantern parade. This event's scale has expanded extensively in the past few years. In 2019, Village B, which had about 2000 permanent residents, accommodated 10 times as many people on the day of the event, and political powers and new social agents were involved. For example, the county-level government stationed security personnel at the entrance of the village to maintain order. The local TV station and online media provided coverage of the event. Social media in particular contributed to the viral circulation of the event details. Many photography, folklore, and tourism enthusiasts from distant towns and cities shared pictures, texts, and videos on WeChat or Weibo, and even appeared in the village and took part in the activities. The evening dinner was served through newly formed social connections, as the hospitable villagers prepared considerable numbers of meals beforehand and invited the outsiders to come to their homes for dinner.

The above examples show that *minjian* religious activities in Guangdong province have undergone a profound hybridisation of participants, with brand-new versions of sociality and locality. This finding is consistent with the implications of the term *minjian*, which, as Palmer (2019) indicated, "evokes specifically the horizontal relationships between people within the interstices of a hierarchical structure" (p. 158). Various types of participants, including local villagers, outsiders, social groups, and political powers, coexist in the same temporality and spatiality of these folk events.

We emphasise three points regarding the religious hybridisation of participants. First, local governments have made greater use of religious activities to govern their villages and reshape their locality; in so doing, they can effectively intervene in local civic affairs. For example, by encouraging villagers to initiate and participate in the local cultural activities, the county-level government of Village A aimed to create its own cultural brand to drive local economic development. This case is consistent with Yang (2012, p. 104), who suggested that certain government agencies in China sponsored the *minjian* religious revival for economic reasons. However, this study focuses not on the tension between political power and local community but on their collaboration and coordination. This differs from the focus of Dean (2011), who indicated the contradictions in local forms of religiosity between the state's national unity requirements and explorations of local cultural creativity. In addition, local authorities in the two case studies were cautious to avoid the religiosity of the folk activities—for example, the religious sacrifices by the local people did not appear in the official news media reports.

Second, local residents use the *minjian* religious activities to consolidate their group identity and collective cohesiveness. As part of villagers' everyday life, the reinvented festival events provided them with innovative ways of delineating the boundaries between themselves and "outsiders", thus intensifying their local identity and cultural pride. We interviewed a university graduate in Village A who returned from Guangzhou to work as a civil servant in the local town authority, responsible for the village's daily affairs. When talking about why he decided to return to his hometown, he said,

> Why did I come back from Guangzhou and insist on being a village official (*cunguan* 村官) even though I was paid such a low salary? It is for the sake of my hometown. Now I am in charge of the village affairs; this makes me feel that the attachment to and responsibilities for my hometown outweigh the job itself.[4]

In particular, he mentioned the profound influence of the Hanlin Cultural Festival and its associated social mores that focus on moral education in his village. He stated,

> The inscription on the restored Hanlin memorial archway reads: "For centuries, families have been accumulating virtue, and the most important thing in the world is to learn." Well, I think it is these words—"to accumulate virtue" (*jide* 积德) and "to learn" (*dushu* 读书)—that have permeated the cultural mores of our entire village. [. . .] Now I see why I keep doing these things—probably because I have been influenced by the culture here since I was a child. My ancestors have

> set an excellent example for us. No matter what high position they held in ancient times, they eventually returned to their hometown and built their homelands.[5]

Third, the associated social organisations collaborated with local governments and residents to hold the festival events and promote them to a social network beyond the geographical village boundaries. This finding accords with Gao and Ma's argument (Gao and Ma 2011) that folk festivals may be transformed from symbols of village identity to symbols of regional locality.

In summary, the hybridisation of participants in *minjian* resligious festivals has resulted in the expansion of the clan-based village community to connect with the broader public, where local cultural meanings are generated by the interactions between villagers, "outsiders", governments, and social groups. This finding confirms that contemporary folk festival events "are complex, collective actions including many different participants in different roles" and "unfold in multiple centers of activity" (Dean 2011, p. 154).

6. Performative Hybridisation of Rituals: Coexisting Deities and Secularities

This section discusses the second aspect of the ongoing *minjian* religious hybridisation: the performative hybridisation of rituals. It focuses on two interrelated aspects: the rejuvenated *minjian* religious activities maintain the mystical, deistic symbols in ritual performance while simultaneously serving secular, educational functions. We therefore avoid oversimplifying the revival of *minjian* religion to either a termination of secularisation or a pure re-sanctification; rather, we argue that a hybrid perspective should be adopted to explore the combination of religious and secular elements in Chinese *minjian* religion.

Scholars (e.g., Wong 2011; Zhang et al. 2021) have explored the mysticism of Chinese *minjian* religion and clarified its syncretic beliefs, which include the worship of deities, ancestor spirits, and ghosts; seasonal rituals and celebrations; cosmology or world view; belief in fortune-telling; and the concept of *tian* 天 (heaven). A typical example of the mysticism of *minjian* religion from the case study of Village A is the reappearance of the traditional "Thanking Deities Tamasha" (*Choushen saihui* 酬神赛会), which dates to the middle and late Qing dynasty, when the worship of deities and ancestors based on lineage and clans was institutionalised in Guangdong. According to local gazetteers, more than 100 birth celebrations and festivals of local deities with regional influences occurred in this area annually. Because of the natural conditions of agricultural communities, local villagers developed the worship of supernatural forces and gods, representations of which were placed in local temples. Dedications and ceremonies were regularly held in these temples, in which incense was burned year-round. The revived "Thanking Deities Tamasha" retains many original mystical symbols. The parade, an essential part of the Tamasha, usually starts at the village temples with prayers for the local deities' protection, and it then proceeds along a main path that includes key locales such as ancestral halls, public squares, and natural landscapes. Ritual performances include a variety of entertainment activities, such as a lion dance, dragon dance, Cantonese opera, and dragon boat race.

The annual *tuanbai* 团拜 (group worship) in Village B is also filled with mystical symbols of deities. On the seventeenth day of the first month of lunar year, the villagers invite relatives and friends to participate in this traditional event, which includes making sacrifices to deities, traditional drama performances, and a banquet. Of particular significance is the festive lantern parade. It starts from the rebuilt Wugu Temple[6], where villagers invite the local deities to come outside with them in the daytime and send them back at nightfall. The parade route must include all ancestral halls, village temples, and statues of local deities. Every household in the village sends a representative to participate in the parade, festive lanterns in hand. This four-hour event reinforces the local worship of ancestors and deities and strengthens the villagers' sense of belonging and collective identity.

In addition to preserving mystical symbols, the *minjian* religious rituals have developed secular elements. Some symbols of deities have been remade as part of a more general performance programme, functioning as an expressive representation of people's secular life, personal emotions, and local identities. Thus, the folk rituals in the villages of this

study provide secular entertainment. For example, the residents of Village B perform traditional Cantonese opera and puppet plays in the annual group worship event. These performances have two purposes: to thank the gods and deities and to entertain the audience. When relatives and friends of local villagers and visitors from outside gather at the square to enjoy the shows, the original purpose of thanking the deities seems to be overshadowed by the entertainment. In addition, the villagers have transformed some sacred elements to fit contemporary secular life. For example, the traditional white paper-tied lanterns have been given new colours to cater to contemporary aesthetic standards. The traditional white has a sacred meaning, honouring deceased clan members; however, outsiders may not understand this. The village's youth have introduced new colours to lantern production in recent years, and now, these colourful lanterns are hung in the streets and alleys during annual events. These findings align with observations made in previous studies. As Dean (2011) indicated, the festivals of the gods in rural China do not constitute "a sacred time of transcendence set apart from the daily profane order", but rather are an intensification of the joys of everyday life (p. 152). Furthermore, it has been argued that the secular salience of these activities makes them "part of the local cultural tradition or folklore, rather than as part of religion itself" (Yang 2012, p. 105). This point accords with the fact that Chinese *minjian* religious practices have been revived in the name of preserving cultural heritage.

Related to this ritual secularity is the increasing educational function of *minjian* religious activities. We draw on the case of Village A's Hanlin Cultural Festival to illustrate this point. Before the ritual of worshipping Confucius became a communal festival, it had already been practised by the old generation, usually on an individual and spontaneous basis. One middle-aged villager recalled the original custom of Confucian worship. He said,

> There was such a custom [of worshipping Confucius] when I was a child. On the day of Confucius' birthday, my mother would take me to the Temple of Confucius to worship the deity, and only after that would I go to school. I would also go to worship before each school year and before exams. I did not understand why at that time, but I knew that worshipping the god would make me feel better.[7]

The village repaired and improved the Confucius temple in 2010 and has held the new Hanlin Cultural Festival since. In addition to a traditional celebration of Confucius' birthday, the festival includes many forms of secular entertainment. According to the 2019 observations, the ceremony included the following: (1) a lion dance performance at several memorial archways at 8:00 a.m.; (2) an opening ceremony with a dance performance at 10:00 a.m.; (3) the burning of incense to venerate Confucius in front of the Confucius temple; (4) reciting of the epitaph to Confucius by the ceremony host; (5) the performance of non-material cultural heritage projects; (6) a scholarship award ceremony for the village youth studying in for junior college, undergraduate, and postgraduate programmes; (7) the performance of a classical opera; (8) all participants parading around the Moon Pond following the Cloud Route; (9) the accommodation of guests at Hanlin banquets; (10) a closing ceremony at around 2:00 p.m. It is noted that some parts of the festive ceremony come from the adaptations of the old ritual practice. For example, unlike the Hanlin Cultural Festival's parade route around the pond only, the old parade route covered the whole village. According to the recollection of one of the village elders, in the late 1940s, the parade route for the village folklore event was to follow the village boundary and then walk around the village's large pond, covering all the major residential areas.

Despite the changes in ritual elements, the ceremonial events have evolved from the traditional ritual of worshipping Confucius to include fresh secular elements and have been reconstituted into a modern "cultural festival". Not every aspect of the festival emphasises the mysticism of deities and gods; the complex traditional rituals of worshipping Confucius have been simplified, and popular cultural performances have been added. However, some of the activities perpetuate the traditions of respecting culture and loving study, such as students bowing to thank their parents and ancestors, and participants reciting Confucian classics. It has been noted that the educational and moral nature of these

refashioned folk rituals aligns well with the ideology of China's socialist regime, which aggressively promotes "excellent traditional culture" to cultivate core socialist values, enhance its governing legitimacy, and strengthen national and social unity (Walton 2018).

7. Hybridisation of the Spatial Layout: Between "Traditional" and "Modern"

This section discusses the third aspect of the ongoing *minjian* religious hybridisation in contemporary China, which is the spatial layout of folk architecture that combines both traditional and modern elements. Relatively few studies have examined the spatial dimension of the *minjian* religious rejuvenation. According to one recent study, the revival of traditional rituals has been accompanied by the reconstruction of local ancestral halls that have undergone institutional innovations, as traditional elements have been reconciled with modern society (Chen 2018). Going beyond the ancestral halls, this section examines the overall spatial hybridisation, including rural settlements and residential units.

Historically, the villages and dwellings in Guangdong have formed a patterned spatial layout of religious rituals. Even today, traditional components can be seen in some well-preserved residential buildings. We illustrate three aspects of the layout. First, the spatial layout of the rural settlements has a honeycomb pattern, with settlements leaning on the mountains, facing the water, adjacent to the farmlands, and in neat squares. Correspondingly, the pattern for religious rituals includes a ritual point for worshipping heaven by the pond at the front square of the village; a banyan tree planted at the entrance of the village to symbolise the reproduction of life, with an altar alongside; and an incense burner for the tortoise deity on the hill behind the village. Other temples for deities are located next to the ancestral halls in the first row of the village.

Second, the relative siting of the residential units reflects the villagers' blood relations: those adjacent to each other usually have intimate blood relationships. Because there are no horizontal lanes in front of or behind the houses, the vertical lanes are not only the main traffic channels in the village but also the public spaces for neighbours to interact and communicate. The ritual points, which are set up at key spatial sites such as alleyway entrances and wells, provide easy access to the neighbourhood around the village.

Third, the traditional family house consists of three rooms and two corridors, with the Gods of the Heaven and the Land and ancestors distributed along the central axis of the building. These are the spaces that objects of deities and commemoration are held to occupy. Specifically, there is a Heavenly Official in the middle of the patio wall, an attic at the end of the central axis, a niche in the centre where the ancestral tablets are placed, and a Land God at the junction between the wall and the ground. There are also Gods of the Gate on the side wall of the entrance and a Kitchen God at the stove.

The importance of *fengshui* 风水 (geomancy) in siting temples, ancestral halls, and family houses in the two Cantonese villages is noted. The architectures of Villages A and B are built on hillocks, and the village centres are connected by ponds or reservoirs. This layout creates a geographic pattern of mountains surrounding and rising from the ground, with water gathering in the middle (Tang and Tao 2014). It is in line with the traditional Chinese *fengshui* view, which is based on the idea of the unity of heaven and human and aims to honour nature and satisfy people's phycological need to avoid misfortune.

Because of the repression of rural religious rituals throughout the 20th century, ritual spaces became fragmented. However, since the late 1990s, along with the revival of folk customs, rural residents actively have raised funds to repair or rebuild public spaces such as ancestral halls and temples, which are now embedded in the rural landscape but in hybrid forms. For example, Village A repaired the Temple of Literature (Confucius Temple) and the Temple of War (Guandi Temple), one historical stone road, several ancestral halls, and three pagodas. Although the restoration was based on a hand-drawn clan pedigree and villagers' oral memories, the village entrance pagoda and the Hanlin Gate have been hybridised through the use of modern building materials and construction techniques, and the Hanlin Gate has been moved. Similarly, in Village B, public buildings, including an elementary school and several office buildings, have been built on vacant land. Wugu

Temple was reconstructed in 2016 in a compact space, with a reduced scale and simplified form compared with its original design.

The rebuilt structures include secular elements. For example, many new houses do not have the symmetrical layout of three rooms and two corridors: the patio inside the traditional houses has disappeared, and the entrance of the building is directly adjacent to the street. Today, people set up their shrines to deities and ancestors in flexible ways. The shrines for worshiping the heavenly gods have been placed on the walls either opposite to or by the side of the front door. The living room in new residential buildings is not necessarily on the central axis of the space. The TV wall often stands in the centre of the living room, with shrines for the local God of the Land and ancestors arranged in line with the TV cabinet. The Gods of the Gate and the God of the Stove are posted on the side of modern security doors and kitchen cabinets, respectively. Moreover, shrines are not always made with the traditional process of fine carving, but with the easier techniques of colour printing and laser engraving.

In summary, the spatial hybridisation embodied in the two villages accommodates mystical and secular symbols and traditional and modern spaces in these ritual–spatial relationships. The rebuilt ritual sites have some resemblance to historical traditions but have been adapted for modern needs. We therefore argue that the revival of religious spaces entails not a duplication of tradition but a hybridisation of traditional and modern architectural elements.

8. Concluding Remarks

This study demonstrates new developments in the hybridisation of *minjian* religion—in terms of diversified participants, blended ritual performance, and combined spatial layouts—in rural areas of Guangdong. The revival of *minjian* religion involves the inclusion of both mystical and secular elements and of traditional and modern elements because of the complex interactions between state power and the local communities.

This religious hybridisation can be summarised and understood from three perspectives: socio-political, spiritual, and architectural. First, from the socio-political perspective, this study reveals the diversification of participants as a basic trend in religious activities. Ritual participation has expanded from the original blood-based clans to include local villagers, governments, outside visitors, and social groups. We also show that local authorities and social forces continuously influence rural communities' religious activities. Rural society and the political authorities appear to be intertwined in the hybridisation of ritual performance. We borrow the concept of equivocality to explain this phenomenon (Billioud and Thoraval 2015, p. 230): the actors within a socio-political space interact with each other and use similar modes of rhetoric and practice despite their different and even contradictory strategies. Strategic equivocality can be traced back to imperial China, but it has become increasingly prominent since the beginning of the 21st century. In today's *minjian* religious practices, participants may have different beliefs, myths, and symbols, but they are still able to exchange and negotiate shared discourses and actions. There is also a degree of congruence between the indoctrinating function of the religious rituals and the ideology of the socialist state, suggesting that the two can be collaborative rather than antagonistic (Walton 2018; Yang 2012).

Second, from the spiritual perspective, the revived *minjian* religious rituals and performances are part of a hybridisation process in which the mystical and the secular coexist. This finding indicates the need to rethink religious cosmology in the context of secular modernity. The ancient cosmology intended to unite the visible and invisible worlds has undergone profound changes in modern China. Although modern life strongly features secularisation, this does not mean that the religious cosmology or the worship of deities does not have a place in modern China. Anthropologists exploring Chinese *minjian* religion have argued that a cosmological view still exists in modern individuals' subjective and everyday experiences (Billioud and Thoraval 2015). This paper goes a step further by indicating that religious vitality presents itself not only in the subjective realm but also in the cultural

landscape, material architecture, and ritual content. Thus, we argue that oversimplified traditional vs. modern, mystical vs. secular, and visible vs. invisible dichotomies should be abandoned and that consideration should be given to the hybridisation of religious practice and modern life (see also Yang 2012; Yang and Hu 2012). Finally, from the perspective of architecture, the spatial layout of *minjian* religion in Guangdong combines traditional and modern architectural elements. The revival of the religious spaces has not seen the duplication of the traditional buildings but has entailed a process of combining traditional and modern architectural designs.

A limitation of this study is that it draws on only two cases; thus, the findings may not be representative of other regions of China. Multisite ethnography is needed in the future to validate the findings and to demonstrate the changing landscape of *minjian* religion in south China. The changes in the participants, rituals, and architecture should be examined in greater detail in future studies. As part of a larger research project, this study is exploratory in nature, offering insights into the ongoing hybridisation of *minjian* religion in China today. Several questions remain to be answered. What is the role of *minjian* religion in the reform of local governance? What are the interactions among various participants in the revival of religious activities and practices? What are the implications of the coexisting mystical and secular elements in Chinese *minjian* religious rituals for general studies of religion? How should we understand the shifting relationships between *minjian* religion and official power in the restoration of religious spaces? More studies are needed to answer these questions.

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Notes

1 The communal type refers to "those beliefs and ritual activities based in the local community" (Yang and Hu 2012, p. 508); the sectarian "has an organizational structure beyond local boundaries" (p. 509); and the individual "refers to supernatural beliefs and practices that are independent of any collectivity" (p. 509).

2 For example, the restoration of Mazu 妈祖 temples in Meizhou, Fujian, serves the political purpose of establishing links between Taiwan and the mainland; in another example, the national ceremonies of offering sacrifices to Emperor Huangdi aim to consolidate all Chinese people's (both native and overseas) national identity (see Billioud and Thoraval 2015, pp. 244–47).

3 Hanlin翰林 is the title of an ancient Chinese official, referring to the member of the Imperial Academy. By naming the created cultural festival after the old title of Hanlin, the village establishes a connection with its historical and cultural tradition.

4 Interview in Village A in 2019.

5 See note 4 above.

6 Wugu 五谷 refers to the five common cereals in China: rice, two kinds of millet, wheat, and beans. This name reflects the connection between local agricultural culture and the worship of deities.

7 See note 4 above.

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