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A Discussion and Analysis on the Customs of Polytheism in the "June Gods Fair" in Guide County, Qinghai Province, China*

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Abstract—The "June Gods Fair" in Guide County, Qinghai Province is a large folk religious activity carried out based on the beliefs of Gods Wenchang and Erlang in Amdo area. The content includes not only religious sacrifices, dancing with gods and so on but also contains a large number of folk activities with local characteristics, which enriched the cultural life of local people. The polytheism displayed in the gods fair has many characteristics such as Chinese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism and Taoism. This paper briefly analyzes the phenomenon of polytheism in the gods fair by making a field visit on the form and content of the June Gods Fair.

Keywords—June Gods Fair; polytheism; folk religion

I. INTRODUCTION

The June Gods Fair held annually in Guide County, Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Oinghai Province, is a large-scale folk religious activity based on the temple fair theme of the meeting of Gods Wenchang and Erlang (the local protection gods). In Tibetan, it is called "Labuze". It has already had a history of hundreds of years since the Ming Dynasty and Qing Dynasty. The unique polytheism and the religious participation of Tibetans, Han, and other ethnic groups have formed into a form of folk religious worship with distinct local characteristics, which fully reflects the fusion and communication among Chinese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism and Taoism in the spreading process in relevant regions in the history. In this paper, the phenomenon of polytheism in local folk religions is briefly discussed and analyzed on the basis of literature, field investigation, interview on the public and with reference to the existing research achievements, over a full field investigation on the June Gods Fair in Guide County.

II. FORM OF THE "JUNE GODS FAIR" ACTIVITY

Historical literature and folk saying have different opinions on the historical origins of the June Gods Fair. As said by local people, it was in Ming Dynasty that the form of "June Gods Fair" activity was formed in Guide County;

Liutun village, Hexi town, Guide county where "Wenchang Temple" is located and Zhoutun village, Donggou town where "Erlang Temple" is located were selected as the participants of the activity and the activity time was fixed on Jun.19~Jun.24 every year (in lunar calendar hereinafter). The procedures for the Fair are as follows in general:

A. Inviting Gods

In the temple where "God Wenchang" and "God Erlang" are located, there are two statues of the same god in large and small sizes. All the statues are stored with scriptures. One is about 1.8-2.5 m in height, enshrined in lobby of the temple; the other one is about 0.5-0.8 m in height, enshrined in a special sedan and dedicated for inviting gods to go to a tour on the day of the Fair and is placed next to the large statue for long term. Relevant gods are also regarded as the object of worship by believers. The theme of June Gods Fair is the meeting of "God Wenchang" and "God Erlang". The Jun.19 is the day to invite gods, commonly known as "Xiamiao", namely to get two small statues who are going to take on the sedan carried out of the main temple hall to prepare for the tour, thus opening the prelude of the "June Gods Fair" and "Meeting of Two Gods" activities.

In Liutun village in Hexi town, the part responsible for making offerings to God Wenchang, the master passed from generation to generation and Qin, Zhong, Zhang, Shi and other family names of clans were responsible for matters relevant to inviting gods out, but now the ritual has been lost. At present, the ritual of inviting gods in Liutun area has been greatly simplified. Only at sunrise of Jun.19, young adults in the village may arrive the "Wenchang Temple" after a purifying bath and burning aromatic plant and sacrificing to collectively chant and burn aromatic plant, libate and fire the crackers, then carry out the sedan for accommodating statue. Then, some of them may bath and change clothes for the gods. Some other people may slaughter a white meat breed ram for conducting blood sacrifices. The folk Buddhism and Taoism of Han region reflect the characteristics of primitive religious beliefs. After the dressing and blood sacrifices are completed, the mutton may be cooked and shared to eat. At this time, the preparation for the fair is completed. What needed to do the next is waiting for meeting of the two gods officially on Jun.22.

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But not vice versa in Zhoutun village of Hedong town, the part responsible for making offerings to God Erlang, this village not only retains a series of extremely ancient religious ritual, but also has its descendants of the master and the deity. On Jun.19, the village's full-time masters may collectively chant, beat the sheepskin drums and knock the bronze gong to read eulogy for the gods before sunrise. Moreover, Tibetan Buddhism "Benbenzi" (Nyingma faction) may chant and kill a white chicken and white sheep for blood sacrifice and invite the statues of gods out and bath and change clothes for the gods accompanied by some rituals such as burning aromatic plant, offering a libation and igniting firecrackers and so on. The believers are in an endless stream and eager to worship. They all believe that the gods may wake up and come to the mortal world at this time so that what they petitioned will certainly be blessed at this time. The Xiamiao ritual in Zhoutun village is more complicated than that in Liutun village. Especially for the persons accompanied by in their bodies in time of inviting God Erlang out of the temple and go to a tour in the town, it is more important to prepare all instruments for religious rites and get ready for welcoming and inviting God Erlang. Meanwhile during the three-day ritual, this person cannot eat meat or fish, green onion and garlic, cannot make love and may also regularly listen to the master's and Benbenzi's chanting. After inviting the gods out, relevant persons of Zhoutun village may go to and stay in each temple and believers' home in the village to fulfill their promises and collect money and articles as required for holding the fair at the same time from June 19 to 22. There are god dancing activities all the way. The persons responsible for dancing with the gods and the believers may take good care of the gods. And the persons responsible for dancing with the gods should be those accompanied by deity in their body in important occasion, commonly known as "playing with the gods" and "jumping with the gods", which will be described in detail in following text.

B. Meeting of the Two Gods

On Jun.22, the public of each village in Guide County may dress up various ethnic splendid attires for festival, preparing for participating in the religious event "meeting of two gods". This is also the climax stage in the entire fair. At that time, there may be joss sticks and candles burning in crowded conditions. As the folk saying, it is thought that God Erlang is the uncle of God Wenchang. The "meeting of two gods" activity is to arrange a meeting of the two relative gods who are respectively located in different places of Amdo region to bless people. It is also one of the behaviors of people to express their worship to the gods and offering to the gods. This phenomenon reflects rich humanistic feelings.

In the morning of Jun.22, young adults participating in the dancing with gods in Liutun may concentrate in Wenchang temple to firstly carry out a series of sacrificial ceremony, including chanting, libation, burning aromatic plant and firing crackers and so on. The next step is to dress up ritual clothing: the master may dress up black long gown, holding a sheepskin drum; the sedan carriers may dress up blue Tang suit, short-garment short-gown; those dressed in

red Tang suit also short-garment short-gown, wearing "top hat" are responsible for knocking at the bronze gong and holding the flag and their clothes are all drawn with dragon and phoenix patterns, reflecting a strong cultural characteristics of the Han nationality. After a tour around Wenchang Temple for three circles while knocking at drums and gongs, they begin to go to the meeting destination. Along the way, they may perform a small dance ritual in each temples and household passed by and enter into the temple and household to fulfill their promises and collect offerings and money to support them, including cattle and sheep, food, cash and so on. The ritual in Zhoutun is also similar, but their dresses are slightly different from that in Liutun. In Zhoutun, the master may dress up a black patternless long gown, holding sheepskin drum; the sedan carriers and and his flag holders may all wear Tibetan costumes and "top hat". This also reflects a rich characteristic of Tibetan culture. The ritual processes along the way to the meeting place are the same as those in Liutun and will not be repeated here.

In the past, the meeting place was in family temple of Deng. At that time, local believers might provide their offerings to the temple; masters of the two gods might hold the ritual of religious dancing together, piercing, and arm cutting and so on. Then they might go to the home of Liuqianye in Liujiabao of Bijiazhuang village to fulfill their promises and stay for a while and then go to Shijiasi temple to worship before separating their ways. ¹However in the 27th year of the Republic of China (1938), after Wu Shijin served as the county magistrate, Riverside Park was built up in Hexi town. Thereafter, the meeting place was changed to this park until now. After the two teams arrive at riverside park, they may begin to perform "dancing with the gods" in the form as follows: the sedan carrier may shake the sedan up and down, left and right to show the appearance of the gods and their joys when seeing each other, then continuously shake, sometimes revolving around and sometimes making a compliant bow to each other. The vivid and grand scene made the believers on site filled with deep esteem and moved to cry. At this time, the two deity possessors may wait by the side, wearing a long braid, with upper body naked and waist fastened with a red satin, waiting for the right time to appear. Before their appearance, the two masters may chant and perform a religious rite and then quickly penetrate the mouth brazing rod (a steel needle of about 20 cm long, serving as a religious instrument) into the cheek of the possessors. The deity possessors are designated persons passed down from generation to generation in the villages. They can neither feel pain or bleed when penetrating mouth brazing rod into their cheeks. After subjecting to piercing of the brazing rod, the deity possessors may await the opportune moment to participate in the dancing performance, namely firstly obstruct the sedan door and then take part in the shaking and dancing performance. The possessors may firstly raise their arms, making the "V" gesture to shuttle through the corners of the venue, and the sedan carriers may show an attitude of inability to resist, and

Yao Jun. Local Chronicles of Guide County. Qinghai People's Publishing House, October 1989 edition. (in Chinese)



then the possessors may cooperate with the sedan carriers to carry the sedan to main ground of the meeting place. After the sedan is placed in the center of the main ground, the believers may flock to the front, offering Hada, satin, money and other offerings, and stretch their heads under the sedan to worship in order to pray for auspicious peace. Many of them may even tear, with hands trembled to contribute property and worship. At this time, the deity possessors may worship on bent knees in front of the sedans, and then the masters may take the mouth brazing rod out and cover a long gown on their heads. Then, the deity possessors may be taken away from the venue by the two teams. Until then, the ritual of dancing with gods is ended. In 2012, the Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture held the first intangible cultural heritage exhibition. The opening ceremony was scheduled on the day of "meeting of the two gods". Therefore, after ending of the dance ceremony, the two gods may be enshrined in the center of the back part of the opening ceremony stage, indicating blessing and also containing the meaning of supporting the gods in entertainment programs, which indicates the cultural and recreational nature of folk religions in contemporary society to some extent.

C. Sending the Gods back

The appearance and motion of deity, namely dancing with gods, is the major content of the entire fair. Compared with that, the ritual of sending the gods back is extremely simple. It was observed that before sunset on Jun.22, masters of the two villages lead the team to protect God Wenchang and God Erlang returning back to their own temples. Along the way, they continuously dance with gods and fulfill promises, accompanied by chanting and burning aromatic plant. On the remained Jun.23 and 24, they may irregularly go to farmlands or households of the village to perform the ritual of dancing with gods. It is right in season of harvesting crops. Hence, this ritual also has meaning of blessing for harvest and good luck. Up to Jun.24, the statues of the two gods will be sent back to their respective temples. Finally, the masters may chant, sacrifice and recite scriptures to see off the two gods going back to the heaven. After that, the public may share the sacrificed foods and worship on bent knees to express their gratitude. At this time, the "Xiamiao tour" ritual is finished.

III. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS ON THE CUSTOMS OF POLYTHEISM IN THE "JUNE GODS FAIR"

In the activities of the fair, each village in Guide County in the Amdo region believes different gods and their sacrificing, worship and offering rituals also have distinct folk religious styles. Wherein, their beliefs are dominated by the belief of Taoism's "God Wenchang" and "God Erlang", associated by the sacrificing and offering methods of Tibetan Buddhism and mixed with the customs of the primitive religious beliefs. They jointly make up the special case of folk religious beliefs in Amdo region.

A. Added Tibetan Elements of God Wenchang

"Wenchang", also called "Amyula" in Tibetan, was originally enshrined by Taoism. God Wenchang was the incarnation of ancient "God Zitong" in Zitong county, Sichuan province. And God Zitong's pre-life as human being was named Zhang Yazi (AD 317~420) and was an official of Jin Dynasty at that time, deeply admired by the masses due to his kindness and helpful nature and always helping those in distress and aid those in peril. After his death, the masses built up a memorial temple in Zitong of Sichuan province and regarded him as an important god in the local area of Zitong. According to legend, in the Tang Dynasty (AD 618~907), Zhang Yazi was ennobled as left prime minister by Emperor Xuanzong for reason that he had blessed the Tang army to put down the rebellion. Since then, the sacred Zhang Yazi had become widely known and gradually been called as a god of the heaven in the Divine Land (a poetic name for China) over a highly praise and spreading of Emperors in Tang Dynasty. In addition, among the common people, there has been a saying circulated that Zhang Yazi is the incarnation of Wenchang star. During Shaoxi period of Emperor Guangzong in Southern Song Dynasty (AD1127~1279), God Zitong and Wenchang star were Dynastv merged into one and Zhang Yazi was confered the title of "God Wenchang", becoming an important role in the Taoist immortal pedigree. 2

However in the Amdo Tibetan area, the belief of "God Wenchang" is somewhat different from that in Han nationality areas. According to the local people's saying, "In Qing Dynasty (about AD1644~1911), when God Zitong was reincarnated as an official of the Emperor in that dynasty, he died after suffering from a hidden grievance that cannot be disclosed and then reincarnated as a non-human being with endless power. In the period when God Wenchang became a non-human being, he once was lucky to be accepted with pleasure by several eminent Tibetan monks at that time. This god protected and was always together with Xiangze Jiangnabaluozhejiacuo or Jiayangdanbeinima (1686~1738) of Gandan Saichi temple (the master of Tibetan Gandan Temple and teacher of the Emperor at that time of Qing Dynasty) all the time. When the teacher unfortunately became in political dangers in the royal court, he always saved timely by the god. Later, when Chijianaba came to Amdo area, he got God Wenchang ennobled as the local god in Guide region in accordance with his previous commitment to God Wenchang and wrote the "Sutras for Chanting in burning aromatic plant and sacrificing in Front of God Wenchang" which is still used for offering sacrifices to God Wenchang today." Hence about the spreading of belief of God Wenchang in Tibetan area, it can be generally concluded as follows: it was in about Ming Dynasty and Qing Dynasty when the belief was introduced into the area. Under the general background of the Tibetan Buddhism culture prominent at that time, the belief of God Wenchang

This information was internal material obtained from the Wenchang Temple Management Office of Hexi Town, Guide County.

The narrator is Do Latai (49 years old), the director of Wenchang Temple Management Office and the interview was dated on August 9, 2017.



among the Taoism culture in Bashu region was introduced from central China. After being influenced by the promotion and transformation of Gelug Sect of Tibetan Buddhism, a unique cultural characteristic of Buddhism and Taoism was formed in Guide region. Taoist culture was localized when it was gradually integrated into the Tibetan Buddhism culture of Guide County in Amdo region; while Tibetan Buddhism also absorbed the belief of Taoism and the ethical and moral concepts of the Confucianism and Taoism in central China such as loyalty, righteousness, rites, wisdom and faith. The two beliefs both obtained new religious significance. This is an inevitable process for various religions to adapt to the trend of the times in pursuing for their own development and to mutually collide and integrate with other ethnic cultures in political, economic and ethnic exchanges.

B. Conversion of the Functional Meaning of God Erlang

"God Erlang" ("Ami Rilang" in Tibetan) is also a deity enshrined and worshiped by Taoism. "God Erlang" was originally derived from the legendary beliefs of Zhao Erlang, Yang Erlang and Li Erlang. It has been in existence since the Tang and Song Dynasties. During the two Song Dynasties, the three sayings were merged into one and unified into the image and connotation of the existing God Erlang. They were highly praised for their image of the God of War in line with the special social background at that time and later were incorporated into the deity system of Taoism. However, due to the declining of national power during the two Song Dynasties, the royal court's control on the frontiers was weak. In this period, the belief of "God Erlang" was less likely to be spread in the Amdo Tibetan area. The royal court of Ming Dynasty strengthened the control and even the economic and cultural exchanges in the Tibetan areas in the border areas. Whereas, the "Journey to the West" written in Ming Dynasty is a major proof of the wide spread of the belief of God Erlang so that it is well known in the world. The process of Sun Wukong's fighting against the God Erlang itself reflects the process of conflicting and fusion between Buddhism and Taoism. While in the Tibetan area, due to the special history and geography and other factors, people advocates various gods dominated by those militant so that the beliefs of Guangong and Erlang and other gods are successively introduced into the Amdo area at the Han-Tibetan border, integrated with local primitive religions and Buddhism and were endowed with a new national cultural significance, making it a major religious feature of Guide County in Amdo.

As a local people said in an interview on site, "At the beginning, the ancestors greeted and invited God Erlang and God Wenchang from Sichuan Province; the ritual was generally as follows: God Erlang firstly appeared and opened the way, and then God Wenchang went crossed the river. "⁵ Regardless of the true or false of the saying, an important information that can be acquired is that: the Tibetan people

in Amdo still remained the tendency of advocating military and restricting culture when the military God Erlang and God Wenchang were introduced into the area, which also reflects the historical social environment at that time and its own national character. As for later, the belief of God Wenchang is more popular than that of God Erlang so that the former belief was widely spread in Tibetan areas. This is also because of the change of this social tendency. However, many masters and believers enshrined and worshiped "God Erlang God" still retains the ancient and primitive religious customs, including going to a tour in the town, blood sacrifices, etc., and even their costumes also retain the pattern of Tibetan costumes. This all indicates the integration of the religious beliefs and folk customs of all ethnic groups under the general background of national integration.

C. The Integration of Many Folk Religious Rituals Predominated by Tibetan Buddhism

Although the beliefs of Taoism deities such as God Wenchang and God Erlang dominate the June Gods Fair, their believers are still mainly Tibetan. Their sacrificial rites, chanting scriptures, etc. still depend on the ritual procedures of Tibetan Buddhism. For example before "Xiamiao" activity of the two gods, it is always necessary for Tibetan Buddhist monks to recite or chant scriptures and prayed fir blessing; they abide by a series of ritual procedures of Tibetan Buddhism (such as offering Hada, supporting the masters and bending knees for worshiping) when they worship the two gods. This conforms to the beliefs of local ethnic minorities, and the Han people in the area also gradually become close to Tibetan Buddhism in their beliefs and customs.

For Guide County located at the junction of Han nationality and Tibetan nationality in the history, it is not surprising to form a religious belief under a multi-ethnic culture. But there is always a dominant culture no matter how complicated the culture of any region is. For example in Guide county, local people has an saying that "as my ancestor told me, God Wenchang is the embodiment of the Black Wenshu bodhisattva in Tibetan Buddhism and is the guardian of Amdo region", although what local people enshrined and worshiped is the "God Wenchang" and "God Erlang" in Taoism immortal system and further the annual June Gods Fair is established. ""But, there is also a saying that a famous Tibetan eminent monk in the Qing dynasty found that the local people were weak in character and needed to be protected by God Wenchang when he were sitting and in the meditation so that then he invited God Wenchang to protect them. ""It is because God Wenchang once came here by a white mule, playing with small monks in Shijia temple and after that was regarded as the incarnation of God Wenchang. "It is also said that God Wenchang was originally a Tibetan god. It is only a place of cultivation in the Han and other areas and it was originally a god for blessing granting people child and was called Wenchang.⁶ The legends about God Erlang are also the like. They all show a psychological mode of Tibetan in accepting

⁴ Li Chenling, Jia Wei. A historical investigation of the spread of the belief of God Erlang in Amdo Tibetan area. Qinghai Journal of Ethnology (Folk Religion Study), 2007, No.3. (in Chinese)

⁵ The narrator is Dan Zheng (26 years old), a resident of Zhoutun village and the interview was dated on August 9, 2017.

The narrators are several believers participating in the "Meeting of two Gods" and the interview was dated on August 9, 2017.



gods of religion in other place. It can be seen that in the Guide County dominated by Tibetan, even the God Wenchang or God Erlang worshiped by Taoism and praised by local people is also incorporated into the Tibetan Buddhism system of its own belief.

However, there is also another noteworthy phenomenon here. Namely, the rituals used by Zhoutun and Liutun during the religious rituals are typical folk religious forms, and their eulogies are mainly based on local dialects in Qinghai Province. These rituals are formed into a system of its own. These rituals neither depend on the procedures of Buddhism ritual nor are similar to the ritual conducting manner of Taosim such as the said killing livestock for sacrificing ritual. In the entire process of inviting gods, dancing with gods and sending gods back, no Buddhist monks or Taoists participate in the leadership, but only a few "Benbenzis" associated chanting sutras to pray for blessing and the successive folk masters in each village responsible for completing all the rituals and being praised by various ethnic groups such as Tibet, Han and Tu. In the ritual process of inviting gods, the master may not only hold the butter lamp offered in Tibetan Buddhist temple and chant but also bend his knees on the ground to burn the yellow paper and spiritual magic figures to worship the gods; the sedan for accommodating the gods is not only provided with Hada and satins and other offerings Tibetan Buddhism but also show the "Consciousness of the Godhead" and "Grant Whatever is Requested" on the dedan door. As for the event of possession of deity, various religions have the same saying. But generally, the event is held under supervision of special clergies such as eminent monk or Taoist priest in extremely formal religious occasion. However in the June Gods Fair. folk master only opened the fair by chanting and piercing brazing rod into mouth. What followed is not chanting and instructing any more but let the deity possessor act freely. This indicates the characteristics of folk religions. The local believers always abide by the entire process of this form of local folk religion fused with various religious rituals up to now, with objection. Therefore, this religious ritual in the region is a new form of religious belief dominated by belief customs of Tibetan Buddhism and combined with folk religious rituals. It is also an inevitable phenomenon of ethnic integration and cultural exchange.

IV. SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THE CUSTOM OF POLYTHEISM IN THE "JUNE GODS FAIR"

The June Gods Fair, which was passed down from generation to generation in Guide County of Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai Province, is one of the typical folk religious activities in the region. Its polytheism customs indicate that the region is in an important area of cultural exchanges between the Han and Tibetan cultures, depend on the historical, religious and cultural psychologies of local people and gradually formed an open, diverse and well-covered cultural circle. The content of the June Gods Fair involves various forms of contents of Buddhism, Taoism and original ecological religion. It is a typical representative of the formation of folk religions in the region and reflects the profound religious complex of the local

people. Even complicated and profound religious theories and forms are popularized here. Local people may enshrine and worship gods based on their own production, living and psychological demands and form a cultural lifestyle with local characteristics based on this demand. It can be said that the Fair is a relatively independent religious customized culture system under the general background of Tibetan Buddhism culture in the Tibetan region of Amdo and is the a key part of the entire culture here.

Folk religious belief is a major part of Chinese religious system. Under the general background of social harmony and national integration, with the trend of cultural development in the new era, folk religions become more and more important and its development trend may affect the overall trend of Chinese religious development. So, it should not be underestimated. Taking the June Gods Fair as an example, its social function and historical significance have been endowed with the cultural function and significance in the new era of socialism. In 2008, "June Gods Fair" was listed in the Qinghai Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects Directory, which indicates that its form and content are not only limited to religious culture, but also become the carrier and benchmark for carrying out local folk culture activities. As can be seen from the field investigation of the June Gods Fair in Guide county in 2012, after completing a series of religious activities, the "Material Exchange Bazaar" was held nearby the meeting place for local people to collect the daily necessities; there were also various recreational activities voluntarily organized by the public — the public of each ethnic gathered in crowds and groups along Yellow River, dressing in Festival costumes, singing "Rye" (a Tibetan love song), playing "Guozhuang" (a Tibetan collective dance), showing a scene of a lively and vivid "grassroots culture". In order to further develop the social and recreational functions of the June Gods Fair, the local government took this chance to hold the "2012 First Hainan Prefecture Intangible Cultural Heritage Exhibition and Performance", systematically responsible for control of the religious activities on the "June Gods Fair", meanwhile, to show the ancient folk culture of each nation in Amdo based on the theme of "promoting traditional folk culture and carrying forward the new trend of harmonious culture"; moreover, the Fair is incorporated into the governmental system so that the management on local folk religious activities is normalized, the intrinsic bad and old customs in history is abolished and contribution is made to protecting cultural heritage and preserving traditional culture.

V. CONCLUSION

The polytheism customs in the June Gods Fair of Guide County is one of the folk religious modes formed by the integration of multiple cultures. In the past, the belief of "polytheism" is an expression of the cultural exchanges and integration among various ethnic groups such as Han, Tibetan and Tu and its function is to protect people, unite people and inherit the ancient ethnic cultural customs; however today, in the process of historical changes and cultural accumulation, the belief of "polytheism" has formed a unified cultural and psychological mode of various ethnic



groups in the region, plays more and more characteristics of its culture, becomes an important form of promoting traditional culture of the nation, reflects the harmonious coexisting of Buddhism, Taoism and folk culture in the context of a harmonious society, makes a successful example for the contemporary development mode of folk religion and also provides an excellent track for forming an excellent national culture.

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