At dusk one day, as I was having dinner with the family I lived with in Wannian Village, I heard a faint, rhythmical pounding sound in the distance. I asked the head of the family what it was. He said a spirit medium was probably possessed by a deity. I asked whether he knew where this ritual was going on. He judged from the direction of the sound that it was not far, probably in the northeast of the village. I quickly finished my meal and rushed out to see what was happening. The sound became clearer as I walked toward the northeast. It was coming from the ancestral hall of the Wang family’s house.

After greeting the head of the Wang family and the spirit medium interpreter, I stood to one side to observe. The spirit medium was already in a trance, singing the divine words of the god; the sound I had heard was him beating on a table in rhythm with his singing. I gradually came to learn that it was the Wang family’s second son who was in trouble. He worked at a factory in the nearby town and had been ill for a long time. He had seen many doctors, but they had not been able to cure his illness, and Mr. Wang finally decided to ask one of the village deities for help. A few days previously, he had gone to the temple and brought home the statue of the tiger god. He “offered tea” (jingcha) to the statue at his home and informed the spirit medium that he wanted to “consult the deity” (qingshi shenming). After a few days, the medium came to the Wang house at dusk. In front of the statue, he was possessed by the god as the ritual began. He said the son’s illness was caused by a fetus Mrs. Wang had lost to a miscarriage. It had been haunting the son as a way of “asking for worship”; that is, the spirit was requesting an ancestral position in the family so that he could be worshiped at the family altar. After the spirit medium
interpreter confirmed with Mrs. Wang that the miscarriage had in fact occurred (a long time ago, it turned out: an event that no one knew about), the spirit medium asked the haunting spirit to depart and promised to fulfill the spirit’s request if the son recovered. After that, he performed a “fate-changing” rite (gaiyun) for the son and said that he would come back in a few days to complete any remaining tasks.

A few days later, I ran into Mr. Wang and asked him whether his son was better. He replied, “Yes, he is much better now! . . . The tiger god in our village is very efficacious and truly powerful!”

This scene sounds familiar, reminding us of Turner’s (1969) fieldwork among the Ndembu. Starting his ethnography in the era when the influence of structural-functionalism was at its peak, Turner was keen to collect genealogies, kin terms, and census materials in order to construct a picture of social structure. However, as he himself confessed, Turner was initially so prejudiced against rituals that he overlooked them entirely. But he could not ignore the constant thumping of ritual drums and the sight of people running to attend numerous rituals, and thus eventually began to appreciate their significance. Similarly, it is very common in my field site to see people going to the village temple to take god statues home to consult about their illnesses or misfortunes. A few days afterwards, the deity’s spirit medium comes to the petitioner’s house; after being possessed in front of the statue, he transmits the god’s instructions on how to alleviate the patient’s problem. This process is the most direct way for lay people to experience the deity’s magic power—ling or lingli, a very important topic in Chinese religion. Indeed, as I shall show in this book, god statues and spirit mediums coordinate closely to produce magic power. However, very little research has studied them both in a unified way. This book tries to tackle exactly these questions: What are the roles of god statues and spirit mediums in Chinese popular religion? What kinds of power do they create, and how do they reinforce each other? How can a study combining god statues, spirit mediums, and magic power improve our understanding of Chinese religion in particular, and religion in general?

The Magic Power of Chinese Deities

Previous anthropological and historical works on divine magic power provide us with important points of departure. First of all, many scholars
discuss divine power from a social perspective. Arthur Wolf (1974: 131) famously argued that Chinese religion “mirrors the social landscape of its adherents”; Chinese people think of their gods in terms of a bureaucratic hierarchy. The power of the deity, therefore, comes from people’s imagination of imperial officialdom.

The state and bureaucrats are not only projections by which ordinary people imagine the supernatural; they are also instrumental in augmenting the powers of deities. This argument is most evident in Watson’s (1985) study of T’ien Hou (or the goddess Mazu). Watson indicates that T’ien Hou was originally only a minor goddess on the coast of Fujian during the tenth century. When the state found that it could use her to enhance coastal pacification, it gradually began to promote her from around the twelfth century. In this process, “the elevation of T’ien Hou and the promotion of her cult [were] paralleled by the gradual rise of state authority over China’s southern coastal region” (293–94).1 This political or politico-economic perspective has similarly been applied to analyze the developments of popular religion in contemporary Taiwan. The rapid development of Taiwan’s economy from the 1970s onwards has led to the rise of individualism and utilitarianism, and the decline of community religion. The rise in the 1990s of amoral ghost cults, catering purely to private needs and desires, exactly resonates with this trend (Weller 1994a, 1994b).2 In sum, Wolf, Watson, and Weller all attribute the popularity of deities and ghosts and the expansion of their power to political or economic forces. These analyses are important in that they help us understand how Chinese religion is closely intertwined with changes in society, and how it responds to them.

Other scholars, however, have taken a different route to probe the nature of popular religion. Sangren’s (1987) earlier work on magic power tries to go beyond social-structural explanations and draws on structural theories to explain Chinese religion. He applies the Chinese structure of value—the mediation of yin and yang—across the broadest range possible, from the smallest neighborhood cult to towns, regions, the state, and finally to cosmic rituals, thus giving popular religion an important cultural basis. Many other anthropologists have also in various ways expressed ambivalence about the bureaucratic understanding of Chinese religion. Shahar and Weller (1996) have discussed several kinds of unruly gods not governed by this bureaucratic metaphor. Others (Feuchtwang 2001[1991]: vii; M. Wang 1995) have pinpointed important aspects of local Chinese religion that flourished outside the government’s control and were embedded in specific places with their own histories.
Hymes’s (2002) work on religion in the Southern Song (1127–1279) ambitiously proposes yet another way of understanding Chinese deities. He questions whether the bureaucratic model is the only way for Chinese people to understand the divine pantheon. By comparing the scriptural texts of a Daoist sect, the Celestial Heart, with local records of three Daoist immortals, he argues that two models of divinity have evolved since the Southern Song: the bureaucratic and the personal. The personal model, which is the focus of his analysis, embodies an authority that dwells in a particular place and maintains a personal relationship with the people it serves. Indeed, place and people are significant themes in many other studies of Chinese popular religion, such as the theory of the “ritual sphere” (jisi quan; also translated as “worship circle”) in Taiwan (Hsu 1973; M. Lin 2008; Z. Shi 1973), and some of the research in Fujian and Guangdong provinces in China (Dean and Zheng 2009; Faure and Siu 1995). In this book, we will find that these concepts figure even more prominently in rural Taiwan.

Distinct from these socio-cultural approaches is Sangren’s (2000) latest Marxist analysis. Supernatural power (ling) is considered an ideologi-cal alienation that inverts the relations between producers (individuals or society) and products (the deity’s power). Taking god statues as an example, Sangren (2000[1991]) argues that the productive forces of people are attributed to the magic power of these sacred objects, which are in fact the alienated forms of individuals and social collectivities.

As recent studies of material culture point out, the relationship between humans and objects is not simply one-directional alienation; interaction between humans and objects can be reappropriated and thus reconstitute social relations. In the following section, I shall discuss how the important insights of material studies, especially those related to the agency of objects, can shed new light on our understanding of Chinese religion.

Material Culture and the Agency of Objects

In his review of the theories of objects, Tilley (2006) gives a lucid explanation of how they have developed in the social sciences. He points out that in early anthropological texts, scholars usually considered objects as
reflections of social groups or cultural concepts. In evolution or diffusion theories, for example, objects were seen as evidence of the movement of people and ideas (see also Miller 1987: 110–11). In the Durkheimian tradition, society or culture was thought of as being prior to things (Durkheim and Mauss 1963[1903]); material forms mirror social distinctions or cultural values. An important change came with Miller’s book, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (1987), which introduced a new understanding of objects.

Going beyond the dualisms of subject/object and person/thing, Miller (1987: 28, 180) argues that in the processes of production, exchange, and consumption, people and objects continually reconstitute each other. He applies the term “objectification,” which includes both self-alienation and sublation, to explicate this process. That is, in producing objects, people not only externalize themselves (self-alienation), but also reappropriate and reabsorb this externalization (sublation) and thus reconstruct themselves. From this perspective, the material world is indispensable for understanding the mutual constitution of individuals and society (33). Material culture has thus been repositioned in a significant place in anthropology.

Miller’s work inspires further thoughts about objectification. For example, do different kinds of material have varying forms of objectification and correspondingly diverse kinds of agency? If so, how are they related to each other, and what purposes do they achieve? These issues have been explored in research on the agency of objects. In his investigations of nonhuman elements such as technology, bacteria, and materials in laboratories, Latour points out that scientific facts are constructed by both human and nonhuman elements such that the latter cannot be subsumed by the former (Latour and Woolgar 1986; Latour 1987, 1993). A special term, “actant,” is borrowed from semiotics to depict the agency of these nonhuman factors. They work together with human actors in a network that creates mediation and generates translation (Latour 1993, 1999, 2005). The original state of affairs is transformed and a new type of being appears. It is thus important for us, when considering the agency of objects, to examine both human and nonhuman elements, their mediation in a network, and the translations they generate. Some of the concepts in this theory have been applied to study Chinese pilgrimages and objects related to ghosts (Hatfield 2010, 2011).

Whereas Latour looks at the nonhuman world, Gell (1992) examines artifacts in human society (see also Miller 2005: 12) by taking into account
the technology of enchantment, that is, how an art object comes into the world. Diverging from previous scholars who analyzed art and material culture from aesthetic or symbolic perspectives, Gell (1998: 17) argues that the agency of artifacts has to be understood in terms of the texture of social relationships. As an example, consider his analysis of Indian images, which provides this book with profound insights with which to examine Chinese deity statues. He discusses the agency of images by means of “internal” and “external” strategies (126–54). The internal strategy entails giving a body, a soul, and other materials to enliven an object in consecration, whereas the external strategy further animates the idol into a social agent, able to embed itself into social contexts and obtain its significance from social interactions. This meticulous theory in which objects are constructed as persons in relation to one another is implicitly built on Strathern, who has developed an exquisite analysis of symbolic transformations between objects and persons in Oceania (Strathern 1987).3

Gell’s discussion of the agency of artifacts in his book is complex, multifaceted, and sometimes difficult to comprehend.4 It is not the purpose of this work to fully examine it. However, the controversies his work has raised, in their turn, can further elucidate the intentions of this book.5 The most debated part of his project is his minimization of the cultural aspect in shaping the use or reception of objects (Layton 2003: 447; see also Arnaut 2001: 205; Morphy 2009). Morphy lucidly describes how Gell’s disregard of culture narrows our understanding of objects’ agency:

In relation to meaning[,] Gell’s ‘theory’ . . . privileges social action, it makes objects exist for the moment and fails to take into account the knowledge and presuppositions that people bring to bear when acting in relation to objects. (Morphy 2009: 20)

In other words, if one only considers the agency of objects from their social positions, their power seems to exist only in a certain social moment or action; consequently, one ignores how agency is also constituted by a wider system of cultural meanings (17) that bestow unique significance upon particular social relations. Thus the purpose of this book is to probe the cultural significance of objects’ agency when studying god statues and spirit mediums.

The preceding discussion also points to the intricate connections between material culture and religious studies, which have the potential to increase our understanding of religion. Indeed, religious studies in recent
years have noticed the importance of material culture; dialogue between the two disciplines has become more frequent.

**A Material Turn in Religious Studies**

In anthropology, the appropriateness of studying religion from the perspective of belief was challenged by R. Needham (1972), who urged scholars not to privilege inner experiences. The way anthropological studies value belief systems and symbolic meanings has roots in a specifically Christian background (Asad 1993). It was in the seventeenth century, following the fragmentation of the Catholic Church and the consequent wars of religion, that the first systematic attempts to produce a universal definition of religion were made (40–43).

The emphasis on belief meant that henceforth religion could be conceived as a set of propositions to which believers gave assent, and which could therefore be judged and compared as between different religions and as against natural science. (Asad 1993: 40–41)

The importance of belief was subsequently developed even further, particularly by Geertz (1973), to the point that it entered into the core concepts of anthropology and became evidence of the very existence of culture (Keane 2008: 111). Since the 1990s, anthropologists have tried to break the tight link between religion and belief. Keane (2007, 2008), for example, has studied religion via material practices, by specifically focusing on linguistic activities.

A similar trend has emerged in religious studies. Religion scholars started a journal, *Material Religion*, in 2005 with the purpose of transcending the stereotype by which religion is seen as an abstract engagement in doctrine or dogma (Goa, Morgan, and Paine 2005: 4). It represents the conviction that religion is fundamentally material in practice. A series of books and symposiums have since followed (Arweck and Keenan 2006; Houtman and Meyer 2012; King 2010; Morgan 2010; Vasquez 2011) advocating this “material turn” and its possible fruitful breakthroughs.

However, studying religion only from the viewpoint of objects also has its limitations. In Chinese religion, the power of a deity is not only
objectified by material artifacts, but also by human beings, specifically, spirit mediums. The study of spirit mediums (and of shamanism) has a long history in anthropology (Boddy 1994; Atkinson 1992). These mediums, who possess the ability to communicate with the supernatural, themselves also embody a unique magic spiritual power. However, when scholars of material culture discuss power, their main focus is always on objects; spirit mediums and material culture are hardly ever combined and discussed in a unified way. In other words, studies of spirit mediums and material culture have developed independently in anthropology; they constitute their own subdisciplines, with few intersections between them. This book aims to bring these two subdisciplines together to advance our understanding of religion in terms of different forms of material agency.

**Materializing Magic Power: God Statues and Spirit Mediums**

This book analyzes the power of a deity from the perspective of materialization. It discusses how a deity, originally conceived as abstract and omnipresent, acquires a unique magic power in the human world when it is materialized. Its main focus is on god statues and spirit mediums, two very important material forms of Chinese deities. In Mandarin and in the local dialect, they are called “golden bodies” (*jin shen*) and “golden sons” (*jin zi*) of the deity, respectively, indicating their status as precious and special revelations of the deity.

By focusing on this aspect, I do not exclude the possibility that a deity’s power can be revealed through other material means, such as divination blocks, incense ashes (Chang 2006; Sangren 2000 [1991]), and spirit money (Blake 2011; Gates 1987; McCreery 1990; Scott 2007; Seaman 1982). However, a comprehensive treatment of all of these methods would be a major undertaking that would leave little space for a detailed discussion of religious materiality and the transformations of magic power in villages and cities, which is my primary interest here. Thus, I choose to focus on god statues and spirit mediums, and their materialization in the living world.

In this book, I examine the significance of materialization in terms of three interrelated aspects: its cultural mechanisms, social consequences, and material forms.6
THE CULTURAL SYMBOLIZATION OF POWER

I first build on Gell’s theory of agency, and discuss the “internal agency” of statues and spirit mediums derived from their consecration ritual and initiation ceremony. At the same time, I go beyond Gell’s framework of “social” analysis of agency by exploring the cultural symbolization of Chinese magic power (see also Strathern 1987). Specifically, by drawing on ethnography from Wannian, a village in southwestern Taiwan, I argue that personification and localization are the two cultural mechanisms bestowing efficacy on deity statues and spirit mediums. Personification engages the Chinese ideas of body, soul, and social person, in which kinship relations are emphasized. Localization is built upon the traditional cosmological model of the “center and four directions” (zhongxin yu si-fang), which in Taiwan is encapsulated by the idea of the five camps of spirit soldiers (wuying) and also their concrete physical sites. These cultural concepts form the basis of the Taiwanese people’s conceptualization of the magic power and efficacy of a deity.

This cultural discussion of religious power can bring a new understanding of Chinese popular religion in two distinct aspects. First, as previously mentioned, many previous works on Chinese religion analyzed religion from social, economic, or political perspectives. This study, on the other hand, reveals that popular religion has its own cultural basis, rather than being merely an appendage to the socio-economic domain. Furthermore, it allows us to reconsider whether Chinese popular religion has only a “diffused” character, lacking its own significant content. C. K. Yang (1961: 295) claims that popular religion’s theology, cults, and personnel are so intimately diffused into secular social institutions that they have no independent existence. This book, by examining deity statues and spirit mediums, will show how Chinese popular religion possesses cultural bases and mechanisms that endow it with defining features and characteristics; consequently, it is inappropriate to think of popular religion as simply having been subsumed into existing social institutions.

THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES
OF MATERIALIZATION

Secondly, this book examines the efficacy of deities through the social interaction between god statues, spirit mediums, and their followers. This
is the “external strategy” in Gell’s framework, or the mutual reconstitutions of objects and humans in the process of objectification (Miller 1987). I will illustrate how the consecration ritual of a god statue and the initiation ceremony of its spirit medium redraw or reconfirm the village boundaries and connect each household by means of a kinship metaphor. The originally autonomous households are thus linked by a metaphorical kinship relation in a concrete locality.

I shall also discuss how an omnipresent and abstract deity, when materialized into a statue and a spirit medium, is able to embed itself into social contexts and obtain its unique power through household consultations and village as well as transvillage rituals. These god-human interactions can, in the long term, result in the waxing or waning of a deity’s power. This variability explains why some deities are seen as particularly efficacious, or as possessing special abilities, to the point that they may even gain recognition from the state (Hansen 1990; Watson 1985), whereas others who have not demonstrated efficacy may gradually be forgotten or even disappear into oblivion.

TWO MATERIAL FORMS OF MAGICAL EFFICACY

We may wonder: why does the deity’s power need to reveal itself through statues and mediums? Chapter 1 shows how a statue, by virtue of its solid and permanent qualities, is evidence of the deity’s continued existence for the devotees. Adherents believe that the god consistently dwells in the statue after the rite of “entering the spirit” (rushen) is performed. Any action that may cause the deity’s spirit to leave the statue—such as refurbishing it—is scrupulously avoided unless absolutely necessary. These concepts reinforce the permanence of the deity in the statue, which thus becomes the guardian of the devotees in troubled times.

Statues, however, are static, unable to react to contingencies and devotees’ needs. Another material form of the deity’s power thus becomes very important: the spirit medium. Humans are fundamentally different from statues: they are dynamic, spontaneous, and sensual. When prompt help is needed, spirit mediums can offer succor. They can speak to patients and comfort and heal them. Therefore, they are able to form a much closer affective connection with the adherents than statues. However, spirit mediums are also temporary and provisional; they are not as durable or long-lasting as statues. Not only are they possessed by the deity for short
stretches at a time, but their lives and services are also limited. A spirit medium is replaced when he passes away. His power is evanescent and disappears when he dies, and it cannot be transmitted to the next generation. He lacks the enduring existence of a statue.

Therefore, this work sets forth an explanation of how deity statues and spirit mediums materialize magic power separately in distinct ways, but complement and coordinate with each other in the daily lives of adherents and in ritual moments. Deity statues, by their very nature permanent and durable, contain divine power within them; spirit mediums draw out this power and express it to the world through their miraculous performances. One is long-lasting but static, the other is temporary but instantaneously responsive, but they complement each other on many occasions. This research thus provides clear examples to demonstrate how distinct kinds of power are transmitted through different material forms, an issue that has not been adequately addressed in the previous literature on objects and agency (Gell 1998; Latour 1993, 2005).

The way in which god statues and spirit mediums coordinate with each other is probably not exceptional in human life: very similar arrangements can be found in other cultures or socio-cultural dimensions. Parry and Bloch (1989), for example, point out that in many cultures, the monetary systems comprise a cycle of short-term exchanges, which are usually the domain of individual and acquisitive activities, and a cycle of long-term exchanges, which are concerned with the reproduction of the social and ideological system. These two related but separate cycles are organically essential to each other and articulated in the long run to achieve the reproduction of the society.

History and the Changing Rural Religion in Taiwan

What we see in rural Taiwan now is likely not accidental, but rather has deep historical roots. Many studies of Chinese religions have detailed how people in the past imagined deities through statues and communicated with the divine by means of spirit mediums. Hansen’s (1990) work on the Southern Song in particular presents very rich records and analyses. Yü (2001: 21) also shows how Avalokiteśvara was able to become localized
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into Chinese society because of the aesthetic appearances and forms of indigenous Chinese statues. It is not too far-fetched to suggest a historical continuity between the religious world of the Southern Song and that of rural Taiwan today.

God statues and spirit mediums, furthermore, provide an opportunity to reflect upon the different approaches to understanding the power of the divine proposed by previous studies, namely Wolf’s bureaucratic and Hymes’s personal models. How do these two models work in local society? In Chapter 3, I take the village of Sanliaowan as an example to explicate how these two models have worked historically in a local place. A close study of local legends will show how this village’s supernatural system reflected the regional and administrative forces at play during its earliest period of settlement. Over time, a local god appeared with whom people developed deep connections. Gradually, this local deity came to acquire magnified significance to the point that it even outranked the regional gods. The appearance of the deity statue and the practices of the spirit medium during this historical process draw for us a vivid and detailed picture of how the bureaucratic and personal models intertwine and compete in local society.

Furthermore, the case of Sanliaowan reveals a dynamic picture of popular religion in contemporary rural Taiwan. Owing to its infertile soil, many residents of Sanliaowan began to move to cities in search of livelihood during the period of Japanese rule (1895–1945). These out-migrants and their continuing connections with their hometown have had an important impact on the development of the village temple. This phenomenon serves as a reminder to take into account a wider politico-economic history (Appadurai 1986; Thomas 1991) in the consideration of contemporary religious developments and material transformations. The second half of this book will focus on these aspects.

From Villages to Cities

Part II of this book follows the young generation of rural migrants to cities and discusses how the power of Chinese gods is reconfigured in an urban context. Since Taiwan embarked on the road to industrialization in the 1960s (Gold 1986), capitalist forces have continued to draw people
from the countryside to work in industrial cities. The youngsters in Wannian, like people in other rural places (Gallin and Gallin 1974; W. Lin 2009a, 2009b), moved to major industrial zones, including greater Taipei, Taoyuan, and Hsinchu in the north, and Kaohsiung in the south. As a result of personal connections, many of the Wannian natives settled in Taoyuan County, in particular the city of Bade.

Although some apprenticed in vocational crafts, most of them took manual jobs, working in factories or as contract laborers. From the start, they faced an unfriendly environment. Contract laborers, for example, were at the mercy of irregular hiring cycles and harsh working conditions. Factory workers did not really fare much better, as their hours were long, their jobs repetitious, and the rhythm of work stultifying. The whole situation was aggravated after the coming of neoliberalism: the capitalists could now easily cross international borders, with little control by the state (Harvey 2005). Factory closings greatly increased in frequency, and unscrupulous factory owners often decamped the country, leaving hapless laborers with many months’ wages unpaid. The subsequent advent of the information age, moreover, brought with it more competition for traditional workers. These problems and resulting difficulties of maladaptation took a significant toll on the workers’ physical and mental health, as was first detailed by Kleinman (1980).

The second half of this book studies how people moved to the city and settled there. When rural migrants faced difficulties, they tried to cope by formally inviting (qing) branch statues of their village deities to Bade, inaugurating their own shrine, and selecting a spirit medium. In this transition, a clear line of continuity between the religious traditions in the village and the city can be seen. However, as will be discussed, the urban medium has also greatly refashioned the village religion and reconstituted relations among the migrants. These material forms and practices, therefore, provide a crucial way to see how village religion has continued and been reconfigured in the urban context.

Urban Spirit Mediums

Previous anthropological literature contains rich accounts of how people contend with the unpredictability of capitalism in changing economic
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conditions through shamanic practices, spirit possessions, and folk belief. Seminal early works include those of Taussig (1980), Comaroff (1985), and Ong (1987). Since the 1990s, other studies have tried to tackle the tangled problems of the even more volatile globalized capitalist economy (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; West and Sanders 2003). In Taiwan, Weller (1994a, 1994b, 2000) has delved into the popularity of ghost belief and linked it to that country’s increasingly marginalized politico-economic situation in the 1990s. Although all the issues raised in these texts are also major concerns of studies of urban shamanism, the latter in particular address the struggles of rural migrants turned into petty merchants and how they grappled with the arbitrariness of capitalist markets (Kendall 1996, 2003, 2008, 2009; Lindquist 2002), and their vacillation between tradition/modernity and rural/urban relations (Humphrey 1999).

The case of Bade echoes the issues previously raised. The core members of the Bade shrine, for example, came from rural areas in the 1970s. In the city, these migrants not only lack support from the village, but also have to face all kinds of challenges from unpredictable capitalism and modernity. The spirit medium in Bade, who himself used to be a maladjusted worker, understands these urban problems and refines traditional religion to help his temple’s devotees adapt to their new urban situation.

Meanwhile, the rural religion, characterized by the close coordination of god statues and the spirit medium in the residents’ living space, has become less and less feasible in the urban context. Migrants are now scattered in different corners of the city, and it has become difficult for the deity statues to visit a petitioner’s house and create power through a direct encounter. As god statues now are mostly grounded in the shrine, they have gradually become, in the main, static repositories of spiritual power, considerably more passive than statues in villages. As a result, the urban spirit medium has been motivated to be more active in exploring new ways to increase the deity’s power. The Bade case will show how the role of the urban medium has become more important than he is in the village. He has obtained unprecedented subjectivity: his role has been transformed from that of the “spokesman” of the god to the organizer or even creator of religious knowledge and power. The change of spirit medium from villages to cities can be compared to a Wana shaman (Atkinson 1989) turning into Uma Adang in south Kalimantan (Tsing 1993). The former functions within a well-bounded symbolic system, whereas the latter is exposed to different forces, which she mixes and reassembles to create a new form of power.
Religious Power Reconfigured

In the transition from the rural to the urban, the power of the deity is reconfigured in various ways. First is delocalization. As rural migrants spread over diverse places in the city, it becomes impossible—and also unnecessary—to set up the five camps of spirit soldiers (wuying) to define the concrete boundary of their living space. Thus the power of the village deity characterized by strong territorial and social ties has lost significance for urbanites. In Part II, I shall discuss how, on the one hand, the urban spirit medium in Bade City changes divination methods to filter out territorial elements, and in doing so, popular religion in the city becomes less exclusive and more able to incorporate people not originally from the home village. On the other hand, the urban medium also tries to break the traditional temple network by attempting to directly connect with higher transcendental divine powers (such as the Jade Emperor and the Three Pure Ones). All these efforts have made the deity’s power increasingly delocalized and nonhierarchical: the traditional ordering of local, regional, national, international, and global “arenas” as a concentric arrangement of progressively larger scale phenomena is suspended, and the divine power becomes “multiscalar” in nature (Greenhouse 2010: 6; Sassen 2004: 176).

Many studies of contemporary Chinese religion have recorded similar developments and often ascribed them to an “individualistic” trend (Goossaert and Palmer 2011: 286; Ting 2009): a pursuit of self-discovery (Marshall 2003) or personal freedom (Fan, Whitehead, and Whitehead 2004, 2005). Undoubtedly, these views are influenced by the sociologists’ emphasis on the challenges industrial capitalism has posed to the authority of religious institutions and symbols. Religion in modern society thus becomes individualized; it is a matter of rational choice or individual freedom (Berger 1990[1967]; Luckmann 1967). Many studies have discussed these individual-centered religious developments in the United States since the 1980s. Scholars are concerned with issues such as religious individualism (Bellah et al. 2008[1985]; Hammond 1992), and the change from dwelling-oriented to seeking-oriented spirituality (Wuthnow 1998). “Self-religion” is the term used to describe the individualistic orientation of the New Age movement, popular in the West since the 1980s (Heelas 1988, 1996).
However, in Heelas’s second book, based on fieldwork in the Lake District in England, he pinpoints a different perspective to explicate this religious trend. Taking an idea from Taylor (1991), he suggests that contemporary religion implies a massive subjective turn of modern culture:

a turn away from “life-as” (life as dutiful wife, father, husband, strong leader, self-made man etc.) to “subjective-life” (life lived in deep connection with the unique experiences of my self-in-relation). (Heelas and Woodhead 2005: 3)

This “subjective turn,” in other words, entails a change of religion from being embedded within objective social relations to subjective dimensions, such as emotions and bodily experiences. “Subjectivization,” furthermore, should not be confused with “individualization” because “subjective-life spirituality involves self-in-relation rather than self-in-isolation” (Heelas and Woodhead 2005: 11). It is this affective and expressive relationality that characterizes contemporary religions (Heelas 2008: 36).

**An Affective Turn in Contemporary Popular Religion**

My analysis of the urban shrine benefits from Heelas’s ideas. In Chapter 4, I shall first discuss how the establishment of the urban shrine is a way for the rural migrants to tackle the challenges they confront in the era of industrialization and neoliberalism. Second, I will show how a new life rhythm has been forged among the core members of the shrine through various kinds of religious activities. By recasting the process of divination in a novel way, the spirit medium furthermore has been instrumental in tightening the bonds amongst the members, as well as between them and the shrine. Intimate affective connections developed among them through joint participation in religious practices and by sharing life-cycle rituals, annual festivals, and leisure activities together. In this way, the core members have come to replace the roles traditionally played by kinsmen, thus creating a new type of family and kinship intimacy in an urban setting. In other words, the shrine members are no longer connected by a metaphorical kinship relation as in their home village,
but by affective ties which, in their own words, are “thicker than blood” (H. pi hiann-ti-tsi-mue ko kha tshin). A similar emotional closeness is evident between the urban spirit medium and his master deity; their relationship is no longer a top-down hierarchy, but a “heart-to-heart” (xin yin xin) connection. I shall show how these affects become another important source of the deity’s power, which is materialized in the free and selfless religious services offered to all people by the spirit medium and the shrine members.

What about other shrine visitors, outside its core membership? Whereas occasional petitioners at the temple, after coming once or twice to consult the deity, may not come back if they experience no obvious miraculous effects, those who frequently come to seek help usually think of themselves as being linked to the deity by yuan or yuanfen, a unique but unexplainable affinity.

Is the Bade shrine, with its particular background of migrant members, an exceptional case in the contemporary development of religion? Probably not. C. Huang (2009) in her analysis of Tzu Chi, a very influential Buddhist sect in Taiwan (and also beyond), has discussed how emotion, in particular crying and wailing, plays an important role in this religious movement. Many followers cry whenever they see the Venerable Cheng Yen, the master of the sect. This feeling is interpreted by the master as a “homecoming—like a child, to a family reunion” and the emotional connection between them is considered to be a predestined bond, yuan (140). Similar to the case of Bade, this religious experience is rooted in the adherents’ mutual emotional connections stemming from an unexplainable affinity and a family-like intimacy.

How can one conceptualize the emotional and psychological connections that have become increasingly important for urban popular religion? Two significant contemporary trends are worth considering. First, one can see that the emotional closeness comes from the intertwining of religion and kinship in the urban context. Their blending, furthermore, has its correlative in the wider society: it can be separated neither from the alienation in the industrialized and urbanized world that the rural migrants face, nor from the impact of neoliberalism, which blurs the boundaries between culture, politics, and economy (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 45; Y. Huang 2012).

Second, can one say that this affective and psychological development is moving toward an individualistic religion, as most previous scholars maintain? The case of Bade suggests a different answer. As indicated earlier,
the core members have created a novel type of family and kinship intimacy based on “thicker-than-blood” closeness; the regular shrine visitors are linked to the deity by an unexplainable affinity, yuan. These attachments are neither the result of birth, as in the rural areas, nor a voluntary decision based on individual choice, as in the case of new religious groups in the West. In other words, we can say that there is a “subjective turn” of popular religion in cities, as Heelas and Woodhead (2005) have highlighted. However, this turn in Taiwan is distinct from Western religious individualism pivoted on personal preference and freedom of will (Bellah et al. 2008[1985]; Berger 1990[1967]; Luckmann 1967). And although this development has its cultural basis in traditional Chinese kinship and personhood, as discussed in Part I, it is evolving into a different form in contemporary society, and so deserves continued study.

The Ethnographical Settings

The fieldwork for this book was conducted across multiple sites: from the villages of Wannian and Sanliaowan in Tainan, to the city of Bade in Taoyuan (Map 0.1). Wannian is my long-term fieldwork site, where I have been doing research since 1995. It is located in the north of Tainan County, on the banks of the Jishui River. Its population is no more than three hundred people, or around seventy households, comprising three main surnames: Gao, Li, and Wang.10 There are hardly any records describing this small village’s history, but it is known that Wannian had developed into a village by the period 1796–1874 because its name appeared in the book Taiwanfu Yutu Zuanyao (A brief account of Taiwanfu maps) (Anon. 1983[1796–1874]).

Because it is so proximate to the river that flows to the south of Wannian, the Japanese colonial government chose to build a dike to the north of the village. This dike had a serious impact on the village, as Wannian was consequently excluded from the important Jianan irrigation system that extended only up to the dike. As a result, Wannian’s farmers have never had enough water to be able to grow profitable crops; the whole village has been completely dependent on the vagaries of the weather.11 During the Japanese period, villagers were primarily engaged in planting sugarcane, which was purchased by the sugar factory in the nearby town of Xinying.
MAP 0.1  Wannian, Sanliaowan, and Bade
In the postwar era, a paper factory that used the bagasse of sugar-cane to manufacture paper was set up in Xinying. Since a large number of laborers were needed to transport the lees, the factory became a new source of income for Wannian residents. However, the village suffered an economic setback beginning in the 1960s as the price of sugar declined. A manifestation of this hardship was that eight households in Wannian sold their property and moved to Pingtung County, a marginal place in southernmost Taiwan, to continue farming. In the 1970s, as Taiwan industrialized, many residents of Wannian moved to areas around Kaohsiung, Taoyuan, and Taipei. Part II of this book discusses the Wannian out-migrants who moved to the city of Bade in Taoyuan.

Today, only one or two brothers from each household remain in Wannian to look after their family farms. In the 1980s, this little village, rich with sandy soil because of its proximity to the river, prospered for a short period from asparagus farming. But as Taiwan’s asparagus market came to be dominated by imports, Wannian’s deterioration accelerated. The farmers of this village today primarily produce government-subsidized sorghum and corn. The subsidies only cover the cost of planting and are insufficient to meet daily expenses. Therefore, many villagers take on work as casual laborers to supplement their income or depend on remittances from their children in the cities. The young residents remaining in the village mostly work in nearby factories (as, for example, Mr. Wang’s sick son described earlier in this introduction) or do business in the town.

In general, owing to its location near the river, Wannian has never had proper irrigation facilities for developing agriculture. Therefore, the villagers have become manual labor suppliers for the surrounding region during the slack seasons. The people of Wannian have lived a hand-to-mouth existence. No successful emigrant entrepreneur has returned home to build ancestral halls; its temple was built only in the early 1990s.

The second field site of this book, Sanliaowan, is a much bigger village, with four hundred households and two thousand people. It lies twenty kilometers west of Wannian, in a region known as the “salt zone” (yenfen didai). The topography of this area has undergone drastic changes since the seventeenth century, when the current location of Sanliaowan was still under an inland sea, with long offshore sandbanks stretching from north to south. Since the late eighteenth century, the coastline has been advancing westward toward the Taiwan Strait because of river diversions and
the accumulation of alluvial sediment. Sanliaowan was formed by the silt- ing of the sea and the Jiangjun River. As a result, the soil in Sanliaowan is highly saline, making it difficult to grow rice. Thus, people in Sanliaowan started to move to cities as early as the Japanese period. For those who stayed, their income mostly comes from inshore fishery, especially oyster beds.

The historical record of Sanliaowan is as scant as Wannian’s. In Taiwan Maps (Taiwan Baotu), compiled in the early Japanese colonial period (Provisional Land Investigation Bureau of the Colonial Government in Taiwan 1996[1905]), however, the village of Sanliaowan already appeared in a form very similar to its current one.

The population of Sanliaowan now is composed of seven major surnames, each of them gathering in their own neighborhoods that house their ancestral halls and temples, mostly donated by successful out- migrants. A village temple, Donglonggong, is the site where most of the residents worship, superseding all these neighborhood temples in importance. Sanliaowan’s infertile soil pushed its inhabitants to move to cities much earlier than those of Wannian. These migrants gradually became, and continue to be, the driving force behind the redevelopment of the village temple. During the Japanese colonial period, for instance, some migrants had already contributed funds and materials for temple refurbishment. The present temple was strongly supported by migrants and completed in 1979, almost twenty years earlier than in Wannian. When I conducted fieldwork in 2004, there were already twenty-six branch temples, mostly set up by migrants from the village who were successful in business. If the most famous temples in Taiwan, such as Dajia Zhenlangong (Chang 2002; Sangren 1987), Beigang Chaotian- gong (Chipman 2008; Sangren 2000), or Taipei Xiantiangong (Madsen 2007) are large-scale temples, Wannian’s temple registers on the smaller end of the scale, and Sanliaowan’s is in the middle.

In addition to the large, medium, and small temples, there is a store- front shrine, generally called shentan in Mandarin, which does not have its own temple yet. There is one like this in Sanliaowan, but its impact on local society is limited.12 The storefront shrine discussed in detail in the the second half of this book was founded by the Wannian migrants in the city of Bade, Taoyuan County. Taoyuan is an important center for industry and manufacturing in northern Taiwan, with many industrial districts aggregated there. During the early days of industrialization, many
rural people moved to Taoyuan to earn a living. Subsequently, foreign workers from Southeast Asia were introduced. Today, a multinational commercial district has developed near the railway station (C. Wang 2006), with many shops selling goods from Southeast Asia. Bade used to be a small agricultural town but developed quickly in tandem with the growth of Taoyuan. There are many textile, electronic, and mechanical companies in this area. The people of Wannian started to move to Bade in the 1970s and set up their shrine in 1997. I have participated in their religious activities since 2011.

As, respectively, a traditional village, a village greatly influenced by its out-migrants, and a new industrial city, Wannian, Sanliaowan, and Bade offer different perspectives with which to explore various forms of divine magic power and their relationships with economic changes. The aim of this work is to bring a richer understanding of the dynamics of popular religion in Taiwan by considering the three places together.

**Book Outline**

The introduction delineates how magic divine power has been studied in the literature and proposes that the concept of materialization can reinvigorate our understanding of this topic. The rest of the book is divided into two parts, dealing with popular religion in villages and cities, which explore, respectively, how the magic power of deities is conceptualized in rural areas and reconfigured in cities. Chapter 1 analyzes how deities are materialized into statues, through which the formless but omnipresent gods enter into their adherents’ social network and living space, and form long-term relations with them. This chapter also examines the consecration ritual of deity statues in Wannian, and shows how personification and localization are the symbolic mechanisms by which people conceptualize gods. Chapter 2 examines three important rituals related to spirit mediums—their initiation ceremony, the consultation ritual, and the oil-boiling purification—to show how the spirit medium is another objectified form of the deity’s power. The final chapter of Part I, Chapter 3, combines historical studies of Chinese religion and another ethnographical analysis of a village in Taiwan. Through rereading Hansen’s and Hymes’s works, I show how personification and localization have likely been im-
bued in popular religion since the Southern Song. The ethnography from the village of Sanliaowan provides rich data to further examine the intersection of different kinds of magic power in rural Taiwan.

Moving on to cities, Part II discusses rural migrants, urban shrines, and the transformation of magic power. Chapter 4 investigates the challenges faced by the Wannian migrants in the cities and shows how establishing an urban shrine has greatly altered their relations not only to each other but also to popular religion itself. This chapter studies the division of labor in their religious activities, life-cycle rituals, and daily lives, and how affection and mutual attachment have grown over time. Finally, a new type of family, mixing religion and kinship in a novel way, has emerged in their urban homes. Chapter 5 analyzes how divine magic power is reconfigured in the urban setting. It discusses how the spirit medium of the city shrine modifies traditional divination methods and loosens the social and territorial connotations of popular religion. It examines the narratives of the spirit medium, the core shrine members, and occasional petitioners and shows how affective and psychological connections have gradually become the most important links binding urban adherents and deities.

In the conclusion, the broader implications of this research for anthropological and religious studies are addressed by asking the question, What new understanding of Chinese popular religion in particular, and of religion in general, can the perspective of materialization give us? Chinese popular religion is different from Daoism, Buddhism, or Christianity in being neither transmitted through written scriptures nor supported by any religious institution. In contrast to these religions, the material forms of religious power—god statues and spirit mediums—are especially important ways of comprehending this special kind of religion. It is through tangible contacts with these material forms that the devotees experience, sense, and imagine the content of the supernatural world.