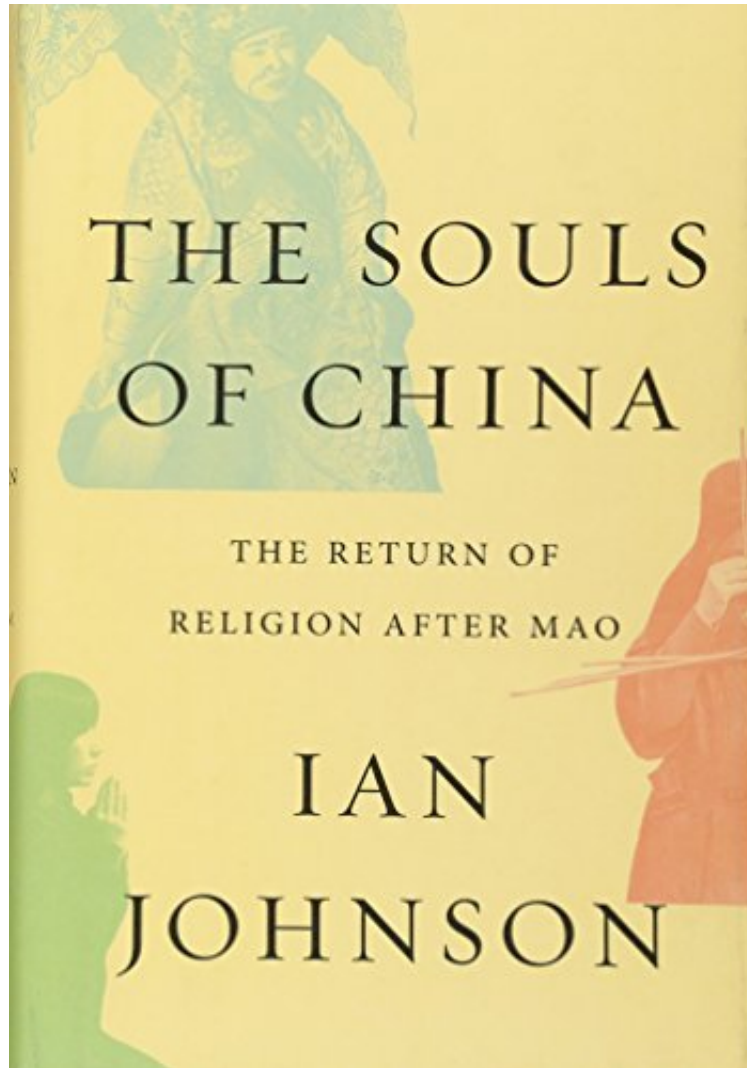


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The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao

Ian Johnson

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Ian Johnson : The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao:

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. A very important book, a China classic that is key to understanding this superpower today By Jean Shen A masterpiece of reportage by one of the best reporters of China today. Ian Johnson tackles the issue at the heart of present-day Chinese society: its lost moral compass. This is, at base, a defining characteristic of Chinese society which is still dealing with the long legacy of the Cultural Revolution and decades of this political culture. Ostensibly about religion, this book goes much deeper -- really into what makes China tick. The

China he describes with great detail, unique empathy derived from his speaking Chinese, his cultural affinity, and real immersion in the laobaixing / regular Chinese people's lives, is one locals will recognise and acknowledge is accurate. He goes deep into documenting how different groups of Chinese now are searching for a pathway out of this moral malaise, offering a heartening portrait of how China might change in time to come. This search for values will define the next chapter of life in and the behaviour of this super power. Johnson is a solid and warm, empathetic guide who takes us to meet the characters he got to know over years of reporting in pockets of China that even many of us who live here might not have encountered. Reading this book is key to really understanding China -- its society, political life, foreign policy behaviour. It really does offer a window into this complex country's soul. The depth of his reporting, the lyricism in his writing are unparalleled among China-based English language writers today. Very few really have invested as much time -- and emotion -- in understanding China from the very grassroots. I can't recommend this important book highly enough. I think it will prove to be a classic in China reporting, as was Johnson's previous book *Wild Grass*. The book and its writing feel understated in many ways, but it really is very valuable in making sense of what China is and where it's going. It will also be of broader interest to non-China watchers -- for those interested in religion, sociology, politics -- for it is a portrait of a society grasping with massive transformation, being lost and trying to find new ways forward. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Great and valuable book on an important subject. By Michael L. Friedmann Compelling, important book. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. The search for meaning and identity By Gail Pellett Essential to understanding the space that many Chinese are seeking to find identity, meaning, truth and morality.

From the Pulitzer Prizewinning journalist, a revelatory portrait of religion in China today its history, the spiritual traditions of its Eastern and Western faiths, and the ways in which it is influencing China's future. *The Souls of China* tells the story of one of the world's great spiritual revivals. Following a century of violent anti-religious campaigns, China is now filled with new temples, churches, and mosques as well as cults, sects, and politicians trying to harness religion for their own ends. Driving this explosion of faith is uncertainty over what it means to be Chinese and how to live an ethical life in a country that discarded traditional morality a century ago and is searching for new guideposts. Ian Johnson first visited China in 1984; in the 1990s he helped run a charity to rebuild Daoist temples, and in 2001 he won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the suppression of the Falun Gong spiritual movement. While researching this book, he lived for extended periods with underground church members, rural Daoists, and Buddhist pilgrims. Along the way, he learned esoteric meditation techniques, visited a nonagenarian Confucian sage, and befriended government propagandists as they fashioned a remarkable embrace of traditional values. He has distilled these experiences into a cycle of festivals, births, deaths, detentions, and struggle a great awakening of faith that is shaping the soul of the world's newest superpower.

"Ian Johnson has long been a resourceful and bracing guide to the biggest national transformation of modern history. In *The Souls of China* he masterfully opens up a little explored realm: how the quest for religion and spirituality drives hundreds of millions of Chinese." Pankaj Mishra, author of *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* *The Souls of China* is a rich, informative, and timely book, which explores a major aspect of Chinese life. Ian Johnson carries erudition lightly and describes the people and events with deep insights and personal involvement. Section by section, the writing shows long-term dedication and meticulous research. At heart this is also a personal book, full of feelings and exuberance. It's a tremendous accomplishment. Ha Jin, author of *War Trash*, *A Free Life*, and the National Book Award-winning *Waiting* *The Souls of China* is a marvel of reportage. For more than five years, Ian Johnson travelled all around China to observe rituals that few outsiders ever witness: funerals and temple fairs, fortune-telling and internal alchemy, Daoist cultivation exercises and underground Christian church services. Johnson writes about Chinese believers with detail and insight, but also with great heart their stories are often inspiring and moving. At a time when most China books focus on politics or economics, this is the best exploration of the cultural and moral life of everyday citizens. Peter Hessler, author of *River Town: Two Years of the Yangtze* On one level Ian Johnson's book is about sages and spiritual pursuits, but it also embodies critical insights into Chinese society and its looming existential concerns. His engaging stories reflect a deep understanding of Chinese traditional religions: Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, as well as the rebellious groups and sects popular among those on the bottom rung of society. I wonder if I can attribute such knowledge and insights to the author's deep roots in China? Since the 1980s he has spent most of his time there, traversing the countryside and the city streets, calling on the impoverished and downtrodden, and immersing himself in the lives of ordinary folks. His tripartite masterpiece *Wild Grass* and his newest book, *The Souls of China*, are the most remarkable works to come from a western author in the past two decades. Liao Yiwu, exiled Chinese author of *God is Red: The Secret Story of How Christianity Survived and Flourished in Communist China*, *The Corpsewalker: Real Life Stories*, *China from the Bottom Up*, and *For A Song and a Hundred Songs: A Poet's Journey through a Chinese Prison*. The great Chinese writer Lu Xun once wrote that when many men pass along the same way, a new road is made. *The Souls of China* shows us how the Chinese people, some with heroic steps and others with hesitant ones, are making a new road for Chinese religion in the twenty-first century. The reappearance

and flourishing of religion is perhaps the most surprising aspect of the dramatic changes in China in recent decades. With great sensitivity Ian Johnson guides us on a tour of the rituals, festivals, and above all some of the remarkable characters who make up this new Chinese religious world. This is a beautiful, moving and insightful book. Michael Szonyi, author of *Cold War Island* and director, Harvard University's Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies Ian Johnson breaks new ground with a brilliant approach, mixing theoretical explorations with real life vignettes from a convincing insider-outsider-combined perspective, making them commenting each other, illuminating in the same way as through the traditional Chinese criticism paradigm of I commentate the six classics which commentate me. *The Souls of China* is a must read for an understanding of China. Qiu Xiaolong, author of *The Inspector Chen Novels* This entrancing and engaging book challenges the modern assumption that religion is a thing of the past; on the contrary, the dramatic resurgence of spirituality in China, after a century of violent persecution, suggests that it is an irrepressible force that may in some sense be essential to humanity. Karen Armstrong, author of *Fields of Blood* Ian Johnson peels back the gleaming surfaces of modern China to reveal a sacred landscape underneath a web of ritual and tradition, myth and faith that has sustained the Chinese for centuries and is doing so anew. Over a year in the traditional calendar, Johnson takes us on an extraordinarily rich and intimate journey from pilgrimages on holy mountains, to the thriving Protestant congregations in the nations booming cities, to the village farmhouses where Daoist funerals are held and fortunes told. Johnson shows us what is really in Chinese souls and hearts. This vividly written, deeply researched book will be the primary work about religious faith in China for years to come. Leslie T. Chang, author of *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China* Mr. Johnson has long delved into the Chinese soul, winning a Pulitzer prize in 2001 for his reporting in the *Wall Street Journal* on the party's suppression of Falun Gong, a spiritual movement. He compares the religious revival with the Great Awakenings in America in the 18th and 19th centuries, when a stirring of popular Christian belief led to major social and political change. A fascinating panorama. *The Economist* Compelling. Johnson's fundamental aim in this book is to make sense of this great spiritual awakening, which he does with compassion and insight. He also wisely avoids offering any facile or sweeping explanations for a phenomenon that is clearly not unique to China. Rather, by focusing on four different religious groups that cut across regional and socioeconomic divides and by following them all through a full lunar year he is able to situate the particular Chinese experience within larger realities that define our current world. Wonderful. Los Angeles of Books Chinese society is not religious. At least that's the conventional wisdom, which argues that there is no place for religion in a China consumed by materialist capitalism under the control of a dictatorial government. But in *The Souls of China*, journalist Ian Johnson brilliantly demonstrates that the conventional wisdom is wrong. Vivid and moving. *The Washington Post* A masterpiece of observation and empathy. What Johnson brilliantly describes in this book is how ordinary people, seeking faith to give meaning to their lives, are not waiting for Xi to lead them to his version of the promised land. Daoists, Buddhists, and Confucians are allowed to rebuild temples and memories of past practices persist, enabling believers to return to them. *The New York Times* [A] fascinating odyssey through contemporary Chinese religion. Johnson succeeds in having produced a nuanced group portrait of Chinese citizens striving for non-material answers in an era of frenetic materialism. *The Guardian* Fascinating. Johnson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, guides us on his exploration of the resurgence in religious belief by using a map grounded in tradition. He frames his book around the Chinese lunar calendar seasons such as *The Awakening of the Insects* or *The Hungry Ghosts Festival*. It is a charming conceit that provides a living link to ancient beliefs. En route, he introduces us to a rich cast of well-drawn characters who bring the pages alive. Their faith brings a personal dimension to this meticulously researched book, six years in the making. A deeply knowledgeable, eminently readable and important book that reveals a side of China that foreigners rarely explore. [Johnson] is an excellent and companionable guide. *The Christian Science Monitor* Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Johnson delves into the lives of several families and communities as they live out varying faith traditions in China. Along the way, he provides useful history lessons on how religion in China has come to be what it is today. In touching, descriptive prose, Johnson brings his subjects to life amid a colorful backdrop. Throughout this worthwhile study, the author touches on a wide array of issues related to faith in Chinese culture, including the advent of the technology age, urbanization, respect for the dead, the role of family, and the ever looming communist state. Engaging, timely, and humane. Kirkus's *starred review* Through interviews conducted with a wide variety of practitioners, Johnson paints a vivid picture of the diversity of Chinese religious life. He provides a fascinating account of how traditional activities recovered after enduring severe repression during China's Cultural Revolution (1966-76). An excellent work that is highly recommended for readers interested in Chinese culture or religion. *Library Journal* *starred review* Johnson's writing is compelling and lyrical, and his research strikes a fluid balance between the political implications of a resurgence of spirituality in a society that for so long suppressed any official religious presence, and the implications for daily life and society found in the complex and human details of this new populist cultural development, including funerals, births, marriages, and applications of government propaganda. The book should appeal to anyone interested in China, and to readers interested in how people use religion and spirituality to forge relationships, build cultures, and make sense of their lives. *Publishers Weekly* Johnson practices what might be called slow reporting: a form of patient watching, listening, and asking that produces deep insight into China's multifaceted religious revival. He sits with a Christian prayer group, practices Taoist

meditation, participates in a raucous yet spiritual mountain pilgrimage, and attends burial rites. As a curious foreigner, he is welcomed by Chinese hosts who graciously instruct him on their idiosyncratic beliefs. His deft descriptions of these encounters distill the results of broad scholarly research with gentle humor and quiet emotion. Foreign Affairs Johnson is at his best, showcasing his mastery of immersive reporting as he travels with Buddhist pilgrims and lives with Chinese Christians. [A] peerless book. Foreign Policy Wonderful. For anyone interested in looking beyond the headlines to understand the complexity of religious life in China today, *The Souls of China* is a must-read. The Gospel Coalition About the Author IAN JOHNSON is a regular contributor to *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*, and his work has also appeared in *National Geographic*. He is an advising editor for the *Journal of Asian Studies*, and teaches a course on religion in Beijing. He is the author of two other books that also focus on the intersection of politics and religion: *Wild Grass: Three Stories of Change in China*, and *A Mosque in Munich: Nazis, the CIA, and the Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in the West*. He lives in Beijing. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Chapter 1 Beijing: The Tolling Bell In the southeast corner of Beijing is a neighborhood called Fenzhongsi, or the Temple of the Tolling Bell. According to local legend, the name came from the story of an old widower who was kind and pure of heart but childless. In traditional China, that meant he had no one to support him in old age. His fellow villagers took pity and offered him a small job as the community's night watchman. His task was to walk around the village every two hours, marking time by beating clappers. He accepted the job but refused pay, saying the villagers should save their money to cast a bell that would replace him when he died. Over the years, the locals saved their money, while he carried out his duties to unusual effect. During the last watch, just before dawn, he would sound his clappers especially loudly in front of the doors of lazy people, hoping to wake them and get them off to work. In front of the doors of the diligent, he was as quiet as could be, allowing them a few more minutes of sleep in the knowledge that they would get up on their own. As time went by, some villagers said his clappers anticipated the changing seasons or warned of coming storms. When they heard the steady beat, they knew what they had to do not just when to work or sleep, but how to live their lives, following good and avoiding evil. Eventually, the old man died, the money was counted, and the bell cast. When it was rung, it had the same miraculous effect, a bell tolling for each person. The bell, the temple that was later built around it, and the village all were torn down long ago, leaving only a story and the name of a highway overpass, a subway stop, and a neighborhood of tenement homes about to be demolished. Over the past decades, this wave of destruction has rolled over the rest of the capital as well, eliminating a vast medieval city of twenty-five square miles. Beijing had once been made up of hutongs narrow alleys that passed between walled homes, interspersed with hundreds of temples. Superimposed over these communities was an imaginary landscape of holy mountains and deities who linked the city into a sacred bond of myth and faith. For centuries, this epitomized the political-religious state that had run China for millennia. That changed in the twentieth century, especially after the Communist takeover in 1949. Many of the temples and hutongs were destroyed to make way for the new ideals of an atheistic, industrial society. Starting in the 1980s came economic reforms and uncontrolled real estate development, which has wiped out almost all the rest of the old city and pushed most of Beijing's original residents out of the city center. In the few fragments of the historic city that survived, migrants moved in. Some were poor workers from the countryside, others rich gentrifiers from somewhere else. With them came new food spicy dishes from the interior or nouvelle cuisine from abroad and new customs, such as the mass exodus out of Beijing during holidays to rural hometowns or tropical beach resorts. Lost was a way of life, just as the local cultures of other great cities have been swamped by our restless times. I watched this transformation since first coming to Beijing in the early 1980s. Like many people, I was disheartened and felt the city and its once-great culture were lost. But in recent years I began to realize I had been wrong. Beijing's culture was not dead; it was being reborn in odd corners of the city like the Temple of the Tolling Bell. It was not the same as in the past, but it was still vibrant and real ways of life and belief that echoed the sounds of the past. The Temple of the Tolling Bell was the home of the Ni (pronounced NEE) family, ordinary Beijingers who had once lived in the old city near one of its most famous landmarks, the Temple of Heaven. Next door to their old home had been a much smaller temple to Our Lady of the Azure Clouds, or Bixia Yuanjun, an important Daoist goddess. The Ni family children used to play in the temple's three courtyards, and the family was friends with an old priest who lived there. In 1992, their house and the Daoist temple were slated for demolition to make way for the headquarters of the General Administration of Sport of China, a government agency charged with creating national glory. Faced with such a strong opponent, the Ni family did the wise thing: it yielded. As compensation, they were given money and land to build new homes in the Temple of the Tolling Bell neighborhood. It was from this new encampment outside the old city that they helped orchestrate the revival of Beijing's spiritual life. On the second day of the Lunar New Year, I paid a visit to the Ni family's eighty-one-year-old patriarch, Ni Zhenshan. Two nights earlier, Beijingers had heralded the Year of the Dragon with loud and endless fireworks against the dark, moonless sky. Yesterday, the first day of the New Year, had been quiet. Traditionally, it is a day for staying home with one's family, cooking big meals, and recuperating from the previous night's excitement. The second day is given over to social calls, and so here I was, plodding past spent firework casings and charred paper, doing what any gentleman is supposed to do on this day: pay respects to one's betters and elders. Compared with me, the Nis were both. Old Mr. Ni and his fifty-six-year-old son, Ni Jincheng, were just older;

they understood infinitely more. They knew all the holidays on the traditional calendar, the right way to kowtow before a statue, how to recite sutras, which cigarettes to smoke, and which grain alcohol to drink. They knew which fruits to eat in April and why you never make a gift of a knife or a plum. They had stylish clothes made by a dead tailor, second homes acquired for a song, calligraphy from a colonel, teapots from a royal kiln, and a flock of European racing pigeons. When I asked why or how or when, they would look at me as if I had missed the point: there was no reason; this was how you lived. Like any good gentleman, Jincheng was waiting for me at the street corner as I got out of the taxi. He was broad shouldered, with a beefy face and a thick head of hair that was combed back in a rakish wave. In his normal life, he had a desk job at the Ministry of Construction but had spent most of his career out in the field, managing projects or inspecting them for safety defects. His speech was distinctive, in part because of its volume: this was a man whose work called for him to communicate over the roar of a jackhammer. But he also peppered it with a patois of ur-Beijing dialect laden with religious expressions. He talked about karmic retribution (baoying), and when someone died, he spoke of the dark gate (xuanmen) closing. His clothes reflected his double life. Draped over his shoulders was a green army greatcoat that could have been worn by a worker, but underneath was a tailored collarless jacket made of brown silk and patterned with a stylized version of the character shou, or longevity. His cheeks were redder than usual, and he motioned for me to follow him. You'll catch a cold out here, I said. He grunted. Wang Defeng was here visiting the old man. Everyone was drinking. Wang Defeng was a government official who ran the most important religious site in Beijing, Miaofengshan, or the Mountain of the Wondrous Peak, located about forty miles west of the city center. I had met the Ni family there a year earlier during the annual pilgrimage to worship Our Lady of the Azure Clouds, the same goddess whose temple had also been next to the Ni family's old home. During the pilgrimage, the Ni family ran a small shrine next to the main temple. It was dedicated to another popular goddess and had a stand offering free tea to pilgrims. This is known as a pilgrimage association and is meant to help the faithful by providing them with physical and moral sustenance as they climb the mountain. About eighty of these groups exist in Beijing. Some provide food and drink, while others honor the gods with acrobatics, stilt walking, humorous skits, and martial arts. During the two-week pilgrimage, many of these volunteers live on the mountain, bunking out six to a room or, like the Ni family, sleeping on cots in the back of their shrines. The temple is owned by the government, but neither it nor Manager Wang controls the pilgrimage associations. They are independent, with an authority that comes from tradition and faith rather than power and money. Over the course of many generations, the pilgrimage associations have been handed down through clans and families, and they have developed arcane sets of rules and regulations. They choose who can ascend Miaofengshan and how to behave on the mountain. They even decide how you should greet another association member on the street. And they are crucial to the pilgrimages' financial success. If the groups participate, then the Miaofengshan fair is a genuine spiritual event and a destination for tens of thousands of pious pilgrims. If the groups stay away, then it's nothing but a carnival. Manager Wang had not come to ask the Ni family to attend this year's pilgrimage; no man of culture would come at the start of the Lunar New Year on such a crude mission. Instead, he was paying a courtesy visit. A cynic might view this as the same thing, but this would be too narrow. Personal contact is how life is organized in China, whether running a pilgrimage, business, or political party. All of these have rules, regulations, or bylaws, but what really holds them together is a web of relationships that rarely fits on a flowchart. It includes who is related to whom and who has done whom a favor, when, and under what circumstances. It is about who has the personal charisma and prestige and who has donated the most money, but also it is about who is sincere in carrying out obligations—something even the poorest person can do. Mr. Wang had visited because he was an able administrator wanting to make the next fair a success, but he didn't think in such unsophisticated terms; he was here because visiting Old Mr. Ni was the right thing to do. The patriarch was a great man in Beijing's religious scene. Not visiting him on the second day of the New Year would have been unthinkable. Jincheng led me down a side street, turning in to an alley too narrow for a car. He pushed open the second door on our right, and three small dogs charged out, barking and wagging their tails. He walked through the first room, where his wife and several other women were playing mahjong on a dark rosewood table. They looked up and called out greetings, offering tea and sunflower seeds, which I waved off. Jincheng slid open a glass door, and we entered the back room, where his father sat waiting for me on a heavy, carved wooden chair—a throne for one of the noblemen of Beijing's religious life. Old Mr. Ni had a shaved head and thick dark eyebrows that seemed permanently arched upward in a sign of surprise and humility. He loved to talk about catching crickets, collecting gourds, and raising dogs. When I had visited him a few months earlier, we had chatted for a couple of hours about everything from calligraphy to the construction industry, where he had worked since his youth. He had told me that he had cancer but he was certain that he would recover. Now, though, I could see that the illness had overwhelmed his body. His hands clutched the armrests, as if struggling to keep his body upright. His head was bowed slightly and immobile; when I approached, he did not move. It took him a moment to open his eyes and gesture for me to take a seat next to him. Then he summoned his energy and issued a command. If you want to write a book, be accurate. You don't want to be spouting nonsense like people on television, filming this or that, and making all sorts of misleading statements about us. Don't lead people astray. Do you understand? I thought back to my visits to Miaofengshan. State-run television often filmed the colorful festival and aired reports on how everything was well and good with traditional Chinese culture. It rarely showed

people worshipping, and avoided mentioning that this was primarily a religious event. It usually seemed like a report on a new theme park. I nodded. I am not so strong anymore and am not sure I can explain everything. If I lead you astray, then you will write errors and others will be misled. We'll get further and further from the truth. But I want you to mark this: All temples are not the same. Some are fake. When you're writing, you have to know the distinction. You have to know which permit pilgrims and which do not. Miaofengshan does allow them. It's why our tea association goes there. Jincheng leaned over and whispered in my ear, reminding me how his family's tea association had been founded. It had been 1993, and Old Mr. Ni had been ill with kidney cancer. Surgery was imminent. He vowed that if he lived, he would make a trip to Miaofengshan to thank Our Lady of the Azure Clouds. She had looked after the family in their old home, and he was sure she would help him now. Back home, Jincheng lit incense and prayed. The surgery had gone well, and Old Mr. Ni had recovered. The next spring, he went to Miaofengshan to fulfill his vow. Although the family had lived next to the temple of Our Lady of the Azure Clouds, they had never made the pilgrimage to her mountain. Old Mr. Ni had been just eight years old when the Japanese invaded and twenty when the Communists took power. In such tumultuous times, the flow of pilgrims had slowed to a trickle, with people worried about safety and generally too poor to afford the long trip through the mountain roads. After Mao took power, his zealots destroyed the temple. But by the mid-1990s it had been rebuilt, and the pilgrimage had resumed. On his way down the mountain, Old Mr. Ni told Jincheng that he had an idea. He wanted to set up his own pilgrimage association to offer pilgrims tea. In a literal sense, pilgrimage associations are superfluous; nowadays, a pilgrimage usually just takes a day, and no one needs free tea or food. But the associations survive because the idea behind them is more important than their function. They symbolize piety, a gathering of people who had enough faith to sacrifice the thousands of dollars and weeks of time that it takes to run a pilgrimage association.