Zhu Yuanzhang dreamed a dream, and it meant so much to him that he composed an essay to expound its significance. In the dream, said to have occurred in the fall of 1367, slightly before the founding of the new dynasty, Zhu was wandering aimlessly in his hometown and saw a flock of birds in the sky, among which a fairy crane flew southeast. Then five-colored clouds with black banners passed by, and a red wooden tower appeared in the northwest sky. In front, two men exactly resembling the two law-guarding celestial gods (jingang) inside the gates to Buddhist temples seemed to be making a pronouncement. On the tower were several people with official hats and three dignitaries who looked like the Daoist Three Pure Ones (Sanqing). These dignitaries stared intently at Zhu for a moment and then went away to the northwest—back to the Heavenly Palace. He hurried off to follow them, but bumped into several Daoist priests in purple robes, one of whom granted Zhu a five-colored garment called the “dress of the ‘realized man’” (zhenren). Another gave him a sword that shone with great splendor. They then ordered him to go southeast. On his way, Zhu came across a strangely dressed man: His black garment was sleeveless, and
his head, shoulders, and thighs were bare. This man stared angrily at Zhu and then went off northeast. When Zhu continued his journey southeast, he crossed a stream and saw his heir apparent standing in front of a house. At this moment, Zhu awakened from the dream.¹

The message of the dream is clear: Zhu Yuanzhang had received the Mandate of Heaven to found a new dynasty. Heavenly spirits had chosen him (the crane) out of the masses and granted him, the "realized man" or sage, the imperial regalia. They not only guaranteed his victory over the Mongols (represented by the angry man), but set the future dynasty’s course by arranging for his succession. In the dream, the auspicious colors, the southeast direction (as the power base of the new regime), and crossing the stream (standing for the Yangzi River), all symbolized divine sanction for the new ruling house. In the second month of 1368, right after the founding of the dynasty, Zhu asked his court advisor Zhu Sheng (1299–1371) (DMB, 348–50), then the Hanlin expositor-in-waiting, to explain the dream. Zhu Sheng said just what the emperor wanted to hear: “This was indeed an omen of Your Majesty receiving the Mandate” (TS, 527).

While various meanings can be read into this story, the rituals recorded in or omitted from the imperial account are noteworthy. The narration indicates that to establish and consolidate his government, Zhu Yuanzhang would have to rely on rituals connecting him to superhuman forces. Hence, a ceremony was held in which the Mandate was announced, garments and sword granted, and the title “sage” conferred—the approximation of “an elaborate ritual for a sage receiving the Heavenly Mandate in the popular Taoist tradition” (Chan 1975a, 706). Moreover, the ceremonies held in the dream reflect diverse intellectual sources. It comes as no surprise that Zhu’s story accorded with the official interpretation of the Heaven-human relationship, where the Heavenly Mandate was bestowed upon a sage ruler. What is striking in the narrative is the significant role played by Buddhist and Daoist priests, who proclaim the Mandate and preside over the ceremonies in which Zhu receives the imperial symbols. They are also envisioned as spirits who reside in the heavenly palace. Thus, together with the official deities, Buddhist and Daoist spirits also blessed Zhu’s dynastic enterprise.²

Equally significant in the imperial account, as Romeyn Taylor (1976, 4) notes, is the omission of the White Lotus Society with which Zhu had been closely associated early in his career. Apparently, Zhu did not identify himself with millenarian believers and practitioners, and must have intentionally left them out of his narrative. This short dream record, therefore, demonstrates the importance Zhu placed upon certain rituals in building the Ming empire.
Indeed, the role of ritual—standardized, repetitive, and symbolic behavior—in creating social meaning, constructing social solidarity, and forming political communities has been extensively studied by scholars of various disciplines (e.g., Bell 1992, 1997). In the case of China, the sociologist Stephan Feuchtwang (1974) and anthropologist Arthur Wolf (1974b) study the Taiwanese conception of the supernatural world, and find that people’s construction of supernatural beings—gods, ghosts, and ancestors—are modeled on their vision of social classes. In contrast, the anthropologist Emily M. Ahern (1981, 110) examines the relation between rites and politics in southeast China, and demonstrates that “religion and ritual mystify their adherents and conceal the true nature of political power from them.” In examining the role of ritual and symbol in legitimizing the Tang Dynasty, the historian Howard J. Wechsler (1985) bases his study on the theoretical framework of present-day political science.

While these scholars have revealed governmental manipulation of religious rituals for political ends and the social impact this has on people’s values, other scholars emphasize the belief in the power of the spirit world held by those participating in rituals. In discussing “folk Buddhism” in late imperial China, for example, Daniel Overmyer challenges the view that religion is a mere superstructural embodiment of deeper political and socioeconomic forces. Despite its frequent utilization in political activities, he holds, one should recognize religion’s “central role” as a spiritual vision with “a shaping power in its own right.” Overmyer’s argument directs our attention to the spiritual as well as political and socioeconomic functions of religious rituals (Overmyer 1976, 16, 19, 70–71, 199). This chapter draws on his insights, attempting to understand rituals prescribed in *The Great Ming Code* in terms of their role in replicating the cosmic order and transforming the human spiritual world.

Rituals, of course, were present in many areas of social experience during the Ming. The *Great Ming Commandment* of 1368 provides systematic regulations on rituals (Farmer 1995, 163–77). In the *Collected Rituals of the Great Ming* (Da Ming jili, 1370), the established “five rituals” cover a wide range of matters, such as sacrifice to spirits, court audience procedures, capping, marriage, foreign tribute, military operations, mortuary procedures, court regalia, and music (TS, 1113–14). All of these rituals are regulated in *The Great Ming Code*, which defines rituals in specific articles, general rulings and references to other Ming ritual texts. This study is focused on rituals for communication between the spirit world and the human realm, usually characterized as “religious.” They are divided into three categories, depend-
ing on their treatment in *The Great Ming Code*: (1) official rituals, sets of symbolic behavior endorsed and promoted by the government; (2) popular rituals, practices that coexist with official rituals but are subject to government control; and (3) “heretical rituals,” those that are considered dangerous to the official cosmic order and are prohibited by law. The evidence gathered for this study indicates that Ming regulations on rituals were designed to promote spiritual guidance, as well as to provide political legitimacy.

**PROMOTING OFFICIAL RITUALS**

For the early Ming ruling elite, rituals for communicating with deities were necessary for effective communication between spirits and human beings, and for promoting the government-envisioned worldview among the people (Romeyn Taylor 1990, 1998). Zhu Yuanzhang and his officials systematically established and strenuously enforced a set of sophisticated rituals in the course of the dynastic founding. These rituals consist of sacrifices to a large pantheon of spirits such as Heaven, Earth, human ancestors, the sun, the moon, sacred peaks, and abandoned ghosts (MS, 1225–26). The sacrifices are official versions of ceremonial, hierarchal rules enabling human beings to communicate with the spirit world. Sacrifices other than these were considered “heterodox sacrifices” (*yinsi*), and officials at various levels were not allowed to perform them (MS, 1306). *The Great Ming Code* served as one of the key measures to protect and manifest these rituals.

Article 176 of the *Code* stipulates a set of rules on procedures for worshipping Heaven and lesser deities. The Court of Imperial Sacrifices, for instance, had to announce in advance the dates of the sacrifices to every yamen. No mistakes were allowed for either organizers or participants. Once officials had begun a period of abstinence, they could not attend funerals, visit the sick, sign documents concerning punishments, or attend feasts. If an official was in mourning for a relative of the fifth degree of mourning or closer, or had been punished by beating with the heavy stick, he could not be appointed as an officiator or participate in the sacrifices. Those who were in mourning or had committed transgressions were also responsible for reporting these matters. Officials who had begun a period of abstinence must sleep in purified rooms at their houses during the period of partial (or relaxed) abstinence (*sanzhai*), and in their own offices during the period of full (or intensive) abstinence (*zhizhai*). Furthermore, offerings like sacrificial beasts, jade, silk, or grain had to be prepared according to the rules; for example,
the responsible office must feed sacrificial animals properly, so they would not be thin or injured. Obviously, this article was intended to correct lack of reverence toward deities during sacrificial rites. Indeed, sacrificial rituals were regarded as important dynastic institutions whose function was to “move the deities and obtain their blessings” (XTFL, 6.2a; JJFL, 918). One model verdict for the Code emphasizes the significance of sacrificial rites by attributing the successful establishment of the Shang and Han dynasties to their founders’ sincere performance of rituals (LTSY, 11.4a; ZPZZ, 5.2b). The set of regulations in this article ensures that ritual participants will have sincere hearts and clean bodies. The requirement for a pure body is particularly noteworthy. All participants must be clean, including both exterior cleanliness and pure internal organs. A contaminated body (such as one with offensive odors or that had received punishment) would not be an effective medium for communication with the deities. Furthermore, bodily contamination derives from invisible/spiritual as well as visible/physical pollution. The inauspiciousness and filth caused by visiting the sick or attending a criminal trial could not be eliminated by cleansing acts. This article sets up strict purification requirements for rituals, promoting a “clean body and pure heart” (jieti mingxin) (LMBJ, 4.3b).

The Code also protects the facilities and objects used for sacrificial rites, prohibiting the damage or destruction of mounds and altars (Art. 177) and unauthorized entry into the Altar of Earth (Art. 202). Those who discarded or destroyed objects used in sacrifices to spirits would be punished by one hundred strokes of beating with the heavy stick and penal servitude for three years; for lost or mistakenly destroyed objects, the punishment would be reduced by three degrees (Art. 177). More seriously, for stealing sacrificial objects such as utensils, curtains, or offerings of jade, silk, livestock, or food vessels, offenders would be decapitated, making no distinction between principals and accessories. Whether or not the sacrificial objects had already been offered, the penalty would still be one hundred strokes of beating with the heavy stick and penal servitude for three years (Art. 280).

Two points are noteworthy in the above rulings. One is the sacred nature of sacrificial facilities and objects. Mounds and altars were viewed as places where the deities resided, and the gates were where they could be greeted. The penalty for damage or destruction of these facilities was not differentiated on the basis of intentional or negligent acts (LTSY, 11.4b; XTFL, 6.3b). In addition, because they were utilized to communicate with deities, the Code treats them differently from ordinary property; those who infringed upon them would receive fixed penalties, unlike the calculated property val-
ues that determined punishments for “illicit goods” (zang). The commentaries on the *Code* state that ritual utensils are special, for they are utilized to worship the deities, and thus should not be treated like “money and grains in granaries and treasuries” (JJFL, 924, 1315; DLSY, 211).

A second observation is that different penalties were imposed for discarding, destroying, or stealing objects used in the great and medium sacrifices. One might assume that the act of robbery would be less serious than that of destruction or discarding, since in the former case, the sacrificial objects might be returned without any damage, whereas in the latter case they might be damaged or disappear forever. The law, however, took the opposite view. Not only was robbery punished more severely, it was also categorized as “great irreverence,” one of the most heinous of the Ten Abominations. In the *Collected Commentaries*, this is seen as a sacrilege; stealing sacrificial objects “profanes the deities to to the utmost,” so the offenders deserve an extreme penalty (JJFL, 1313–14). Perhaps robbery was punished more severely because the stolen objects could fall into the hands of individuals who might use them. The possession of sacred objects by individuals rather than the government was considered a threat to the security of the dynasty, as well as a sacrilege against the deities.

The *Code* was designed to preserve an imperial monopoly over communication with Heaven, ensuring the ruler’s role as mediator between Heaven and human beings. It forbade private households from engaging in any activities that connected Heaven and human beings. A section of Article 180, “Profaning the Spirits,” reads:

In all cases where private families pray to Heaven, worship the Dipper [baidou], burn incense at night, or light the celestial lamp [tiandeng] or the seven lamps [qideng], thus profaning the spirits, they shall be punished by eighty strokes of beating with the heavy stick. If women commit such crimes, the household heads shall be punished.

Central to this passage is the authorization to worship Heaven, Earth, and other deities; tension is seen between the imperium and private families. When private families communicated with Heaven, Earth, or other major spiritual bodies, they infringed upon the imperial prerogative and duty to serve as the mediator between Heaven and humankind. Even though they acted secretly at night, without performing these rites publicly, it was still viewed as politically dangerous. The passage also addresses itself to the issue of committing sacrilege against the spirits. Sacrilege involved the status of worshippers, as well as the ceremonies they observed. In the Ming official
cosmology, deities were differentiated into superior and inferior orders, and humans of different social stations were assigned different responsibilities in divine interactions. Although people were all generated by Heaven/Earth as cosmic “children,” only the ruler could be the “Son of Heaven.” In this parent-child relationship, people were “outsiders”—Heaven and Earth’s lesser children—and were supposed to know Heaven’s will only through the ruler’s interpretation. The worship of Heaven by any unauthorized person, as articulated in the Code, was punished not only because it violated the ruler’s authority, but also because it profaned the most respected deities. Likewise, in order to display reverence toward Heaven/Earth and other major deities, worship was to be performed in prescribed places using established procedures. The casual ceremonies and celestial lamps mentioned in the passage did not accord with dynastic standards, and might offend the deities. Therefore, “the status of commoners is humble, and the dwellings of private families are unclean.” Rituals performed by these people in such places profaned the deities (DLSY, 213).

Additionally, private families were prohibited from collecting and keeping celestial instruments or proscribed books, such as those on astronomical prophecy or augural diagrams (Art. 184). The political significance of this rule is obvious. The banned items were for observing the movement of Heaven and predicting future disasters or favorable events; hence, they could be used to “confuse the world and deceive the people” (LTSY, 12.5a; JJFL, 948–49). One model verdict cites two historical examples: Zhang Jue (d. 184) and Huang Chao (d. 884) practiced divination, which eventually caused the collapse of the Han and Tang dynasties (LMBJ, 4.15a-b). The law inflicted corporal punishment on offenders; it also granted ten liang of silver to accusers, encouraging them to “open the door” and help stop crime at the outset (Art. 184; JJFL, 948–49; ZPZZ, 5.12b). In addition to political considerations, this rule also demonstrates a deep cosmological conviction, envisioning a powerful spiritual realm and acknowledging the effectiveness of instruments used to connect that realm and humankind. This prohibition, therefore, did not simply facilitate political control, but also aimed to defend the officially endorsed cosmic order.

To safeguard imperial authority over communication with Heaven, the Code also forbade the private practice of astronomy. Astronomy was employed to examine and predict good or bad fortune for the dynasty. It was so closely related to court politics that only students at the Directorate of Astronomy were allowed to study it (LTSY, 12.5a). Those who studied or practiced astronomy without authorization would be treated like those
who collected celestial instruments (Art. 184). If those who practiced astronomy privately had already learned certain skills and procedures, after being punished they could be sent to the Directorate of Astronomy to become astronomy students (JJFL, 950). Likewise, if students of the Directorate of Astronomy committed crimes punishable by life exile or penal servitude, the penalties could be converted to beating or redemption by copper cash, and they could still use their specialized knowledge and skills at the astronomical offices (Art. 19). What mainly concerned the government was the spread of these skills into the public domain; making individual criminals suffer painful punishments was not its primary goal. In this case, the law drew a clear boundary line between “private” and “government”; in order to eliminate the possibility of “spreading fallacies to deceive people” (LJBY, 135), no practitioner of astronomy could remain outside the official sphere.

During interactions between Heaven and humans, messages from Heaven were extremely important; the ruler’s receiving and interpreting such information was always taken with great seriousness. Therefore, officials at the Directorate of Astronomy were required to accurately “observe and report heavenly portents” such as the sun with double rings and five-color clouds (Art. 196). According to the Collected Commentaries, the ruler needs to know about such heavenly phenomena because anomalies would inspire him with fear and make him take measures to rectify himself; while propitious signs would encourage him to cultivate virtue. Thus “they are essential to the court” (JJFL, 978). If officials at the Directorate of Astronomy falsely reported good omens or did not memorialize the truth regarding anomalies or propitious signs, which were considered serious crimes of “deceiving both the human ruler and Heaven” (XTFL, 13.14b–15a; JJFL, 1828), they would be punished by eighty strokes of beating with the heavy stick and penal servitude for two years, a penalty two degrees heavier than that for ordinary persons (Art. 387).

The Code protected imperial ancestor worship in two sets of rulings. The first states that most regulations concerning the great sacrifices are applicable to imperial ancestor worship, since the latter is part of the former (JJFL, 917). Thus, violations of rules on sacrificial procedures and objects were punished like violating rules on the great sacrifices. For example, since stealing objects for the great sacrifices figures in the “Ten Abominations,” then stealing objects used for sacrifices to the imperial ancestors was covered under the same ruling and was an equally serious offense (Arts. 2, 280).

Another set of rulings relating to imperial ancestor worship spells out specific crimes. The most serious crime is “plotting great sedition” (mou dani).
Ranked second in the “Ten Abominations,” this crime includes plotting to destroy imperial ancestral temples or mausoleums (Art. 2). Since it indicates an intent to usurp the throne (JJFL, 1301), it merits the Code’s harshest penalty: offenders would all be executed by slow slicing, their close male relatives would be decapitated, their close female relatives would be enslaved to meritorious officials, and their property would be forfeit to the government (Art. 277). Other related crimes included unauthorized entry to the imperial ancestral temple, tombs, or grave area (Art. 202), violation of imperial ancestral name taboos (Art. 67), and improper behavior during worship at imperial mausoleums (Art. 187). Stealing grass or trees, planting crops, grazing sheep and cattle, or accidentally setting fires within the imperial grave area were also prohibited (Art. 286).

The Code also protected the tombs of what Howard Wechsler (1985, 135–41) calls the dynastic “political ancestors,” including rulers, loyal subjects, martyrs, sages, or worthies of previous dynasties. As “political ancestors,” such historical figures represented both political and spiritual guidance for the empire. Politically speaking, they were models worthy of emulation in society. And as “ancestors” they became part of the official pantheon, and were thought to have the power to bestow blessings on humans. Thus, the act of collecting firewood, tilling the land, or pasturing domestic animals like cattle or sheep on their tombs profaned the deities, and also ran counter to the dynastic goal of venerating and manifesting the age-old tradition that these deities embodied (Art. 179; JJFL, 928; XTFL, 6.5a; ZPZZ, 5.5a).

For commoners, the Code placed great stress on mortuary rituals. In this respect, two groups of rulings are noteworthy. The first is concerned with the worship of deceased paternal grandparents and parents, especially during the prescribed mourning period. As crimes showing a “lack of filial piety,” actions like arranging for one’s own marriage, remarrying, making music, or taking off mourning garments and putting on ordinary clothing during the period of mourning for one’s parents are all listed in the “Ten Abominations”; they were punishable by beating with the heavy stick (Arts. 2, 111, 198). If during a mourning period, officials did not go home for mourning or were actively seeking office, not only would they be punished by beating with the heavy stick, but also those who awarded them official positions would be dismissed from office. And those who committed fornication during this period would be punished two degrees more severely than for ordinary fornication (Art. 396).

The second group of rulings deals with general mortuary rituals regard-
ing the dead body. In legislating death rituals, the Code took the Collected Rituals of the Great Ming as its standard (JJFL, 989; TS, 1113–14). When a death occurred in a household, the deceased had to be buried within three months in accordance with the abovementioned ritual code. The Code prohibited keeping a coffin with the remains in a house for more than a year for the purpose of geomancy or other reasons. It also forbade the cremation of corpses or throwing them into water, even at the behest of the dead person, unless the death occurred in a distant place, making it impractical to bring it back home for burial (Art. 200). Ensuring the timely burial of a corpse certainly has a practical side—decay sets in rapidly after death. But the law also endows the dead body with spiritual meaning: opening a grave to bury the dead will lead the soul to its home, and a safe home where the deceased can rest in peace is in the soil, not in fire or water (JJFL, 988–89; LMBJ, 4.31b–32a; ZPZZ, 5.27a-b).

In addition, the law also registers competing mortuary rites. To carry out the “geomancy” mentioned in the Code, the Collected Commentaries lists the practices of locating the “dragon’s den” (longxue) or other lucky, sandy, or watery sites; the “ten stems and twelve branches” (gan-zhi); and “mutual production and mutual destruction” (sheng-ke) (JJFL, 988). The purpose of these geomantic practices was to find an auspicious site for the “home” of the deceased by identifying the focal point where earthly vital energies converged. In other words, these practices found the dead body a place in Earth’s body, with the auspicious future for the former in the cosmic embrace of the latter. To be sure, the official ritual code and popular beliefs and practices concerning the dead have much in common: they both view death as a transition point rather than the end of the human journey; thus, they both perceive the corpse as a crucial vehicle enabling the deceased to pass from this life to the afterlife. Within the official religious framework, the popular practice of geomancy was tolerated by the state. But if these two worldviews clashed—when geomancy was practiced in violation of official guidelines, the government would then have to intervene.

These mortuary regulations also reveal concern over possible challenges to the official cosmic and social order. The ritual code, the Collected Rituals of the Great Ming, stipulates different mortuary periods for different social groups: for the Son of Heaven, seven months; for princes, five months; and for all other people, the term is three months (LMBJ, 4.30b). The Great Ming Commandment also specifies different tomb sizes and styles (Farmer 1995, 173–74). Allowing the corpse to remain unburied beyond the
The prescribed period was considered in defiance of the official hierarchical order spelled out in these law codes. Indeed, according to two “model official notices” (gaoshi) people often delayed burying the deceased (usually parents) because they wanted to acquire more goods for a more luxurious, though illegal, burial. This violated the filial code and defiled social customs, making the parents’ bodies a tool to acquire fortune; it also infringed upon the fixed social order wherein high and low each had their assigned place. The model official notices further state: “Whenever funeral arrangements are to be made, it is essential to be content with your poor or rich lot; do not transgress the status limit and legal regulations, violate the ritual code, or follow [vulgar] customs” (LMBJ, 4.31b; ZPZZ, 5.27a-b). Here again, each rival mortuary practice endows the dead body with symbolic meaning, making it a means of displaying status. There is a discrepancy between the time period stipulated in the official ritual code (three months) and that in The Great Ming Code (more than a year); perhaps twenty-seven years after the Collected Rituals was enacted, the Code allowed for compromise between the official ideology and popular beliefs.

Before moving to the next section on popular religions, a brief note on official rituals during the early Ming is in order. The early Ming period witnessed a growth in imperial authority over the reinterpretation of items and procedures for spirit sacrifices. Ho Yun-yi (1978) has shown the tension between Zhu Yuanzhang and his Confucian advisors in understanding the cosmic order, as seen in ritual reforms for the worship of Heaven and Earth. During the first decade of the Ming, Heaven and Earth were worshipped separately, on the winter and summer solstices, respectively. In 1375, Zhu combined these rites on the grounds that the separation of cosmic parents did not accord with principle (li) and caused them to demonstrate their unhappiness with unpleasant weather (YZWJ, 176–77).

The early Ming also saw the incorporation of a number of popular rituals into the official rites, as is seen in the Sacrificial Statutes. Romeyn Taylor (1977) states that early Ming official religion cannot be understood solely in terms of Song Neo-Confucianism; taking acceptance of the “gods of the walls and moats” (cheng huang zhi shen) by the government as an example, he argues that Zhu Yuanzhang’s intended goal of a unified religious community reveals an amalgamation of politics and religion. Indeed, a number of new spirits, including city gods, the star of longevity, and abandoned ghosts appeared in the Ming official pantheon, which was the official image of the cosmic order.
The term “popular religion” has been used by scholars in various ways. Romeyn Taylor and Daniel Overmyer, for instance, use it to denote nonofficial religions, namely, the religious beliefs and practices that developed “outside the official religion without either the sanction of the law or the authority of the officially registered and regulated Buddhist and Taoist clergies” (Romeyn Taylor 1990, 128) or “below official rank” (Overmyer 1989–1990, 193). Other scholars use this term more broadly to designate religious beliefs and practices shared by all social groups, including both the ruling class and the common people.\(^{11}\) In this study, the term “popular religions” denotes the beliefs and practices that were neither promoted nor prohibited, but rather regulated by the government—primarily Buddhism and Daoism.\(^{12}\) In *The Great Ming Code*, popular religious rituals were legal and could coexist with official rituals; but at the same time, due to their nonofficial nature, they were subject to control.

*The Great Ming Code* established three major categories of regulations for Buddhism and Daoism. First, the law controlled the erection of Buddhist and Daoist monasteries and the ordination of priests. During the Hongwu reign, in order to regulate monastic life, the imperial court had *Comprehensive Supervision Registers* (Zhouzhi ce) compiled to record the monks’ relevant information. The government required that each prefecture, subprefecture and district could have only one large Buddhist monastery and one Daoist temple, and specified that only those who were not yet twenty, upon the request of their parents, would be allowed to take examinations on the Buddhist or Daoist scriptures. Those who passed the examination would be granted an ordination certificate, and those who failed would be punished by beating with the heavy stick and returned to the civilian register (MHD, 568–69; Yü 1998, 895–96). The *Code* stipulates that to build new monasteries or receive ordination, it is imperative to receive official permission; otherwise, all of those involved in the case, either officials or priests, would be punished by the heavy stick, penal servitude, reversion to secular status, or even military exile (for male priests) or enslavement by the government (for nuns) (Art. 83).

The socioeconomic interests of the government account for the establishment of strict procedures and age requirements for the ordination ritual. The government was competing with Buddhist and Daoist circles for a labor
force and land; it also aimed to maintain a stable sociopolitical order. But doctrine was also important. To place legal restrictions on the number of monasteries and ordinations, various commentaries on The Great Ming Code view Buddhism and Daoism as heterodox or heretical, and blame them for "confusing the world" and challenging the Confucian "correct way." These legal texts articulate a confrontation between the "immortal wind and Buddhist sunshine" and governmental "ritual scriptures and penal documents." The control over religious institutions and their body of rituals, therefore, was designed to "prohibit heresies and promote the orthodox Way" (jin xie-shu chong zhengdao) (JJFL, 550; LMBJ, 2.6b–7a). A model verdict states that "although Buddhism is like an ocean that can save one hundred thousand people, it is the imperial institutions that, like Heaven, command all the Three Teachings" (XTFL, 2.5a). Here, Ming jurists express anxiety over a challenge to the official worldview from Buddhism and Daoism; Buddhist and Daoist monasteries hence became the locus of intellectual struggle and spiritual conflict.

To mitigate the Buddhist and Daoist challenge to the official interpretation of the cosmic order, the Code prohibited priests and nuns from establishing sacrificial altars to worship Heaven, presenting black-paper charms or yellow-paper prayers, or using charms or prayers to avert fire calamities (Art. 180). The central issue here is that such charms and prayers were used to communicate directly with the Lord on High; as nonofficial ritual practices, such communication "profanes Heaven's hearing with sublime words" (yi weiyuan du tianting) (DLSY, 213). This prohibition is also expressed in the article concerning "profaning spirits," meaning that the Buddhist and Daoist clergy were not authorized by the government to communicate with officially endorsed deities like Heaven and Earth: their challenge to official authority was a threat to political legitimacy and its spiritual foundation.

While the law controlled certain Buddhist and Daoist rituals, it endorsed monastic celibacy. The Code punished violations of sexual taboos by Buddhist and Daoist priests, forbade priests to take women as wives or concubines (Art. 120), and barred women from entering Buddhist or Daoist monasteries (Art. 180). Furthermore, for priests or nuns who committed fornication, the penalty would be two degrees heavier than for ordinary persons (Art. 396). This group of rules is particularly concerned with expectations for the Buddhist and Daoist body. When priests shaved their heads or arranged their hair and put on priestly robes, they were supposed to follow Buddhist or Daoist rules and eradicate their lust for "sounds and sights" (shengse, i.e., music and women); they could not "close the mouths that should be used to
chant the name of Buddha but let loose the hearts to indulge in lewdness” (LMBJ, 2.62b–63a). The ears, eyes, mouth, and heart of the body should be used to think about, chant, observe, and listen to the teachings, rather than to indulge in sensual pleasures; the sexual parts of the body were deemphasized. To be sure, Buddhists and Daoists developed a variety of techniques for nourishing, strengthening, and enjoying the sexual body. While they could utilize such techniques on their own, they were not supposed to practice them with the opposite sex. In this regard, the Code sided with Buddhist/Daoist regulations and perceived the Buddhist or Daoist collectivity as socially nonsexual. Official concern, of course, went beyond the body. When the imperial law defended the Buddhist and Daoist ritual norms—a very rare gesture in the Code, it endeavored to create a clear boundary line between priesthood and laity: a person cannot be both priest and layman at the same time; crossing of the boundary line “pollutes civilized transformation and increases filthy customs” (ZPZZ, 3.52b–53a; JJFL, 931).

One radical measure for dealing with popular religions in Ming law was reorienting the rituals toward family institutions and value systems. The Code defined members of Buddhist and Daoist monasteries with an analogy to family hierarchy. The relationship of priests and nuns to their masters was considered the same as to paternal uncles and their wives. In other words, the relationship of master to disciple was considered the same as to the children of elder or younger brothers (Art. 44). In the event that they committed crimes against one another, the masters would be treated more favorably. The imitation of the family model within the monastic order undoubtedly served to protect Buddhism and Daoism. It also demonstrates the law compilers’ ambition to incorporate Confucian family values into Buddhist or Daoist principles.

This stance is further articulated in Article 195 of the Code:

All Buddhist and Daoist priests and nuns shall honor their parents and conduct sacrifices to their ancestors; the mourning degrees shall all be the same as those for ordinary people. Any violations shall be punished by one hundred strokes of beating with the heavy stick, and the offenders shall return to lay status. (Art. 195)

This article requires Buddhist and Daoist priests and nuns to observe Confucian family values, hierarchical relationships, and mortuary rituals. Various interpretative commentaries on the Code blamed priests for “forgetting the virtue of Heaven and Earth and discarding the human way.” Although Buddhists and Daoists were part of the “heretical” (yiduan) world, they should by
no means sever the “heavenly bond” and betray “heavenly nature,” which are
based on parental “loving-kindness in giving birth to the body and maintain-
ing life” (shengshen yangyu zhi en) (LMBJ, 4.25b–26a). A model verdict asks this
question: “Buddhists and Daoists are also human beings; they do not receive
their bodily forms (xing) from nowhere. Are your parents not your relatives
[from whom you have received your bodies]!” When they place a Buddhist
robe on the body or chant the Daoist scripture entitled Huangting jing (Book
of the Yellow Court), they stop thinking about their origins (LMBJ, 4.26a;
XTFL, 6.18a-b). In a word, if Buddhist or Daoist priests and nuns replaced
the Confucian family rituals with their “heterodox teachings” (yijiao), they
deserved the punishments designated for “discarding relatives, disregarding
moral obligations, and breaking off the Way of human beings” (JJFL, 976).

It is interesting to note that the model verdict pinpoints the Daoist text,
the Book of the Yellow Court. This book, according to Kristofer Schipper (1978),
provides guidelines for cultivating the Daoist body. It seems clear that Ming
law was unconcerned with the spiritual quest of the Buddhist or Daoist
clergy to attain either Buddhahood or immortality, but instead endeav-
ored to maintain their connection to the human realm through the body.
This is evidence of keen competition between different belief systems and
ritual practices. Indeed, since the fall of the Han Dynasty, family values had
become one of the focal points in the intellectual debate between Confucian-
ism and its rivals Buddhism and Daoism. The requirement of the monastic
life style—the severing of family ties—was attacked, defended, and rein-
terpreted when the conflicting schools of teachings vied with one another
within spiritual as well as sociopolitical domains. When the Chinese people
accepted the foreign teaching, Buddhism, and developed their own indig-
enous system, Daoism, these two teachings underwent significant trans-
formation when Confucian values were incorporated into their doctrines.
Lewis Lancaster observes that the notions of praising living parents and hon-
oring ancestors permeated a variety of Buddhist sutras (Lancaster 1984).15
Masaharu Ozaki also points out the influence of family values on Daoist
beliefs and practices such as retaining the hair and surname after “leaving
home” (chujia) (Ozaki 1984). Thus, while the Great Ming Code’s effort to bring
Buddhism and Daoism into the official ritual orbit may be interpreted as a
bid for political control, it can also be understood as a cultural and ritual
amalgamation of different beliefs and practices resulting from these intel-
lectual exchanges. The legal stipulations, therefore, reveal the early Ming
ruling elite’s ambition to reform Buddhism and Daoism by imbuing them
with Confucian family values.

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The above regulations in *The Great Ming Code* indicate three different attitudes toward popular religions. The first is the desire to control the expansion of Buddhist and Daoist communities; the second is the willingness to protect the Buddhist and Daoist teachings that repress the sexual function of the Buddhist and Daoist body in society; and the third is the determination to reform the Buddhist and Daoist values and practices that sever parental ties by forcing Buddhists and Daoists to adopt Confucian values and ritual practices. The legal regulations imposed on Buddhists and Daoists demonstrate the official desire for political, social, and economic control; they also indicate an intellectual struggle between imperial orthodoxy and unorthodox teachings.

The ambiguous legal status of popular religions mirrors the complex attitudes of the early Ming ruling elite toward these religions. In some respects, Zhu Yuanzhang and many of his advisors envisioned a constructive role for popular religions, anticipating that they "could supply the state with ideological and educational services" (Brook 1997, 169). In a variety of essays, Zhu argued that Buddhism and Daoism share the same purpose as Confucianism in transforming human beings. In "On the Three Teachings," for example, he says:

The expression “three teachings” has been on everyone’s lips since Han times, through Sung times, and down to the present. According to it, the scholars take Confucius [as their master], the Buddhists take Shakyamuni, and the Daoists Lao Tan [i.e., Lao Zi]. Among these three, the damage done to Lao Tzu has gone on for many years. Who does not realize that Lao Tzu’s TAO is not that of the techniques of elixir and Yellow Hats [i.e., the alchemical Daoists]; rather, that it is something for the ruler of a state to practice on a daily basis and is something that he cannot do without. (YZWJ, 155; Langlois and Sun 1983, 123)

He concludes that Buddhist spirits and Daoist immortals can, “without being noticed, help the kingly principles and benefit the realm endlessly” (YZWJ, 156).

In another essay, “On Giving Office to Buddhist Priests,” Zhu Yuanzhang identifies the Buddha as another sage created by Heaven to carry out the “unchanging Way” of the “Three Bonds and Five Constants.” He argues that although Confucianism and Buddhism have different terminologies and procedures, both of them uphold the same principles that “benefit the myriad things” (YZWJ, 162; Dardess 1983, 227). By including the Buddha in the official cosmological discourse on Heaven and the Way, the emperor hoped that
Buddhism would help transform the “stupid and villainous” human realm.

In practice, the Ming court made a great effort to promote popular religions. The emperor not only wrote essays expounding Buddhist principles (e.g., Ge 1980, 75–172; YZWJ, 121–22), but also personally presided over Buddhist festivals in close association with Buddhist monks (Ge 1980, 345–52; Huanlun 1992, 2.7b). The establishment of the government’s Buddhist and Daoist offices was at the priests’ request; they were supervised by Buddhist and Daoist monks themselves (Berling 1998, 960; Mano 1979, 248–55; Yü 1998, 905). Tens of thousands of Buddhist and Daoist priests were ordained by the government; many of them were appointed high-ranking officials (MS, 3988–89). Many court officials also associated themselves closely with Buddhism and Daoism. Song Lian, who circulated in Buddhist and Daoist circles (DMB, 1321, 1561) as a Confucian scholar-official who “pursued deep studies of Buddhist and Daoist teachings” (Huanlun 1992, 2.16a), wrote prefaces to some commentaries on Buddhist sutras and biographies of eminent Buddhist and Daoist priests (DMB, 1320; Ge 1980, 399–416; Chan 1975b, 90–93). Likewise, Zhan Tong (fl. 1350–1374), a chief imperial counselor and government official (DMB, 43–44), collaborated on music for imperial sacrificial ceremonies with the Daoist specialist Leng Qian (ca. 1310–ca. 1371) (DMB, 802–4; Huanlun 1992, 2.6b; Seidel 1970, 491). In general, the early Ming government “gave Buddhism and [D]aoism a clear and open, legitimate status in the Imperial order” (Berling 1998, 978).

However, the Ming court often criticized disorderly Buddhists and Daoists. In 1372, the emperor ordered severe punishments for Buddhists and Daoists who, during religious rituals, behaved licentiously by mingling with women, drinking alcohol, or eating meat (TS, 1351); this was an injunction that later became part of Article 200 of The Great Ming Code. In his Comprehensive Instructions to Aid the Realm, he criticized unenlightened Buddhist priests for (1) not marrying; (2) not returning home to care for parents; (3) not achieving the Way but still cutting off their family line; and (4) doing nothing but indulge in liquor and sex, thus defaming both teachings (ZSTX, 1469–71). For the emperor, while the Buddhist and Daoist scriptures were worth reciting, many of those who recited them were so corrupt that they should be strictly controlled. To regulate popular religions, the imperial court not only established government offices—the Central Buddhist Registry and the Central Daoist Registry—but also reorganized Buddhist and Daoist teachings. The emperor ordered that official versions of the commentaries on three major Buddhist sutras be composed (YZWJB, 297–98; Mano 1979, 255–57); he also personally regrouped Buddhists into the sects of meditation, exposi-
tion, and teaching (or yoga) (Yü 1998, 906–7), and wrote his own personal commentary on the Daoist text *Classic of the Way and Its Power* (Dao de jing) (YZ WJB, 292–93; Ma 1994, 160–61). Obviously, the emperor’s attention to popular religions not only extended to the material issues of taxation and the labor force, but more importantly, concerned the redefinition of their teachings, so that they could be incorporated into the official ideology.

In the later years of his reign, Zhu Yuanzhang identified more and more problems in Buddhist and Daoist circles. He denounced priests who engaged in lewd or licentious activities in the monasteries and who, on the pretext of begging for alms, deceived people to gain money. He condemned monasteries that hid military deserters or escaped prisoners, and said that many members of religious communities were “evil and worthless rascals” who were despised when they went out begging for food. These problems, the emperor believed, not only corrupted social customs and disrupted public order, but also defiled Buddhist and Daoist teachings (Ge 1980, 237, 242, 243, 49–50). Consequently, in 1391 and 1394, the court promulgated two decrees entitled *A Placard to Elucidate Buddhism* (Shenming Fojiao bangce) and *Regulations for Avoidance and Pursuit* (Biqu tiaoli) (Ge 1980, 231–39, 249–55; Huanlun 1992, 2.24b–26a, 2.28b–29a). These laws were intended to clean up the monasteries, rectify the priests’ behavior, and promote true devotion to religious teachings (Brook 1997, 167–69; Mano 1979, 257–61, 271–74; Yü 1998, 907).

Respecting popular religions, the early Ming government was in a perplexing situation. First, government officials knew that Buddhism and Daoism were competing teachings that could not be eliminated; the best they could do was impose restraints on them. A passage in the *Collected Statutes of the Ming* states: “Since the Han and Tang, Buddhism and Daoism have permeated popular culture. It is difficult to eradicate them entirely. We can only apply strict prohibitions so as not to let them spread vigorously” (578). Second, the Ming court also realized the positive role Buddhism and Daoism could play in social construction, and so made a great effort to promote them in government agencies and among ordinary people. By observing the values and rites of Buddhism and Daoism, religious adherents might become more tractable. Third, in order to compete with popular religions, the Ming government would have to redefine their spiritual values and practices. The court selected core Buddhist and Daoist texts and had commentaries written, sponsored examinations on Buddhist and Daoist canons, redesigned Buddhist and Daoist rituals, and reformed popular teachings in line with official religion. In short, popular religions were treated by the government as “both dangerous and necessary” (Schneewind 2001, 346, 354). The regula-
tions and reforms for Buddhism and Daoism in The Great Ming Code reflect the apprehension and uncertainty of the early Ming ruling elite regarding this issue.

In his study of the relationship between the state and Buddhism, Timothy Brook observes an important shift in imperial policy toward Buddhism during Zhu Yuanzhang’s Hongwu reign, which left a strong legacy for succeeding political periods. To Brook, the critical date was 1380: before that year, the imperial court “cast Buddhism in the role of adjunct to a state-centered structure of public authority, almost an official religion”; after that year, “Buddhism was no longer a resource for ruling but a threat to it. Monks were no longer men of wisdom but charlatans and draft dodgers whose very existence symbolized the failure of that [public] authority to take hold” (Brook 1997, 164, 165). Brook’s proposition differs sharply from that of Yü Chün-fang, who argues that the primary purpose of the imperial laws on Buddhism was to reform a debased clergy and “purify the sangha by subjecting it to tight control” instead of suppressing the alien teaching (Yü Chün-fang 1981, 144–47; 1998, 909). Sarah Schneewind, however, suggests that these different viewpoints should be reconciled. Based on her seven-phase model, she concludes that the emperor’s “policies toward Buddhism changed in step with other local institutional policies”; that is to say, “Zhu’s regulations for local society treated the Buddhist clergy much as he did other social groups” (Schneewind 2001, 346, 354).

This debate certainly affects our understanding of the regulations in The Great Ming Code on popular religions. If the imperial policy did shift to suppression in 1380, then most of the stipulations in the Code discussed above would make little sense. Central to the debate is the question of how to interpret the post-1380 imperial regulations. Since much is at stake in understanding The Great Ming Code on popular religions, several observations on this debate illustrated by passages from the Code are in order here. First, in line with Yü and Schneewind, among others (Ma 1994, 161; Mou and Zhang 2003, 762–76), this study argues that the purpose of these imperial regulations was not to “suppress” but to regulate popular beliefs and practices. Although Buddhism and Daoism differed significantly from official ideology and rituals, the Ming court did not regard these popular religions as threats to the imperial government. The imperial laws mainly targeted Buddhist and Daoist individuals, not their beliefs and ritual systems. “Buddhist doctrines,” as Schneewind observes, “were not condemned, but they were focused, like Confucian doctrines, through a selection of texts and commentaries for promulgation, examination, and ritual use” (Schneewind 2001, 354). The “unity of the three
teachings” became indeed a lofty ideological goal for the Ming founding emperor (Berling 1998, 978; Langlois and Sun 1983; Ma 1994, 161–66), although he weighed Confucianism more heavily than Buddhism and Daoism.18

Secondly, while different regulations were promulgated during the three decades of the Hongwu reign, none suggests an overall change in the imperial policies toward Buddhism and Daoism as belief systems. For one thing, prior to 1380, when the imperial court clearly favored Buddhism and Daoism, it also condemned corrupt priests, as indicated in the abovementioned 1372 injunction and 1375 essay. Also, after 1380, although the court intensified regulations by restructuring monastic orders and imposing severe punishments, it continued to commend Buddhist teachings for furthering the spiritual transformation needed to govern the realm; it also continued to request monk’s services,20 patronize monasteries,21 and issue ordinance certificates to priests.22 In 1382, in order to defend his Buddhist policy, Zhu ordered the deaths of two officials of the Court of Judicial Review, Li Shilu and Chen Wenhui, who had vehemently criticized the throne for abandoning the “sacred” Confucian learning and embracing “heretical” Buddhist ideas (MS, 3988–89; MTJ, 398; Langlois 1988, 146–47). In 1392, Zhu Yuanzhang was close to dying of fever. Since none of the medicines prescribed by imperial physicians were effective, the emperor decided to try a medicine presented by a Buddhist monk that had been prepared by the Daoist Crazy Zhou Immortal. After he took the medicine, Zhu recovered overnight and was much impressed by the magical effect of the medicine.23 Clearly, after 1380, Buddhist and Daoist teachings and practices influenced not only government affairs but also the emperor’s personal life.

Thirdly, even the post-1380 regulations did not imply the outright suppression of Buddhism and Daoism. In many respects, these regulations were still designed to protect popular religions, although they imposed stricter controls over them. Some regulations, for example, seem to have promoted the autonomy of Buddhist and Daoist authority;24 others protected monastic property;25 and still other regulations prohibited lay persons from interfering with monastic affairs.26 It would be farfetched to argue that these rules evince a repressive policy toward popular religions. As a matter of fact, many of the early Ming regulations had their origins in the preceding Mongol Yuan dynasty;27 it is commonly accepted that in the Yuan, “Tibetan Lamaism received the bulk of imperial patronage and favor from the time of Khubilai to the end of the dynasty”; and “Buddhism was strong both in Chinese elite society and among the common people” (Mote 1999, 501, 502). The post-1380 regulations, therefore, do not necessarily support the suppression thesis.

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Finally, it should be emphasized that the purpose of imperial regulations on Buddhism and Daoism went beyond competition for material resources, social power, and political control; these rules were also intended to strengthen the spiritual leadership role of the imperial court. The emperor endeavored to become an ideological authority by inculcating his official worldview among the people and reforming popular religions. As the religious leader of the dynasty (De Heer 1986, 5–6, 122–23), the emperor made tremendous efforts to turn all of his subjects into his disciples. In this sense, it is misleading to state that under imperial regulations, the “realms of religious and secular life were thus to be neatly separated, with the intention that the influence of the former on the latter be kept to a minimum” (Brook 1997, 169). Indeed, Zhu never intended to separate religious and secular realms. Instead, he endeavored to unify the one human world in accordance with his religious vision. While he attempted to limit the influence of popular religions, he did not mean to limit the influence of the religious realm on the secular one. Rather, he worked strenuously to influence the world with his religious blueprint. His world, then, was not differentiated into “religious and secular realms.”

The above observations regarding the relations between the government and popular religions in the early Ming are all supported by a survey of the regulations in the Code. First, the extant versions of the Code do not indicate any outright suppressive policy. Among the three extant versions of the Code, the one published in 1386 was supposed to be a copy of the Code of 1376 (LJBY); the Korean version of 1395 replicated the Code of 1389 (Ko and Kim); and the final version of the Code of 1397 was published in most existing editions of the legal text (e.g., Gao Ju). Present-day scholarship on these texts reveals that the legal regulations in all three versions of the Code are almost identical.28 Hence, the legal rules in the dynastic code on popular religions must have remained the same at least from 1376 to 1397.29 The same laws covering a span of more than two decades demonstrates the constancy and continuity of government policies on popular religions.30

In addition, the Code that was finalized in 1397 also shows no sign of a suppressive tone. As discussed in this chapter, the Code evinces multifaceted attitudes toward popular religions. It controlled them by limiting the construction of monasteries and the ordination of priests; it protected them by enforcing canonical codes on sexuality; and it reformed them by compelling priests to reestablish family ties. These legal measures accord with the imperial goal: to make popular religions “secretly aid the Kingly Way” (Ge 1992, 2.25a). They differ in nature from rules that truly suppress “heretical religious rituals.”
Finally, the religious mission of transforming “all under Heaven” is illustrated in the differential treatment of religious rituals in *The Great Ming Code*. Dynastic law aimed to promote official religion, to regulate popular religions, and to eradicate “heretical” religions. This was a mammoth project designed to transform everyone’s spiritual world in line with the official religion.

In short, this brief examination of the relation between the government and popular religions during the Hongwu reign suggests the implausibility of the proposition that the early Ming imperial court abandoned the belief that “Buddhism was amenable to incorporation into state institutions and could supply the state with ideological and educational services” (Brook 1997, 169). A complete shift in imperial policy toward popular religions did not occur during Zhu Yuanzhang’s Hongwu reign.31 To be sure, after 1380, Zhu did “put together an edifice of laws designed to subordinate monks and monasteries to the complete authority of the state” (ibid., 161); but these laws primarily targeted Buddhists and Daoists as individuals instead of their belief systems and ritual codes as a whole.32 At the same time, the imperial court also promulgated a large number of strict laws regulating imperial clansmen, government officials, students, military personnel, Confucian scholars, and commoners (Farmer 1995; Yang 1988). The claim that Zhu Yuanzhang changed his policy toward Buddhism and Daoism and viewed them as a threat to public authority would require an accompanying note to the effect that he also changed his policy toward every subject of the Ming empire, and viewed the entire empire and value system as a “threat.” This was certainly not the case—he took elaborate precautions against individuals, but did not interfere with the existing superstructure of Confucian teachings, imperial clans, officialdom, military organizations, Confucian education, and so on; he relied on all of these beliefs and institutions to achieve his goal of world salvation. Hence, in understanding the legal status of popular religions, the differential treatment accorded to individuals and doctrines should be noted.

**Prohibiting “Heretical Religious Rituals”**

By “heretical religions,” I refer to religious beliefs and practices that were prohibited by the government.33 “Heretical religions” were considered a serious problem by the imperial government throughout Chinese history because, as Robert Weller (1982, 464) observes, “sectarian ideologies can indeed provide an alternative worldview that potentially conflicts with offi-
cial desires.” This was especially true for the early Ming, since the founding of the Ming dynasty had in part been a result of messianic movements based on Manichaeanism and the White Lotus Buddhist sect. Zhu Yuanzhang had seized empirewide power in part by maintaining a close relationship with the White Lotus Society (Bailian She) armies; moreover, he chose the dynastic name Ming, which was a White Lotus term signifying “radiance” or “brightness.” It is quite possible that the success of the millenarian movement in overthrowing the Yuan regime had alerted the Ming founder to the danger that potentially subversive millenarian doctrines might also be used to combat the new dynasty.34 But as Romeyn Taylor (1977, 42) asserts, the White Lotus Society actually had little impact on the Ming emperor. Studies by John Dardess (1983) and John Langlois Jr. (1981b) also suggest that Zhu depended heavily on Confucians from the Jinhua area who tried to sway him toward acceptance of Confucian ideals. Therefore, instead of promoting the beliefs and practices of sectarian teachings, Zhu Yuanzhang, aided by his court advisors, began to denounce them as heresy even before the founding of the dynasty (Wu 1961b, 262–66).

The Great Ming Code prohibited sectarian rituals, severely punishing exorcists or shamans who invoked heretical spirits, drew charms, made incantations over water, wrote messages with planchettes, prayed to saints; called themselves “Proper Lord,” “Grand Guardian,” or “Grand Instructress”; recklessly claimed to be the Buddha Maitreya; or formed societies like the White Lotus Society, the Light-Honoring Sect, or the White Cloud School. The penalty was strangulation for principal offenders and one hundred strokes of beating with the heavy stick and life exile to a place three thousand li distant. Moreover, if community heads knew the circumstances but did not report them to the authorities, they would be held responsible for their nonaction. The Code justified the prohibition by defining these acts as “deviant ways” (zuodao) and claiming that they caused harm to orthodox elements, agitating and confusing the people (Art. 181). The various commentaries to the Code further interpret them as “heresy” and “sorcery,” stating that such practices are disastrous to all under heaven since they destroy the “five teachings” (JJFL, 934–35; ZPZZ, 5.9a). One model verdict furnishes specifics on this issue: These practitioners “constantly sing and dance and thus destroy the caps and robes of the Central Kingdom (Zhongguo); [they claim] to have neither father nor ruler and thus block the correct path to benevolence and righteousness” (LMBJ, 4.10b). That is to say, sectarian rituals did not just threaten the political order, they also endangered Chinese civilization. Particularly noticeable is the accusation “constantly singing and dancing”
that derives from the Book of Documents (Shangshu). This Confucian classic condemns “customs of sorcery,” “dancing constantly in the palace and singing in exhilaration from drinking in one’s house” as two of the ten major transgressions responsible for the destruction of self, family, and the dynasty (Shangshu zhengyi, 163). Here, the ruler of the Shang dynasty was denouncing heretical practices by which the Lord on High, the imperial ancestors, and a great many minor deities in the official pantheon were worshipped. The Ming ruling elite inherited this tradition and endeavored to purify the world.

Although Zhu Yuanzhang openly denounced sectarian teachings about Maitreya as “heretical remarks” (yaoyan) as early as 1366, the prohibition of the White Lotus Society and other sects was not codified in the first edition of the Ming Code in 1367. The strong influence of the White Lotus Society among the Red Armies might have been a factor that deferred this legislation. According to the Veritable Records of the Ming, it was in 1370, when ministers from the Secretariat memorialized a petition to ban sectarian societies and other types of sorcery, that Zhu Yuanzhang first ordered this prohibition.35

The politico-ideological message of the new rule is obvious: these “heretical rituals” challenged both the officially envisioned cosmic principle and the mundane political structure. On one hand, people might be deluded into believing in unorthodox interpretations of the cosmic order; on the other hand, large groups of people gathered together to perform such rituals might be difficult for the government to control. Therefore, although the groups on the list are Buddhist sects, they were still banned by the government. Such concern was not ungrounded. Many episodes chronicled in the Veritable Records demonstrate that even after the founding of the dynasty, sectarian societies were still active in parts of Huguang, Jiangxi, and Sichuan. Not infrequently, believers in unsanctioned world orders had turned into rebels who captured cities and killed officials. The government responded to them by relentlessly applying the death penalty (Li 1968). There is no doubt that the prohibitions in the Great Ming Code were not empty words.

The Code also severely punished those who prepared or circulated prophetic charms, invocations, magical books, or incantations to “delude the public” (huozhong): offenders would be decapitated, with no distinction made between principals and accessories; and those who only possessed heretical books would also be punished by one hundred strokes of beating with the heavy stick and penal servitude for three years (Art. 279). According to the commentaries on the Code, “prophetic charms and invocations” were materials and predictions about the future; “magical books” were “evil and inauspicious works”; and “magical incantations” were “deceitful, false, and vicious
The purpose of such items was to “fraudulently” investigate the rise or destruction of the dynasty, the prosperity or adversity of the world, or the good or bad fortune of the people—all of which deceived the public and confused the masses (LJBY, 175; JJFL, 1311; LMBJ, 6.4a). The political message of this injunction is also clear: several model verdicts on the law point out that the Qin, Han, and Tang dynasties all ended due to the spread of magical books and incantations (LMBJ, 6.4b; ZPZZ, 8.4a). Indeed, the act of “making up magical incantations” was considered so dangerous that the Ming founding emperor personally denounced it on many occasions. In the Comprehensive Instructions to Aid the Realm, for example, Zhu Yuanzhang included a section on “fabricating [magical] incantations” (zaoyan). The essay identifies this activity with rebellion, and gives many examples throughout Chinese history to warn that the “divine utensil” (shenqi) is bestowed by Heaven and those who rise in rebellion will be exterminated by the Lord on High (ZSTX, 1476–77).

In addition to its content, the political significance of Article 279 on “making, circulating, or keeping magical books or incantations” also lies in its location within the Code: it is placed in the section entitled “Violence and Robbery,” and appears right after the articles “Plotting Rebellion and Great Sedition” and “Plotting Treason.” In fact, as mentioned above in sections one and three of this chapter, both practicing sorcery and keeping proscribed books were already noted as grounds for punishment in the Code (Arts. 181, 184), but these two articles were placed in the chapter on ritual regulations and merit lighter penalties. The major difference between the two sets of rules has to do with the content and intent of the crimes. In Article 279, the magical books and incantations seem to deal directly with the fate of the dynasty, and were intended to prompt their followers to take political action. In Article 181, the “sorceries” were practiced for “seeking the rewards of good deeds” (JJFL, 935) in religious cults; here again, political danger seemed likely. As proscribed books, Article 184 includes those predicting the political future, such as the Yellow River Diagram (Hetu), the Book of the River Luo (Luoshu), the Back-Pushing Diagrams (Tuibei tu), and the Classic of Understanding Heaven (Toutian jing) (LJBY, 134–35; JJFL, 948). The difference between these works and the “magical books” banned in Article 279 might be that the former teach a general knowledge of political prophecy, while the latter set forth more specific political targets and strategies. At any rate, as a comprehensive rule to counteract imminent threat, Article 279 overrides the general regulations stipulated in Articles 181 and 184. In reality, though, these crimes are so closely related that they were often treated identically in
law enforcement. In the stories collected in the Veritable Records regarding sectarian societies, there are many instances of “making up magical incantations” (Chan 1969).

Condemnation of heretical rituals, of course, does not mean that the law denied the superhuman capacity to predict the future. One model notice advises those who “master magical divination” not to spread the information to others because “extraordinary men” always try to avoid leaking their secrets (ZPZZ, 5.4a-b). Here, the law acknowledges the existence of specialists who are capable of making prophecies; its first and foremost goal was to separate those specialists from the masses, among whom a large number of “ignorant persons” were liable to believe in “groundless magical incantations” (ZPZZ, 5.4b). The Ming government, therefore, was contending with an enemy circle for ideological leadership of the people. In the above-mentioned essay, Zhu Yuanzhang was not just concerned with the political manipulation of heretical rituals; he looked further into the rebels’ minds:

There have been ignorant persons of this kind from remote antiquity. They have usually been killed. After a while they appeared again. Why is this? It is because throughout their lives they did not study principles (daoli). All day long they associated with ill-mannered, mean persons. Treachery and waywardness accumulated in their minds and they were unable to change right up to the time they were killed. (ZSTX, 1474)

By fusing educational norms with coercive sanctions, punishment for heretical rituals was not merely a measure for behavioral control; it also served as a way of transforming a wrongdoer’s inner world.

In order to defend the dynastic order and official worldview, the Code especially guarded against the spread of subversive propaganda among civil and military officers. While it allowed casting horoscopes and divining in the homes of officials, it prohibited magicians and soothsayers from predicting the disaster or good fortune of the dynasty there (Art. 197). The essence of this injunction was to keep officials away from the influence of “fraudulent and preposterous prophecies.” Officials might be superior to commoners, but while assisting the ruler to govern the realm, they might also undertake treacherous acts, causing much more serious trouble for the regime than ordinary persons (see chapter five). By punishing soothsayers, the imperial law ensured that the officials would remain satisfied with their “Heaven-determined fate,” and thus “nip the evil in the bud” (XTFL, 6.19b; JJFL, 979).

The Great Ming Code also forbade several kinds of sorcery known as “black
magic” (Ch’ü 1961, 220–25). The first was “extracting vitality by dismembering living persons” (Art. 311). This crime was committed in various ways. One was to beat a living person to death, and then extract the victim’s eyes, ears, nose, tongue, lips, teeth, feet, palms, nails, and hair. Next, the offender would make a human figure out of yellow mud and attach to it all of the body parts. He would then pray that spiritual forces operate through the newly assembled person. Another method involved luring the victim into the mountains or a forest and killing him there. The offender then cut the victim’s body and extracted his internal organs and vital energy for dedication to the spirits. Still another technique was to take the fetus from a pregnant woman for magical purposes (LMBJ, 7.9b; LJBY, 201; LFQS, 6.39a). The common feature here lies in using living or freshly-killed human body parts to communicate with superhuman forces. This crime is similar to “dismembering living persons” (Art. 310); and both were considered “heinous” acts—they are among only thirteen crimes in the Code that were punished by “death by slow slicing” (the penalty for treason is only decapitation [Art. 278]). Nevertheless, “extracting vitality” differs from “dismembering living persons” in that the former involves practicing sorcery. The serious concern over sorcery accounts for why “extracting vitality” was punished more severely. For one thing, the collective punishment it entailed extended not only to “wives and sons,” but additionally to “wives, sons, and those who live in the same household.” Moreover, the offenders as well as their wives and sons were punished severely even though no physical harm had ensued. In addition, community heads were charged with criminal collusion if they had been aware of these activities, and those who reported the crime were rewarded by the government. Therefore, although dismembering persons and extracting vitality are similar criminal acts, the criminal motivation was not the same. The former merely involved killing others, whereas the latter was a kind of sorcery used to “delude people” (JJFL, 1486; JS, 556).

Article 312 of The Great Ming Code specifies two more “heretical arts”: “inflicting captive spirits on others” and making spells or incantations to harm others. The former included drawing or engraving human images and then piercing their hearts or eyes or tying up their hands and feet in order to make the real persons become sick or die. The latter meant acts like drawing magic figures and then invoking demons and chanting incantations to harm others (LJBY, 203; JJFL, 1490). These acts posed a twofold problem: they involved worshipping “evil spirits” and causing harms to others. Since these techniques were practiced in order to kill others, the offenders should be punished for plotting homicide; thus, once the act had been initiated, the
offenders merited punishment even though no physical harm had ensued. The law implied that the artificial human body and real human body had a spiritual and physical connection; hence, acts done to the former would cause spiritual suffering or physical damage (either death or sickness) to the latter. This reveals a strong belief in the dynamic interaction between humans and spirits: superhuman forces were deemed to exist and to respond to human invocations, and the artificial bodies served as a medium to invoke spiritual forces. As Derk Bodde comments, it would be difficult to "explain the continued presence in the Chinese codes down to the present [twentieth] century of harsh penalties for manufacturing magic poisons or practicing other forms of black magic unless there was belief in such magic" (Bodde 1981, 16).

This belief is vividly revealed in an early Ming law case. In 1375, Zhu Yuanzhang went on an inspection tour of his hometown, Fengyang District, where imperial halls and palaces were under construction. While the emperor was sitting in a hall, he felt as if someone were stabbing his back with a weapon. The prime minister, Li Shanchang, reported to the throne that the artisans were using the tricks of "capturing spirits" to endanger the imperial body. Outraged, Zhu ordered all the artisans executed. The minister of public works, Xue Xiang, petitioned to distinguish those who had been on duty and those who had not, and to exclude the blacksmiths and stonemasons who were not involved. Thanks to Xue’s petition, several thousand workers had their lives spared (MHY, 1268; MS, 3973). This case indicates the fear of and belief in rival superhuman forces. The government was struggling against an enemy spirit realm.

Of the three kinds of heretical arts, two—"extracting vitality" and "inflicting captive spirits on others"—were included in "Ten Abominations"; consequently, the offenders would lose privileges such as the "eight deliberations" and "staying home to serve old or severely handicapped parents or paternal grandparents" (Arts. 3, 4, 9, 18), and would not be pardoned under general amnesties (Art. 16). When they died in exile, their families were not allowed to return to their hometown (Art. 15). To the Tang Code of 653, The Great Ming Code added an additional crime—"extracting vitality," and increased the penalty for the crimes "inflicting captive spirits on others" and "making spells or incantations to harm others." This indicates that at a remove of over seven hundred years from the Tang dynasty, the early Ming ruling elite was still very much concerned over the effects of heretical rituals.

This chapter reviews the nature and functions of religious rituals in communicating between the spirit world and the human realm from a legal per-
The Great Ming Code treats these rituals with different measures. In promoting official rituals, the Code protects the emperor’s status as the Son of Heaven, the only one authorized to worship Heaven and Earth; ensures the correct performance of ceremonies; and enforces ancestor worship for both the ruling elite and commoners. In regulating popular religious rituals, the law controls the construction of monasteries and ordination of priests, enforces canonical rules on sexuality, and reforms popular religious teachings and rituals on the basis of Confucian filial piety. In prohibiting heretical religious rituals, the Code prohibits sectarian beliefs and practices, sorcery, and “black magic,” all of which were considered political dangerous and spiritually polluting. By enforcing, regulating, and prohibiting different categories of religious rituals, the early Ming ruling elite intended to transform people’s spiritual world as well as to impose behavioral control.

This examination of legal regulations on rituals might aid present-day studies of religious rituals and the relation between government and popular religion in Ming China. Regarding rituals, James Watson and Evelyn Rawski are at odds regarding the extent to which ritual participants knew or believed in the meaning of the rites they performed. Watson sees “paramount importance” in “orthopraxy,” i.e., the correct performance of rituals. “Performance, in other words, took precedence over belief” (Watson 1988, 4). Rawski, by contrast, considers belief to be as important as practice in ritual. She particularly points out that the “Chinese ruling elite tended to see belief and practice as organically linked to one another, each influencing the other” (Rawski 1988, 28). This chapter, while recognizing the value in Watson’s contention, accords more with Rawski’s view (at least on the level of the ruling elite). Zhu Yuanzhang and his court officials were of course concerned with how and what people practiced, so they sought to regulate people’s behavior by means of legal sanctions. But they were at least equally, if not more, interested in what people thought when they behaved in certain ways.

The Ming ruling elite’s stance is evident in the varying treatment of different rituals for communicating with deities in The Great Ming Code. Official rituals governing the worship of Heaven and Earth and their subordinate deities were protected and promoted. Popular rituals such as Buddhism and Daoism were condoned, but put under legal control. The “heretical” rituals, such as sectarian practices and sorcery, were strictly prohibited. These different treatments illustrate the law compilers’ intellectual inclination and demonstrate the balance of contemporary intellectual forces. The ruling elite intended to manifest the officially interpreted cosmic order by performing
official rituals. They also endeavored to combat the rival deities worshipped in nonofficial rituals. Although they could be manipulated to assist the official cosmology, popular rituals had to operate within set limits due to their heterodox nature. The ruling elite did not entirely agree with the cosmic order envisioned in Buddhism and Daoism, but they had to let these teachings exist among the people, conceding to contemporary intellectual forces in society. All they could do was create rules to control and guide unofficial beliefs and practices.

To be sure, the persecution of subversive “heretical rituals” was based on political considerations. The founding of the Ming was a result of rebellions that were permeated by millenarian beliefs. The prohibition of such sectarian practices was apparently a measure designed to prevent further dynastic upheaval. Overmyer (1976, 24) argues that the government’s opposition to organized sects must be understood against the political background of concern over collective ceremonies as a potential source of disorder. Nevertheless, he adds, “prohibition of dissenting religion was based on ideological grounds as well.” In terms of the early Ming ruling elite’s goal to promote public transformation, this point is well taken. The law code was designed not only to control people’s behavior in performing forbidden rituals, but also to defend the official rituals and to “purify” people’s intellectual world with the official worldview.