Renao (Heat-noise), Deities’ Efficacy, and Temple Festivals in Central and Southern Hebei Province

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Abstract:

There is a tradition of holding temple festivals in villages in central and southern Hebei Province. This tradition was once suspended after the establishment of P.R.C., but it revived and thrived after the reform and opening-up. Temple festivals are a kind of renao (热闹, heat-noise) events in rural life, and the organizers of temple festivals pursue the effect of renao as much as possible. Renao is a popular life condition welcomed by people; meanwhile, it can be regarded as an important exterior indicator of the efficacy of deities. Hence holding temple festivals and make renao at them provides an opportunity not only for people to experience and enjoy renao, but to acknowledge, publicize, and even produce the efficacy of deities. These sacred and secular rewards can partly account for the enduring resilience and vitality of the local tradition of holding temple festivals.

Key Words: Temple festivals, Renao, Efficacy, Folk religion, Central and Southern Hebei Province

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1. INTRODUCTION

In rural areas of Hebei Province, especially in the plain of central and southern Hebei Province, there is a tradition of holding temple festivals which is usually called by local people "guo miaohui" (过庙会) or "guo miao" (过庙), “guo hui" (过会) for short. These temple festivals are usually organized by people within a village and worship baohu shen (保护神 the patron god) in village temples, which is one type of Chinese religious festivals. Although they have multiple functions in people’s life, most researchers agree that temple festivals are essentially a kind of folk religious activity. For example, Liu (2005) argues that temple festivals in rural and urban China are one of the basic practical modes of folk religion of Han Chinese, and Overmyer (2009:9) contends “the whole of Chinese local religion had its own forms of organization, structure and inner logic, forms that are particularly apparent in village temple festival.” Similarly, Zhao (2002:192) also points out temple festivals in Hebei Province grew out of activities of worshipping deities.

In rural areas of Hebei Province, holding temple festivals has a long history. According to his statistics on the records in gazetteers in the Republic of China, Zhao (2002:198) finds the number of temple festivals in Hebei Province was numerous, for example, there were 102 temple festivals annually in Wu’an County, 46 annually in Zhangbei County, and all temple festivals in Wuqiao County totally took more than 130 days every year. After the founding of People’s Republic of China, the tradition of holding temple festivals was once banned as a superstitious activity. However after China’s reform and opening up, the tradition of holding temple festivals has been picked up again, and various temple festivals thrived in the region.

Currently, temple festivals in the rural area of central and southern Hebei Province are still very prosperous. For example, there are a total of 1,719 village temple festivals in Xingtai Municipality according to incomplete statistics in 2009.1 Similarly, case studies in the neighboring Shijiazhuang Municipality also support this point. According to my investigation in Changxin Village, Fanzhuang Village, and Linzi Village of Zhao County in 2009, people in each village participated in an average of 47 temple festivals held in the surrounding district, which means almost one festival per week.

Facing this phenomenon, one may ask why there are so many temple festivals in central and southern Hebei Province, or in other words, why people in this region are so interested in holding and participating in temple festivals.

This seems to be a common topic. All the research on temple festivals in North China has, more or less, touched this question. Existing responses can be roughly divided into two categories.

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1 Xingtai Municipality has two cities (one is county-level city) and 15 counties and there are 191 towns and townships in total in this municipality. To facilitate businessmen and vendors attending temple festivals, some people print a kind of temple festivals directory which indicates the location and time of nearly all village temple festivals within a certain territory. In my field work in 2009, I got a temple festivals directory of Xingtai Municipality from a vendor and then made the statistics based on this directory.
One answers the question through functional analysis of the temple festivals. Temple festivals in China are considered to have various functions (Wu 1988, quoted in Tam 2004: 820). Likewise, researchers who focus on temple festivals in North China also point out temple festivals can serve some secular ends like entertainment and trade as well as praying to gods, and in turn imply that these functions are probably the causes of temple festivals (Li [1933]2005; C.K.Yang 1961; Gamble 1968; Zhao 2002; Litzinger 1996). Village temple festivals, especially large-scale ones located in traffic hubs, do have these functions, however, it is noteworthy that the functions of temple festivals do not necessarily equate with the motivations and objectives of the organizers of temple festivals. This structural functionalist perspective reduces the role of religion as an integral part of society and tends to ignore the logic of religion itself. The other point of view is to consider temple festivals as struggle arenas, in which different actors strive to achieve their respective goals. For example, Duara (1988) thinks holding village temple festivals in North China is an important means for local elites to acquire authority. Based on his study on Dragon Tablet Festival in Fanzhuang Village in Zhao County, Yue (2007) contends temple festivals are a stage for various actors in rural area to display their powers and to contest against with each other. This perspective can reveal the diversity of pursuits among various festival participants and complex social relations based on temple festivals; however, a shortcoming is the religious factor is only seen as a tool to pursue secular goals and does not receive its due attention.

Obviously, these two approaches both easily lead to the reductionist analysis of religion. Meanwhile, such research does not really include the voices of the festival organizers and the ordinary believers at festivals. Based on resources collected in field work, this paper tries to seek the reason that local people are interested in holding and participating temple festivals through directly analyzing the ideas of the organizers and participants of temple festivals in central and southern Hebei Province, at the same time, this paper views temple festivals as an integral part of local folk religious life and seeks the answer within the logics of Chinese folk religion.

2. TEMPLE FESTIVALS IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN HEBEI PROVINCE

Central and southern Hebei Province is not a clearly-defined region; in this paper it mainly refers to the present-day Shijiazhuang and Xingtai Municipalities in Hebei Province, especially Zhao County and Ningjin County on the border of these two municipalities. This region is located in the heart of the North China Plain. Presently, tens of thousands of villages are scattered in this vast fertile land that includes three cities and dozens of county seats. Although settlements emerged in this region as early as 4,000 to 5,000 years ago, the villages have been ruined and rebuilt again and again because of frequent warfare and natural disasters, so most of the present villages can only trace their histories to the beginning of the Ming dynasty (Cong 1995: 61-67; Wang 2002). These villages share the similar natural environment, historical background, dialect and customs as well as religious life.
In this region, there are many active believers devoted to local folk religion in most villages. These believers call themselves and are called by others *xinghao de* (行好的, literally means people who do goodness), which can distinguish them from those believers devoted to other religions such as Catholicism and *mentu hui* (门徒会, the Sect of Disciples).

Apart from worshipping certain deities at home, a villager, as a *xinghao de*, need take part in some collective activities such as holding village temple festivals and making pilgrimage, which are usually organized by all the *xinghao de* in a village.

In central and southern Hebei Province, the number of temples in different villages is not the same, and the number of temple festivals is different too. But generally, a village temple holds one temple festival a year, lasting three to five days each time.

Before the temple festival, *xinghao de* have a lot of preparation work to do, such as buying and making offerings, building *shenpeng* (神棚, the deity shed), and booking opera troupes, etc. When the festival starts, *xinghao de* first invite and welcome the major deity as well as the accompanying deities to the deity shed; this process is generally called *qingshen* (请神, inviting deities). For this purpose, the statues or portraits of deities are moved into the deity shed from the village temple or the *xinghao de* house where the deities have been residing and placed on the altar. In addition, some certain symbolic religious rituals should be conducted, such as chanting scriptures greeting and welcoming the deities.

In some villages, a grand parade will be held in the process of welcoming the major deity to the deity shed, in which, besides the *xinghao de*, some performance teams are invited or hired to join in, such as stilt performing, *yangge* dance, brass band, running donkey dance, and comic performances, etc. The whole parade carrying the sedan chair with the portrait of the major deity will traverse through the main streets in the village, attracting the eyes of villagers along the path. Compared to the major deity, inviting the accompanying deities is relatively simple. Their portraits will be uniformly hung in the deity shed after the ceremony of welcoming the major deity, incense sticks and candles will be burnt in front of each accompanying deity, and then *xinghao de* will chant the individual greeting scriptures of each deity. Sometimes there will be too many accompanying deities, and then one or two general scriptures will be chanted.

After the deities have all been invited into the deity shed, the next stage is *jishen* (祭神, worshipping deities). Then, those *xinghao de* in charge of scripture chanting will stay in the shed, conduct various rituals, and chant corresponding scriptures according to certain specified procedures. All *xinghao de* and ordinary villagers who believe in local folk religion send family members to the deity shed to burn incense to the deities, present offerings, and donate some *youqian* (油钱, oil money), praying for blessings of the deities. Villagers who have *shi* (事, problems) will definitely use this opportunity to pray for help from the deities. This kind of appeal can be directly communicated to the deities. For example, a villager makes a vow in front of the altar hoping the deities will help him or her solve a problem, and if the problem is successfully solved, the villager will come back to redeem his or her vow at the temple festival.
held the next year. Most often, people communicate with the deities through incense heads. An xiangtou (香头 incense head) is a local appellation of a spirit medium in this region. An incense head is also a xinghao de, but he or she has some special capability that an ordinary xinghao de does not have. An incense head can cure diseases, solve problems, predict fortunes, choose auspicious dates, and even practice geomancy for villagers with the help of deities. Some incense heads from the host village or neighboring villages provide the service of kangxiang (看香 observing incense) in the deity shed. Besides believers from the host village, the xinghao de associations from neighboring villages also send representatives to participate in the temple festival.

During the festival, in addition to the worshipping activities in the deity shed, there are often local operas, huahui (花会 folk performing arts), circus performances, and modern singing and dancing performances outside the deity shed. These are believed to entertain the deities but they also attract many villagers to come, even some non-believers. As people gather from all around, itinerant traders and business people also come. They set up stalls and outlets selling commodities, forming a temporary fair around the deity shed. Villagers from adjacent villages also come to the festival. The believers can go to the deity shed to pray to the deities for blessing, while non-believers can see the operas, do some shopping, or just enjoy the excitement. These scenes will last three to five days until the stage of songshen (送神 seeing off the deities), that is, sending the deities back to where they came from. Similar to welcoming deities, the portraits or statues of deities will be carried back to the village temples or the xinghao de houses; in addition, certain ceremonies will be held, such as chanting corresponding scriptures and holding the chushui (出水) ceremony to give food to the roaming ghosts and spirits. “Seeing off the deities” indicates the end of a temple festival for the year.

There is still work to be done after the temple festival, such as cleaning up festival articles. The incense burners and candle holders should be packed up for the next use. The deity shed will be dismantled and the spot cleaned up. Financial personnel are responsible to check income and expenses and post a balance sheet on the main street in the village, announcing the financial status of the temple festival to the public. Also, the xinghao de leaders will burn a balance sheet in front of the major deity, which means reporting the income and expenditure of the festival to the deities.

A village temple festival is obviously a collective religious activity, so it is always held by the xinghao de association of a village. The leader of an association is generally called the huizhang (会长 association chairman), key members are generally called huitou or huishou (会头 or 会首 association heads), under association heads there are some lianshou (敛首) who are responsible for fundraising as well as accounting, and some cuishou (催首) who run errands.

Funds for the temple festival are raised by xinghao de. Because the land owned by the temples was confiscated by the government in the land reform in early 1950s, now the temples don’t have any income. In order to hold the annual temple festivals, xinghao de associations might either go to the villagers to raise money before the festival, or ask association heads to offer the
money in advance, which will be repaid using the oil money and donations received at the festivals. Sometimes, oil money and donations received are not enough to compensate the expense of the festivals, and then the gap is shared by xinghao de, especially association heads. For example, to hold the temple festival in 2009, 12 association heads chipped in 600 RMB, which accounted for 80% of the total expenditure in Linzi Village, Zhao County, while in the neighboring Changxin Village, the association chairman donated 1800 RMB for the temple festival in 2009. To local people, donating money to sponsor village temple festivals is one sign of xinghao de, because those villagers who don’t believe in folk religion don’t sponsor village temple festivals.

3. FESTIVALS AS SOCIAL EVENTS OF RENAO

From the above description, we can see that all the temple festivals in central and southern Hebei Province are held by local folk religious believers, namely xinghao de. Then, how do xinghao de consider the question of why they hold so many temple festivals? During field work, I found the pursuit of renao was mentioned by xinghao de frequently but often overlooked. For example, the pursuit of renao can be found in the words of xinghao de as festival organizers, such as:

Mr. Shi, the chairman of the xinghao de association in Fanzhuang Village of Zhao County tells: “What do I pursue? I am an association head. As an association head for 18 years, I should let others feel our festival is renao. If so, I will have no regret even if I resign the association chairman several years later. This is what I want to pursue.”

Mrs. Wang, a female leader of the xinghao de association in Linzi Village of Zhao County says: “The purpose for us to hold the festival is just to make renao (renao yixia 热闹一下).”

An association head in Gou’an Village of Zhao County states: “In the past we organize our temple festival to pray to the deity for no hail. But now no young villagers care if it is hailing or not. In the past, hailing means no harvest for villagers. But now villagers do not take hailing as a serious issue, and what’s more, even if it hails, now [the government agency] can launch rockets to dispel it. Then why do we still hold our festival? That is because we just utilize the date and the tradition to hold a festival, while the real purpose is to make renao.”

Therefore it is evident that renao is an important factor at temple festivals valued by xinghao de in this region. As a concept to describe a crowded and noisy social condition with lively atmosphere, the term renao is so common to Chinese people that it is often overlooked and is usually considered self-evident. Thus, with a few exceptions (e.g., Pan 1993; Weller 1994; Chau 2006), the term renao seldom draws researchers’ attention although it is frequently mentioned by festival organizers and participants. But it is hard to gainsay that all temple festivals in central and southern Hebei Province are full of renao.

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2 The word renao can be used as both a noun and an adjective in Chinese. The noun may be translated “heat-noise” and the adjective may be translated “hot-noisy”.

Pan (1993) contends *renao* is a special social psychological phenomenon of Chinese people, which is also one of the embodiments of Chinese cultural values, and it is always embodied at certain social events. In addition, he points out the three basic elements of *renao* are crowd, activity, and sound. Obviously, all temple festivals in rural central and southern Hebei Province have these three basic elements of *renao*, and they are *renao* social events in rural life.

First of all, temple festivals, no matter what type, all lead to massive crowds. Despite that the population of each village in North China Plain is usually between 2,000 and 5,000, after the reform and opening up, family becomes the basic unit of daily production and life as the building of the household contract responsibility system. At the same time, the political movements which were popular before the reform and opening up appear rarely. So, temple festivals are one of the few occasions for massive population aggregation. A village temple festival often attracts not only most of the host village’s population, but also the residents in nearby villages, mobile vendors, and outside opera troupes, circuses, etc. So the size of the crowd far exceeds the population of the host village itself. And a temple festival held at a pilgrimage center always attracts tens of thousands of people from far and near. Hence temple festivals always result in the gathering of massive crowds.

Secondly, there are a wide range of activities during temple festivals. Besides the greetings, burning incense, prostrations, and commodity dealings that can be seen in daily life, there are lots of other activities such as: religious rituals, processions, setting off firecrackers and fireworks, beating drums and gongs, chanting scriptures, singing operas, and so on. So it is obvious that both the number and the content of activities during temple festivals are more than those in daily life.

Again, these activities produce a wide variety of sounds, such as the sound of drums and gongs, the sound of firecrackers, the sound of chanting scriptures, transportation noise, etc. These voices intertwine together and engender the pleasant noise of *renao*.

Therefore, temple festivals held by *xinghao de* in central and southern Hebei Province possess the three basic elements of *renao*: crowd, activity, and sound, and they can be seen as a kind of *renao* social events in rural life.

In fact, in central and southern Hebei Province, *renao* is not only one of the attributes of temple festivals, but also one of the goals that the festival organizers, namely *xinghao de*, seek to achieve. All *xinghao de* hope their festivals are *renao*. Festival organizers use various methods to achieve the effect of *renao* at temple festivals.

Firstly, entertainment is offered to attract as many people as possible. In central and southern Hebei Province, a village temple festival is one of the few occasions that provides collective entertainment such as local opera and folk performing arts. In this region, singing opera is an integral part of a village temple festival and has in turn become one of the important marks of it.

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3 Other occasions include fairs, weddings, and funerals.
Seeing opera at a temple festival has become a custom in this region, and whenever a village holds a temple festival, the villagers invite their friends and relatives who live in other communities to come see opera. According to a villager in Shuangmiao Village of Zhao County, some families in his village have not had enough left to eat after the temple festival because all the food was used to feast the guests who came to see the opera. Although there are various opinions about the opera at temple festivals, it is obvious that a temple festival can attract more people through the opera, which no doubt helps to create the ambiance of renao.\(^4\)

The quantity and quality of opera is usually the indicator of whether a temple festival is good or not. Sometimes, xinghao de in neighboring villages compete with each other over the opera at their respective festivals. According to one elder’s memory, once the temple festival held in Zhentou Village in the suburb of Shijiazhuang City was extolled for its renao by people in neighboring villages. To outperform them, the nearby Jianliang Village deliberately prepared ten stages of opera during their temple festival, because Zhentou Village provided nine stages of opera at their temple festival (Liu 1984).

Singing opera is an indispensable part of a village temple festival. In 2003, the temple festival organizers in Fanzhuang Village, Zhao County, decided not to provide an opera due to short funds. This decision caused turbulence in the community with the villagers’ comments and gossip. Later, under pressure from a famous incense head in the village, the organizers managed to invite an opera troupe. The frequent discussion of this event even several years later indicates the importance of opera at the temple festival. When I asked why she insisted on inviting an opera troupe during my field work in this village in 2009, the female incense head said: “The absence of opera is not allowed, and an opera troupe must be invited in any case. Why? Our temple festival cannot lack the opera no matter whether the opera is good or not. If it lacks the opera, the temple festival is not complete and not renao, which is definitely not good.”

Apart from the local opera, the folk performing arts, called wanyi er (玩意儿) by local people, are another kind of popular entertainment which can strengthen the effect of renao at temple festivals. In this region, every village usually has one or two folk performing art teams. These teams consist of ordinary villagers and perform some folk arts descended from their ancestors such as dance with fan drums, yangge, lion dance, martial arts, comic shows, etc. These folk performing art teams are popular and are invited by the organizers of village temple festivals. During the temple festivals, most village temple associations set up a panel that is in charge of inviting and serving the folk performing art teams from other villages. For instance, before their

\(^4\) Many researchers contend the fundamental aim of opera at festivals is to entertain gods, and in the second place, it is to entertain people. For example, C.K. Yang (1961: 84) thinks “the play was considered an offering to the patron god,” Hanson (1990: 74) contends that the primary aim of plays is for gods, and Barbara Ward (1985: 165) comments on Hong Kong theater: “Unlike the secular shows, the primary object of the festival performance is neither commercial nor artistic; it is to please a deity or deities.” In addition, Martin Yang ([1948]1998) also finds that singing opera at festivals is the most important method to express people’s gratitude to gods in Taitou Village of Shandong Province.
temple festival in 2010, the association heads in Zhongcao Village of Ningjin County dispatched people to send and post invitation letters in nearby villages inviting folk performing art teams, and the invitation letter said: “To make our festival in this year more renao, and to make the ambience of happiness and harmony, we sincerely invite the folk performing art teams to attend our festival……” So obviously, one important aim of inviting folk performing art teams is to produce the ambiance of renao at festivals.

Nowadays, some modern song and dance shows also appear at temple festivals, which are especially popular with young villagers. In Linzi Village of Zhao County, the Association of Goddess could not afford an opera troupe during the 2009 festival because of the lack of funds, but the association heads invited a song and dance troupe and offered a popular song and dance show. This made the association heads feel proud and content; as one female association head said: “Although we had not much money, we managed to provide a song and dance show, which brought about renao to co-villagers.” So even if a modern song and dance show replaced the traditional opera, in the eyes of the festival organizers it has the same function as opera, because it can also attract people and create the ambiance of renao.

Secondly, incense heads are invited to offer on-the-spot religious services at temple festivals. In central and southern Hebei Province, there are usually several incense heads in every village. These incense heads are believed to communicate with deities and can provide villagers with some religious services like divination, prediction, healing, and so on. During temple festivals, the organizers always invite some incense heads to go to the deity sheds and offer religious services, whether or not they are members of a temple association. So it is common to find several incense heads serving villagers through “observing incense” in the deity sheds with groups of onlookers around them.

In this region, the ability of incense head varies from one person to another. Some incense heads with strong abilities can acquire high reputation and attract a lot of clients, and some clients even come from adjacent counties and prefectures. Likewise, these incense heads with strong abilities are popular with festival organizers because their appearances at temple festivals can attract clients from villages far and near, which, apart from bringing more donations, can obviously make the festivals more renao.

Thirdly, the organizers of a temple festival would form mutual-visiting relationships with other xinghao de associations. In central and southern Hebei Province, when xinghao de in a village hold their festival, the xinghao de in neighboring villages will attend the festival in an organized manner.

This relationship of visiting each other’s festival is formed purposely. When the xinghao de in a village hold the village temple festival, they send advance invitations to xinghao de associations in nearby villages, which indicate the date of their festival according to the lunar calendar. When the time comes, all the invited xinghao de associations delegate a team to attend the festival.
Such a team of festivalgoers usually consists of several to tens of members of a xinghao de association, and most of them are female. They usually attend the festival by tractor or tricycle. Before leaving their own village, they gather at the village temple (if any) and worship their deities and the God of Route in order to pray for a safe journey. As the team of festivalgoers arrives at the host village, they line up with somebody holding their flags and somebody holding some gifts like incense, spiritual money, and offerings, and then walk to the deity shed with some of them playing musical instruments. As they approach the deity shed, the hosts send a group of people beating drums and gongs to welcome them. After the greeting ceremony, festivalgoers walk into the deity shed, offer their gifts, and donate some oil money, then they chant scriptures in front of the main deities. The hosts would provide a free lunch. After lunch, festivalgoers chant scriptures again and then go home.

This kind of festivalgoing is mutual. The xinghao de association in a village has the obligation to visit the festivals of those xinghao de who attended their festival. For example, 49 xinghao de associations from other villages visited the temple festival of Changxin Village in 2009, which indicated that the xinghao de association of Changxin Village should attend the temple festivals of these 49 xinghao de associations. So the hosts of a temple festival always set up an accounting counter at the festival to record the names of the xinghao de associations from other villages and the amount of oil money donated by them, so they can revisit these festivals. Not revisiting other’s festivals is not only a discourtesy, but also results in the termination of the mutual-visiting relationship.

This mutual visiting of festivals in central and southern Hebei Province has attracted some researchers’ attention. For example, Zhao (2003: 180-185) contends it may strengthen the connection between villages. Given the religious heterogeneity in villages in this region (e.g., the existence of villagers who believe in Catholicism, Falun Gong, and the Sect of Disciples) and that the mutual-visiting relations are mainly confined to xinghao de, the prime effect of this mutual visiting is for xinghao de in different village to support each other through intensifying the ambiance of renao at each other’s festivals. Because these village temple festivals cannot attract as many pilgrims as some big-scale temple festivals of pilgrimage centers, this mutual visiting can guarantee xinghao de from the neighboring villages will attend the village temple festival, which can add people, activities, and sounds to the temple festival and in turn strengthen the ambiance of renao.

4. HUMANS, DEITIES, AND RENO AO AT TEMPLE FESTIVALS

From the above description, it is clear that renao is one of the important goals that xinghao de wish to achieve and pursue with all their efforts when they hold temple festivals. So why do they pursue this goal? This question is quite complex, because people have many different motivations to organize or participate in temple festivals. Next, I will give some preliminary analyses from two aspects.
Firstly, *renao* is a kind of social living condition welcomed by Chinese people, so *xinghao de* in central and southern Hebei Province hope to make *renao* when they hold temple festivals.

Chinese people love *renao* (Pan 1993), and this point has also deeply influenced Chinese folk religion. For instance, Weller (1994) calls Chinese religion in Taiwan “hot and noisy religion,” because “any successful large event in Taiwan, from a market to a ritual, provides plenty of heat and noise – it should be packed with people, chaotically boisterous, loud with different voices, and clashingly colorful” (Weller 1994: 118). At the same time, he finds that getting the heat and noise, like being granted favors, is one of the motivations that cause people to go to temples (Weller 1994: 128). Similarly, Chau (2006) finds that *honghuo* (红火), the colloquial equivalent of the Mandarin word *renao*, is the most positive, desirable mode of sociality in Shaanbei. In other words, *honghuo* is a state of being that is most desirable in some social events such as funeral and wedding banquets or temple festivals. Thus in Shaanbei, as in other Chinese cultural settings, a social event such as a temple festival, a wedding, a business opening ceremony, etc, that is not *renao* will be considered a failure and will bring shame to its host (Chau 2006: 150), hence the host always pursue the effect of *renao* as much as possible.

To the participants, temple festivals provide occasions when they can produce and experience *honghuo*, and in turn, according to the “sociothermic theory of sociality” that he put forwards, can experience the red-hot sociality and construct and affirm the relationships between people and the deities (Chau 2006: 147-168). So in sum, these two researchers reveal that Chinese folk religious activities provide occasions when people (participants) can experience and enjoy *renao*.

Likewise, people in central and southern Hebei Province love *renao*. By holding a temple festival, *xinghao de* not only worship their deities openly and collectively, but also attract people by offering various entertainment activities and other methods, which makes a temple festival a noisy and lively social event in rural life and creates an opportunity for people to experience a hot-noisy time. Therefore, just as the words of some *xinghao de* cited before showed, one purpose of a temple festival is to offer an opportunity for people to enjoy *renao*.

The *renao* scenes at temple festivals are welcomed by local people. About this point, an official report of Ding County in the 1960s gives a vivid description:

> Peasants have dense interest in temple festivals, and they see temple festivals as their own holidays. During a temple festival, every family wrap dumplings and glutinous rice dumplings, invite their relatives, and go to the temple festival to see *renao* with all family members in their best dresses. Generally, schools and production teams give a day or a half day off. If production teams do not give them a day off, peasants will ask for leave spontaneously. No one can stop them.\(^5\)

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\(^5\) “Seize the position of cultural propaganda at temple festivals: the investigation report of temple festivals in Ding County and some suggestions to improve the cultural propaganda at temple festivals,” 1963. Kept in the Archives of Hebei Province (file no. 1030-5-324).
In addition to *xinghao de* and ordinary villagers who believe in folk religion, even some people who have other religious beliefs such as Catholics and the adherents of the Sect of Disciples visit temple festivals. A *xinghao de* told me that these people came to the festivals neither for burning incense nor for worshipping deities, but just to watch the *renao*.⁶

Therefore, in central and southern Hebei Province, a temple festival, on the one hand, is one of the few opportunities that can create *renao* in village life; on the other hand, *renao* at a temple festival is welcomed by people. Hence, all *xinghao de* try to create the effect of *renao* with all their efforts when they hold temple festivals.

Secondly, as most temple festivals were founded initially for worshipping deities, *renao* at temple festivals is considered to be created purposely to make the deities happy. In central and southern Hebei Province, deities are thought to love *renao*. Once, a *xinghao de* from Changxin Village, Zhao County, in order to show me how efficacious a deity in his village was, told me a story he experienced himself. Once he was inserting a pipe into his well to pump water out to irrigate his land. When the pipe reached a certain depth, it could not go deeper; but at that time the pipe didn’t reach the water in the well so the water could not be pumped out. With all efforts tried without result, he prayed to *Jiang Shifu* (姜师傅 Master Jiang), one commonly worshipped deity in his village, that, if the pipe could reach the water, he would present one bottle of liquor, two packs of biscuits, and ask a man who was capable of *suona* (唢呐 trumpet) to perform several pieces. After he prayed, he tried to insert the pipe again and succeeded. Then he went to thank Master Jiang as he had prayed. After hearing the story, I was very curious why he specially promised to ask a villager to play *suona* for the deity in his pray. He answered that it was not because the deity loved music, but the deity loved *renao*.

Why do deities love *renao*? One possible reason is that *renao* might have close connection with deities’ efficacious power, which touches the core issue of Chinese folk beliefs. To Chinese folk religious believers, no matter how different the deities they worship are, all hope the deities they worship are efficacious, or to put it another way, “they only worship those efficacious gods” (Hansen 1990: 75). But the degree of efficacy of different deities is different (Chen 2008). Some deities are considered to be very efficacious, or in other words, they have big efficacious power; some deities are said to be less efficacious, or with small efficacious power. What’s more, even the efficacy of the same deity might change as time and space changes (Chen 2008). A deity might be very efficacious at the beginning but less efficacious later, or the other way around; or a deity might be very efficacious at a certain place or temple, but not efficacious at all in other places or temples. These features, together with the diversity of deities in the Chinese folk religious pantheon, make it very important for worshippers to distinguish whether a deity is efficacious.

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⁶ Martin Yang ([1948]1998: 160) finds that in Taitou Village, Shandong Province, Christian families didn’t join the village collective ceremonies, nor did they sponsor opera singing, but they would go to watch the opera during temple festivals.
Generally speaking, there are two ways to distinguish the efficacy of a deity. One is direct experience, e.g., a believer’s direct experience of the miracle, for instance, a disease was cured or a problem was settled after praying to a deity, or to know other people’s direct experience of efficacy through miracle tales. The other way is indirect sense, namely, to distinguish whether a deity is efficacious by some exterior indicators, such as number of worshippers in the temple, prosperity of incense fire, amount of donations, etc. This is because, as Hansen (1990: 127) has discovered, “without miracles, no supporters would come to the temple or attend the annual festival dedicated to a specific deity,” so people tend to believe that “the one [god] which is most chosen is most ling (efficacious)” (Feuchtwang 2001: 143). Therefore, a crowd of worshippers, many donations, and prosperous incense fire indicate the efficacy of a deity (Chen 2008). Eventually all these indicators can be defined into the concept of renao. So, renao can be regarded as an important exterior indicator that distinguishes whether a deity is efficacious or not. For instance, a renao temple indicates there are many believers coming to burn incense and worship, which shows deities in the temple are efficacious, otherwise, there would not be so many worshippers. On the contrary, a temple with few visitors, which means the temple is not renao, indicates that deities in that temple are not efficacious. So, based on his observation in Taiwan, Weller (1994:119) concludes that “temples with no heat and noise are on their way to disappearing.”

Renao can be an important indicator to check whether a deity is efficacious. Thus, on the one hand, believers can tell whether a deity is efficacious by the degree of renao of the temple or temple festival dedicated to the deity, so as to further choose whether to worship the deity. On the other hand, this makes it possible to show or acknowledge the efficacy of a deity through the making of renao (Chen 2008). The latter is completely in line with the argument that many researchers propose that deities and people depend mutually on each other. For example, Durkheim (1965: 388) states that “of course men would be unable to live without gods, but, on the other hand, the gods would die if their cult were not rendered.” This mutually dependent relationship between people and deities is the same in the realm of Chinese religion, for instance, Hansen (1990: 48) argues that “as men needed protection and miracles, deities needed people to acknowledge and reward them.” Actually, in practice, holding temple festivals to create renao is an important means for people to acknowledge and reward the deities. For example, Chau (2006: 138) points out “how well the festival is organized……reflects on the capability and magical power of the deity.”

Xinghao de in central and southern Hebei Province have the same wish: that the deities they worship are efficacious. So temple festivals are occasions to hold some renao activities to show their deities are efficacious. As discussed above, temple festivals are a concentrated display of the religious life of xinghao de and are also renao social events in rural life.

In central and southern Hebei Province, the major activities of temple festivals are presenting offerings and chanting scriptures openly and collectively, while believers can take the chance to worship deities and redeem vows. Most temple festivals are held once a year, when all
believers can gather together. Thus temple festivals become important opportunities to show whether the deities are efficacious. The more hot-noisy the festival and the more participants there are, the more efficacious the deities worshipped at the festival. So, in the countryside in central and southern Hebei Province, the degree of renao becomes the most direct indicator verifying efficacious power of the deities. Therefore, to make renao through temple festivals becomes an important mechanism for xinghao de to acknowledge, show, or even “produce” the efficacious power of deities. This is one of the reasons that xinghao de go in for temple festivals and organizers of temple festivals particularly care about the renao degree.

Creating renao through temple festivals to acknowledge and demonstrate deities’ efficacy can be proved by cases of some village temple festivals. In some villages in this region, the reason to hold temple festivals is just because of the efficacy of deities residing in these temples. By holding festivals, the efficacy of the deities can be further acknowledged and publicized.

In the renowned social investigation conducted in Ding County of Hebei Province in the 1920s (Li [1933]2005), researchers found a story about the origin of a village temple festival. Historically Yaoliuzhuang Village had no temple festival. In the winter of 1927, the village head suggested cutting down a big willow growing in the west of the village and selling it for money to operate a school, but this suggestion was not taken due to opposition. In the next year, the villagers began to hold the temple festival for the big willow. There were three different versions about the origin of the temple festival. The first one is that a villager said that he had a dream in which a deity told him that the bark of the big willow could heal all kinds of illnesses. After that, many villagers burned incense and prostrated themselves before the big willow, asking it to cure their illnesses. A sick man drank the infusion made from the bark of the willow and his illness was cured, so the villagers began to hold a temple festival for the big willow. The second version is that a villager could not move suddenly when he went by the big willow one day and stood there for a day. Another villager took him home and asked the reason. The villager replied that he once said some irreverent words about not believing in gods, so it must be the punishment of gods through the manifestation of the divinity of the big willow. So the villagers began to hold a temple festival for the big willow after they heard this story. The third version is that a sick man from the neighboring Wuji County prostrated himself to the big willow when he went by it and prayed to it. As a result, his illness was cured. This sick man told the story to the villagers and the villagers decided to hold a temple festival for the big willow. No matter which version was true, Yaoliuzhuang Village began its temple festival for the willow from the second to the fifth days of the third lunar month in 1928. All the households in the village chipped in 150 yuan to invite an opera troupe, build a deity shed, and set up the altar. In 1929 when the researchers conducted their investigation in this village, the

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7 The temple festival in Dongwang Village, Ding County, which is recorded in Tinhshien: A Social Survey, can explain this issue. “There is a City God Temple in Dongwang Village, located north to south. According to local people, this temple was once very efficacious. When villagers got diseases or problems that couldn’t be solved, they would go to the temple to burn incense and pray, and finally the diseases were cured and problems solved, so some people advocated holding a temple festival.” (see Li [1933]2005: 429)
temple festival was quite *renao*. Several days before the temple festival, all the villagers inside the village began to invite their friends and relatives from other villages and feast them with good foods. When the temple festival began, farmers stopped working and students did not go to school so they could attend the temple festival. The temple festival also attracted many hawkers, and it attracted about 4,000 festivalgoers every day from a dozen villages nearby. Some of the festivalgoers came to pray to the willow god, so the shed around the big willow was crowded with people. Many people prayed to be cured of illnesses, and many people brought plaques with words like “always responds whenever is requested,” “very efficacious,” and so on (Li [1933] 2005: 428-429).

In this story, villagers in Yaoliuzhuang Village decided to hold a temple festival after the first manifestation of the efficacious power of the willow (god), and within two years it attracted more than 10,000 festivalgoers during the four days festival and spread the fame of the willow (god) to more than ten villages. When Overmyer (2009: 110, n16) quotes this case, he points out that the story of Yaoliuzhuang Village “is a precious example of how a temple festival might start, even in the absence of a temple.” But I am more interested in the relationship between the temple festival, *renao* at the festival, and the deity’s efficacy in this case. Although there were different stories about the origin of the temple festival, there is no doubt that the reason to hold the temple festival is the manifestation of the efficacy of the willow (god). Hence we can infer that an important motivation, if not all the motivation, for villagers to hold the festival is to acknowledge and publicize the efficacious power of the willow (god). More importantly, this aim was realized. Because, like all other temple festivals in central and southern Hebei Province, the temple festival in Yaoliuzhuang Village was also a social event of *renao* and attracted a large number of villagers from far and near, as a result, not only all residents in Yaoliuzhuang Village, but the villagers from adjacent villages knew the efficacy of the willow (god) through the holding of the temple festival. So this case indicates that the efficacious power of the willow (god) was confirmed and publicized through the holding of the temple festival after its first manifestation.

In summary, temple festivals are a kind of *renao* social event in the rural areas of central and southern Hebei Province. The ambiance of *renao* at temple festivals is welcomed by local people; meanwhile, it is believed that deities worshipped by *xinghao de* also love the ambiance of *renao* at festivals, because it can be regarded as the exterior indicator of deities’ efficacy. Through holding temple festivals, organizers not only acknowledge and publicize the efficacious power of deities (sometimes the capability of incense heads), but also let more people share efficacy tales (or experiences).

5. CONCLUSION

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8 The description on the temple festival in Yaoliuzhuang Village, Ding County, was adapted from “the temple festival in Yaoliuzhuang” in *Tinhsien: A Social Survey*, see Li ([1933]2005: 428-429). The translation makes a reference to Overmyer (2009: 109-110). Gamble (1968: 412-413) also records the story of this temple festival in the name of “the fair in Yao Lu Chuang.”
In central and southern Hebei Province, holding and participating in temple festivals is an important aspect of the religious life of xinghao de, namely those villagers who believe in local folk religion. The tradition of holding temple festivals was once suspended after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, but it was revived after the reform and opening-up.

Although all the existing studies on the village temple festivals in North China consider them as a kind of religious phenomena, most of them emphasized the social, economic, and entertainment functions, and too little explicit attention was given to the religious significance of these festivals. What’s more, the voice of ordinary folk religious believers (xinghao de, in central and southern Hebei Province) is rarely heard in those studies. Based on the field investigation on the temple festivals in central and southern Hebei Province, this paper examines why xinghao de are enthusiastic for holding and participating in temple festivals from the perspective of renao, a special psychological phenomenon of Chinese people. One finding is that temple festivals themselves are hot-noisy social events in rural life, at the same time, xinghao de who organize temple festivals always try to pursue the renao effect as much as possible. The pursuit of renao is because, on the one hand, renao is a social living condition loved by Chinese people; on the other hand, from the perspective of mutual dependence of deities and human beings, renao at temple festivals can be regarded as an exterior indicator judging whether deities are efficacious or not, so xinghao de create the ambiance of renao to acknowledge, demonstrate, or even “produce” efficacy of deities by holding temple festivals.

When I highlight the relationship between the pursuit of renao and the enthusiasm of xinghao de in holding and participating in temple festivals, I don’t intend to ignore other functions of temple festivals or their appeal for xinghao de. On the contrary, my analysis from the perspective of renao can be seen as a supplement to the existing studies. At the same time, my study seeks to reveal that temple festivals in central and southern Hebei Province, as a kind of renao events, can provide local people with both secular and divine rewards. This point, to some extent, can account for local people’s enthusiasm for temple festivals and the long life of the tradition of holding temple festivals.

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