



Improvisation, collective structure, and culture change: A theory of bricolage

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ant**Jules Zhao Liu** 

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Abstract

The concept of bricolage was formulated by Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* to provide an analogy for how mythical thought works. In the following decades, scholars have frequently deployed the concept, not only in anthropology, but also in sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Inheriting Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, French-speaking scholarship has tended to emphasize the structural patterns or constraints of bricolage, while English-speaking scholars have shown more interest in the individuality, subjectivity, or contingency of bricolage. This article seeks to integrate the merits of both strands of scholarships, transcend the collectivist/individualistic divisions, and develop bricolage into a multidimensional concept: Bricolage is a generative principle of regulated improvisation responding to restrictive or limited conditions. My ethnographic study of Kitchen God worship in one region of China shows that the entire process of creating bricolage is an individual embodiment of collective structure. Although bricolage is a product of structure intended to reproduce the structure, it can occasionally affect or change the structure. Thus, it is an important micro mechanism for culture change.

Keywords

Bricolage, Lévi-Strauss, improvisation, Chinese popular religion, Kitchen God worship, revolutionization of the Spring Festival, culture change

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Correction (February 2025): Article updated; for further details please see the Author's note at the end of the article.

Introduction

The concept of bricolage was introduced by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* (Lévi-Strauss, 1966). It is presented as a pre-industrial mode of practice: bricoleurs use whatever is at hand to make do with a problem instead of designing a specific means to solve the problem. Lévi-Strauss (1966: 21) formulated this concept as an analogy for how mythical thinking works: Mythical thought selects the fragments or residua of previous cultural formations to build up structured sets; its operation appears to be an intellectual form of bricolage. Despite being a popular mode of thought and practice in the pre-modern era, bricolage persists in various spheres of modern society. As such, scholars have addressed this form of thought and applied the concept to a vast range of phenomena.

Over decades of development, the concept bricolage has spread far beyond anthropology to include the humanities (Altglas, 2014; Amita, 2023; Chao, 1999; Maria, 1999), science (Ciborra, 1996; Duboule and Wilkins, 1998; Garud and Karnøe, 2003), and social science (Allain and Madariaga, 2020; Baker and Nelson, 2005; Baker et al., 2003; Domenico et al., 2010; Hassenforder and Barone, 2019; Hull, 1991; Shalley et al., 2015; Weick, 1998; Wilder and Howlett, 2014). While scholars use bricolage from a diversity of perspectives, three conditions always apply. First, agents do not have the most appropriate resources at their disposal to solve a pressing problem. Second, they have an existing repertoire of tools or resources. Third, they are able to repurpose a tool or reconfigure existing resources to respond to their problem. Briefly speaking, the pressing problem or situation forces pragmatic agents to find a way, often the makeshift adaptation of existing tools and resources within their repertoire, to make do with the task.

French-speaking scholars (Altglas, 2014; Bastide, 1970; Campiche, 2003; De Certeau, 1987; Mary, 2005) inherited Lévi-Strauss's structuralist perspective when using bricolage in their research. These scholars regarded bricolage as a product of structure, intended to reproduce the structure. For instance, when Bastide (1970) applied bricolage in the studies of collective memory, he depicted bricolage as a response to the collective mental structure. As bricolage drew on the remnants of collective memory for improvisation, it was limited by the structure of collective memory. De Certeau (1987) took bricolage as a cultural tactic of the subaltern. When examining how the native people in the Americas resisted their Spanish conquerors, he found that the local people subverted the imposed rituals, representations, and laws not by rejecting them but by repurposing them. Such action dissolved the original meanings of the imposed system and deflected the power of the conquerors. In De Certeau's work, bricolage was portrayed as a collective activity structured by local culture. Echoing De Certeau, subsequent scholars such as Campiche (2003) and Altglas (2014) also emphasized the socio-cultural logics as pre-constraints of contemporary bricolage, although Campiche began to stress individuals' agentic role in improvisation.

When the concept of bricolage was disseminated in the English-speaking world, the structuralist dimension of the concept seemed to be disempowered. Scholars have shown more interest in the individuality of bricolage. Their works have tended to

emphasize the critical role of agency, the mental process of innovation, the subjectivity of bricoleurs, and the contingent nature of improvisation. For example, Muggleton (2000) regarded bricolage as the result of individuals' liberation from collective norms and values. He argued that this innovative act allowed bricoleurs to overcome current restrictions and freely pursue the realization of themselves. Shalley et al. (2015) depicted bricolage as an individualistic/psychological process actors used to develop new solutions by making use of previously unrelated knowledge they have already acquired. Amita (2023) examined the role of bricolage in artistic creation over the twentieth century. He stated that bricolage provided artists with unbounded freedom and creativity to engage with the world in an ideal way. Organizational sociologists (Baker and Nelson, 2005; Baker et al., 2003; Weick, 1998) accentuated entrepreneurs' agentic capabilities to resolve resource limitations by bricolage. Their studies showed that this capacity enabled an entrepreneur or organization to overcome crises and survive in a turbulent environment.

In contrast, this study seeks to integrate the merits of both French and English strands of scholarships, balance structure and agency, and transcend the collectivist/individualistic division. My ethnographic study of Kitchen God worship in Pingxiang shows that bricolage is an individual embodiment of collective structure. **Bricolage is an individual practice and bears the indelible imprint of an agent**, given that bricolage is subject to a bricoleur, including his or her repertoire, repurposing skills, and practical objectives. At the same time, the entire process of improvisation is not unrestricted but constrained by a series of structural factors.

First, bricoleurs' repertoire is not infinite resources but a finite ensemble of available materials. Second, bricolage is always made to fulfill a specific goal, which sets up limitations for bricoleurs. Third, bricoleurs' improvising competence is not unbounded but regulated by their practical sense (Bourdieu, 1977). Finally, despite an individual practice, bricolage embodies a collective mental structure. This is why members of the same community (cultural, religious, political, or social) can easily recognize its potential meaning, value or purpose after it is cut off, repurposed or adapted for new objectives (De Certeau, 1987). My ethnography reveals that even separate bricolage by individuals may arrive at the same outcome.

This research seeks to resolve the dialectic of individuality and collectivity by bringing together improvisation, agency, structure, and collectivity in a new way. My ethnographic study of Kitchen God worship shows that the entire process of creating bricolage is an individual embodiment of collective structure. To convey the multidimensional meanings of the concept, I would define bricolage as a generative principle of regulated improvisation.

Fieldsite, case background, and research methods

Although Pingxiang is a medium-sized city now, before 1970, it was a frontier county spanning the border of Jiangxi and Hunan provinces. As most other rural areas in China, Pingxiang was predominantly agricultural. Although it covered 2764 square kilometers, most of the area was mountainous (26%) and hilly (66%), and the farmland, which was barren and vulnerable to natural disasters, took 14% of the total territory

(Pingxiang shizhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, 1996). Moreover, as it was located at the watershed of the Gan River and the Xiang River, this region was prone to flooding. In an agricultural society, people's subsistence depends largely on crop output, while agricultural production in a disaster-prone area is strongly affected by climate factors. For a long time, the occurrence of a natural disaster was fatal to rural people's lives. Facing the mystery of unpredictable disasters, religious coping with disasters prevailed in Pingxiang for centuries: Local people interpreted natural disasters as supernatural punishment, ascribed them to gods' anger, and invented a series of rituals to communicate with gods, appease them, and seek blessings and forgiveness (Liu, 2020). As scholars (Bentzen, 2013; Johnson, 2005) have shown by observing over 800 regions of the world, people tend to be religious in disaster-prone regions. In Pingxiang, popular religion was widespread and ingrained in people's daily lives.

After the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rose to power in 1949, the state began to take actions against various religions in China because state leaders regarded religion as one of the root causes of China's backwardness and underdevelopment. This ethos prevailed among political elites and intellectuals and thus affected policymaking. Throughout the Maoist era, policies strove to suppress or strike down religions. In the early 1950s, state leaders launched a nationwide campaign to demolish popular religious organizations, including "redemptive societies" and "sworn brotherhoods" (Hung, 2010; Liu, 2020: 83–126). Later, political leaders made a series of policies to confiscate religious properties. Many temples were either abandoned, desecrated, or repurposed to be storehouses or granaries, and most deity statues were either burnt or damaged. The anti-religious policy was further radicalized during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) (Goossaert and Palmer, 2011). Even agricultural rituals to pray for harvests and prevent disasters were forbidden by state authorities in the countryside.

From 1959 to 1962, China was ravaged by the Great Famine (Dikötter, 2010). Ten of millions of people died in these years. Officials explained this massive disaster of the "three bad years" as a result of a concatenation of natural disasters, including drought, floods, typhoons, plant diseases, and insect pests. However, as the overly frequent occurrences of various disasters immediately followed the proscription of agricultural rituals, these two events seemed causally related to people. Millions of peasants and workers were convinced that the root cause of the Great Famine was the proscription of rituals, especially agricultural rituals (Smith, 2006). Grievances, anger, and hostility to state authorities and policies mushroomed in the countryside. Religious activities, such as worshipping deities, repairing temples, and rebuilding deity statues, were vigorously revived in cities and rural areas in the early 1960s (The Ministry of Culture Party Committee, 1997). Although state leaders initiated new policies to suppress the religious revival, these policies were largely undercut during implementation because the Leap weakened state authorities and their control over the rural areas. This article examines the Kitchen God worship under the socio-political circumstances of that historical moment.

In 1964, the CCP initiated a nationwide campaign to revolutionize the Spring Festival. Under the banner of revolution, the campaign aimed to secularize this traditional festival. One of the harshest measures was to prohibit the production and circulation of religious items. My fieldwork in Pingxiang revealed that despite massive reportage of the state's

triumph, revolutionizing the Spring Festival did not result in secularization, but led to religionization of revolutionary symbols instead. This idiosyncratic result is ascribed to the transformative power of collective bricolage. Collective bricolage here does not mean a group of people working together on bricolage, but rather that separate bricolage by individuals produces a collective outcome.

This article examines how local people coped with this campaign. Based on historical materials including government documents, newspapers, people's diaries, and oral history interviews, I explain why the state failed to secularize rural Chinese society. I conducted field research in Pingxiang five times between 2014 and 2019, in periods ranging from a couple of weeks to a few months. Over those 5 years, I conducted ethnography and oral history interviews with over a hundred people and collected a great many miscellaneous histories. These precious materials enable me to construct a bottom-up history of the period between 1949 and 2016, which is different from China's official record. Hence, this article not only provides a new theory of bricolage but also new original data enriching scholars' understanding of this history.

Although Pingxiang is a medium-sized city, most of the region is still rural, and local residents have maintained their rural lifestyle and customs. During my field research, I visited over 20 villages, saw ritual performances, interviewed 37 ritual experts, and participated in some religious festivities to form an emic perspective to understand popular religion. As for the Kitchen God worship, I talked with 16 experts on the historical development of its ritual structure and procedure from the 1940s to the 2010s. Echoing Yang's observation (2015) that the female gender has dominated popular religion in rural areas, the ritual experts I interviewed were almost all women and aged over 70, and they witnessed this ritual's transformation in Pingxiang. Three experts were young women, around 35 years old; they inherited their ritual knowledge from their deceased parents. These experts lived in dispersed villages, and they probably did not know each other. However, the ritual structure and its developmental trajectory were almost the same, despite the fact that the ritual expression was diversified in minor aspects.

My interviews were conducted in a casual way. On most occasions, I sat together with a group of villagers (one of them was a ritual expert) around a tea table. I would start a topic, make tea for them, and listen to their stories. As I had visited their villages a couple of times and established good contacts with many of them, they were not constrained during our talks. Old villagers were talkative in Pingxiang. As their children were always busy working, these old people felt lonely most of the time. When I, a young man, visited them, respected them, and made them feel cared for; they were happy to talk. During the interlocution, I would ask questions regarding the specific of the ritual detail. All of them would tell what they knew, although they might not agree on the same thing all the time. At this moment, the ritual expert would make judgment and help to reach a consensus through her religious authority. Sometimes when what I asked was beyond her recall, other interlocutors would supplement detail, help her remember, and co-work on my questions. The interviews were carried out as a co-production so that my transcripts should be seen as the collective efforts of all participants rather than only the knowledge of religious experts.

Since the events I examine in this article took place 60 years ago, we cannot expect informants' memory directly correspond to the events being recalled. To corroborate

their oral histories, I looked through many historical materials after each interview. Once I found a disparity between official reportage and their memory, I would visit them again and consult about the difference. Cross-checking helped me better understand how the same historical fact might be narrated in different stories. In this way, I confronted the startling contrasts between official history and oral history in China in the interpretation of the same events. Despite that, interpretations do not twist facts. Facts are real happenings in history, while interpretations are how people make sense of facts. So, when I organized my empirical case from massive transcripts, I paid serious attention to distinguishing facts from interpretations, to develop a more objective and fair understanding of this history. It is important to highlight that I have through extensive analysis developed a logical narration from the massive and fragmented oral history interviews.

Case introduction: revolutionizing the Spring Festival

Chinese New Year, also known as the Spring Festival, is the biggest holiday in China. The festival originated in the Han Dynasty (202 BC–220 AD). After centuries of evolution, the holiday has become the most important custom holding Chinese society together. Despite its antiquity, it continues to bond Chinese communities and people across the world today. For Chinese people, celebrating the Spring Festival implies fulfillment of a series of rituals, the most important ones at least, such as Kitchen God worship. Without the rituals, the Spring Festival is deprived of distinctive characteristics, loses its spirits, and its emotional resonance is diminished. An unattractive festival could not have been passed down through history. However, this traditional festival was suppressed from 1963 to 1976 (the end of the Cultural Revolution), in the name of revolutionizing the old customs. Public holidays were annulled, family reunions were disallowed, and all forms of religious ritual were prohibited in China.

Scholars such as Stephen Landsberger (1996) and Michael Schoenhals (1996) thought that revolutionization of the Spring Festival began during the Cultural Revolution. However, the movement originated earlier, in May 1963, when Mao remarked about a work report from Zhejiang province. In this report, he commented that “class struggle, production struggle, and scientific experiment are three revolutionary movements to strengthen the Socialist state” (Mao, 1996: 293). Mao’s statement was encapsulated as the Three Revolutionary Movements Theory (TRMT). At the Shanghai Party Congress in December 1964, the Party Secretaries of Shanghai, Chen Pixian (1916–1995) and Ke Qingshi (1902–1965), elevated the TRMT to the highest ideological principle for Party members and the ultimate criterion to examine their thought and conduct (Shanghaishi Dangan Guan, 2009). Ke appealed to Party members to revolutionize themselves by studying the TRMT. Driven by the Party secretaries’ appeal, revolutionization of the self became a new movement in Shanghai. Because the Congress was convened near the time of the Spring Festival, some Party members proposed to revolutionize the Spring Festival. Therefore, the revolutionization of the Spring Festival gained momentum.

In February 1964, the Jiefang Daily published an editorial that lauded the idea of revolutionizing the Spring Festival in Shanghai and called for all governments, enterprises,

and people's communes across the country to mobilize the masses to revolutionize the Spring Festival and discard the old customs in the lunar New Year. Since the *Jiefang Daily* was a mouthpiece of the CCP Central Committee, the appeal received support at all levels of government, and the discourse of revolutionizing the Spring Festival rapidly overwhelmed discussion in the mass media. Newspapers advocated a revolutionary break with what the Spring Festival represented: religion, capitalism, and tradition tied to clan organizations (*The Editorial*, 1964). The Party regarded religious customs as the most ingrained and challenging to tackle given that Chinese New Year had been celebrated religiously for centuries. Therefore, to replace the old customs, the media touted revolutionary activities such as singing revolutionary songs, posting revolutionary New Year paintings (such as Mao's images), reading Mao's writings, and studying Maoist thought.

In Pingxiang, the local authority stipulated a series of interdicts pertaining to religious activities. First, religious professionals were required to register with the local People's Committees, hand over all religious instruments, confess crimes, and write guarantees that they would no longer engage in superstitious activities. The government would treat sincere confessants with leniency and expel those who refused to show repentance. Second, the local government prohibited the production, distribution, and exchange of religious objects. Existing objects had to be destroyed or handed over to the local Public Security Bureau. Third, all religious activities, such as temple renovation, worship, and rituals to dispel ghosts and prevent disasters, were forbidden (Pingxiangshi gonganju gonganshizhi bangongshi, 1991).

The interdicts took immediate effect. Religious commodities such as joss sticks, joss paper, papier-mâché items, Bodhisattva statues, and images vanished from the local markets. Even sale of traditional New Year paintings of the Kitchen God and the Door God were prohibited (Wan, 1964). Instead, revolutionary New Year paintings erupted in quantity. These images foregrounded Mao with printed words such as "We Love Chairman Mao" or "Chairman Mao Comes to My Home." Driven by the state campaign, it became fashionable to buy images of Mao to replace the traditional gods (*Jiangxi Daily*, 1964a). In Pingxiang, Mao's image became one of the basic necessities of New Year shopping. In certain production brigades, most households took down images of the Kitchen God and hung pictures of Mao instead. Some mineworkers brought dozens of Mao's images and planned to give them to friends and neighbors as New Year gifts (Li, 1964). In Yiyang County, most people purchased Mao images to celebrate the Spring Festival. In a single bookstore, over 10,000 Mao pictures were sold out in 20 days (*Jiangxi Daily*, 1964c). In Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi province, revolutionized festivity dominated: whether in downtown or the countryside, people put Mao busts on the altars where they had worshipped gods (*Jiangxi Daily*, 1964b). Mao images became the most popular commodity of the Spring Festival.

According to miscellaneous local newspapers, the revolutionization of the Spring Festival begot immediate consequences: religious products could no longer be purchased in most markets, and public religious performances vanished. Instead, a set of revolutionary festivities was arranged as a substitute. Ostensibly, the traditional New Year festival was revolutionized as the state projected. Nevertheless, oral history interviews with local

people enabled me to find an alternate history behind the official discourses. My interviews revealed that wherever state power was absent or weak, religious rituals were performed as usual in the Spring Festival. Most family rituals such as Kitchen God worship continued because coercive state power could hardly penetrate households to supervise family activities. Given that the requisites for the ritual, such as joss sticks and images of the Kitchen God, were forbidden, how, then, were family rituals conducted? In-depth interviews with local people showed that the lack of religious items was solved by bricolage. To better understand how bricolage solved the problem, let us focus on a case of Kitchen God worship, and scrutinize how bricolage enabled families to make do.

Kitchen God worship in China

There was not a unified explanation of the Kitchen God in Chinese folklore. Various legends of the Kitchen God coexisted and were passed down in different regions (Liu, 2006). According to Hao (2003), the Kitchen God originated in the cult of fire in ancient times, suggesting he was a fire god. Before the Han Dynasty, people regarded the Yan Emperor, Zhu Rong, and the Huang Emperor as fire gods. From the Tang to the Ming Dynasty, Daoism developed the figure of the Kitchen God from male fire gods to a family of Kitchen gods (including male and female deities),¹ supervising people's daily routines. Since then, the Kitchen God became extremely popular in Chinese religious culture and diversified images of the Kitchen God proliferated in different regions of China.

Kitchen God worship is a traditional family rite in China. It falls on the 23rd day of the twelfth lunar month, which is called the Little New Year.² According to Chinese legend, the Kitchen God ascends to Heaven to report a family's annual performance to the Jade Emperor that day. The Jade Emperor rewards or punishes the family according to this appraisal. To delight the Kitchen God and earn a good appraisal, every family would hold a feast to bid farewell to them.

In Pingxiang, the Kitchen God was sometimes depicted as a benign grandfather with a square face, arched eyebrows, and a long beard; other times the deity was characterized as a lady, with an oval face, long black hair, and a slender body. The god and goddess were also portrayed as a couple surrounded by their immortal offspring. Thus, the Kitchen God had different presentations even in the same area. However, people seldom bothered about appearances. They were more concerned with the right way to please them because their appraisal of the family's performance was related to their future prosperity.

A proper feast was widely considered the best means to delight them. The feast is part of a sequence of actions, routines, and performances that constitute the ritual of Sending Off the Kitchen God. The ritual begins with a thorough house cleaning, as cleaning is a symbolic means to create a sacred space for worship. Then, the household prepares offerings. People offer the Kitchen God sweet foods, including fruits, candies, and rice cakes, to influence them to speak sweet words to the Jade Emperor (Bredon and Mitrophanow, 1966). In the local Chinese dialect, this is known as smearing lips with honey.

The feast often begins at dusk. People place offerings on a table in the kitchen, where an image of the Kitchen God is hung on the wall. Then, the oldest man or woman of a family lights joss sticks to summon the god. Lighting joss sticks is also a signal of the formal start of the ritual. From that moment, the family should be serious and sincere toward the image, as it is assumed that the Kitchen God's spirit has descended into it. The entire family gathers in the kitchen and follows elders to pray together. Practice usually begins with kowtowing to the God's image, communicating their highest respect. Then they pray. Prayer differs from family to family, but two aspects are indispensable: the offering the family prepares and the blessing they wish to get from them. Family members kneel during prayer, kowtowing every time they make a wish. They kowtow to symbolize their submission and beg the god to grant their wish. The end of the feast is signaled when the joss sticks burn out. After that, the entire family can share the offering together in a festive atmosphere. After the family feast, elders take down the Kitchen God image from the wall and burn it. Burning is the final step of the ritual. It indicates that the spirit of the Kitchen God is released from the image and then ascends to Heaven to fulfill their duty.

According to Chinese legend, the Kitchen God accomplishes their work in a week and returns to the family on the eve of the Spring Festival. The family must therefore perform the corresponding ritual to welcome their return. On the eve of the new year, a fresh image of the Kitchen God should be posted where the old one was taken down. The new image signifies the god's return. Since the ritual time overlaps with the family reunion on New Year's Eve, people often invite the god to join the family's jovial feast rather than preparing a special feast for them. Thus, the feast is regarded as part of the welcoming ritual. At the start of the family reunion feast, elders of the family often light joss sticks, greet the Kitchen God's image with a "Welcome back," and invite them to join the family dinner. People rarely pray for blessing in this ritual because it was accomplished in the previous ritual. Compared with the previous one, the ritual to welcome them back is simpler. The new picture is displayed until the next Little New Year, when another ritual will take place.

In fact, only the rudimentary elements and basic procedures of the ritual are depicted above. Each step of the ritual is expressed differently in different areas of Pingxiang. Despite its diversity, Kitchen God worship features an overarching structure. The structure consists of a configuration of basic practices, such as house cleaning, praying, and image burning, and ritual items like the image of the Kitchen God, food offerings, and joss sticks. House cleaning is a symbolic means to create a sacred space for the ritual. Food is offered in exchange for the God blessing. Joss sticks provide a channel to summon the God, and burning them signals the beginning and end of the feast. Prayers express people's wishes, the purpose of the ritual. The Kitchen God's image represents their presence, reminding people who they worship, and burning it releases their spirits to depart for Heaven. Posting a new image of the God symbolizes their return, the beginning of a new year, and the start of a new cycle. The two rituals—Sending the Kitchen God Off and Welcoming the God's Return—constitute a complete rite of Kitchen God worship, which is among the most important practices of the Spring Festival. Thus, Kitchen God worship is reproduced by performances of two alternating rituals (Figure 1).

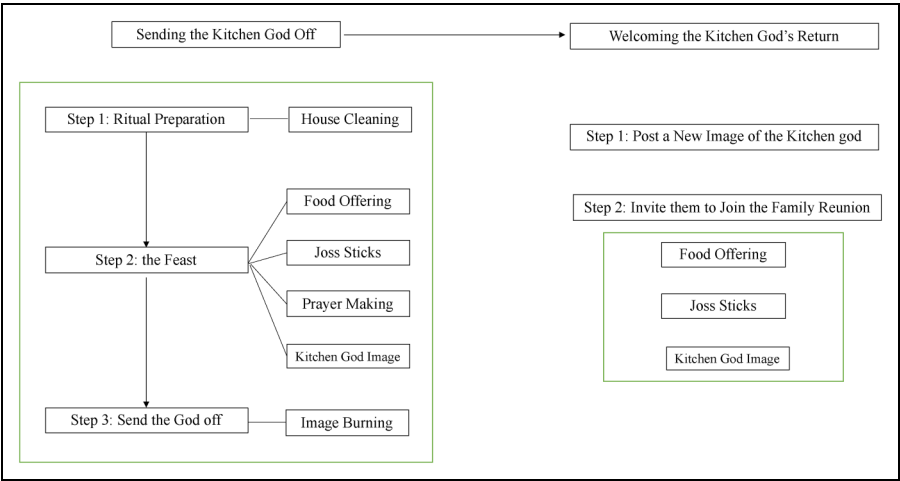


Figure 1. The structure of Kitchen God worship

Repetitive practice and the formation of a ritual structure

Pingxiang people conduct Kitchen God worship from childhood. After years of repetitive practice, people internalize the objective structure of the rite and turn it into a cognitive and motivating structure in their minds despite the fact that they are not conscious of its existence. This statement is based on my ethnography and in-depth interviews during fieldwork. When I asked them the structure of the rite, they were at a loss. Ordinary peasants and even religious experts who had performed the ritual for years had no idea what structure meant. Unlike scholars, they could not abstract the basic elements of the ritual in a theoretical manner. But this does not mean they do not have a structure in their minds. For practitioners of religion, the structure is embodied in the sequence of their actions when performing the rite.

Each element was indispensable to complete the ritual. When I asked why they could not perform the ritual without items such as joss sticks, an image of the Kitchen God, offerings of food, and prayer, they could always give reasons. “Without joss sticks, how could we summon the God? Without a Kitchen God image, how would we know whom we are praying to? Without food offerings, how could we show our sincerity? Without prayer, how would the God know our wishes? Without burning the Kitchen God image, how would we send him off to Heaven?” Additionally, I found that the correct sequence of actions is crucial. A ritual performed with an incorrect procedure will not generate any effect. For example, people must light joss sticks before praying because if the God is not summoned home, he will not hear people’s prayers. If he does not know people’s wishes, he cannot help people realize them. The ritual will fail. For local people, each of the basic elements plays an integral part in the holistic rite. Moreover, only the right

configuration of these elements, performed in the correct order, can produce the desired effect. To wit, the basic elements and the right sequence of actions constitute the ritual structure, although practitioners may be unaware of this.

A correct procedure of a ritual performance transmits the structure and meanings of the ritual to agents. Years of repetitive practice enable them to internalize the objective ritual structure and turn it into a cognitive and motivating structure in their mindset (Bourdieu, 1977, 1992). This subjective structure guides their actions when performing the ritual and sets the limits for bricolage when one or several elements are missing. As long as the subjective structure in people's minds does not break down, the absence of one or a few necessary elements cannot prevent them from practicing the ritual. Bricolage enables them to improvise the missing element and fill the "hole" in the structure. So, bricolage is constrained by the existing structure and intended to reproduce that structure. Furthermore, people's cognitive structure, constructed by years of repetitive practice, is isomorphic to that objective structure. This collective structure provides a necessary condition for collective bricolage—individual bricolage by multiple people may arrive at a homogenous result. Bourdieu's insights about the homology of objective and cognitive structures (Bourdieu, 1977, 1992; Lizardo, 2004) helped me solve the dialectic of bricolage's individuality and collectivity.

Bricolage in the revolutionary Spring Festival

The CCP's interdict on the production of religious items in 1964 was intended to eliminate the performance of religious rituals during the Spring Festival, on the assumption that rituals cannot be carried out without key religious items. However, in defiance of the state's expectations, the prohibition of religious products did not work. On the Little New Year, people cleaned house, prepared a feast, took down the Kitchen God's image, and burned it; on New Year's Eve, people welcomed the God's return as usual. Without the Kitchen God's image, people posted Mao's image where the God's image had hung before. In addition to the normal procedure, people added a new step—interpretation—to explain how and why they improvised ritual expression under restrictive circumstances.

After preparing the holiday feast, families lit three cigarettes. Kowtowing, they addressed the image on the wall:

Welcome back, benevolent Kitchen God. Please understand that the requisites for worship cannot be purchased anywhere. Don't blame us. This is not our fault but the limitation of present circumstances. Even in such a harsh environment, we continue to worship to demonstrate our sincerity. We bought cigarettes to replace joss sticks, Mao's image to worship you, and made more sweet foods to delight you. Join our family and enjoy the New Year feast.

The absence of religious items did not prevent the ritual, as the impressive capacity of bricolage enabled people to improvise simple substitutes. My interviews found that the

“make-do” spirit enabled the ritual to go on even in the Great Famine, when food offerings were impossible for most households in China. Without food, a humble bowl of sweet water made do. The rationale of bricolage enabled people to perform a ritual under almost any circumstance. Bricolage enabled other New Year rituals to continue in the same way.³ In the official discourse, people purchased Mao’s images and posted them to revolutionize the New Year. In-depth interviews showed that Mao images were used for religious purposes instead.

Oral history interviews enabled me to find that revolutionization of the Spring Festival did not secularize the traditional custom; instead, it led to religionization of Mao’s images. This does not deny the revolutionality of the Mao image, however. I stress the duality of the symbol as simultaneously revolutionary and religious. The revolutionality of the symbol was defined by the official discourse, while the religiosity of the symbol was constructed by religious practices. The state has authority to define the official meaning of the symbol, whilst people have the discretion to re-interpret its meaning in practice. The state had coercive power to prohibit the production of religious items, but people could improvise substitutes under the restrictive circumstances, dodge conflict with the state, and resolve practical problems innovatively. The state monopolized revolutionary symbols, but they could not control how people made, interpreted, and repurposed the symbols imposed on them. As De Certeau (1984) argued, bricolage was a cultural tactic of the subaltern. The state’s authoritarian power and the people’s interpretive power co-construct the dual realities of the symbol.

The duality of Mao’s images provides a reason for its widespread popularity. The local authorities encouraged people to post Mao’s images to revolutionize the Spring Festival, and people needed the repurposed symbols to perform religious rituals. Bricolage solved the antithesis between revolution and religion, integrated revolutionality with religiosity, and enabled people to practice religion under the cover of revolution. To observe how bricolage solved the dialectic of religiosity and revolutionality, we should scrutinize its operation in the ritual and answer why it is Mao’s image rather than other symbols that realized this dialectic.

Practical sense: the basis for bricolage

In *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss (1962) accentuated a bricoleur’s ability to repurpose material for bricolage but neglected the fact that the ability to repurpose material was based on a bricoleur’s competence to understand the objective to be fulfilled. A bricoleur should understand not only the objective per se but also its relationship with the system it is intended to serve because an objective to be fulfilled is not isolated but organically connected with other elements in a particular configuration to constitute a whole. One example of this dynamic is the Kitchen God image used in Kitchen God worship. The competence to comprehend the objective by subsuming it into its original system, field, or structure is a prerequisite for bricolage. This competence is based on practical sense or a “feel for the game.” According to Bourdieu (1977), practical sense is produced by an agent’s experience or involvement in a field or game. The objective structures of the field or regulations of the game impose themselves on the agents and enable them to form

a feel for the game. This practical sense enables them to master the regularities of the game, anticipate the future consequences of a present occurrence, and orient their actions deliberately.

A bricoleur needs more practical sense than specialist knowledge for bricolage, just as a native speaker can improvise a metaphor to express the meaning of a forgotten word without having the knowledge of grammar. This practical sense is not modern people's privilege but a quality acquired by human beings who are born into the game and acquire an understanding of its operation and regulation within a specific social setting. In this process, all arbitrariness and artificialities constructed socially are taken for granted. Despite the innate capacity for this type of learning, formation of the practical sense for a skillful bricolage is not easy. Bricoleurs must be immersed in the game for a long time. Only after they have internalized the rules and regulations of the game and formed a generative principle of regulated improvisation, can they acquire the competence of bricolage and be able to improvise adequate substitute for elements of the game. Without practical sense, bricoleurs can hardly make regulated improvisation but random improvisation. To make an analogy, regulated improvisation is to random improvisation as jazz improvisation is to random play. Random improvisation may lead to an inadequate or failed bricolage. Take the present case for example.

The Kitchen God image was a basic element of the ritual. Without knowledge of Kitchen God worship, bricoleurs may substitute anyone's image for the Kitchen God's. They might argue that an image is only a signifier. Why couldn't anyone's image signify the Kitchen God? Without a feel for the game, of course, any image can arbitrarily be chosen to signify the Kitchen God. They can even use manure to signify a god. But such bricolage cannot be understood and accepted by people who have practiced the ritual for years. Such bricolage is alien to those who grow up within the religious culture or whose practical sense has been constructed by the religious culture. The practical sense makes them "feel wierd" about a random bricolage and so reject it. Such bricolage is an individual product that nobody can recognize except for the bricoleur, since it fails to connect itself with the existing system or field familiar to people. When bricoleurs do not have a practical sense of the game, they don't have the competence to make an collectively accepted bricolage.

The competence to solve the problem of the absence of the Kitchen God image is subject to an agent's practical mastery of religious knowledge of the ritual obtained through years of practices, by which the agent has internalized the regularities of the ritual. This competence contributes to formulating logical, cogent, and expressive improvisation to make do with any problem related to the ritual. In my case, the Kitchen God is a legendary god in Chinese religion and enjoys widespread respect and love. Nevertheless, most people actually did not know who the God was. Their diverse images did not confuse, annoy, or give rise to doubt as to who these deities were, or prevent people from worshipping. On the contrary, the ambiguity of their biography was a reason for their widespread popularity. Everyone could use their imagination to make up for the unknown or ambiguous aspect of the god, making them the ideal god for each worshipper.

Since their duty was closely related to human's mundane lives, the god was constructed to be humane, easy-going, and benign (Hao, 2003) in contrast to the Heavenly

gods, who were more distant and ascetic. A feast of sweet foods could “bribe” the gods and buy their good words to the Jade Emperor. Moreover, the Kitchen God could bring prosperity and happiness to families. No matter if rich or poor, anyone could worship and obtain blessings so long as the ritual is carried out correctly. The practical sense of the Kitchen God worship implies three aspects at least: the spirits’ ambiguity, character, and holiness. The Kitchen God’s ambiguous and diverse appearances allow people to imagine the god as they wished, making them more constructive for bricolage: a portrait of a grandfather, lady, or couple that could evoke people’s imagination of benign and easy-going deities makes do. Despite this superficial ambiguity, the god had a stable personality. An adequate bricolage should evoke people’s feeling of the god’s character, or at least it should not conflict with people’s imagination of these characteristics. An evil-looking face, poor posture, or plain clothes would not do. Someone people know personally also would not do because actuality precludes holiness; concreteness precludes imagination. In Kitchen God worship, the god should be imagined to be sacred and perfect. An actual person in reality can hardly be holy or perfect. Everyone is mundane and has flaws. **So, bricolage of an actual person does not make do. It is the practical sense of what feels right or not right intuitively, rather than ratiocination, that guides people’s improvisation.**

Conquering the limitations innovatively

Bricolage is intended to resolve various limitations. The second step involves deep engagement with the current limitations, a comprehensive understanding of the limitations, and practical sense of potentiality of possible tactics to solve the problem begotten by the tension between subjective aspirations and objective limitations. In my case, the limitations were set by the state and its policy. From 1949 to 1965, nationwide revolutionary campaigns took place in rapid succession.⁴ People who were involved in these campaigns witnessed the state’s expansion, felt state power, and formed a collective tactic in dealing with the imposed policy. This collective experience constructed a practical sense of how to survive in the revolutionary game: when facing coercive policies, people seldom engaged in direct, open, and fierce confrontation with the state unless their survival was threatened. People were more disposed to use a euphemistic means to resist the state. Bricolage was one of the most popular strategies of resistance.

Without considering the current limitations, a portrait that evoked people’s imagination of the Kitchen God should have made do. There might have been many hypothetical choices in a bricoleur’s repertoire. Nonetheless, given the circumstances of the time, and the revolutionization of the Spring Festival, made bricolage more complex. When the state revolutionized the New Year, a portrait that evoked everyone’s imagination of the Kitchen God was too overt a bricolage. Everyone could discover the bricolage’s hidden purpose of resisting state order. A bricolage that everyone could recognize was not a wise tactic, because such bricolage might invite someone to snitch on the bricoleur. An overt bricolage did not help bricoleurs realize their aspirations, but on the contrary, would bring them trouble. An overt bricolage was equal to an open confrontation with

the state, which would provoke serious results. A wise bricoleur would calculate the possible outcomes of bricolage and anticipate the consequences before acting. Bricolage, as a strategy-generating principle based on agents' early experiences, enables wise decisions with anticipation of the future consequences of present behavior. This competence helps bricoleurs to forestall the happening of a future adverse event by calculating the risk of making a bricolage, estimating its likelihood of success, and coping with present limitations.

A clever bricoleur would have to evoke people's imagination of the Kitchen God and preclude the possibility of being reported. In other words, the bricolage had to evoke people's religious imagination of the god and simultaneously prevent people from identifying it as a religious bricolage. A tactical bricolage enables a bricoleur to disown religious signification, deny playing the trick of bricolage, and eschew possible troubles brought by bricolage. Regarding these limitations for bricoleurs (in a bricolage building on religious practices), the bricolage must be religious and non-religious at the same time. To fulfill this paradoxical requirement, the image must be multivalent: the meaning of the image is subject to how a viewer perceives it. The performativity of the image requires active participation and interpretation from practitioners or viewers to activate the meaning indicated or concealed by the image. A tactical bricolage must fulfill the requirement: if a viewer identifies religious meaning in the image, it is his disposition to interpret the image religiously, but not the fact that the image *per se* is religious. Only this kind of bricolage can allow bricoleurs to have the leeway to disown bricolage and get rid of potential troubles. Such bricolage requires more sophisticated skills than Lévi-Strauss acknowledged. A wise bricolage entails thorough and extensive consideration of the objective to be fulfilled, the limitations of the socio-political environment, and the consequences the potential bricolage may bring about. When considering the risks of a bricolage, many possibilities are actually ruled out. Mao's symbol was the best bricolage to solve the paradox between religiosity and non-religiosity at the time it was adopted.

Bricolage engenders changes of ritual structure

When expounding the concept of bricolage, Lévi-Strauss focused on the connection between bricolage and the new purpose it was intended to fulfill. My research finds that although a makeshift bricolage was cut off or disconnected from its original context, it still bore the mark of its early uses, ends, features, and meanings inherited from its earlier system. These inherited qualities might affect the new system that the bricolage is intended to serve. Despite the fact that a bricolage is structured by an existing structure (it makes do by substituting an element in the structure), it may give rise to structural changes or even re-structure the structure on particular occasions because of its connections with the early system. This is why Lévi-Strauss stated that bricolage sometimes can reach brilliant unforeseen results.

The meaning of Mao's image was deconstructed and reconstructed by the ritual practice: Mao, the apparent signified of his picture, was repurposed to be a signifier through bricolage. The ritual becomes a determinant of what the signified would be.

In other words, the signified of the representation was subject to what ritual was intended to perform. Mao's image signifies the Kitchen God in Kitchen God worship, the Door God in Door God worship, and the Fortune God in Fortune God worship. The ritual structure repurposes Mao's picture and redefines its meaning in the course of ritual practice.

However, the new purpose and meaning did not erase the original purpose and meaning of the picture. The ritual only created a new dimension of purpose and meaning and turned Mao's image into a multivalent symbol. The old meaning (revolutionality) and the new (religiosity) coexisted. When people prayed for a god's blessing, religiosity took precedence over revolutionality; when they coped with the mission of revolutionization, revolutionality preceded religiosity. People were not aware of the processes of meaning interchange between revolutionality and religiosity in their daily practice. The complex sensemaking processes were solved by people's practical sense. This means the meanings of the symbol naturally come out when people are practicing it.

During my ethnography, some interviewees said that if you took the image as Mao, it was Mao; if you took it as the Kitchen God, it was the Kitchen God. People were not bothered by the conflict between the signified and the signifier. The problem brought about by bricolage did not come to people's notice until the next Little New Year of 1965, when the ritual to Send the Kitchen God Off took place.⁵ When people completed the feast and prepared to burn the Kitchen God image, they realized that the image could not be burned, because the portrait on the image was of Mao. In China's revolutionary discourse, burning Mao's image was regarded as counterrevolutionary. The meanings and rules of the revolutionary system began to affect the performance of the ritual thanks to bricolage. The last step, burning the image to send the Kitchen God off, could not be carried out because the meaning of the revolutionary discourse infiltrated the ritual along with Mao's image. How could people complete the ritual and release the god to ascend to Heaven without burning the image? This became an apparently insurmountable obstacle, interrupted the ritual's normal procedure, and made people realize that the signified conflicted with the signifier. Any bricoleur knew the risk and outcome of such unwise conduct: burning Mao's image would be deemed a counterrevolutionary crime and bring disaster. How could worshippers address the awkward situation brought about by bricolage?

The problem engendered by bricolage could be solved by bricolage. From my interviews, I have found two ways to deal with this. The first bricolage was in the performative domain: inventing a ritual to deactivate the image without burning it. People took down Mao's image, rolled it up, and sealed it with a red rope or wrapped it in red paper. This was a traditional way to deactivate a god's statue in China when it was no longer worshipped. The second bricolage was in the ideological domain: inventing a new discourse that declared the Kitchen God would ascend to Heaven without his image being burned. People assumed that the Kitchen God would depart to Heaven spontaneously. Guided by this idea, people bowed to Mao's image after the feast, took it down, and stored it somewhere clean. In the ritual to welcome the Kitchen God back, a new image of Mao would be posted on the wall. In this way, the problem brought about by bricolage was resolved by another bricolage. In many cities and the countryside, Kitchen God worship took place

in this manner even in the Cultural Revolution. People bought a fresh image of Mao and put it on their wall every year. Over the years, they stored many pictures of Mao in cupboards as nobody dared to burn them. Outsiders might take this as Mao cult, given the fact that people had collected so many Mao images. Under the cover of the cult of Mao, religious activities went on clandestinely throughout the Cultural Revolution.

Although two different bricolages made do at the same time, the first bricolage was not as popular as the second one, because the first was an overt bricolage. Anyone who had religious knowledge could identify it as a bricolage for religious purposes. Especially in the Cultural Revolution, an identifiably religious bricolage was risky. So, the first bricolage disappeared soon after it was invented. The second bricolage satisfied people's religious aspirations and the socio-political restrictions and mitigated the risks the most. Hence, it became overwhelmingly popular. Under the cover of Mao cult, people performed individual rituals that expressed collective aspirations.

My ethnography shows that nowadays when Kitchen God worship is permitted and hence bricolage is not needed, people no longer burn the Kitchen God image in the ritual. In Pingxiang, a prevailing discourse states that the Kitchen God will dutifully ascend to Heaven on his own, making it unnecessary to burn his image to release him. In fact, people see image-burning as disrespect. Ritual performers even asked, "why would we burn the God's image when we do not hate them?" For the generation that has been "culturally revolutionized," image burning is not taken as a means to release the god, but an expression of disrespect or hatred.⁶ In Pingxiang today, as image burning is no longer necessary, people do not buy a fresh image of the Kitchen God and post it on the wall every year. An image of the Kitchen God will hang on the wall for years and not be replaced unless it is damaged or stained. Not only in Pingxiang, but in many rural areas across China, many Kitchen God images hang on the wall for many years without being renewed.

Because of bricolage, the two alternating rituals of Kitchen God worship have been simplified to one—Send Off the Kitchen God. The ritual to welcome their return is omitted by most. Although there are many reasons for the simplification of this ritual, the religious bricolage that repurposed Mao's symbol is an important one. The taboo that Mao's symbol could not be burned led to a change of religious discourse, which further begot procedural changes in the ritual's performative field. From the post-Mao era, as people no longer burn the Kitchen God image, it is unnecessary to buy a new one and post it on New Year's Eve. Along with this, lighting joss sticks is omitted as well. This is because posting the Kitchen God's image signifies his return, so the family should light joss sticks to ritualize the welcome ceremony. However, when the step of posting a new image is discarded, people have no idea when the god will return, and their sense of ritual evaporates correspondingly.

The basic ritual elements of Welcoming the God's Return are all gone except for food offerings, as shown in Figure 2. Omitting important ritual elements turns a religious activity into a mundane feast. In the absence of other religious factors, food offering on its own could hardly be regarded as a ritual in Chinese religious culture, so it has been gradually appropriated by the mundane feast of the family reunion. As such, the ritual to welcome the god's return was gradually omitted or forgotten by ordinary people. Today, most

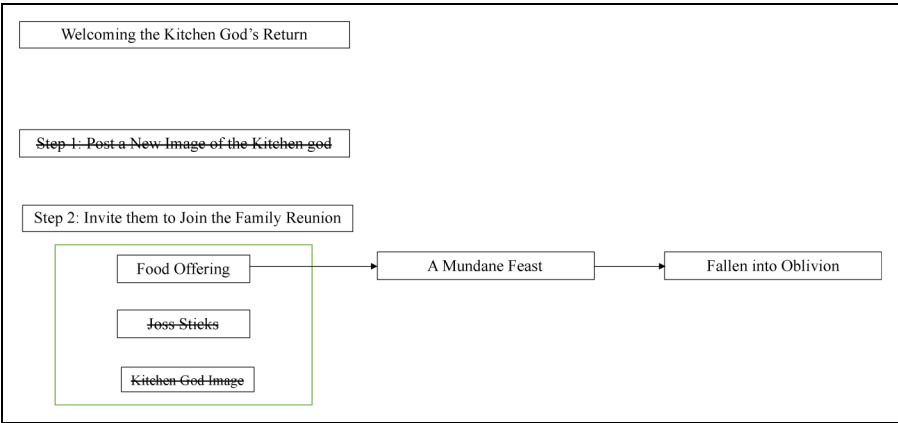


Figure 2. The structural change of Kitchen God worship

people only remember the ritual to send the Kitchen God off. The complete rite of Kitchen God worship that consisted of two alternating rituals becomes a single ritual.

Bricolage, which is cognitively structured by the objective ritual structure and intended to reproduce this structure, led to structural changes of the rite. The understanding that burning Mao’s image would be seen as counterrevolutionary begot another bricolage to solve the problem. Consequently, a new discourse was produced that critiqued the image-burning step of the ritual, triggering a series of changes in the ritual, and leading eventually to the alteration of the ritual structure. Bricolage is an important micro mechanism of ritual transition or transmutation in popular religion. It provides a new perspective to understanding the diversity, heterogeneity, and syncretism in Chinese religious culture.

Conclusion: Bricolage as a micro mechanism for culture change

Bricolage stems from the innovative capacities of human beings. It helps individuals to creatively solve practical problems caused by restrictive or limited conditions. As an agentic capacity or skill, it is ubiquitous in people’s daily lives in all societies or cultures. Moreover, as bricolage embodies a collective structure, people from the same community may easily recognize, learn, and emulate it. Once bricolage is increasingly accepted, mimicked, and reproduced, individual improvisation grows into a collective phenomenon, a popular innovation, and a social force, leading to changes in cultures. A theory of bricolage enriches scholars’ understanding of culture change.

First, bricolage is an adaptive change responding to exigent circumstances; the purpose of making change is to maintain the overall consistency or structural stability. However, minor changes in some parts may affect the rest of a cultural practice through time, beget unanticipated results, and lead occasionally to structural alterations. Thus, bricolage provides a new perspective to understanding unplanned culture change:

culture change may begin from a minor or makeshift change on a limited scale. This statement seeks to draw attention from evolutionary anthropologists, who have tended to adopt a grand perspective, focus on millennia-long time scales, and look mainly into the macro processes when studying culture change. I argue that a micro mechanism of culture change such as bricolage should not be overlooked or downplayed because the accumulation of minor changes can beget a structural change or cultural transformation.

Second, bricolage helps scholars to better understand why culture change might sometimes take on a regressive or hybridized form rather than a unilineal or multilineal trajectory. This is because bricolage is subject to bricoleurs' repertoire. If the available material is from the past, bricolage takes on a blending of the old and new, by contrast, if bricoleurs borrow an element from a different culture, bricolage features a hybridized or creole form. In the globalized world, the growing interactions or exchanges between societies and cultures increase the diversity of cultural elements in bricoleurs' repertoire. Bricolage in the current situation easily takes on highly diversified and hybridized forms. The same restrictive conditions working on bricoleurs may generate multifarious forms of bricolage that vie for recognition, popularity, and circulation. Against just this backdrop, creolization, a concept to depict the generative process when cultures come into contact, becomes a heated topic in the humanities and social science. The theory of bricolage enriches scholars' understanding the creole phenomena in the world of today.

Finally, since the selection of adequate substitutes is highly individual and random, bricolage may create new, idiosyncratic, or unimagined ideas, forms, or expressions. It is a significant micro mechanism that facilitates diversification, heterogeneization, and hybridization of cultures. It makes our world more variegated, charming, and colorful.

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Notes

1. Before the Ming Dynasty, the Kitchen God were male deities. Since Daoism developed the Kitchen God into a family of gods, both male and female deities appeared in public images. Given that Western scholars have used the word Kitchen God for a long period, I would continue to use Kitchen God to denote both male and female deities without gender-biased connotation.
2. In China, the Little New Year is a week ahead of the New Year. It indicates the beginning of the preparation process for the New Year Festival given that a variety of things must be done before New Year's Eve. In the past, peasants began to take rests from farmwork on that day and prepare for the arrival of the Spring Festival.
3. For example, at midnight on New Year's Eve, Door God worship was conducted as usual. People lit firecrackers to celebrate the New Year and posted Mao's image on the front door to worship the Door Gods. On the fifth day of the New Year, when people celebrated the birthday of the Fortune God, Mao's bust was put on the altar as a substitute.
4. The Land Reform (1947–1952), the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries (1950–1953), the Withdraw from the Sects Movement (1951–1953), the Three-Anti and Five-Anti Campaigns (1951–1952), the New Three-Anti Campaigns (1953), the Sufan Movement (1955), the Hundred Flowers Campaigns (1956–1957), the Party Rectification Campaign (1957), the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957–1959), the Great Leap Forward Campaign (1957–1960), the Re-education of Party Members (1961), and the Socialist Education Movement (1963–1965).
5. My interviewees said that Kitchen god worship was not affected in 1964, when the interdict took effect, because the ritual of sending the Kitchen God off did not need a new image.
6. This is not to deny that in some regions, rituals of the traditional structure revived. People burned the Kitchen God's image after their feast. Therefore, the performative field of the Kitchen God worship becomes diverse. However, a discussion of the diversity of the performative field is beyond the scope of this article.

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