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Healing the Community:

The Grassroots Confucian Activism of Wang Fengyi's *Shanrendao*, circa 1880 to 1910

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in East Asian Studies

by

Dongshi Zhang

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2024

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Healing the Community:

The Grassroots Confucian Activism of Wang Fengyi's *Shanrendao*, circa 1880 to 1910

by

Dongshi Zhang

Master of Arts in East Asian Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Andrea S. Goldman, Chair

Shanrendao, or The Way of Goodness, founded by Wang Fengyi (1864-1938), an illiterate peasant from Chaoyang County, Liaoning Province, is one of many hundreds of religious cults in Northeastern China that proliferated in the late Qing. Defined by Prasenjit Duara and Shao Yong as either a redemptive society or a secret society, both designations fail to capture *Shanrendao*'s identity prior to its absorption into the *Wangguo daode hui* (Universal Moral Society) in 1928.

Through close reading of Volume 3 of the *Shanrendao* text, *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu* (*The Words and Deeds of Wang Fengyi*), this study explores the formative stage of Fengyi's doctrines and activism to improve moral customs, circa 1890-1909. Frustrated by a perceived prevalence of moral corruption and desperate to make sense of a seemingly collapsing society, Fengyi borrowed from local customs and reworked Neo-Confucian morality to craft both a metaphysical explanation for the social disorder and a morality-healing technique to ameliorate the ills of his rural neighbors. As Fengyi began to institutionalize his redemptive activism, he

incurred the watchful eye of the state; he further faced financial constraints that limited his initiatives. These twin constraints pushed him to join forces with the more socially exalted *Daodehui*, lending *Shanrendao* both greater legitimacy and economic resources; as revealed through later volumes in *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, this came at the cost of the founder's agency.

Using *Shanrendao* as a case study, this project reveals the circulation of socio-cultural repertoires across classes. Fengyi, by weaving together vernacularized Neo-Confucian ethics and grassroots practices, constructed his metaphysical approach to redeeming the socio-moral order; as his reputation grew within Northeast China, his pastiche of *Shanrendao* doctrines came to be reintroduced to elites and officials, demonstrating both the persistence and the malleability of "traditional" culture in a modernizing world.

The thesis of Dongshi Zhang is approved.

Richard Von Glahn

Katsuya Hirano

Andrea S. Goldman, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

For my father, whose “wood” personality always collides with mine, but whose stubbornness for justice is also a life-long lesson for me to learn.

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I must also thank Professor Richard Von Glahn, as it is he who expanded my interest to economic history, enabling me to see a broader picture of dynastic transitions. It was also his work that allowed me to envision the connection between popular religion, economic statistics, and institutional changes. Knowledge from his courses, along with conversations during office hours, sharpened my observations and offered more prisms through which to view Chinese history.

I am also grateful to my parents, who have inquired after my progress on a daily basis. Their encouragement for me to pursue my interests and ideals is simply too valuable for an international student majoring in the humanities. There is so much more I could say about my father’s approach to *Shanrendao* that I am afraid I have not been able to address in this thesis; I envision telling those stories in the future.

Lastly, I want to thank my friends, William, Euphymia, Bene, and Chumeng, for accompanying through this tiring journey during the summer. Of course, to my dear old friends Grant and Cyrus, you have had a lasting presence in my thoughts this whole time, too. I wish the best for all of us, no matter where we end up.

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Introduction

Upon learning about my recent research on Chinese popular religion, my father occasionally nudged me in our conversation: "Why don't you learn more about *Shanrendao*? It is a good belief." Since high school, he has been encouraging me to embrace Christianity, viewing this Western religion as beneficial in many ways. Combining this with his reading of Buddhist texts, I always thought this reflected his preference for institutional religion over diffused religion, a strong inclination among Chinese intellectuals, at least nominally.[1] This sudden mention of *Shanrendao*, however, brought my memory back to the year before I came to the U.S. for Catholic high school, when he was driving me home from a tutoring session. I forgot how he started the conversation, but he introduced to me a framework called, "The Five Elements of Personality" (*wuxing xing* 五行性). Perhaps drawn by a curiosity similar to the fascination with zodiac signs, or MBTI[2] personality for a more contemporary audience, I was fascinated by this new theory that could be used to interpret both my own personality and my social relationships with others. At the time, I was unaware that this "Five Elements" framework was derived from the central doctrine of *Shanrendao* teachings.

"According to my observation," I remember my father stating, "both you and I belong to the element of Wood." This might explain my rebellious personality against superiors, especially teachers and students from upper grades. I don't remember other descriptions my father narrated, so I here provide an explanatory description by Hsuan Hua, founder of the City of Ten Thousand

[1] As defined by C. K. Yang, this sort of popular religion has been categorized as "diffused religion," in contrast to the institutionalized religion commonly imagined as Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, or Islam. See Daniel L. Overmyer, *Local Religion in North China in the Twentieth Century the Structure and Organization of Community Rituals and Beliefs* (Leiden, Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2009), 4.

[2] MBTI, or The Myers–Briggs Type Indicator, employs four binary indicators (Extraversion-Introversion, Sensing-Intuition, Thinking-Feeling, and Judging-Perceving) to categorize people into 16 types of personalities, concluded through a set of self-reported questionnaires.

Buddhas in Talmage, California: "People belonging to the *Yin* wood element, contradict defiantly against superiors, likely unfilial, prideful, feeling others inferior to themselves: 'What is so good about them?' Enjoys grabbing all the power, so-called 'stubborn, tough, hard, contradict, collide.'" If anyone who knows me finds such descriptions apt, perhaps my father's diagnosis is accurate. The remnants of his description of the other four *Yin* elements, including all five *Yang* counterparts, are rather vague in my current recollection. All I can remember is that the *Yin* Water Element people are gentle, but their soft tempers constantly make others think they are wishy-washy. "Your mother might belong to this category, and you inherited some of her features; therefore, you have a better temper and are more compassionate than I am," he said. I remember these parts of the conversation because I took them as compliments.

I do not recall him ever mentioning those "Five Elements of Personalities" again prior to my leaving home for high school. Later, during one of my summers home, which year I can no longer recall, I brought up the subject in a casual conversation: "How come you never talked about *wuxing xing* with me after that one time?" He paused for a moment, then responded with a smirk: "I thought you were not interested."

Just Another Illicit Cult

Intrigued by this memory, I started reviewing existing materials on *Shanrendao*, only to discover the suppression of its materials by the People's Republic of China (PRC) over the past decade. On 6 May 2016, the Beijing Municipal Radio and Television Bureau published an article on its website, reporting on an ongoing campaign, aiming to carry out a rectifying campaign against the publishing market. The obvious campaign had a clear target in mind, as the only book mentioned by name for banning was one belonging to a secret society named *Shanrendao* (the way of

goodness 善人道):

> [The Administration also] organized city-owned publishing houses and wholesale markets for books to investigate and deal with publications relevant to the secret society of *Shanrendao*, altogether confiscating 612 books including *Wang Fengyi Speaking about Life and Harmony in Family Makes Everything Prosperous: Six Steps for Family Education*, and demanding Beijing Yanshan Publishing House to cancel the ISBN for these books.

The goal of this campaign, the article elaborates, is to "enhance the legal investigation over the cultural market." As a result, the Cultural Committees of the Chaoyang District, Miyun District, Fengtai District, Dongcheng District, and Shijingshan District have all launched effective means to "strengthen supervision [over the publishing market] on all dimensions" and "timely troubleshoot publishing markets' security hazard. The Dongcheng and Shijingshan districts, specifically, "thoroughly investigated publications harmful for their political or vulgar content." Presumably, this city-scale campaign over the publication market was "successful."

Such proscriptions against the publication market, especially the *Shanrendao* texts, are echoed in subsequent years in pronouncements and local campaigns by nationwide regional governments, from 2016 to 2019. The rhetoric used in these official announcements gradually shifted from "strengthening regulation over *Shanrendao* publications" to "giving heavy blows to illicit cults" who "advocated illegal activities of 'spiritual cultivation' (灵修) and illegally organized various forms of publications."[3] The supervision was also extended to online

[3] www.tjjn.gov.cn/zwgk/zcwj/qjwj/ggz100/202012/t20201208_4679445.html

materials: “Censor and cleanse online reading materials or messages related to illicit cults, semi-illicit cults, vicious *qigong* practices, and other superstitious beliefs; once landing on verified sources, [we will] confiscate the books and investigate the [involved] individuals.”[4] Clearly, the current PRC authorities have deemed *Shanrendao* to be an illicit cult deserving of nationwide suppression, with a particular focus on the organization’s publications.

In actuality, however, these proscriptions also show that suppression is not that easy; the mention of investigating online sources in the announcement made by the regional government of Fanchang District in 2018 points to the active circulation of *Shanrendao* texts on the internet across the globe. The extant materials scattered across diverse websites, including the electronic texts elaborating on Wang Fengyi’s ideas and videos preaching *Shanrendao* doctrines, show the prevalent spread of the Society’s doctrines beyond physical publications. Nonetheless, the termination of E-book downloading and reading services on one Morality Book website based in mainland China, with the website owner explicitly stating this decision was a response to the state’s new regulation in 2016, reflects the tangible aftermath of the state’s crackdown. Moreover, journalistic reports, including online debates as to whether *Shanrendao* constitutes an illicit cult or a beneficial belief, indicate the subject has become a dynamic locus for public opinion and not just a matter of top-down state repression-versus-grassroots social practices. Indeed, the online controversy over *Shanrendao* erupted prior to the state’s decisive prohibition, suggesting that the official pronouncement was possibly a catch-up intervention by the state. Critics and defenders write online posts, though most of them only tell a one-sided story. Behind all these social controversies surrounding *Shanrendao* is a discrete socio-political tension that

[4] “监测清理网上涉邪教、类邪教、有害功法及其他迷信邪教内容物及有害信息，线索落地、收书查人。” www.fanchang.gov.cn/openness/public/6604831/17253261.html

has not gained much scholarly attention.

Despite the juxtaposition of *Shanrendao* with various *qigong* organizations and illicit cults emerging during the *qigong* fever in the 1980s in these official pronouncements, the history of the Society can be traced back to the late 19th century, a timeline similar to the emergence of *Yiguandao* 一贯道 [The Persistent Way], another religious society that became the subject of proscription in both the Nationalist and PRC regimes.[5] The suppression of secret societies under the PRC's anti-superstitious doctrines after 1949 suggests it was only reasonable for the state to prohibit *Shanrendao*'s spread once it gained public attention.

Still, both my personal encounter of the Society's impacts within my household and the abundant textual sources available online indicate *Shanrendao*'s continuous percolation throughout contemporary Chinese society, with audiences from diverse social classes still echoing the Society's spiritual and physical salvational messages. On the one hand, this social phenomenon marks the failure of previous Chinese states' suppression attempts, casting doubt on the effectiveness of the outcome of the current regime's new campaigns. On the other hand, my personal encounters in daily life have spurred me to investigate the charm of this religious cult. What exactly is the appeal of the Society such that it has maintained its attraction for over a century and across the tumultuous and rapidly changing social, political, and historical contexts of modern China? When my father justified his reasoning for reading *Shanrendao* texts, he said: "Although it might

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[5] Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), 288-289.

appear superstitious occasionally, most of Wang Fengyi's points actually make sense." What, I wanted to know, is making sense for my father? As an attempt to understand a piece of my family's mentality, and with an interest in questioning the meaning of the current PRC state's renewed suppressing attitude against private cultural institutions in contemporary Chinese society, I start delving deeply into the historical timeline of *Shanrendao* to understand its origins and what it meant to people in the past.

A General Timeline for *Shanrendao*

Shanrendao developed out of the teachings of Wang Fengyi 王凤仪 (1864–1937) in Northeastern China during the late Qing and Republican eras; the organization has been characterized as both a redemptive society and a secret society by earlier scholarship. The founder of *Shanrendao*, Wang Fengyi, born in a village in Chaoyang County, Liaoning Province, in 1864, spent his early life as a farmer and laborer. Inspired by neo-Confucian values and other blended religiosities in the morality book (*shanshu* 善书) genre, he developed his spiritual healing doctrines, what I will call "morality healing," across the first four decades of his life. Other than performing morality healing in the Chaoyang region, starting in 1906 Wang further strengthened his social impact by establishing charitable schools for women (*nuzi yixue* 女子义学). The merging of his organization with the *Wanguo daodehui* (Universal Moral Society 万国道德会) in 1931, another syncretic cult initiated in Shandong Province, and the later division of Wang's branch from the *Wangguo daodehui* under the Japanese puppet regime of Manchukuo (established 1 March 1932), further colors later public perception of *Shanrendao*. Texts composed by one of Wang's disciples, Zhu Xuntian, indicate that some *Shanrendao* members sought to initiate New Villages (*xincun* 新村) with communal property, intertwining communist ideals (or, as Zhu himself notes,

invoking Kang Youwei's concept of "Great Harmony") with *Shanrendao* religiosity. The suppression of secret societies and anti-superstition campaigns conducted by the People's Republic of China (PRC) after 1949 seem to have halted the organization's growth in China proper, although some devotees relocated to Taiwan, where they established new branches. Economic reform beginning in the late 1970s created openings for the re-emergence of Wang Fengyi's teachings. However, as witnessed in various government pronouncements since 2016, another abrupt round of suppression superseded the state's earlier tolerance of the Society.

This lengthy timeline and the socio-political dynamics accompanying the Society's development cover a wide range of historical subjects: its institutionalizing process in the Republican period, its development under Manchukuo rule, its continued reformation in Northeastern China after Manchukuo's collapse, its post-49 fate and re-establishment of branches in Taiwan, and its reintroduction to mainland China during the *qigong* fever of the 1980s. However, as previous scholarship has already comprehensively addressed many of these institutional aspects of the Society, known by its other name *Wanguo daodehui*, rarely have scholars looked directly into its founder's early life and his development of *Shanrendao*'s central doctrines. In other words, earlier historians have generally overlooked the period of *Shanrendao* before its mass-scale institutionalization under the auspices of *Wangguo daodehui*. My research aims to understand Wang Fengyi's process of constructing *Shanrendao* as a reflection of the grassroots community in which his ideas first emerged. The outcome of this inquiry, I argue, will also shed new light on the seemingly convoluted image of *Shanrendao* in the existing scholarship. *Shanrendao*, I will show, developed out of a grassroots engagement with syncretic religious practices—including Confucian precepts—and local societal crises in Northeast China at the end of the Qing.

Secret Society or Redemptive Society?

Although the terms secret society and redemptive society are both largely descriptive, the Chinese and Anglophone scholarship on this religious movement have offered polarizing images of the Society's past. Shao Yong identifies *Shanrendao* as a secret society, whereas Prasenjit Duara categorizes it as a redemptive society.[6] Indeed, this is more than a difference in word choice; it reflects their fundamentally different attitudes to the role *Shanrendao* played (and continues to play) in Chinese society.

The Chinese literature treats *Shanrendao* as identical to *Wangguo daodehui*. *Collection of Historical Sources on Chinese Secret Societies* (*Zhongguo huidaomen shiliao jicheng* 中国会道门史料集成) organizes comprehensive records of nationwide secret societies by province, further subdivided by county. Each organization under different counties is recorded separately, even if they clearly share the same names. For *Shanrendao*, specifically, most of their branches in Northeastern China are listed as *Daodehui* (moral society) or *Wanguo daodehui*, indicating 1) awareness of these associations constituting larger-scale cross-regional organizations; and/or 2) the fragmented nature of this compilation. In explicating their formation, some of these branches of the Society trace back to their origins in Shandong Province, while others are recorded as founded by local leaders. Their demise also falls under different timelines, with some disbanded right after the collapse of Manchukuo in 1945, and others persisting until 1949 when the PRC outlawed such "superstitious" societies.

Shao Yong's research on Chinese secret societies constitutes more comprehensive

[6] Without offering any conclusive definition of *Shanrendao* at this time, I will use the capitalized term "Society" in reference to the organization based on Wang Fengyi's teachings.

research on specific secret societies spanning the Ming dynasty to the early PRC. His book *Chinese Secret Society,* published in 1997, represents the earliest systematic attention to *Shanrendao* by Chinese scholars. Also recognizing *Shanrendao* as continuous with *Wanguo daodehui*, Shao chronologically periodizes the secret society's development into four chapters, respectively, the warlord era, the early Republican era, the Anti-Japanese War period, and the post-war late Republican era up to 1949. Wang Fengyi's doctrines only appear briefly.[7] Citing *Wanguo daodehui*'s publication in 1938, which proclaimed explicit support for Japanese imperialism and encouraged overthrowing the Republican and Communist parties to restore peace, Shao Yong categorizes *Daodehui* as a traitorous secret society.[8] Records of certain branches secretly rescuing many Communist cadres from Japanese imprisonment between 1941 and 1945, in Shao's view, only constitute "special scenarios" and do not diminish the organization's essential characteristic as treasonable.[9]

A few other Chinese studies on *Shanrendao* and *Wanguo daodehui* are collected in *China's Recent Studies on Secret Societies* (*Zhongguo jindai mimi shehui yanjiu* 中国近代秘密社会研究). This 2016 edited collection, though compiled by Shao Yong, surprisingly includes relatively more diverse perspectives on the Society. Yu Ximin's article, "Studies on Northeastern Secret Societies in the Republican Era" (*Minguo shiqi dongbei huidaomen yanjiu* 民国时期东北会道门研究), provides a short account of the various Societies popular on the spatial-temporal scale of Republican Northeastern China, similar to Shao Yong's writing structure. The author's narrative of *Daodehui*, while identifying Wang Fengyi's "superstitious" doctrines as the core

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[7] Shao Yong 邵雍, *Zhongguo huidao men* 中国会道门 [Chinese secret societies] (Shanghai, China: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1997), 306-307.
[8] Shao Yong, *Zhongguo huidao men*, 382-385.
[9] Shao Yong, *Zhongguo huidao men*, 382-383.

value that transformed the organization into a secret society, also stresses its traitorous nature in the Manchukuo period.

Wang Fumei's "*Wangguo daodehui*'s Spread in Northeastern Regions" (*Wanguo daodehui zai dongbei diqu de chuanbo* 万国道德会在东北地区的传播), another article in the collection, statistically lays out the institutional conditions and transformations of *Wangguo daodehui*'s organizational structures throughout Northeastern China. Recognizing the patriarchal nature of Wang's teaching, despite the organization's seeming efforts to educate women, in essence, Wang concludes *Shanrendao*'s surface-level moral practices were meant to serve its immoral activities. Zhuang Ying, in "On Wang Fengyi's Thoughts" (*Lun Wang Fengyi de sixiang* 论王凤仪的思想), proposes a more positive evaluation of *Shanrendao* doctrines. Focusing on Wang Fengyi's ideas about women and familial relationships, Zhuang considers his views to represent positive progressive in patriarchal rural China, even though certain conservative mentalities inevitably persisted in the context of the late Qing and Republican eras.

Lastly, Yin Xi's essay, "*Wanguo daodehui*'s Spread in Taiwan" (万国道德会在台湾的传播), represents a shift from the pre-1949 activities of the Society to its developments in Taiwan after 1949. Utilizing *Cong Dongbei dao Taiwan: Wanguo daodehui xiangguan renwu fangwen jilu* (from Northeastern China to Taiwan: relevant interviews with adherents of the Universal Moral Society), a collection of oral accounts of *Wangguo daodehui* members escaping from Northeastern China to Taiwan, Yin notes the dominant status of Wang Fengyi's thoughts in the Taiwan branch. Yin considers the Society's expansion strategies, while completely different from those of its counterparts in mainland China, to have been more effective.

Although Zhuang Ying's study proposes a comparatively positive conclusion regarding

Shanrendao's image, Shao and other Chinese scholars' approaches to *Shanrendao* and other private organizations, especially those containing religious elements, are still mostly negative. Their perspectives both reaffirm a state-informed PRC attitude and justify the current ongoing suppression of the Society. Most online controversies deeming *Shanrendao* as superstitious and traitorous seem to follow Shao Yong's conclusion, demonstrating the impact of such scholarship well beyond the official level. Of course, this potentially raises a contradiction regarding the PRC state's previous tolerance from the 1980s through circa 2016, a question that I will not pursue here but might explore as a future project. Nonetheless, the avowed atheism of the Communist state is adopted by the Chinese scholarship, whether consciously or not. Therefore, this labeling of *Shanrendao* as a "secret society" is likely intertwined closely with the state's revolutionary vision of eliminating superstition from grassroots society.

The Anglophone scholarship, in contrast, mostly follows Prasenjit Duara's identification of *Shanrendao* and *Daode hui* as a redemptive society, that is, an association dedicated to the shared project "of saving both individuals and the world as a whole."[10] David Ownby's chapter in the second volume of *HdO Modern Chinese Religion II* identifies *Shanrendao* as a subcategory of *Wanguo daodehui*, a redemptive society established by Jiang Shoufeng in 1921 under the heavy influence of Kang Youwei's *Kongjiaohui* (孔教会 Confucian Teachings Society), with the Society's initial vision attempting to defend "spirit writing" as a "scientific practice," "condemn superstition," and "reestablish China's moral foundation." Jiang's death in the late 1920s led Du Yannian, a Heilongjiang businessman and philanthropist, to replace the vacuum by incorporating Wang Fengyi and his teachings into the core practice of *Wanguo*

[10] Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 93. Also cited in Duara's *Sovereignty and Authenticity,* 89-129; Shao Yong, *Zhongguo huidaomen*; Tan Songlin, ed., *Zhongguo mimishehui*, vol. 7.

daodehui.[11]

As Sébastien Billioud notes in the same volume, the redemptive societies in the late Qing and Republican eras functioned as a replacement for the suddenly-deceased "Confucian ritual and culture" that "left about 5 million traditionally educated literati" with no "ritual and organizational outlet for their values and identity."[12] These new social organizations, he maintains, "transmit the classical scriptural legacy" while adapting to "new, Western-inspired models of a 'religion.'"[13] David Palmer further recognizes *Wanguo daodehui* as a redemptive society that "maintained a strong Confucian identity," in contrast to the other redemptive societies that "derived from earlier syncretistic and millenarian traditions"[14] Parallel to Shao Yong's condemnation of *Daodehui*'s traitorous activities for receiving support from the Japanese colonial forces, Billioud stresses *Wanguo daodehui*'s rapid development under the Manchukuo puppet state due to the Japanese colonial vision for assimilating "all kinds of redemptive societies into its rhetoric of Eastern civilizations."[15] This narrative, however, contradicts certain *Shanrendao* texts that specify the restrictions imposed upon the Society under Manchukuo rule. Nor do they account for claims in PRC gazetteers that Wang Fengyi's son, Wang Guohua, was poisoned by the Japanese for refusing to cooperate with Manchukuo policies.[16]

Billioud's work also discusses the post-1949 condition of the redemptive society after its

[11] This narrative contradicts Shao Yong's interpretation regarding who replaced Jiang Shoufeng. In Shao's telling, it was Jiang Xizhang who replaced his father Jiang Shoufeng and fostered the integration of Wang Fengyi's beliefs into *Daodehui*; David Ownby's storyline has Du Yannian intervening and introducing Wang into the organization. See in Vincent Goossaert, Jan Kiely and John Lagerway, eds., *HdO Modern Chinese Religion II*, 1850-2015 (Leiden: Brill), 695-697.

[12] Here, Billioud is citing Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer's arguments. See Goossaert, Kiely, and Lagerway, eds., *HdO Modern Chinese Religion II*, 784.

[13] Goossaert, Kiely, and Lagerway, eds., *HdO Modern Chinese Religion II*, 784.

[14] Goossaert, Kiely, and Lagerway, eds., *HdO Modern Chinese Religion II*, 784.

[15] Goossaert, Kiely, and Lagerway, eds., *HdO Modern Chinese Religion II*, 785.

[16] *Chaoyang County Gazetteer* 朝阳县志 (Shenyang: Liaoning minzu chubanshe, 2003), 768.

reestablishment in Taiwan, noting the same collection of oral accounts Yin Xi utilizes, with one of the accounts exposing the presence of the Society in Jilin province around the time Billioud was writing his chapter until the "campaigns of repression against Falungong in the late 1990s" terminated its re-development.[17] At the same time, Billioud's mention of Falungong brings to mind the social phenomenon known as Qigong Fever, i.e., the rapid emergence of qigong 气功 organizations in the 1980s and 1990s. These possible associations reflect upon the significant transformation *Shanrendao* underwent in contemporary PRC China. Billioud further discusses the presence of a similar redemptive society in his own research on the Yidan xuetang (一耽学堂 Embracing unity study hall), a non-profit organization promoting Confucian classics and rituals, which also engages in the faith healing methods of redemptive societies such as *Shanrendao*. To Billioud, this evidence of Confucian revivalism in mainland China seems to indicate "an extremely favorable 'socio-political ecology' for the return of the pre-1949 redemptive societies," even as the recent suspension of *Shanrendao* organizations by the PRC government starting in 2016 points toward increasing state repression.

Despite my inclination to agree with Duara's identification of *Shanrendao* as a redemptive society, which I believe better captures the organization's characteristics, I find both the Chinese and Western scholarship inadequate for its equation of *Shanrendao* with *Wanguo daodehui.* The underlying assumption for this conflation stems from the scholarship's neglect of *Shanrendao*'s formative stage, when Wang Fengyi had not yet institutionalized his visions into a mass organization. It is in this stage, I argue, that Fengyi's narrated anecdotes can be used to reconstruct the vivid social-cultural landscape from which the ideas *Shanrendao* later

[17] Goossaert, Kiely, and Lagerway, eds., *HdO Modern Chinese Religion II*, 785-786.

encapsulated were originally drawn. This thesis, then, focuses on Wang Fengyi's early activist period in rural Northeastern China, circa 1880 to 1910. Latter-day labels such as secret society, illicit cult, or *qigong* organization fail to speak to the Society's draw for devotees in Fengyi's own times.

A Palimpsestual Primary Source

Among the various materials on *Shanrendao* and Wang Fengyi, I find one text especially promising for exploring the multiple facets of *Shanrendao* teachings. *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu* (A record of Wang Fengyi's words and deeds 王凤仪言行录), hereafter referred to as *Yanxing lu*, contains both systematic elaboration on *Shanrendao* doctrines and a colorful narrative of Fengyi's life stories. Divided into five volumes, the text spends the former two volumes explicating *Shanrendao*'s philosophical doctrines and the latter three volumes elaborating on Fengyi's biographical anecdotes. The first volume lists Fengyi's own quotes to clarify his visions step-by-step, while the second formulates these quotes into lengthier sections resembling speeches. The third volume focuses on Fengyi's early life, with attention to how he became enlightened to understanding the Way and how he initially applied his realizations in his local community. This part of the book is written to resemble *The Analects*, ventriloquizing Fengyi's own voice to narrate his past stories. The fourth volume temporally proceeds further to speak about his successful establishment of female charity schools across Northeastern China, but the narrative starts to incorporate stories about individuals who participated in the process in addition to Fengyi. The fifth volume focuses on the development of the Society after the merging of *Shanrendao* into *Wanguo daodehui*, which inevitably suppresses Fengyi's voices to a great extent. Not only are other members of *Daodehui* elaborated, but institutional information and statistics of the Society are also listed. Of the five volumes, the first and the third appear to be the

least processed, on the surface, at least, suggesting that they may serve as effective primary sources for reconstructing Fengyi's development of *Shanrendao*.

The complicated historical process by which *Yanxing lu* took form, unfortunately, compounds the difficulty of working with this text. At the end of the third volume of *Yanxing lu*, it is noted that the book was originally published under the title *Wang Fengyi Shanren yanxing lu* (A Record of the Words and Deeds of Wang Fengyi, the Virtuous Man 王凤仪善人言行录) in 1968 as an offprint, until an updated version retitled *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu* was published in 1976, which incorporates what is currently the second and the third volumes.

At the end of the book, Zheng Jiachun 郑嘉春(style name, Zidong 子东) is credited as the book's narrator, the voice behind each, "I heard Wang, the Virtuous Man, speak thus…" Zhang's life story is comprehensively introduced in the section titled, "Short Account of the Narrator [Zheng Jiachun]." Born in Benxi County of Liaoning Province in 1896, Zheng Jiachun started his own charity school for poor children in 1921. He transformed the school into a charity school for women in 1926, after becoming associated with Zhang Yaxuan, another key figure in the founding of *Shanrendao*. In 1930, he followed Wang Fengyi to Heilongjiang Province to study the Way, after which he became increasingly prominent in the *Shanrendao* organization. In 1946, he moved to Beiping with his wife and began preaching *Shanrendao* in the region over the subsequent years until his whole family relocated to Taiwan in 1948. Two years later, he was re-elected as the supervisor for the Taiwan branch of *Wanguo daodehui*, where he continued preaching the Way until his death in 1973.[18] Based on this timeline, we can assume that the first version of *Wang Fengyi shanren yanxing lu* was published in 1968 under his supervision, but the

[18] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 347-348.

updated version titled *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu* in 1976 is surely not his work.

Following this biography is "An Afterword," where a compiler named Zheng Gaojing 郑高静 supplements more details on Zheng Jiachun's last moments in his life, indicating that the publication was issued immediately following Zheng Jiachun's death.[19] While I can find no information regarding Zheng Gaojing's identity, it is reasonable to suspect that the individual was a relative of Zheng Jiachun due to the editor's apparent intimacy with Zheng's close friends and family, and possibly one of his children given their shared surname. Nonetheless, it is difficult to assess Zheng Gaojing's role in the 1976 publication.

The last section of the book is titled, "The Complete Story of Compiling and Editing" (编修始末), which provides a more thorough timeline regarding the various editions of the *Shanrendao* publication, though it exhibits minor discrepancies from the details listed above. Reaffirming the publication of *Wang Fengyi shanren yanxing lu* in 1968, the "Complete Story" clarifies the publication in 1976 was to be titled *Wang gong Fengyi yanxing lu* (Record of the Words and Deeds of the Gentleman Wang Fengyi), which compiled together *Wang Fengyi jiangdao xingxue lu* 王凤仪讲道兴学录 (A record of the virtuous Wang Fengyi's lectures and establishment of charitable schools), *Wang Fengyi shanren jiangdao chuanghui lu* 王凤仪善人讲道创会录（A record of the virtuous Wang Fengyi's lectures and creation of the society）, and *Wang Fengyi shanren xingdao shilu* 王凤仪善人行道实录（The true record of the virtuous Wang Fengyi's practice of the Way）; these three texts, respectively, correspond to the titles of volume 4, volume 5, and volume 3 of the full text. Note that the third volume, *Xingdao shilu*, the

19 "兹当先翁遗著付梓之际，谨缀数言，以志始末。" See *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 349.

major source for this study, was only added in the 1976 edition without any specified reasoning. To counter this edition's overdependence on oral accounts from Zheng Jiachun and other *Shanrendao* disciples, the editor also adds references from records by Zhu Yungong (also addressed as Zhu Xuntian, one of Wang Fengyi's close disciples who remained in mainland China after 1949), *Chengming lu* 诚明录 (A record of sincere understanding), and *Duxing lu* 笃行录 (A record of faithful practice) written by Wang Guohua, Wang Fengyi's son, which were both published in 1934.[20]

In the year of 1984, a newer version was updated to revise the texts' chronological order in accordance with Zhou Zhigen's 周知根 *Wang Fengyi luezhuan* 王凤仪略传 (An abbreviated chronicle of Wang Fengyi). Zhou's work, the editor writes, was essentially based on Zhu Xuntian's textual notes and, hence, was more accurate than the oral accounts by Zheng Jiachun.[21] The editor also argues that the earlier editions published before 1976 could not possibly have plagiarized the version published in 1984; furthermore, since the latter work utilizes sources from mainland China, it could not have plagiarized the texts published in Taiwan, and hence, the similarities between the narratives in two texts corroborate the historical validity of their descriptions.[22]

But contrary the clarification surrounding Zheng Gaojing's "signature," this editor, though copiously revealing the layered sources contributing to the newest edition of *Yanxing lu*

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[20] Wang Guohua, Wang Fengyi's son, was poisoned by the Japanese and died in 1942. See "*Riben qinluezhe ansha le Wangguo hua*," 日本侵略者暗杀了王国华, as cited in Lei Yindong, *Chaoyang shi zhengxie wenshi ziliao* 朝阳市政协文史资料, vol. 2, ed. Guan Wenhua (Chaoyang, Liaoning: Chaoyang shi zhengxie wenshi ziliao xuexi gongzuo weiyuanhui, 1989), 155-156.

[21] Here, Zheng Yishi addresses Zhu Yungong by his style-name Zhu Xuntian, different from in his earlier mention of Zhu in the previous section.

[22] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 350.

and having necessarily participated closely in the editing and compilation of the texts, chooses to remain anonymous. Nor is his identity illuminated anywhere else in this set of texts. Nonetheless, his identity is not at all mysterious; instead, a name is constantly attributed to by publishers as the chief editor of these *Shanrendao* texts, particularly those based on Zheng Jiachun's oral accounts. This unnamed editor was Zheng Jiachun's oldest son, Zheng Yishi. His birth was incorporated in Zheng Jiachun's biography, but no further information was recorded. It is only in another 1991 edition of *Yanxing lu* that his name is identified in the "Complete Story of Re-editing and Re-compiling *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*" (《王凤仪言行录》再修订始末): "*ROC 80 (A.D. 1991),1 June, Editor, Zheng Yishi, Be Vigilant*."[23]

His choice to remain unidentified in the earlier version of *Yanxing lu* can be surmised from sources outside the *Shanrendao* texts. According to the Taiwan Human Rights Memory Bank, Zheng Yishi (alternatively named Zheng Shiying) was a victim of the anti-Communist political campaign in Taiwan known as the White Terror (1947-1987), conducted under the Kuomintang regime.[24] The website indicates that his arrest occurred in June 1955, having been accused of previous involvement in communist organization in Heilongjiang Province. The web page writes: "Back in Harbin, he [Zheng Yishi] participated in the bandit-party organization via an introduction from a bandit-cadre.[25] Later, concerned for his own safety, he took the opportunity to escape, as he was sent by the bandit cadre to campaign elsewhere, and immediately returned to Beiping to reunite with his family. Informing his father, Zheng Zidong

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[23] 民国八十年（1991 年）6 月 1 日 修订者 郑宜时 谨识/ http://www.sharebook.net/wang/wfyyxl/wfyxdsm.htm

[24] https://memory.nhrm.gov.tw/TopicExploration/Person/Detail/5223?Year=1950

[25] Bandit-Party 匪党 and Bandit-Cadre 匪干 were common Kuomintang phrases for referring to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the party's cadres. The language in the electronic record well conveys the political dynamics of the era in which Zheng Yishi was convicted.

(Zheng Jiachun), about his fear of reprisal from the bandit and other situations, Zheng Yishi and his whole family fled to Taiwan." Setting aside the irony and injustice of imprisonment, this information matches with Zheng Jiachun's biographical timeline. Zheng Yishi, a middle school teacher in Nantou County when arrested, received a life sentence at the time, a term that was later reduced to 15 years in 1975. He was released that same year, two years after his father's death.[26] Although none of these experiences are specified in the *Shanrendao* materials I gathered, it explains his absence during the publication of the first version of *Wang Fengyi shanren yanxing lu* in 1968, as well, possibly, his hesitation to publicize his identity and relationship with Zheng Jiachun in the later versions. It also provides a reason for why it was Zheng Gaojing, instead of Yishi, who supplemented the information recounting Zheng Jiachun's last moments.

The editing of *Yanxing lu*, therefore, is highly palimpsestual. Not only is it mostly based on oral accounts of one disciple, Zheng Jiachun, who escaped to Taiwan in 1948, but works by Wang Fengyi's other disciples who stayed in mainland China (Zhu Xuntian) and Wang's own son (Wang Guohua) were all considered when compiling the first publication in 1968. Moreover, following the release from prison in 1975 of Zheng Jiachun's oldest son, Zheng Yishi, new layers of materials were added to the previous edition. Zheng mentions the inclusion of information from Zhou Zhigen's *Wang Fengyi luezhuan*, which supposedly was more trustworthy due to Zhou's heavy reliance on Zhu Xuntian's textual notes, yet I could not locate any physical or electronic copy of this text. Rather, another book titled *Wang Fengyi nianpu yu yulu* (Wang Fengyi's Chronology and Sayings 王凤仪年谱与语录) is constantly credited and cited as the formal publication of Zhu Xuntian's notes. I fully acknowledge that all these

[26] https://memory.nhrm.gov.tw/TopicExploration/Person/Detail/5223?Year=1950

perplexing layers of information complicate the plausibility of retracing the origins of the ideas presented in the edition of *Yanxing lu* that I was able to acquire. Moreover, it is always feasible to ask whether Zheng Yishi's own experiences as a political prisoner may have colored his editing of the *Shanrendao* text. Still, I maintain that it is worth trying to peel back the onion to excavate the early history and context of the Society.

To be sure, readers of *Wang Fengyi jiayan lu* should not neglect the presence of religious lenses feeding into the construction of the book. We certainly should not interpret these *Shanrendao* texts as exact representations of Wang Fengyi's life experiences, nor should we equate the social landscape of Northeastern China detailed in these materials as a faithful reflection of historical reality. Instead, I propose to first read *Yanxing lu* for its storyline, then examine extracted patterns from the cultural and social dimensions of Northeastern rural society, thus constituting the three chapters of this thesis. The first chapter offers a close reading of *Yanxing lu* with attention to his two Enlightenments; I attempt to extract a twofold model from Fengyi's series of anecdotes, representing the two focal points in *Shanrendao* teachings, enlightenment, and morality healing. The second chapter, positions this twofold model in relation to other longstanding intellectual patterns and cultural practices in Chinese late imperial society, revealing *Shanrendao* to be both continuations and transformations of existing cultural repertoires Fengyi drew upon from his surrounding environment. The third chapter, proceeding further along Fengyi's storyline, analyzes the process by which Fengyi started to formalize his *Shanrendao* vision into institutional structures in local communities via the attempt to establish charitable schools and a local pawnshop, which respectively ended in partial success and absolute failure. These early institutionalizing attempts by the founder not only closely intertwined with the socio-economic contexts of the era, but also generated lasting impacts on

the redemptive society's later development. Collectively, these three chapters should provide a comprehensive understanding of what *Shanrendao* doctrines meant to not only the founder, but also to his rural audiences, with attention to from which aspects of the society the organization drew its sources of power. In the end, it was never *Shanrendao* that selected who to save from rural Northeast China, but people from rural communities who chose *Shanrendao* as a form of personal redemption. Wang Fengyi was only, perhaps, the earliest member to make such a choice.

Chapter 1: The Words and Deeds of Wang Fengyi

In *Empire and the Meaning of Religion in Northeastern Asia, Manchuria 1900-1945*, Thomas David DuBois depicts Manchuria as a land of progress "driven by a combination of opportunity and necessity," positioning the topic of religion in the highly dynamic Northeastern society rife with tensions between political forces.[1] In his understanding, religion in Manchuria constitutes a "global phenomenon," which can only be appropriately understood while taking into account of the "global flow of ideas."[2] The obvious aftermath in the case of Japanese colonizers, he notes, was reflected in the concept of "unity of the five races" (*wuzu gong he* 五族共和), and their later conceptual framework distinguishing between proper religions like Christian missions and "the dumping ground of superstition."[3] Nonetheless, the portrait DuBois presents of redemptive religion in Northeastern China in the first half of the 20th century does not mesh with the sense of social anxiety present in Wang Fengyi's *Shanrendao* texts. Fengyi's early life experience in rural communities diverged sharply from the cosmopolitan world described in DuBois's study. *Shanrendao* texts present a world in which the social order was disrupted, families were dysfunctional, and local customs had become corrupted. Chinese society, as Fengyi saw it, was in such desperate straits that for a time he saw no point to go on living. Out of that deep place of despair, Fengyi experienced a moment of enlightenment, which launched him onto his path as a charismatic faith healer, building a syncretic, moralistic, quasi-

[1] Thomas David DuBois, *Empire and the Meaning of Religion in Northeast Asia: Manchuria 1900-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1.
[2] DuBois, *Empire and the Meaning of Religion in Northeast Asia*, 9.
[3] DuBois, *Empire and the Meaning of Religion in Northeast Asia*, 9-10.

Confucian religious society whose influence would come to span continents, even as at times it was actively repressed by various state regimes claiming to represent parts or all of China.

A close reading of the *Shanrendao* texts has the potential to offer a different perspective on the rural conditions and religio-cultural landscape of Northeastern China on the verge of the 20th century. Unlike the *Shanrendao* philosophical theorizations in the first and second volumes, which convey direct, moralistic exhortations to their readers, the meanings implicit in the scattered stories in volume three may have been more enjoyable as listening material for sermons but are less immediately penetrable for modern-day researchers to use to understand the religiosity of this redemptive society. This chapter focuses on the beginning stage of Wang Fengyi's *Shanrendao* career by paying particular attention to Fengyi's anecdotes from 1864 to 1909 in the third volume of *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu* (A Record of Wang Fengyi's Words and Deeds 王凤仪言行录), individually titled "Real Record of Practicing the Way" (*Xingdao shilu* 行道实录). The nine chapters in this volume start with one anecdote from Wang Fengyi's childhood proving his longstanding practice of filial piety and ends with his trip to Tengaobao 腾鳌堡 for the purpose of investigating local customs, altogether covering not only Fengyi's early life but also the diverse range of motives that led to the develop of *Shanrendao* doctrines. The volume essentially ends with his failure at establishing female charity schools. The third volume, thus, represents a stage at which *Shanrendao* was still far from its later institutionalized image as depicted in other sources. It opens a window onto a time before Wang Fengyi's rural lecturing and charitable activism had been absorbed by the redemptive society of *Wanguo daodehui*. In other words, this is also the period ignored by previous scholars who have equated *Shanrendao* with *Daodehui*, allowing us a different angle from which to understand the meaning of *Shanrendao* for rural communities at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries.

The texts associated with *Shanrendao* are characterized by palimpsestual multivocality; later *Shanrendao* disciples have added to the construction of the religious texts. *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu* (hereafter, *Yanxing lu*), in effect, is a biographical narrative contained within a religious morality book. This work, compiled by his disciples, and then edited by later followers, is framed in a style resembling *The Analects*: the text starts most of its sections with the line: "I heard Wang, the Virtuous Man, speak thus…" Religious texts, especially those generated within a syncretic tradition, pose a challenge to historians as to how to interpret their historicity and authenticity. This concern unquestionably arises in the case of *Yanxing lu.* Fengyi's basic biography is occluded by layers of mystification: various spirits, buddhas, Daoist deities, bandits, officials, landowners, distant relatives, unfilial children, morality books, illicit cults, etc., each with their own distinctive cosmologies and worldviews, are all jumbled together and intertwine with Fengyi's biographical timeline, generating a kind of cognitive dissonance. This seemingly bizarre outlook on life, perhaps, was exactly what a rural peasant would have observed when contemplating his surrounding world in late 19th-century northeast China. Fengyi's religio-philosophical frameworks, while shaping strands within *Shanrendao* religiosity on the face of it, reaffirm the complexity of his (and his disciples') mental landscapes.

It is tempting to read with the presumption that the *Shanrendao* texts lack any coherent theoretical framework, and instead recognize each embedded doctrine as its own pragmatic response to particular social issues that the Society noticed or attempted to address. However, although most stories in *Yanxing lu* consist of moral exhortations transmitted in Wang Fengyi's voice, some of these anecdotes are actually interconnected and demonstrate a sort of progressive trajectory in Fengyi's *Shanrendao* "career." To elucidate this development, this chapter is divided into two parts, each of which distinguishes two threads of attention, or *leitmotifs*, found

within the third volume of *Yanxing lu*. The gradual emergence of *Shanrendao* doctrines from Fengyi's anecdotes grounded in his experiences in rural Northeastern China, if read as extensions from two central Enlightenment events whereby Fengyi came to understand the Way, constitute two clear storylines leading to the maturity of *Shanrendao*'s theoretical frameworks. Some of these anecdotes perform double duty in the narration of these two Enlightenments. Here, I find Prasenjit Duara's concept of superscription useful in thinking through 1) the gradual maturity of Fengyi's *Shanrendao* tenets, and 2) his disciples' interpretations of his inspirations for attaining the Way.

The First Enlightenment

Picture two men traveling at dusk to Erligou village, the sun hovering above the horizon. The light gradually fades, replaced with gloom swallowing up the sky. The older one strides out in front, ceaselessly shouting: "If Yang Bai dies, I cannot go on living either! If Yang Bai dies, I cannot go on living either!" His younger cousin, Li Quankui, follows him at a distance, asked by the former's worried father to accompany him. This does not prove too burdensome for the young man, since his original plan was to acquire a transdermal patch at Erligou village. As they proceed forward, the impassioned man suddenly raises his head, seeing that what should be a pitch-blacked sky has suddenly become illuminated. Awed by the miraculous scene, he stops calling out until the shadows once again consume the sky. After a period of time he describes as "the duration to finish a meal (一顿饭的功夫)," he asks, "Why has the sky turned dark?" Hearing this odd question, Li Quankui, who had fallen behind, now advances to his side: "On such a gloomy night, how could it possibly be bright?" It was at this moment, seeing the sky turn

bright in the middle of the night, that the first man, Wang Fengyi, became enlightened. He tells his followers:

> "When I saw the daybreak [in the dead of night], I understood the Way of Heaven. I also knew Yang Bai's case was Heaven's test of his sincerity, that he was supposed to serve six months of imprisonment. I needed to visit Chaoyang County three times, and Erligou three times, to resolve his crisis, but I already knew how to deal with the problems in each of these visits. I also knew how the nation should launch political reform, when the bandits could be eliminated, how men and women should practice the Way, and how the world could become peaceful… How was I able to know everything at that moment? It was because, for the previous few days, I had been asking heaven how to save Yang Bai every single moment, dedicating my whole heart to investigating (格物) his rescue. By investigating sincerely, I let go of my body such that I could not feel myself, I let go of my consciousness such that I felt no desire, I let go of my inherent nature such that everything became clear (空身无我，空心无欲，空性自明). Thus it was that I came to understand the omnipotence of the Ultimate Heaven (太虚空). I not only came to understand sixty thousand years of things; even things stretching across billions of years, I also knew."[4]

Upon reading this passage from "Saving Yang Bai," section 41 in the third volume of *Yanxing lu*, one might easily dismiss this story as the superstitious imaginings of a peasant, not so different from the many cosmologies witnessed in Chinese popular religions with grassroots origins. However, this dismissive approach would miss the opportunity to delve into the

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[4] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 111.

worldview of the founder of *Shanrendao* and his followers contained within such religious texts. The historical narrative surrounding *Shanrendao*, if read through the lenses of the cult's own texts, suggests the story is a formative moment in the religious vision of the charismatic morality healer, Wang Fengyi.

This third volume of *Yanxing lu*, in which Fengyi's first enlightenment appears, recounts the founder's early years. These seemingly disconnected anecdotes read as if we are walking in Fengyi's shoes, taking in the rural communities in Raoyang county, and yet the diverse elements he observes inevitably cultivate a sense of distance, hindering our imagination of the historical moment. One way to avoid this, as I have suggested, is to tease out the existing leitmotifs dispersed throughout Fengyi's short stories, through which we might uncover the larger issues leading to his enlightenment.

On the inside front cover of *Yanxing lu* is a short description of Fengyi, which reads: "The Virtuous Man, Wang Fengyi, given name, Shutong, from Chaoyang county of Zhili province under the Qing. Since childhood he had herded cattle for others; in adulthood he worked as a hired hand. Showing filial piety as a child, [he] demonstrated loyalty as a hired laborer. At the age of 35, he pledged his life to courageously rescue his friend, Yang Bai, and he came to understand the Way on his journey (seeing the bright sun in the dark night). From then on, he explicated sickness, encouraged virtue, and brought salvation to people and the world for over forty years." (内封,王凤仪言行录) The introduction in another *Shanrendao* text, *Zhibing hejia baodian* (A Treasure Book for Curing Disease and Family Harmony), reads similarly: "Gentleman Wang Fengyi (1864-1937), because of his belief in and practice of loyalty and filial piety, his sincerity led him to revelation; at the age of 35, [he] went to save his friend Yang Bai,

and on his journey "saw the bright sun in the dark night," thus coming to understand the Way." (治病合家宝典)

Clearly, this event of "seeing the bright sun in the dark night" (黑夜见白日) was crucial for *Shanrendao* adherents and text compilers to explain who Fengyi was and how he achieved his first enlightenment. One figure mentioned in the anecdote is worthy of further explanation; otherwise, readers cannot understand the circumstances surrounding this abrupt moment of epiphany: Yang Bai. A local philanthropist, also called Yang, the Virtuous Man (杨善人), Yang Bai is introduced a few sections prior to Fengyi's enlightenment.[5] Yang Bai appears in the first section of the chapter as Fengyi is watching the morality book performance, "Sanniang jiaozi" (Third concubine disciplines her son 三娘教子) at Yang Bai's place. This episode, we are told, also inspired Fengyi's recognition of a central tenet in his later cosmology, that is: "virtuous people identify their own faults, while ignorant people always argue about who is right-or-wrong." (贤人争'不是'，愚人才争理) This simple realization cured Fengyi's own chronic illness and functioned both as a minor transitional moment for his moral vision and as an origin story for his practice of morality healing. Analyses of this episode appear again in later sections of this chapter due to its close association with the two major themes in Fengyi's early development of *Shanrendao* teachings.[6] Yang Bai clearly plays a central role in Fengyi's philanthropic journey.

Fengyi's enlightenment narrative begins with the comment that Zheng Jiachun heard Fengyi recount the following story: "After the Turmoil of 1895 [the First Sino-Japanese War],

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[5] This is a title Wang Fengyi will later receive as well.
[6] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 108-109.

bandits erupted everywhere, [causing] chaos throughout the localities. In villages, all the well-to-do families felt precarious…”[7]

Three of Fengyi’s kin, chief among them Wang Yuheng, smoked opium and idled the days away. Yuheng and his associates, known for having contacts with bandits, visited Yang Bai in Erligou village one day, telling Yang that they would use their cozy relationship with the bandits to shelter him from assault, if, in exchange, he would lend them grain. Although Yang generously agreed, his other family members in the village were angered by this. Thereupon, they captured the three good-for-nothings despite pleas from Yang. They sent the three to the county magistrate for punishment, but their reckless actions incurred the ire of local bandits, who immediately threatened vengeance on Yang Bai. *“Bandits at the time valued brotherhood, and they would avenge anyone causing harm to their peers, no matter whether they knew the peer or not,”* Fengyi recounts.[8] For unknown reasons, Yang was arrested and imprisoned by Chaoyang administrators.[9] This led to the event described at the beginning of the section, where Fengyi decided to imitate Yang Jiaoai, a character in a popular morality book who committed suicide to assist his friend. In the case of Fengyi, it clinched his decision to sacrifice his life, if necessary, to rescue Yang Bai. In section 42, “Rescuing Yang Bai from Prison,” Fengyi clarifies that his enlightenment revealed the cause of Yang’s imprisonment to be the greed of the Chaoyang magistrate’s private secretary (师爷). By the end of the story, Fengyi has been able to convince the official to formally try Yang Bai, by means of which he can discover that Yang has been framed by the false accusations of Yuheng (and the other good-for-nothings). The crisis came to

[7] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 110.
[8] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 110.
[9] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 110.

a fortuitous resolution, although we never learn whether it was the private assistant's greed or Yuheng's false confession that started the trouble.[10]

The various narratives of Fengyi's enlightenment raise questions about the nature of the Way that he claimed to understand. What does it mean when Fengyi says: *I let go of my body such that I could not feel myself, I let go of my consciousness such that I felt no desire, I let go of my inherent nature such that everything became clear*? What does "Ultimate Heaven" mean in his religiosity? These are clearly phrases drawn from Buddho-Daoist terminology, used in both ancient and contemporary religious texts. In understanding these phrases, we can pursue two directions: the theoretical framework of Fengyi's philosophy, written about as the "philosophy of personality and fate" (*xingming zhexue* 性命哲学), tracing the origins of these terms that Fengyi appropriated from Buddhist concepts, which he then incorporated into his *Shanrendao* cosmology; and "healing through moral reasoning" (*xingli liaobing* 性理疗病), which contains the seed of the Society's later social platform. Answering these questions requires engaging with the influence of Buddhism in late Qing Chinese society, as well as the adaptation and transmission of such concepts within rural communities in Northeastern China. Similarly, the term, *gewu* 格物, which Fengyi uses to explain his own investigation of methods for rescuing Yang Bai, clearly was borrowed from the Confucian classic, originating in "The Great Learning" chapter in the *Book of Rites*, but likely having undergone intermediary adaptation via Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian discourse, and perhaps even learned through vehicles such as the Amplifications on the Kangxi Emperor's Sacred Edict.[11] Fengyi's use of this term is reminiscent of what

[10] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 112-113.
[11] Pei-kai Cheng, Michael Elliot Lestz, and Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China: A Documentary Collection* (New York: Norton, 1999), 66.

historian Qitao Guo, in another context, has called, "popular Confucianism.[12]" How might that complex of ideas have been expressed in Northeastern China at this specific historical moment?

These questions, as will be discussed in the next chapter, indeed allow historians to retrace the intellectual lineage of *Shanrendao* and position Fengyi's thoughts within the Neo-Confucian discourse and religious syncretism of late imperial times and its legacy into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. An equivalently significant task in this study is to understand the meaning of these inquiries for the grassroots society with which Wang Fengyi directly engaged. Through a close reading of the anecdotes in volume three of *Yanxing lu*, I attempt to reconstruct the biography of Fengyi's formative years, the origins of his moral and religious convictions, and expose the complicated socio-cultural dynamics that rural residents in Northeast China were exposed to circa 1890-1910, which became the fertile ground out of which Wang Fengyi's ideas emerged. Similar kinds of questions have been explored in scholarship on popular religion in late imperial China by Meir Shahar and Prasenjit Duara.[13] What, I ask, might Fengyi's narrative of his enlightenment experience reveal about the mental make-up of peasants in Northeast China, as transmitted through the voice of this one charismatic preacher? And might that help us to uncover the existing socio-cultural dynamics of rural communities in Northeastern China during this time of personal and national trauma?

I aim to utilize the lens of *Shanrendao* texts to answer these questions, excavating—or recovering—the underlying concerns refracted through these anecdotes within their historical context. Why might *Shanrendao* devotees have been drawn to these stories and the charisma of

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[12] Qitao Guo, *Ritual Opera and Mercantile Lineage: The Confucian Transformation of Popular Culture in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005), 2-3.

[13] Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900-1942* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1988); Meir Shahar, *Crazy Ji: Chinese Religion and Popular Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 1998).

Fengyi? How does the manner of presentation of these stories provide insight into grassroots values? And why did this form of moralizing religiosity take root and take off, turning the Society into an association that could attract a much wider range of devotees over time and space?

The collected *Shanrendao* texts tell us that when Fengyi first achieved enlightenment, he immediately preached to his younger cousin about the Way, saying: "I needed to visit Chaoyang County three times and Erligou three times to resolve his crisis, but already I knew how to deal with the problems on each of these visits. I also knew how the nation should launch political reform, when the bandits could be eliminated, how men and women should practice the Way, and how the world can become peaceful…"[14] Through investigating Fengyi's vision and enlightenment after he encountered the "bright sun in the middle of a dark night," we may find that the contents in this quote do not necessarily cohere. Understanding the urgency of Yang Bai's situation, his unfortunate imprisonment, and Fengyi's dedication to emulating the morality book character Yang Jiaoai to rescue his friend, his enlightenment and his strategies for saving Yang Bai found perfect justification. Yet, this immediate context fails to connect with Wang's vision regarding launching political reforms (变法). Likewise, as the misfortune Yang Bai encountered was due to the problem of bandits, directly corresponding to Fengyi's foresight for eliminating bandits, it does not explain his incorporation of methods for achieving harmony in male-female relations and a peaceful world (世界清平) as part of "the Way."

By describing his enlightenment, I speculate that Fengyi also was registering his ideas about many large-scale, systemic issues that Chinese society was facing in the last decade of the nineteenth century and into the first of the twentieth. Indeed, his concerns about a collapsing

[14] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 111.

morality were echoed in multiple locales prior to his encounter with Yang Bai, forming another path through which Fengyi gained his determination to redeem the local social customs (风俗). Interestingly, despite the apparent severity of banditry and the frequency of its mention in many early sections of Fengyi's biography, what first drew the condemnation of his moralistic ire was the practice of gambling in the local community.[15]

In section 31 of the second chapter, titled "Aspiring to Change the Customs," Fengyi reflects on the issue of gambling; all three of his brothers were addicts. He writes:

> The people sow in the spring, plow in the summer, harvest in the autumn, and store [grain] in the winter; working ceaselessly throughout the whole year, they finally can bring the grain home. [Yet] by the Lunar New Year, no matter whether male or female, every single household member engages in gambling to the extent that they forget to sleep and eat, becoming so exhausted that they mess things up; there are also people who lose all their possessions. A good person, as soon as he gambles, does not want to do anything [else], which turns good people bad. Because I resented gambling as a custom so much, I began to resent the Lunar New Year, too. I would constantly think, why did the ancients [even] preserve the New Year?[16]

Immediately in the next section, Fengyi elaborates on an illness that he attributed to his revulsion at this social custom:

> Because I hated the world (愤世嫉俗), I felt frustrated at work. I despised the custom of gambling, [because] people worked so hard until the end of the year

[15] For example, Wang Fengyi secretly donated money to sustain a local private school for five years until the rise of bandits caused the school to be disbanded. See: *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 104-105.
[16] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 120.

> and finally could bring the grains home in the autumn, and yet what type of New Year did they have? Once the New Year arrives people start gambling to such an extent that it breaks them! I had been upset about this since the age of 24, which caused a skin ulcer to grow on my belly… I did not seek out doctors for five or six years, until I injured myself when fixing a plowing tool in the autumn when I was 29, making the skin ulcer swell and causing unbearable pain.[17]

Fengyi's filial piety moved a Tibetan lama (喇嘛) priest to offer him some medication that slightly relieved his condition; still, the chronic illness restricted him from engaging in any form of heavy labor.[18] This passage is the lead-in for the introduction of Yang Bai and the performance of "Sanniang jiaozi" at Yang's house, which opened Fengyi's eyes to the importance of morality. He maintains:

> I suddenly felt my heart lighten up, [so I] immediately ran into the yard and scolded myself: "Wang Shutong, Wang Shutong![19] Even if it is wrong for those people to gamble money, is it right for you to feel [so] upset? Your brothers gamble, but you keep getting irritated to the point that you fall ill. Is that going to stop them from gambling?" Thinking on this, [I realized] no wonder I was ignorant, because only the ignorant argue about who is "right or wrong"!

As he headed home, the narrative continues, Fengyi kept scolding himself: "How is it right for you to only look at others' faults? How is it right for you to get irritated by others' mistakes?" He asked himself until he began to laugh at his own close-mindedness. The next morning, the anecdote continues, the skin ulcer that had bothered him for 12 years had completely vanished.[20]

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[17] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 102.
[18] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 203-204.
[19] Shutong is Wang Fengyi's given name; Fengyi is his style name.
[20] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 108-109.

This miracle became his inspiration for healing through preaching morality, which would become a key component of *Shanrendao* teachings. At the time, however, as told in the anecdote, the incident represents part of the process leading to Fengyi's understanding of the "Way of Heaven."

This culminates in the incidents of "saving Yang Bai" and "seeing the bright sun," both situated toward the end of the fourth chapter in *Xingdao shilu*. The miraculous self-healing after visiting Yang Bai's household serves as the first event recorded in this same chapter. The following section 40, titled "Determined to Starve to Death," while not remarked upon as much by later disciples in the prefaces to the *Shanrendao* texts, seems to represent another turning point in Fengyi's mental transformation, where he changed his attitude toward all the wrongful behaviors he noticed around him. This passage describes the course of action by means of which Fengyi shifted from longstanding moral anxiety to religious activism:

> Since January, I had been able to regret my faults and cure my disease after listening to the morality book at [Yang] Bai's house. I started working in the fields around the time of the Qingming festival. While working, I also pondered all the episodes in the morality books to which I had listened. One piece called "Xunnu liangci" (训女良词) (Good words to instruct women) states that women have seven principles they must follow. I thoroughly pondered all the women in our village, from the east side to the west, [and realized] that not one of them abided by those seven principles. (没有一个不犯七出的) Then I started examining the men, [and realized that] none of them fulfilled filial piety or care for siblings 尽孝尽悌.[21]

[21] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 109.

Here, similar to his desperate criticism of gambling in the earlier section, Fengyi ruminated on another troubling social issue while working in the fields. However, unlike the gambling, which he had personally witnessed, and which afflicted his three brothers, he noticed this additional manifestation of moral corruption in his community through the lens of morality books. While "pondering all the episodes in morality books," and recalling this "one piece called 'Xunnu liangci,'" Fengyi evaluates the women of his village according to the seven virtuous principles described in the exhortatory teachings, reaching the shocking (to him) conclusion that none of them were virtuous. For the men, he used a more concise criterion, which was to "fulfill filial piety and care for siblings," yet none of them could meet this "simple" task. This suggests yet another key strand within his thinking. While his original frustration stemmed from his recognition of systemic moral degradation, his deductive reasoning alighted on the respective virtues (or their lack) of both women and men. This, too, would become central to his parallel realizations as explained his first enlightenment: "I came to understand… how men and women should practice the Way, and how the world could become peaceful…"[22] To Fengyi, the world was no longer peaceful and full of corruption precisely because both men and women were failing at their moral duties. Even as this excerpt provides a possible explanation of the content of his enlightenment in "seeing the bright sun," it further reveals the significance of a gendered binary in Fengyi's moral system. If Fengyi's moralistic revulsion to gambling was manifested through his bodily sickness, his sudden realization of the thorough corruption of the world (un)surprisingly led him to a far more radical approach:

> So, I began to feel life was meaningless in such a corrupted world, and death might be better. I pondered again how I should die. By hanging? That would be

[22] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 111.

> ugly. By cutting my throat? I had not done anything wrong, so I worried people would gossip after my death. Thinking back and forth, I finally came up with a solution: wouldn't one die if he stopped eating? So, I started fasting. It was the end of April, and my family became extremely worried after learning of this, all rushing over to convince me to eat, but I did not listen to them. They knew I held the same values as Teacher Guo, the village teacher, so they asked him to come reason with me. I asked him: "For a horrible world like this, in which men do not look after their elders and siblings, and in which women are not virtuous, what is the point of living? Also, for what end do I need to keep living?" He said: "Living is living, why do you need to find an end?" I said: "If there is no end, I am not eating."[23]

A manifestation, perhaps, of Fengyi working through an existential crisis, his decision to starve himself to death is intriguing in several respects.

First, this anecdote in section 40 immediately follows his first healing experience after listening to the morality book performance (section 39). If he had already been enlightened enough to focus on his own mistakes rather than the faults of others, this extreme response to the lack of virtue within his village would seem to be a regression along his path toward spiritual maturation. Perhaps, the sudden recognition of his own faults, instead of focusing on those of others, was an afterthought, not systematically arrived at by Fengyi at the time, suggesting that we should not view the events in consecutive sections within the narrative of *Yanxing lu* as necessarily causally related. Instead, these were stories reflecting on the theme of his

[23] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 109.

enlightenment, “seeing the bright sun,” a reasoning possibly reached by Fengyi in retrospect, added by his disciples through the multiple re-edits of the texts, or both.

Another way to understand this inconsistency in Fengyi’s reasoning is by reading it as an even more severe social issue in comparison to his previous revelations about the corrupting effects of gambling. Even so, this explanation inevitably undermines the role of the self-healing anecdote in his overall spiritual progress, rendering that earlier incident a transitional step, instead of a culminating moment.

We can also read this episode in light of its similarity to tales in circulation about the life of the historical Buddha. Fengyi’s dilemma, whether consciously or not, mirrors Shakyamuni’s realization of the extreme of asceticism for achieving enlightenment. Like the Buddha, Fengyi subsequently finds a middle way between self-sacrifice and enlightenment. Following Fengyi’s attempted starvation, the story turns in a mythical direction, with him undergoing another out-of-body hallucination leading to the climax of this incident: “After starving for five days, my spirit left my body without my realizing it. I did not need to walk using my legs, and I was flying not far from the ground. Floating in the wind, I flew at will.”[24]

Awed by the agility of his spirit, Fengyi instantly arrived in Jinzhou just in time to view people celebrating the Dragon Boat Festival. The sound of oinking pigs, he said, was like listening to vague phone calls, which immediately sent his spirit back to his home, because “a spirit-soul is still a spirit.”[25] (灵魂到底还是灵) Returning to his own yard and seeing his own family also slaughtering pigs, he commented: “You kill him, and it kills you, [causing] an endless cycle of karma. What a shame!” Entering the room and seeing his body still in the same

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[24] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 109.

[25] The mention of phone call is possibly the result of later editing, either by Fengyi’s own reinterpretation of memory or by his disciples who published the texts in a much later period when phone calls were common in daily life.

position, he repossessed his body but could not understand why his family members were upset. Little by little, he finally recalled that he was in the midst of starving himself to death.[26]

This experience, as related in the *Shanrendao* texts, set up a kind of roadmap for Fengyi's future activism:

> Then I asked myself: "If you die, who can your elders rely upon? You may starve yourself to death due to the degradation of this world, but will that make things better after your death?" I answered myself: "It will not get better." Then I asked myself again: "Then why do you live?" I again responded: 'To first show filiality to my elders until they pass away (作古); thereafter, I shall go forth to transform the world through exhortation (劝化), and so change the morals of society."
>
> Having reached this insight, I asked my family to cook congee for me, [because] I was no longer seeking death."[27]

It seems that at each answer to his own questions, Fengyi expounds upon certain fundamental *Shanrendao* doctrines. The significance of this self-reflection is that it functions as a moment of spiritual metamorphosis, differentiating Fengyi from his previous pessimism and advancing his aspiration to actively reform his surrounding society. His answers to himself also provide a solution to the existential crisis that Teacher Guo had failed to offer: first fulfilling his filial duty and then turning to the redemption of social morality. This vision later became the blueprint for Fengyi's activism as described in the next few chapters. Of course, since this episode is placed before the "Seeing the Bright Sun" story in the narration, Fengyi had not yet had his epiphany about the ways to save the nation. Still, this is the moment from which he renounced his critical

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[26] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 109.
[27] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 109-110.

view of his surroundings and resolved to redeem the public, becoming the cornerstone upon which he eventually built his redemptive society. Although *Shanrendao* disciples clearly recognized the enlightenment incident of "seeing the bright Sun in the dark night" as a watershed in Fengyi's spiritual journey, I suggest that this episode in which he overcomes existential crisis plays an equally important role in shaping his later social activism in Northeastern China and in his founding of *Shanrendao*. Collectively, these several anecdotes piece together a coherent story arc through which Fengyi acquired his vision for recouping social morality; his moment of enlightenment becomes a ritualized incident marking the finalization—or formalization—of this vision in the core of *Shanrendao* cosmology and doctrine.

The Second Enlightenment

I turn now to a second *leitmotif* in the *Shanrendao* texts that deserves clarification, manifested via another enlightenment achieved through different but overlapping paths. The metaphysical enlightenment, Fengyi's understanding of the Way after "seeing the bright sun," was accompanied by his transition from moral anxiety to religious activism. This transition also generated his agenda for future practice: waiting until his elders passed away to redeem people's morality. These insights are critical to appreciating Fengyi's coherent motive and the driving force manifested throughout the remainder of the text. However, as many details in the anecdotes therein contained already "hint at," another thread of storyline progressively culminates in a second enlightenment. To further clarify this, I turn my attention to how *Shanrendao* disciples spoke about Wang Fengyi.

As mentioned in the previous section, the *Shanrendao* text *Zhibing hejia baodian* confirms the significance of Fengyi "seeing the bright sun in the middle of the night." In its full

text, the *Treasury Book* also narrates an additional event of revelation as his ultimate moment of spiritual transformation. Following Fengyi's enlightenment at the age of 35, the text continues: "At the age of 38, his father passed away, [so he] guarded the grave (living in a shed next to the grave) for hundreds of days, ultimately received enlightenment, and invented the morality healing techniques, explicating illness to save the world and redeem public ethics." (治病合家宝典)

Fengyi's "guarding the grave" episode constitutes another crucial moment of enlightenment, yet he was not inspired to commit to such a practice until his brother-in-law, Bai Qin, first guarded his own mother's grave in 1901. Other than demonstrating Fengyi's filial piety, *Zhibing hejia baodian* depicts this scenario as representing the ultimate transformation through which he gained the Way and became enlightened, which has the possible effect of undermining the centrality of his "seeing the bright sun in the middle of the night" in his spiritual journey. This is potentially reaffirmed by the distinctive manner in which these two events are narrated in *Yanxing lu.* "Seeing the bright sun in the middle of the night" constitutes one section in the middle of a chapter, whereas "guarding the grave" spins out one coherent theme across an entire chapter. However, a closer examination of the event may reveal another determining factor for *Zhibing hejia baodian* to incorporate the episode as Fengyi's more important moment of enlightenment.

The sixth chapter in *Yanxing lu*, "Guarding the Tomb (1901-1904)," is far lengthier than the fourth, "Understanding the Way (1898-1899)," in which the first enlightenment is presented. The sixth chapter utilizes a wide range of stories to describe Fengyi's life experiences residing next to his father's tomb. Also, contrary to the narrative approach utilized in the first enlightenment, the epiphany in this case is abrupt, related in the third of eighteen sections within

the chapter. Indeed, Fengyi's description of this enlightenment event is also extremely concise, relayed in only four sentences, and comes across as far less vivid than the narration of the first enlightenment.

In the first two sections, Fengyi respectively explains his promise to his brother-in-law to *also* guard his elder's grave and his commencement of living beside his father's tomb after the completion of the funeral. As further proof of his dedication, Fengyi recounts a story about his peaceful cohabitation with a snake inside his shack. He also mentions that he at first went back home for meals, but soon thereafter became too busy "explicating illness" for others, and so had his family bring food to him.[28] These stories are interwoven with other anecdotes in this chapter, forming the central theme of "explicating illness," whereby Fengyi treated patients and cultivated a widespread reputation over the next three years as he sat vigil by his father's tomb. The incident is quite different from the first enlightenment, both with its double-layered origin story and a rather concise moment of spiritual metamorphosis.

Despite the beginning section of the chapter attributing his original inspiration for "guarding the grave" to his brother-in-law, Fengyi provides another anecdote for his source of inspiration for guarding his father's tomb in the third section, "Guarding the Spirit for the Three Realms." He writes: "If people want to commit to any task, they must set their mind to it on normal days. As for 'guarding the grave,' I had set my mind to it some time ago."[29] Four years before Fengyi guarded the grave, he learned about the filial son Yang Yi during a morality book lecture. As Fengyi tells it, Yang Yi discovered a cellar of silver when guarding his parent's grave but chose to distribute that silver to other villagers because the wealth was meaningless to him without elders to look after. Fengyi was moved by Yang's filial piety and decided to follow suit.

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[28] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 119-120.
[29] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 120.

While this explanation differs from the first mention of his inspiration for "guarding the grave" (possibly a result of Fengyi's own imperfect memory or a reflection of the text's palimpsestual editing history), the section indeed amplifies our understanding of his second enlightenment by allowing us to grasp the implied expected outcome of carrying out this filial deed:

> "When I guarded the grave, I thought: what should I guard the grave for? Of course, I do not want silver either. If it is for poor patients, I will ask for a prescription. My hometown had barren land and poor people, who had no money for medication. So, I was determined to guard [the grave] until I learned how to explicate illness. No medicine is required, but patients are instantly cured of their sickness, how beautiful 俏皮 (*qiaopi*) that is!"[30]

Following this noble ambition comes the second enlightenment in Wang Fengyi's spiritual journey:

> To my surprise, once I guarded [the tomb] for one hundred days, I genuinely guarded spirits of the Three Realms. (守灵了三界) Not only [did I] understand healing through the teaching of morality 性理疗病, but I received the Investiture of the Gods (得了封神榜). At the time, buddhas, ancestors, and gods from all the realms came to "compare answers" (答查对号), for which I worked exhaustively for three days and three nights. Otherwise, how would I dare to claim myself the progenitor of this religion!"[31]

If "seeing the bright sun" represented the maturity of Fengyi's vision for saving the Qing regime and Chinese society, "guarding the grave" was more a stage of bringing his healing practices to

[30] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 120. The text provides a gloss for 俏皮 indicating that the compound means "beautiful" in the local dialect.
[31] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 120-121.

fulfillment, both on theoretical terms and via reputational means. The receiving of the Investiture of the Gods serves as a reaffirmation of his first enlightenment, where he understood the Way: for deities to "compare answers" with him likely referred to the process by which deities tested the validity of his first revelation. Given that the title of *Zhibing hejia baodian* already explicitly puts a focus on Fengyi's healing techniques, it seems reasonable that it would include this second enlightenment event in introducing Fengyi's identity. But the supposed core of his enlightenment, as suggested by *Zhibing hejia biaodian*, only occupies half a line with no further elaborations.

Although this might lead us to suspect that this abrupt and concise moment of enlightenment was purposely chosen by the editors of *Zhibing hejia baodian* for their own motives, these two experiences of enlightenment are corroborated in other sections of *Yanxing lu.* In Fengyi's own voice: "I was at the Preaching Hall (宣讲堂) in Yingkou, when I met an old Daoist priest (老道). I told him about how I saw the bright sun on a dark night, how I guarded [my father's] grave and the Three Realms (怎样守坟守灵了三界), and all my deeds, and then asked him if there was anything I did wrong."[32] Clearly, even in Wang's own summary of his deeds, the second enlightenment is highlighted as a critical moment. Therefore, if viewed along with Fengyi's own attention to his episode of "guarding the grave," *Treasury Book*'s specific focus on his morality healing indicates a duality in *Shanrendao* cosmology: these two incidents do not only stand as watersheds in his spiritual transformation, but each of them also represents key concerns in Fengyi's mental landscape, which constitute the central motives for his social and moral activism.

[32] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 157-158.

How, then, should we understand the conciseness of the description of the second enlightenment, especially in comparison with both the accounts of the first enlightenment? Perhaps, we can find justification from his earlier experiences with morality healing, resketching the gradual maturity of his healing technique. The first time Fengyi introduced his self-healing techniques occurred while he was listening to a morality book lecture at Yang Bai's place. Recalling that he found himself miraculously cured the next morning, he said: "This was also why when I first explicated sickness (讲病) for others, I told them that if they could sincerely regret their own past mistakes, they could heal themselves. This method originated from my personal experience."[33] This event of self-healing may constitute a subtle origin story of his healing-through-morality practice. Although this might seem to contradict my earlier analysis of this self-healing incident, which I suggested played only a minor role in his transformation into a religious activist, I believe this seeming paradox exactly points to these two threads of redemptive society and morality-healing methodology as two distinct leitmotifs that occasionally utilize the same incident for their respective elaboration.

Another anecdote situated between the two enlightenments may supply a clearer picture of Fengyi's transition to his morality healing methodology, and through which he gained confidence in the effectiveness of such healing practices. In section 47, "Curing Illness through Ethics," Fengyi is described as lecturing on morality books in Xiakanzi village, when the Li family from another village invite him to "explicate illness" for a young wife who had suffered from gastric bloating for over half a year. Although Fengyi insisted that he was not capable of "explicating illness," the family begged him to pay a visit to the woman. Arriving at the household, he immediately noticed that the woman disdained her husband as ignorant and was

[33] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 109.

extremely impatient with her grandmother-in-law, who was the only person taking care of her. Fengyi pointed out to the woman that her disease was caused by her own temper. To cure her disease, he said, she needed to not only feel sincerely grateful the next time her grandmother-in-law took care of her, but should learn to walk in her grandmother's shoes:

> When you have time, you should keep asking your grandma about how she came to be married to grandfather, how old was she at the time, when did she give birth to your father-in-law, when did your father-in-law marry your mother-in-law, when did both of them pass away, how old was your husband at the time, how was she able to raise up your husband, and how did she set up the wedding when your husband married you? By asking these questions, you will understand how much hardship your grandmother-in-law has experienced. Not thinking about your own sickness, through these questions, you will lose your selfishness and gain conscience… and you will be cured.[34]

Following Fengyi's instructions, the woman was able to sit up from the sick bed in 3 days, walk in 7 days, and travel by herself back to her natal family in 10 days.

Though the woman's return to her natal family may raise doubts about the effectiveness of Fengyi's intervention in the woman's dispute with her husband's family, at the very least, it showed his morality healing to be successful enough to relieve the woman's physical ailments. In his own recap of the import of the incident, Fengyi comments: "This time I was forced to join the Liangshan Mountain rebels, to show my face.[35] People are always pressed to show their faces. What a joke."[36] In contrast to his lack of confidence when the story begins, at which

[34] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 117-118.
[35] Originating from an episode from the vernacular novel, *Shuihu zhuan* 水浒传, this idiom was later used to refer to someone being forced to commit to an action.
[36] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 118.

"sweat poured down his head" (满头大汗) when the Li family insisted on his morality-healing visit, by the end, Fengyi recognizes that the incident has allowed him to gain a reputation among the rural community, possibly also reaffirming to himself the validity of his "explicating illness" technique, which has the ability to cure people through self-reflection and repentance. Combined with Fengyi's miraculous self-healing after returning from Yang Bai's house, this incident is one more step in his accretion of the experiences, resources, and reputation to develop his healing techniques, which reach maturity in the second enlightenment when all the buddhas and deities come down from the Three Realms to reaffirm his omniscience.

Forming the second *leitmotif* in *Yanxing lu*, these stories analyzed above constitute a coherent story arc, revealing Wang Fengyi's "startup" stage as a religious practitioner that became formalized/ritualized via the second enlightenment. *Shanrendao*'s major attractiveness to commoners, as I will show in Chapters 2 and 3, would indeed be grounded in this unique morality-healing technique.

Conclusion

The "Real Record of Practicing the Way," the third volume of *Yanxing lu*, contains a narrative in Wang Fengyi's voice explicating the specific steps through which he gained the Way. Each step, presented as an anecdote capturing Fengyi's experience in rural communities, was to introduce Fengyi's increasing realization of the Way. The extraction of these two *leitmotifs* aims to uncover an essential duality constituting the core of *Shanrendao* values, for both its founder and its advocates.

The two Enlightenments, during which the founder ultimately gained omniscience and developed his morality-healing techniques, could be understood as addressing two of his major

concerns about the collapsing rural community: omniscience granted him the capacity to know ways of saving Chinese society; morality-healing techniques allowed him to cure people's bodily sickness by repenting past moral failures. Later disciples' continuous emphasis on these two Enlightenments, as cornerstones justifying *Shanrendao*'s legitimacy, reaffirms this interpretation of the presence of this duality among its advocates. A similar applicability of this dual structure of *Shanrendao* will become apparent in the remaining sections of this thesis. The two *leitmotifs* present in the anecdotes related in *Yanxing lu* would gradually consolidate into concrete practices in Fengyi's activism in the forthcoming years, institutionalized through his healing practices and his development of charitable schools. Both would draw believers into the *Shanrendao* organization.

Before turning to Fengyi's attempts to institutionalize his teachings, it is crucial to first understand these two themes as not abrupt inventions by one charismatic figure. Fengyi's development of his beliefs and practices was positioned within a larger intellectual-cultural context existent in Chinese society since at least the mid-sixteenth century. People's familiarity with these cultural repertoires, furthermore, fostered their acceptance of Fengyi's *Shanrendao* doctrines. This approach, I argue, allows historians to more comprehensively understand the meaning of *Shanrendao* to, first, the rural communities with which Fengyi interacted, and later, the Northeastern society in China as a whole.

Chapter 2: The Morality Books and Morality Healing of Wang Fengyi

The vision promoted in *Shanrendao* beliefs clearly draws upon a diverse range of longstanding popular morality practices in late imperial China. One central theme that saturated the first *leitmotif*—enlightenment to the Way—in Fengyi's early stories was a sense of moral anxiety, which had recurring precedents among late imperial local elites. One response to such anxiety was the production, reproduction, and investment of time and expense into morality books. Fengyi constantly cites morality books as his source of inspiration for many of his ideas and practices; they were often the medium through which he came to recognize existing social problems in his own time.[1] As the work of Cynthia Brokaw and Tobie Meyer-Fong has demonstrated, local elites in the late Ming and post-Taiping Qing times also addressed their concerns about moral corruption and social anxiety via morality books. One difference between the ledgers of merit and demerit (*gongguoge* 功过格) in the late Ming or Yu Zhi's 余治 moral exhortations in the second half of the nineteenth century and Fengyi's own moral stories, though, might be that in the earlier examples the elites not only recited existing morality books, but also actively developed new works and new textual formats for their moral exhortations. In the case of Fengyi, perhaps due to his limited literacy, he seems to have cobbled together ideas from the existing repertoire of morality books.

[1] Fengyi seems to only recognize the existence of social issues through the values promulgated in morality books. This is especially highlighted in his story of nearly starving himself to death. But this is not to say that he would not have developed moral anxiety without the influence from these morality books. Instead, I believe these moral exhortations were only a medium through which Fengyi was able to better explain the societal problems he witnessed, functioning as useful mnemonic by means of which he could articulate his dissatisfaction with local customs.

To properly understand *Yanxing lu*'s explication of the cultural nexus in rural communities with which our protagonist interacted, I examine Wang Fengyi's *Shanrendao* doctrines in relation to Yuan Huang 袁黄 and Yu Zhi's engagements with the morality book tradition. Each respectively adding to this socio-cultural movement that translated social anxiety into textualized moral guidance, these three figures by no means resorted to the same procedures but instead chose different strategies within the repertoire of cultural elements available to them in their respective times and locales; yet, at the same time, it is possible to view their contributions to the morality book tradition as an accumulative process through which socio-cultural elements reverberated between social groups and, thereby, circulated across regions and classes over the Ming-Qing era, collectively constructing a deep repository of beliefs, texts, and practices surrounding the morality text medium that could generate plausible moral strategies for manifold audiences throughout Chinese society.

The first section offers a comparison between Fengyi and Yuan Huang. The examination of Yuan's rewriting of *gongguoge* morality books provides a channel for retracing the intellectual origins of some of Fengyi's *Shanrendao* beliefs, which reinterpreted and vernacularized elite orthodoxy for rural audiences. Interestingly, in spite of their divergence in terms of social status, Yuan Huang and Wang Fengyi presented highly similar approaches to utilizing a blend of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy and three-teachings syncretism in formulating and defending their innovations.

I then turn to the continuities of intellectual foundations and dissemination practices of between Yu Zhi and Fengyi. Parallels between their lecturing strategies shed light on more concrete practices surrounding morality book teachings in the late Qing, whereby individual proselytizers mobilized the lecture—or oral transmission—to communicate with rural audiences

and defend orthodox moral values in the face of a perceived increasingly corrupt moral order. Through these comparisons, I also reveal an undercurrent of Qing state-sanctioned moral messages that became part and parcel of *Shanrendao* teachings.

Finally, I turn attention to *Shanrendao*'s second *leitmotif*—morality healing— which, I will argue, moved Fengyi from lecturing to activism and was crucial for his later success. Healing through morality offered local audiences a concrete method to ameliorate their troubles. Still, for morality healing to be effective, Fengyi had to base it upon existing cultural repertoires, the most noteworthy of which was the ritualistic transformation of filial tombs into sacred sites. By the 1930s, parallel practices in Northeastern China—originally viewed as deviations from proper filial protocol—would come to be associated with the later iteration of *Shanrendao* teachings known as *Wanguo daodehui*.

Overall, I propose that the diverse strategies involved in the construction of *Shanrendao* can be viewed as a rural Northeastern China instantiation of "grassroots Confucianism," a slight twist on what, in other contexts, Qitao Guo has called "popular Confucianism."[2]

Fate and Religious Syncretism

Historical work on the late Ming has addressed the widespread social anxiety of the era, and many of these studies speak to the common understanding of social disorder as closely associated with moral failures.[3] The ledgers of merit and demerit of the 17th to 18th centuries, a form of morality book that gained wide popularity across social stratifications, represent attempts by people from diverse social groups to calculate their merit score and thereby predict the

[2] Qitao Guo, *Ritual Opera and Mercantile Lineage*, 2-3.
[3] Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure:The confusions of pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1-3.

fortune or misfortune they might encounter during the coming year.[4] Gaining literati attention since the 16th century and becoming increasingly popular across the next two centuries, the ledgers constitute part of a larger "morality book movement" that continued to penetrate society in Fengyi's time. In the late Ming, these ledgers were still mainly produced by authors from "all levels of the scholar-to-official hierarchy" in Southeastern China, where Chinese people experienced the most "profound economic changes and social upheavals."[5] Though some ledgers were later published in North China, Brokaw emphasizes that the popularity of these morality books largely remained a social phenomenon in the South. Fengyi, in comparison, differed from these characteristics both regionally and by his relatively lower position in the social hierarchy.[6]

Brokaw shows that despite the complicated economic, social, and intellectual dynamics within which the movement was positioned, the ledgers' rising significance could find one of its crucial driving forces in the prominent individual, Yuan Huang 袁黄 (1533-1606). Yuan Huang, a scholar-official from Zhejiang, was inspired by both family tradition and personal experience to reinvigorate the concept of merit and demerit with a more active understanding of how people might shape their own fate or destiny. Embracing this new perspective on fate and merit, he encouraged such a vision through his rewriting of *gongguoge* morality books. Reading Wang Fengyi's teachings in light of Yuan Huang's *gongguoge* morality books contributes to understanding Fengyi's enlightenment experiences as both following a morality book tradition and reinventing new interpretations over previously existing notions in such cultural products. Additionally, not unlike the religious syncretism characteristic of the *gongguoge*, Wang Fengyi's *Shanrendao* doctrines were undergirded by a similar blend of Confucian, Buddhist, Daoist, and

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[4] Brokaw, *Ledgers of Merits and Demerits: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), 4.
[5] Brokaw, *Ledgers of Merits and Demerits*, 4.
[6] Brokaw, *Ledgers of Merits and Demerits*, 4.

folk beliefs. The concept of *liming* (determining fate 立命), which Brokaw has shown to be Yuan Huang's reinterpretation of existing Neo-Confucius orthodoxy for the purpose of justifying his own merit-demerit framework, becomes further elaborated in Fengyi's theorization of three types of fates. Still, a close reading of Fengyi's borrowing of this term *liming* exposes the shifting ground of religious syncretism inherent within morality book dissemination and belief in Northeast China at the end of the Qing.

What's more, this shared legacy is highlighted in works by later *Shanrendao* advocates. Yu Lingbo 于凌波, the editor of another version of *Wang Fengyi jiayan lu* (Records of Wang Fengyi's Goods Words), paired the quotations of Fengyi in *Yanxing lu* with Yuan Huang's famous instruction book, *Liaofan sixun* (Four Instructions from Liaofan 了凡四训).[7] This late 20th-century recognition of the two individuals' works as complementary further reaffirms the continuities of the morality book movement found in the writings by Fengyi and his disciples.

Of course, the impetus for the development of Yuan Huang's doctrines and reshaping of the *gonguoguo* practice is not as systematically observed as in Fengyi's narrative of his contemporary social issues, but instead seems to have originated from a generation-long family struggle to overcome misfortune since the beginning of the Ming dynasty. Banned from participation in the civil service examinations in the early Ming, the Yuan family instead invested in becoming medical healers, which they believed would enable them to accumulate merit for later generations.[8] The Yuan family's choice to become medical practitioners is echoed

[7] The compiled work is titled *Liaofan sixun yuyi*; *Wang Fengyi jiayan lu hekan* 了凡四训语译・王凤仪嘉言录合刊 (Combined publication of *Translations of Liaofan's Four Instructions* and *The Goods Words of Wang Fengyi*). The version available online only has the section on Wang Fengyi, but Yu clarifies in the preface that his motive for publishing the two morality books side by side was inspired by the encouragement of another devotee in Taiwan named Chen Yuejiao. Also, he spoke of both himself and Chen Yuejiao as lay devotees, as opposed to direct members of *Shanrendao* or *Daodehui*. In other words, the current impact of *Shanrendao* doctrines may extend beyond Society members. https://simple.taolibrary.com/category/category4/c402.htm#a02
[8] Brokaw, *Ledgers of Merit and Demerit*, 65-68.

in Fengyi's attention to healing, what I have called his second *leitmotif*. A longstanding cultural correlation between practicing medicine and moral conduct helps to explain this parallelism.[9]

Interestingly, to form and justify the merit accumulation system, the Yuan family also borrowed "from a variety of beliefs and texts," or what scholars of late imperial China speak about as "Three-Teachings Syncretism, which embraced the Wang Yangming interpretation of Neo-Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism."[10] Fengyi's complex beliefs and healing practices also evince religious syncretism, although it is further inflected by larger socio-cultural patterns in rural communities of Northeastern China during his own lifetime.[11] Not only is there a diverse range of cultural-religious factors scattered throughout Fengyi's early activist practices and formation of *Shanrendao* doctrines in the third volume of *Yanxing lu*, but the organized doctrines are also systematically outlined in the first volume of *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, individually titled *Wang Fengyi jiayanlu* (The Good Words of Wang Fengyi). In this volume, Fengyi's theorization utilizes diverse religious systems for the purpose of explicating his *Shanrendao* visions. This is most explicitly clarified in section 22: "All religions are the same; it is only due to [people's] different ethnicities and cultural customs that the founders of the different religions established different religions. The central doctrine is always to carry out Heaven's Way, and the goal is always to redeem humanity, to redirect them from evilness to goodness, and therefore to save lives."[12] Pointing towards a relativist position, such tenets support Fengyi's religious syncretism.

Although emerging centuries earlier than Fengyi's time, Yuan Huang clearly represents one of the predecessors of this movement. He used the term *liming* (determining fate 立命),

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[9] Of course, the existence of this cultural mentality shows greater resemblances with Fengyi's second *leitmotif*, which will be discussed below.

[10] Brokaw, *Ledgers of Merit and Demerit*, 74-75.

[11] Brokaw, *Ledgers of Merit and Demerit*, 73.

[12] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 36. 万"教都是一个，因为种族不同、风俗不同，所以各教教主所创的教也不同。他的宗旨都是替天行道，他的目的都是为了度人，使人改恶向善，以救人的性命。"

meaning "standing firm on one's proper destiny" (derived from teachings in the *Mencius*), to describe his vision of merit accumulation.[13] In the process, Yuan took Mencius's words as proof that one could self-cultivate and commit to certain actions to reshape his or her originally assigned fate. However, as Brokaw points out, such an interpretation of Mencius deviated from the Neo-Confucian orthodox interpretation of the classics, which only confirmed the plausibility of improving one's moral dignity, not one's material conditions.[14] These unique interpretations of individual fate argued by means of phrases within the *Mencius* resurface in Wang Fengyi's explication of *Shanrendao* doctrines, again reflective of the continuities from the late imperial morality book tradition. In section 21, "Three Fates," Fengyi explains his categorization of three types of fate human beings possess: the fate of Heaven (*tianming* 天命), the fate of predetermination (*suming* 宿命), and the fate of temperament (*yinming* 阴命). Fengyi respectively defined these fates as "morality and justice" (道义), one's knowledge, ability, and wealth, and one's negative personality traits. Based on these definitions, he writes: "If you investigate thoroughly these three fates, and use them well, you will certainly receive a good fate. It is on you whether you have a good fate or not, and [so] why would you need fortune-telling?"[15]

It is not surprising, perhaps, that Fengyi also made use of Mencius in support of his vision. Quoting *Mencius'*, "Commentary on Gaozi I" (告子章句上), he states: "Mencius said: 'Cultivate the noble rank assigned by Heaven and noble rank in the human world will follow,' but once people receive their noble rank in the human world, they stop cultivating the Heavenly

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[13] I follow the translation of the term *liming* from Brokaw, *Ledgers of Merit and Demerit*, 77.
[14] Brokaw, *Ledgers of Merit and Demerit*, 84.
[15] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 35.

one!”[16] The first half of the sentence directly quotes Mencius, whereas the second half shifts to Fengyi’s own vernacularized translation of Mencius’s words. Fengyi’s own voice, by such means, becomes closely intertwined with that of Mencius, implying that he is following a manner of reinterpretation of Mencius’s texts consistent with the Confucian notion of self-cultivation not unlike that expressed in Yuan Huang’s ledgers.

This similarity is further accentuated in Fengyi’s differentiation of Mencius’s distinction between Heaven’s noble rank (tianjue 天爵) and humanly noble rank (renjue 人爵) in his own distinction between the three different fates and their complicated relationships. He says:

> Cultivating morality is to lengthen the fate of Heaven (*tianming* 天命), learning skills and accumulating wealth are to lengthen the fate of predetermination (*suming* 宿命), while contention and greediness are to lengthen the fate of temperament (yinming 阴命). Wisely use your fate of predetermination, and you can lessen your fate of temperament; not using the fate of predetermination well will increase the fate of temperament. Only by lengthening the fate of Heaven can you for sure lessen the fate of temperament. Nowadays, people only know how to use [indulge] the fate of temperament and value only the fate of predetermination, but do not know how to lengthen their fate of Heaven. How can they possibly understand the Way of Heaven?[17]

Beneath this seemingly complicated framework is actually a straightforward message: the goal is self-cultivation and the gradual erasure of one’s personality weaknesses; this can be achieved

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[16] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 35.

[17] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 35. “孟子说：‘修其天爵而人爵从之’，可是人一得了人爵，就不再修天爵啦！修德性是长天命，学习技艺、多积钱财，都是长宿命，争贪是长阴命。善用宿命的长知足，能消阴命，不会用的长阴命。只有长天命，是一定可以消阴命。现今的人只知用阴命，重宿命，不知道长天命。又怎能明白天道呢？”

through cultivating one's sense of morality and justice; it is also possible to lessen weaknesses by correctly utilizing one's wealth and abilities, such as helping others and engaging in charitable practices; if, however, one blindly uses wealth and skills to pursue more wealth and higher social status, this will only lead one to indulgence in weaknesses and to become even more corrupt.

As shown, Fengyi's interpretation of Mencius is no less idiosyncratic than Huang Yuan's approach. At first glance, these words might appear to resemble an orthodox Neo-Confucius interpretation of Mencius's words due to his prioritization of the fate of Heaven, which corresponds to the self-cultivation of personal moral fate over the fate of predetermination. However, Fengyi fails to fully separate moral fate and material fate. In his mind, one can still correctly use material fate (the fate of predetermination) to cultivate oneself and change one's destiny. In other ways, however, Fengyi's notion of the fate of temperament does not fully correspond to Huang Yuan's *gongguoge* framework, which further signifies his departure from not only Neo-Confucian orthodoxy but also Yuan Huang's merit-demerit theories. It is safe to say that Fengyi is by no means completely adhering to any already-existing systems in his preaching of *Shanrendao*; rather, he instead is actively crafting his own syncretism of elements collected from his surrounding environment.

The appearance of the term *liming* in the *Shanrendao* doctrines further reaffirms this understanding of *Shanrendao* as not merely continuous with *gongguoge* practice; instead, it represents its own discrete reinterpretation of concepts learned from previous morality books. Section 23 of the first volume is explicitly titled *liming* (立命), resembling a core notion in Huang Yuan's belief, but Fengyi's explanation of the term differs from Huang's definition. He starts the section with the line: "People in the world all want to live a happy life, but why are

there few people who enjoy such a life while most people suffer? This is because, first, people do not know when to feel satisfied, and second, they do not recognize their own fate. For a person to achieve the Way, they need to know how to enjoy happiness when they have it and know how to seek happiness when they don't."[18] These starting lines conclude that most human tragedies originate from people not knowing when to feel satisfied (*bu zhizu* 不知足) and "failing to recognize their fate" (*bu renming* 不认命). While the former phrase, *bu zhizu*, is a common saying condemning human greediness, the latter three-character phrase, *bu renming*, has a more ambiguous meaning: it can mean either not recognizing one's fate or not submitting to one's fate.

Such ambiguity made *Shanrendao* a target of later criticism due to its implicit fatalism in the face of Japanese imperialist aggression in Northeast China. Here, suffice to say, the significance lies in the term's deviation from the meaning assigned to it in Yuan Huang's writings. Unlike Yuan Huang's perception of fate as a combination of one's moral magnitude, material possession, and social status, Wang Fengyi's description of determining fate is more linked to a person's responsibility within society, what he calls one's duty (*benfen* 本分). He writes: "Fate is one's *benfen*, and fulfilling one's duty determines his fate of Heaven."[19] This supplementary definition of the fate of Heaven, he goes on to elaborate, requires people to follow their appropriate titles, or stations in life: "People's titles are given by Heaven: those who cook are called head chefs, and those who write are addressed as teachers. If people commit to things that do not follow from their titles, that is relinquishing their fate of Heaven, and therefore not recognizing their fate." He further warns of the risk of overstepping such duties and titles: "To practice the Way is to not step away from one's original position. If [one] leaves their original

[18] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 37.
[19] 命就是人的本分，守住本分就立住了天命。See: *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 37.

position, there is no reward but only retribution for such efforts. What is the original position? That is one's *benfen*. Accepting the situation/position will lead to achieving the Way."[20] The concept promoted here resonates with the basic Confucian concept of the "rectification of names" (*zhengming* 正名), which emphasizes the importance of conducting oneself in accordance with certain social positions, thus Fengyi's stress on *benfen* suggests more of a restoration of social hierarchy instead of (as in the case of Yuan Huang) taking the agency to transform or improve one's destiny.

While all these ideas can be viewed as encouraging a fatalistic vision among the rural devotees to accept their lot in life, Fengyi certainly recognizes the proper duties that correspond to people of the various social classes: "For the governor of a province, the people in the province are his fate. For the magistrate of a county, the people in the county are his fate. For a teacher, his students are his fate. For a swineherd, the pigs are his fate. If they complain about the workload, or bully others with their power, that is abandoning their fate (life)!" He justifies this logic through "supply and demand": "If there were no pigs, why would anyone hire a swineherd? If there were no students, why would anyone hire a teacher? If there were no people, there would be no officials. It is clear that those things under one's responsibility are their fate of Heaven."[21] Like what we have witnessed with Fengyi's construction of *Shanrendao* doctrines, specific social issues are hinted at in his elaboration of *Shanrendao* theory. As exemplified by Yang Bai's misfortune in the anecdote in volume three, the issue of banditry became the immediate context for many of Fengyi's stories. The social disorder depicted in *Yanxing lu*, including the

[20] 人的名是天给的，煮饭的叫大司釜，写字的称为先生。人做事要是名不符实，就是丢天命，也就是不知命。行道不可出本位，若是离开本位，不但劳而无功，反而有过。什么是本位呢？就是人的本分，‘素位而行’就可以成道。See: *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 38.

[21] 当省长的一省的民就是他的命，当县长的一县的百姓就是他的命，当教师的，学生就是他的命，放猪的猪官，猪就是他的命。要是因为事多生怨，或是仗势欺人，都是不要命啦！若是没有猪，谁雇猪官？没有学生，谁请先生？没有百姓，不会设官，可见本分内的事就是人的天命。See: *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 38.

dysfunction of the local bureaucracy, is further highlighted when Fengyi concludes Yang Bai's false arrest to be the result of the yamen secretary's greed. Prasenjit Duara's work has provided a more comprehensive picture of the systematic failure of local bureaucracies in rural north China during the Qing's waning years. Not only did the state-brokerage model lead to sub-bureaucratic clerks and runners abusing their powers, but the state's incompetence at the village level also seeded the conditions for the proliferation of local bullies.[22] If read in light of Fengyi's concept of fate, then all these societal problems can be explained as people having relinquished the duties of their fate. Fengyi's exhortations to determine one's individual fate, then, represent a call to restore social order and bureaucratic responsibility.

Compared to Yuan Huang's cautious calculation of merit and demerit through the writing of *gongguoge*, the collective effect of which would determine one's fate, Fengyi's explanation of the notion of *liming* is simplistic: fulfilling one's duties determines one's fate. This can be explained by the vernacular nature of Fengyi's teachings. Parallel to Fengyi's own low social status in comparison to Yuan Huang, *Shanrendao*'s target audiences were also on the lower end of the social ladder. Unlike Yuan Huang's readers, who had a clear path of examination to pursue to transcend their social station, Fengyi's rural audiences lacked any specified means of social mobility. This makes bodily healing the more attractive outcome and, therefore, the standard for efficaciousness for *Shanrendao* beliefs and practices.

Orality and Local Responses to Trauma

That we can find traces of Yuan Huang's ideas in *Shanrendao* doctrines suggests the effective dissemination of elite ideas into rural, illiterate populations from the seventeenth

[22] Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State*, 47, 223.

through the nineteenth centuries. Still, the divergences between the syncretic pieties of the *gongguoge* practice and Wang Fengyi's teachings become more apparent by turning to the second of his two *leitmotifs*, morality healing. Fengyi's *Shanrendao* offers a response to the lack of medical care in the local community. As a result, his most intuitive goal for self-cultivation is self-healing. This facet of *Shanrendao* teachings was likely also a major attraction for Fengyi's early rural audiences.[23] To trace this thread further, I take insight from Tobie Meyer-Fong's research on the creation and promulgation of morality books in rural communities by the commoner man of letters Yu Zhi (1809-1874) in the wake of the Taiping Civil War. Meyer-Fong's analysis of Yu Zhi's writing of precious scrolls and morality books demonstrates an instance closer in time to that of Fengyi and at which individual and communal trauma was interpreted through a moralistic lens and took succor in redemption through social morality. Yu Zhi's methods for conveying his message across rural communities in the form of morality books highly resemble those of Fengyi. Fengyi, of an even lower social station, whether consciously or not, tapped into these same strains of socio-cultural anxieties.

If Yu Zhi's emphasis on morality book lectures in rural regions was backed by his own interpretation of a national crisis as a result of the heterodoxy messages spread by Taiping rebel forces, in Fengyi's case the social disorder and outburst of local violence were responses to the First Sino-Japanese War in Northeast China.[24] Both preachers of morality shared their understanding of what caused such nationwide catastrophes: people's moral failures.[25] The solution, subsequently, was to rely on lectures and performances in rural communities to spread

[23] Brokaw, *Ledgers of Merit and Demerit*, 103.
[24] When addressing the cause for Yang Bai's imprisonment, Wang Fengyi blamed the emergence of bandits as a result of the Turmoil of Jiawu 甲午变乱, another name for the First Sino-Japanese War. See *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 110.
[25] Tobie Meyer-Fong, *What Remains: Coming to Terms with Civil War in 19th Century China* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013), 30.

the correct values, although the definition of such "correct values" could be ambiguous. Comparison of Fengyi with Yu Zhi draws the focal point to their shared use of orality and ritual action as a response to trauma in local communities.

In Yu Zhi's vision, "the spoken words" both homogenize value systems across the communities and consolidate existing social stratifications "imagined as an audience of gentry, elders, and commoners."[26] Adapting to his audiences' needs, such as "uttering in dialect," Yu Zhi's ultimate goal was to "evangelize for moral and political transformation" even for "those too ignorant to read." Wang Fengyi's absorption of morality book messages in his early life as a laborer, before he could write or read, shows Yu Zhi's vision to have been effective. As Meyer-Fong has shown, such methods were not restricted to Yu Zhi but were also employed by other local elites to gain support for "militia resistance" against the Taiping troops.[27]

Although state-funded orators already existed in rural areas, holding regular lectures on imperially sanctioned ethics, Yu Zhi had found their efficacy unsatisfactory. In his opinion, these people lacked the necessary skills to attract rural audiences, whereas his personal experience as a primary school teacher equipped him with sufficient oral skills "to utter moral messages in a range of vernacular registers."[28] At a later time, he further criticized local officials' incompetence, saying that the bureaucratic system could not timely protect local interest. As Meyer-Fong points out, Yu Zhi advocated having local activists replace representatives of the state in restoring social order and moral values in the local region, a perspective shared by Fengyi as well.[29]

[26] Meyer-Fong, *What Remains*, 30.
[27] Meyer-Fong, *What Remains*, 30.
[28] Meyer-Fong, *What Remains*, 32.
[29] Meyer-Fong, *What Remains*, 33-34.

On the one hand, Fengyi clearly was among those commoners, in the words of Yu Zhi, "too ignorant to read," as he collected many of his early inspirations from local lectures based on morality books. On the other hand, the *Shanrendao* founder also wielded the method of morality book lectures in conveying his message to local communities in the face of the state's failure to protect social justice. His own lectures on morality before his community subsequently enabled him to transcend his status from a commoner listening to such stories to an activist who actively crafted new morality tales to awaken rural populations. Fengyi's early dissemination of morality stories was also driven by a sense of insecurity regarding any official attempts to restore social order and public morality. Certainly, the Qing state's presence was almost completely lacking in the picture that emerges from Fengyi's anecdotes about his local community; the only local officials occasionally mentioned are presented as engaging in shady activities. In the anecdotes following Fengyi's two enlightenments, and more specifically, after he successfully finished guarding his father's tombs, he proceeded to promote his ideas through lecturing on morality himself. Preaching morality and practicing morality-healing constituted the two fundamental methods through which he cultivated his personal charisma in rural communities, thereby launching the later success of *Shanrendao*.

However, lectures might be meaningless without the correct messages. This need for an ideological basis, viewed as fundamental by Yu Zhi for him to begin his career as a proselytizer of popular Confucian morality, is also visible in in Fengyi's exhortatory anecdotes. In Yu Zhi's "battle" against the Taiping rebels, he argued that to avoid the spread of heterodox messages across rural communities, including those "proclaiming seductive messages of disorder, the end of rents, and eradication of the 'demon-Manchus,'" the speaker in the community had to ground

his messages in the correct vehicle.[30] He subsequently identified the rural compact (*xiang yue*), village lectures, or The Yongzheng Emperor's Amplification of the Kangxi Emperor's Sacred Edict, as an effective, imperially sanctioned basis that could be utilized for "shielding communities from war and heterodoxy."[31]

Despite the state's negligible appearance in *Yanxing lu*, the Kangxi Emperor's Sacred Edict, a partial foundation for Yu Zhi's oral performance and morality book lecturing also undergirded the morality books that influenced Fengyi and garnered his endorsement. The Kangxi Sacred Edict still informed—directly and indirectly—the textual sources essential to his religio-philosophical ideas. This suggests that Qing state orthodoxy also fed into *Shanrendao* doctrines in the late Qing and early Republican eras, in addition to the blend of Daoism, Buddhism, and folk wisdom that was already a long-standing part of popular morality in the late imperial era. Across the scattered stories leading to Fengyi's enlightenment, many of these morality book stories can be traced to a common textual origin. When speaking about his first encounter with Yang Bai, he specifically introduced the book, *Xuanjiang shiyi* 宣讲拾遗, a collection of morality book stories compiled by Zhuang Boxian 庄跛仙, as the material upon which Yang Bai based his lectures at the time. The stories, Yang Jiao'ai Lays Down His Life for the Sake of Friendship (羊角哀舍命全交) and "Third Concubine Disciplines Her Son" (三娘教子), were included in Zhuang's compilation.[32] Morality book stories lacking specific sources, such as "Xunnu liangci" 训女良词 (Good words to instruct women) from Fengyi's anecdote, "Determined to Starve to Death," also were collected in *Xuanjiang shiyi*.

[30] Tobie Myer-Fong, *What Remains*, 30.
[31] Tobie Myer-Fong, *What Remains*, 31.
[32] Yang Jiao'ai Lays Down His Life for the Sake of Friendship also can be found in Feng Menglong's *Stories Old and New* 喻世明言; "Third Concubine Disciplines Her Son" (三娘教子) is featured in Li Yu's short story collection, *Silent Operas* 无声戏.

Even stories not explicitly referred to by Fengyi but contained in the collection suggest strong correlations. A story titled, "Repenting for Faults and Healing Disease," in *Xuanjiang shiyi* speaks of a woman who cures her sickness after letting go of her irritation. This example proposes another possible source of inspiration for Fengyi's invention of morality-healing techniques. It is possible that *Sanniang jiaozi* was not the only morality book story that touched Fengyi to recognize his own flaws; perhaps the use of morality to heal psychosomatic symptoms in this unspecified story may have also provided inspiration for his notion of morality-healing.

Undeniably, the presence of such a compilation reaffirms the position of Fengyi's *Shanrendao* activism within the larger morality book tradition, expanding our understanding about the context of cultural repertoires integrated into its creation. The image of the state, contrary to its seeming invisibility in *Yanxing lu*, becomes highlighted in this process. But simultaneously, this insight into the state's image can become further complicated by Duara's notion of superscription. In the case of the god Guandi, Duara argues, the Qing state effectively constructed multiple layers of symbolic images for the deity. Yet, such an ideological instrument was also extremely compatible with Guandi's image in folk culture as a popular god of wealth. Established via this superscription of diverse symbolism, the cult of Guandi gained its popularity among different social classes and groups and subsequently became a strong medium for both the state and the local elites to mobilize the public; in crises such as the Taiping Civil War, such superscribed beliefs proved successful in garnering commoner support for the Qing state.[33]

We can detect this pattern of superscription in *Xuanjiang shiyi* as well. Starting with the Kangxi Sacred Edict, Zhuang's introduction continues to employ instructions from the imperially approved popular deities in support of the text's legitimacy, including not only the

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[33] Prasenjit Duara, "Superscribing Symbols: The Myth of Guandi, Chinese God of War," *Journal of Asian Studies* (Nov. 1988, Vol. 47, No. 4): 789-790.

aforementioned Guandi, but also Wenchang, Lü Dongbin, and the Stove God. Drawing from a wide range of cults, all imperially sanctioned but carrying different symbolic significance, the local elite was deploying a strategy similar to what Duara has observed about the cult of Guandi in rural North China. The resurgence of this state-directed strategy in Zhuang Boxian's work, with Guandi's name also closely intertwined with the emperor's instructions, suggests another mode of lecturing in rural communities that enabled the morality book lecturers to be successful.

Still, as suggested above, Fengyi differed from Yuan Huang and Yu Zhi, specifically regarding their engagement with the process of morality book writing. With both Yuan Huang and Yu Zhi, we can witness their writing and rewriting of essentially newly constructed containers for value systems, not to mention other instances of vernacular literature or popular culture continuously incorporated into the content of morality books.[34] With Fengyi, in contrast, despite his enthusiasm for spreading moral exhortations, he was never a direct crafter of any morality book stories. Even the textualization of orality, the most thorough of which was *Yanxing lu*, was constructed decades after Fengyi's times by his close disciples such as Zheng Jiachun or Zhu Xuntian. Fengyi's absence from textual creation may have been on account of his illiterate background, but it may also be a result of his focus on speaking to lower-class rural audiences. For Fengyi, the stories in morality books were not just stories; to him, these were recordings of actual historical experiences. In the first volume of *Yanxing lu*, Fengyi clarifies his understanding of morality book characters: "[Although] I did not read books as a child since I was illiterate, whenever I heard about the goodness of an ancient person, I learned from them."

[34] The incorporation of popular deities and other vernacular stories into the category of morality books are clear examples in our case.

He sees this as fundamental to his apprehension of the Way: "Knowing another person is knowing another Way."[35]

Despite our awareness that many morality tales were mobilized in the writings of Ming-Qing elites for a new kind of fiction, Fengyi treats the characters in these stories as actual historical figures whose virtues he dedicated himself to emulating. In the same quote explaining his perspective on the morality book characters, Fengyi once again presents his recognition of his two enlightenments, positioning his argument about the meaning of morality book characters within his two series of anecdotes:

> I first learned from 'Yang Jiaoai Sacrificing His Life for His Friend' to rescue Yang Bai, and then learned from 'Yang Yi Guarding the Tomb' to sit vigil at my father's tomb for three years.[36]

Such practices, Fengyi states, were also the Way of the Sages, "learning with a constant perseverance and application 学而时习之."[37] For Fengyi, this was also where people failed to follow the sages' instructions:

> Shamefully, people cannot believe sincerely, refuse to learn, and pay no attention to the virtuous people they encounter, which amounts to futilely learning and not practicing 空学没习... People nowadays read a lot of books, [and therefore] know a lot of ancient people, but they do not take a liking to any of them, so they do not learn from any of them either. That is thinking too highly of themselves…[38]

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[35] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 3.
[36] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 3.
[37] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 3.
[38] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 3.

This approach to the morality book tradition, reflected as the central premise for the formation of *Shanrendao* doctrines, thus became another driving force for Fengyi to utilize morality book lectures to launch his activism. In Fengyi's point of view, introducing these ancient people to his contemporary audiences was to prevent moral corruption from infiltrating Chinese society, thereby redeeming social justice. Consequently, such views by Fengyi played crucial roles in his justifications for moral concerns, or perhaps more fundamentally, in systematizing the moral values that later became manifested and consolidated into *Shanrendao* both textually and institutionally.

On the one hand, these insights expose the potential mental landscape in rural communities regarding the commoners' understanding of the fictional characters in morality books upon which such books gained their rhetorical effectiveness. On the other hand, they directly explain the reasoning behind the invocation of Yang Jiaoai's and Yang Yi's stories, both of which were core to the Fengyi's enlightenments. While Yang Jiaoai's story likely became known to Fengyi through *Xuanjiang shiyi*, I have not been able to trace a definitive source for Yang Yi's story. To fill in this vacuum, I turn now to the second thread of attention in the *Shanrendao* texts, morality-healing.

Morality-Healing

If the analyses orienting Fengyi's participation in an ever-transforming morality book movement have comprehensively exposed the forms of intellectual and cultural continuities, along with reinterpretations, *Shanrendao* doctrines represented in comparison to cultural products by Fengyi's predecessors, the series of *Shanrendao* anecdotes on morality healing reveal the borrowing of cultural symbols surrounding ritualized action in Northeastern rural

communities. This, I argue, was also a major attraction for most of Fengyi's early devotees. Rural commoners' concerns were necessarily different from those of social elites.

If anything, the extreme filial piety signified by sitting vigil at familial tombs deviated from elite perceptions of proper filial devotion. The practice of "guarding the tomb," along with the notion of manifesting extreme filial piety through this ritual, as DuBois demonstrates in his study of "the cult of filial tombs" during the Manchukuo period, represents a large-scale reinvention of filial rituals in the grassroots society of Northeastern China. In *Yanxing lu*, the narrator provides two sources of inspiration for Fengyi to guard his father's tomb in 1901, respectively being Yang Yi's story from morality book teaching and Fengyi's brother-in-law, Bai Qin, who personally guarded his mother's tomb for three years and received an official commendation as a filial son. While Fengyi's narrative of these origin stories might have conveyed to his readers a sense of ritualistic legitimacy, DuBois reveals that such practices were, in fact, considered too extreme in the eyes of Chinese elites, as they "depart[ed] from traditional Confucian mourning practice" and were unorthodox in nature.[39] For a ritual to represent Confucian ideals, it was necessary to accord with proper protocols; mourning excessively conducted could well evoke antipathy from local officials and state authorities.[40]

If DuBois's argument that Chinese elites held neutral, if not negative, attitudes to such improper filial rituals is correct, then Bai Qin's receipt of the title, Filial Bai, may represent a case in which local elites attempted to officially define—and thereby delimit—an already-existing social practice.[41] On a more popular level, however, by undergoing legalization in the early Ming and the formulation of extreme filial piety "exceeding the rites" in popular stories

[39] DuBois, *Empire and the Meaning of Religion in Northeast Asia*, 164-165.
[40] DuBois, *Empire and the Meaning of Religion in Northeast Asia*, 168-169.
[41] DuBois, *Empire and the Meaning of Religion in Northeast Asia*, 165.

like the *Twenty-Four Exemplars of Filial Piety* (*Ershi si xiao* 二十四孝), the tradition of mourning for three years after a parent's death had become deeply embedded in the cultural practices of Chinese society for centuries, especially through tales and oral traditions, which were known for their effectiveness in penetrating grassroots society. Even if people rarely fully committed to these dangerous rituals, DuBois argues that they were certainly familiar with such practices.[42] By such means, Fengyi's inspiration from Yang Yi's story in morality book teachings surely represents a manifestation of this popular social practice.

Guarding the grave also had cultural roots in the custom of graveside worship in northern China. One characteristic of this tradition was that such practices constantly transformed the grave into a "sacred site," from which not only "moral exemplars" but also "efficacious healers, sectarian teachers, and local military figures" gained inspiration. Late Qing healer Yu Wu, whose grave became the locus of "the construction of the Previous Spreading Light Pagoda" 普亮宝塔, and missionary Liu Lisan, who "brought the Heaven and Earth Teaching to Cang County in southern Hebei," and whose grave still "remains a place of special veneration" in the region, both exemplify how such cultural notions and local religious customs surrounding graves were converted into lasting, systematic local practices.[43] Such cultural perceptions of gravesites, as witnessed in Fengyi's moral healing technique, were continued in the *Shanrendao* founder's enlightenment story. However, as DuBois also notes, for many of these early cases, the attractiveness of the grave and the derived sacredness of this ritualized space largely came from the "magical power of the grave's occupant."[44] Thus, Wang Fengyi's enlightenment, while likely borrowing from the sacredness surrounding his contemporary ritualized gravesite, also

[42] DuBois, *Empire and the Meaning of Religion in Northeast Asia*, 170.
[43] DuBois, *Empire and the Meaning of Religion in Northeast Asia*, 167.
[44] DuBois, *Empire and the Meaning of Religion in Northeast Asia*, 168.

constitutes a reinvented tradition that came to be standardized across the late Qing and Manchukuo periods.

Two other cases of filial sons around this time offer a closer resemblance to Fengyi's scenario. Their dating is somewhat later than Wang's guarding the tomb practices, yet they further reaffirm the prevalence of this custom in the region in the early 20th century. Wang Mengxing 王梦惺, also known as Filial Wang, represents an elaboration of the stereotypical filial son story from the end of the Qing dynasty into the Republican era. Mengxing guarded his mother's tomb for three years beginning in 1910; he ultimately died at the end of his vigil and was buried next to his mother. Compared to his poor living circumstances and filial piety in his lifetime, DuBois notes, Wang's righteous death likely augmented his reputation in the community. Other than receiving recognition from local elites and acquiring the label of the "tomb of the filial son," Wang's gravesite also gained a reputation for possessing "miraculous power." This was partially due to his reputation for healing others during the three years of the vigil, although even after his death this reputation was magnified, as proven by people's continuous visits to the site for the purpose of fortune-telling, medicine-seeking, and vow-making.[45]

Clearly, Filial Wang's tomb was also ritualized into a sacred site, following the local custom sketched out by DuBois. At the same time, his curing of others during the vigil period resembles Fengyi's practices in the sixth chapter, "Guarding the Grave." Still, Wang Mengxing's practice occurred about a decade later than Fengyi's, suggesting that such practices increased into the early 20th century and that local elites became more sympathetic toward this grassroots ritual, which would have been condemned as improper in earlier times.

[45] DuBois, *Empire and the Meaning of Religion in Northeast Asia*, 171.

The case of Filial Li, perhaps, can reveal the greater impact of Fengyi's practice of guarding his father's tomb. In 1935, one of the female leaders of the *Daodehui* from Jiutai County passed away. Li Zhongsan, another Morality Society teacher from Yushu County, arrived right after the female leader's funeral and interment, insisting the woman was his deceased mother despite no one in the community recognizing him. Convinced by Li's passionate mourning and self-condemnation of "his own lack of" filial virtue, *Daodehui* members permitted his request to reside in a straw hut beside the grave, thus initiating Li's three years of vigil.[46]

Li's wife, brothers, and sisters soon joined him, and the local community also supported him with food and daily necessities. The local government noticed this activity, as they "posted placards warning nearby peasants and shepherds" not to create "excessive noise." The gravesite, as one would expect, underwent a sacred transformation, with people making pilgrimages to visit the site. Li, himself, became a target of people's worship and sold "handfuls of earth from the grave" as medicine. He also sold his calligraphy, as he was not allowed to speak during the vigil period and communicated mostly through writing.[47] Clearly, Li seems to have been able to extract a great amount of revenue from his three years of "guarding the grave," if not mobilizing "various support industries" encompassing the gravesite to provide "transportation, restaurants, opium houses, inns, and other votive goods" for visitors.[48] DuBois considers Li's success a result of his "manipulating the magical and financial power of the filial tomb," by invoking "the centuries-old association between extreme filial piety and miraculous power."[49] However, as Li's major backers were members of the Morality Society (and taking into account *Daodehui*'s

[46] DuBois, *Empire and the Meaning of Religion in Northeast Asia*, 176.
[47] This is different from Wang Fengyi's case, as Wang "explicates disease" for others.
[48] DuBois, *Empire and the Meaning of Religion in Northeast Asia*, 176-177.
[49] DuBois, *Empire and the Meaning of Religion in Northeast Asia*, 179.

popularity in the region at the time), it may be possible that these rituals were inspired to a certain degree by the Society's founder, Fengyi, whose participation in *Daodehui* in the 1930s represented the institutionalization of his *Shanrendao* doctrines.

Still, Filial Li's story is distinctive from Fengyi's second enlightenment in terms of both his financial motives and the form of medicine he offered to visitors. Instead of receiving financial benefits, according to the narrative of *Yanxing lu*, Fengyi provided patients with food, using a miraculously self-filling rice jar.[50] Wang's morality healing also emphasized the patients' recognition of their own faults and relieving sickness through the resumption of moral duties.

As Li Zhongsan's case exposes that Fengyi's teaching was not necessarily well understood by all his followers, we cannot neglect the reality that his teachings in *Yanxing lu* were also re-edited by his close disciples and later followers. In other words, all these doctrines extracted from the text might not be comprehensively representative of *Daodehui*'s methods back in the early 20th century. The discrepancy between the graveside vigils of Wang and Li reveals a key notion in Fengyi's *Shanrendao* cosmology that is different from other ritualistic expressions of faith healing: the absence of material mediums. Unlike Filial Li, Fengyi relied on nothing other than his skill at persuasion.

Yet, this is not to condemn Li Zhongsan's practices as an anomaly distorted by his financial motives; on the contrary, Filial Li's usage of ritualized materials for spiritual healing is reminiscent of other longstanding popular religious practices, one manifestation of which was spirit-writing. In Meir Shahar's study of Crazy Ji (*Jigong* 濟公), for example, the author observes the legendary Buddhist monk involved in various spirit-writing rituals, with devotees consulting his spirit for messages through the instrument of the planchette. Spirit-writing, an

[50] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 122.

automatic writing technique, is normally conducted with one or multiple individuals “in a trance” writing information down at the instruction of a deity, and the goal is to convey the deity’s words to the mortals’ world.[51] By the early 20th century, Jigong cult’s members constantly performed spirit-writing séances in the temple built on Ji’s gravesite, especially in a room recognized as Crazy Ji’s original bedroom.[52]

Shahar further reveals these spirit-writing rituals as not exclusively conducted by members of the Jigong cult, but a common practice that “enjoyed great popularity” among not only peasantry but also “some segments of the learned elite” at the time.[53] People from wildly divergent social groups, ranging from the anti-Christian Boxers in 1900 to Christian converts in the 1920s, resorted to the ritual for divine revelations.[54] This latter case especially draws my attention, as the Christians who summoned Jesus to the spirit-writing rituals, according to the original recorder of the anecdote Xu Dixian, conducted the ritual in Dalian, Liaoning, only about 500 kilometers away from Fengyi’s activity in Chaoyang county in the same province. Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” was assumed to be written in English, but since no one at the scene was able to read the original language, the Christian members had to call upon Jigong’s spirit for help, who then descended and wrote down the translation in Chinese. [55] Throughout the spirit-writing process, the planchette was the essential communication tool, constituting the ritualized object through which the metaphysical powers were manifested.

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[51] Meir Shahar, *Crazy Ji*, 188.

[52] As this certainly differed from the filial tomb practices in many dimensions, the sacralization of legendary figures’ tombs appears to be a common response people held. Meir Shahar, *Crazy Ji*, 172-173.

[53] Meir Shahar, *Crazy Ji*, 187.

[54] Meir Shahar, *Crazy Ji*, 189.

[55] Dishan Xu notes how strange it is for Jesus to speak in English, instead of Hebrew or any other language. This is because, according to Xu’s interpretation, Christian converts present at the scene likely had only heard preachings from the Bible from English-speaking missionaries, which subsequently proves that the content of spirit-writing actually depended on the knowledge and consciousness of those present at the ritual. Dishan Xu, *Researches into the Spirit-Writing Superstition*, (Changsha, Hunan: Yuelu Press, 2011), 78.

The practice of the automatic writing techniques, Shahar specifies elsewhere, served multiple visions of its participants: "from divination and the writing of charms to the compilation of lengthy books on morality, salvation, and the supernatural."[56] If the writing of charms and divine voices resemble those of Filial Li's ritualized materials for the purpose of spiritual-healing or fortune-telling, the function of producing morality books, then, further highlights the practice's involvement in the cultural arena in which *Shanrendao* took shape. As the core values within these morality books were not so different from those of Yuan Huang and Yu Zhi, combining "Confucian values with Buddhist ideas of karmic retribution" and encouraging "the virtues of filial piety, frugality, self-restraint, acceptance of hierarchical social relationships, and charitable works," realization of this other form of morality book writing may suggest yet another unspoken source of inspiration for Fenyi's embrace of the morality book movement.[57] Although I cannot not locate any specific text generated in this manner, traces of this automatic writing technique may still be witnessed in *Yanxing lu*.

In section 80, "Worshipping the Altar in Gangyaoling" 缸窑岭朝坛, reflecting the time at which Fengyi had already started launching campaigns to build female charity schools, the founder mentions his participation in a spirit-writing ritual at a temple in Gangyaoling. The descended deity at the time was Zhenwu dadi (also known as Xuantian shangdi), whose voice reaffirmed many of Fengyi's early practices:

> The old buddha (laofo 老佛, likely referring to Zhenwu dadi) sent down the message, pointing out my life stories, saying that I fulfilled loyalty as a laborer, fulfilled filial piety to my parents and brothers, and fulfilled justice by saving

[56] Meir Shahar, *Crazy Ji*, 188.
[57] Meir Shahar, *Crazy Ji*, 188.

> friend Yang Bai, therefore [I] could see bright sun in dark night and understand the Way. [He also said that I] guarded the tomb and guarded the three realms, redeeming people by explicating sickness, restoring people's hearts in the future, and redeeming morality and ethics. He considered me trustworthy and encouraged me to proceed further on my path.[58]

On the one hand, the repeated mention to Fengyi's two Enlightenments across *Yanxing lu* and *Shanrendao* advocates' later storytelling suggests that the *Shanrendao* text may have utilized spirit-writing rituals in support of its own vision. On the other hand, the direct incorporation of the spirit-writing rituals in one of Fengyi's anecdotes indicates the likelihood of *Shanrendao* members' familiarity with the cultural practice, justifying Filial Li's usage of ritualized calligraphy in his spiritual-healing and fortune-telling "businesses." The effect of this ritual practice, I argue, is akin to the sacralization of filial tombs that Li shared with Fengyi's precedent.

Filial Li's selling of his calligraphy, which DuBois explains away as a result of him being unable to speak during the vigil period, may echo the popular late Qing practice of *xizi*, or cherishing the written word. Starting as an individualized form of self-cultivation in late Ming, organized Societies had been established for such purposes since the early Qing, commonly referred to as *xizihui* (Societies to Cherish Written Words 惜字会). Initiated by examination candidates, the *xizi* practices uncoincidentally became accepted by people lower on the social ladder as time passed, coming to be reflected among "local elites, merchants, shopkeepers, and others."[59] The aftermath of cherishing words started to shift from merely leading to examination

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[58] "老佛降谕，把我的身世指示出来，说我扛活尽忠，奉养老人尽孝，对兄弟尽悌，救朋友杨柏尽义，所以才能黑夜见白日明道。守坟又守灵了三界，讲病化人，对未来的挽正人心，重整伦常，唯我是赖，勉励我好好去做。" See *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 147.
[59] Tobie Meyer-Fong, *What Remains*, 26.

success and ensuring intelligence in one's offspring, to more "flexible" rewards, including the gaining of wealth and long life.[60] Similar to the pattern of vernacularization from Yuan Huang to Fengyi's cases, the motives for cherishing written characters also varied according to the worshipper's social status and expected outcomes, which Wu Jen-shu concludes led to a reconciliation of previously conflicting attitudes to cherishing written words between literati and merchants.[61]

While *xizihui* constantly engaged in charitable activities, their fundamental doctrines still oriented toward a belief in the supernatural power of in words written on paper, and their central interest was grounded in protecting these words from pollution. Such pollution, in their vision, included misuse of characters in corrupting dramas and publications, but they also prohibited violating paper with words printed on them. For example, shops ought not to wrap their commodities in paper printed with the names of their stores. Words were not supposed to be printed on daily-use materials, such as "umbrellas, candle cores, doors and windows, joss paper, and toilet paper."[62] In these cases, the material stuff employed in popular religious rituals was not restricted to things but instead emphasized the symbolic significance of "written words," thereby transforming paper with writing on it into something possessing metaphysical power. The emphasis on preserving paper to cherish the written words signifies, perhaps, people's attention to materiality in the process of "negotiating" with the deities to an even greater extent than the tool used to communicate with the deities in spirit-writing rituals.

Evidently, in the case of Fengyi, the obvious distinction between him and Filial Li would be the absence of a material medium in which the spiritual power might inhere; Fengyi also

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[60] Wu Jen-shu, "Shi, shang wenhua de chongtu yu tiaohe" 士、商文化的衝突與調和, *Jindaishi yanjiu jikan* 近代史研究所集刊, Vol. 100 (June 2018), 34.
[61] Wu Jen-shu, "Shi, shang wenhua de chongtu yu tiaohe," 34.
[62] Tobie Meyer-Fong, *What Remains*, 26.

appears to lack any coherent set of rituals that might bring about healing miracles. While "Guarding the Grave" functioned as a sacred site through which he gained morality healing skills in the first place, in the rest of the story he no longer needs to maintain this ritual for the healing to be effective. This minimization of outer resources for people to heal themselves, taking nothing other than restoring one's moral principles and resorting to the correct family relationships in order to expel any sickness, therefore transformed Fengyi's morality healing techniques into an extremely appealing method for rural audiences. The popularity he gained in rural communities when still residing next to his father's tomb was a clear proof.

Another unique feature in Fengyi's healing philosophy is the lack of any personal agency in the success of morality healing; rather, he plays an initiator's role in enlightening individuals about their own moral failures, mobilizing the patients' own confessions and repentance to cure the disease. What this means is that Wang Fengyi had no monopoly on the means to spiritual healing, but instead whoever understood the underlying principles of the morality healing techniques could easily convey the method to others. This, as demonstrated by the institutionalization of *Shanrendao* into *Daodehui* in the 1930s, indeed occurred on a large scale. Nonetheless, Filial Li and his other *Daodehui* supporters' re-emphasis on the ritualistic feature of filial tombs to successfully perform healing miracles suggest that, to a certain extent, people still utilized existing cultural practices to understand Fengyi's ideas, some of which inevitably undermined certain core principles of the founder. Crucial for people to understand the validity of morality-healing in the first place, these cultural elements such as filial tombs, spiritual-writing, and word-cherishing ironically may have hindered Fengyi's audiences from fully understanding *Shanrendao*.

Conclusion

This second chapter has expanded its inquiry from the anecdotes of *Yanxing lu* to the long history of morality books and healing as the basis of syncretic cults and religious practices from the late Ming to the turn of the twentieth century. It has juxtaposed Fengyi's deeds and thoughts to cultural repertoires recognized by other secondary scholarship, namely, the morality book movement and the sacralization of filial tombs. As a result, *Shanrendao* has been presented as both continuous and transformed in comparison to previously existing popular religious movements. My intent is not merely to prove *Shanrendao* as the inheritor of longstanding cultural/intellectual practices in Chinese society across late imperial times; rather, these analyses of the constituent influences on Fengyi's redemptive society point to the local emergence of something that historian Qitao Guo has labelled popular Confucianism. Here, I suggest that Fengyi's *Shanrendao* teachings were even more grassroots—hence my "grassroots Confucianism"—than the discourse that circulated in Ming-Qing Huizhou. That popular Confucianism was based on a combination of Mulian opera performances and local lineage institutions.[63] Northeastern China necessarily lacked the robust lineage system compared to Guo's case study, not only because of its relatively less sophisticated lineage institutions in general, but also due to the late occurrence of Han migration into Manchuria (post 1870s). But the dual emphases on morality book learning and morality healing point to something similar, an "ungainly whole" of a cultural octopus, to invoke the famous phrase of Clifford Geertz."[64] If anything, the popular Confucianism analyzed in Guo's study is more top-down, disseminated through operas written by lineage elites to instruct their less educated kinsmen and kinswomen. The "grassroots Confucianism" of *Shanrendao*, I suggest, shows the reception of such ideas by

[63] Qitao Guo, *Ritual Opera and Mercantile Lineage*, 3.
[64] As cited in Qitao Guo, *Ritual Opera and Mercantile Lineage*, 144.

those at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. Fengyi's moralist worldview was constructed by the morality book movement. His response—in some ways more extreme than even orthodox Neo-Confucianism—was to build a redemptive society that was "fundamentally cultural, not intellectual or philosophical."[65] I want to stress the plausibility for *Shanrendao* to appeal to a more diverse cross-section of audiences; the gap between Filial Li and Wang Fengyi in conducting tombside healing represents exactly a divergence of this sort.

This exploration of the grassroots Confucianism of Wang Fengyi in rural Northeastern communities also casts doubt upon earlier scholarship that simply conflates *Shanrendao* with the later *Wanguo daodehui*, as such research overly emphasizes the institutional aspect of Fengyi's religious practices and hence views *Shanrendao* as a new social organization adapting "the classical scriptural legacy" into "new, Western-inspired models of a 'religion'" or as maintaining "a strong Confucian identity."[66] As my analyses in this chapter have shown, these approaches over-simplify the cultural significance of *Shanrendao* principles. If these previous studies have established *Shanrendao* and *Daodehui* as nodes in which Chinese traditional value systems reacted and transformed in the face of new global dynamics, with social elites attempting to re-instill institutions through appealing to Chinese identity, a more thorough understanding of the diverse cultural repertoires through which *Shanrendao*'s teachings gained their effectiveness reveals Fengyi's complicated interlinkage with rural communities on another level. In short, *Shanrendao* represents a bottom-up approach to a rural activism that commenced with a charismatic-but-illiterate farmhand who used stories—his own and those he heard in lectures—to save his communities and ultimately to influence people far higher on the social ladder.

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[65] Qitao Guo, *Ritual Opera and Mercantile Lineage*, 144.

[66] See, respectively, the entries by Sébastien Billioud and David Palmer, in Goosaert, Kiely and Lagerway, eds., *HdO Modern Chinese Religion II*, 784.

To begin to see how Fengyi's mélange of ideas and visions came to be institutionalized, in the next chapter, I turn from close readings of texts to observe Fengyi's direct attempts to intervene in society materially as well as through moral means: the expansion of this morality-healing practice and his attempts to establish female charity schools in rural Northeastern China.

Chapter 3: The Institution Building of Wang Fengyi

Following his second enlightenment, Fengyi started to practice morality healing at the graveside. However, despite any expectation that Fengyi might immediately begin saving rural customs and redeeming social morality via his miraculous powers, much of the storytelling that follows in *Yanxing lu* is dedicated to Fengyi's resolution of local quarrels and conflicts of interest. Unlike Filial Li's practice of selling medication right next to the grave, readers witness Wang Fengyi playing more the role of a consultant for visitors, in most cases explicating people's sickness as consequences of their familial disharmony. To cure the disease, Fengyi would always explain, the visitor had to resolve the ongoing quarrel within the household.

Conflicts of interest are certainly settled at the end of these anecdotes, with people increasingly convinced of the efficaciousness of the healing technique of "Filial Wang."[1] Across the stories, Fengyi's own family, both nuclear and extended, benefited from his peacemaking. After his successful mediation, a quarrel between his wife, Bai Shoukun, and his daughter-in-law became an opportunity for them to adopt this healing technique. After restoring the familial harmony within his own household, he ultimately decided it was time for him to proceed beyond his community to redeem public morality for a larger audience in Northeastern China. He relates his decision as follows:

> In the winter, when I turned forty and my vigil period was almost completed, I told my woman, "This time, when my vigil period is completed, I will not be able

[1] In one anecdote, when the Qu family's daughter-in-law's son died after Fengyi's prediction of this misfortune, which he explained was due to her unfilial deeds against her mother-in-law, she became convinced of Fenyi's judgement and proclaimed to others that "Filial Wang's words were indeed efficacious… From now on, I need to behave filially to my mother-in-law." See *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 132-133.

to harmonize our family matters. [Instead,] I will need to go outside and redeem the public. [I would] also expect you and your daughter-in-law to aspire to redeem the public." She would not agree.[2]

To counter his family's disapproval, Fengyi resorted to a strategy similar to when he first recognized the moral corruption of his current world, which was to, again, go on a hunger strike:

> I then aspired to take full command of myself. After that, when they brought me food, I would not eat once I had laid the offerings on the altar. [I did this for] three days in a row, [until] both my wife and my daughter-in-law visited me again at the gravesite: "How come you have stopped eating food again?" I responded: "Do you know where I came from?" They said: "Not really." I started laughing. Then I asked my woman again: "Why do you keep spinning the yarn." She said: "To weave cloth [and] make clothes [for us] to wear.' I said: "If a person has no life, would he need to wear clothes? I will tell you the truth. I am from the Buddha's kingdom, and I will commit to the deeds suitable for the Buddha's kingdom. You disagree with me about redeeming the public, so I will return to the Buddha's kingdom. Why do I need to eat?" I started laughing out loud after I finished this line. I also told them how good the Buddha's kingdom is, how much better [it is] compared to the Sahā world. [It is] unlike this world, [where] you are afraid of [your] women and children [to a point] you do not enjoy happiness.[3]

Presumably, Fengyi did not intend to starve himself to death this time, as he had already realized the futility of any attempt to redeem Chinese society through suicide. Instead, it was only a form of resistance he demonstrated to his family as a sign of determination. Or was he serious? When

[2] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 134.
[3] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 134.

he had almost starved himself to death the previous time, he resolved his existentialist crisis by recognizing the ineffectualness of suicide, subsequently inspiring him to develop his activist blueprint for healing. By such means, perhaps, it may be plausible to interpret Fengyi's suicidal threats as a response to his family impeding him from fulfilling his goals. Either way, as Fengyi may have expected, his family gave in to his desires:

> They said: "We will listen to you then. Just start eating your food." Once the vigil period was completed, people from Liujiazi town's lecturing hall drove a carriage to invite me to take up a post at their hall. From then on, I started wandering across regions, dedicating myself to redeeming the public as my vocation.[4]

Thus, no longer expressing the despondent pessimism of an illiterate farmhand, nor the metaphysical doctrines behind the efficacious power wielded by spirit mediums in nearby villages, he commenced his journey of institutionalizing *Shanrendao*, building an organization that gained wide popularity and possessed discrete transformative power for Northeastern communities across decades. The later results of his evangelizing work have been alluded to in studies on the origins of *Wangguo daodehui*, but they leave out a missing step between his departure from the graveyard and his eventual success. The engaging anecdotes that recount this transitional period are contained in the remaining three chapters of the third volume of *Yanxing lu*.

Following Fengyi's two Enlightenments, the rest of the third volume relates the founder's early attempt to institutionalize his two concerns throughout rural communities. His activist vision of transforming Chinese society, as hinted at by his disquisition on gender relationships after his first Enlightenment (Saving Yang Bai), became formalized in his efforts to establish

[4] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 134.

female charity schools. The manifestation of his second Enlightenment, his acquisition of morality-healing techniques, functioned as a supplementary strategy for him to attract more diverse groups of devotees, in many cases directly gaining him the necessary resources for building female charity schools in rural communities.

Had these two goals—representing the maturity of *Shanrendao* beliefs—been successfully carried out, they might have consolidated into the emergence of tangible social organizations, prompting more significant social impacts in rural Northeastern China. Yet, the storyline does not proceed smoothly in the remaining two chapters of this volume. Reaching a temporary success in female charity schools, especially by overcoming the crisis of the Qing state's suspicion of Fengyi's connection with the illicit cult of the Red Lanterns, the subsequent anecdotes instead culminate in temporary, but disappointing, failures due to financial concerns.

Such frustration was manifested in two ways: 1) certain details in the third volume of *Yanxing lu* indicate the economic burden of maintaining the female charity schools; and 2) another anecdote dwells on the bankruptcy of Fengyi's pawnshop due to mismanagement. The first is only a red flag among many of the anecdotes celebrating the success of Fengyi's establishment of charity schools across rural regions. The second form of failure, conversely, while further underscoring the financial failure in the first issue, suggests a potentially overlooked third thread of attention in *Shanrendao*'s activism. Embedded in Fengyi's concerns about virtue (or its lack) was a vision of rural financial stability; this led him to set up a pawnshop business. Despite any lack of reference to this episode in his earlier anecdotes or among his later advocates, this experience is incorporated into one of the sections in *Yanxing lu's* first volume as part of his theoretical framework. As briefly mentioned in the introduction, one of Fengyi's close disciples, Zhu Xuntian, attempted to launch new village movements circa

1945, likely appealing to this economic facet of *Shanrendao* practices. Fengyi's failed pawnshop venture may have been an early manifestation of this vision for shoring up the moral and social conditions of rural society.

To explore Fengyi's early attempts to institutionalize *Shanrendao* teachings, this chapter will focus on two prominent themes in the last three chapters of *Yanxing lu*'s third volume: the installation of the female charity schools and the economic considerations accompanying the overall institutional process of *Shanrendao* at this time. The morality healing *leitmotif* that was highly visible in earlier *Shanrendao* texts now appears more as a strategy for Fengyi to gain community support to further carry out his vision. More significantly, the aftermath of Fengyi's institutionalizing efforts, though not achieving full success by the end of this volume, eventually became a central incentive for the Morality Society established in Shandong Province to incorporate *Shanrendao* into its organization and central doctrines, which, ironically, became core to what *Daodehui* was known for in the next century.

Establishing Charity Schools for Women

The establishment of private schools in Northeastern China during Fengyi's time constituted a large trend within reforming efforts conducted under the promotion of the Qing and Republican states. In DuBois's view, the efforts to institute "modern village schools" in Northeastern China were not translated into massive success for the first two decades of the twentieth century, at which time higher education was also "entirely dominated by foreigners."[5] On a scope not restricted to Northeastern China, Thomas Curran recognizes the issue as one reason rural Chinese viewed these "reforms initiated by authorities at the county or sub-county

[5] Thomas DuBois, *Empire and the meaning of Religion in Northeast Asia*, 72.

level" as "unwelcome intrusions into their local affairs." At the same time, he notes the existence of conflicting attitudes among the rural population: people who already had benefited from the traditional school systems and possessed economic or political privileges easily dismissed these reforms as harmful to their existing interest; others seeking redistribution of power and resources were inclined to embrace these reforms with higher enthusiasm.[6] Viewed in this light, Fengyi's activism in establishing schools for girls falls under this latter rural group looking for change. Although Curran's analysis imputes the founder's practice as aiming for power redistribution, *Yanxing lu* justifies Fengyi's attempts as based on his pursuit to redeem social customs and morality. Of course, regardless of Fengyi's original motives, the newly implemented institutions necessarily introduced new dynamics into the previous power structures in rural communities.[7]

In Elizabeth VanderVen's study of Haicheng County in Liaoning, a location not so distant from Fengyi's hometown in Chaoyang County, educational reform in rural regions of Northeastern China met with both cooperation and resistance from rural communities in the face of the late Qing and Republican mandate for modernization.[8] Arguing against previous scholarship, which commonly emphasizes the urban region playing a greater role in the Chinese modernizing movements on the verge of the twentieth century and undermines the agency of the rural population in these modernizing experiments, VanderVen alternatively stresses the active roles played by rural community members in constructing widespread "lower primary schools" in rural regions.[9]

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[6] Thomas Curran, "Education Reform and the Paradigm of State-Society Conflict in Republican China," *Republican China* Volume 18, No. 2 (April 1993): 33-34.

[7] This is not to assume an existing stability in the previous school system in Northeastern China. As some of Elizabeth VanderVen's cases already entails a fragility in some of the schools established by multiple villages cooperatively. See in Elizabeth VanderVen, "Village-State Cooperation," *Modern China* Vol. 31, No. 2 (April 2005): 219-229.

[8] Elizabeth VanderVen, "Village-State Cooperation," 205.

[9] VanderVen's disagreement to previous scholarship is twofold. First, she rebukes Sally Borthwick and John Cleverley's arguments that education reform undermined the rural populace and extracted abundant resources from

While VanderVen's approach to rural communities was already more attentive to the grassroots dynamics in comparison to scholarship on Northeastern education reform from a top-down perspective, her research still mainly focuses on the strategies these rural communities employed in establishing their own educational institutions. Left out of her study is attention to the underlying aim driving these participants; they are presented as loyally responding to the state-driven modernizing visions. Yet, the instances in which she presents rural activism overlap in both place and time with Fengyi's institutionalizing efforts in rural Northeastern China, suggesting that Fengyi's work was one manifestation of the rural education reform movement. Not only do the locations for the schools in VanderVan's study and the *Shanrendao* text of *Yanxing lu* overlap, but many of the same individuals who contributed to establishing schools for women are mentioned in both materials.[10]

In one instance where an individual community member undertook the mission to establish rural primary schools, a resident in Xintaizi village named Gao Yuanzhong started a girls' primary school in 1913 "by campaigning vigorously for donations from individual members of the community," a strategy that was proven sufficiently successful that he was able to institute another girls' school only a few years later, ultimately collectivizing funds to sustain the schools from eighteen villagers.[11] This name also recurs in *Yanxing lu*'s fourth volume, with Gao's deeds recorded among multiple successful charity school implementations. In Fengyi's narrative, Gao Yuanzhong resided in Xintaizi village, Haicheng County, and was the youngest

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these regions; second, she rejects Joseph Esherick's view that modernization in late Qing and Republican eras largely succeeded in urban regions. This assumption, VanderVen argues, has led later scholars to overlook the significance of rural communities in participating and promoting the modernizing process of Chinese society. See Elizabeth VanderVen, "Village-State Cooperation," 205-207.

[10] In one example, a village called Bajiazi, which became involved in conflict with another village for cooperatively funding schools, is also mentioned by Wang Fengyi as one of his early sites for conducting morality book lectures. VanderVen, "Village-State Cooperation," 223. *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 115-116.

[11] VanderVen, "Village-State Cooperation," 216.

among four brothers. He had formerly attended morality lectures in the town of Tengaobao and started lecturing on morality books himself with Fengyi after becoming persuaded by Fengyi's morality healing technique. After being inspired by Fengyi's other close friend, Zhang Yaxuan, who also actively worked to set up charity schools, Gao also aspired to build a charity school for women in his own village, despite opposition from his brothers. As a result, he divided the small household with his siblings, meaning that they still shared property but did not share future earnings (and potentially debts). After overcoming all these difficulties, Fengyi notes, Gao ultimately established a female charity school in Xintaizi.[12] Although the *Shanrendao* text never mentions the success of Gao's second charity school, Fengyi's narrative attributes Gao's deeds to the influence of Fengyi and his followers, a causation elided in VanderVen's study.

Juxtaposing Fengyi's building of charity schools during this period with VanderVen's research reveals another potential cultural landscape in rural communities that fostered the development of educational reform at the time. Considering Fengyi's initial inspirations in his construction of *Shanrendao* doctrines (as demonstrated in Chapter 2), we can see that longstanding socio-cultural repertoires typically labeled as traditional contributed to these modernizing social reforms. However, besides belonging to the larger realm of modernizing efforts, I also want to draw attention to Fengyi's gender-specific vision of female education. The whole series of institutionalizing attempts began with his encouragement (coercion) for Bai Shoukun to attend a local female private school in 1905, an incident that is positioned among multiple of his morality-healing anecdotes. In the story, it took Fengyi a few months to ultimately convince his wife to pursue the education:

[12] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 169.

> In February, I asked Qiu Laobai to advise her [to go to school] once, and she did not listen. In June, [I] exhorted her another time. And in September, I advised her again, saying: 'Remember! After you go to school, I will not need you to wash my clothes. You should focus on studying. The ancients said: "As long as people leave misfortune behind, misfortune will leave you as well, with all disasters turning into dust."[13] Now you can go study and leave behind the family's bitterness, which is leaving behind misfortune; if you can study well in the future and be capable of teaching others, that is having misfortune leave you; and if you can resolve the negative parts of your personality, you can turn all disasters into dust. Just drop all family matters and prepare yourself a bit, and I will send you to school.[14]

This time, in September, Fengyi cited the ancients in support of his belief, though it likely was again one of his reinterpretations of Buddhist texts. Yet, in response to his moral exhortation, Bai Shoukun viewed the recommendation as completely unnecessary, especially due to her age: "She said: "How old am I? You are still urging me to go to school."[15] Fengyi responded by stating that she could go to school later if she could grow younger over time. Seeing the determination in her husband's mind, Bai Shoukun finally begrudgingly gave in to Fengyi's request:

> On September 1, when I was forty-three, I drove donkey and sent my woman to the private school for women in Zamulinzi, Yizhou. She rode on a donkey, crying as we traveled. I walked behind the donkey and could not stop laughing. I was laughing at this horrible [ridiculous] social custom! For people nowadays, it is

[13] The text Fengyi cited, 人离难，难离身，一切灾殃化为尘, likely originated from 白衣观音大士灵感神咒.
[14] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 137.
[15] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 137.

> really easy to turn them bad yet extra hard to turn them good. On November 26, my maternal nephew Li Zhaobi brought her back. During this short amount of time, she already finished studying *Nü sishu* (Four Books for Women 女四书) and *Lie nüzhuan* (Biographies of Female Martyrs 烈女传).[16]

Fengyi seems to have always launched his vision within his own household first, providing him with a social realm in which he possessed the highest authority. Still, the most significant aspect of this anecdote is that it signifies one of his initial incentives for establishing charity schools for women as extended from his first *leitmotif* of saving Chinese society: to reverse the ongoing societal corruption through the cultivation of more virtuous mothers. At the beginning of the anecdote, the editor tells us that he once heard Fengyi say:

> When I guarded the tomb, I knew that the world was not good because people's roots were bad. Why were people's roots bad? It was due to a dearth of mother's teachings. In ancient times, there was Mencius's Mother, and after that came Mencius. As for today, to transform a 'comfortable' world (小康世界) into a world of Great Harmony (大同世界), there must be countless virtuous wives and mothers to give birth to more virtuous sons and grandsons. But at the time, the social atmosphere was to prefer sons over daughters, [so] girls rarely studied. Taking my hometown as an example, not a single woman could read, and neither was there any school for women. How can females understand reason without studying? And how can they give birth to virtuous sons and grandsons without

[16] The 烈女传 (Biographies of Female Martyrs) should be distinguished from the 列女传 (Biographies of Female Exemplars), with the former collecting stories of women who committed to more violent means to preserve their virtues in comparison with to the latter text. When rendered into pinyin romanization, they two texts share the same spelling, *Lie nüzhuan*. *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 137.

> understanding reason? It was this that inspired me to establish charity schools for women.[17]

Stories like these likely account for the contemporary criticism of *Shanrendao*; despite Fengyi's promotion of female education, his justification for this endeavor was still largely based on a traditional understanding of women's roles in the family. Scholars like Zhuang Ying, although recognizing the progressiveness represented by Fengyi's vision of female education, still identify his emphasis on childbearing responsibility as an inevitable limitation imposed by his life experience in a patriarchal society.[18] Indeed, Fengyi's patriarchal inclination is suggested by many previously mentioned anecdotes, the one most memorable being reducing his wife to tears by insisting that she attend a school.[19]

However, even this patriarchal inclination is not necessarily a consistent expression of Fengyi's vision. In another anecdote merely a few pages later, "Converting the Female Teacher He" (化何女师), Fengyi presents another reason for establishing female charity schools, one that appears less conservative and embraces the concept of gender equality to a larger extent. Repeating his reference to the world of "Great Harmony" and his realization that "women suffer the most in the world" during his graveside vigil, Fengyi nonetheless comes to envision women independently from men:

> When I guarded the grave, I knew that women suffer the most bitterness in the world, so I aspired to establish female schools, teaching women knowledge and

[17] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 137.
[18] Zhuang Ying 庄颖, "Lun Wang Fengyi sixiang" (论王凤仪思想 Examining Wang Fengyi's Thoughts), in *Zhongguo jindai mimi shehui yanjiu* (中国近代秘密社会研究 *Studies on Chinese Secret Societies in Recent Eras*) (Shanghai, China: Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House, 2016), 235.
[19] The last image in the anecdote, where his wife cries on the back of the donkey as he quietly laughs behind the donkey still makes me chuckle, possibly due to his humorous rhetoric undermining the sense of coercion. To be fair, I would personally prefer going to school than doing family chores, but that instinct is also likely based on my own comfort zone.

> skills; and [they could thereby] stay independent and never rely on men, saving women from bitterness and [enabling them to] gain happiness. In the future, when the world achieves "Great Harmony," women can be officials and rule the nation. So, I sent my wife to school to have her take the lead. Ever since establishing schools for women, I deliberately visited the virtuous.[20]

On the one hand, these two inconsistent, if not contradictory, explanations for his initial motives for establishing charity schools for women can be seen as a palimpsestual accretion of reasons for Fengyi to launch his early institutionalization of *Shanrendao*; on the other hand, both of these explanations represent extensions from the original activist blueprint sketched in the first *leitmotif* (when he almost starved himself to death), as solutions to saving Chinese society and redeeming social morality. In other words, although these two reasons for his initial incentives to educate rural women again indicate multivocality within the *Shanrendao* text, it is still plausible to view them both as institutionalized extensions of Fengyi's primary moral concerns.

While the overall *Shanrendao* doctrines evince sometimes-contradictory reasoning regarding gender relations, Fengyi's earliest involvement in educational reform suggests that his establishment of charity schools only for women was perhaps not as singular a goal as it might seem in *Yanxing lu*. Three months after Bai Shoukun returned from the private school, Fengyi started his own school in the local community, with Bai teaching the women and his son teaching the men. This was made possible after Fengyi successfully resolved a lawsuit for one Mister Zhang Wu in Shilitai village, Jin County, who thereafter lent his central building to Fengyi for the charity school.[21] Recognized by

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[20] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 144.
[21] The details of the case are not specified in *Yanxing lu*.

Fengyi as the first step in his efforts to create a charity school for women, this anecdote entails a few unique details.[22] First, other than reaffirming the effectiveness of Bai Shoukun's education in the local girls' school in Zamulinzi, Fengyi also attributes his wife's teaching abilities to her previous study of Buddhism, which aligns with Borthwick's observation that "the Confucian classics were normally beyond a woman's reach, but Buddhism was less discriminatory."[23] This additional detail regarding the types of education available to Bai Shoukun reflects upon a social transition underway in the rural locale.

Second, besides having his son and wife, respectively, teaching male and female students, Fengyi's first charity school also spatially divided its male and female sections with a wall separating the two. This is made especially clear by some of the narrated details: whenever Bai Shoukun could not read or apprehend certain characters, she would have her son Guohua write down the explanation and pass the paper to her through a crevice in the wall.[24] To be sure, Fengyi's school was by no means challenging longstanding norms of gender segregation. And yet, it is also evident that Fengyi's earliest participation in education reform was not exclusively directed at rural women but also at men, although those efforts are for some reason elided in the

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[22] *Wang Fengyi yanxinglu*, 139.

[23] Sally Borthwick, *Education and Social Change in China*, 21.

[24] Many of Fengyi's approaches parallel Duan Zhengyuan's attitude to gender relationships in his moralist/moralistic framework, a social elite identified by Sébastien Billioud as an initiator of another redemptive society of the Republican era, namely the Moral Studies Society. Duan's advocacy of "the respective proper positions of males and females" 男女正位 high resembles Fengyi's notion of the male-female social binary first summarized in his first Enlightenment. Although regarding his classroom setting, Fengyi was perhaps more conservative than Duan Zhengyuan, who, though having a stricter admission process for women students, still permitted his male and female students to study in the same classroom. See Feng Lei 冯蕾, "Lun Duan Zhengyuan 'nannü zhengwei' sixiang" (论段正元"男女正位"思想 Examining Duan Zhengyuan's Thoughts on "Male-Female Proper Positions"), in *Zhongguo jindai mimi shehui yanjiu* (中国近代秘密社会研究 *Studies on Chinese Secret Societies in Recent Eras*), 242-243.

Yanxing lu.[25] The rest of *Yanxing lu*, when depicting Fengyi's charity school ventures, is entirely oriented to the schools for women.[26]

As recounted in the final sections of *Yanxing lu*, Fengyi's vision for female education apparently took off across rural Northeast China, with ever more rural individuals inspired by the virtuous man to participate in school-building specifically for women students. Section 78 relates that Fengyi moved a benefactor surnamed Qin to provide a site, learning equipment, and food to establish a girls' charity school in the village of Gendeyingzi, which enrolled more than 60 students at its peak.[27] In the same year, he traveled to Yangxing Village and lectured on morality books, at which time he convinced another benefactor named Wang Tianlong of the need for virtuous mothers to restore a moral world. Wang subsequently provided Fengyi with the necessary resources for building a girls' school in that village.[28] From then on, Fengyi narrates, his benefactors increased and donated sufficient resources for him and his followers to launch six more female charity schools, catering to a total of more than three hundred students.[29] Expansion of such schools generated its own problem: a dearth of suitable teachers:

> Because [we] were unable to recruit more female teachers, we just picked students with the best grades among girls at the charity school of Yangxing Village to be the female teachers. Fortunately, at the time, [we] only needed to teach students how to recognize characters, memorize writing, and strive to carry

[25] *Wang Fengyi yanxinglu*, 139.
[26] The only other trace of a co-educational school throughout *Yanxing lu* was launched by Wang Guohua, Fengyi's one and only son, who was also the teacher for male students when Fengyi started his first charity school. Guohua's school is recorded in an annotation within section 162 of the last volume, named Guohua Private School 私立国华学校 in the town of Yangshan, Chaoyang County and solely funded by philanthropist Deng Elou. However, following the bankruptcy of the school, Guohua started a new school in the countryside of Chaoyang County in 1928, this time named Fengyi Girls' Normal School 凤仪女子师范学校, the name of which clearly acknowledges his father as a pioneer in building schools for rural women. See in *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 254.
[27] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 146.
[28] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 146.
[29] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 149.

out the doctrines of filial piety, unlike the massive amounts of assignments [they have] nowadays. The youngest among all women teachers was Zhao Boxin from Jinzhou, who was only thirteen years old, [selected] because she had read *Nü sishu* at home. This was certainly not a success.[30]

Narrated from the perspective of hindsight, Fengyi's activist career in its early stage appears to be hindered by the lack of women teachers. Surely, this would have been less of a problem if Fengyi had been open to recruiting male teachers; but, as seen with the "prototype" school, Fengyi was firmly committed to maintaining gender segregation in educational settings.

But, of course, Fengyi's attitude was by no means unique among social elites or reformers in the early 20th century. The Liang-Guang Commissioner for Education essentially addressed the same concern, stating that "half of those who support" female education "are young men, whose boldness makes enemies even aside from the possibility of actual misconduct."[31] In the mid-1920s, violent incidents still occurred out of suspicion of sexual impropriety in girls' schools, as experienced by a lecturer at Chengdu Girls' Normal School who almost fell victim to the lynch mob "after developing photographs in a darkroom with a girl student."[32] Even figures like Duan Zhengyuan (1864 –1940), who allowed co-educational schooling in his Moral Studies Society (another redemptive society established in 1916), identified this as a primary concern in his career as an educator: "Nowadays, what type of boys and girls are graduating from the schools. Whether boys see girls as their sisters, whether girls see boys as their brothers… how do we [help them] maintain integrity and avoid turning them

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[30] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 149.
[31] Sally Borthwick, *Education and Social Changes in China*, 116.
[32] Sally Borthwick, *Education and Social Changes in China*, 116.

into hooligans?"[33] It is safe to conclude that this anxiety over male-female relationships in the school setting was a prevalent theme across the education reform movement, which was also echoed in *Shanrendao*'s experimentations.

Furthermore, gender-specific texts such as *Nü sishu* and *Lie nüzhuan* likely also contributed to Fengyi's conservative choice at the time. These two texts were the standard textbooks for the girls' schools mentioned in the *Shanrendao* text. Yet, as Fengyi's retrospective voice implies, the curriculum became increasingly complicated in the following decades. Liu Hanzhang, an oral informant who became a devotee of *Daodehui* and whose words were collected in the book, *Cong Dongbei dao Taiwan* (从东北到台湾 From the Northeast to Taiwan), recalls her experience attending the *Shanrendao* girls' schools since the age of five in 1913. According to Liu, the curriculum at the time focused on the Four Books and Five Classics, rather than the *Nü sishu* and *Lie nüzhuan*. And it was only after she formally joined *Daodehui* that she was exposed to *Shanrendao* doctrines oriented toward Fengyi's metaphysical teachings.[34] While such evidence suggests Fengyi's charity school curriculum was not static across the decades, the curriculum of *Nü sishu* and *Lie nüzhuan,* with their moral exhortations, surely appealed to Fengyi's initial redemptive vision, which would have further restricted the pool of teaching candidates.

Nonetheless, as the remainder of the story suggests, the scarcity of teachers was less of an issue than donations to support the *Shanrendao* activism. Immediately following his complaint about the shortage of female teachers, Fengyi proudly proclaimed yet another

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[33] Feng Lei, "Lun Duan Zhengyuan 'nannü zhengwei' sixiang" (Examining Duan Zhengyuan's Thoughts on "Male-Female Proper Positions"), in *Zhongguo jindai mimi shehui yanjiu*, 243.

[34] Liu Hanzhang 刘汉章, "Interview Records wtih Ms. Liu Hanzhang," in *Cong Dongbei dao Taiwan: Wanguo Daodehui Xianggaun Renwu Fangwen Jilu* (从东北到台湾:万国道德会相关人物访问记录 From Northeastern China to Taiwan: Interviews with Members of the Worldwide Morality Society), Interviewer Lo Jiu-jung 罗久蓉 (Taipei, Taiwan: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 2006), 6-8.

achievement: "[We] spent another 1,000 yuan donated by Master Ma to establish four more female charity schools in Jinzhou, Gaoqiao, and Jinxi."[35] In total, ten female charity schools are introduced in this one section of the text, constituting a major milestone in *Shanrendao*'s success in fostering charity schools for women.

Despite this preliminary success, however, these schools incurred suspicion from state representatives. In section 86, Fengyi recounts that he was publicly accused in the newspaper of being involved in illicit cult activities:

> When I initially started the female charity schools, the social atmosphere was not open. The official schools in the cities were just getting started, and, of course, there were no girls' schools in villages or towns. Commoners found it strange due to the rarity of seeing such things (少见多怪), so throughout my three years establishing schools, all sorts of rumors went wild. And someone even published a notice in the newspaper accusing me of being 'a leader of the Red Lanterns,' covertly spreading the illicit cult.[36]

As expected, this accusation drew the attention of the local governor, who came to investigate Fengyi's schools for Red Lantern (*Hongdengzhao* 红灯照) activity. The Red Lanterns, the female counterpart of the more renowned Boxers, were a group of "young women and girls" believed to have magical powers, which they used to assist the Boxers both in physical combat and post-battle healing.[37]

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[35] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 149.
[36] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 150-151.
[37] Paul Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998), 125-126.

The women in Fengyi's charity schools fit, to a certain extent, the characteristics of the Red Lanterns (that is, young women engaging in spiritual healing techniques). Fengyi's reputation as a virtuous man possessing miraculous healing powers that were transmittable to his followers, now combined with the spatial setting dominated by women in girls' schools made for easy associations in people's minds with the state-prohibited illicit cult. Although Fengyi attributes the accusation to conservative people failing to recognize his innovative activism, his tireless preaching of the metaphysical *Shanrendao* doctrines—which also incorporated Buddho-Daoist ritual practices—was likely an equally provoking factor leading to popular speculation. The prefect of Chaoyang County, Wang Naibin, subsequently summoned Fengyi and harshly questioned him about the validity of such accusations. In response, Fengyi invited the magistrate to visit his charity school and investigate the matter personally, to which Wang Naibin agreed. Following his return from the interrogation, Fengyi sent messages to all his teachers at the charity schools, requesting them to gather at the Gendeyingzi Women's Charity School, one of the earliest schools that had gained success. When the magistrate arrived two days later, one crucial figure in dismissing the official's suspicion was female teacher He (*He nüshi*). When magistrate Wang entered the school, it was He who led all other female teachers and students to greet him. Fengyi says:

> "His Excellency [the magistrate] met with He nüshi, [who] behaved appropriately, responded by following proprieties, talked elegantly, showed deep knowledge, and was the daughter of an illustrious family. He then met with the female teachers from all charity schools, and personally tested students."[38]

[38] *Yanxing lu*, 150-151.

After this inspection, the magistrate ultimately confirmed the validity of Fengyi's charity schools, rewarding the founder with many books and allowing him to establish female schools across Chaoyang County.[39] Needless to say, *He nüshi*'s identities perfectly matched the state's ideal of the virtuous woman, which likely assuaged the magistrate's concerns over the legitimacy of Fengyi's charitable schools. Indeed, the magistrate was so impressed that Fengyi's wife, Bai Shoukun, was also appointed a position in the state-run local girls' school, while his son Guohua was granted entrance to the Liaoning Province Normal School.

From another perspective, however, we might speculate that the magistrate was not without reason in being suspicious of the women who gravitated to Fengyi's school. Indeed, even Teacher He who so impressed the official with her propriety, is earlier introduced by Fengyi as a patient needing help to quit an opium addition. The description of the cure that Fengyi performs to heal Ms. He is remarkably reminiscent of Buddho-Daoist exorcism rites, practices largely absent elsewhere in *Yanxing lu*. In this instance, however, Fengyi performed ten days of ritual to "convert her fate" (*hua xing* 化性). As he describes it:

> Every night, in the courtyard, [I] laid out many lights, [they] say the religious rite must go on ten days, first travelling across the eighteen layers of hell, lecturing while walking, and crying the hearts out. People who watch the fun filled the courtyard. After traveling across the hell, [we] began to travel across the heaven. For every layer we reach, [we] would be in so much rupture that we danced for joy and describe [what we see] to the people.[40]

[39] *Yanxing lu*, 150-151.
[40] *Yanxing lu*, 145.

As a result, Fengyi was able to get her to quit smoking opium and convert her fate, ultimately resolving her issues and recruiting her to teach for his charity schools.[41] Here, Fengyi seems to turn to existing ritual practices, even if it not openly incorporated into his *Shanrendao* metaphysical framework, to garner support from rural devotees. It may well have been the resemblance of such rituals to popular exorcism rites that fostered the rumors that Fengyi and his female disciples were associated with the faith healing of the Boxers/Red Lanterns. Ultimately, however, Ms. He's transformation seems to have been so successful that the magistrate was assuaged of any concerns. State distrust of *Shanrendao* practices shifted toward support.

The late Qing state's sanction of Fengyi's activism (roughly circa 1909), represented a significant transition in his charity school career.[42] As recorded in the narratives of the last two volumes of *Yanxing lu*, the state's affirmation did not diminish with Qing's demise in 1911, as representatives of later regimes mostly helped to bolster the reputation of *Shanrendao* morality and organizations. To be sure, the relationships between Fengyi's redemptive society and the Republican/Manchukuo regimes were complicated, with both regimes adopting distinctive religious policies and holding ambiguous views on the nature of *Shanrendao*.[43] Nevertheless, we can see that Fengyi's grassroots initiatives enabled his redemptive society to gain greater visibility and at least partial state approval in Northeastern society, which in turn marked a significant watershed in *Shanrendao*'s move up the social ladder.

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[41] *Yanxing lu*, 144-145.

[42] The timeline of the anecdote is not specified, but it was positioned between stories occurring in 1908 and 1909. Since the overall storyline is chronologically structured, I assume that this incident took place between 1908 and 1909.

[43] In another anecdote from 1910, Fengyi mentions how magistrate Wang used him as a model in a local meeting on political reform. See *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 155. The magistrate, Wang Naibin, clearly still held official position in Fengtian (Liaoning) Province until 1920. But in another anecdote in the fourth volume of *Yanxing lu*, local police and inspectors started arresting *Shanrendao* female charity school leaders in 1914, causing seven charity schools to be disbanded. It was not until one *Shanrendao* participant, Liu Ziyang, sought help from a relative who was a military leader that the crisis was resolved. See *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 172.

However, gaining approbation from representatives of the state was only one of the crises Fengyi's institutionalization had to address. As comprehensively discussed in VanderVen's research on Haicheng's rural school construction, such educational reform exhausted many resources, driving activists/participants to seek financial support and school buildings from rural elites. While many of *Yanxing lu*'s anecdotes tell of stories where Fengyi was able to successfully convince benefactors to provide funding for female charity schools, subtle clues in the anecdotes piece together a rather dim picture of the future of Fengyi's charity school activism. A passage close to the beginning of chapter 9 (the last chapter in volume 3), writes:

> In Yangxing Village, Jin County, benefactor Wang Tianlong started the female charity school in 1907, running the school for three years, but ended up debt-ridden. He asked the virtuous man [Wang Fengyi] what he should do. The virtuous man recommended that he close the charity, sell his properties to pay back off school's debt, and then travel beyond the locale to persuade others to be good and to establish charity schools. He followed the virtuous man's words and was able to gain the Way and erase his weaknesses in personality. [Thus he] saw the "golden world," the "silver world," and started preaching about transcending the three realms…[44]

The story functions as another moral exhortation, an example in which people gain the Way by overcoming hardship; however, underneath the positive message lies a concerning reality – the female charity school funded by Wang Tianlong in Yanxing Village was the third school Fengyi had founded. In previous narratives, these initial institutions gave Fengyi the confidence to further expand his vision into more rural communities. However, only three years later, the

[44] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 156.

school had already fallen into such debt that Fengyi recommended the benefactor close the school and sell off his property.

Other than revealing the economic crisis some of these female charity schools might have encountered, the story also exposes the fragmented nature of these institutions nominally linked to Fengyi's *Shanrendao*. The economic situation of each school seems to have depended on the donor's own capacity to run the organization. Further examination of the rest of the volume indicates the presence of an oft-overlooked aspect of Fengyi's early *Shanrendao* grassroots initiatives: the search for economic resources through institution-building.

Virtue and the Rural Economy

Despite Fengyi's moralist position and constant eschewal of economic benefits from his activism, financial considerations were not completely absent in his *Shanrendao* teachings. If anything, Fengyi emphasizes the significance of money as "the blood between heaven and earth," which is formally brought up by Fengyi in section 152 of *Yanxing lu*, when explaining his vision for ideal marriages. His disciple hears him saying: "People are the *qi* between heaven and earth, and money is the blood between heaven and earth."[45] In context, such notions were extended from his encouragement for husband and wife to both establish savings and have a career before marriage so they could remain independent and not enter matrimony to gain dowry or a bride price. According to Fengyi, this was also an intelligent strategy for resolving disputes between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.[46] While the intention in this section resembles a call for basic social welfare, urging "the public to establish careers" for those "too poor and bitter to make a living so long as they fulfill their duties," Fengyi's attention to the financial factors in

[45] *Wang Fengiy yanxing lu*, 236.
[46] *Wang Fengiy yanxing lu*, 236.

rural communities, especially the maintenance of financial stability to restore social morality, is surprisingly recurrent in many other sections of the *Shanrendao* text. As Fengyi's extremely grassroots background and lack of experience in commercial activities undermined the possibility of him developing these thoughts on his own, his experiences intervening in family quarrels and gathering funding for establishing charity schools may have fostered some of his reflected in *Shanrendao* regarding the relationship between virtue and the rural economy. The previously seen pragmatic responses through which Fengyi developed many of his metaphysical doctrines further enhance this plausibility. After all, one crucial event in Fengyi's "spiritual awakening" was his despise of gambling.

Of course, having such a vision was not equal to understanding how to implement that vision successfully, and this was precisely what occurred during the early stage of *Shanrendao* institutionalization. Fengyi suffered a significant failure when attempting to prop up a local pawnshop on the brink of bankruptcy. Chronologically juxtaposed next to his proclaimed success in establishing female charity schools, this hidden storyline represents an often-unmentioned frustration in *Shanrendao*'s development before its merger with *Daodehui*. The occurrence of this event around the same time that the Yangxing Village's female charity school suffered its debt crisis suggests not only the large-scale economic pressure *Shanrendao* encountered at this time, but also provides a potential explanation for Fengyi later decision to merge with *Wanguo daodehui*, an organization with far greater economic resources.

The series of stories starts with section 87, "The Bankruptcy of Yongqing Pawnshop in Yangshan Town (羊山镇永庆当倒闭)." In this anecdote, Fengyi is shown to once again be lecturing on morality books when he discovers that his audience is smaller than usual; those present seem distressed. Upon inquiry, Fengyi discovers that the Yongqing pawnshop in

Yangshan Town has gone bankrupt; the tickets of all who pawned items have been nullified, leaving the people of the locale in desperate straits. This was because, Fengyi notes, "rural residents almost all possessed their [the pawnshop's] tickets" since "Yangshan Town, with its close distance with all three counties, was an important location" and "the Yongqing pawnshop had a good reputation."[47] Fengyi then reasons:

> Taking into account the fate of temperament, the Yongqing pawnshop's shareholders should have taken responsibility; taking into account the fate of predetermination, magistrate Wang (Wang Naibin) should have resolve the people's difficulty, but none of them cared. When talking about the fate of Heaven, people call me a virtuous man (善人), and therefore, I must save the people on behalf of Heaven. [So] I started investigating ways to resolve this enormous crisis.[48]

Fengyi's usage of the fate of Heaven, which in an earlier section he explains as one's "morality and justice," and the fate of predetermination, which he defines as "one's knowledge, ability, and wealth," indicate the consistency of the definitions of these phrases within *Shanrendao*.[49] Fengyi justifies his intervention in the matter as adhering to "morality and justice," while magistrate Wang's responsibility originated from his status as the local official. However, it makes less sense when Fengyi concludes that the original shareholders of the pawnshop should be responsible for the crisis due to their fate of temperament, which he elsewhere defines as people's negative personality traits.[50] Would not their fate of predetermination function as a better justification for their responsibility in this matter? These inconsistencies suggest the

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[47] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 151-152.
[48] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 152.
[49] Also comprehensively discussed in my second chapter. Original quotes see in *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 35.
[50] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 35.

possible reinterpretation of these terms in different sections of *Yanxing lu*, again pointing to the palimpsestuous nature of the text.

Nonetheless, clearly Fengyi sees resolving this crisis as one of his many duties to redeem rural society. He thus promises the people that he will take over the running of the pawnshop and that he will honor their pawnshop tickets.[51] The ending to this short anecdote carries a rather idealistic (possibly naive) tone regarding people's responses:

> Although the people knew I did not have the money, [they knew] that I never go back on my word, so they deeply believed me. One told ten, and ten told a hundred [until] everyone knew I was going to take over Yongqing pawnshop, and therefore felt secure and waited for me to redeem their tickets.

The story explicitly ends by re-emphasizing Fengyi's high reputation in the rural community, a theme well-cultivated throughout the previous seven chapters of the volume and compatible, if not complementary, with the ostensible success of his female charity schools. Whether people's reactions were genuine or not, the section represents Fengyi's incorporation of a local economic meltdown into his *Shanrendao* vision, which obviously gained sufficient recognition from his disciples that they incorporated the episode into *Yanxing lu*.

In the next section, "Finding Shareholders to Establish the *Shande* Pawnshop (招股开善德当)," Fengyi further exemplifies the connection between his economic vision and his metaphysical teachings by stating his strategy to "mobilize the three realms and find shareholders from Heaven."[52] Bizarre at first sight, Fengyi soon elucidates his meaning:

[51] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 152.
[52] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 152.

> What does it mean to find shareholders from Heaven? People are the Heaven, or do you think I meant Heaven as in the sky? Or, to speak more precisely, human nature is Heaven. If a person interacts with others with an understanding of human nature, it is to interact with Heaven. Mobilizing the three realms means selling ideas to Yangshan Town's surrounding communities with three trips.[53]

When stressing the virtue of investing in the pawnshop, Fengyi proposes to divide the profits threefold: one-third as dividends for shareholders, one-third as funds for engaging in charitable deeds, and one-third for establishing schools. After many attempts, Fengyi convinces his cousin's son, Li Liancheng, to take the lead in investing, who collects the original pawnshop's capital stocks and changes its name to *Shande dang* (meaning goodness and morality pawnshop). Li subsequently sells all of the real estate Yongqing pawnshop owned, and within half a year he is able to redeem all the previous tickets Yongqing pawnshop had distributed, amassing a total number over 400,000 strings of coins (四十多万吊), an act that Fengyi exults as "finally saving this regions' people."[54] The statistics may be doubtful, as they are extracted from a religious text. Equally dubious is Fengyi's claim that Li redeemed all previous pawnshop's tickets, especially for those who could not repay back the loan, let alone the interest. Furthermore, other than exemplifying Fengyi's persuasiveness as one contributing factor to his personal charisma, his plan for a three-fold division of the pawnshop's future profits indicates his vision in engaging the business to not simply secure the livelihood of those who mortgaged items, but also to establish an economic institution that might potentially provide stable funds for his other *Shanrendao* activities.

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[53] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 152.
[54] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 152.

Taking into account the significance pawnshops played in Chinese society in the late Qing, this proposal was more ambitious than it looked at first glance. Other than loaning money to borrowers in accord with the value of the possessions they left at the store, the business supported a far wider range of services to different social groups. According to research conducted by Brett Sheehan and Yingui Zhu, pawnshops in the late Qing engaged in businesses ranging from "taking deposits," "making loans," and "exchanging money," to "issuing paper money exchangeable to silver or copper," and "purchasing gold, silver, or copper as investments," facing customers including ordinary individuals, the wealthy, businesses, and the government.[55] For its most basic purpose, pawnshops before the 1930s were already crucial—if not dominant—financial sources for rural residents to gain personal loans. This trend continued into late 1930s, with 3,386 pawnshops loaning a total amount of 14,931,500 yuan to peasants in 1937, in contrast to the new-style banking institutions, which loaned less than 2 million in 1933 to people in rural communities and barely caught up with about 14 million yuan in 1935 despite their exploding growth during the period.[56]

The greatest advantage pawnshops possessed in comparison to other contemporary economic institutions was their convenience for people desiring "fast cash." Ji Zhaojin notes that the pawnshops required neither credit check nor guarantors, allowing pawners to exchange cash with a wide range of items, with the downside of higher interest rates. As a result, small-business owners and lower-income persons constituted about 90 percent of the loaners.[57] Huang Zhenglin in his study further explicates the components of the collateral, which rarely consisted of jewlry

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[55] Brett Sheehan, and Yingui Zhu, "Financial Institutions and Financial Markets," in *The Cambridge Economic History of China*, eds. Debin Ma and Richard von Glahn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 282.
[56] Brett Sheehan, "Financial Institutions and Financial Markets," 299.
[57] Ji Zhaojin, "Pawnshops," in *Berkshire Encyclopedia of China*, vol. 4 (Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire Publishing Group, 2009), 1725.

or possession with high value but mostly were daily necessities: farming tools and relatively valuable clothing. In one instance, a rural pawnshop in Qinghai even accepted manure as collateral for the loan.[58]

Surveys from Guangxi and Guangdong Provinces, despite their far geographical distance from Northeastern China and their focus on city residents, reaffirm that commoners were regular customers of local pawnshops.[59] Placed in the context of such nationwide research on the pawnshop industry across the late Qing to Republican eras, Fengyi's narrative of the large-scale economic catastrophe caused by the bankruptcy of Yongqing pawnshop is rather reasonable, including the claim that most rural residents held the previous shop's loan tickets. These observations potentially echo Fengyi's previous complaint of the rampant gambling addiction in his surrounding villages, with loans from the pawnshop likely contributing to funds for gambling. Nonetheless, if examined in relation to the economic pressure in some of *Shanrendao*'s female charity schools around the same time time, Fengyi and his cousin's son's economic investment in the pawnshop may have been a strategy envisioned to resolve funding issues for the charitable schools. The outcome of this venture led to the exact the opposite, the undermining of the schools.

In three different places, the narrative records the title of Chapter 9 as "Frustrations with Starting Schools" (兴学受挫). Despite the chapter's title focus on charity schools, the only actual disaster depicted in this last part of *Yanxing lu*'s third volume is the bankruptcy of *Shande dang*. This reaffirms my earlier speculation that Fengyi and his *Shanrendao* disciples viewed the operation of the pawnshop and the establishment of female charity schools as two sides to an

[58] Lin Zhenglin, "Qingchao zhi minguo shiqi ganningqing diqu de diandangye" (Ganningqing Region's Pawnshop Industry from Qing Dynasty to Republican Era 清朝至民国时期甘宁青地区的典当业), *Xixia yanjiu* 西夏研究 No. 4 (2012): 77. doi:CNKI:SUN:XAYJ.0.2012-04-013.
[59] Brett Sheehan, "Financial Institutions and Financial Markets," 320.

institutional solution to local sustinance, with the failure in parts of the system inevitably posing financial challenges for the overall *Shanrendao* activities. Just one year after Fengyi's relative, Li Liancheng, headed up the business of the pawnshop, Fengyi had a premonition that *Shande dang* was heading to a bad end:

> Because both of us [Li Liancheng and Wang Fengyi himself] were farmhands, who knew little about running businesses, we took on board the wrong people. The shopkeepers we hired were excessively extravagant and embezzled the shop's funds. As a result, [the pawnshop] had a deficit of over 40,000 strings of coins (equal to about 3000 silver coins), so it could no longer operate and had to go out of business.[60]

Fengyi attributes the failure of the pawnshop to Li's inexperience in business and the shopkeepers' greed, but without access to account books or other sources, it is difficult to know for sure the reasons for *Shande dang*'s bankruptcy after merely one year of operation. Still, it was unlikely due to a widespread failure of the pawnshop industry. In Sheehan's study, although there was a drastic decline in the numbers of nationwide registered pawnshop across the nineteenth century as a result of the Taiping Civil War and large-scale social turbulence, decreasing from 21,000 to 4,000, the decline of this number entering the twentieth century slowed, with the number dropping to 3,386 in the 1930s right before the outbreak of World War II.[61] The conditions for pawnshops' survival were only better in rural China. As mentioned earlier, the banking systems' loans to rural populations did not catch up that of the pawnshops until mid-1930s. No matter what the cause was, it seems to have been due to either regional or individual circumstances.

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[60] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 155-156.
[61] Brett Sheehan, "Financial Institutions and Financial Markets," 285.

Fengyi himself, however, upheld a fairly optimistic perspective on the misfortune brought about by his adherence to "morality and justice." To the shareholders and creditors who came to scold and argue with him, Fengyi declared to his disciples that he was not overwhelmed by the debt at all:

> I pretended to have a worried frown, remaining speechless despite their yelling and shouting… Once the creditors left, I closed the door and started laughing, calling to myself: "Debts, debts, everybody is afraid of you, [but] I have no fear of you. Others fret in front of you, so you eat them; but I laugh when seeing you, so you can do nothing to me."[62]

Beneath this forced bravado, though, Fengyi may have questioned his own deeds and handing of his commitments. In October of the same year that *Shande dang* went bankrupt, Fengyi traveled over 200 kilometers to Yingkou to again lecture on morality books at a local lecture hall.[63] Refusing the hall owners' offer for a long-term position at the site by eschewing the search for profit, Fengyi met an old Daoist at the place and told his personal stories to the stranger:

> I told him how I saw the bright sun at the dark night, how I guarded the grave and therefore guarded the three realms, and how I committed to everything I did, and then asked him whether I did anything wrong. How did I receive such a huge blow? He told me that what I gained was indeed the Way, which can be found in the classics, and I did things correctly. But virtue is one foot tall, while the devil is ten feet high; even when virtue is ten feet tall, the devil still rides above its head. How can anyone achieve the Way without suffering the devil's trials? [He] advised me to not lose my determination. After his encouragement, I regained my

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[62] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 156.
[63] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 157.

> courage and started to travel towards the direction of Haicheng City. At the end of the year, I arrived at the morality book lecturing hall in Tengaobao Town.[64]

Unlike Fengyi's self-proclaimed lightheartedness in the face of the failure, *Shande dang*'s bankruptcy indeed seems to have eroded the founder's confidence to his own activism and *Shanrendao* visions. The old Daoist's words were effective on terms of renewing Fengyi's confidence, essentially because his assurance was consistent with Fengyi's values. By affirming to Fengyi the consistency of his thoughts and deeds with the teachings from the classics, the old Daoist walked in the same pair of shoes as the founder when he first developed the *Shanrendao* doctrines. His use of idioms also resembles Fengyi's styles in speech when conducting moral exhortations, all of which presumably provided comforts to Fengyi's frustration.

The aftermath of this drastic failure in shoring up *Shanrendao*'s own embryonic economic institutions, a gesture likely envisioned to grant the organization greater agency in its charitable activities, was twofold. First, it likely contributed to the formation of *Shanrendao*'s economic principles that were increasingly highlighted as *Shanrendao* grew beyond its rural roots, and which were ultimately theorized into the notion of establishing funds (立金), a practice that Fengyi later viewed as essential for securing one's virtue. Second, as Fengyi clearly states in the fifth volume of *Yanxing lu*, when *Shanrendao* formally merged with *Wangguo daodehui*, he analogized the other two major leaders of *Daodehui*, respectively, as the lamp oil who provided the money and lampshade who contributed fame, even as he himself played the role of the lampwick, central in leading the organization toward the Way.[65] Grasping only the theoretical framework and entrusting to others for the economic vitality of the organization,

[64] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 157-158.
[65] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 246.

Fengyi's financial failures during Shanrendao's early institutionalizing period may have shaped his choice. In hindsight, it seems that Fengyi's narrowing of his ambition ensured that his *Shanrendao* teachings became the core values the *Daodehui* organization promoted. It also seems that Fengyi's retreat from active engagement with institution building may be a reason why later scholars have overlooked the independent stage of Fengyi's organization, arbitrarily equating *Shanrendao* with *Daodehui* and essentially dismissing the grassroots complexity of the founder's activism on the verge of the 20th century.

Conclusion

Unlike my approach in the second chapter, where I placed Fengyi's anecdotes within the cultural realm of Northeastern rural communities, this chapter positions stories extracted from *Yanxing lu* within the socio-economic contexts surrounding the founder's activities. More explicitly, this chapter has explicated *Shanrendao*'s early institutionalizing methods. The female charity schools and the *Shande dang* pawnshop, as the two major forms of institutions representing Fengyi's most concrete efforts to magnify his impact in rural regions, thus became the central attention of this chapter.

Following his activist blueprint to redeem the social customs after three years of vigil, Fengyi launched his initial campaign by becoming involved in the emerging education reform movement of the late Qing. By starting to promote his vision for female education within his own household, Fengyi was soon able to convince more benefactors to establish charity schools for women, in many cases through his morality book lectures. While various sections of *Yanxing lu* point to the complicated motives behind Fengyi's gender-specific focus, his utilization of *Shanrendao* elements formulated out of local cultural repertoires functioned as an effective

means for gathering local support in the process. These various anecdotes not only grant historians with a more bottom-up perspective on the presence of grassroots initiatives within the education reform movement, but also demonstrate unique channels through which cultural-intellectual continuities and transformations were gradually manifested through institutional building, subsequently functioning as new arenas for further cultural metamorphosis. Moreover, Fengyi's gaining of state sanction after deflecting official suspicion marks a critical transitional moment in which *Shanrendao* began to shed its grassroots origins and identity, foreshadowing its future merger with *Wangguo daodehui*, which further gentrified the redemptive society.

Still, accompanying these seemingly successful moves to institutionalize *Shanrendao* teachings was the financial instability of these charity schools, as glimpsed through the predicament of Wang Tianlong's school in Yangxing Village. Possibly to counter such economic concerns, or in Fengyi's own words to save the local economy, he convinced his cousin's son Li Liancheng to resuscitate the Yongqing pawnshop in the guise of the *Shande dang*. While Fengyi envisioned the profits from the pawnshop as benefiting both the shareholders and his other *Shanrendao* activities, he soon realized the implausibility of the plan; the *Shande dang* went out of business within a year of operation. Snippets within the third volume of *Yanxing l*u suggest that this event may have impaired his confidence. It also may have contributed to *Shanrendao*'s later precepts on economic life and the founder's decision to merge with *Daodehui* to secure financial support. In the fourth and fifth volumes of *Yanxing lu*, the female charity schools are shown to be flourishing, although Fengyi never again tried to establish any additional financial institutions such as *Shande dang* to foster his moral vision. All in all, *Shanrendao* became part of *Wangguo daodehui*, and *Daodehui* ultimately became known as *Shanrendao*. The result of these

economic and institutional gains, though, came at the expense of the Fengyi's grassroots charisma. In later volumes of *Yanxing lu*, Fengyi's voice is gradually lowered and diminished.

Conclusion

So, what is *Shanrendao*? A superstitious cult that has persisted into modern times? A secret society transformed from popular beliefs? A reinterpretation of elite notions and cultural repertoires appropriated by Northeastern rural communities? An incoherent metaphysical framework imagined by an illiterate farmhand? A redemptive society aiming to redeem the world from impending catastrophe? All these definitions touch upon certain elements of the subject of this study, yet none comprehensively captures the complete representation of the organization that Wang Fengyi commenced. The difficulty in defining *Shanrendao* stems from the century-long historical complexity of this grassroots initiative, the drastic ruptures between the various state regimes under which *Shanrendao* was launched and later evolved, and the very malleability of its meaning for audiences from different social groups at different times. The view that I have presented here, attempts to retrieve (as best I can) the origins of *Shanrendao*, which, I argue, constituted a grassroots initiative to transform local conditions in rural Northeastern China on the verge of the 20th century.

I started the project with the naive ambition to uncover the diversity of *Shanrendao*'s identities from the late 19th to the early 21st centuries. However, the information generated through the research soon proved that plan to be implausible, forcing me to reduce the temporal scale and the range of sources. The latter restraint, of course, was also due to my limited access to archives in China and Taiwan during this research. Even so, my research on *Shanrendao*'s formative period, that is, its founder, Wang Fengyi's, building of the Society and development of its teachings within his surrounding environment, and his initial attempts to institutionalize his visions in rural communities, still offers a view of the organization that has been occluded in

many other studies that simply identify it as the precursor of *Wanguo daodehui*. This project, then, both supplements and hints and one reason for why Shanrendao came to be subsumed into *Daodehui* in the 1930s.

To pursue this goal, I have structured the thesis into three chapters. Chapter 1 has extracted from the palimpsestual writings of *Shanrendao* doctrines two *leitmotifs* representing the maturation of Fengyi's metaphysical ideas, exposing the development of these two threads of attention in response to two social crises perceived in his surrounding milieu. The first *leitmotif*, initiated by his own existential crisis in the face of a morally corrupted world, was ultimately resolved by Fengyi's seeing of the bright sun on dark night, where he gained the Way to save the nation. The second *leitmotif*, in response to the lack of medicine in rural communities, motivated Fengyi to combine his personal healing experiences with the Way to perfect his morality-healing techniques.

Chapter 2 has examined the diverse socio-cultural repertoires the founder likely absorbed from his rural milieu by juxtaposing details in *Yanxing lu* to secondary scholarship that has investigated the morality book movement, filial tombs, and spiritual healing: Brokaw's study of Yuan Huang's more agentive reinterpretation of Neo-Confucianism; Meyer-Fong's work on morality book lecturing in the late Qing as epitomized by Yu Zhi's popularization of Neo-Confucianism in rural communities; DuBois's attention to the unorthodox use of filial tombs as ritualistic sites for performing faith healing; etc. In the process, it becomes apparent that Fengyi mobilized ideas originally linked to the pursuit of examination success for rural audiences' more urgent need for medical care. This became the central attraction of the original *Shanrendao*. In this process, we witness a kind of centuries-long process of circulation between elite ideas and popular practices, in which normative ideas of morality became popularized and disseminated

into local communities and then acquired new justifications for their renewed popularity via the incorporation of beliefs and practices prevalent among grassroots target audiences. This dynamic discourse, which reached downwards into Chinese society, as exemplified in Fengyi's early activist efforts in the third volume of *Yanxing lu*, is what I call "grassroots Confucianism."

However, Wang Fengyi's construction of *Shanrendao* was not a mere one-sided vernacularization of elite ideas in combination with popular cultural practices. Instead, as I show in Chapter 3, with Fengyi's establishment of charity schools for women, the multi-layered *Shanrendao* doctrines reveal a bottom-up vitality, which exerted impact upon people higher on the social ladder. Fengyi's participation in the local, late Qing education reform movement by motivating rural populations through morality-healing and morality book lecturing, read in light of previous scholarship on such initiatives as driven by the efforts of the state or local elites, demonstrates the grassroots forces contributing to a modernizing process that previously has been imagined as exclusively top-down. But the picture of grassroots activism is not completely positive. As witnessed in Fengyi's failures to implement *Shanrendao*'s own financial institution, the Shande Pawnshop, such initiatives were inherently flawed due to limited financial resources. In the process of gaining recognition from people possessing greater resources, Fengyi's own voice was gradually diminished.

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The increasing institutionalization of *Shanrendao*, and its ultimate culmination in *Wanguo daodehui*, while confirming Fengyi's success in gaining recognition from audiences of higher social station, also represent Fengyi's gradually diminished agency within *Shanrendao* (and later *Daodehui*) Society. This refers not only to the instance of Filial Li (see chapter 2), where

Daodehui members completely deviated from Fengyi's doctrines and practices, but also points to a textual phenomenon reflected in *Yanxing lu* in the fourth and fifth volumes. In these later volumes, Fengyi ceases to be the sole protagonist. As anecdotes start to orient around other *Shanrendao* and *Daodehui* members, the texts sometimes directly narrate the story from a top-down perspective, commenting on the new progress the Society achieved through meetings and collaborations with state representatives. Certain sections even abandon the story-telling format, functioning instead as records of the organization's statistics or other institutional information. Clearly, as *Shanrendao* grew as an organization, Fengyi's textual voice came to be simultaneously muted. His words gradually lost the level of authenticity that seem to permeate the third volume, when he still wandered alone across the rural lands of the Northeast to spread his *Shanrendao* ideals, accompanied on his travels occasionally with, at most, a few relatives or close friends.

One might be tempted to justify this transformation in narrative style as the result of later editorial choices, especially since *Yanxing lu* does clarify in its editor's notes and at the end of the third volume that the volumes 2 and 3 were added in 1976, about eight years after the first publication of other volumes 1, 4, and 5. Still, there actually is not a noticeable abrupt transition in narrative style between the third and fourth volumes. Instead, this change in narrative tone is already evident in the last three chapters of the third volume, when Fengyi records his initial institutionalizing attempts. Although these ending chapters still largely resemble Fengyi's original quotes, certain sections revealed editorial redaction by speaking on Fengyi's behalf from a third-person perspective. Those additional passages exhorting moral teachings through stories of local exemplary figures, including the piece recording Wang Tianlong's bankrupted charity school, also indicate a process through which the focal point of *Yanxing lu* started shifting away

from Wang Fengyi toward more *Shanrendao* participants. This is also why I am inclined to treat the early stage of *Shanrendao* depicted in the third volume as different from the formalized institutions narrated in the fourth and fifth volumes. After all, the former part offers a closer lens through which to observe the bottom-up socio-cultural landscape of Northeastern rural communities, allowing readers to walk in Fengyi's soiled shoes.

Of course, as I have emphasized throughout the thesis, this recognition of the third volume of *Yanxing lu* as closest to Fengyi's authentic voice among all five volumes is not to suggest the anecdotes in the text as an accurate representation of his life experiences. Editorial tinkering can still be perceived even in his direct quotes. This may account for not only the obvious multiplicity of ideas in *Shanrendao* teachings (possibly a result of Fengyi's own palimpsestuous memory or continuous reinterpretations of his own ideas), but, more importantly, the elision of non-Confucian elements and constant highlighting of orthodox notions. Combining these features with the state's suspicion of *Shanrendao*'s association with illicit cults, there may have been more than sufficient motives for Fengyi and his disciples to undermine the presence of such perilous beliefs and practices in their narratives. No matter how authentic Fengyi's voice may sound, it is always necessary to read his anecdotes critically. So, too, is the case for all historical sources.

At the end of volume three, after the old Daoist reignites Fengyi's confidence, our protagonist starts to head North from the town of Tengaobao with another friend names Liu Zhenming, aiming to investigate local conditions and customs. Without carrying a single coin on them, the two beg along the way for three months and travel over 2,000 *li*. When they reach Dagaohu Village, they encounter a local rule that villagers are not permitted to host outsiders. Fengyi takes up the challenge and starts lecturing on morality books, finally moving an elder

who tells them: "You can live at my place. Who carries their houses on the back when travelling outside!"[1] When they arrive at Fuyu County, they learn that the local magistrate has banned all morality book lecturing halls on the pretext that: "Even when I kill, people won't turn good. And now you are expecting to convert them with words?"[2] At Shuangchengbao, they meet an old man who queries: "Do you need all those teachings? All you need is to not harm anyone." But when Fengyi asks him whether he knows the Way of his wife and son, the old man cannot answer, to which Fengyi responds: "If you do not know the Way of those who are closest to you, how can you possibly say that you are not harming anyone?"[3]

At the end of the trip, Fengyi laments that he had not met a single virtuous person: "The world really lacks people who understand the Way! I am only more determined to convert the world." The anecdote abruptly ends with a moment of family reunion, thus concluding the volume:

> In the winter my third brother walked all the way from the East, because some people in Chaoyang County said that I had died in Dongsheng, and someone else said that I already had travelled abroad. Once we met in Tengaobao, [my brother] Shusen sobbed on my shoulder.[4]

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Like a bookend, I end where I began my interest in *Shanrendao.* My father's enthusiasm for its teachings drew me to identify the values contained within the religious text. However, as my research progressed, I started to identify many previous unwitting exposures to *Shanrendao*

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[1] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 158.
[2] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 159.
[3] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 159.
[4] *Wang Fengyi yanxing lu*, 159.

concept throughout my youth. For instance, the economic thread of *Shanrendao* doctrines was actually expressed to me way before I recognized its presence in the *Shanrendao* text. When addressing the significance of managing personal finances, my father would always say: "Money is the blood of this society, and you should never overlook the importance of money."[5] The first time I heard him using such rhetoric (when I was still in high school), I thought it was driven by his liberalist inclination toward free market policies. Another time, I received such exhortation as a sophomore in college, at which time I understood his saying as a rephrasing of Adam Smith's classical economics principles. Only after starting this research, upon reading *Yanxing lu* and Fengyi's exhortations, did I realize how mistaken I had been. In one of our recent conversations, I told him: "I really thought you were quoting some economic theories, but it turns out you were repeating Fengyi's words this whole time!" He laughed and responded: "But what he said makes sense, doesn't it?"

Still, after this lengthy research on *Shanrendao*'s formative stage, it is still quite mysterious to me what exactly captured my father's interest in its doctrines. What might have attracted a former lawyer in PRC China to ponder his words so deeply? Might he have been persuaded by the relative lack of religious rituals and thus the plausibility of reading Fengyi's doctrines merely as means of self-cultivation? Or was he drawn in by the anxiety in the face of a morally collapsing society in Fengyi's narrative, an ongoing concern my father also shares in the contemporary moment? Did *Shanrendao* teachings feel familiar to my father due to his own family background of having grown up in extreme poverty in the rural Northeast, perhaps accounting for his seriousness upon first encountering the text?

[5] I can hardly count the number of times I have heard him quote this phrase.

All these speculations, though, become further complicated when taking into account two additional contemporary figures. My maternal grandmother, who is devoted to a fox cult variant in Northeastern China called *Chumaxian*, exposes a paradox between my father's enthusiasm for *Shanrendao* and his attitude toward other grassroots popular beliefs. As revealed in my interviews with my grandmother for a previous project and in my personal recollections of family quarrels, my father was never a fan of the fox spirits. If anything, I remember him denigrating my grandmother's devotion: "Your grandmother believes in these sorts of things due to her weak mind." A deep investigation in this cognitive division within my own household may contribute to understanding two competing popular religious traditions in Northeastern China, both of which encountered similar suppression and cooptation by modernizing Chinese state regimes across the 20th and 21st centuries. The interaction between my father and maternal grandmother under the same roof, subsequently, may shed light on a form of cultural integration in recent decades.

The other contemporary figure embodying *Shanrendao*'s most explicit successful thread of continuity in mainland China in the past few decades is a peasant named Liu Yousheng 刘有生, who—like my father—originated from Heilongjiang Province. Addressed by others as Liu the Virtuous (*Liu Shanren* 刘善人), a title clearly reminiscent of Fengyi's, he has gained wide support in the rural communities of the Northeastern Province with his miraculous morality-healing. Liu, himself a beneficiary of *Shanrendao*'s healing techniques in 1965 at the age of 25, started performing morality-healing for others in 1982, and established his own "Morality-Healing Rehabilitation Institute" in 1995.[6] Of course, his information and publications went

[6] Yousheng was arrested due to his morality-healing practices in 1984, but was soon released after two and a half months, resuming on healing others. Liu Yousheng, *Liu Yousheng yanjinag lu* (刘有生演讲录 Collection of Liu Yousheng's Speeches), (Beijing, China: World Intellectual Publishing House 世界知识出版社, 2011) vi-ix.

underground after 2015, when the state formally suppressed the spread of *Shanrendao*, but how prevalent his teaching is still in rural communities of Northeastern China remains an open question. Viewing these contemporary circumstances of *Shanrendao* in relation to the investigated origins of Fengyi's words and deeds in late 19th and early 20th centuries, I propose that the study of *Shanrendao* can potentially function as another prism through which to understand the transformation and persistence of longstanding socio-cultural beliefs as practices in a supposedly modernized Chinese society. This thesis serves as just the first step in addressing that larger historical project.

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