Al-Adyan: Jurnal Studi Lintas Agama
P-ISSN: 1907-1736, E-ISSN: 2685-3574
http://ejournal.radenintan.ac.id/index.php/alAdyan
Volume 16, Nomor 2, Juli - Desember, 2021
DOI: https://doi.org/10.24042/ajsla.v16i2.9626

FIVE GREAT FAMILIES AND TELEPATHY: FOLK RELIGION AND BUDDHISM IN NEO-DONGBEI FICTION BY ZHENG ZHI

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Abstract

The 2010s has witnessed the visibility of literature based on China's Northeast (Dongbei), exemplified by literary works composed by Zheng Zhi, Ban Yu and Shuang Xuetao, viz. the 'three masters of Dongbei Renaissance'. In a 2020 novella anthology, Zheng Zhi expatiates upon a veritable cornucopia of representations of folk religion (aka popular religion) and established religions via depictions concerning shamanism, Buddhism and Christianity. In a narrative entitled Xian Zheng 'Divine Illness', Zheng Zhi manifests animal worship as a form of folk religion, by means of painting a vivid portrait of shamanic practices pertaining to 'five major deity families' that denotes fox, weasel, hedgehog, snake and rat spirits. In a narrative entitled Taxintong 'Telepathy', Zheng Zhi depicts Buddhist practices, the preponderant motivations for which are analogous to those for folk religion in contemporary Dongbei, namely, physical wellbeing and psychological solace.

Keywords : *Dongbei Renaissance, China's Northeast, popular religion, Buddhism, Christianity*

A. Introduction

The Northeast of China denotes a geographical region comprising three provinces to the east of the Da Hinggan (Greater

Khingan) Rang, viz. Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning, which are collectively referred to as 东北Dongbei (Coogan 1994, Nelson 1995, Leng 2021). Notwithstanding declining manufacturing industry and thus its nickname as 'China's rust belt', Dongbei used to be extolled as the 'eldest son of the Republic' by Mao Zedong owing to its industrialisation and urbanisation landscape (Hanser 2008: 19, Xie et al 2016, Chan 2019, Tang 2019). Apart from its contribution as China's old industrial base, Dongbei plays a preponderant role in modern Chinese literature. The 1930s witnessed the creation of a profusion of illustrious and influential Dongbei-based works, in which the Dongbei-born authors manifested unstinting patriotic fervour towards their war-plagued mother country in a virile style (Hsia 2004: 338, Smith 2012: 93-94, Zhang 2015, Yu 2018), by means of expatriating a quagmire of cataclysms imposed on the masses by Japanese imperialism (McDougall and Louie 1999: 235-236, Wei 2014, He 2016, Yu 2018). Nonetheless, since the 1980s, there has been an absence of a dominant literary style such as the once-prevailing 'root-seeking literature' and 'avant-garde literature', until the epoch-making resurgence of Dongbei-themed literature in 2011 (Cong 2020a, 2020b, Huang 2020).

The literary resurgence led by the 新东北作家群 *xindongbei zuojia qun* 'cohort of neo-Dongbei writers' (Trans. Mine) is part of 东北文艺复兴 *Dongbei Wenyifuxing* 'Dongbei Renaissance' (Trans. Mine) that is a neologism went viral in China's cyberspace and cultural arena in 2019 inspired by a hit song 野狼Disco *Yelang Disco* 'Disco Alaskan Wolves' by a Dongbei-born singer 董宝石 Dong Baoshi (Liang and Jia 2020, Jiang 2020, Zhang and Chen 2020). In the literary field, 东北文艺复兴三杰 *Dongbei Wenyifuxing sanjie* 'three masters of Dongbei Renaissance' (Trans. Mine) are comprised of three celebrated writers, viz. 郑执 Zheng Zhi, 班宇 Ban Yu and双雪涛 Shuang Xuetao (Liang and Jia 2020, Yang 2020, Tong 2021), who are also referred to as 铁西三剑客 *Tiexi san jianke* 'three swordsmen in the Tiexi District' (Trans. Mine) due to their same birthplace in the Tiexi District of Shenyang (Xin and Hu 2019, Han 2020). Alternatively, they are comically dubbed as 东北F4 *Dongbei F4* 'Dongbei Flower Four' (Trans. Mine) by netizens along with another neo-Dongbei writer pseudonymised 贾行家 Jia Hangjia (1978-) (Tong 2021), whose chefs-d'oeuvre are two prose compilations 尘土

Chentu 'Dust' (Trans. Mine) (Jia 2017, Wang 2017) and 潦草 *Liaocao* 'Hastiness' (Trans. Mine) (Jia 2018). Among this cohort of writers, Shuang Xuetao is particularly illustrious for his 2016 novel compilation 平原上的摩西 *Pingyuan Shangde Moxi* 'Moses on the Plain' that unravels predicaments of laid-off workers in a post-Maoist industrial context, in that this collection is extolled for ushering in the era of neo-Dongbei writing (Wang 2019, Huang 2017, 2020). In general, fiction composed by the four leading writers paints a vivid portrait of dilapidated metropolises replete with historical reversals and social issues, as well as travails of city dwellers from both ends of the social spectrum, especially impoverished and marginalised laid-off workers imperilled by a reform of state-owned enterprises in the 1990s (Lee and Warner 2005, Cho 2013: xii-xiv, Zheng 2017, Zhang and Zhang 2018).

In this research, I investigate a 2020 novella anthology entitled 仙症 *Xian Zheng* 'Divine Illness' (Trans. Mine) that is composed by the neo-Dongbei writer Zheng Zhi (Su 2020) and is constituted of six thought-provoking novels. Taking 蒙地卡罗食人记 *Mengdi Kaluo Shiren Ji* 'An Account of Cannibalism at Monte Carlo' (Trans. Mine) as an example, this narrative concerns a spontaneous elopement of a pusillanimous adolescent boy with an older girlfriend, as well as his encounter with his aunt's ex-husband who has been doing a range of jobs in various countries to make ends meet yet is plotting to rob his ex-wife with a gun (Zhang 2019, Zheng 2019). This narrative is regarded to fall into the literary genre of Bildungsroman, as it concerns the protagonist's emotional transition from puberty to adulthood triggered by agitation and depression inherited from the previous generation, and the protagonist's fictional transformation is surmised to demonstrate perpetual suppression and final recalcitrance in dolorous surroundings (Zhang 2019, Zhou 2019). It is notable that prior to an abrupt ending concerning the protagonist's transformation into a bear, *An Account of Cannibalism at Monte Carlo* is marked by realistic narration, exemplified by quotidian dipsomaniacs, laid-off workers and diners in a mundane restaurant. Additionally, the author also alludes to the prevailing misdeeds of embezzling collective assets as well as a series of robbery-homicides that indeed occurred in various cities in Dongbei on the threshold of the 21st century.

In the anthology *Divine Illness*, Zheng Zhi expatiates upon a veritable cornucopia of representations of folk and established religions, embodied by depictions appertaining to shamanism, Buddhism and Christianity.

B. Folk religion

Dongbei abounds with beliefs and practices of folk religion, aka popular religion (民间宗教 *minjian zongjiao*) (Adler 2005, Deeg 2015), the occasions and actions of which 'nourish a rich surfeit of multivocalic meaning which opens up many interpretive possibilities' (Weller 1994: 4). Discrepant from the vast majority of shrines in China highlighting ancestral ritual (Shih 2014), Earth Celestial Beings (地仙 *dixian*), i.e. animal spirits, are worshiped in Dongbei, whose divine intervention covers the entire local communities, rather than individual households (Liu 2000). Taking fox spirits as an example, as the most preponderant animal deities (Kang 2006: 45-50), they have been highly visible since the Tang (618-907 AD) era (Kang 1999), and the vast majority of fox-related lore prevails in Dongbei (Johnson 1974). As 'betwixt and between', the power and efficacy of fox spirits for local cults and subcults can be manifested in social and religious life, because foxes can cross gender boundaries freely and their powers can be deployed 'to define the official and unofficial, private and public, and moral and immoral in social and religious practices' (Kang 2006: 8). In terms of the provenance of animal worship, impoverished farmers migrated from Shandong and Hebei provinces to Dongbei in the 20th century, seeking cultivable land and job opportunities in new industries; a by-product of the population expansion was traditional approaches they had been deploying for self-enhancement and self-protection (Coogan 1994). Given the fact that North China, especially Shandong and Hebei, is the cradle of animal worship (Kang 2006: 45), such culture was brought to Dongbei by the migrants (Liu 2007). Additionally, in the Japan-occupied Manchuria (1932-1945) that is officially known as 满洲国 *Manzhouguo* 'the Nation of Manchuria', the indigenous shamanism has both been existing in its original form and been transformed into worship of animal spirits (DuBois 2006).

In this section, I scrutinise a narrative entitled 仙症 *Xian Zheng* 'Divine Illness' that is a namesake compiled in the anthology. In Example (1), Zheng Zhi alludes to 五大仙门 *wuda xianmen* 'five major deity families' (Trans. Mine) as well as a practitioner of esoteric arts and occult powers. Since the Qing (1644-1912) dynasty and the early Republic (1912-1949) period, a group of five animals have been worshipped in Dongbei, which are collectively dubbed as Five Great Families (五大家 *Wudajia* or 五大仙 *Wudaxian*), viz. foxes, weasels, hedgehogs, snakes and rats, corresponding to 狐黄白柳灰 *Hu Huang Bai Liu Hui* (Kang 2006: 4, Liu 2007). Alternatively, the four types of animals, without rats, are denoted as 四大门 *Sidamen* or 四大家 *Sidajia* 'Four Great Families' (Li 1948). Moreover, animals are surmised to serve as spirt facilitators of shamans or ritual masters (香头 *xiangtou*) (Li 2011, Pedersen 2014) and ordinary human beings can form quasi-kinship with Earth Celestial Beings via claiming to be their offspring and offering sacrifice perpetually; in return, human beings can attain mortal-immortal complements as well as rewards such as wealth, health and reproduction (Li 1948, Liu 2007). As can be seen from Example (1), the practitioner of folk religion claims to deploy the divine force of hedgehogs through kinship, so as to offer protection and blessing to her clients.

(1) 赵老师说, 他肯定又干损事儿了, 你心里没数吗? 大姑说, 哦,
哦, 我想想, 对了, 半年前, 他抓了一只刺猬,
烤着吃了。电话那头许久不响。大姑说, 喂? 信号不好?
听筒里突然传出一声尖吼, 你等着死全家吧! 大姑也急了, 说,
你不是修行人吗? 咋这么说话! 那头吼得更大声,
你知道保你家这么多年的是谁嘛! 你知道我是谁嘛!
老白家都是我爹, 你老头儿把我爹吃了!…大姑说, 广源,
你知道白三爷是谁吗? 你学中医的, 我想你懂得多。李广源说,
我第一次进咱家门就看见那俩牌位了,
高的那个是白仙家。大姑说, 白仙家到底是谁啊? 李广源说,
狐黄白柳灰, 五大仙门, 中间的白家, 就是刺猬。大姑说, 哦,
刺猬是赵老师她爹。李广源说, 谁爹? 大姑摇摇头。李广源说,
妈, 以前我不是这个家的人, 不好张口,
现在我想说一句。大姑点点头。李广源说,
我爸还是应该去医院。大姑说, 我再想想。李广源说,

牌位也撤了吧, 不是正道儿。大姑说, 要不也得撤了,
你爸把人爹给吃了。

Master Zhao said: 'Your husband must have done something evil. Don't you know?' My aunt replied: 'Um, I don't know off the top of my head. Oh yeah, half a year ago, he caught a hedgehog and ate it roasted.' There was a long pause over the phone. My aunt asked: 'Hello? Can you hear me?' Master Zhao suddenly burst into a piercing scream: 'All your family are dead people!' My aunt was mad too: 'I thought you were a "Master"! How could you say that?!' The scream was even louder: 'Do you know who's been protecting your family these years?! Do you know who I am?! The Bais are my dads. Your old man ate my dad!'…My aunt asked her son-in-law: 'Who on earth are the Bais?' Li Guangyuan told her: 'There're five major deity families, Hu, Huang, Bai, Liu and Hui. The Bais are hedgehogs.' My aunt said: 'I see. Hedgehogs are Master Zhao's dads.' Li Guangyuan asked: 'Who?' My aunt shook her head. Li Guangyuan said: 'Before I married your daughter, I felt I shouldn't say it, but now I'm part of the family.' My aunt nodded for Li Guangyuan to continue, 'I think you should take your husband to the hospital.' My aunt replied: 'Let me think about it.' Li Guangyuan said: 'Also, put the two memorial tablets away. They're useless.' My aunt replied: 'I'll have to. He ate her dad.'

(*Divine Illness*. Trans. Mine)

In Examples (2-3) extracted from the same narrative, Zheng Zhi expatiates exorcism and occult activities in graphic detail, such as setting of an 'altar of the magician' (香坛 *xiangtan*) (Li 1948) and resorting to shamanism to diagnose and heal illness (Heyne 1999, Xing and Murray 2018). As can be seen from Example (2), the shamanic healing practitioners are dubbed as 出马仙*chuma xian*, the literal meaning of which is 'action-taking immortals', in that deities' disciples are construed to be able to act on their behalf and treat patients possessed by spirits (Heyne 1999, Li 2011). Moreover, the gender of 'Master Zhao' in Example (2) is consistent with an observation that spirit mediums are almost exclusively female (Cline 2010), and hence the terminologies 巫 *wu* 'shamaness' and 巫婆 *wupo* 'witch' (Boileau 2002, Holyoak 2005, Michael 2015). It is worth mentioning that Zheng Zhi also unravels the practitioner's means of

income in Example (3), which, I posit, reflects a preponderant reason behind the popularity of the animal cult, namely, practitioners are avaricious in their pursuit of profit (Hai 2019).

(2) 我问过大姑, 当初为什么没早带王战团去看大夫。大姑说,
看了就是真有病, 不看就不一定有病, 是个道理。道理我懂,
其实大姑只是嘴上不愿承认, 她不是没请过人给王战团看病,
一个女的, 铁岭人, 跟她岁数差不多,
外人都叫赵老师。直到多年后赵老师给我看事儿时,
我才听说过出马仙的名号, 家里开堂口, 身上有东西,
能走阴过阳。

I asked my aunt why she had not taken her husband to see a doctor. She replied: 'If I have, he's truly sick, but if I haven't, he may not.' It was crystal clear to me that my aunt did not want to admit, but I knew she had indeed asked someone to treat her husband. The woman from Tieling was about her age and was called 'Master Zhao'. I had not heard of action-taking immortals until Master Zhao came to exorcise me years later. She was from a shamanistic family and had parapsychological abilities.

(*Divine Illness*. Trans. Mine)

(3) 赵老师第二次到大姑家, 带来两块牌位,
一高一矮。矮的那块, 刻的是那位女债主的名字,
姓陈。高的那块, 名头很长:
龙首山二柳洞白家三爷。赵老师指挥大姑重新布置了整面东
墙, 翘头案贴墙垫高, 中间摆香炉, 两侧立牌位,
左右对称。赵老师说, 每日早晚敬香, 一牌一炷, 必须他自己来,
别人不能替。牌位立好后, 赵老师做了一场法事,
套间里外撒尽五斤香灰, 房子的西南角钻了一个细长的洞,
拇指粗, 直接通到楼体外。全套共花费三百块,
其中一百是我奶出的。那两块牌位我亲眼见过,
香的味道也很好闻, 没牌子, 寺庙外的香烛堂买不着,
只能赵老师定期从铁岭寄, 五块一盒。那天傍晚,
赵老师赶车回铁岭前, 对大姑说, 有咱家白三爷压她一头,
你就把心揣肚里吧。记住, 那个洞千万别堵了, 没事多掏掏,
三爷来去都打那儿过。全程王战团都很配合, 垫桌子, 撒香灰,
钻墙眼儿, 都是亲自上手。赵老师临走前,

王战团紧握住她的手说, 你姓赵, 你家昨姓白呢? 你是捡的?
赵老师把手从王战团的手里抽出, 对大姑说,
要等全好得有耐心, 七七四十九天。

The second time Master Zhao came to my aunt's, she brought two memorial tablets. The shorter one was engraved with the name of the resentful ghost, a Miss Chen. The name on the taller tablet was very long: The Third Oldest Son of the Bai Family in the Double-Willow Cave in Mount Dragon-Head. My aunt reorganised the entire east wall according to Master Zhao's order. A prayer table was elevated and placed against the wall, and the two tablets were put on the table, with an incense burner right in the middle. Master Zhao said: 'He must present an incense stick to each talent every morning and evening. It must be him, not anyone else.' After the tablets had been set properly, Master Zhao held an exorcism and sprinkled two and a half kilograms of incense ash in the flat. A long, thin hole was drilled in the southeast wall, linking directly to the outside. The whole process cost three hundred yuan, and my grandma covered one hundred. I saw the two tablets with my own eyes, and the incense smelled good. The incense had no label, and it was not sold in any store, so it had to be posted from Tieling by Master Zhao, for five yuan per box. In the evening, before heading back to Tieling, Master Zhao assured my aunt: 'Our Lord Bai is more powerful than the ghost. Don't worry. Remember, make sure the hole isn't covered. Lord Bai needs to visit your home through that hole.' During the entire process, Wang Zhantuan was very obedient, as he himself elevated the table, sprinkled the incense ash and drilled the hole. Prior to Master Zhao's departure, Wang Zhantuan shook her hand firmly and asked: 'Your surname's Zhao, but your family's Bai. Were you adopted?' Master Zhao got rid of his hand and told my aunt: 'Be patient. It'll take forty-nine days to cure your husband completely.'

(*Divine Illness*. Trans. Mine)

In terms of believers' mentality, it can be exemplified by Examples (2-3), in which shamanistic exorcism serves as an alternative to medical care. China's folk religion is marked by dispersal, locality and practicality (Zeng 2009: 362), which is

profoundly epitomised by the cult of animal spirits in Dongbei (Hai 2019). To be more specific, the belief in shamanism and animal spirits is attributed to solace, catharses and an ideomotor phenomenon (Wu and Lee 2018). Chinese civilisation entails an immemorial construal that animal and human spirits are capable of triggering and curing diseases, while certain individuals are blessed with prowess to harness supernatural forces, which are recounted and embroidered in a profusion of religious scriptures and literary works (DuBois 2005: 65-66). For instance, the imperial period abounds with narratives appertaining to fox spirits and fox worship under the fully-fledged genre of 志怪 *zhiguai* 'strange writing' (Huntington 2003, Kang 1999, 2006: 3, Hai 2019), viz. 'accounts of miraculous paranormality and abnormality' concerning divinities, ghosts, divine phenomena, mythological events, mythical sites, as well as arcane esoteric arts and occult powers (Campany 1991, 1996: 99, Chen 2002, Chiang 2005: 12-13, Shang 2018). In Examples (2-3), instead of medical treatment, the shaman's client resorts to divine intervention as a form of escapism, and simultaneously attains psychological comfort.

It is notable that towards the end of the narrative, the same character converts to Christianity, as shown in Example (4). Traumatised by the Opium Wars in the mid-19th century, the Chinese masses used to regard Christianity as an indivisible component of imperialist oppression and colonisation, so in 1922, an 'Anti-Christian Movement' disseminated across the whole country, especially among Chinese communists and the educated elite in Beijing and Shanghai (Zhuo 2015). Moreover, the founding of People's Republic of China in 1949 ushered in a period when Christianity was repressed by Communism (Bays 2012). Nonetheless, by virtue of the epoch-making Reform and Opening-up drive since 1978, there has been a religious revival, including the rapid growth of Christianity, i.e. the so-called 'Christianity Fever' (Ying 2009, Lim 2013). As a consequence, the number of Chinese Christians has been increasing expeditiously, reaching approximately 100 million in 2018, which is inspired by a multitude of factors, including Christianity's inculturation and successful integration of traditional Chinese culture (Yang 2014), Christianity's moral strength, as well as people's sense of disillusionment, spiritual emptiness and relational deprivation

(Brandner 2019). Analogously, other neo-Dongbei literary works also concern Christianity in contemporary Dongbei and believers' mentality, which are exemplified by 光明堂 *Guangming Tang* 'Chapel of Illumination' (Trans. Mine) compiled in a 2017 novella collection entitled 飞行家 *Feixingjia* 'Flyer' (Trans. Mine) by Shuang Xuetao (Example (5)).

(4) 这一次, 同一张翘头案上, 牌位被换成了十字架,
耶稣基督被钉在上面, 耷拉着头。我说, 大姑,
你信教了。大姑说, 是信主。我说, 你信主了。大姑说,
不信的时候其实已经信了, 主一直就在那,
是主找到了我…大姑正跪在十字架前, 俯首合掌。大姑说,
主啊, 我早该跟你告解, 向你忏悔了,
我是个罪人。我给我的丈夫下药,
我是比潘金莲还毒的毒妇。我太累了, 主啊,
我也想一觉睡过去, 我真的累啊, 主啊,
主。大姑没有察觉到我就站在她身后。有哭声传出,
眼泪吧嗒吧嗒地打在两手指尖。

This time, on the same prayer table, the memorial tablets had been replaced by the crucifixion of Jesus. I asked: 'Aunt, are you believing in religion now?' My aunt corrected me: 'It's Christian religion.' I asked again: 'Are you believing in Christian religion now?' My aunt replied: 'Before I believed in the Lord, I actually already believed in him. The Lord has always been there, and it was him who found me.'…My aunt was kneeling in prayer in front of the cross: 'Lord, I should have prayed and repented my sins a long time ago. I drugged my husband, and I'm more wicked than the most wicked woman in history! Lord, I'm too tired. I want to drug myself too, so that I can fall asleep too. Lord, I'm so tired, Lord.' My aunt did not notice me standing behind her, so she did not suppress her whimper and let tears fall on her fingers.

(*Divine Illness*. Trans. Mine)

(5) 圣经读完, 他领着众人祷告, 话很长, 他念一句,
底下人跟着念一句, 三姑又牵住我的手, 我低着头,
没有跟着念。终于完了, 他从台子的一角拿起一个纸壳箱子,
在人们的面前走过, 三姑往里面放了五块钱, 我吓了一跳,

五块钱是我半个月的生活费…到了我身后的老人, 老人说,
孩子, 我的脚烂了, 今天差点爬不起来,
你让它快好吧。林牧师说, 您得去看大夫。老人说,
每次听你讲完, 我都好一些, 你让它快好吧,
要不然下次我就来不了了。林牧师说, 您把肉体和灵魂搞混了,
去看大夫吧, 希望下次还能见到您。老人说, 我有个外孙,
爹妈不管, 跟您说过, 一点不省心,
请为他祈祷。林牧师点点头。老人往箱子里放了五角钱, 说,
让我摸摸你的书。

After reading the Bible, Priest Lin led the prayers. The prayers were very long, so he stopped at the end of every sentence for people to repeat. My aunt held my hand again, but I lowered my head and did not join the crowd. The prayers finally finished. Priest Lin took a box from the corner of the stage and walked in front of everybody. My aunt put five yuan into the box, which made me surprised, as it was half of my monthly maintenance…An old woman behind me said to Priest Lin: 'Son, my foot's festered. I almost couldn't make it today. Can you heal it up?' Priest Lin said: 'You need to see a doctor.' The old woman said: 'Every time I hear you praying, I feel better. Heal my foot up please, or I won't make it next time.' Priest Lin said: 'You've mixed up body and soul. Go to the hospital. I hope I'll see you next time.' The old woman said: 'I've got a grandson, but his parents don't care about him. I think I've told you before. I'm so worried about my grandson. Please pray for him.' Priest Lin nodded. The old woman put half a yuan into the box and said: 'Let me touch your prayer book.'

(*Chapel of Illumination*. Trans. Mine)

Furthermore, Example (4) also manifests harmonious contemporaneousness of institutionalised and popular religions in China since the imperial era. Notwithstanding discrepant tenets, teachings and liturgies (Huang 1998, Adler 2002), the indigenous Confucianism and Taoism as well as the Sinicised Buddhism of alien provenance have been functioning as gentry syncretism (Shan 2012) and demonstrating condominium, viz. 儒释道三教合一*Ru Shi Dao sanjiaoheyi* 'unity of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism' (Clart 2007, Fan and Whitehead 2011, Shahar 2013) since the Tang (618-907) dynasty (Smith 1978, Brook 1993, Gong and Gong 2010).

C. Buddhism

In modern China, citizens are indoctrinated by Marxism-Leninism-Maoism (Meisner 1971, Walder 1977, Chai 2003) and atheism (Xie et al 2017, Li et al 2018) via political education programmes (Zhao 1998, Nanbu 2008), and institutionalised religions might be surmised to be correlated with feudalism (viz. Buddhism and Taoism) and foreign imperialism (viz. Christianity) (Leung 2005). Nonetheless, given the fact that institutionalised religions have been existing in China from time immemorial, people residing in less developed areas are still favourably disposed towards religions (Zou 2003, Wang 2007, Xu 2008, Cao 2017, Yuan 2017).

In this section, I explore Zheng Zhi's another novella entitled 他心通 *Taxintong* 'Telepathy' that is collected in the same anthology. The title, *taxintong*, or ceto-pariya-ñāṇa 'mind-penetrating knowledge; mind-reading ability' (Wen 2009: 42, Cholvijarn 2019), is a Buddhist terminology denoting 'higher knowledge' concerning observability and awareness of others' thoughts and feelings, which is asserted to be realised by advanced practitioners of meditation (Clough 2012, Purton 2017). In the narrative, Zheng Zhi explicitly depicts Buddhists and Buddhist practices that have been localised in Dongbei since the imperial era (Wang2009). As can be seen from Example (6), Buddhists' clothing, comportment and rituals are presented in graphic detail, along with the venue and building of their Buddhist practice. In Example (6), the description that the vast majority of the cohort is female is consistent with an observation that the number of female Buddhists is twice as much as that of their male counterparts in Dongbei, and female Buddhists are more devoted and engaged than their male counterparts (Wang 2015).

(6) 院子里聚集着至少二十人在迎接, 统一着海青服,
女的占一多半…母亲也下了车, 走到那排女人们面前,
双手合十地拜谢, 说了什么, 我听不清。楼的举架异常之高,
往大厅深入, 迎面是一尊高大的观音坐莲像, 金身, 披红袈裟,
足有四米多,
高举架估计是为了迁就观音的挺拔(早听说楼是居士们捐钱盖的)。墙顶挂有两只喇叭,
循环播放着佛号声…旋即起身奔出房门, 穿过长长的走廊,

路过观音巨像, 横穿院子, 直冲进道场, 推开那扇大门,
眶当一声响, 惊得满堂佛号骤停, 堂内足有一百人, 同时望向我,
男男女女全身穿海青服, 还有不大点儿的小孩儿,
整齐划一地跪在各自膝下的小方垫上, 王护法手持戒尺,
正踱步其间, 蒋老师站在台上, 手握麦克,
依旧是那般从容不迫…老居士带了十八名居士, 算他自己在内,
把整间1026挤得满满登登。他们围绕着床上父亲的遗体,
最近的一排就紧贴床边, 齐声唱经, 不用照本, 老居士领头儿,
韵律跟节奏竟完全一致, 一个错儿都没出。

There were at least twenty people in Buddhist robes waiting us in the yard, most of whom were women…My mother got out of the car and made a mutra at the row of women. She said something gratefully, but I could not tell what she said. The ceiling of the building was exceptionally high, and there was an elephantine statue of the Bodhisattva in an enormous shrine, which was painted gold and covered with red kasaya. I heard that the building was fundraised by Buddhists, and the tall ceiling was designed to accommodate the four-metre-high statue. There were chanted sutras coming out of two speakers on the wall…I stood up and dashed out the room. After passing the long corridor, the huge statue and the yard, I pushed the gate wide open and ran into the hall. The loud bang interrupted the rites, and nearly one hundred people in Buddhist robes stopped chanting and stared at me in shock. All those men, women and even small children were on their knees while Guardian Wang was walking around with a rod in his hand. Master Jiang was standing on a stage, with a microphone in her hand. She still looked so calm…Room 1026 was crowded by eighteen younger Buddhists led by an old one. The cohort stood very close to the corpse of my father in a circle and began to chant sutras. To my surprise, the chant led by the old Buddhist was flawless, without a single wrong tune or rhythm.

(*Telepathy*. Trans. Mine)

In Dongbei, a considerable proportion of conversion to Buddhism is triggered by significant misfortunes or inspired by friends and families, and the vast majority of believers regard Buddhism as means

of blessing and protection (Wang 2015). The popularity of religion in Dongbei is particularly salient since the widespread redundancy and impoverishment caused by a reform of state-owned enterprises in the 1990s (Gu 2000, Solinger 2001, 2006, Hai 2019). As can be seen from Example (7), the narrator's mother is enticed into Buddhism by a laid-off friend, and her motivation is to cure her husband's fatal illness.

(7) 蒋老师是在父亲昏迷前, 被母亲特意请来沈阳的,
中间通过一位阿姨引荐。那位阿姨是母亲以前在厂子里的老
工友。后来母亲赶在厂子倒闭前, 凭借民歌特长,
花钱托关系进了一家国企的附属小学当音乐老师, 逃过下岗,
踏实熬退休。那位阿姨,
此后在原厂址附近卖烤地瓜。母亲那天路过买烤地瓜,
俩人重逢。阿姨看上去要比母亲老十岁, 然而气色却胜过母亲,
脸上总挂着红扑扑的笑容。叙旧后得知, 阿姨信佛小十年了,
生活中所有的困苦都被解决, 起码心里解决了,
不再抱怨任何事, 感恩一切有缘人,
她自己这么说。母亲好奇问, 咋结的缘? 据阿姨说,
一次回黑山老家探亲, 碰巧溜达进了蒋老师的道场,
听见人家讲经当场哭晕过去,
从此做了蒋老师的俗家弟子。母亲问, 有证吗? 阿姨说,
你指出家证? 没。母亲不觉景儿, 还追问, 为啥没有? 阿姨说,
怎么跟你解释呢, 蒋老师不是住持, 所以那不叫庙, 叫道场,
民间的, 她自己也是带发修行, 人可年轻了,
比咱小不少。母亲说, 啊, 年轻有为。阿姨说, 娟儿啊,
我劝你也信佛吧。母亲问, 信佛真管用吗? 阿姨说,
这么问就不对, 你想管啥用呢? 信佛不是为了跟佛要啥玩意儿,
其实该给的, 佛早都给你了。母亲说, 这磕儿唠得高级了,
那你信上, 感觉有啥不一样了? 阿姨说, 心里得劲儿了,
哪哪都得劲儿了…阿姨在门外问母亲, 你看蒋老师长得咋样儿?
母亲问, 啥咋样儿? 挺年轻的。阿姨说,
你不觉得长得像什么人吗? 母亲苦想说, 蔡琴啊? 阿姨笑, 说,
菩萨啊。这叫观音相, 万里无一。

Prior to my father's coma, my mother invited Master Jiang to Shenyang on recommendation of a friend, who used to work in the same factory with her. Before the factory's bankruptcy, my mother managed to become a music teacher in a primary school affiliated

with a state-owned enterprise, via bribing some contacts. She was not laid-off and had been working there until retirement. Her friend, however, had been selling roast sweet potatoes since redundancy. One day, my mother bumped into her. She looked ten years older than my mother, but was in a good mood and permanent smile. My mother found out from chatter that she had been a Buddhist for almost ten years, and according to her, all sufferings and problems in life had been solved in her mind, so she never complained about anything and was always grateful to all kind-hearted people. My mother was curious about the trigger. According to her friend, she happened to walk into Master Jiang's hall in her hometown and heard her preaching; she cried her eyes out and became one of her disciples. My mother asked: 'Is she qualified?' Her friend asked: 'Officially qualified? No.' My mother would not give up: 'Why not?' Her friend replied: 'She's not a nun, so her place is called a hall, not a temple. You see what I mean? She's still got her hair, and she's very young, a lot younger than us.' My mother said: 'Wow! Talented young woman!' Her friend persuaded her: 'Juan, you should be a Buddhist too.' My mother asked: 'Is it useful?' Her friend said: 'This isn't right. What "use" are you looking for? It's not about asking from the Buddha. In fact, the Buddha has already given what you should have ages ago.' My mother said: 'This is becoming philosophical. Then is there anything different you feel?' Her friend said: 'I feel good in my soul, so my whole body feels good too.'…My mother's friend asked her outside the ward: 'How do you feel about Master Jiang?' My mother asked: 'What about her? She's pretty young.' Her friend asked again: 'Don't you think she looks like somebody?' After pondering, my mother said hesitantly: 'The singer Cai Qin?' Her friend burst into laughter: 'It's the Buddha! Master Jiang has an extremely rare face called Bodhisattva Face.'

(*Telepathy*. Trans. Mine)

Examples (8-9) illustrate the conversion of the narrator's father to Buddhism: his psychological change from atheism to Buddhism not only reflects his desperate pursuit of blessing and protection in the face of fatal illness, but also psychological intervention as solace and catharses that cannot be provided solely by medical treatment.

Moreover, in Example (9), Zheng Zhi also reveals the cupidity of the Buddhist, parallel to the avarice of the shaman in Example (3).

(8) 母亲后来有一阵心里很不得劲儿, 为求得抚慰,
闲暇时开始在家看一些光碟, 有法师讲经的录像,
也有演绎释迦牟尼成佛历程的电视剧, 什么制作单位也不清楚,
但演员都是真的印度人。光碟都是那阿姨给的,
她总说母亲慧根深, 有佛缘, 母亲果真也看进去了。某一晚,
父亲回到家, 不知道又在哪儿喝的闷酒, 带气儿进门,
见母亲又在看碟, 直接把VCD 机给搬起来砸了, 母亲受到惊吓,
但没发脾气, 只对父亲说, 你这样严重谤佛的行为,
是很危险的。父亲说, 滚鸡巴犊子, 我他妈谁都不傍,
我自力更生, 我谁也不欠。

Afterwards, my mother had been bothered for a period of time, so she started to look for solace in VCDs recording monks' interpretations of Buddhist texts. She also watched TV serials recounting Gautama Buddha's ascetic life and awakening; the producers were unknown, but the cast was Indian. Those VCDs were given by that friend, and she kept encouraging my mother that she was a born Buddhist, which obviously had convinced her. At a midnight, my father returned home drunk. His drinking must be depressing and pesky, so the moment he caught sight of my mother watching those VCDs again, he raged at her and smashed the VCD player. My mother was frightened but not irritated. She just told him: 'Your profanity will get retribution.' My father yelled obscenities at her: 'Screw you! I ain't fucking reply on no one. I earn my own bread. I ain't owe no one!'

(*Telepathy*. Trans. Mine)

(9) 那天, 蒋老师跟父亲一共只聊了不到五分钟,
两人单独在病房里。我跟母亲还有阿姨守在门外。蒋老师出来时, 正在将一把剃头推子塞进包里, 门刚打开,
我就听到了父亲的哭声。我第一个进去, 见他竟在地上跪着,
掩面痛哭, 头光了, 黑发散落在地上, 围住自己一圈儿。我震惊,
急忙把他搀回床上, 他继续哭着, 我没说话,
只把病床摇高三十度角, 小心地托他靠下去, 一偏脸才注意到,
床头的墙上多了一幅A4 纸大小的观音图, 观音持瓶滴露,

身后佛光普照, 正对着父亲瘦削的背。我忍不住问, 爸, 你咋了?
父亲摇着头, 说不出话。我又来到门外, 问三个女人,
我爸到底咋了? 阿姨说, 你爸没事儿了, 好了。我说, 啥就好了?
病好了? 头发咋都剃光了? 阿姨又说, 是精神好了,
心里得劲儿了。我说,
我不得劲儿。蒋老师第一次开口跟我讲话, 她说,
你父亲做了一个决定, 他不要按俗世的方式走, 想走佛道了,
如今他已是我的弟子, 身后事, 我答应管。此话一出,
母亲瞬间泪如雨下, 连连作揖,阿姨在一旁摇了摇母亲的手臂,
她这才缓了过来, 从小包里掏出一摞钱, 报纸裹着, 我一眼认出,
那就是前一天陌生女人送来那一万, 后来我给了母亲,
那张报纸我认得,《深圳晚报》,
头版头条是庆祝深圳特区成立三十周年。

On that day, Master Jiang only talked to my father alone for less than five minutes, while my mother and her friend were waiting outside the ward. When Master Jiang was walking outside, she was putting a hair clipper back into her bag. As soon as the door was open, I heard my father crying. I entered first and saw him crying his eyes out. He was on his knees and surrounded by hairs on the floor. I was shocked and helped him lie back in the bed. He could not stop crying, so I did not say anything but tilted the bed slightly, so that he could lie more comfortably. I caught sight of a A4-sized portrait of Bodhisattva on the wall. The Bodhisattva was holding a bottle vase, with Buddha's grace illuminating towards my father's skinny back. I could not help asking him: 'Dad, are you okay?' My father shook his head and could not say a word. I came out of the ward and asked the three women: 'What happened to my dad?' My mother's friend said: 'Your dad's fine. He's well now.' I said: 'He's well?! What happened to his hair?' My mother's friend said again: 'He's well in his mind. He feels comfortable.' I said: 'But *I* don't feel comfortable.' Master Jiang spoke to me for the first time: 'Your father's made a decision, and he doesn't want to live a non-sectarian life anymore. Since he's my Buddhist disciple now, I promise to perform funeral rites for him.' Hearing this, my mother burst into tears and kept bowing to her. After her friend shook her arm to remind her, she stopped bowing and gave Master Jiang a bundle of notes wrapped in newspaper. I knew it was the ten thousand yuan given by the unknown woman the day before. I gave the money to my mother, but I still remember the

newspaper: it was Shenzhen Evening News, with a frontpage headline 'The 30th Anniversary of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone'.

(*Telepathy*. Trans. Mine)

D. Conclusion

As one of the 'three masters of Dongbei Renaissance', Zheng Zhi not only depicts Dongbei's status quo in a post-industrial era, but also unravels people's belief in popular and institutionalised religions in a reality-oriented manner. In *Divine Illness*, shamanistic practices are conducted via the alleged occult force of hedgehogs and the quasi-kinship established with them, so as to substitute medical treatment, offer emotional solace and fulfil practitioners' avarice. It is notable that the same character resorts to Christianity at a later stage, which epitomises the popularity of Christianity in contemporary Dongbei as well as the contemporaneousness of institutionalised and popular religions. Such harmonious coexistence of religions in Dongbei can also be embodied by the novella *Telepathy* that concerns Buddhists and Buddhist practices. Analogous to animal worshippers, believers of Buddhism deploy religion as an approach to attain blessing and protection as well as a means of catharses under the context of redundancy and impoverishment since the 1990s.

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