

# 1963

*From the early 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party employed activist cadres and mass campaigns to limit or eradicate local religious practices. Whatever progress had been made on this terrain was seriously challenged by a massive revival of popular religion that occurred in the wake of the famine resulting from the Great Leap Forward (GLF), during which an estimated thirty million people died. Spurred by Mao Zedong's concerns about the political effects of the liberalising reforms introduced to repair the economic damage caused by the GLF, in February 1963, the Party leadership launched the Four Clean-Ups Campaign, also known as the Socialist Education Movement, which targeted corruption and embezzlement by rural cadres. In the cities, this was paralleled by the Five Antis Campaign, which targeted corruption and theft on the part of officials, along with speculation, extravagance and waste, poor coordination, and bureaucratism. The two campaigns soon broadened into movements to root out the 'three evils' of capitalism, feudalism, and extravagance. Work teams dispatched by the Party between 1963 and 1966 as part of these movements discovered ample evidence of a resurgence of popular religion among both workers in the cities and peasants in the countryside.*

# Gods, Ghosts, and Workers: ‘Feudal Superstition’ and the Socialist Education Movement, 1963–1966

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In August 1963, He Tingfu, a worker in Wuchang, went with his brother to see his sick mother, who lived in a remote mountain village. He was outraged to learn that an elderly neighbour had brought a spirit medium to his mother’s house to exorcise the evil spirit that was supposedly causing her illness. Tingfu refused to allow the ritual, but his brother, also a worker, scolded him, saying: ‘Why bother? It’s enough that we don’t believe in spirit mediums.’ Tingfu thereupon wrote to the *Beijing Workers’ Daily* (北京工人日报) to ask why ‘feudal superstition’ had returned to such a high level, fourteen years after liberation.<sup>1</sup> The editor curtly denied there was any such resurgence and went on to criticise the attitude of Tingfu’s brother:

To not believe in superstition is insufficient. We must also take the lead in doing away with it ... We workers have our destiny in our hands. We employ different kinds of machinery and harness water, fire, electricity—elements with which people in the past were not familiar ... It would hardly be a joke if we once again asked spirit mediums to ward off evil spirits and cure diseases or consulted fortune-tellers about our future weal and woe.<sup>2</sup>

Workers, in other words, had a special responsibility to combat feudal superstition, given their higher level of scientific knowledge.

The denial of the claim that feudal superstition was on the increase would have surprised Party leaders, even though public admissions to that effect were rare. Unusually, the Guangzhou United Front Bureau noted in late 1962 that ‘religious thinking has grown owing to the economic difficulties of recent years.’<sup>3</sup> In fact, the Great Leap Famine, in which up to thirty million people died, had led to a massive revival of popular religion, the scale of which would gradually become apparent as work teams (工作队) were sent into the countryside between 1963 and 1966 as part of the Socialist Education Movement (SEM). The SEM originated in September 1962 when Mao Zedong warned the Central Committee to ‘never forget

class struggle' (千万不要忘记阶级斗争). Mao had become concerned that the liberalising reforms introduced in the wake of the famine were leading to 'revisionism' (修正主义).<sup>4</sup> In February 1963, this concern was cemented in the form of the 'Four Clean-Ups' (四清) campaign, which targeted corruption and embezzlement by rural cadres, who were, in effect, being made to carry the can for the famine. It was paralleled in the cities by the 'Five Antis' (五反) campaign, which targeted corruption and theft on the part of officials, along with speculation, extravagance and waste, poor coordination, and bureaucratism.<sup>5</sup>

The two campaigns remained distinct, but both broadened into movements to root out the 'three evils' of capitalism, feudalism, and extravagance. The work teams were initially under the tight control of provincial and county-level Party organisations and comprised a majority of Party and government officials, along with graduates, students, and white-collar workers from the towns. Local cadres were the targets of the SEM, and the work teams increasingly mobilised the 'poor and lower-middle peasants' to criticise them and advance their 'class education' (阶级教育).<sup>6</sup> From September 1964, the SEM entered its most intensive phase, as a purge of more than one million grassroots cadres began, and, from January 1965, the Five Antis merged into the Four Clean-Ups.<sup>7</sup> The reports of the SEM work teams provide rich evidence of feudal superstition as practised by cadres, in particular, and the masses in general.<sup>8</sup> The reports express alarm at the extent to which temple reconstruction, extravagant temple festivals, and lavish marriage and funeral rituals had revived in the wake of the famine. In the Handan mining region of Hebei Province, for example, the temples where miners prayed to the mine god for protection before 1949 had all been restored. At the Xiabojian coalmine, 1,370 yuan had been spent repairing the temple, and the Party secretary was criticised for organising three feasts to celebrate the completion of this work.<sup>9</sup>

### Anatomy of Feudal Superstition

Feudal superstition encompassed the entire field of popular religion, though it could extend to include certain nonreligious activities such as extravagant feasting or gambling.<sup>10</sup> Constitutionally, the Government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) recognised freedom of religion, but applied it only to five 'world' religions—Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism—which met the criteria of 'modern' religion by having institutionalised structures, canonical scriptures, a liturgy,

trained clergy, and national representative associations.<sup>11</sup> The religion of the majority of the Chinese people failed to meet these criteria, since it was essentially local in character and family-centred, rooted in ancestor worship, networks of temple cults and festivals, veneration of a rich array of gods, and belief in spirit possession, divination, and loosely defined notions of karmic retribution, fate, reincarnation, and demonic threat.<sup>12</sup>

The official condemnation of feudal superstition comprised the following elements. First, it was a backward mode of thought that reflected a lack of understanding of science and rationality and that encouraged recourse to invisible entities to explain the world and to offer protection against its vagaries. Second, feudal superstition was seen as a social arena in which the masses were hoodwinked and exploited by unscrupulous practitioners such as spirit mediums, fortune-tellers, geomancers, and religious professionals such as lay Daoist priests (道士) and Buddhist monks. Such people, it was said, traded on the ignorance, credulity, and fatalism of the populace. Third, the central role played by spirit mediums in diagnosing and curing illness was extremely dangerous to the health of the population. Fourth, the tradition of extravagant weddings and funerals, along with the money spent on worship of gods, ghosts and ancestors, brought financial hardship to families. Fifth, feudal superstition had an adverse effect on the wider economy, since events such as temple fairs, pilgrimages, or searches for miraculous cures took people away from the collective and undermined production. It also led to corruption, since officials sought to cover up illicit expenditure. Finally, superstition gave rise to rumours that were often politically destabilising, and it was in this regard that the connection with class enemies was made. Many of these elements of critique could be traced back to Confucian elites in the imperial era and to the vigorous attack on feudal superstition that had been launched by the Nationalist government from 1928 to 1931.<sup>13</sup>

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) saw the eradication of religion and superstition as a long-term task, the key to which lay in carrying out 'ideological education among the masses so as to raise their consciousness and help them do away with them self-consciously'.<sup>14</sup> In the early years, Party ideologists condemned the use of administrative methods to extirpate the two and, although they seldom referred to Soviet antireligious policy publicly, they consciously distanced themselves from it.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the famine, policy towards the officially recognised religions became more repressive. A key event was the Seventh National Conference on Religious Work, which met from December to January

1963, hot on the heels of the Tenth Plenum of the Central Committee, which had endorsed Mao's injunction to never forget class struggle. The Seventh Conference issued a report, the leitmotiv of which was that reactionaries were now using religion as a cover to sabotage progress towards socialism. In the preface to the document, the Religious Affairs Bureau declared: 'Reactionaries brazenly wrap themselves in the garb of religion in order to attack the Party; landlords, rich peasants and others use the revival of religion that is taking place to bring about restoration of the old regime.'<sup>16</sup> The conference put forward a host of policies designed to combat this danger, including a proposal for 'regular education in scientific knowledge and atheism among the people.'<sup>17</sup>

The reference to atheism (无神论) was something of an innovation in official ideology. Through the 1950s, the CCP had made little effort to promote Soviet-style 'scientific' atheism (still less the militant atheism of the 1920s and 1930s), although atheism was a requirement of Party membership. The content of atheist propaganda as it had developed within the European Marxist movement was hardly suited to China, since it related primarily to Christianity and concentrated on debunking the idea of a transcendent creator God and discrediting the Bible, as well as on lambasting the historical links between the churches and the ruling classes. China had its own tradition of materialist and rationalist philosophy, exemplified by the Han Dynasty scientist and philosopher Wang Chong (27 – ca. 100 CE), but the content of 'atheist' propaganda directed at workers and peasants during the SEM bore no relation to this tradition, barely rising above ritual denunciation of religion and superstition as tools of the class enemy. Significantly, the distinction between 'religion' (宗教, *zongjiao*) and 'superstition' (迷信, *mixin*), which had hitherto been sustained, came under increasing challenge, with references to *zongjiao mixin* proliferating. Typical of the new hardline discourse was the warning by the Shanghai Association for the Dissemination of Science and Technology in 1965 that 'in recent years under conditions of complicated class struggle, superstitious thinking in Shanghai has undergone a resurgence, with the five black categories using it to carry out wrecking [破坏运动].'<sup>18</sup>

Chinless Ghosts, Fortune-Tellers, and Demon Hunters

By the time the SEM found its stride, the agricultural and industrial economies were recovering briskly from the famine, yet the public mood

remained anxious—an anxiety that, in 1962, was compounded by the expectation that Chiang Kai-shek would launch a full-scale attack on the mainland and by the sharp deterioration in relations with the Soviet Union. Grassroots anxieties were projected into a spate of rumours of the supernatural that circulated in Shanghai in 1963. Women textile workers were too scared to leave the mills at night because they believed chinless ghosts—so-called stiff-corpse ghosts (僵屍鬼)—were waiting to catch them as they trudged home. This kind of zombie, whose soul had not been properly separated from its body through the correct performance of funeral rites, seemed to mirror the fate of the famine victims. Memories of the famine were still vivid, and the ghost stories attest to a sense that social control of the dead was failing, and that the boundary between the human and the supernatural world had become more permeable.<sup>19</sup> And since, as James Watson puts it, ‘the world and the social structure of the living have meaning only through manipulation and preservation of the dead’, the failure to properly deal with the famine dead appeared to be reflected in the ascendancy of chaotic spirits.<sup>20</sup>

It was in this context that some factory administrators decided to step up work to combat superstition. At the No. 9 Textile Mill in Shanghai, a group of nine women was asked why they thought the famine had occurred. Thirty-nine-year-old Wang Jinxiu said: ‘During the past years there have been an awful lot of natural disasters—first we hear of floods, then of droughts, then of hailstorms, then of whirlwinds. This is all because people no longer believe enough in Buddha.’<sup>21</sup> Three different opinions emerged. The first, shared by six of the women, was that the disasters were sent by Buddha. The second, expressed by the youngest worker, Chen Huicong, was that bodhisattvas (菩薩) did not exist and the famine was a natural disaster. The third opinion, expressed by two women, was that both sides were partly right. As a worker named Ding Alin put it: ‘We cannot not believe in the bodhisattvas, but nor can we believe in them fully. If we say there are no bodhisattvas, how do we explain thunder, rain, hail, and the whirlwind that comes from heaven?’ In response to the discussion, the cadres arranged lectures to explain these phenomena.

A specific target of the SEM work teams was fortune-telling. In times of uncertainty, people seek guidance and spiritual comfort from those believed to be skilled at reading signs that reveal what fate has in store for them. At a rubber factory in Handan, Hebei Province, the work team discovered that Party member Wang Xinsong had returned to his native village to become the apprentice to a master in divination.<sup>22</sup> He copied

out 12 *gua* (divinatory symbols), procured some bamboo slips (used in temples for divination), read a book on physiognomy, and then returned to the factory to set up shop as a fortune-teller. No less a figure than the deputy director consulted him and was told by Wang: 'Your nose is crooked, which means you have suffered since childhood and will never be able to count on another person.' The director replied: 'You are completely right.' Thereafter, more than 70 percent of the 127 employees, including ten of the twenty-eight members of the CCP, had their fortunes told by Wang. At the No. 12 Wireless Factory in Shanghai, a discussion on fortune-telling was organised among a work group of thirteen women and one man.<sup>23</sup> All said they consulted fortune-tellers regularly on such matters as marriage and divorce, whether they would give birth to sons, and whether they should change jobs. Told by the work team that they were being cheated by fortune-tellers, some became irate: 'If the CCP does not believe in superstition, why was the Prime Minister of Ceylon taken to the Jade Buddha Temple when he visited Shanghai?' 'The CCP advocates freedom of religion, so why is it against fortune-telling?'

The state healthcare system had developed slowly during the 1950s, but, with the financial retrenchment that came after the famine, services were cut back. Ordinary folk, who had used the biomedicine and herbal remedies on offer in local clinics, had not stopped using the services of spirit mediums, who were capable of drawing down spirits to defeat the demons that caused illness. Following the reduction in state healthcare provision, their services were in ever-greater demand. In the community around the Nantong coalmine, near Chongqing, there were ten notorious *guanhuapo* (观花婆) (a local type of female spirit medium), who were said to have 'run wild' since 1962. One woman, who had practised before 1949 and who had been put under administrative control (管制) during the 1950s, resumed performing exorcisms as a 'sideline occupation' when the economy liberalised in the early 1960s. Her fame spread far and wide, and soon 120 people were seeking her services each day, some coming by bus and sedan chair from as far as Guizhou across the provincial border.<sup>24</sup> In Taishan County, Guangdong Province, the SEM work teams launched an anti-superstition campaign in a brigade that lived by fishing, where 70 percent of the population was reputed to believe in gods and ghosts.<sup>25</sup> Attention focused on an influential male spirit medium, who was subjected to a denunciation meeting in the course of which some locals called for his execution. A variety of opinions was expressed about spirit mediums. Some said spirit mediums might be illiterate, but they nevertheless had

the power to summon spirits and expel demons. Others said gods existed but demons no longer existed because the spirit medium had caught them all. Yet others opined that the presence of the CCP meant there were no longer demons but, without the Party, demons would return.

As the SEM radicalised from the autumn of 1964, the work teams' emphasis on class enemies and on the need to have faith in Chairman Mao intensified. In June 1965, in Dingzhuan Village in Ji County, Hebei Province, the work team urged villagers to 'abolish' (取消) their gods by burning or throwing images of them into a pit and to replace them with pictures of Chairman Mao.<sup>26</sup> Among twenty-nine women workers, twenty were said to have a good attitude towards the campaign, five were neutral, and four were hostile. During New Year in 1965, a campaign was launched in Chongqing to change customs and habits (移风易俗的春节). Zhang Xiuying, a woman worker at the city's cement factory, was interviewed: 'My mother used to believe in gods (信神), but we lived in beggary. Now we have abandoned our belief and are living a better life thanks to the Party and Chairman Mao.'<sup>27</sup> She went on to say that making sacrifices to the gods was a tool used by class enemies to fool the people. Another member of her family added that in the old society he had been 'fooled by a landlord' into believing that 'poverty is my fate', and he used to pray to the gods for better wages and for his children not to be sick. Now, however, he had learned from the CCP that the 'bodhisattvas are nonsense conjured up by capitalists and landlords'. This emphasis on deceit and trickery was perhaps the most powerful weapon of persuasion in the armoury of the work teams.

### Overcoming Superstition?

It would not be unreasonable to infer that the work teams were engaged in mass indoctrination. Even if we assume that Zhang Xiuying was saying what she was expected to say, it is unlikely she could think outside the framework of official ideology and establish conceptual ground from which to critique the statements she was making. In general, however, the above reports do not suggest that indoctrination is the term that best characterises the relationship between the work teams and working people. First, the format chosen by the work teams was that of the discussion group, and the reports of the debates show that individuals disagreed with one another and that some did not hesitate to oppose the line promoted by the team. The general impression is one of individuals facing a sharp

intellectual challenge to what had hitherto been taken-for-granted knowledge and genuinely wrestling with the critique of supernatural belief with which they were confronted. Second, the participants had some control over the agenda of these discussions, even if it was only to turn rather abstract propaganda about the nonexistence of supernatural entities into debate about identifiable individuals and professions, and about practical problems of health, marriage, jobs, and poverty. Incidentally, although the work teams assumed that women workers were more captive to feudal superstition than their male counterparts, they operated on the assumption that women were capable of liberating themselves from backward thinking.

Does the evidence of workers' ongoing belief in higher supernatural entities make nonsense of the claim of the editor of *Beijing Workers' Daily* that workers, by dint of their exposure to modern technology and scientific knowledge, were destined to rise above feudal superstition? To some extent, certainly. There was, after all, a huge revival of religious belief throughout Chinese society during the reform era. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the impact of the state-backed project of ideological and coercive secularisation. Regardless of the baroque excesses of Mao worship, belief in supernatural entities came under intense and sustained assault. No worker could be unaware that to be a religious devotee was, in some degree, to deviate from the officially approved model of a class-conscious proletarian. Nevertheless, in the long term, more corrosive of religious belief than the *Sturm und Drang* political campaigns of the Mao era were processes of economic, social, and cultural modernisation that served to dis-embed religious beliefs and practices from a body of shared local knowledge. Modernity certainly does not leave an ineluctable decline in religious belief in its wake, but it does change the nature of that belief, making it more a matter of contention and choice. And, for workers in the Mao era, especially those who were physically cut off from the rural cultures into which they had been born, assumptions about the power of invisible entities ceased to be what the philosopher Charles Taylor calls 'facts of life about the world'.<sup>28</sup> It would probably be too strong to claim that at this stage of historical development the acceptance or rejection of invisible entities had become a matter of personal choice for workers; but values and orientations that had once gone unexamined and unchallenged were now exposed to sharp contestation not only from the ideological apparatuses of the Party-State, but also from scepticism on the part of fellow workers. And, as He Tingfu's

thoughtful letter attests, for a growing number of workers, it was a badge of pride to cast off feudal superstition and embrace the model of a rational individual and class-conscious worker.