Prelude

> If one can't perform the Banner Rite, one can't perform any of the rites.
>
> ——Master Jiang Yucheng (b. 1973)

Chen Diwen (陳迪文) puffed on cigarettes one after the other as he sat on a stool on the front porch of the modest two-story brick structure in which he lived with his grandparents and wife.[1] The house was perched on the side of a verdant hill above the tiny hamlet of Mount Xiashan (下杉山), one of dozens of poor villages dotting the rugged hills west of Le'an township (樂安鎮) in Anhua county (安化縣) in central Hunan province. He sat under the awning of the house, protected from the steadily pouring rain. From time to time he stepped out onto the dirt path to look further up the hill, peering between the raindrops at a bamboo flagpole that had been erected in a terraced rice paddy, and particularly at the blue cloth banner that billowed from it. It had been some time since he had finished performing the Daoist ritual in which he produced a long talisman written on the three-by-eight-foot banner and then hoisted it onto the pole. He craned to see whether the wind had tangled into knots the five pennant-like streamers cut into the unattached end of the banner (see cover photo). He saw that it had not and that the long, tapered shapes of the streamers continued to flicker almost like flames in the healthy breeze, as they were when he first raised the banner. Chen returned to his stool on the porch and avoided eye contact with the dozens of masters, relatives, and villagers who were attending his ordination into the priesthood that day. Nervously, he continued smoking. The absence of knots in the pennants meant that the deity he had summoned during the ritual had not yet heeded his call.

Chen Diwen felt anxious for good reason. His ordination into the priesthood hinged on the deity's response. For the last four years, Chen had trained with a local master who was a member of the Daoist lineage that dominated the area. As an apprentice, Chen had assisted in the various rites officiated by ordained priests in that lineage. Finally, after his master had agreed he was ready to be ordained, Chen spent forty-nine straight days diligently memorizing and practicing the complicated summoning ritual, making sure he could properly inscribe on the banner the complex talisman the ritual is designed to produce. On that rainy day in February 2004, Chen Diwen performed the Banner Rite (to Summon) Sire Yin (Yingong fanfa 殷公旛法, the Banner Rite) as the first ritual of his own ordination *jiao*.[2] This performance was the first time he had officiated over a ritual in public. If he happened to be unsuccessful and the deity failed to descend from his celestial palace and use the wind to knot the summoning banner, the rest of the three-day ordination *jiao* would likely be aborted and Chen would not be ordained at that time.

The masters in Chen Diwen's lineage recognize a deity called Celestial Lord Yin Jiao (Yin Jiao tianjun 殷郊天君), also known as Thunder General Yin Jiao (Yin Jiao leijiang 殷郊雷將) or Prime Marshal Yin Jiao (Yin Jiao yuanshuai 殷郊元帥), as the agent of their liturgical power. As in much of south China, masters in the region around Le'an township serve their local communities as liturgical specialists. Like many masters in Hunan, they consider themselves members of the broad Zhengyi (正一, Orthodox Unity) tradition. They marry, live in homes rather than in temples, and often hold secular jobs in addition to minding their liturgical responsibilities. They are regularly hired by members of the community to perform an array of ritual services, including rites to thank the high gods for prosperity, funerary rites, and rites to protect bodies and households from demons that cause illness, economic misfortune, and agricultural irregularity. On occasion they are called on to heal bodies and households from demonic infiltration. Technically speaking, it is not the masters who drive demons away; it is Celestial Lord Yin and a host of other heavenly generals and their spirit armies who—under the master's command during ritual—disperse, pacify, or sometimes even destroy disruptive demons and sprites.

The Banner Rite is the ritual way masters in Chen Diwen's lineage attempt to summon the powerful Yin Jiao and submit him to their will. An ordinand cannot be ordained a Daoist priest if he is unable to prove that he can properly perform the Banner Rite. A failed Banner Rite at ordination would signal that the ordinand could not secure General Yin's allegiance and thus could not direct the deity's exorcistic power to fulfill a ritual need. The young master's liturgical performances would lack efficacy, and no one in the community would spend their scant money to hire him. Even if the ordinand practiced the Banner Rite another forty-nine days and tried again, the pressure would be excruciating. A second failed attempt would certainly doom the budding master's reputation before his career even began. All these anxieties swirled in Chen Diwen as he sat chain-smoking and waiting for Marshal Yin to reply.

This book begins with Chen Diwen's palpable anxiety surrounding the Banner Rite. It asks why his performance of the ritual was so intense. It is easy to see that the social condition surrounding the Banner Rite generated much of his concern. The community that would furnish his livelihood was watching, in inescapably empirical terms, whether he could muster enough divine power to merit hiring in the future. His performance of the Banner Rite was a de facto job application, his very aspiration to become a liturgical master was put to a public test.

This book, though, asks why Chen Diwen was so apprehensive from a different point of view. It asks whether anything in the liturgical workings of the Banner Rite itself contributed to his unease. To pose the question this way is really to ask how the Banner Rite works—or fails to work. How might the cosmological, theological, and anthropological assumptions ensconced in Chen Diwen's performance of the liturgy be animated to produce an efficacious or inefficacious result? In other words, what was going on within the world of the Banner Rite such that Chen might compel Yin Jiao to respond favorably—or not? What within the world of the ritual led Chen to agonize? These questions are different ways to frame a classic question in the phenomenology of religion: what is really going on inside a religious moment such that it is experienced in a certain way?

Answering the question posed this way requires a journey deep inside the world of the Banner Rite. Such a journey shows that Chen's apprehension about his performance of the ritual was in large part driven by concern for whether the ritual would accomplish its liturgical goal—successful communication between officiant and deity. Communication here implies a relationship between particular subjects. The Banner Rite is the ritual way that Chen Diwen the ordinand hoped to forge a relationship with his lineage's main martial deity, Yin Jiao, the supplier of his exorcistic power. Using complicated incantations, visualizations, ritual gestures, and inscriptions, Chen strove to convince Yin Jiao that the two should form an intimate bond. If successful, this bond would last for the rest of Chen's liturgical life. Whenever he would need exorcistic power, he would call on Yin Jiao.

But the relationship negotiated in the Banner Rite is far more complicated than one-to-one correspondence. Chen Diwen was not simply a lone ordinand trying to invoke a single deity in straightforward terms. Within the world of the Banner Rite, Chen operated within a web of relationships with divine figures. He was presented as the student of a long, winding lineage of deceased, deified masters who had ritually invoked Yin Jiao for as long as anyone could remember. The lineage has inherited that ritual knowledge from practices dating to at least the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. It is the prestige of the lineage and its maintenance of arcane ritual knowledge that allowed Chen to even dare to approach a deity as fierce as Yin Jiao. For his part, Yin Jiao also exists within a matrix of relationships. He is bound by ties of obligation to his celestial superior, a stellar deity called the Emperor of the North (Beidi 北帝), and to his master, a mysterious figure known as Shen the Realized One (Shen zhenren 申真人), a patriarch of Chen's lineage and the figure to whom Yin Jiao first swore allegiance.[3] Within the world of the Banner Rite, the ordinand Chen Diwen relied on ritual knowledge transmitted through his lineage that taught him how to elicit a response from Yin Jiao by entering into the thick web of divine relationships surrounding the god, and then relying on their authority to communicate his intentions directly to Yin Jiao.

The Banner Rite

Since around 1990, when the local government liberalized official policies on religious expression in Le'an township and its environs, liturgical masters have been reviving ritual traditions suppressed by the Chinese Communist Party for the previous thirty-five years. Locals have slowly raised money to rebuild temples that were desecrated and looted by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Young men like Chen Diwen have once again chosen to be ordained and to make their livings by serving the religious needs of their communities.

While working with Chen's lineage since the mid-2000s, including living with its masters for stints sometimes several months long, I have been struck by how much these masters ground their liturgical identity in their ability to perform the Banner Rite. This single ritual is the touchstone that signals the beginning of every ritual practitioner's transition from an apprentice under tutelage of a master to a full-fledged master capable of officiating over Daoist liturgies, exorcistic rites, and Buddhist funerals.[4] As in Chen Diwen's case, the Banner Rite must successfully be performed by an ordinand on the first day of his ordination *jiao* before the ordination can continue with confidence. An ordinand must publicly show the pantheon of gods and deceased masters of the lineage and his local community that he has mastered the Banner Rite, which is a display of the lineage's most guarded esoteric knowledge. That knowledge has been preserved and passed down the generations in an amalgam of textual and oral forms. The masters of the lineage regard their texts as their most precious heirlooms and make sure to copy them by hand every generation. Their texts are so esteemed that during the Cultural Revolution, when all forms of religious practice were harshly persecuted, the masters surrendered scriptures singing praises of high gods to government officials who searched their residences for religious paraphernalia, but risked arrest and even imprisonment to conceal their ritual texts, chief among them the manual scripting the Banner Rite.

The Banner Rite is a kind of ritual repository for the lineage's most precious secret teachings. It performs the esoteric instructions (*mizhi* 秘旨) for wielding potent exorcistic power for apotropaic or therapeutic ends.[5] The masters of the lineage are very concerned with whether a ritual and a ritual officiant are *ling* 靈 or possess *lingqi* 靈氣—by which they mean ritual efficaciousness driven by "divine power" or "divinely powerful *qi*."[6] In abstract terms, a ritual works if it supplies divine power potent enough to rearrange or change the movements of *qi* comprising the situation addressed by the ritual. A space or body clogged by static or stale *qi* cannot be healthy and prosperous. A ritual such as the Banner Rite is designed to prevent obstructions or unclog a space or body by bringing about an infusion of divine *qi*. These masters imagine both numinous power and unhealthy obstructions of *qi* in terms of subjects. Heavily armed, fierce martial deities literally embody divinely efficacious *qi* by warding off, shooing away, or on rare occasions even destroying demons or sprites that cause disease and misfortune. Chen Diwen and his masters have inherited from their long lineage a special relationship with one of these martial deities—Celestial Lord Yin Jiao. We shall see that Yin Jiao has sworn an oath to serve as martial functionary under the command of the masters of Chen's lineage. Yin Jiao and his spirit army, as well as other celestial generals and their heavenly forces who march under Yin's banner, are responsible for responding to the call of all masters recognized by the lineage.

The Banner Rite performed at an ordination *jiao* 醮 is the most comprehensive version of the ritual, the fullest invocation of the divine, exorcistic power embodied by Yin Jiao and his spirit forces. It requires about an hour and twenty minutes to perform and constitutes a kind of public test of an ordinand after several years of training. Its successful performance is the sine qua non of becoming a full-fledged master. At an ordination such as Chen Diwen's, the Banner Rite is the moment the ordinand forms an intimate relationship with the martial deity, which is what actually allows the master to direct the deity and his exorcistic power. If this initial relationship is not established, any subsequent ritual performance is considered impossible. The banner typically takes anywhere from an hour or so to a few days to knot. A longer wait time or a looser knot signals a less than enthusiastic response from Yin Jiao. Inability to garner a response at all is tantamount to ritual impotency.

The Banner Rite can also be used for many purposes in different liturgical settings. It is performed on the first day of any large *jiao.* Yin Jiao and his minions are summoned to guard the perimeter of any altar space from the disruptive influences of demons and sprites, and to protect the spirit messengers who transmit written memorials and petitions prepared and dispatched by ritual officiants to the various celestial palaces of high gods on behalf of the community or household that sponsors the liturgy. They are also called upon to execute any exorcistic aim of the *jiao,* which might be to defend the community or household from economic strife, interpersonal tension, illness, or consequences of negative karmic action. Shortened versions of the Banner Rite constitute the liturgical heart of any apotropaic or therapeutic "minor rite" (*xiaofa* 小法). Yin Jiao and his forces safeguard individual households from any sort of calamity, often economic, and protect the bodies of its inhabitants—especially women (who are susceptible to complications during pregnancy and childbirth) and children (who are vulnerable to disease)—from what might be demonic meddling. At times, Yin Jiao is charged with healing a household or person who has already been afflicted.

The masters of the lineage dare not breezily presume that their performance of the Banner Rite will in fact summon Yin Jiao and his forces. One need look no further than Chen Diwen's tense smoking to sense how serious this business is. Even seasoned masters are anxious each time they perform the Banner Rite on the first day of a *jiao.* Masters are wary of the possibility that they might mangle parts of the long and complicated ritual. They are also wary that Yin Jiao himself might, for whatever reason, choose not to respond. After all, despite having sworn an oath submitting his services to Chen's lineage centuries ago, Yin Jiao—like all martial deities—can be frighteningly ferocious and obdurate. He is forceful enough to deal with intrusive demons but can also be fickle and capricious. Even a competent performance of the Banner Rite might end in failure. "After all," a master in the lineage notes, "Yin Jiao *is* a god, and he is a little bit unruly [*ye* 野]." This fear is magnified tenfold when the Banner Rite is performed publicly for the first time during an ordination.

The Banner Rite is a decidedly Daoist mode of ritual communication. What enables a mortal such as Chen Diwen to enter a web of divine relationships is successfully establishing a foundation for the communication. That foundation is ontological. By detailed visualizations and complex inner alchemical procedures, an officiant like Chen attempts to recover the divine core of his very self, which shares the same stuff, the same primordial *qi,* as the divine bodies of the Emperor of the North, Shen the Realized One, and Yin Jiao. It is that ontological identity that makes possible communication between a ritual officiant and specific deities.

Once a common ontological ground is established, an officiant like Chen Diwen can converse in the language of the gods. He can literally channel the primordial stuff of his body to express a kind of synesthetic language in a long talisman (*fu* 符) inscribed on the banner. Each utterance of the talisman is an emanation of primordial *qi* from the officiant's body into an amalgam of written graphs, verbal incantations, mental visualizations, and gestures. Such mingling of inscription, voice, mental imagery, and movement communicates with deities because they are infused with the primordial *qi* that ontologically connects the sender with the recipient. If rendered properly, the talismanic language penetrates (*tong* 通) Yin Jiao. He should be moved (*dong* 動) by its message. That message is an entreaty that Yin Jiao be respectful of the web of divine relationships in which he exists. He should abide by the command of his celestial superior the Emperor of the North, he should remember the oath of loyalty he pledged to his master Shen the Realized One, and he should heed his pledge to serve Shen's liturgical progeny—Chen Diwen's lineage of masters. Provided that Chen performs the entire ritual well, Yin Jiao should recognize his duty to his celestial superior, to his master, and to Chen's lineage and agree to serve the ordinand.

The Banner Rite, then, is a sophisticated mode of ritual communication between an officiant such as Chen Diwen and the martial deity Yin Jiao, which mobilizes a web of gods to compel Yin to take up his dutiful position and serve as Chen's exorcistic functionary. This book unpacks this thesis by telling the stories of the two main interlocutors in the ritual—Chen Diwen the ordinand and Yin Jiao the martial deity—and then by drawing out the cosmological, theological, and anthropological concepts animating Chen's inaugural performance of the Banner Rite on that day in 2004. In the spirit of phenomenology of religion, the book articulates what is really going on inside the Banner Rite in Daoist terms. Those are the terms in which Chen Diwen experienced intense anxiety as he sat on his porch after his performance of the Banner Rite.

Ritual, Relationship, and Communication between Subjects

The historian of religion Lawrence Sullivan notes that every ritual is itself a theory of ritual writ large—that is, the symbols of any given ritual, strung together in a particular way in performed action, give a subtle accounting of the nature of ritual.[7] This book demonstrates that the particular theory running through the Banner Rite is that ritual performance itself is first and foremost communication. The interlocutors of that communication are both human and divine subjects thick with their own histories, formative relationships, and ability to participate in the ritual activity in a more or less engaged way—or not to participate at all. The Banner Rite is through and through informed by this notion of ritual, which has in large part come down to it from strands of practice and theory within the great liturgical movements of the Song and Yuan dynasties (960–1368). The masters in Chen Diwen's lineage who perform the Banner Rite today interpret the rite with this notion of ritual in mind.

The idea that ritual is a mode of communication between human and divine subjects has not been at the fore of the classic scholarship on Daoist ritual that informs this book. Kristofer Schipper famously looks at Daoist ritual as a "liturgical structure" or "liturgical framework" that organizes the daily life of local Chinese communities and integrates individuals within them. "The liturgical tradition of Taoism is first of all a great structuring system (*fa* 法) which pursues the autonomy of the social body. The integration of individuals into this body is achieved through ritual (*ke* 科)."[8] Daoist liturgies performed at the major markers of an individual's life—birth, puberty, marriage, death—as well as at public events—new year celebrations, thanksgivings for divine blessings—give shape to the rhythm of local communal life. Partaking in those performances, administered by local "Dignitaries of the Dao" (Daoist priests, *daoshi* 道士), literally incorporates individuals into that "social body," which is itself imagined as a part of the great cosmic body composed of primordial energies from the source of all things, the Dao. The liturgies that have comprised a more or less continuous "practice of the Dao" for two millennia have given shape to the religious and political workings of "non-official China" beyond the control of the state. For Schipper, what is important about ritual is that it provides remarkably durable form or pattern to social life on the ground, and that that local social life stubbornly resists top-down shaping by the state.

Schipper looks so intently at the formal aspects of Daoist ritual that he regards the doing of ritual, not discursive interpretations of that doing, as the very core of ritual:

> When investigating the meaning of Daoist ritual, it soon becomes clear that there is no general value system, but a number of different and overlapping ones. They no doubt reflect different stages and moments in the continuous quest for meaning, and periodically renewed adjustments or additions made to cope with the preoccupations of the times. At the same time, the core of the ritual is preserved. Transformations in meaning do not touch such fundamental ritual actions as singing, the burning of incense and the oblation of sacred, if often unintelligible, writings. It is around these nuclear ritual forms that various interpretational clusters have accumulated.[9]

It is not only the forms, or doing, of ritual action—singing, burning incense, burning liturgical documents like talismans, to name a few—that have endured during the long history of Daoist practice, it is the structure of those forms of doing—the way they are arranged vis-à-vis one another in the sequence of performance—that has persisted. This attention to structure compels Schipper to map out discrete forms of doing into an order or syntax that composes a larger formal set. Discrete "rites" (*fa*) are ordered in a certain way to compose "rituals" (*yi* 儀), and rituals are ordered in a certain way to compose "services" (*hui* 會, *ke*), such as "retreats" (*zhai* 齋) and "sacrifices" (*jiao*). The order of each set is logically similar, which creates a nested symmetry of ritual action that has been remarkably durable. Onto that "formal" structure of ritual syntax practitioners have grafted discursive meanings, which are multiple because they have changed with the vicissitudes of time and place. For Schipper, what Daoist liturgists do and the order in which they do it—rather than what they say about what they do—is the core of Daoist ritual seemingly impervious to major change.[10]

If what is important about ritual is the impact on local society by its performance, and especially the order or syntax of its performance, rather than its interpretation, then the participants in ritual matter for the roles they play in that performance. Noticing that during festivals in Taiwan Daoists often put on plays with string dolls on outdoor stages set up in front of temples, Schipper likens liturgical officiants to puppeteers, and both gods and mediums to puppets.

> The structure that governs the relation between puppet master and puppet—between the one hidden in the shadows who pulls the strings and the other who occupies center stage and, while the show lasts, holds the attention of the audience—is the same structure found in the relation between masters and mediums, men and gods. The gods are puppets. . . . In this game, men play with the gods, and the temple becomes a great dollhouse.[11]

In Taiwan, barefoot ritual masters (*fashi* 法師)—colloquially called "red heads" (*hongtou* 紅頭) for the color of their ritual headgear—perform rites in the vernacular language in which they communicate with various deities or deceased ancestors through mediums. Mediums go into trance, become possessed by specific spirits, and then speak in the spirit's voice or inscribe the spirit's intentions through spirit-writing. The medium is an instrument of the master's power, a tool by which the master communes with otherworldly beings. In addition, just as the barefoot master controls the medium, so does he hold sway over various spirits. Upon ordination, a ritual master makes a covenant with each of the gods, expressed in a sealed ordination document, in which the deity promises protection and aid. The covenant affords the master remarkable power to summon to the vessel of the medium each of the spirits of the pantheon, from lofty deities to lowly demons and orphan souls. The master knows the secret names of those spirits and how to write them in the mysterious language inscribed on talismans. He knows their legends and hails them by reciting vernacular verses alluding to their histories. Spirits are sure to respond. "In spite of respectful words, the summons is real. A law requiring the gods to obey the master is the result of an agreement between the master and the gods [upon the master's ordination]: those who obey will be promoted and honored, the others will be persecuted. They are thus forced to manifest themselves in the medium or the puppet, or to reveal themselves through inspired writing."[12] Higher deities are bound by cosmic law to work for the benefit of mankind, and lower spirits obey masters in their bid to ascend the ladder of merit that leads to a desirable position in the heavens.

Likewise, Schipper argues that Daoist priests (*daoshi*)—those who perform rites in the classical language and, he insists, are direct descendants of the early Celestial Master (Tianshidao 天師道) movement of the second century CE—occupy the role of master over certain deities. During his ordination, a Daoist is conferred a list of functionary deities with whom he has a "personal relationship." They accompany him wherever he goes and protect his body and his ritual performances from demonic attack. Schipper classifies these deities as members of the popular pantheon. Unlike the highest deities, who are hypostases of the Dao and so are regarded as properly "Daoist" gods, popular deities were once lowly, even demonic, spirits who are working their way up the cosmic hierarchy. "These popular gods entered the covenant in order that they might progress in the merit system of the *ke* (liturgy). The *daoshi* is their master and, thanks to his liturgy, the gods may 'pass' (*du* 度). Any of their actions favorable to mankind are duly recorded so that they may gradually transcend their demoniacal identity."[13] For Schipper, the familiar relation between the barefoot ritual master and his medium, between the barefoot ritual master and his spirits, applies here. The Daoist priest is the puppeteer and the deities conferred to him are his puppets. Deities must respond to the summons and directives of the Daoist master.

Schipper's influential ideas about ritual help us get at part of the theory of ritual assumed by the Banner Rite and its liturgists. Ritual is indeed about communication between masters and deities, especially functionary deities such as Yin Jiao with whom the master has a personal relationship struck during ordination. Masters do indeed hail those deities by calling their secret names or writing them out in talismanic language, and by regaling deities by alluding to narratives about their histories. Yet, the Banner Rite insists that the relationship between master and martial deity is more complicated and interesting than that between a puppeteer and his puppet. Although obligated to serve a master, a martial deity is both fearsome and fickle. That he can refuse—and at times does refuse—to obey his obligation is why ordinands such as Chen Diwen are so anxious about whether the ritual succeeds. The master cannot force his functionary deity to respond to his summons, despite divine laws or statutes commanding compliance. For this reason, the master communicates with a host of other deities, who themselves have influence on his functionary, to convince and even coerce the capricious deity to comply. For Schipper, the master and deity are flat characters in a ritual play with an inevitable outcome; they are functions of a virtually unchanging "liturgical structure." But the Banner Rite insists that both master and deity are active participants in an encounter with an uncertain ending, and each uses the symbolic language of the ritual to influence how the ending comes about.

In an incisive critique of Schipper's position that ritual ought to be understood as purely formal syntax vacant of discursive meaning, Poul Andersen argues that ritual has meaning in a relational sense. Ritual means something to someone in a certain context within a larger life world.[14] In other words, ritual involves subjects. By the term "subject," I mean those who have a history, articulable in narrative, in which they are formed by means of relationships with others. Subjects actively participate in endeavors like ritual in such a way that their participation is particular to them in their contexts within a larger life world.[15] Many subjects are involved in a ritual such as the

Banner Rite. Liturgists, lay patrons, artisans, cooks, and even local officials, as well as different classes of deities, deified masters, and demons, all congregate in and around the altar space. But we shall see that the Banner Rite and its liturgists are concerned primarily with two subjects—the ordinand and his martial deity.

These subjects of the Banner Rite are entangled in particular histories. Chen Diwen, who was a sickly child whose grandmother prayed to a deified local master for his health, later found his way into the apprenticeship of another local master. That master introduced Chen to a long lineage of deceased masters who claim to descend from particular Song-era Daoist patriarchs and a quirky Buddhist patriarch. A particular history of Yin Jiao has made its way down to Chen. Narratives and iconography maintained by his lineage recount that Yin Jiao attends to one of the highest of the celestial deities and has passed several lifetimes as a prince of various rulers, most recently of the infamous King Zhou of the ancient Shang dynasty. Yin Jiao began this lifetime as a traumatized boy bent on revenge for his slain mother at the hand of his wicked father, but later gave that up and pledged himself to serve the Dao under the tutelage of a wise master, who happens to be one of the patriarchs of Chen's lineage. The notion of ritual assumed by the Banner Rite and its liturgists, then, is a mode of communication between these two active subjects who are enveloped in histories filled with relationships that have shaped them.

At every turn, Chen Diwen and his masters use the word *goutong* (溝通)—to communicate, to link up—to characterize the Banner Rite. As one master put it, the Banner Rite is performed "to see whether one can communicate with the marshal" (看看自己是否能跟元帥溝通). For Schipper, communication between masters and martial deities is one-way. Ritual language flows from the master who speaks to a deity who receives. The deity, like an actor in a play, has no choice but to obey the speech or written signs. But the Banner Rite and its liturgists recognize that ritual communication is not monologic. It is instead dialogical. It consists of an active call from the officiant and an active response by the deity via the symbolic forms of language supplied by the ritual.