

A THIRTEENTH-CENTURY CULT IN  
THE VILLAGES OF JI'AN (JIANGXI),  
OR 'FIELDWORK FOR HISTORIANS'

Anne Gerritsen UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

I had already spent an afternoon and a whole morning in Dingtang 丁塘, a village of perhaps 270 inhabitants just over ten miles from the city of Ji'an 吉安 in Jiangxi, when suddenly one of the village elders asked me if I would be interested in seeing some old ornaments belonging to Kang Wang 康王. I had come to Dingtang with Professor Liang Hongsheng 梁洪生 of Jiangxi shifan daxue to ask if the villagers had heard of the god Kang Wang. According to thirteenth and fourteenth century temple inscriptions, Kang Wang temples had dotted the landscape around Luling 廬陵 (now known as Ji'an). I had been shown the dilapidated ruins of Yin'guo Temple 因果寺, once visited by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, and been given a pink piece of paper requesting donations for its restoration. I had taken a photo of the empty space near the entrance of Yin'guo Temple, where they told me Kang Wang's statue had once stood. I had also taken a photo of the piece of paper, stuck to the inner wall of an otherwise empty shrine inside the disused lineage hall, that mentioned Kang Wang. Then suddenly these ornaments were mentioned. They were in a bag in the village elder's house, where he had somehow kept them away from the Red Guards. Of course I would be interested! Why didn't he tell me before?

Out of this grubby-looking bag came the most extraordinary treasures. There was a fuchsia-colored robe with glorious silk embroideries to adorn the Kang Wang statue, there was an ivory-colored robe with equally fierce embroideries worn by the statue of the god Xianfeng 先鋒, there were curtains embroidered with birds and disintegrating tablecloths embroidered with what looked like tigers. Then more treasures appeared: beautiful silver helmets and crowns for the gods, with the most delicate ornamentation, and long banners with stories told in faded pictures. I took photos, and then everything was stuffed into the

bag again. As the bag disappeared into the elder's house, Gao Liren 高立人, director of the Ji'an museum and our guide on these travels through Ji'an, told me he had taken photos of these treasures before, as part of his county-wide inventory of 'ancient relics.'

It still puzzles me now, to think that Gao Liren knew that Kang Wang was my particular interest on this trip, and these treasures were not the first thing he took me to see. I can think of many different explanations, but one of them has to be that it remains hard for the inhabitants of these extremely poor villages, and even for the director of a regional museum who has worked with scholars from the West like Kenneth Dean and John Lagerwey, to believe that a *laowai* is actually interested in seeing these remnants of village culture. It struck me several times on my recent trip (September 2002) and on the one before (April 2000) that if we, as students of China, do not express our interest in what is left of the cultural traditions in villages and show our support for those in China working to preserve it, then these fragile remnants will disappear. Of course there are places like Jinhua 金華 in Zhejiang, where the past has become a thriving economic enterprise, but in these villages in southern Jiangxi getting people decent housing and access to the most basic facilities is a higher priority than preserving the old wooden buildings, however beautiful the carvings inside.

It seems to me to be important that we, as historians of Song and Yuan China, take the trouble to travel to these places. (And believe me, it does take some trouble, both in terms of the necessary administrative arrangements and the physical aspects of traveling along endless dirt roads into very poor villages.) It shows that we value what is left today of this cultural heritage, even if in the eyes of many of the locals that heritage is not worth preserving. To express our interest in village history and to support attempts at preserving the past are not, however, the only reasons for undertaking such travels. I think we can learn a great deal about middle-period history by going to the places we otherwise only know from the written record. Let me give two examples.

I came to know about Kang Wang from a text by the famous Luling scholar Ouyang Shoudao 歐陽守道 (*js.* 1241). It is an inscription for Lingyoumiao 靈佑廟, a temple situated at Baisha 白沙. A later inscription by Liang Qian 梁潛 (1366–1418) and the Qing gazetteer (there are no extant Ming gazetteers for Ji'an) both suggest that Baisha is about thirty *li* upstream from Luling. Would the temple still exist? On my first evening in Ji'an my local guides were

not even sure which of the several Baisha in the greater Ji'an region Ouyang Shoudao referred to. After several more inquiries over the next few days, we were told first that there were no remaining traces of this temple, and then that the village of Baisha was inaccessible because recent rain had destroyed the dirt roads into the village. But we persevered, and on our last morning in Ji'an we did get to Baisha, despite the roads and the discouragement. And lo and behold, here, hidden within a tiny village, right next to the fast-flowing Gan 贛 River and surrounded by mountains, there was an enormous temple. It was restored in 1998, still called Lingyoumiao, with a huge statue of Kang Wang inside. The guard of the temple told us his family had looked after this temple for twenty generations! He walked with us through the overgrown area in front of the temple, and pointed to the traces that marked the outline of the old temple, its forecourts and the space where theatrical performances used to be held.

I was amazed, not just by the scale of the place (what kind of impression must this temple have made on its visitors in the past?), but also by its proximity to the river (perhaps in the past most people never bothered with the roads, but arrived here by boat?). How distant the traffic and noise of today's Ji'an seemed here! Would it have been as inaccessible and remote in the Song? Seeing the place, I suddenly had a much better sense of what questions to ask, even if finding the answers was still difficult.

Another example. Robert Hymes' new book (*Way and Byway: Taoism, Local Religion, and Models of Divinity in Sung and Modern China*, University of California Press: 2002) makes it very clear that to understand what Chinese gods were (or are), we must, among other things, ask who is doing the praying, or sacrificing, or talking about the god. From a literatus like Ouyang Shoudao we learn that the god Kang Wang was the spirit of Kang Baoyi 康保裔. According to Kang's *Songshi* biography, he was born in Luoyang just before the establishment of the Song dynasty. Having repeatedly demonstrated his loyalty to the new Song dynasty, Kang Baoyi was put in charge of defense against invading Khitan forces at the northern Hebei border, and died a heroic death on the battlefield. In honour of this, his spirit was enfeoffed by the Song court. The gazetteers all follow Ouyang's example and identify Kang Wang as Kang Baoyi. Yet, even Ouyang knows his identification is not widely accepted. In *Lingyoumiao ji* Ouyang complains that Kang Wang's popular worship in Song Jizhou ignores the heroic values Kang Baoyi embodied during

his lifetime, and is instead driven by fear for the awesome powers of the god, as well as by fear for the spirit-medium in charge of his worship. Ouyang urges the worshippers to concentrate instead on the moral values embodied by Kang Baoyi.

A text in the *Daozang* provides yet another answer to the question of Kang Wang's identity. In the hagiography of Wen Qiong 溫瓊, also known as Marshal Wen, written by Huang Gongjin 黃公瑾 in 1274,<sup>1</sup> Wen Qiong encounters Kang Wang in a wing of an old Buddhist temple in Guozhou 果州. There is a sign outside saying Plague Department (*yi si* 疫司), and Kang proudly displays his honorary titles of Awesomely Helpful, Good and Beneficial, of Broad Kindness, Heroically Martyred King (*weiji shanli fuhui yinglie wang* 威濟善利孚惠英烈王). His duties, as he himself sees it, include "being in charge of the plague department and investigating good and evil,"<sup>2</sup> but the text describes him as a rogue spirit. He is held responsible for recent widespread plagues, and in the end receives one hundred blows as punishment from Marshal Wen. In the Daoist version, then, Kang Wang is the kind of local demon who needs to be subordinated.

So who is the Kang Wang that the villagers of, say, Baisha prayed to? I asked this question at every Kang Wang temple I found in Ji'an, and got a different answer each time. According to the female lay residents at one temple, where I found a statue of Kang Wang standing on a very thin attic floor together with Dimu Niangniang 地母娘娘 and Guanyin 觀音, Kang Wang *pusa* 菩薩 featured only in a support role to Guanyin. In several villages they knew Kang Wang as the protective spirit for their area (*ben fang li zhu* 本方里主 or *ben fang fu zhu* 本方副主). At Dingtang, one village elder told me that there were three different Kang Wangs in the village, the most important of which was the spirit of a man who hanged himself after an illicit love affair had come to a tragic end. In Yonghezhen 永和鎮, once a place more famous for its kilns than Jingdezhen, Kang Wang was revered for his medical knowledge. If someone was severely ill, the Kang Wang statue would be carried in his sedan to the ill man's home. A prescription would be selected, perhaps pointed to in a book, and if Kang Wang agreed with the treatment he would bump against

---

1. The hagiography is entitled *Dizhi shangjiang Wen taibao zhuan* 地祇上將溫太保傳, *Daozang* 18.90–96 (TT 557). See Paul Katz' discussion of this text in *Demon Hordes and Burning Boats* (State University of New York Press, 1995) pp. 80–88.

2. *Daozang*, 18.94.

the side of the sedan. If he remained motionless, another prescription would have to be selected. In some places, Kang Wang would be paraded around the area on festival days; in other places only his hammer would travel; in yet others he never travelled, and only moved outside of the temple.

In the Ji'an area, most of these rituals have not been carried out for years, and many of the people who witnessed the last of them are very elderly or already deceased. Some rituals may one day be carried out again; many temples are now being restored. Such revived Kang Wang cults will no doubt take on their own identities, based on a combination of new and old traditions. What matters for us as historians, I think, is that none of the stories told about Kang Wang are the same. The villages I visited in Ji'an were mostly less than 30 miles from Ji'an city; some were within walking distance of each other across fields. Yet the local understandings of who and what Kang Wang was or is were all different. To find such variety in such proximity is nothing new, of course. But such differences between traditions separated only by tens of miles or tens of years are easily ignored when one is looking from the vantage point of a Western library hundreds of years later, thousands of miles away.

I found Liang Hongsheng, Professor of History in Nanchang at Jiangxi shifan daxue, and head of a local history research station, after Professor Kenneth Dean had mentioned his name to me. Because of his interest in local history, he has well-established local contacts, most importantly with the director of the Ji'an museum, but also with heads of local libraries, and with the county and township administrators that have an interest in preserving what is left of Song, Yuan, and Ming culture in their own areas. Before we could travel to Ji'an from Nanchang, a train journey of several hours, a certain amount of formalities had to be undertaken. Since there are no official links between my institution and Jiangxi shifan daxue, I needed the recommendation of someone at one of the bigger universities before Liang was allowed to embark on a research trip with me. But once my status had been confirmed, we were free to travel to the countryside. Museum Director Gao accompanied us, and he guided us from one village to the next. There seems to be a resurgence of interest in local history, and local scholars are a great resource. Do tap into it!

