

CITY UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG
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**Revitalization of Folk Religion in
Contemporary China:
A Case Study of Dragon Tablet Festival in
Central and Southern Hebei Province**

當代中國的民間宗教復興：
對冀中南龍牌會的個案研究

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an empirical study of the revival and development of folk religion in contemporary central and southern Hebei Province, North China. Community-based local cults prevail in the rural areas of central and southern Hebei Province, and *xinghao de*, namely, local folk religious believers, are enthusiastic in holding religious festivals to worship their deities. Those folk religious activities were prohibited in the Maoist era, but they have been revived and have thrived after the reform and opening up.

After a general introduction to the folk religion and its revival in this region, this dissertation focuses on the story of the revitalization and development of Dragon Tablet Festival, a religious festival held annually dedicated to Dragon Tablet, a public deity in a village in Zhao County. Considered as “a typical example of feudal superstition,” Dragon Tablet Festival was banned in the Maoist era. After it was revived in the reform era, Dragon Tablet Festival attracted lots of researchers after a local scholar accidentally discovered it and in turn introduced it to academia. Subsequently, Dragon Tablet and Dragon Tablet Festival were reinterpreted as “Dragon,” the common ancestor and totem of the Chinese Nation, and “the living fossil of Dragon Culture,” respectively. Accordingly, Dragon Tablet Festival acquired a great success: a temple to Dragon Tablet was officially permitted to build in the name of “Dragon Culture Museum,” and Dragon Tablet Festival was listed as a provincial level “intangible cultural heritage” and hence protected by the local government. The revival process is generalized as “culturalization of a local cult,” which may represent a developmental tendency of folk religion in contemporary China. The completion of this process depends on the cooperation among local people, outside researchers, local government officials, and journalists.

Based on ethnographic research, this dissertation examines three intertwined themes and proposes some arguments. Firstly, the revitalization of folk religion is the

outcome of various factors. Both internal factors, such as the pursuit of *renao* (heat-noise) by folk religious believers and the resilience of folk religion caused by the flexibility of religious festivals, and some external factors, such as the enthusiasm of outside researchers and local government officials' pursuit of local economic interests, contributed to the revival and prosperity of Dragon Tablet Festival. Secondly, legitimization is an important goal for these folk religious groups and believers in the "gray religious market," a transitional area existing between the legal and illegal religious groups which is mainly caused by the current religious policy in China. To achieve this goal, folk religious groups utilize different strategies to legitimize their religious activities. Thirdly, the researchers who do field research on folk religion need to adopt some strategies to legitimize their research due to the religious policies and the related regulations of academic affairs in China, but meanwhile, their research on folk religion can be utilized by folk religious believers and local government officials to achieve their own interests. So eventually, the researchers and local government officials are also involved into the process of the revitalization of folk religion and to some extent promote this process.

This research not only provides a vivid picture of the revival of a local cult, but also reveals some rules in the "gray religious market" in contemporary China. At the same time, it illustrates that the revival and development of folk religion is not a process of "folk resistance" but involves and requires cooperation among various actors and stakeholders. The fundamental rule behind the cooperation is the rational choices of different actors in this complicated and important process.

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