

## **The Logic of Chinese Local Religion ---Analysis of the Statement of ‘Serving *Lao Niangniang*’ Claimed by the Incense Societies’ Pilgrimage to Miaofeng Mount**

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Qingren ZHANG

Institute of Global Ethnology and Anthropology,  
Minzu University of China, China  
Email: 18911137454@126.com

### **Abstract:**

The pilgrims heading for Miaofeng Mount address the *Bixia Yuanjun* as “*Lao Niangniang*”, and describing their religious practices as serving *Lao Niangniang*. These actions reflect the logic of the Chinese local religious practice. The motivation of religious practice is to obtain the goddess’ blessing. In the believers’ opinion, although all the believers pray in front of the goddess and pilgrimage to Miaofeng Mount, the religious practices are centred around the goddess and the blessings differentiate depending on the relationship between the goddess and the believers. The believers try to establish an intimate relationship with *Bixia Yuanjun* by addressing *Bixia Yuanjun* as *Lao Niangniang* and describing their religious practices as serving *Lao Niangniang*. Therefore they are able to use the moral obligation between relatives to ensure the goddess’ rewards. The logic of the local religious practices is then shaped by the Pattern of Difference Sequence of Chinese society.

**Key words:** Religious Practices, The Pattern of Difference Sequence, The Relationships between gods and believers

## 1. CHINESE LOCAL RELIGION RESEARCH: FROM TYPOLOGICAL STUDY TO RELIGIOUS PRACTICE RESEARCH

Chinese local religion attracts increasing attention in the field of sinology anthropology. Current studies of Chinese local religion mainly conform to the following orientations. The first is to discuss the basic theoretical issues. Some researchers tried to find the characteristics that matched the definition of sacred religion given by Emile Durkheim. Terms such as diffused, lower or superstitious were used to label Chinese local religion in contrast to the institutional, higher or religious western religions<sup>1</sup>. Although statements of Chinese local religion such as C. K Yang's study is a diffused religion<sup>2</sup> deepened our understanding of Chinese local religion to a certain extent, he ignored the complex meaning of the word "religion", and also neglected the investigation of the believers. This orientation also has a tendency to simplify the diversity of Chinese local religious practices. Some other western theories such as interactions between the country and the society, national tradition and country tradition, religious sphere and sacrifice sphere, ritual theory and the theory of religious market are the mainstreams of Chinese local religion research, but those theories lack microscopic analysis of the religious practices in the social-historical context from the believers' perspective.<sup>3</sup>

With the introduction of the inter-subjectivity reflection of anthropology and the practice theory, it became an important trend to analyze Chinese local religion from the believers' religious practices in Chinese local religion studies. Considering the very concept of "belief" in the Chinese popular religious context had been heavily burdened with Judeo-Christian theological content<sup>4</sup>, Adam Yuet Chau proposed the concept of "do religion" to analyse Chinese local religion. He pointed out that different ways of "doing religion" had been evolving in the history of Chinese religion and had cohered into distinguishable models, including "the discursive/scriptural model, personal-cultivational model, liturgical/ritual model, immediate-practical model, and relational model".<sup>5</sup>

Ian reader and George J. Tanabe encountered the same problem when they tried to fit Japanese local religion into the western religion concept. They claimed that the religion concept was

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<sup>1</sup> Such as C. K Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society- A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970; Li, Yih-yuan, *The Images of Culture*, Taipei: Taiwan Yunchen Wenhua Shiye Gufen Youxian Gongsi, 1992, pp.180; Jin Ze, *Religious Anthropology*, Beijing: Religious Culture Press, 2001, pp.104-182.

<sup>2</sup> C. K Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society- A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> Such as Zheng Zhenman & Chen Chunsheng ed: *Popular Religion with Social Space*, Fuzhou: Fujian People Press, 2003; Wu Xiaoqun, *Miaofeng Mount: The Historical Changes of Civil Society of Beijing*, Beijing: People Press, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*, Redwood: Stanford University Press, 2006, pp.59.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.75.

occurred within the Christianity background which relates to creeds, beliefs, teachings and doctrines; therefore “it is inappropriate as a term of analysis for situations where customs, practices and other ritual actions may be the means of expressing underlying meanings that do not need affirmation in doctrinal forms”.<sup>6</sup> So they proposed to define the Japan local religion as mundane practicalities.

Thus we use ‘religion’ as an inclusive term that has elastic frontiers that readily intermingled with cultural and social themes in which belief and doctrine can play a part but are not essential. Under the rubric of ‘religion’ we include such things as visits to shrines and temples (locations that cannot be classified other than as religious institutions), participation in festivals that are focused on shrines, temples, and deities, the acquisition of amulets and talismans, and the seeking, through petitioning of deities, of worldly benefits.<sup>7</sup>

Both the concepts of “doing religion” and “mundane practicalities” are influenced by the practice theory proposed by Pierre Bourdieu. The practice theory considers that the culture has never been static but is a process, which keeps evolving and innovating on the basis of past experience. This theory emphasizes the mutual promotion between culture system and culture process. The religious practice research which is influenced by the practice theory tries to recover the believer’s subjectivity focus on the religious practice process and emphasize to comprehend the meanings of the religious practice from the believer’s daily life.<sup>8</sup>

The way the believers address the god is an important religious practice in Chinese local religion. Comparing with the abundant studies on kinship terminology, there were few studies on how the believers addressed the god. Levi Strauss<sup>9</sup> and Fei Xiaotong<sup>10</sup> regarded kinship terminology as an expression of social structure, “it is used to express personal status or power relationship, expression one’s feelings and attitudes toward his/her relatives”. Similarly, the addressing of the gods shows how the believers comprehend their relationship with gods and the logic of Chinese local religious practice.

In the north part of China, many villages usually have some social organization for cults named *xianghui* 香会 (incense society). During the temple festival, they organize pilgrims at the village or street level and pilgrimage to the religion center. Based on this assumption and investigation on the incense societies in Beijing district, this article takes the incense societies which

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<sup>6</sup> Ian reader and George J. Tanabe, jr, *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998, pp.4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.5.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Le Sens Pratique*, translated by Jiang Zihua, Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, translated by Xie Weiyang and Yu Mengxuan, Shanghai: Shanghai Yiwu Press, 1995, pp.36.

<sup>10</sup> Fei Xiaotong: *Peasant Life in China*, Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 2002, pp.240.

pilgrimage to Miaofeng Mount as examples to analyse the logic of the Chinese local religion from the addressing of the deity.

## 2. BIXIA YUANJUN: THE LAO NIANGNIANG OF MIAOFENG MOUNT

Miaofeng Mount is one of the most famous religious centres around Beijing district. There has been numerous incense societies pilgrimage to Miaofeng Mount since Ming dynasty. Many rules must be abided during the pilgrimage. The incense societies must burn incense to the most important goddess named *Tianxian Shengmu Bixia Yuanjun*<sup>11</sup> 天仙圣母碧霞元君 when they reach the peak shrine in Miaofeng Mount. The leader of the society has to do the rituals named *jiaoxiang* 叫香 (shouting incense) and *du biaowen* 读表文 (reading the article). The goals of these rituals, which introducing the basic information and reporting to the goddess, are to show their respect to the goddess and ask for her blessing. *Jiaoxiang* and *du biaowen* are the only occasions in which the believers address the goddess directly. During the temple fair in 2010, the leader of an incense society which named *Taiping Tongle Yangge Dance Sacred Society* 太平同乐秧歌圣会 did the ritual as follows:

*We are here to meet all the working staffs in Miaofeng Mount, to meet all the elder leaders in Beijing Shuntian Province Daxing and Wanping counties and the leaders of the thirteen Wen and Wu societies in the six ministries of the Forbidden City, to meet all the leaders of the societies from Beijing and elsewhere. Here being witnessed the Taiping Tongle Yangge Sacred Society is burning incense.*

After that, the leader read the following article:

*Hearken, Lao Niangniang who dwells in the Linggan Palace on the lotus flower golden peak of Miaofeng Mount in the west part of Beijing. We are here to inform thee some tidings of this society; thou art so efficacious that we had a favorable weather without any disaster under thy blessing. We all are greatly indebted to thee. The sick were cured once we burn incense before thee, for thou fulfil every desire of us out of mercy. Thy followers dwell in the land where they were born under thy blessing. Thus Lao Niangniang receives more and more worship, and all the people in the world respect thy name. Our society pilgrimages to Miaofeng Mount every year. We write for thee the auspicious article, burn the incense before thee and pray for a smooth life. Now all the believers kowtow to thee. Now all the members of Taiping Tongle Yangge Sacred Society salute twice before thee and burn the article.*

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<sup>11</sup> Tianxian Shengmu Bixia Yuanjun (天仙圣母碧霞元君) is a famous goddess in north China, we could find the changes and characters of this goddess in Kenneth Pomeranz's article. Kenneth Pomeranz, "Power, Gender, and Pluralism in the Cult of the Goddess of Tai Shan Theodore Hutters", in Roy Bin Wong and Pauline Yu (ed.), *Culture & State in Chinese History: Conventions, Accommodations, and Critiques*, Redwood: Stanford University Press, 1997, pp.182-206.

In nowadays, many leaders omit the ritual of *du biaowen*, but start to *jiaoxiang* right away after they had a short break in the Linggan palace of the Miaofeng Mount. During the temple fair in 2011, Ling Changchun, the leader of the *Han Jiachuan Village Stilt Society* 韩家川高跷会 did *jiaoxiang* like this:

*Today we pilgrimage to the peak. Lao Niangniang sits in the center. All the societies demonstrate their talents. They wish to have a smooth and propitious life. We have met all the believers who guard the goddess' shrine, met all the elder leaders of the societies which are in or outside of the Beijing city. Now being witnessed we are burning incense.*

In the same year, the *Nananhe Village Karma Society* 南安河善缘老会 did *jiaoxiang* in the following way:

*Today we pilgrimage to the peak, Lao Niangniang sits in the centre, all the societies are burning incense in the hope of a smooth and propitious life under thy blessing. We have met all the elder leaders of the societies which are in or outside of the Beijing city. Now being witnessed we are burning incense.*

The process of *jiaoxiang* and the wording of *biaowen* are formulated with subtle differences among different societies. During my investigation, when the incense societies communicate directly with the goddess, they use *Lao Niangniang* 老娘娘 instead of *Tianxian Shengmu Bixia Yuanjun* 天仙圣母碧霞元君 to address her. How do the society members address the goddess when they introduce her to someone outside the ritual process?

When I did my first fieldwork and went to Miaofeng Mount with the *Taiping Tongle Yangge Dance Sacred Society*, the leader Zhao Fengling told me many stories about how efficacious *Lao Niangniang* was.

*When I was young, an elder told me that there was a villager who was possessed by the fox spirit. He always acted in a strange way, but when he made a pilgrimage to Miaofeng Mount, he became sober suddenly and was not insane at all. Someone asked him why he became sober, he answered that because both he and the fox spirit were in Miaofeng Mount, they should observe rules. Because Lao Niangniang administrate all the spirits, so the fox spirits feared her and behaved normal. How efficacious the Lao Niangniang is!*

Huang Ronggui, the eldest apprentice of Sui Shaofu, who is considered to be the most famous person in Beijing incense societies, was totally awestruck when he spoke of *Lao Niangniang*,

*We have made pilgrimage to Miaofeng Mount more than 20 times. You must be devout and behave well during this process. Once we were on the way to Miaofeng Mountain, it was raining so heavily that we all thought we couldn't arrive at the temple. The master said: "Don't worry, Lao Niangniang would bless us." When we reached the archway that was the entrance of the pilgrim route, the sun came out. It*

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*must have been the manifestation of Lao Niangniang because it was raining so heavily in the city.*

Lao Lu is the leader of an incense society which named *Qinyou Tongle Tea Sacred Society* 亲友同乐清茶圣会, who also built a shrine in his home to worship *Lao Niangniang*. When we talked about the reasons for pilgrimage, he said,

*When I was young, I didn't know Bixia Yuanjun, I just knew this was my Lao Niangniang who lived in my home. When my mother was alive, if we had any problem, we would just burn some incense towards the west, the problem would be solved soon. Now we found this tea society just to serve Lao Niangniang.*

It is no coincidence that all the leaders of the incense societies address *Bixia Yuanjun* as *Lao Niangniang*. During my investigation when the believers mentioned *Bixia Yuanjun*, they always addressed her as *Lao Niangniang*. Comparing with the situation that the name of *Lao Niangniang* was rooted deeply in the believers' mind, some members of the incense society even did not know that the goddess' name was actually "*Tixian Shengmu Bixia Yuanjun*". No matter who the believers were, no matter when they mentioned the goddess, *Lao Niangniang*, rather than *Bixia Yuanjun* was used to address the goddess.

The reason why believers address *Bixia Yuanjun* as *Lao Niangniang* is obviously relevant to *Bixia Yuanjun*'s identity as a female. In the article which traces the formation of *Bixia Yuanjun*, Kenneth Pomeranz found that *Bixia Yuanjun* was considered as a goddess of fertility. As the daughter of Mount Tai, *Bixia Yuanjun* was endowed with the power of giving life and judging the dead. His research of one of the Chinese traditional novel named *Xingshi yinyuanzhuàn* 醒世姻缘传 also uncovered the goddess' function of helping parents recover at the cost of sacrificing their children. Kenneth Pomeranz concluded that *Bixia Yuanjun*'s role offended against Confucian tradition for the contradiction between the goddess of fertility and the image of an unmarried girl. Only after *Bixia Yuanjun* had been known as a married daughter of Mount Tai who returned back to maiden home was she accepted by the society, and *Bixia Yuanjun* also became an all-purpose goddess, "from whom people sought good harvests, profits in trade, and general safety, but above all she brought children and health to parents."<sup>12</sup> *Lao Niangniang* is how the believers address the goddess after the transformation of her image from an unmarried maid to a married woman. To address *Bixia Yuanjun* as *Lao Niangniang* is to grant her more respect and place her in a higher position in Miaofeng Mount. Moreover, *Lao Niangniang* means she has many children and is a goddess of fertility.

Multiple meaning is presented in the term *Lao Niangniang* in addition to demonstrate *Bixia Yuanjun*'s female characteristic. The word *niang* 娘 (mother) can refer not only to mother but also the elder lady and married woman in oral Chinese. Using *lao niangniang* (old mother)

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<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Pomeranz, "Power, Gender, and Pluralism in the Cult of the Goddess of Tai Shan Theodore Hutters", in Roy Bin Wong and Pauline Yu (ed.), *Culture & State in Chinese History: Conventions, Accommodations, and Critiques*, Redwood: Stanford University Press, 1997, pp.191-193.

to address *Bixia Yuanjun* reflects the believers' imagination and perception of *Bixia Yuanjun*. In the believer's statement, *Lao Niangniang* i.e. *Bixia Yuanjun* did not live in a world beyond their reach, but in the same world where they live, and took care of their daily life just like a lady-next-door. The image and the appellation of this goddess also remind us that although *Bixia Yuanjun* as a goddess is superior to the believers in status, she is however understood by the believers as a human. Furthermore, the colloquial appellation makes the relationship between the goddess and the believers as close as those of relatives. Now that we understand the believer's perceptions of the goddess, the next question is how do the believers comprehend their religious practices?

### 3. THE PRAY PRACTICES: SERVING LAO NIANGNIANG

Pilgrimage to Miaofeng Mount is the most important religious practice for these incense societies. These religious societies are divided into two kinds, the *Wenhui* 文会(civil society) and the *Wuhui* 武会 (military society). The Wen societies refer to those providing services of putting up sheds for pilgrims and shrines for the goddess. When talking about the function of Wen society, the leader of *Taiping Tongle Yangge Dance Sacred Society* named Zhao Fengling said:

*The Wen societies actually provide food and accommodation. For example , steamed bread society is in charge of eating, tea society is of drinking, and we also have a duster society for cleaning, a flower society to present flowers to Lao Niangniang. They serve niangniang directly. And then there are other societies in charge of mending roads, sewing clothes or lighting roads at night. It seems that they offer direct services to pilgrims, but in fact they are serving niangniang indirectly by attracting more pilgrims and incense.*

Although the Wu societies mainly practice Chinese kungfu, the leaders insisted that the purpose of the 13 kinds of Wu societies also served *Lao Niangniang*. Unlike services provided by the Wen society, services provided by the Wu society can be interpreted on many levels. First and foremost, their pilgrimages to Miaofeng Mount contribute to get much more incense for the cult. Secondly, the Wu societies present wonderful performance before the goddess' shrine. Last but not the least, the 13 societies in old Peking constituted a symbolic temple with their internal symbolic meaning.

*The flying fork society goes first, the five tigers stick society follows behind. We put stilts in front of the door (stilt society). The pennant looks so majestic (pennant society). Lions crouch down on both sides of the door(lion society), two stones on the bottom of the door(two stones society, stone locks brace the door(stone lock society), thick stick lock the door(thick stick society), the parterre is used to hold the wine(parterre society), the voice of blowing and beating makes noise(noisy society), we use sticks to hold the boxes for paying tribute(box society), we use balance to*

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*weigh(scale society). And the bass drums stoop down (drum society). All these pennants and drums are working to make the world peace and tranquil.*<sup>13</sup>

Among these 13 incense societies,

*The lion society symbolizes the stone lions in front of the temple. So the lion society must let other societies go first during the pilgrimage. The pennant society symbolizes the flag in front of the temple, so this society should go first. The bicycle society acts as a messenger raising money and food. The flying fork society just like a pathfinder who clears away the obstacles for Lao Niangniang, so they practice forks. The five tigers stick society and the shaolin stick society are the heralds. The scale society is responsible for weighing for Lao Niangniang, the waist drum society seems to play the holy music. The box society represents the box for storing money and food. The yangge dance society and the small cart society stand for the tourists coming for the temple fair. The two stones society, the stick society and the parterre society etc. symbolize the deacons in the temple and the entertainers in temple fair.*<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, if the bicycle society, small cart society and the land boat society wanted to become members of the Wu societies during the period of Republic of China, they should make a statement that they were here to serve *Lao Niangniang*: The bicycle society said they were raising food and money for *Lao Niangniang*, the small cart society said they were carrying money and food by lands for *Lao Niangniang*, the boat society said they were carrying money and food by water for *Lao Niangniang*.

In addition to making pilgrimages, many members of the incense societies also build shrines of *Bixia Yuanjun* at home, which was thought as serving *Lao Niangniang* as well. As I have mentioned above, one of the leader named Lao Lu always burned incense on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> day of every lunar month. He also offered fresh fruit to the goddess whenever he could get some, and prayed before the goddess before the tea society set off. In his opinion, *Lao Niangniang* was just a kind elderly lady who blessed his family.

Like Lao Lu, Zheng Wei, the leader of *Juyi Tongshan lion society* 聚义同善天缘狮会, also served *Lao Niangniang* in his own house. Although he had founded the society, he did not set a shrine at home in the first place. The lion society was used for commercial purpose. He was diagnosed to have diabetes mellitus in 2004, the illness his parents and parents in-law had suffered before. What is worse, his mother suffered from brain hemorrhage which caused her tardiness and deaf. His family could not afford the high medical charge, so the elders in his village advised him to make a pilgrimage to *Lao Niangniang*. With the help of other people, Zheng Wei made his pilgrimage to Miaofeng Mount, and was able to set a shrine at home.

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<sup>13</sup> Wu Xiaoqun, *Miaofeng Mount: The Historical Changes of Civil Society of Beijing*, Beijing: People Press, 2005, pp.85.

<sup>14</sup> Jin Shoushen, *Beijing Tong*, Beijing: Dazhong Wenyi Press, 1999, pp.155.

After that, Zheng wei's lion society became increasingly prosperous, and his physical condition has improved. Due to the development project of the village, Zheng wei's house need to be relocated, and his family received three flats and almost two million RMB for compensation. As a result, all the problems were immediately solved.

Zhengwei attributed all these changes to *Lao Niangniang*'s blessing, so he sincerely served this goddess. The room where the shrine of *Lao Niangniang* was placed was a sacred place in his flat. Everyone must pay attention to their behaviours. The first thing he did everyday after getting up was to show respect to the goddess. On the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> day of every lunar month, Zheng Wei burned incense in front of the goddess. He also prayed to the goddess before leading the performance of the lions dance society. Every time before the Society set off for pilgrimage, following Zheng's lead all members would kowtow to *Lao Niangniang* before her shrine.

Pilgrimage and burning incense are common ritual practices in Chinese local religion. According to their statements, the leaders who were the subjects of the religious practices did not care about the symbolic meanings of these rituals. What they mentioned was the essence that all these rituals were means of serving *Lao Niangniang*. That is to say, their comprehension for these religious practices slides over the symbolic meanings and focuses on the rituals as an expression of the relationship between the goddess and the believers.

The believers used "serving *Lao Niangniang*" to describe religious rituals. The word "serving" indicates the hierarchy between the god and believers. But from their comprehension of the religious rituals, we can find that it is the obligation to serve *Lao Niangniang* by doing religious practices and to show their filial respect to the goddess but not the hierarchy that is being emphasized. With *Bixia Yuanjun*'s image as a next-door-elder-lady, we can conclude that the believers' comprehension of their rituals as serving *Lao Niangniang* shows their intention to establish quasi-kinship with the goddess.

#### 4. THE BELIEVERS AND THE GOD: DIFFERENCE SEQUENCE IN MUTUAL BENEFIT

Why did the believers call *Bixia Yuanjun* as *Lao Niangniang*, define their religious practice as "serving *Lao Niangniang*" and try to establish quasi-kinship with the goddess? We could understand their religious behavior and practice by analysing the goals of their religious practice.

As shown in the pilgrims' religious experience, efficacy is the motivation for their religious practices. The efficacious gods are not unreachable but rooted in the believers' daily life. The believers seek to recover from the disturbed life through the goddess' blessing. That is the goal of all the religious practices. In this sense, the religious practices are nothing but a living strategy.

The believers set the shrine of *Bixia Yuanjun* and make pilgrimages to Miaofeng Mount for the goddess' efficacy. They hope to serve the goddess through pilgrimage and worship, the goddess rewards the believers by solving their problems. But this reciprocal relationship is not an equal-value exchange relationship. As a leader named Liu Xin said,

*Worshiping the goddess does not mean you will receive equal amount of rewards. Whether the goddess is efficacious depends on how pious you are. If you have Lao Niangniang in your heart, Lao Niangniang will be friendly with you in return. If you don't have Lao Niangniang in your heart, no matter how much money you have donated, it is useless for you, and Lao Niangniang will not bless you.*

In these old leaders' opinion, whether one can receive *Lao Niangniang's* blessing depends on whether (s) he has had *Lao Niangniang* in heart and established quasi-kinship. That is to say although all the believers pray before the goddess and pilgrimage to Miaofeng Mount, the efficacy which is the goddess' reward is not equally distributed to the believers, it depends on the relationship between the goddess and the believer. If you are a quasi-kin to the goddess, you will receive much more rewards than those who are not. If you do not establish the quasi-kinship with the goddess, you will not receive any reward.

The believers' opinion links with the Pattern of Difference Sequence of Chinese society. In such a society, the bilateral profit depends on the intimacy of the relationship between the parties involved, which is difference sequence in mutual benefit of communication.<sup>15</sup> Following this thought, believers used their daily life experience to build the relationship with the goddess. As the believers expressed, the efficacy of the goddess is based on the relationship between the god and the believer. That is to say, in the god and believer's relationship, the efficacy which is the god's rewards centres around the god, it is a kind of difference sequence of efficacy based on the intimacy of the relationship between the god and the believer.

How can they receive the god's rewards? The first thing is to build a relationship with the god. The Pattern of Difference Sequence of Chinese society provides many kinds of forms and patterns for building relationship with the god. Personal relationships are the cornerstones of the society. These relationships are bounded by moral obligation.<sup>16</sup> In order to receive the god's rewards, the believers try their best to build connections with the god, and ensure the rewards via moral obligation. They resort to burning the first incense, praying devoutly and many other extravagant actions to show their devoutness and to build quasi-kinship with the god. But these actions can only prove that the believers hold the god in their hearts. How can the believers make sure the god put them in heart and reward them?

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<sup>15</sup> Zhao Xudong, *Power and Equity: Authority Plurality and Dispute Resolution in a North China Village*, Tianjin: Tianjin Guji Press, 2003, pp. 303.

<sup>16</sup> Fei Xiaotong, *From the Soil: the Foundations of Chinese Society*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 1998, pp.26-27.

The quasi-kinship is the best solution. The obligation of kinship covers the utilitarianism of the real human-god relationship, and the moral obligation of kinship ensures the mutual benefit. So the believers address *Bixia Yuanjun* as *Lao Niangniang* and use ‘serving *Lao Niangniang*’ to describe the religious rituals dedicated to *Lao Niangniang* and their pilgrimage to Miaofeng Mount. In this way they build quasi-kinship with the goddess and use the moral obligation of kinship to ensure the goddess’ rewards i.e. the goddess’ efficacy. That is to say, the believers expect *Lao Niangniang* to fulfill her obligation to bless them when they have done their obligation to serve the goddess. That is why when April is coming both the leaders and the members of the societies always say that “it’s time for pilgrimage because April is coming”. In their opinion, like visiting relatives, making pilgrimage is one of the ways to serve *Lao Niangniang* and it has become an important way to communicate with the goddess. I Furthermore it has become the formularization of their daily life. Every pilgrimage to Miaofeng Mount and every reward they have received are the results of the obligation in kinship which in return ensure the future reciprocity between the goddess and the believer. Thus the believers make each pilgrimage with hopes and expectations.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Using ‘serving *Lao Niangniang*’ to describe the religious practices does not confine to the religions practice in Miaofeng Mount. Believers thought they were ‘serving the elder’ when the dragon tablet festival is held in Fanzhuang village in Hebei province. The believers in Ningjin country insisted that they were serving *Sanhuanggu* 三皇姑(the grandma third princess)at home, the pilgrimage to Cangyan Mount temple fair was regarded as visiting grandma. In Shandong Province, believers addressed *Bixia Yuanjun* as grandma and described the pilgrimage as visiting grandma. We can tell that it is a common phenomenon in China that believers of local religion try to build quasi-kinship with the gods.

For the local religion, the religious practices are often for self-interests. It is just a personal choice when the believer could not continue their old way of life. They hope to build a mutual beneficial relationship with the god through religious practices so the god can give efficacious rewards to the believers to redress the disordered daily life. But in the society of differential pattern, the reciprocity between people depends on their relationship. And the believers applied this principle to the relationship between the god and the believer. In the relationship created by the believers, the extent of rewards is determined by the relationship between the god and the believer. Thus the believers try their best to get in touch with the god and try to use the moral obligation of kinship to ensure the god’s rewards. The statement of serving *Lao Niangniang* reflects this logic. To some extent, The Pattern of Difference Sequence of Chinese society has shaped the logic of believers’ religious practice and has become fundamental in their lives.

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## GLOSSARY

Bicycle society 踏车会	Bixia Yuanjun 碧霞元君
Box society 杠箱会	Drum society 大鼓会
Du biao wen 读表文	Duster society 掸尘会
Five tigers stick society 五虎棍会	Flying fork society 开路会
Flower society 鲜花	Han Jiachuan Village Stilt Society 韩家川高跷会
Incense society 香会	Jiaoxiang 叫香
Juyi Tongshan lion society 聚义同善天缘狮会	Lion society 狮子会
Miaofeng Mount 妙峰山	Nananhe Village Karma Society 南安河善缘老会
Noisy society 吵子会	Parterre society 花坛会
Pennant society 中幡会	Qinyou Tongle Tea Sacred Society 亲友同乐清茶圣会

Scale society 天平会

Serving Lao Niangniang 伺候老娘娘

Shaolin stick society 少林棍会

Steamed bread society 馒头会

Stilt society 高跷会

Stone lock society 石锁会

Taiping Tongle Yangge Dance Sacred Society 太平同乐秧歌圣会

Tea society 茶会

Thick stick society 杠子会

Tianxian Shengmu Bixia Yuanjun 天仙圣母碧霞元君

Two stones society 双石会

Xingshiyinyuanzhuan 醒世姻缘传

Waist drum society 挎鼓会

Wen society 文会

Wu society 武会