In the late nineteenth century, powerful forces were transforming the Chinese empire. Popular uprisings had killed millions and disrupted everyday life in many parts of the country; foreign powers were demanding economic and political concessions; and population pressures were contributing to widespread social dislocation. In the midst of these changes came exigencies of another sort, ones as old as human civilization itself. In the last few decades of the century, China suffered a series of natural calamities. Not all were as destructive as the North China Famine, which in the late 1870s claimed the lives of millions of people and impoverished large expanses of the empire. Others were far less severe and occurred in China’s economic and cultural heartland. Three droughts in Jiangsu province—in 1873, 1880, and 1892—sent fleeting shudders through some of the empire’s wealthiest cities and provoked fears of failed harvests, rising prices, and divine judgment. They also precipitated multiple rounds of rainmaking by local officials. Accounts of these activities, gleaned from the headlines of local newspapers, describe anxious officials endeavoring to end the droughts in the only way they knew how, by seeking divine assistance. In many cases, officials prayed and burned incense to various deities in rather straightforward ceremonies; just as often, however, they organized elaborate rainmaking rituals involving ritual specialists and occult technologies. Although these newspaper reports do not provide comprehensive descriptions of the state’s rainmaking activities, they do give a sense of how local
officials responded to droughts and the ritual techniques available to
them. In the process, they open a window through which we can
glimpse, however briefly, a strange but essential aspect of Chinese
official life.

*Summer 1873: The Itinerant Exorcist*

Shanghai is a city shaped by water. It sits near the confluence of the
Huangpu 黃浦 and Yangzi 江 rivers and is only a short boat ride inland
from the East China Sea. As one contemporary observer noted, the
farmland surrounding mid-nineteenth-century Shanghai was “inter-
sected by many beautiful rivers, and these again joined and crossed
by canals, many of them nearly natural, and others stupendous
works of art.” These waterways fed Shanghai’s port with boats of all
sizes, laden with goods from China, Europe, the Americas, and
Southeast Asia. The city’s streets were narrow and choked with peo-
ple, and small businesses such as teahouses, apothecaries, and
pawnshops proliferated. In the late nineteenth century, Shanghai ex-
perienced unprecedented growth, and its borders pushed out for
miles in every direction. Before long, the banks of the river were
crowded with factories, foundries, and warehouses; the city even
had the distinction of lighting its streets with electricity before Lon-
don did. Farmers from the surrounding area filled the bellies of its
residents, while the fruit of the land filled its workshops and mills
with raw materials. In a favorable year, life in Shanghai could be
prosperous for townsfolk and peasants alike.

Yet the city’s fortunes were easily disrupted by natural calamities
such as floods, typhoons, and droughts. Such was the case in the
summer of 1873, when Shanghai received virtually no rain for two
months. Foreign observers noted that north of a line drawn in the vi-
cinity of Suzhou, rainfall had been excessive, but a drought of increas-
ing intensity persisted as one moved southward. The southerly winds
that typically accompanied the summer monsoon had been blowing
particularly hard since the end of July, and as a result, much of the
precipitation that usually fell in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces was
pushing into northern China, with calamitous effects. To the north,
Zhili was reporting heavy rainfall, and rivers near Tianjin had
overflowed their banks, resulting in outbreaks of cholera. Meanwhile,
Shanghai had received only a single thundershower in over seven weeks. Although the city had seen an “unwonted series of prosperous years,” the possibility of scarcity began to worry people.3

By the third week in July, officials in Shanghai had begun to organize rainmaking activities at the City God Temple, the Dragon God Temple, and the Aloe Wood Pavilion (Chenxiangge 沉香閣). All civil and military officials in the area offered prayers for rain in the morning and again in the afternoon. In an act of penitential humility, they chose to forgo the use of their sedan chairs and instead walked from the fasting hall, whose “secluded purity enabled them to attain the sincerity necessary to move the gods.”4 Observers reported that
in nearby Suzhou, where the situation was equally dire, the Dragon God Temple was “daily thronged by officials and their retinues” prostrating themselves before the dragon god while Daoist priests and Buddhist monks chanted prayers asking for rain. Crowds of bystanders anxiously observed these proceedings, hoping they would prove effective. Here and there small groups of listeners could be seen huddled around storytellers solemnly reciting legends about the exploits of different dragon gods.5

On July 22, local officials in Shanghai issued a proclamation forbidding the slaughter of livestock and the sale of anything “with feathers” or having a “fishy smell” such as shrimp or crab. Such prohibitions were typically the first measures taken during crises. Droughts and other natural calamities, it was thought, reflected heaven’s dis-
Headlines

pleasure with the conduct of human affairs, and prohibitions such as these were instituted to demonstrate the community’s contrition for past misdeeds and a desire to reform its ways. Some townspeople, especially those from Guangdong province, who were known for their reverence of the spirit world, closed their restaurants and butcher shops, either out of respect for the gods or because they feared punishment by the authorities. However, in the northern part of the city, where the foreign concessions were concentrated, some butchers reportedly remained open despite the prohibition. Newspapers stated that some people gathered together in the market to fast as a group in the hope that this collective expression of sincerity might move the gods to send rain. The atmosphere was likely energized by a rumor circulating in Shanghai about a magistrate in Zhenjiang 镇江 prefecture, upstream from Shanghai on the southern bank of the Yangzi River, who died while praying for rain. The magistrate, acknowledging that he and the city god were jointly responsible for the sufferings of the people entrusted to their care, took the deity’s image from the protection of its temple and placed it in the scorching sun. Wearing the same kind of clothes and headgear as the deity, the magistrate also exposed himself and refused to eat. Newspapers reported that whereas “the city god was only an earthen image and so naturally could not become ill,” the magistrate “was flesh and blood; so after fasting and faithfully exposing himself in the sun for seven days, he suffered from the heat and died.”

Yet none of these measures achieved its intended effect, and officials in the area continued their petitions. In Shanghai, the judicial subprefect of the Mixed Court, Chen Fuxun 陳福勳, took it upon himself to pray for rain in the International Settlement because there was no Chinese official responsible for that part of the city. Twice daily he walked to the Baaoan Situ Temple 保安司徒廟—popularly known as the Hong Temple—to pray before Guanyin. The Hong Temple was a small temple located just inside the International Settlement on Nanjing Road, one of the busiest commercial districts in Shanghai. The temple was one of the city’s most popular. It was nominally Daoist but contained an eclectic assortment of deities. Since the International Settlement did not have a dragon god temple, Chen erected a tablet in front of the image of Guanyin that read “The Dragon King of the Five Lakes and Four Seas Brings Rain” and then
offered his prayers. It was said that it was “no trouble to do such a small thing for one who has the heart of a father and mother of the people.” In Suzhou, the provincial governor had prohibited the slaughter of animals and had been engaged in rainmaking activities for several weeks. Initially, these activities consisted of performing rituals at the Dragon God Temple, but ceremonies were also conducted at the Guandi Temple and the Surging Waves Pavilion (Cang-langting 沧浪亭), a popular garden in the heart of the city. At the pavilion, officials erected an altar where ten Daoist priests manipulated colored flags while chanting Mongolian scriptures in the manner of “eight trigram bugang 步罡,” a Daoist ritual dance. The performance of this “Mongolian prayer method” had to be delayed while the priests were taught how to properly pronounce the text, but it was finally carried out, apparently with no success.

Meanwhile, in Shanghai, Magistrate Ye Tingjuan 葉廷眷 invited a Daoist priest (faguan 法官) named Lu Baotai 卢保泰 to conduct a rainmaking ceremony. The invitation probably surprised nobody, since it was common practice for local officials to solicit assistance from ritual specialists in their jurisdiction. Successful rainmakers were often rewarded handsomely for their efforts. Master Lu was said to have belonged to the “perfected office of Jiangxi province” (jiangxi zhenrenfu 威人府), a reference to the Zhengyi 正一 ordination center at Longhu Mountain 龍虎山. At the time, he was living behind the City God Temple, where he was being housed while he exorcised a demon from a local residence. He was invited by the magistrate to make rain because he was said to possess a “profound understanding of the mysterious arts.” Master Lu reportedly made a promise in front of the circuit intendant (daotai 逓台) to the effect that the area for over 150 li in all directions would receive a heavy rain within fifteen days. The officials were pleased with this forecast and heartily welcomed his efforts, hoping only that his favorable predictions might come to pass. In addition to receiving 300 ounces (liang 两) of silver to conduct the ceremony—an extraordinary sum—the exorcist was allowed to hire one of his students. Apparently, he had a pupil who had once been employed at a local temple, where he had performed life-prolonging and confession rituals, and was now looking for work. Although it was said this went against local custom, the officials were willing to assent, since they had already agreed to hire Master Lu.
Initially, Master Lu planned to conduct his ritual at the Buddhist Guangfu Monastery 廣福寺 but subsequently settled on the City God Temple. All the arrangements were handled by the county yamen, which ordered yamen runners to erect a large “celestial platform” (gangtai 罡臺), approximately four meters high and six meters wide. The platform was festooned with a long black streamer, and below the platform, the runners placed sixty-four large jars of water. They also prepared twenty-eight black pennants, upon which they wrote the characters for the twenty-eight lunar lodges in white. An invitation was extended to thirty-two Daoist priests to assist with the ritual. Each of them prepared a hu 笯, a thin wooden board approximately half a meter long that was used in Daoist rituals and typically held at chest height. When these arrangements were finalized, preparations were made on August 2 for a three-day fast at a local teahouse, which temporarily shuttered its doors for business. All
nonefficient employees were sent away, and only those bringing food were allowed in or out. The county provided meals for the poorer laborers who were helping with the preparations. At the doors to the teahouse, “loyal braves” were posted to keep watch and to prevent people from making a racket, in order to “maintain seclusion and eradicate impurities.”

On August 3, images of the city god, the officials of hell, and other deities were reverently placed on the altar. Master Lu filled a vase with water, recited an incantation (zhου 祀), and composed a talisman (fu 符) to command the deities of wind, clouds, thunder, and rain, which he then burned. The ritual itself probably took place on the fifth. It is unclear what the Daoist priests did during the ritual, but Master Lu’s duties involved writing out talismans, reciting incantations, and standing on the altar and brandishing a sword in various poses. It was said that whenever he moved his sword during the ritual, the water in the vase would change direction or height accordingly. If he raised the sword, then the water level would rise; if he lowered the sword, the water level would drop. Both the magistrate and the assistant magistrates were present on the altar and participated in the ritual. After wielding the sword himself, Master Lu gave it to the lead official who was praying for rain—probably Magistrate Ye—who was also able to alter the water level in the vase. To observers, this confirmed the ritual’s potency, and it was said that as long as the magistrate was sincere and Master Lu expended all his effort, the rainmaking would be successful.

On August 7, clouds gathered and a northwesterly wind began to blow, suggesting that it might rain within the next few days. Shortly afterward, a steady rain started to fall. The precipitation was thought sufficient enough that the magistrates lifted the prohibition against slaughtering animals and ordered the altar at the City God Temple dismantled. By August 12, Shanghai had received a welcome downpour, which saturated the ground and marked an end to the drought.

**Autumn 1880: Bronze Buddhas and Buried Frogs**

Nearly eighty kilometers west of Shanghai stands Suzhou, one of the Qing empire’s wealthiest and most sophisticated cities. Suzhou’s relative affluence could be attributed not only to its advantageous geographical location and flourishing silk industry but also to its fer-
tile alluvial soil and temperate climate. As one sanguine observer remarked in the mid-nineteenth century, “The whole country, as far as the eye can reach, is one vast rice-field, and everywhere the pleasing clatter of the water wheels falls upon the ear, and hundreds of happy and contented Chinese peasants are seen engaged in the cultivation of the soil.” In a typical year, the visitor to Suzhou would be greeted by lush fields of grain and a profusion of yellow roses and white gardenias in the city’s famous gardens.

But 1880 was not a typical year. Sometime in October, it stopped raining. At first, this lack of precipitation was likely little more than an inconvenience. By the beginning of November, however, it still had not rained, and the fields had become dry and scaly “like the cracks of a turtle’s shell.” The people and local officials started to feel anxious, since a successful spring crop required a successful fall planting. By the following week, the city’s wells were dry and its rivers were reduced to shallow, muddy streams. In conditions such as this, farmers would have to dig frantically for ground water to irrigate fields normally fed with water pumped from streams and canals.

Faced with an impending crisis, local officials began to take action. At first, officials did not coordinate their efforts and acted individually, probably after peasants from the surrounding area had traveled to their respective yamens to report on the lack of rain. Prefectural and county officials responded to these reports by praying for rain in the city, confident their sincerity would reach heaven and “the people’s longing would be fulfilled.” By November 21, however, the situation had deteriorated to the point that Jiangsu Governor Wu Yuanbing 吳元炳, whose yamen was located in Suzhou, issued a proclamation prohibiting butcher shops from slaughtering animals. The proclamation was then passed along to the magistrates of each of the three administrative units headquartered in the city—Wu county 吳縣, Yuanhe county 元和縣, and Changzhou county 長州縣. On the same day, Governor Wu and his subordinates set up an altar in the Xuanmiao Abbey 玄妙觀, a large Daoist temple complex near the commercial heart of the city, and held a jiao 捷 ceremony. That night, light rain and drizzle were reported in the city. Dense cloud cover persisted throughout the following day, and the wind steadily increased out of the northwest. In fact, it was said that as local officials returned to their yamens, “rain followed their carriages,” a
sure sign that the officials had achieved a state of sincerity and moved the heart of heaven.24

Unfortunately, this meager amount of moisture could not make up for many weeks of drought. One frustrated Suzhou resident suggested that the failure of prayers to bring sufficient rain could be attributed to certain individuals who were breaking the government’s prohibition against selling meat. Despite the fact that the city had erected altars, prohibited the slaughter of animals, and fasted “with utmost sincerity,” some butcher shops were conducting business as usual. One day, yamen runners visited a butcher shop with ties to an elite family, where they found a plate of freshly salted meat.25 Two days later, a newspaper reported that butcher shops were doing a brisk business in salt pork, and the price of duck and chicken had risen so dramatically that both were now difficult to procure. Some vendors boldly hawked their meats at the entrance to the market; others did so surreptitiously from baskets they carried on their shoulders. Not wanting to risk being caught slaughtering animals within the city walls, most butchers did so at hidden locations in the countryside.26

In the meantime, rainmaking activities continued unabated. For over ten days, Governor Wu and his subordinates prayed for rain twice daily at the Xuanmiao Abbey, with no success. On December 6, they began to make their daily visits to the temple on foot. Officials even canceled classes at a local academy so officials could pray for rain.27 Over six centimeters of snow and sleet followed these efforts, but the farmers still longed desperately for moisture. It was reported that all the high officials “harbored secret sorrow for the distressed,” but this did little to bring rain. Some people began to question the effectiveness of the rainmaking methods officials were using. For example, the author of an article in a Shanghai newspaper suggested that officials might be more successful if they employed the “uterus method” of praying for rain (yuebofa 月孛法), a technique used long ago in Suzhou to end a particularly severe drought. In this method, a pregnant or virginal woman ascended the altar with a Daoist priest, began wailing hysterically, and removed all her clothes. She was then placed in a reclining chair and exposed in the hot sun, which was supposed to cause rain to fall.28

Although officials did not take this writer’s advice, they did make plans to alter their rainmaking techniques. Specifically, local
magistrates expressed an interest in sending envoys to the dragon fen (longze 龍澤) at the White Dragon Mountain Temple to “fetch water” (qushui 取水). Fetching water involved sending an official or an envoy to a particularly efficacious water source, such as a dragon grotto (longdong 龍洞) or dragon pool (longchi 龍池), to fill a vase with water. The envoy then brought the vase of water back to the city and presented it at an altar of some kind so that prayers and incense might be offered. Local officials also made plans to travel to the Mount Guangfu Monastery 光福山寺—not the same one as in Shanghai—which was located twenty-five kilometers west of Suzhou on the shores of Lake Tai 太湖, to invite a bronze image of the bodhisattva Guanyin into the city so they could offer prayers to it. The “Bronze Bodied Guanyin” (tongshen Guanyin 銅身觀音), as she was commonly known, is a cast bronze statue approximately one meter in height that depicts a bejeweled bodhisattva with an oddly elongated torso and disproportionately short legs. Her right palm is raised in a gesture of reassurance (abhaya mudra), indicating her ability to protect the people, and her left hand gestures to the earth with an open palm (varada mudra), expressing her willingness to grant the people’s wishes. It is said that a peasant, surnamed Zhang 張, had unearthed the Tang dynasty image from the mud outside the monastery in the year 1040. Despite having been buried for such a long time, legend has it that the image emerged from the mud with a brilliant golden luster. Shortly after it was unearthed, the image proved effective in alleviating a drought in the Suzhou region, thereby earning it a central place in subsequent rainmaking events.29

At dawn on the morning of December 11, Governor Wu sent Magistrate Gao Xinkui 高心夔 of Wu county to retrieve the Bronze Guanyin from Mount Guangfu Monastery and accompany it into the city. That same afternoon, the image arrived by boat at the Xumen 薛門 dock on the western side of the city, where Governor Wu had led a group of officials to receive it. While holding sticks of burning incense, the retinue of officials knelt reverently for an extended period of time as they waited for Guanyin’s bronze image to come ashore. Once the image was unloaded, it was placed in a green eight-man palanquin and was welcomed with great reverence and fanfare into the city. It was housed in the Great Cloud Shrine (dayun ci 大雲祠) at the Surging Waves Pavilion. Governor Wu had an altar erected and personally led his officials to burn incense and offer prayers for
rain using a ritual that involved sprinkling water with a willow branch among the participants.\(^{30}\)

On the following day, Governor Wu also organized a rainmaking activity that was said to have originated with the eminent general and statesman Hu Linyi 胡林翼 (1812–61).\(^{31}\) At dusk on December 12, Governor Wu ordered yamen runners to dig a hole approximately 15 centimeters wide, 30 centimeters long, and half a meter deep in the northwest corner of the Illuminated Path Hall (Mingdaotang 明道堂), which was located on the grounds of the Surging Waves Pavilion. After the hole was dug, they gathered a single frog and forty-nine small pieces of yellow paper that had been cut into squares. On each of the slips of paper, they wrote a small “fire” character (huō 火) in red ink. They then put the pieces of paper into the frog’s mouth and put the frog in the hole, using sand to fill the hole and form a circular mound. Afterward, they built a brightly colored pavilion around the spot, and over the mound they placed a table. The table held incense and a tablet that read “The Four Lords: Nine Dragons, Eight Rivers, Four Seas, and the Golden Dragon,” which was written in white paint on black paper. After these steps had been completed, the governor ordered Buddhist monks and Daoist priests to ascend the altar and “present a memorial” (baibiao 拜表), a communication to the deities, which was read and burned. The clerics then circumambulated the altar late into the night, until the third watch. It was reported that precisely at that moment, thick red clouds gathered, dumped rain in one burst, and then stopped. However, because the downpour was so brief, the fields received little relief, and Governor Wu continued to offer daily rain prayers as before.\(^{32}\)

Over the next few days, it turned cloudy and rained lightly in and around Suzhou. During the fourth night watch on December 15, a seasonable snow—like “mixed pearls and jade”—began to fall. By the following afternoon, almost ten centimeters of snow had accumulated. One commentator attributed the precipitation to Guanyin’s supernatural powers and Governor Wu’s ability to move heaven, and he felt confident that the dry weather would not return since the moisture had been brought about by the “limitless power of the Buddha.”\(^{33}\) Again on the morning of the eighteenth, a light rain began to fall, and it continued to rain into the afternoon. By this time, Suzhou and the surrounding countryside had finally received
sufficient moisture to end the drought. In an expression of thanksgiving, Governor Wu quickly led his subordinates to the Surging Waves Pavilion to burn incense in front of Guanyin. He then issued a proclamation lifting the prohibition against slaughtering animals. Magistrate Gao of Wu county hastily compiled a subscription list so that donors might build a shrine to house Guanyin at the Mount Guangfu Monastery. On the same day, the image was reverently escorted back home.

**Summer 1892: Welcoming the Dragon**

It is not clear when it stopped raining in Jiangsu in the summer of 1892, but by the middle of June, officials in some areas were already engaged in rainmaking activities. In Shanghai, the local officials began to fast on June 18. In the Guandi Temple behind the bell tower, they erected a high altar and a multicolored pavilion. In the center of the pavilion, they placed a table below an awning made of yellow cloth. On the awning, they wrote: “Copious moisture and timely rain” (wopei ganlin 濯沛甘霖). On the table, they erected the spirit tablets for various deities, such as the gods of mountains, rivers, thunder, and rain, as well as several dragon gods. They also placed three large bowls of clear water and some willow branches on the table. Inside the pavilion, they also arranged eight tables around which were hung
eight trigrams in eight different colors. On each of the tables was placed a single “eight trigram vase” into which was inserted a single “eight trigram pennant” made in one of eight colors. Five Daoist priests and one Buddhist monk were employed to perform a ritual with “utmost reverence.” All civil and military officials visited the altar twice daily, at nine o’clock in the morning and again at four o’clock in the afternoon, when they conducted some kind of ritual, which probably involved burning incense and reading a prayer. Afterward, they took their seats as the priests and monk circled the tables three times while holding the eight trigram pennants. The priests and monk then held willow branches and sprinkled water on the altar while chanting scriptures and incantations. It was reported that at the precise moment that this was happening, clouds gathered and thunder was heard, and before long it began to rain. The officials’ clothes and caps were thoroughly soaked, but they braved the rain and refused to leave the altar. The heart of heaven was said to have been moved by the officials’ sincere desire that their people be “healed.”

Ultimately, however, the rainfall must have been insufficient because by the end of July officials were once again organizing rain-making activities. The customs daotai had instituted prohibitions against the slaughter of animals and erected altars at the Aloe Wood Pavilion, where the local officials went to burn incense and pray for rain twice daily. After a morning visit to the temple a few days earlier, one official came across a butcher shop hanging high the “corpse of Qin Gui” 秦桧—freshly slaughtered meat—as he was returning to his yamen. The official was irate, and when he arrived back at his yamen, he ordered the authorities in Shanghai county to make a thorough investigation of the matter. He also ordered yamen runners to arrest the proprietor of the offending shop and have his case tried. Other townspeople proved to be more reverent. It was reported that shop owners in the city and suburbs had dutifully erected incense tables outside the doors to their establishments. They placed tablets of yellow paper on the incense tables, wrote “The Spirit Tablet of the Dragon King of the Five Lakes and Four Seas” on tablets, and prayed for plentiful rain.

Like their counterparts in Shanghai, local officials in the nearby city of Zhenjiang had issued prohibitions against the slaughter of animals and repeatedly made prayers at various altars. They also
shut the southern gate to the city, a step meant to decrease the active *yang* influence in the city and to stimulate the *yin* — the lack of which was thought to have precipitated the drought in the first place. They had even arranged for the city’s celestial deities (*dutianshen* 都天神) to be welcomed into the city on July 13. Yet none of these measures caused sufficient rain to fall, and the surrounding area was suffering as well from vast clouds of locusts. At the end of July, local officials took action by dispatching an assistant magistrate to the dragon pond at Mount Hua 華山, over eighty kilometers distant, where magical dragons were said to live. A few days later, the magistrate returned to the city with one of these dragons—
a lizard approximately five inches long with a square head, a black back, and a red belly—which he carried reverently in an “ancient porcelain vase.” The envoy was met at the entrance to the city by all civil and military officials, who burned incense and made prostrations to the dragon. The dragon was carried in state into the city, where it was placed on a table behind the city’s examination hall. Over the next few days, officials and their deputies performed incense-burning rituals to the dragon. It was said that the officials were planning to select an auspicious day for depositing a small amount of ground tiger bone into the vase. This would so anger or frighten the dragon that it would suddenly expand, breaking the vase. Once free, the dragon would fly into the air, which would cause a heavy rain to fall. It is uncertain whether the tiger bone was actually used, but the surrounding countryside did receive a small amount of rain around the first of August. A week later, heavy rains were reported in the region, signaling an end to the drought.\textsuperscript{41}

These accounts of rainmaking activities, while somewhat fragmented and incomplete, provide an interesting look at an unappreciated aspect of Chinese official life. Although the characters who appear in these headlines—officials such as Governor Wu Yuanbing and Magistrate Ye Tingjuan—certainly put considerable thought and effort into managing the fiscal and legal affairs of their jurisdictions, they also devoted a good deal of time and energy to conducting community religious observances such as those for rainmaking. On the face of it, it is not surprising that local officials were required to participate in these kinds of activities. Other scholars have quite ably detailed the ritual aspects of Qing rule, especially at the highest levels of government.\textsuperscript{42} What is surprising, however, is the picture of local officials that emerges when one thinks seriously about the kinds of activities presented above: officials fasting in local teahouses, sharing the stage with itinerant exorcists, kneeling humbly while a bronze Buddha is welcomed into the city, burying frogs in local temples, and traveling miles to catch lizards that then became the objects of their prayers. These activities are all the more remarkable when one considers that they took place not in the hinterlands but in some of the empire’s great urban centers. Indeed, the image presented here is unsettling precisely because it runs counter to the solemn, decorous
behavior that many have come to associate with officials trained in the Confucian classics.

Why exactly did officials organize and participate in these kinds of activities—activities that appear so “unofficial”? Were officials skeptical of these rainmaking practices but conducted them to appease their local constituencies? Or did officials see themselves as priests possessing powerful esoteric forms of knowledge that gave them control over the natural world? And how did these activities shape the governance of local communities? The answers to these questions are not simple, nor are they easily accessible. The culture of rainmaking in imperial China was extremely rich and reached back into the far corners of Chinese history. It involved different philosophical and religious orientations, various ideas about how the cosmos operated, and commonly accepted notions about the potency of human beings, animals, and physical objects. Any attempt to unravel these puzzles must necessarily venture far afield into a thicket of rainmaking lore and unconventional sources. Nevertheless, the trail is worth following because of what it can tell us about ourselves, about the dynamics of Chinese communities, and about the desires of those who governed them.

The Issues

At first glance, official rainmaking activities appear to have little to do with the larger conceptual issues that currently occupy scholars of Chinese history and religion. Despite the fact that they were performed almost universally across the Chinese empire by officials at all levels of government, rainmaking activities were quintessentially local phenomena and rarely received attention outside the community. They did not belong exclusively to any one of China’s “three teachings”—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism—and have therefore been neglected by most scholars. Since they were carried out at the lower levels of the bureaucracy, they are generally seen as less important than other imperial court rituals that have received attention in more recent scholarship. Moreover, the absence of the explicit ideological content evident in some other state rituals and the lack of strict control by the central government suggest that the state did not consider their proper performance a pressing concern. In short, official rainmaking activities have existed on the margins of most
scholarly discourse on China and have received the amount of attention that a phenomenon of only peripheral importance typically receives—not much.\textsuperscript{43}

Despite this lack of attention, this book argues that state rainmaking activities can shed light on several topics of interest to scholars of late imperial China. To begin with, an investigation of official rainmaking contributes to our understanding of the religious attitudes and practices of Chinese officials. Although few scholars would now crudely assert that officials were “rational” or “agnostic,” there is still a tendency in the secondary literature to treat officials as though they had deep misgivings about the religious pluralism of local society. Due to their training in the Confucian classics, it is said, officials espoused a doctrinaire Neo-Confucian outlook that caused them to take a dim view of local religious practices and inspired myriad efforts to reform local society. Although they seldom were able to influence local religious life in the way they desired, officials, it is asserted, remained committed to a model of religious power that operated according to principles of “official virtue” (de) rather than “magical efficacy” (ling). The accounts of rainmaking described above suggest that these characterizations need to be revised. Officials relied on many different techniques to pray for rain, few of which could be characterized as exclusively Confucian. Indeed, many of the rainmaking techniques employed by officials resonated with practices that are often associated with “popular” religion. Rather than avoiding marginalized religious practices, officials eagerly sought them out and incorporated them into their rainmaking. In fact, officials spent a great deal of time and effort compiling, developing, and disseminating rainmaking knowledge. By focusing on the role of officials as propagators and practitioners of these rainmaking techniques, this study expands our understanding of the religious lives of Chinese officials.

By knowing more about officials’ religious commitments, we can more fully appreciate how state ritual operated in Chinese society. In this sense, this study builds on the work of scholars such as Prasenjit Duara, Michael Szonyi, and David Faure who have demonstrated convincingly that religion “played a central role in relating the Chinese imperial state to local society.”\textsuperscript{44} As the rainmaking accounts presented earlier make clear, local officials did not conduct rainmaking activities in isolation. Rather, rainmaking activities were complex social events that occupied the efforts of the entire commu-
nity: officials, ritualists, shopkeepers, spectators, and so forth. For this reason, rainmaking activities provide a unique window through which we can examine the role of state ritual in local society. In exploring this relationship, earlier studies have emphasized the importance of state policies in defining the boundaries of “orthopraxy” or in “standardizing” local religious behavior.45 This study argues that officials’ participation in local religious life was more complicated than other scholars have allowed. Arguments about orthopraxy and standardization are founded on the assumption that local officials faithfully conducted rainmaking rituals prescribed by the central government. As we will see, local officials did not necessarily follow state guidelines on rainmaking and often carried out rainmaking activities that were not found in state liturgical texts. In addition, officials conducted rainmaking activities that were of dubious legality by venerating deities that were not included in the approved state pantheon. These findings suggest that current understandings of orthopraxy and standardization need to be refined.

Similarly, this study raises questions about the relationship between state ritual and local governance in late imperial China. Surprisingly, state ritual has received relatively scant attention in the secondary scholarship on local governance. For example, in three important English-language studies of local government in late imperial China, fewer than ten pages total are devoted to describing the ritual and religious duties of county magistrates.46 Although this lack of coverage could be interpreted to mean that the religious responsibilities of local officials were unimportant, this study argues that rainmaking was an integral aspect of local governance. To begin with, rainmaking defined what it meant to be a model official. Over the centuries, a wide range of texts had associated rainmaking with ideals of benevolent rule and good governance. As a result, the upright official was expected to take the sufferings of his people seriously and do all he could to alleviate their distress during times of drought. Yet these representations of officials were not simply asserted discursively but performed. Indeed, this study argues that rainmaking activities provided one of the most important venues where behavior associated with the ideal of benevolence could be enacted. It was through rainmaking performances that these representations were embodied as officials rendered themselves visible for public consumption. As we will see, the spectacularity of
rainmaking activities allowed them to be politicized—at times violently—as officials and their constituents contested the trajectory and meaning of state rainmaking activities. It was through these encounters that the relationship between officials and local communities was objectified and experienced. As a result, I contend that rainmaking served as one of the key arenas through which the Qing state was culturally constituted at the local level.

Organization of the Study

This book comprises seven chapters. The goal of this chapter has been to introduce the reader to some of the rainmaking activities conducted by Qing officials and the issues this study will address. The following chapter, “A Tradition of Sorts,” provides background for this investigation by describing historical antecedents to late imperial rainmaking. The chapter begins by discussing the efforts of early rainmaking exemplars such as King Xuan, King Tang, and Dong Zhongshu. It explains how the exploits associated with these three figures introduced several different modes of official rainmaking that endured throughout the imperial period—that of the mourner, the martyr, and the magician. From very early in Chinese history, it was common for official rainmaking activities to include demonstrative expressions of concern for the people, a willingness to suffer or sacrifice one’s life, and a wide range of “occult technologies.” 47 Subsequent generations of Chinese officials emulated the behavior of these early rainmakers and transmitted their rainmaking techniques through their writings and practices. Over time there emerged a tradition of rainmaking in which certain kinds of activities came to be seen as appropriate official responses to drought. Yet these rainmaking activities never existed as a rigid ideology that could be easily monitored or policed. In fact, from antiquity, official rainmaking incorporated such a wide variety of different techniques that it suffered from a general incoherence, an incoherence that persisted into the late imperial period.

Chapter 3, “An Unruly Order,” brings this discussion into the late imperial period by addressing how rainmaking was treated in the Qing ritual order. Like its predecessors, the Qing government stipulated that government officials conduct rainmaking activities during periods of drought. Over the course of the dynasty, the central gov-
ernment made a concerted effort to standardize the rainmaking practices of the empire, most notably in the rainmaking reforms instituted by the Qianlong emperor in 1742. The Qing state described with a fair amount of specificity the kinds of rainmaking activities to be carried out by officials at all levels of the administrative hierarchy. Yet these guidelines appear to have been regularly ignored or “supplemented” by local officials. Even attempts by statecraft scholars to prescribe rainmaking practices were plagued by a general confusion among officials as to which rainmaking techniques were proper and effective. This chapter argues that the basic problem was that Qing efforts to define the rainmaking regime narrowly ran counter to the more catholic rainmaking tradition handed down through history. When confronted with the choice of performing either the rainmaking activities promoted by the state or those advocated by tradition, officials usually opted for tradition.

The incoherence of the Qing rainmaking regime resulted in a proliferation of official rainmaking techniques. Chapter 4, “No Sacrifices Withheld,” attempts to catalog the range of techniques employed by Qing officials. It describes dietary practices such as fasts and prohibitions against the slaughter of animals, feats of endurance, bouts of wailing, accounts of exposure and self-immolation, and occult technologies such as throwing tiger bones into dragon holes, collecting lizards, and burying frogs. It demonstrates that the rainmaking activities of local officials were incredibly diverse and virtually impossible to categorize. The operating principle appears to have been a verse from the Shijing—“There are no spirits not honored, there are no sacrifices withheld”—which many officials interpreted to mean that officials should pray for rain as widely and ecumenically as possible. This chapter shows that far from being doctrinaire in their rainmaking, officials carried out their rainmaking responsibilities with a surprising degree of creativity and flexibility.

Chapter 5, “Master Ji’s Rainmaking Method,” provides a detailed description of a rainmaking method developed by a Qing magistrate named Ji Dakui and disseminated widely among local officials in the nineteenth century. Judging from the number of times that Ji’s method was revised and published in the late nineteenth century, it was one of the most popular official rainmaking texts of its time. Yet Ji’s method does not conform to common scholarly conceptions about the form and content of state ritual. The method employed
clerics, symbols, texts, and ritual implements from several different traditions—Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian—and it advocated the use of potent oral and visual devices such as talismans, incantations, and various kinds of iconography. As a result, it challenges the notion that officials eschewed the use of the occult in their religious duties. Moreover, the care and enthusiasm with which this text was prepared and distributed among officials indicates that many officials took a personal and professional interest in developing new rainmaking technologies. Indeed, this chapter demonstrates that rainmaking was not a peripheral concern for many Qing officials but served as a key site where the goals and methods of governance were articulated and discussed.

Chapter 6, “The Importance of Being Earnest,” describes how official rainmaking activities were contested by different social actors. During the nineteenth century, it was not uncommon for elites and commoners to attempt to shape the rainmaking activities of local officials. Sometimes local people suggested rainmaking techniques they considered to be more effective and proper than those initiated by officials; at other times they violently resisted officials they felt were not being “sincere” in their rainmaking. This chapter argues that official rainmaking activities served as a medium through which relations among officials, elites, and commoners were negotiated. Official rainmaking activities provided a venue for local people to manipulate the state ritual system to their own advantage and comment on the performance of local officials. This finding provides an important corrective to the received view, which emphasizes the efforts of the state to reform local religious practices. Conflicts over official rainmaking suggest that although the state may have attempted to control the religious practices of local communities, local communities also made an effort to control the religious practices of the state.

Chapter 7, “Departures,” brings together different strands of the discussion to suggest ways that the case of state rainmaking alters our view of official religion and its role in local governance. It contends that received understandings of official religion as a distinctively Confucian endeavor or as a vehicle for state orthodoxy need to be revised. The state may have issued detailed regulations that outlined its policies on religious affairs, but these regulations cannot be taken as faithful descriptions of official behavior. And although pre-
sriptive texts may have promoted certain rainmaking techniques and opposed others, officials frequently ignored these guidelines. The chapter concludes by arguing that official rainmaking provided a venue where the relationship between officials and their constituents was established and maintained. As such, I suggest that official rainmaking was instrumental in culturally constituting the Qing state at the local level.