


May 2018

## Of Temples and Trees: The Black Dragon King and the Arbortourists

Adam Yuet Chau  
*University of Cambridge*, ayc25@cam.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp>

 Part of the [Tourism and Travel Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Yuet Chau, Adam (2018) "Of Temples and Trees: The Black Dragon King and the Arbortourists,"  
*International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 8.  
doi:<https://doi.org/10.21427/D7FD71>  
Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol6/iss1/8>

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](#).

# Of Temples and Trees: The Black Dragon King and the Arbortourists

**Adam Yuet Chau**

University of Cambridge  
[ayc25@cam.ac.uk](mailto:ayc25@cam.ac.uk)

The intersection of tourism and religion as two more or less coherent systems of political-economic and symbolic-conceptual productions is premised on a crucial conceptual and physical domain, i.e. the sites themselves that are being visited by the tourists and pilgrims. What unites tourists, pilgrims and local worshippers is the act of visiting sites, which suggests that we might wish to call them by a unified term: site visitors. And their practice can be called site visiting. Using materials collected in the mid-1990s in rural north-central China (Shaanbei, northern Shaanxi Province), supplemented with more recent documentary materials, I shall show how a local popular religious temple dedicated to a certain Black Dragon King (Heilongdawang) succeeded in tapping into the expanding environmentalist discourse in China and grafting a tree-planting enterprise (a hilly-land arboretum) onto the existing temple complex, thus attracting visitors to the temple site from far and wide. This is a story of the transformation of a site that changes the overall configuration of the sitescape by incorporating elements that are new, which in turn attract new categories of site visitors (i.e. tree-planters or arbortourists). Many different kinds of social actors were involved in bringing together the disparate domains that are religion, forestry, environmentalism and schools.

The case study I present is a tree-planting visit to the Black Dragon King Temple in 1998 of a group of environmentalist-activists and students from Beijing (18 hours away by chartered bus). It illustrates how the temple and the temple boss tried to capture 'the powerful outside' to bolster the temple's legitimacy, how metropolitan and global environmentalism articulated with folk environmentalism, and how a certain kind of tourism (what I call arbortourism) interfaced with a religious site despite the fact that the site-visitors ostensibly ignored the religious attributes of the site, all the while with the full corroboration of their local hosts who also elected to only highlight the environmentalist agenda of tree planting and downplay the magical efficacy of the Black Dragon King. As a result of these efforts of mutual dissimulation a sort of theatre was staged, with a happy outcome for both parties.

**Key Words:** popular religion; arboretum, arbortourism, tree planting, environmentalism

## Introduction: Visiting Sites

The intersection of tourism and religion as two more-or-less coherent systems of political-economic and symbolic-conceptual productions is premised on a crucial conceptual and physical domain, i.e. the sites themselves that are being visited by the tourists and pilgrims. These so-called 'sacred sites' (see Naquin & Yü, 1992) are results of years (often decades and centuries) of co-production of tourists and pilgrims (and / or tourist-pilgrims) together with religious authorities and state agencies, including the built structures (e.g. roads, paths, temples, churches, statues, villages, towns, hotels, restaurants, ferry terminals, rest

stops with essential provisions) as well as conceptual structures (e.g. the notions of an 'ideal itinerary', must-see 'sights', 'scenic spots' (see Nyiri, 2006), 'voltexes', encounters, myths, legends, hierarchy of sites, pitfalls and dangers to be avoided or overcome). In other words, what unites tourists, pilgrims and local worshippers is the act of visiting sites, which suggests that we might as well call them by a unified term: site visitors; and their practice can be called site visiting. The overall configuration of networks of sites and their links (physical and conceptual) can be called sitescapes (a nod to Arjun Appadurai's conceptions of various 'scapes') (see Chau under review for the related concept of ritual terroir).<sup>[1]</sup>

Using materials collected in the mid-1990s in rural north-central China (Shaanbei, northern Shaanxi Province), supplemented with more recent documentary materials, I shall show how a local popular religious temple dedicated to a certain Black Dragon King (Heilongdawang) succeeded in tapping into the expanding environmentalist discourse in China and grafting a tree-planting enterprise (a hilly-land arboretum) onto the existing temple complex, thus attracting visitors to the temple site from far and wide, including even environmentalist-activists and students from Beijing (18 hours away by chartered bus). This is a story of the transformation of a site that changes the overall configuration of the sitescape by incorporating elements that are new which in turn attract new categories of site visitors (i.e. tree-planters or arbortourists). Indeed, many different kinds of social actors were involved in bringing together the disparate domains that are religion, forestry, environmentalism and schools.<sup>[2]</sup>

### The Politics of Legitimation: The Longwanggou Hilly Land Arboretum

#### *Incense Money for Trees: Establishing the Longwanggou Hilly Land Arboretum*

By the 1990s (my fieldwork was between 1995 and 1998), Longwanggou (literally the Dragon King Valley, which stands for the Black Dragon King [Heilongdawang] Temple) had firmly established itself as one of the most successful temples in Shaanbei in terms of fame and donation income (in fact second

only to the much more prominent White Cloud Mountain Daoist Complex in Jia County).<sup>[3]</sup> The temple's success was primarily thanks to the charismatic leadership of its temple boss, Mr. Wang Kehua (or Lao Wang, 'Old Wang', an affectionate way to refer to a middle-aged man in China), a villager from one of the three core villages running the temple.<sup>[4]</sup> Each year in the sixth month of the lunar calendar the annual temple festival attracted a couple of hundred thousand visitors over the course of a few days, making it one of the most red-hot event productions in the Shaanbei region.<sup>[5]</sup> The temple became very rich and began engaging in a variety of activities such as running a primary school affiliated to the temple (later on even a secondary school), sponsoring irrigation projects and engaging in charity work. In the mid-1980s a certain Mr. Zhu Xubi, a native of Zhuzhai, one of the six villages now affiliated with Longwanggou, came to temple boss Lao Wang with an idea. Zhu Xubi was a forestry engineer working at the Yulin Prefecture Forestry Scientific Research Institute (linkesuo) and he proposed to Lao Wang to use some of the temple donation money to start a reforestation and botanical project at Longwanggou. At first Lao Wang was not very interested and treated Zhu Xubi as one of the many people who pestered him for money. But Zhu eventually persuaded Lao Wang to experiment with the idea.

1. In China, for example, many religiously important sites come in sets (e.g. the five sacred sites for Buddhism whose relationships have been elaborated over centuries) or at least are understood in an implied network of related sites (e.g. the contested hierarchy of Mazu temples in Taiwan).
2. I have taken most of the ethnographic description from my monograph *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Chau, 2006) and have expanded on some sections. This article is based on materials collected during 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Shaanbei (northern Shaanxi Province in north-central China) between 1995 and 1998. Administratively, Shaanbei comprises Yan'an and Yulin prefectures. My principal fieldsite, the Dragon King Valley, is located in Yulin County, which is one of the twelve counties belonging to the Yulin Prefecture. The loess plateau and cave dwellings of Shaanbei were made famous when the Central Red Army, led by Mao Zedong, made Yan'an the capital of their revolutionary base area from 1935 until 1945 (my fieldsite in Yulin was under Nationalist rule during that period). Shaanbei has been one of the poorest regions of China until coal and natural gas were found in the northern parts of Shaanbei, whose exploitation is bringing more prosperity to the region.

3. Popular religion has enjoyed a momentous revival in China during the reform era (1980s onward), especially in rural areas. New temples have been built and old temples restored; local opera troupes crisscross the countryside performing traditionally-themed opera pieces for deities and worshippers at temple festivals (*miaohui*); *fengshui* masters (geomancers) are busy siting graves and houses and calculating auspicious dates for weddings and funerals; spirit mediums, Daoist priests, gods and goddesses are bombarded with requests to treat illnesses, exorcise evil spirits, guarantee business success and retrieve lost motorcycles; before anti-Falungong suppressions began in 1998, *qigong* sects of all manners competed for followers not only in the cities but in rural areas as well.
4. The temple committee has representatives from nine villages surrounding the temple, but three of these villages have dominant positions due to their traditional link to the temple. Mr. Wang Kehua was instrumental in the revival and rebuilding of the temple in the early 1980s (when popular religion revived in many parts of China) so was chosen as the temple boss (more by general inclination than formal election). The temple boss heads the temple committee and has autocratic power in decision making.
5. Red-hotness (*honghuo/re'nao*) is the ideal condition for occasions such as temple festivals and wedding / funeral banquets. Event productions are socially staged activities (e.g. temple festivals) that are more complex and less coherent than rituals. (For more on red-hot sociality and event productions see chapters 7 and 8 in Chau, 2006 and Chau, 2012.

A meeting was held with those Hongliutan villagers who had land around the temple. The temple offered to lease their land to plant trees in return for a rent that was the equivalent of the estimated highest yield possible from those plots.<sup>[6]</sup> Most of these plots are on steep or rocky slopes, have no irrigation access, and are thus agriculturally unproductive. The most common crops for this kind of marginal farm land are potatoes and black beans with low yield. Hence, it was not difficult to persuade the Hongliutan villagers to lease out these plots to the temple for a steady annual rent. At this time, many Hongliutan villagers were involved in trade, commerce, or rural industry and were only happy to have their farming obligations reduced. In addition, not farming the land also meant that they would no longer need to pay agricultural tax on those plots. Another meeting was held among all the temple officers and village representatives to the Longwanggou temple association to approve the use of temple funds on the arboretum project.

Meanwhile, the project had to be approved by the relevant state authorities. Like many local state service type agencies (*shiye danwei*), the Yulin Prefecture Forestry Scientific Research Institute was extremely short of funds. As a result, many of its personnel became idle (because no work was properly remunerated) and not much was going on. Zhu was one of the few more enterprising employees and hit upon the idea of using temple funds to plant trees. In June 1988 Zhu obtained permission from the Institute's supervisory agency, the Yulin Prefecture Forestry Bureau (*linyejü*), to officially make the Longwanggou arboretum into a research project (*lieru keti*) to include many possible forestry-related scientific experiments. In November the same year the Yulin Prefecture Forestry Bureau, the Zhenchuan Township government and Longwanggou Historical Relic Management Office co-hosted a workshop (*yantaohui*) consisting of 67 experts and scholars from 27 work units in forestry, scientific research, historical relic management (because at that time the Black Dragon King Temple was officially registered as a historical relic management unit) and culture to discuss the issues related to the establishment of the arboretum. Longwanggou of course footed the bill to host, accommodate and lavishly fête all the guests. At the conclusion of the meeting the Longwanggou Civil Hilly Land Arboretum (*minban shandi shumuyuan*) was officially established ('civil' because it is not operated by the state). Because the arboretum project would not be possible without the money from incense donations to the temple, the arboretum (just as the

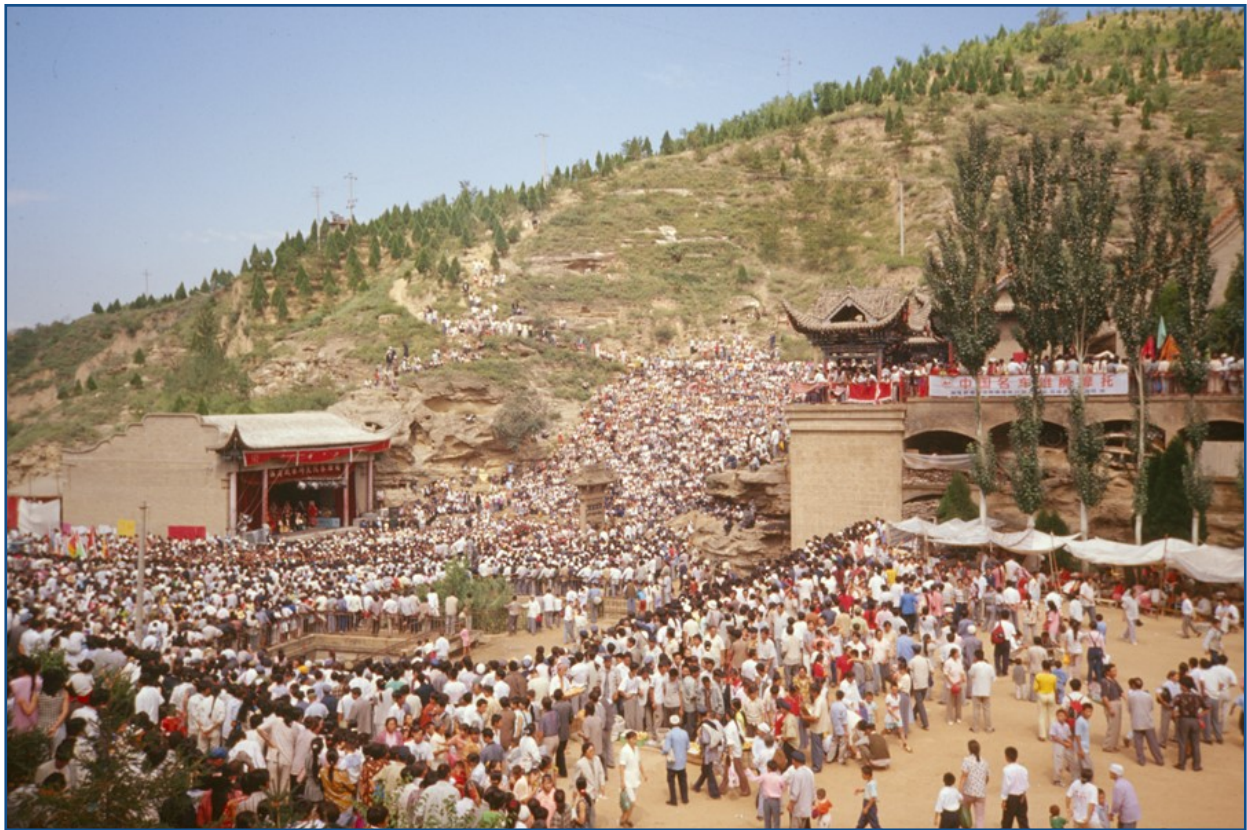
primary school affiliated with the temple) therefore justified and shielded the divine efficacy-related activities of the Heilongdawang Temple such as divination and the dispensing of 'magical healing water' (officially considered as superstitious and illegal) from possible official criticism and crack down.<sup>[7]</sup> This was a manifestation of the politics of legitimation (commonly seen in all similar situations of negotiating acceptance under unfavourable legal-political environments in semi-authoritarian regimes).

After securing the land for the project and the green light from the authorities, the next step was to plant trees. Capitalising on his long years of experience as a forestry engineer and his personal and professional connections to different forestry bureaus, seedling stations and botanical gardens in Shaanbei and beyond, Zhu Xubi managed to obtain for Longwanggou a large number of different species of trees, shrubs and flowers. The temple truck became very handy in hauling the plants back to Longwanggou. The planting process was an arduous task, as the land was not suitable for trees and needed a lot of preparation. Lao Wang and the other temple officers worked with a team of hired laborers and volunteers to blast holes into the rocky slopes, build small terraces, haul dirt and seedlings up the hills and plant the trees (see figures 1 and 2). Zhu and his associates provided the scientific expertise in zoning the different species and ensuring the optimal conditions for survival for the new trees. The arboretum subsequently also served as a scientific research base for the Yulin Forestry Scientific Research Institute with dozens of different research projects. A few of these projects won prefectural level scientific research awards. Zhu Xubi was allocated an office at the temple and became a resident consultant for the arboretum.

The significance of the arboretum project has to be seen in the larger context of rising national environmental concerns in the reform era and Shaanbei's harsh environmental setting. Yulin county and many of Shaanbei's northern counties face constant threats of desertification and dust storms (part

6. All land in China officially belongs to the state. During the reform period (post early 1980s) villages were given the right to distribute plots to households depending on the number of household members, but people only have usage rights rather than ownership over these plots.
7. As the local state has, during the reform era, become accommodationist and regulatory vis-à-vis popular religion, there have been very few incidents of official crackdown on temple cults. But the pursuit of official recognition was essential for warding off possible future episodes of official persecution.



**Figure 1. Site-visitors at the 1998 summer Black Dragon King Temple festival.**

The opera stage is on the left, facing the main temple hall on the right (partially obscured by the tall birch trees). The evergreen trees of the Longwanggou Hilly Land Arboretum are visible on the slopes flanking the temple ground.

Photo by the author.

of the Maowusu Desert of Inner Mongolia extends southward into Shaanbei), and because of the long history of human settlement and dry climate, Shaanbei has a severe tree shortage. As a result, reforestation has always been a high-profile issue in Shaanbei. The Longwanggou arboretum project capitalised on the moral virtue of environmentalism - this was around the time when environmentalism became all the rage in public discourse on a national level in China - and thus quickly gained regional, national and even international attention. One cannot underestimate the aesthetic and emotional appeal of the green hills around the temple, set against the often parched landscape of Shaanbei loess plateau. In 1996 Longwanggou hosted another workshop where even more officials, scientists and scholars converged to assess the arboretum's achievements. The main guests at this workshop were representatives of the official China Botanical Institute (*zhongguo zhiwu xuehui*) who confirmed the arboretum's environmental and scientific value through the ritualistic activity of official endorsement by certificate granting.

### *Planting Trees as 'Doing Religion'*

In examining the activities engaged in by Longwanggou it is useful to evoke the concept of 'doing religion' (see Chau, 2006). Even though the Heilongdawang Temple is theoretically a 'religious' institution, its actual activities have gone far beyond the religious. Therefore it is not adequate to only consider the state's religious policies and examine how local temples react to these policies. Instead, it is important to look at what local temples and local state agencies do. The Heilongdawang Temple's various religious and non-religious domains of activity constitute how local people 'do religion' on the ground. In these activities the actions of local state agents and sometimes social actors from far away (such as the tree-planting visitors I will discuss below) are as important as the villagers and temple organisers.

The temple's many-stranded activities have induced various branches of the local state to descend upon Longwanggou. Of course sometimes Longwanggou invited the presence of these local state agencies out of concerns of legality and legitimacy. As these vertical ties between different local state agencies and

**Figure 2. The Black Dragon King Temple festival in the summer of 2016.**

The main temple hall is on the left. The temple dormitory and temple-run primary school are in the building on the right. Many new features have been added since the 1990s (e.g. the pavillion on one of the hilltops). The lush green scenery is very much evident in the surrounding hills, all part of the hilly-land arboretum.

Photo by the author.

Longwanggou multiply and thicken, the legitimacy of the temple increases, as no single local state agency alone can determine the fate of the temple (not even the Religious Affairs Bureau, which became relevant after the temple was officially granted the status of a 'venue for religious activities' in 1998). This functional expansiveness of popular religious temples demonstrates that the emerging 'religious field' in today's China is often shot through with institutional arrangements and practices that are non-religious, and often these non-religious aspects play the role of legitimating the religious aspects of the temples. This is particularly true in the case of popular religion as compared to the officially recognised five religions because of the former's status as theoretically illegal 'feudal superstitious' activities.

The local state's regulatory paternalism is, on the other hand, a form of local state activism, when local state agents also actively seek ways to expand their resource and profit base. For example, the establishment of the Longwanggou Hilly Land Arboretum exemplifies the negotiation, mutual co-optation and co-operation between Longwanggou and those local state agencies

in the forestry sector (even if the forestry expert Mr. Zhu was initially not necessarily representing the interest of the local state).

The idea of *minjian* (non-governmental) has gained salience in public discourses in the PRC since the 1980s. While the idea of 'people' (*renmin*) still retains a lot of currency (as an object to be acted upon by the state or to be served by 'civil servants'), the idea of *minjian* points to an expanding public sphere where citizens act upon their own initiatives (see Yang, 1994). Lao Wang and his associates learned to promote the high appeal of the fact that the Longwanggou Hilly Land Arboretum was the first *minjian* hilly land arboretum in China — this 'firstness' carries significant symbolic capital in today's China, signifying an innovative spirit. In fact, the twin features of *minjian*-ness and 'folk environmentalism' exemplify two of the most important ideological emphases of the reform era: privatisation and environmental protection. This has lent Longwanggou an aura of legitimacy and savvy that other temples are rightfully jealous of. Newspapers reported on the arboretum; officials and foreign dignitaries visited it;



botanists, forestry specialists and other scientists came to bestow their approval and marvel at this folk initiative; environmentalist groups from Beijing and NGO groups from Japan came to plant trees (more on this below). The media was particularly happy to have discovered a great story: peasant intellectual (Lao Wang) turning superstitious activities into a tree-planting project that benefits the people. In a fashion reminiscent of ‘model-making’ (*shuli dianxing*) during the Maoist era, Lao Wang was made into a folk hero whose vision, dedication and leadership transformed the badly eroded barren slopes of Shaanbei into a green and beautiful oasis (see figures 1, 2 and 3).

The presence of foreigners in particular has bestowed added legitimacy upon Longwanggou. In the summer of 1990 Longwanggou received the first foreign visitors who had heard about the temple and the arboretum. A few Japanese were the first to come, and they were followed by a steady trickle of foreigners of different nationalities. Not many foreigners had visited Shaanbei because much of it was still officially closed to foreigners at that time, therefore their visit to

Longwanggou conferred importance and recognition on Lao Wang and his colleagues’ enterprise. Quite a few of these foreigners were journalists, scientists, or academics and they wrote about Longwanggou after they went back to their countries. Through one of these transnational connections, Lao Wang was invited to become a Chinese member of Inter-Asia, a Japanese-funded, pan-Asian, non-governmental organisation. As the leader of Longwanggou, Lao Wang was invited to participate in national and even international conferences on forestry, environmentalism and sustainable development. The visits of foreigners to Longwanggou became so frequent that the Yulin Prefecture Foreign Affairs Office (*waishiban*) decided to grant Longwanggou official permission to host and register foreign visitors.

The success of the arboretum was a huge boost to the official status and image of the temple, and the temple has been riding on this success ever since. In the 1990s a few other Shaanbei temples followed suit to use temple funds to initiate reforestation projects. The most famous one among these is in Shilisha (Ten Mile

**Figure 3. A view of the Longwanggou Hilly Land Arboretum.**



Photo taken by the author in the summer of 2016.

Sand), also in Yulin County, based on a temple dedicated to the Perfected Warrior Ancestral Lord (Zhenwu zushi). The arboretum at Shilisha was subsequently consecrated as China's first civil sandy land arboretum (minban shadi shumuyuan) after going through a process of accreditation similar to the one I just described for Longwanggou. To what extent this arboretum trend will spread in Shaanbei and other places is unclear at this moment, even though it is clear that it has provided popular religious temples a legitimisation model to emulate.

An interesting twist in the establishment of the Shilisha Civil Sandy Land Arboretum is that it was again Zhu Xubi the forestry engineer who initiated it. Upset at what seemed to be Zhu's lack of loyalty to Longwanggou, Lao Wang eventually banished Zhu from Longwanggou and replaced him with a younger forestry technician. This demonstrated how conscious Lao Wang was about the potential competition for fame and recognition other temple-cum-arboretums might present. Zhu was very bitter about the experience but sought comfort in his other, new arboretum sites. He was also bitter that now Lao Wang received all the credit for conceiving and starting the arboretum project and no one knew or cared about his crucial contributions.

### Contestations

Lao Wang's temple boss status and his vision for the temple's development and the uses of temple funds have not gone uncontested. Village temples are in principle public goods that belong to the village collectivity. Yet, when there is village factionalism, members of opposing factions would vie for control of the temple association the way they would the Villagers' Committee. Temples serve as yet another battleground for local political manoeuvres and intrigues. Because temple offices are public, the cultural ideal for a temple officer is caring for the common good without partiality. In reality, however, all recognise the inevitability of temple officers' serving their particularistic interests. Given the internal divisions of every community, a temple officer is bound to be perceived as a benefactor and ally by some people and a bully and enemy by others.

With or without the temple association, micro-politics is endemic in village communities. A loose coalition of Lao Wang's enemies had formed over the years and they launched one attack after another in their attempt to dislodge him from power. They successfully put Lao Wang under police detention for a few months in 1990

on charges of misappropriation of government irrigation funds to the village (Lao Wang successfully appealed the case and was released). They also sued him for taking valuable farm land to build the new school building for the Longwanggou Primary School (located on flat irrigable land that used to be the Hongliutan village orchard) and the Longwanggou arboretum. This last attack was particularly damning, as the newly propagated national Land Law (tudifa) stipulated strict approval requirements for converting farm land to non-agricultural uses.

Let me briefly present an example of counter-legitimation assault that was done through a highly unusual, informal idiom: written denunciation posters that were posted in towns near Longwanggou. The contents of these posters were a vengeful diatribe against Lao Wang and a public exposé of all his supposedly unlawful deeds related to Longwanggou. This was penned by a man nicknamed Wer (about 60 years old in 1998). Wer was from Heshang Village, one of the six new affiliated villages that contributed to the rebuilding and the running of Longwanggou (adding to the original three core villages). Similar to Zhu Xubi's situation, he also helped Lao Wang but was later dismissed by him. He developed some serious personal grudges against Lao Wang and had gone to the authorities to denounce Lao Wang but to no avail. The details of his problems with Lao Wang need not detain us here. The most interesting aspects of his denunciation relating to the focus of this article has to do with his characterisation of the relationship between the Heilongdawang Temple, Lao Wang and the Longwanggou Hilly Land Arboretum. Let me quote a few short passages from his rather verbose poster:

The ex-convict Wang Kehua sits in the Dragon Valley. He is famous in the region and has his gang in the county. Everyone knows about his fame, and he himself knows that. *He uses the forest park to protect the god, the god to protect himself and the money to protect his power.* He has been in control of the temple for eighteen years. To enrich himself he has done so many things. *He has a corrupted morality. He has done rotten and criminal deeds to oppress the masses and to spoil the party and the government . . . You do things that violate the country's laws. Incense temple and forest park? What will humans depend on for food? Land cannot be used whatever way one likes. What is a proper matter? What is other people's business?* At the Central People's Congress in 1997, the spirit of President Jiang's talk repeatedly emphasised family planning, the



control of the growth of the population and other big matters such as wrongful use of land because people depend on it for livelihood. *And you! You use money to buy fame! That forest park of yours? There are too many people and too little land in Hongliutan. How much flat land and hilly land per head? Turning huge pieces of good farm land into forestry land for the god? You think about it yourself! . . . To people outside you used renminbi [i.e. the Chinese currency] to buy their hearts and souls; to the people inside you burned pieces of curse at the dragon palace . . . I know that you are tough [S. pi'ning, literally meaning 'skin is hard,' a Shaanbei expression connoting toughness and invincibility], with helpers and protections from outside and the formidable money of the Marquis of Efficacious Response [title of the Black Dragon King]. But I am not scared of you . . .* (italics added)

Wer's poster was a strongly worded, heart-rending plea for justice. Among other things, he rather perceptively pointed out the intricate role the arboretum plays in protecting the temple and the role temple funds play in protecting Lao Wang ('*He uses the forest park to protect the god, the god to protect himself and the money to protect his power*'). The point of including this text is to highlight the counter-legitimation challenges Lao Wang constantly has to face, and to illustrate the kinds of political and moral contestation that are prevalent in today's agrarian political culture. Because of Lao Wang's now extensive connections with different local state agencies and officials at the township, county and prefectural levels, he has so far been able to successfully weather these challenges. Lao Wang did admit to me once, though, that he was afraid that one day some bad elements might set fire to the arboretum and destroy the fruits of so much effort.

### Longwanggou Hosts a Tree Planting Event: The Visit of Beijing Arbortourists

One event related to the arboretum that I witnessed and participated in during my fieldwork in 1998 is a particularly good example to illustrate how the temple and Lao Wang tried to capture 'the powerful outside' to bolster the temple's legitimacy, how metropolitan and global environmentalism articulated with folk environmentalism, and how a certain kind of tourism (what I call arbortourism) interfaced with a religious site despite the fact that the site-visitors ostensibly ignored the religious attributes of the site, all the while with the full corroboration of their local hosts who also elected to only highlight the trees and downplay the temple. As a result of these efforts of mutual

dissimulation a sort of theatre was staged, with a happy outcome for both parties.

The leaders of Friends of Nature (Ziran zhi you), a non-governmental environmentalist organisation based in Beijing, had heard about the achievements of the Longwanggou arboretum project and decided to bring some of their members as well as some Beijing secondary school students to Longwanggou to plant trees (tree-planting being one of their most important outreach activities). The director of the organisation was a certain Dr. Liang Congjie, a university professor and a well-known member of the National Political Consultative Congress (Zhengxie). As Lao Wang was elected to be a member of the Yulin County Political Consultative Congress, Dr. Liang and he were also linking up as members of the same nation-wide organisational system (*xitong*), though at two very different levels (one national while the other merely local). Lao Wang the local elite had control over some local resources (i.e. Longwanggou) to offer the national elite (Dr. Liang and his associates) in exchange for possible favours in the future. It was trees that the Beijingers were coming to Longwanggou to plant, whereas Lao Wang and his associates wished to 'plant' crucial *guanxi* (connections) with some potentially useful external forces. The Beijingers were to come in the spring of 1998, during the May Day long vacation (*wuyi laodongjie*).<sup>[8]</sup>

Lao Wang was very excited about their imminent visit. He made various arrangements to ensure that their visit would be pleasant and successful. Of course no one can just show up at a place and decide to plant some trees; a lot of preparatory work is needed. At that time, all of the hilly land around the temple had been planted, so Lao Wang ordered the forestry technician and a team of laborers to vacate a couple of patches of the arboretum not too far from the temple to let the Beijingers plant trees. This meant digging up many healthy trees that had already taken root and re-plant them in some other spots in the arboretum at the risk of killing them. They also needed to purchase tree saplings from some nearby sapling stations and store

8. Intending to stimulate consumption and leisure activities, the reform-era Chinese state expanded the May First International Labour Day into a long vacation that is enjoyed by school children and state and private enterprise employees alike. The other long vacation is during the Chinese New Year. Both can last up to ten days. To go on a tree-planting expedition during vacation seems to be a legacy of the Maoist era, when different urban work units and schools organised collective volunteer labour activities such as planting trees and rice seedlings, harvesting, building dams and terraced fields, etc.

**Figure 4. The reverse side of the stele commemorating the tree-planting event of the Beijingers.**

Photo taken by the author in 2016.

them at the temple until the day the Beijingers came. Other things they had to purchase were shovels, buckets, hoses and tags for the Beijingers to mark the trees they would plant as 'their trees' so that in the future they could come back and check up on them. The forestry technician warned that it would not be the perfect time to plant those trees (more than a month later than the ideal planting time) and he had serious doubts that they would survive. But the 'tree-planting event' as a performance had to succeed, even if the new saplings might not survive and some old trees had to be dug up to make room for some cosmopolitan environmentalist arbortourists.<sup>[9]</sup>

The members of Friends of Nature and the Beijing students and teachers came in three big rented sleeper buses in the early morning of May 1st, after about 18 hours of travel. They even brought a TV crew and a few Chinese and foreign journalists. There were altogether about a hundred and twenty visitors. They

were welcomed warmly by the temple staff and fed a hearty and multi-course Shaanbei breakfast (presented as 'revolutionary food' though considerably superior to the real revolutionary diet of the Red Army or that of the high Maoist era). After resting a little while in their dormitory rooms that had been specially readied for them, they climbed up the hill behind the temple with the tools and began planting trees under the supervision and with the help of Longwanggou arboretum and temple staff. It seemed to be a fun activity for the Beijingers, especially the students; they were singing songs, chatting and laughing. But all worked hard. For them this was the most suitable activity for a 'labour day.'

The tree-planting activity occupied the entire first day. On the second day the Beijingers visited the nearby village Batawan on some kind of folk culture tour; the students were assigned to different peasant households to experience Shaanbei life. This kind of rural-life tourism was only beginning to take shape in China in the 1990s. It soon took on the umbrella term 'peasant family happiness' (*nongjiale*) (see Park, 2008; Chio, 2012). Other than some minor incidents all the

9. As if blessed by the Heilongdawang, most of the trees actually survived through at least the summer of 1998, thanks to the abundant spring rain, the availability of irrigation and the care of the arboretum staff.



**Figure 5 : Festival-goers with incense waiting for their turn to pay respect to the Black Dragon King**



Photo taken by the author 2016.

activities went smoothly.<sup>[10]</sup> In the evening a ‘happy-together’ gala (*lianhuan wanhui*) was held on the opera stage where the Beijing visitors and the Longwanggou Primary School students performed songs, dances, *yangge* [a group dance style in local folk tradition] and skits to a large and enthusiastic audience that was composed of villagers from the area.<sup>[11]</sup> The gala was concluded by a large *yangge* dance in the open area in front of the opera stage where all the Beijingers participated.

The next morning, before the Beijingers were to depart in their buses, a little solemn ritual was held. A beautiful stone stele (Figure 4) was officially ‘revealed’ (*jiebei*) at a prime spot near the temple with inscriptions to commemorate the tree-planting event (the polished black granite stone alone cost the temple 1,000 yuan - see chapter 11 in Chau, 2006 for the story behind the erection of this stele). The stele was also intended to provide material expression of Longwanggou’s far-flung translocal ties and legitimacy. Curiously, the traditional idiom of erecting a stele at a temple ties Longwanggou’s arboretum

enterprise and the Beijingers’ arbortourism back to popular religion (all temples feature steles commemorating the rebuilding or renovation of various temple structures).

The success of this tree-planting event provided Longwanggou yet another organisational idiom or model to interact with outsiders (the other idiom being

10. A female Beijing student was bitten by a peasant home guard dog (she was trying to take a picture with the dog thinking that it was a pet while in fact peasants use dogs primarily as guard dogs and they can be extremely fierce). She was rushed to the local hospital to be checked if she had contracted rabies (fortunately she did not). One of the Friends of Nature members was known to be physically weak but she worked very hard until she got sick and had to lie down in the dormitory.
11. Some of the Longwanggou Primary School children’s parents complained that the temple and Lao Wang were exploiting their children in entertaining the Beijing guests. But the Beijingers did reciprocate appropriately by donating a large number of books to the schools of the nine villages affiliated with Longwanggou. The majority of the books went to the Longwanggou Primary School. (See Chau, 2007 for an analysis on youth and youth cultural production in rural China).



the experts' workshop I mentioned earlier). In terms of monetary and labour input, the tree-planting event was very taxing for Longwanggou, but it apparently was deemed worth the effort, at least from Lao Wang's perspective. Thereafter, the Friends of Nature came to Longwanggou for more tree-planting activities (see the appendix for a call for tree-planting participants in 2001). Members of Inter-Asia, the Japanese-funded, pan-Asian, non-governmental organisation to which Lao Wang belongs, also came to Longwanggou to plant trees. More commemorative steles were erected.

What is most interesting about these arbortourist visits to Longwanggou that is relevant to the theme of this special issue on religion and tourism is how seemingly far tree-planting as an environmentalist-driven activity is from religion. The Beijinger arbortourists seemed to have fastidiously avoided touching anything religious when they were at Longwanggou - most likely because an understanding was reached amongst the adults, including the teachers, that it would be better to play safe and not to expose the schoolchildren in their charge to 'feudal superstition'. It seems that as far as they were concerned they were visiting the Longwanggou Hilly Land Arboretum and not the Black Dragon King Temple, and the trees they were planting were to benefit the environment conceived broadly rather than the Black Dragon King Temple grounds. This conceptual apartheid between the environment and religion was in fact crucial to the use of the arboretum and the arbortourists in legitimating Longwanggou, which until 1998 was not officially registered as a venue for religious activities, which meant that all the religious activities taking place at the temple (dispensing divine healing water, divination, worshipping and making offerings to the Black Dragon King, providing child-protection rituals, the temple festival, etc.) were illegal 'feudal superstition' that should have been suppressed by the Public Security Bureau (i.e. the police). However, all the money (lots of money!) that sustained these tree-oriented activities (including the hiring of forestry technicians and labourers; irrigation works; the buying and transportation of saplings and tree-planting equipment; the hosting of arbortourists, forestry experts, journalists and other site-visitors; the rental on the plots; etc.) came from incense donations to the temple, which ultimately were derived from folk religiosity and belief in the Black Dragon King's magical efficacy, his miraculous response to the prayers of the worshippers. If the Beijingers and other visiting arbortourists were genuinely ignorant of the religious nature of the funding that enabled their visits and their tree-planting

activities then they seemed to have come to this encounter with Longwanggou in bad faith (though I am certain some were not so naïve). Lao Wang and the temple, on the other hand, knew perfectly well what *they* were doing.

## Conclusions: Mutual Capture and Sites

In the Introduction I proposed the label 'site visitors' to bring under one unified term tourists and pilgrims. In this concluding section I would like to suggest the notion of 'capture' to best understand what has been going on at Longwanggou with temples, tree planting and arbortourists.<sup>[12]</sup>

In the above extended ethnographic vignette we see plenty of examples of how the folk (i.e. the villagers sponsoring the Black Dragon King Temple) captures useful elements of the state (i.e., local state agencies, scientific expertise and endorsement) and transnational environmentalism; and how agents of the state capture the folk to further their ends; and how metropolitan and transnational environmentalism captures the folk. In the environmental anthropology literature we often read about examples of how religion is used to protect forests in the form of *fengshui* forests or sacred groves or wooded areas preserved for the purpose of providing forest products for religious events or safe-guarding good *fengshui* (e.g. Gold & Gujar, 1989; Tsu, 1997). The Longwanggou case suggests yet another way in which religion and trees interact: in this case trees are used to protect the temple and in turn the temple's income and religio-physical location (i.e. the temple as a site) sustains the trees.<sup>[13]</sup> This vignette should, I hope, illustrate even more clearly how the different kinds of environmentalisms, or more specifically tree-mindedness, converge and articulate with one another. The tree-mindedness of the members of Friends of

12. It was Deleuze and Guattari (1987) who first introduced the concept of 'apparatuses of capture', but the ritual studies scholar Kenneth Dean reworked the concept in the context of analysing the complex ritual networks and 'ritual machines' in southeastern coastal China (Dean, 1998:45; also Dean and Zheng, 2010). In explicating the exuberance of ritual performances on the Fujian coast (across the Taiwan Strait from Taiwan), Dean defines 'apparatuses of capture' as 'the capture and temporary consolidation of social, economic, political, and libidinal forces by cultural forms' (Dean, 1998:45).

13. A recent example of religion tapping into environmentalist discourse is The Green Pilgrimage Network started in 2011 that includes four Daoist sites in China: <http://greenpilgrimage.net/members/china/louguantai/> (accessed on May 4, 2016). I thank Knut Aukland for this information.

Nature and the Beijing students has been nurtured by global and state environmentalist discourse, NGO practice, tree planting practices, etc. Had the temple not captured the expanding environmentalist discourse and founded the hilly-land arboretum, it would never have captured elite site-visitors such as the Friends of Nature environmentalist-activists and the students and teachers of an elite secondary school in Beijing. I believe 'mutual capture' is a useful notion in analysing these situations, as the sites and the site-visitors are normally very far apart from each other but somehow each has managed to capture the other for their own agendas.

## References

- Chau, A.Y. 2006. *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Chau, A.Y. 2007. 'Drinking Games, Karaoke Songs, and Yangge Dances: Youth Cultural Production in Rural China'. *Ethnology* 45 (2): 161-72.
- Chau, A.Y. 2009. 'Expanding the Space of Popular Religion: Local Temple Activism and the Politics of Legitimation in Contemporary Rural China'. In *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Contemporary China*, edited by Yoshiko Ashiwa and David Wank. Stanford University Press, pp. 211-40.
- Chau, A.Y. 2012. 'Actants Amassing (AA)'. In *Sociality: New Directions*, edited by Nick Long and Henrietta Moore. Berghahn Books, pp. 133-55.
- Chau, A.Y. Under review. 'Ritual Terroir: The Generation of Site-Specific Vitality'. In *Religion in a Plural society: Comparing the Chinese and Indian Worlds*, edited by Vincent Goossaert.
- Chio, J. (Director) 2012. *Peasant Family Happiness (Nong Jia Le)*. Ethnographic film. 71 minutes.
- Dean, K. 1998. *Lord of the Three in One: The Spread of a Cult in Southeast China*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Dean, K. and Zhenman, Z. 2010. *Ritual Alliances of the Putian Plain. Volume One: Historical Introduction to the Return of the Gods*. Leiden: Brill.
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. 1987 [1980]. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gold, A.G. and Gujar, B.R. 1989. 'Of Gods, Trees and Boundaries: Divine Conservation in Rajasthan'. *Asian Folklore Studies* 48 (2): 211-229.
- Naquin, S. and Yü, C, eds. 1992. *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Park, C. 2008. *Delights in Farm Guesthouses: Nongjiale Tourism, Rural Development and the Regime of Leisure-Pleasure in Post-Mao China*. PhD dissertation University of California, Santa Barbara.
- Tsu, T. 1997. 'Geomancy and the Environment in Premodern Taiwan'. *Asian Folklore Studies* 56 (1): 65-77.

## Appendix. The 2001 Friends of Nature Call for Participants for Tree Planting Trip to Heilongtan in Shaanbei<sup>[14]</sup>

The 2001 Friends of Nature Call for Participants for the Summer-Season Tree Planting Activity  
The summer vacation is upon us. The Friends of Nature tree-planting trip will be organised shortly. Based on experience in past years and a group discussion we decided to visit Heilongtan (i.e. Longwanggou), Yulin Municipality, Shaanxi Province, a fourth time to plant trees. The ecological environment over there needs our attention.

The specifics of the itinerary are as follows:

- August 17 (Friday) Afternoon: departing (Beijing) at 14:30 (assembling at 13:40 in the waiting room of the Lizeqiao long-distance bus terminal);
- August 18 (Saturday) Morning: arriving at Heilongtan at about 07:30; visit peasant homes in Batawan Village after breakfast; tree-planting labour (*laodong*) in the afternoon;
- August 19 (Sunday) Labouring all day;
- August 20 (Monday) Tree-planting in the morning; touring the Hongshixia Reservoir and the Zhenbei Fort of the Great Wall (participants will pay for any fees required; those who are not taking the tour are free to do what they like); evening gala with local students and teachers at Heilongtan;
- August 21 (Tuesday) Labouring in the morning; departing for Beijing after lunch;
- August 22 (Wednesday) Arriving into Beijing in the morning;

Fees: 450 RMB for members of Friends of Nature; 480 RMB for non-members (covering transportation between Beijing and Heilongtan, meals and accommodation; tree saplings are free of charge);

Note: Please prepare suitable labouring clothes, shoes, etc., and be prepared against sun and heat or rain;

Deadline for registration: August 10. Those who plan to participate please complete the form below and send (or fax) it to the 'Friends of Nature' office, or complete the form online at this address:

[www.fon.org.cn/newsoffon/010817zhishu.html](http://www.fon.org.cn/newsoffon/010817zhishu.html)

Address: Room 315, the Gonghe Commercial Building, No. 10, North Alley, Qihelou, Dongcheng District, Beijing 100008

Fax/Telephone: 6523 3134; website: [www.fon.org.cn](http://www.fon.org.cn); email address: [office@fon.org.cn](mailto:office@fon.org.cn)

Please be understanding: Due to the relatively high organisational cost of this tree-planting trip, our office has limited capacities. Those members who plan to bring relatives and friends please limit those to two maximum.

**The Friends of Nature Office**  
**July 23, 2001**

### **Reply slip for participating in tree planting:**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Gender \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_ Member? \_\_\_\_\_  
 Telephone number \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_  
 Other valid contact information \_\_\_\_\_  
 Planning to bring relatives or friends \_\_\_\_\_ persons (please indicate their name, sex and age)

14. Translated from the Chinese. This document had been copied in the early 2000s from the Friends of Nature website. The original document has since been taken down.