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# The Dynamics of Religions and Cultural Evolution: Worshipping Fuxi in Contemporary China

**Abstract:** The paper discusses the theme of the congress ‘Dynamics of Religions’ in the theoretical context of cultural evolution. In contrast to the prevailing progression model of cultural evolution, it proposes a diversification model that allows for considering the dynamics of religions on the micro-level. In this view, a central element of cultural evolution is the dialectical relationship between cultural production and cultural environment, which is the outcome of cultural production and at the same time enables and restricts further production. The approach is exemplified by the religious dynamics in contemporary China focusing on the worship of Fuxi in popular and state rituals. The example also serves to illustrate divergent views of what counts as religion.

**Keywords:** cultural evolution, religious dynamics, China, Fuxi, popular religion, state rituals, ancestor worship

As this opening lecture is at the same time the first Gary Lease Memorial Lecture, I would like to begin by briefly referring to a theoretical point made by that honored scholar of religion. In an article published in 2000, Lease discusses the perennial problem of defining religion. He concludes with the remark: ‘But whatever definitions may emerge, they will always be accompanied by boundaries that allow us [...] to distinguish what we allow to count as religion from the rest of our cultural productions’ (Lease 2000, 293).

It is noteworthy to observe that Lease does not ask for the boundaries of religion, but for the boundaries of ‘what we allow to count as religion.’ The study of religion is facing the dilemma that religion is not an object of empirical observation (Lease [1994] 2009, 129). Addressing this dilemma and reflecting on it is a constitutive element of our discipline. It has, as it were, lost the innocent naivety which most other disciplines are privileged to use when dealing with religion.

The question of boundaries to distinguish religion from the rest of cultural productions will repeatedly surface in this paper although I shall not treat it systematically. Primarily, I will approach the general theme of this conference, which is ‘dynamics of religions’. When drafting this paper, my starting point was the observation of temple activities in contemporary China that appeared to be examples of religious dynamics on the micro level. After briefly describing one of these ex-

amples, I will put the discussion of religious dynamics into the theoretical frame of religious and cultural evolution. This will be followed by a more detailed description of the empirical case and its historical context, in order to use it as an illustration of cultural evolution on the micro level. Finally, some further theoretical aspects of religious evolution and methodological problems will be addressed against the backdrop of the findings.

## 1 Dynamics of popular religion in contemporary China

The theme of this Congress is supplemented by the specification ‘past and present’. I have chosen therefore an example from the present that allows for drawing lines to the past. Contemporary China is a perfect case to observe religious dynamics in the present. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), most temples, monasteries, mosques and churches were destroyed or converted to other purposes. All religious activities were outlawed and virtually disappeared from public life. With the change of the religious policy of the Communist Party from the early 1980s on, however, there began a tremendous revival of religions. Its most visible expressions are the large-scale reproduction of religious sites and the building of new ones. Buddhist and Daoist institutions were reorganized and expanded, and Christianity and Islam increasingly gained public visibility. Most remarkable is also the revival of what Western scholars usually call ‘popular religion’, which includes all religious sites and activities that do not belong to one of the five officially recognized religions. It is on this aspect of contemporary religious dynamics that I will concentrate in the following.

In the spring of 2015, I had the opportunity to observe a number of temple festivals in north-western China. Temple festivals (*miaohui*) are quite common in the region nowadays, because each village has its own temple. Depending on the importance of the temple and its deity, the festivals can be big events. They involve not only rituals of worshipping and presenting offerings to the deity, but also various kinds of entertainment. The really big festivals extend over several days or even weeks and usually include temple fairs. They may attract tens, or even hundreds, of thousands of people.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One of the biggest temple festivals takes place in Huaiyang, Henan province, at a temple compound including the alleged tomb of Fuxi. It lasts for one month from the second day of the second lunar month to the third of the third month and attracts more than two hundred thousand visitors from the neighboring provinces; Hudong Baike 2014; Baidu Baike 2015b.

The example I will use to illustrate some aspects of religious dynamics is a temple festival which is celebrated in the city of Tianshui in Gansu province from the 13th to the 17th of the first lunar month, which in 2015 was early March. It is one of the bigger events with all day performances of local operas, music and dancing troupes, and other entertainments. The festival is dedicated to Fuxi 伏羲 – a mythical figure said to have invented the foundations of Chinese culture, among them the institution of family and the famous Eight Trigrams (*bagua*) on which the *Book of Changes* is based. Fuxi is worshipped in a large, walled temple compound. Bordering the temple wall is a small temple of the Black Pool Dragon King (*hei chi longwang*).

Part of the rituals that can be observed during the days of the festival is a parading of the statues of Fuxi and the Dragon King, both sitting in palanquins carried by a number of young fellows. The parade includes a troupe of Daoist priests and nuns who during these days also perform rituals in front of the Dragon King temple. However, the Daoists do not play any role in the main rituals for Fuxi, which take place inside the temple compound and are performed by lay people of the temple association.

It is also inside the temple compound where an unusual ritual can be observed. It consists in slaughtering, rather unceremoniously, a pig and a sheep in front of the temple of Fuxi. The blood of the victims is drunk by some, but most use it to soak money bills, which is said to bring good fortune. Later on, the pig is displayed as an offering on the threshold of the main hall facing the statue of Fuxi.

There is no need to describe further details of this five-day ritual event. The brief description should be sufficient to explain why, as a scholar of religion, I was interested in attending this ritual. I was convinced I would witness an example of the dynamic revival of popular religion, including the very rare performance of an animal sacrifice. However, when I asked people, they unanimously explained that the rituals for Fuxi have nothing to do with religion. The reason given was very simple: Fuxi is not a god but considered the first ancestor of the Chinese people. So, it is a form of ancestor worship (Xin Xuan 2015, 50). But again, it's not religious. Otherwise, the mayor of the city and other representatives of the Communist Party certainly would not have participated as guests of honor in the main offering ritual on the night of the third day. After all, members of the Communist Party are not allowed to publicly engage in religious activities.

If religion is what people declare to be or allow to count as religion (Lease [1994] 2009, 130), then I apparently was on the wrong track when I expected to observe a religious event. But, even if it might not be part of a religion, the Fuxi temple festival without doubt is an interesting object of research of the study of religion. I will come back to this festival later.

## 2 Cultural and religious dynamics and evolution

Before returning to the worship of Fuxi, it is necessary to explain the theoretical outlook I take on the concept of ‘dynamics of religions’. A possible understanding would be to simply equate dynamics with change. In conventional language the concept of change is sufficiently clear, but as a theoretical concept it is apt to lead into the trap of essentialism by suggesting that there is something that changes in some respects while remaining essentially the same. Religious change could thus mean that religion changes its forms without changing its essence of being religion. Evidently, what remains the same is not religion as something that exists behind the empirical data, but religion as a theoretical concept used to interpret the data. As the concept of change can imply essentialist assumptions, I prefer to explicate religious dynamics as an aspect of cultural evolution.

‘Cultural evolution’ is a theoretical concept referring to the production and re-production of human culture. The concept is related to genetic evolution, which in the case of human evolution is about the role of genes: their transmission and modifications as factors conditioning the phenotypical traits of humans. Cultural evolution likewise aims at understanding factors conditioning human phenotypes, which include not only the anatomical properties and neuronal functions of human bodies but also the ways humans behave, think, feel and interact. From this perspective, there is a great diversity of human phenotypes, which obviously is not due to genetic but to cultural diversification. The cultural diversification of humans at any given time is the outcome of evolutionary processes that make up cultural evolution.

To contrast genetic and cultural factors influencing human phenotypes, I take ‘culture’ to refer to everything conditioning human phenotypes that is an outcome of human activity. It thus includes both material and immaterial human products. It should be observed that this concept of culture is more comprehensive than the usual understanding of the term in the social sciences, where culture mostly is taken to denote patterns of meaning, values, rules, ideas and knowledge that are represented symbolically (Tylor 1871, 1; Kroeber, Kluckhohn [1952] 1963, 357; Geertz 1966, 3; Archer 1996, xviii). In the terminology used here, this all would be part of the immaterial culture, which includes social institutions. However, culture also comprises material products. In short, it denotes that part of reality affecting human behavior, thinking, feeling, and bodily functions that exists only because it has been brought about by humans.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It should be observed that cultural evolution presupposes genetic or biological evolution because humans are biological beings. They have evolved genetically in a way that enables them to

This applies to immaterial as well as to material products. In fact, material and immaterial culture are closely connected because the production of material goods usually depends on available technologies and knowledge. Furthermore, the meaning of material products, such as temple buildings or particular dress, is an element of immaterial culture. Because material and immaterial products exist in the cultural environment of individual and collective actors, their behavior has to adapt to their environment and is therefore to some extent conditioned by it. This is why culture is both a product of human activity and a factor affecting human activity. This dialectical relationship between human activity and human culture is the key factor of cultural evolution.

The connection between cultural evolution and the dynamics of religions stems from the fact that religions are part of human culture. Whatever definition of religion we may choose and however we define the boundaries, it is obvious that there cannot be religion without humans. When we study religion empirically, such as beliefs, rituals, institutions, symbolic representations or material artifacts, we deal with human products.

While cultural evolution involves the whole process of cultural production and reproduction in the evolution of humankind, cultural dynamics applies to developments within a circumscribed period of time. As a theoretical concept, cultural dynamics includes qualitative and quantitative aspects. Qualitatively, we must differentiate between different classes of human products such as beliefs, rituals, institutions, social organization, technologies etc. The quantitative aspect of cultural dynamics concerns the increase or decrease of the number or frequency of production of particular products within the time range under consideration. To give an example from the field of Chinese religions: if we take cultural products classified as temples, we observe that during the three decades after 1980 their number has increased, which indicates positive dynamics in the production and reproduction of temples. The same applies to other cultural products such as temple festivals, Buddhist monks,<sup>3</sup> or publications about deities. Since all these products are usu-

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produce culture. However, human behavior, thinking, feeling, and bodily functions are not determined genetically because ontogenesis is also affected by environment factors. What I want to underline here is the fact that a large part of the environment conditioning human life has been produced by humans in the course of cultural evolution. This means that human phenotypes, i. e., the actual behavior etc., is a result of both genetic and cultural evolution. The production of culture is part of the biological nature of humans that enables the species to transmit phenotypical traits to the next generation independently of genetic inheritance.

<sup>3</sup> Buddhist monks are cultural products in the sense that the status of monk depends on human activity. An increase in the number of monks presupposes an increase in human activities that confer the status of monks.

ally classified as religious, their increased production could be taken as an indicator of religious dynamics. The example shows that the concept of cultural dynamics provides a theoretical perspective on cultural processes that has not the same extension as cultural change.

Of course, cultural dynamics and evolution also imply cultural change if we consider their effects. Culture, conceived of as the totality of human products, changes with the appearance or disappearance of certain cultural products. However the processes that induce these changes are not changes themselves, but singular events that occur under particular conditions of time, space, environment and agency. To consider the conditions under which singular events of cultural production occur allows for zooming down the theoretical perspective to the level of empirical data.

As has been illustrated, the dynamics of religions can be understood as a particular aspect of cultural dynamics referring to cultural productions considered to be part of a religion or classified as religious. The problem is that what is allowed to count as religion or deemed religious may be highly controversial. This doesn't make the concept of religion futile and the study of religion impossible. But we have to be aware that religion is not an empirical object whose dynamics can be observed, but a theoretical concept directing the perspective with which to look at and interpret empirical data. Applying this perspective is what characterizes the study of religion, even if there is no consensus about what counts as religion.

Cultural and religious evolution cannot be studied without studying history. History is also concerned with human activities and their outcomes. While the empirical data are the same, the study of cultural evolution and human history are different in their research outlooks. The goal of historical studies is to reconstruct, understand and possibly explain events and developments that happened at particular constellations of time and space. The study of cultural evolution aims at understanding and explaining the general factors that condition the ongoing processes of cultural production and reproduction. However, data provided by historical research are indispensable for the analysis of cultural evolution. As will be seen in the next section, theories of cultural evolution are therefore prone to take the form of theories of history.

## 2.1 Two approaches to cultural evolution

There are two main approaches to cultural and religious evolution, which I call the 'progression model' and the 'diversification model'. They do not contradict each

other, but reflect different views on the dynamics of religions both past and present.

The progression model focuses on the sequence of stages in the development of human culture. The best example of this approach is Robert Bellah's sequence of tribal, archaic, historical, and modern religions, which corresponds to the development of economic and political formations from tribal societies to modern states (Bellah 1964; Bellah 2001). The basic structure of this model is marked by two major turning points in the evolution of human culture: the Axial Age in the first millennium BCE and the Modern Age.

The Axial Age is described as a breakthrough in theoretical thinking, which opened new horizons of universal principles, critical thinking and an ontological distinction between different levels of reality: the empirical and the transcendent (Arnason, Eisenstadt, Wittrock 2005, 2; Bellah 2005). The emergence of historical religions including Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam is interpreted as one of the outcomes of Axial Age transformations.

The Modern Age, which sometimes is considered a new axial age (Lambert 1999), likewise engendered profound intellectual and religious changes. Although most scholars agree in considering modernity a fundamentally new epoch in human history with far-reaching consequences for the development of religions, there is some disagreement on what exactly these consequences are supposed to be.

The progression model in one form or another has been widely accepted as a basis for structuring human history and viewing cultural and religious evolution. It has the shortcoming of suggesting a linear development of different stages. Gary Lease has characterized such distinctions of stages as a construction of Western historical thinking (Lease [1994] 2009, 119–121; cf. Casanova 2012). The progression model is 'autobiographical' (Weil 1975) because it interprets human history from the perspective of our own modern condition by trying to identify the steps that were necessary to reach this condition. It is a selective view of cultural evolution that concentrates on events and developments that paved the way to modernity. Concomitantly, the countless cultural productions that have no meaning in this teleological interpretation are not seen as being part of cultural evolution. In this way, the progression model overshadows the diversity brought about by cultural evolution.

In contrast to the progression model, the diversification model does not focus on a sequence of developmental stages but on the cumulative process of cultural production. From this perspective, the intellectual and religious innovations that doubtlessly occurred in ancient Greece, India or China do not appear as breakthroughs in the evolution of human consciousness, but rather as products of human creativity that broadened the realm of possibilities. The same applies to

the transformations of modernity, which engender new possibilities in many fields, including religion, without eliminating what has been produced before.<sup>4</sup>

The diversification model avoids the teleological implications of the progression model because it does not intend to understand the emergence of a particular cultural formation, such as Western modernity, but rather the mechanisms of cultural production and reproduction. In this respect its theoretical outlook is closer to the biological model of evolution. To be sure, biological evolution can be misunderstood as a teleological process culminating in the emergence of *homo sapiens*. But such an autobiographical version of natural history ignores the fact that evolution led to an increasing diversity of biological species.

This is not the place to treat the different aspects of cultural evolution that have received the attention of scholars who discuss it against the background of biological evolution.<sup>5</sup> I just want to emphasize two points in which cultural evolution significantly differs from genetic evolution. The first concerns the environment.

Both in genetic and cultural evolution, adaptation to the environment is a decisive factor for the survival of things and their further reproduction. The environment has a selective effect in the evolutionary process by enabling the reproduction of some forms and restricting the reproduction of others. For humans, it comprises both the natural and the cultural environment. Because the products of human activity become part of the environment, the environment changes continuously as a result of cultural production. Indeed, a large part of cultural evolution may be conceived of as behavioral adaptations to environments that increasingly have been shaped by human activity. This is why cultural evolution is a cumulative process in which the culture produced and reproduced by humans feeds back on the conditions of further cultural production (Tomasello 2000).

A second point that distinguishes cultural from genetic evolution is even more crucial. Genetic evolution results from random modifications in the process of reproduction. If the modified phenotypes happen to be sufficiently adapted to their environment, they may survive and reproduce (Mayr 2005, 150–154). The same mechanism works also with cultural evolution: modifications of existing products may be random, such as copy errors or misunderstandings in the reproduction of texts or rituals. However, the production of culture is not a completely random process because humans can act intentionally. They can intentionally create prod-

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<sup>4</sup> I should mention that Bellah, in his late publications, to some extent revised his former views on religious evolution by emphasizing the fact that nothing is lost in the course of cultural evolution, which shifts the interpretation from a sequence of stages with increasing complexity to increasing possibilities and diversity (Bellah 2005; Bellah 2011).

<sup>5</sup> For a convenient overview see Stone, Lurquin 2007, 129–143.



ucts which are better adapted to their cultural or natural environment. The process of cultural evolution therefore is affected by the factor of agency, i. e., goal-oriented action, which is completely lacking in genetic evolution.

The progression and the diversification models of cultural evolution are not incompatible. But the two models differ in their analytical perspectives. The progression model interprets macro-history in evolutionary terms to understand the historical preconditions of modernity. It does not cover cultural evolution that has no significance in this history. The diversification model focuses instead on micro-processes of cultural evolution to better understand its mechanism. It therefore allows for analyzing cases of cultural dynamics without considering their historical significance.

## 2.2 Different interpretations

Let me briefly highlight the different views of the progression and the diversification models on the example of the religious dynamics in contemporary China. A central element of Chinese popular belief is asking gods for help in quite mundane matters such as childbirth, family problems or business success. The religious dynamics visible in the large-scale reappearance of this and other popular practices such as temple festivals do not fit very well the progression model of religious evolution. Chinese popular belief can hardly be seen as a paradigm of ‘modern’ religion, for asking gods for help and communal feasts have been popular practices for time immemorial. They certainly existed in China already before the Axial Age transformations (Maspero [1927] 1965, 130–231). The progression model would therefore see the contemporary occurrence of such beliefs and activities either as relics of former stages or even as retrogressions that contravene the progressive course of religious evolution.

From the perspective of the diversification model, on the other hand, religious evolution includes the reproduction of available religious ideas and practices. However, they are reproduced in and adapted to cultural environments that differ considerably from those in which they were formerly produced. They are not the same as those produced a hundred or a thousand years ago. Rituals and beliefs do not exist as phenomena that manifest in different places and times. Rather, they are always concrete events depending on individual or collective agents who perform rituals or maintain beliefs. They are always singular because they occur under particular conditions of time, space, environment and agency.

These particularities must not be ignored if we want to understand the dynamics of cultural and religious evolution. Just like biological evolution, it takes place in small steps of modification, which often have no lasting effect. Only in retro-

spect can we identify the emergence of new formations, be they new biological species, new economic or political structures, or new forms of religious institutions and beliefs.

### 3 The Fuxi rituals

To illustrate this view on cultural and religious evolution, I now return to the sacrifices made in the Fuxi temple at Tianshui on March 5, 2015, which were part of a temple festival starting two days earlier. The rituals are a rather new invention although in popular publications they are said to have an unbroken history of many centuries (China Culture 2006). I will first sketch the historical view on the ritual and then explain it in terms of cultural evolution.

#### 3.1 Historical development

According to legend, the first temple on this site was built during the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420) by a local official who was later worshipped as the tutelary deity of the region under the title Black Pool Dragon King (Cao Wei 2010, 15–16). Historical documents show that during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) the imperial sacrifices to Fuxi were transferred from a temple on top of the Guataishan Mountain (‘Trigram Terrace Mountain’) to the present site at what today is the city of Tianshui. Imperial sacrifices were regularly performed twice a year until the end of the eighteenth century, when they were first reduced to once a year and finally no more performed as state rituals. Thereafter, the sacrifices were organized by the local population under the responsibility of the Lantern Festival Association (*Shangyuan hui* 上元會), whose members were local gentry and notables (Liu Yanxiang 2003, 151–152, 160). During the Republic (1911–1949) the temple premises were converted to military barracks, but still a modest festival was organized regularly. After the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, the buildings housed military offices, a textile mill and finally a teachers’ seminary. After the Tianshui City Museum moved to some buildings in the compound in 1986, reconstruction of the temple started and in 2001 the reconstructed temple was included in the list of important national cultural monuments (Liu Yanxiang 2003, 115–117). The Fuxi temple that can be visited today is thus a fairly recent reconstruction according to a model of the temple that had been produced and continuously reproduced on the same site from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century.

Collective rituals worshipping Fuxi, in one form or another, seem to have been regularly performed until about 1950, when the Lantern Festival Association was

dissolved and the temple festival with its rituals was not performed any more until the 1980s. In 1988, the Tianshui City Government organized the celebration of an official ritual in honor of Fuxi, and the next year a temple festival was arranged. Sacrificial rituals were performed by members of the newly founded Lantern Festival Association, whose members were mostly common people from the neighboring city district (Cao Wei 2010, 27–28). In 2009 the director of the Tianshui City Museum invited a conference to discuss the reorganization of the popular rituals. It was decided to establish a standard course of action based on the state rituals for Fuxi in the Ming dynasty. This new ritual design included a ritual called *tailao* 太牢 (Li Ningmin 2013). *Tailao*, which can be translated as ‘Great Animal Sacrifice’, is the name of a ritual of the former imperial cult. It usually consisted in offering an ox, a pig, and a sheep.

The *tailao* sacrifice provides the offerings to Fuxi with an even longer historical pedigree. Some Chinese historians argue that the first documented sacrifice to Fuxi dates back to 756 BCE when a *tailao* sacrifice was supposedly offered to Fuxi in the state of Qin (Liu Yanxiang 2003, 145–146). In any case, animal sacrifices in China can be traced back to the second millennium BCE. During the Han dynasty, in the second century BCE, *tailao* sacrifices were the most important of all sacrificial rituals, which the emperor offered in person to the highest deities (Bujard 2009, 785). Since then, they were part of the imperial cult, which was abolished only with the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911. In historical interpretation, we could therefore say that the *tailao* sacrifices attest an astonishing continuity of ritual practices over roughly three thousand years. Its contemporary performance in the Fuxi temple may thus appear as continuing an age-old tradition.

In what sense can we take this as an example of religious evolution? The observation of historical continuity apparently contradicts the assumption of dynamics and change.

### 3.2 Historical continuity and cultural evolution

Historical continuity is a theoretical concept that easily hides the fact that cultural products, which include institutions, practices and ideas, as well as material artifacts, continue only insofar as they are reproduced and maintained through generations. This reproduction may be an exact copying, but in many if not most cases it involves minor modifications, which however, in the course of time, can accumulate to major ones. This is exactly what evolution means.

Sacrifices offered to deities and royal ancestors were the most important state rituals from the late second millennium BCE to the early twentieth century. However during these three thousand years, significant innovations occurred. To men-

tion only one: For the Shang kings at the end of the second millennium BCE, royal ancestors were powerful supernatural agents who needed sacrifices to ward off misfortune (Eno 1996). A thousand years later, in the third century BCE, the Confucian thinker Xunzi explained that sacrifices had no effects whatsoever on fortune or misfortune, but were performed as expressions of cultivated behavior (Xunzi 2014, 179. 215–216). In the Confucian tradition, the utmost importance given to rituals and sacrifices was not explained as an attempt to influence supernatural agents. Instead, the observance of rituals was seen as a way of cultivating the individual personality and securing the harmonious order of society. Ancestor worship was primarily an expression of filial piety, rather than grounded in the belief that ancestral spirits need offerings to feed upon – a belief that was ridiculed by the philosopher Wang Chong in the first century (Wang Chong 1962, 509–524).

The progression model of cultural evolution would take such new interpretations of ritual and sacrifice, which were first produced during the Axial Age, as indications of an increasing rationalization and critical attitude of human thinking (Roetz 1992, 343–363; Bellah 2011, 472–473). Indeed, ancestor worship is being seen as a ritual form of paying respect to one's forbears, without assuming that they are supernatural beings. On the other hand, however, it would be mistaken to imagine that such rational interpretations of rituals have replaced the belief in ancestor spirits needing offerings to secure fortune and ward off misfortune (Wolf 1974, 163–168; Ahern 1973, 191–203). Both explanations were reproduced and modified since antiquity in many ways. Cultural evolution resulted in a diversification – not only of the explanations but also of the design of rituals.

### 3.3 Environment and agency

Ritual practices and their explanations are human products that can be perceived and exist objectively in the cultural environment in which individuals live. However, even in the same society, the cultural environments of individuals are not identical. They depend on location, family background, gender, social contacts, education, profession and other variables. Still, some cultural products are widespread in a society and known to most people. In any case, the cultural environment is the basis on which new cultural products are created.

Besides the environment, the second crucial factor for cultural innovation is agency. To produce something new, there must be agents who are creative. In the 1980s a number of devoted worshippers of Fuxi founded a new Lantern Festival Association to resume the rituals in the reconstructed temple. In contrast to the former association of the same name, it was not dominated by local notables but by common people from the neighborhood. Some of them were old enough to re-

member the former ritual practices, which were to some extent reproduced. But they were not copied exactly. For example, formerly women were not allowed to enter the sacrificial space, but this taboo was abandoned when the leadership of the Lantern Festival Association was taken over by a woman (Cao Wei 2010, 28–30). This modification not only illustrates the role of agency but also the adaptation to the changed status of women in the cultural environment.

However, the Lantern Festival Association was not the only agent that participated in the reproduction of the rituals. For the local believers Fuxi is an object of worship similar to other popular deities,<sup>6</sup> but there are a number of other agents who want to promote the temple and rituals primarily as symbols of the local cultural heritage and prestige or as public events to attract tourists. A decisive role was played by members of the local cultural elite whose educational background is quite different from the common worshipper's. In 2009, the director of the Tianshui City Museum invited local political leaders, retired cadres and scholars to discuss a reform of the popular rituals to make them more cultivated. They decided not only to include the *tailao* sacrifice, after the model of the Ming dynasty state rituals, but also to enlarge the festival by additional entertainments and exhibitions. A new and officially registered association for the organization of the popular Fuxi festival was founded in 2013 by local elites (Li Ningmin 2013), which reduces the influence of the Lantern Festival Association.

The rituals that I could observe in 2015 thus were far from being the same as those performed twenty, let alone two hundred years before. They are new cultural products, which are modified reproductions of older ones. On the one hand, the main components are taken from the pool of festive activities available in the cultural environment. On the other hand, each reproduction involves innovations to adapt the product to aims and purposes prevailing in the environment. Yet the actors engaged in the cultural production do not share the same background and their interests diverge. Conflicting interests have to be negotiated and it appears that those who first reproduced the festival some decades ago increasingly lost control of its yearly reproduction.

Although attempts to make the festival more 'cultivated' were successful in many respects, and while the *tailao* sacrifice supposedly follows the example of the Ming state ritual to meet the cultural expectations of the more educated stakeholders, still the cultural environment of the common people provides some of the components of the newly designed rituals. The statues of Fuxi and the Dragon King

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<sup>6</sup> The Lantern Festival Association also takes care of the temple festival celebrated some days earlier in the nearby Daoist Jade Fountain Monastery (Yuquan guan) (Xin Xuan 2015, 50), which suggests that the members are devoted religious believers.

are carried in palanquins just like other popular deities, for example. More striking is the fact that the introduction of the *tailao* sacrifice was not to supersede another sacrificial ritual of local origin, which is called *lingsheng* 领牲 ('accepting the victim') and takes place in the afternoon before the *tailao*. While the *tailao* is a 'cultivated' sacrifice, which does not involve killing the animals on the spot but presenting their prepared heads as an offering,<sup>7</sup> the *lingsheng* ritual is a blood sacrifice and the blood of the victims, which are butchered in front of the main hall of the temple, is in high demand by the watching crowd. The ritual called *lingsheng* seems to be unknown in other parts of China. It is attested in rural areas of southern Gansu and northern Shaanxi, where it usually involves the killing of a sheep, and is often part of burials (Han Dian 2015; Blog.sina.com.cn 2013). Its inclusion in the program of the Fuxi festival shows that the design of the various rituals performed in the temple reflects the different cultural environments of the key actors.<sup>8</sup>

The invention of the complex five-day ritual event in Tianshui thus illustrates very well the main factors of cultural evolution: environment and agency. The cultural environment provides a reservoir of accumulated human products; at the same time it restricts or facilitates the opportunities of production. Agency refers to individual and collective actors, who creatively select, use and modify some of the available products to invent new ones. Of course, cultural reproduction involves not only temple buildings, institutions or rituals; it also includes ideas.

As to ideas, we can turn to the ideas connected with the symbol of Fuxi. It is not possible here to explain in detail their evolution since antiquity. Suffice it to note that it resulted in an extreme diversity of beliefs. On the one hand, there are mythological accounts of Fuxi and his wife Nüwa, each with the body of a snake and a human head, as well as mythological narratives that describe them as the first beings after the primordial chaos, and creators of humankind (Wang Jian 2004). In the cosmological theories of the Han dynasty, Fuxi was identified with one of the five deities associated with the five cardinal directions. On the other hand, in later historical literature Fuxi was considered a historical personage of high antiquity and the very first in the succession of Chinese rulers (Guo Weny-

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7 In the state ritual of the Ming dynasty, whole animals, which had been killed 'offstage' (Zito 1997, 46), were presented as offerings. See the Ming painting of Emperor Han Gaozu sacrificing to Confucius (BBS.F/173.com 2015).

8 I was unable to find out since when the *lingsheng* ritual has been performed in the Fuxi temple. It is not mentioned by Liu Yanxiang as one of the components that are traditionally part of the ritual and festival. He does mention that after 1988 the popular festival included the sacrifice of two pigs (Liu Yanxiang 2003, 154). However, in the *lingsheng* ritual traditionally a sheep is slaughtered.

ing 2007, 21–22; Karlgren 1946, 206–207). All these diverse interpretations – mythological, religious and historical – are available today. Although in most contemporary publications Fuxi is described as a historical figure, in local lore there still are narratives about Fuxi and Nüwa as a primordial brother and sister couple who created the human race (Cao Wei 2010, 12). The cultural environment provides a choice of explanations and anyone is free to select and mold her or his own idiosyncratic version.

### 3.4 Contemporary dynamics

Chinese academic scholars agree that Fuxi is no historical personage. However, the common understanding keeps to the traditional historiography and takes him as a first of the Three Emperors and ancestor of the Chinese people.<sup>9</sup> This historical fiction is a ready-made component not only for the reproduction of the popular worship of Fuxi; the historical fiction is also used as a component to produce official state rituals.

Besides the so-called popular sacrifices I have been referring to so far, there is also an official ceremony worshipping Fuxi.<sup>10</sup> This official ceremony was invented in 1988 and organized by the city government of Tianshui, but since 2005 has been organized by the government of Gansu Province. It takes place each year on June 22. Nowadays it a spectacular event that starts in the large square in front of the temple compound with professional dance and music performances. The official program is broadcast on television and watched by common people. There is also a by-program on the streets with parades in historical and fantasy costumes.<sup>11</sup>

The main actors of the official ritual are the heads of the provincial government and high-ranking representatives of the Communist Party. Hundreds of invited guests attend the ceremony where the governor of the province solemnly reads a eulogy praising Fuxi for his great achievements as founder of the Chinese culture. Soldiers in dress uniforms carry flower baskets into the temple where the official representatives bow three times to the statue of Fuxi. The table in front of the

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<sup>9</sup> This can be seen from the entries in popular web-encyclopedias (Baidu Baike 2015a; Weiji Baike 2015).

<sup>10</sup> The Chinese terms are *minjian jisi* 民间祭祀 ('popular sacrifice') and *gongji dadian* 公祭大典 ('Grand public memorial ceremony'). *Jidian* 祭典, which is used for the state rituals, literally means '(official) sacrificial rite', but in modern Chinese is usually translated as 'memorial ceremony'. The popular rituals for Fuxi are called *jisi* 祭祀, which is also used for sacrifices to deities and ancestors.

<sup>11</sup> For the official website of the ceremony see [fuxidadian.com](http://fuxidadian.com) 2015.

statue is loaded with food offerings. After the official ritual the common people crowd into the temple to burn incense and worship Fuxi.

What we have here is a recently invented state ritual worshipping a legendary ancestor of the Chinese people. One of its functions certainly is to symbolize the cultural heritage of China, to nurture patriotism and foster the Chinese cultural identity.<sup>12</sup> Remarkably, to do this, the Communist authorities make use of symbols available from both the imperial state cult and popular religious traditions. Offering food and bowing to the statue of a mythical ancestor are ritual behaviors that seem strange if performed by leading representatives of the Chinese state and the Communist Party. They take place in a temple supposed to be the site where imperial sacrifices to the very same mythical figure have been performed. These are all ingredients that have been produced before, but in the course of their modified reproduction gain a new meaning. Whatever this meaning may be, it seems to be quite different from the one attributed to Fuxi by the thousands of village people who, on the day before the state ritual, participate in a popular sacrificial ritual a couple of miles away on top of Guataishan mountain (Tianshui City Government Net 2015; Lanzhou Chenbao 2007). The temple there has been reconstructed by the local population, after having been razed to the ground during the Cultural Revolution.

There is a remarkable dynamics of religious reconstruction in contemporary China. The reconstruction of popular religious temples, rituals and institutions has been observed by many scholars. But how can we interpret the invention of new state rituals devoted to mythic ancestors? The official ‘sacrificial rites’ (*jidian*) honoring Fuxi are not the only ones. There are similar rituals devoted to other equally legendary figures, among them the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi) and Fuxi’s sister and wife Nüwa (Billioud, Thoraval 2015, 189–191). Can we regard these new rituals as modified reproductions of the imperial state cult?

## 4 Cultural evolution and selection

This brings me back to the issue of cultural evolution. Charles Darwin, one of the fathers of the evolutionary theory in biology, explained the origin of species with the formula ‘descent with modification’ (Darwin [1859] 1997). Later on, the metaphor ‘inheritance’ gained usage. Biological evolution is thus conceived as a proc-

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<sup>12</sup> Official reports of the ceremony stress the fact that among the official participants are representatives from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau and overseas Chinese who all share reverence to Fuxi as common ancestor.



ess of differentiation of species based on genetic inheritance with modification. It is this paradigm on which the diversification model of cultural evolution is based.

Inheritance refers to the aspect of continuity. As I have shown, in the field of culture and religion what is perceived as continuity is in fact the ongoing reproduction of cultural products. Cultural products do not persist by themselves, but have to be preserved through human activity, which is often called ‘preserving the cultural heritage’.

Cultural reproduction rarely results in exact copies of existing products. There is usually a range of variations. If we take biological evolution as a paradigm, we must look for mechanisms of selection. Basically, selection means that some variations are better adapted to certain environments than others and can therefore survive by being reproduced. Others may survive only in ecological niches or not at all. From this perspective, changes in the cultural environment in modern China, which includes the political environment, can be seen as resulting in a massive process of cultural selection. Particularly during the Cultural Revolution, many cultural products, including religious practices, ideas and institutions, could not be reproduced under the new environmental conditions and disappeared. Others were reproduced in cultural niches or in heavily modified forms.

During the past thirty years, there were again enormous changes in the cultural environment. Under the new political and economic conditions, many elements of what is called popular religion were reproduced in modified forms. The invention of the popular sacrificial rituals in the Fuxi temple in Tianshui, in which elements of the imperial state cult are combined with local religious customs, is an example. As the success of cultural innovations largely depends on their adaptation to the environment, we should expect the evolutionary dynamics to reflect selective pressures. In a cultural environment controlled by a Communist Party with a declared atheist ideology, the public production of religion is severely restricted. Cultural production adapts to this selective pressure through modifications.

One of the possible modifications is to change classifications. Temple festivals need not be classified as religious events. They have many elements that can be classified as entertainment, such as opera performances, dance, music, and sight-seeing. What we perceive as religious elements, such as burning incense, praying and offering sacrifices, are just one aspect, which – of course – from the perspective of a scholar of religion is the most interesting one. But these elements are only part of the event and increasingly overshadowed by countless activities that are adapted to the expectations of the cultural environment. From the perspective of the local government, prestige, economic and entertainment functions are the most important aspects. They choose to classify the temple festival as a cultural event of national importance. What appears to be the reproduction of traditional

religion is explained as the preservation of the immaterial cultural heritage, which at the same time serves economic development. In fact, however, this preservation is not the reproduction of what has been produced before, but a new product (Du Zhun 2011).

For the study of religions, this presents some methodological problems. How do we deal with a temple ritual that involves animal sacrifice, food offerings, burning of incense and solemn eulogies addressing a mythic ancestor, if all this is declared by the participants as having nothing to do with religion? The study of religion offers a number of possible interpretations. From a post-colonial point of view, we could take the findings as further evidence of the fact that the concept of religion is a Western construction, whose application to other cultures is meaningless. However, from the perspective of the discursive study of religion, this view would need to be qualified, because there are indeed discourses about religion in contemporary China, even very controversial ones. But in the official discourse, worshipping Fuxi is not allowed to count as religion. Taking the position of the cognitive science of religion, it could be assumed that the temple rituals are religious activities, at least for those participants who worship Fuxi as an ancestor. However, the majority would probably explain that even though Fuxi is venerated, he is not a supernatural agent.

This latter view is also the official one given to explain the meaning of the state rituals devoted to mythical ancestors. There still remains the question whether we can interpret these rituals as a modified reproduction of the imperial state cult, which included worshipping the very same imagined ancestor. Of course, nobody would admit that the Communist government is reproducing religious rituals of the Confucian empire. What is obvious, however, is the fact that the production of the contemporary state ritual for Fuxi cannot be explained without referring to the cultural environment. It is the cultural environment that provides the symbol of Fuxi as first ancestor as well as the ritual forms used to stage an official ceremony of ancestor worship. It is not a reproduction of the imperial cult. It is a new cultural product whose creators make use of available components to adapt it to the existing cultural environment. It is an example of cultural evolution.

Evidently, the invention of state rituals dedicated to mythical figures is not a case of cultural evolution in the sense of the progression model. It does not attest to a historical breakthrough. Breakthroughs are retrospective interpretations of historical meaning and it is impossible to know to what extent these new ritual forms and their explanations will be reproduced and elaborated in the future. To be sure, it could be that in retrospect they will appear to have been the first occurrence of new forms of sacralization of Chinese order and history (cf. Billioud, Thoraval 2015, 191), but they may just as well turn out to be a short episode of cultural production without any lasting effects. However, whether they survive by being repro-

duced or not, they are bits of cultural evolution, which is a selective process that works through the elimination of cultural products that are not sufficiently adapted to their environment.

In the short range of the last three decades in China, the production of quite a number of popular and state rituals for imagined ancestors without doubt can be considered an example of cultural dynamics. But how about the dynamics of religion? Can the invention of new ancestor rituals, whether they are on the popular or the state level, be taken as a case of religious dynamics? Could the ritual offerings be religious even though they are not allowed by the participants to count as religion? I cannot answer these questions. I am even not sure that they are meaningful questions. I am sure, however, that dealing with these developments is a meaningful subject of the study of religion even if we should not be able to define the conceptual boundaries of religion.

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