

THE POLITICS OF CULTURE OR A CONTEST OF HISTORIES: REPRESENTATIONS OF CHINESE POPULAR RELIGION

Stephan Feuchtwang and Wang Ming-ming

INTRODUCTION

This essay is concerned with Chinese popular religion. However, it does not deal with popular religious practices in a straightforward manner. We are not engaged here in the description of the object. Instead, we perceive Chinese popular religion — local festivals, spirit possession, fortune-telling, and other forms of divination — as a set of institutions represented in the discourse of policies and of academic analyses. Hence, we would regard the essay — the data upon which it is based being mainly official materials, including both academic publications and policy document — as a commentary upon the representations of the object. Eventually we will return to Western anthropological interpretations as another set of representations. But before that, for the bulk of the essay, we will pay attention to the ways in which this object has been treated by those agencies — academic and political — in the PRC who have had most to do with it.

Despite the fact that empirical study of popular religion has been a rarity since 1949,¹ there are a variety of discussions on the problem of "superstition" and "customs" — two official terms for popular religious practices — in the Peoples Republic of China. This essay is not a generalizing overview of all the discussions. Nevertheless, we do intend to reveal the connections between the representations in general and see them as

part of a politics of culture. The approach taken is to distinguish an object of policy and analysis in the terms by which it is categorized, in this case as "cultural survivals" selected either as "useful" and "progressive," or "superstitious" and "backward." In each case, we will confine ourselves only to recent history and focus upon the period of the reform decade (1978-1989), though reference back to general background will also be made as is necessary.

An exercise in dialogue and dilemma, this essay is jointly written by a native and a foreign anthropologist. The native anthropologist is Wang Ming-ming, the foreign anthropologist Stephan Feuchtwang. The native anthropologist has written in his second language, whereas the foreign anthropologist has written in his first — the dominant English. The sections on Chinese representations of the topic have been written by the native anthropologist, the section on Western anthropologists by the foreign anthropologist, who is one of them. The dilemmas of crossing the distance between the two in an article written for an academic journal in the United States are evident. The foreign anthropologist has written these opening paragraphs and the conclusion, as well as the section on Western anthropological approaches. The reason for this is his greater ease in English and in the Western anthropological habits of self-reflection. But this has not led us to the normal Western anthropological conclusions. Our subject-matter, as well as our joint authorship, has meant our having to forego

Stephan Feuchtwang and Wang Ming-ming are, respectively, Principal Researcher and Research Scholar in the China Research Unit of the Department of Social Sciences, University of London

the comforts of Western anthropology's habitual remoteness from its objects. Even when it engages in self-reflection, it usually does it at home. We have had to engage in reflecting on the policy implications of what we write, and we ask the same questions about the policy implications of what Western anthropologists have written, even when they do not.

Readers will become aware of the authorial division of the essay from differences in style. We have let these stand. The reader will undoubtedly be able to read from them much more than we are able to say. But we have the first say: the article was jointly planned, we have checked over each other's sections, and we agree.

ACADEMIC REPRESENTATIONS AND THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

Academic discussions concerning "culture" (*wenhua*) and "customs" (*minsu*) recently presented in academic publications are diverse. Among them, perhaps the most interesting are those conducted by, on the one hand, folklorists and, on the other hand, sociologists and anthropologists, each of whom put different emphases upon the object and show different theoretical attitudes toward popular religious practices.

Customs, Concepts of the Past, and Folklore Studies

Theoretically and methodologically, Chinese folklore researches are not uniform: each of the folklore works may have its unique arguments and some may incorporate more than one approach. However, examined in terms of their general theoretical tendencies, the analytic approaches taken in the folklorists' studies of popular customs (*minjian fengsu*) seem to be made up from combinations of three assumptions: 1) that the popular customs are "cultural survivals" of ancient times; 2) that the customs could and should be traced to true historic origins;

and 3) that some of the popular customs are compatible with the progress of socialism and others not.

The assumption that popular customary practices — both the popular "superstitious practices" (*fengjian mixin huodong*) and traditional popular cultural activities (*chuantong minjian wenhua huodong*) which do not fit into the former category — are survivals of ancient culture is apparently not a Chinese invention. Its origin can be traced to the Tylorian version of human cultural history which postulated that culture was a fact of either "progress" or "degeneration." Chinese folklorists started to apply a Tylolean conception of culture in their studies of Chinese "customs" as early as the first decade of the 20th century, when the first "folklore movement" (*minsuxue yundong*) was initiated in Beijing University by some liberal intellectuals, one of the best-known of whom was Cai Yuanpei.² As part of the New Culture Movement, which was an early attempt by Chinese intellectuals to create a new type of culture based on the Western model of science (*kexue*) and democracy (*minzhu*), the folklore movement represented an intellectual current to adopt Western humanities and social sciences, especially the subjects most relevant to the problem of tradition, an issue that was derived from the cultural encounter between China and the West.

Folklore researches before 1949 were focused on two main areas: the collection of popular artistic works, especially folk songs (*minge*) and folk arts (*minjian yishu*); and the study of popular customary ways of life.³ According to those folklorists who were active in the folklore movements, the purpose of their researches was to transform Chinese culture through adjusting the elite-oriented perceptions of life to the "folk" or common people's world-views.⁴ However, such a claim obviously did not lead the folklorists to adopt what they also perceived to be the "superstitious" world-view of the rural population. Rather, what they adopted was

an evolutionary view of culture which stressed "struggle for existence" as the ultimate truth and thus also as a standard by which to judge whether a "culture" or a cultural element was good or not. Therefore, although common people's worldviews were regarded as better than the "feudal elitist perceptions" (*fengjian guizhu de shijieguan*), the "superstitious roots" (*mixin genyuan*) of them were not praised by the folklorists. What the pre-1949 folklorists were engaged in was, on the one hand, clarifying the "ancient" origins of the common people's customs and, on the other hand, selecting evolutionarily "better" elements of them — such as the "folk arts" as symbols of "the common people's world views" which they attempted to pick up and use to identify themselves and distinguish themselves from "elite-oriented" intellectuals. Perhaps it was this ambivalence of the folklorists' attitudes toward popular customary practices that made the subject "folklore" acceptable to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

A partial transformation of the pre-1949 Tylorian version of culture started with the establishment of the All-China Folklore Association in 1950,⁵ placing it in a Chinese Marxist theoretical frame. This frame allowed for major swings of approach and policy. They ranged from the conditional tolerance of custom and religion, but not superstition, in the 1950s and 1980s, to the unconditional condemnation of religion and old customs as feudal superstition in the decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). During the Cultural Revolution, folklore studies were not encouraged. But they enjoyed a revival in the 1980s.⁶

Today, "cultural survival" still refers to the historical process through which traditional cultural practices have been generated, but also reflects certain serious discussions of ideological and epistemological problems defined in Marxist rather than Tylorian terms. In their terms, there is still a judgement to be made. To say that popular religious practices are "survivals" of ancient or

even primitive culture may mean that they are to be respected as "cultural," "ancient" or "traditional," but on the other hand this may imply that these practices belong to the past and are thus useless in the present since they only reflect ancient people's lack of scientific knowledge and their "stupid" (*yumei*) superstition.

The evolutionist assumption is complicated by a second type of approach, which is more that of cultural history than of evolution. Here the major concern is to find the authentic historical origins of customs.

The first type of approach involves taking historical materialism as the only valid way to interpret social and cultural phenomena. Following this approach, customary practices are derived from ancient people's productive activities. For example, Chinese annual festivals are regarded, by those who take this approach, as originating in ancient Chinese seasonal production practices rather than in religious practices.⁷ And the reason for their containing "superstitious" elements is said to be later historical and particularly "feudal" impositions.

The second type of approach applies quite a different methodology. Those who take it normally agree to the assumption that some popular religious practices — especially various forms of divination — are "superstitious practices." But they tend to look at popular religious practices other than these "superstitious practices" as a set of ceremonies which have a particular historical position in China's past rather than simply in primitive human culture as in the case of the evolutionary approach. Certainly, the second historical approach can oppose the notion that a traditional popular practice is "superstitious," even respecting festivals for local territory gods as part of Chinese local history. The best example of this approach is the suggestion that Chinese annual customs were formulated either out of the ancient Chinese Way for calculating time or in commemoration of certain ancient national

heroes (*minzu yingxiong*) such as the ancient patriotic figure Qu Yuan.⁸

For different purposes, Chinese folklorists have also adopted some mythological and legendary interpretations as justifiable explanations. However, again, their adopted and transformed interpretations are carefully removed from the "superstitious" ones with which they share some characteristics. Unlike the "superstitious" interpretations which attribute popular ceremonies to gods or goddesses often unique to the localities in question, the intellectually well-organized mythological and legendary interpretations of Chinese popular religious practices more often trace the origins of the ceremonies to the semi-history of "the three emperors and the five imperial gods" (*san huang wu di*) in pre-Xia (2200 B.C.) Northern China or to legend recorded in the ancient written records such as the *Shi Ji* (Historical Records) of Sima Qian of the Han Dynasty.⁹

The two assumptions introduced above are themselves approaches to the notion that popular religious practices can be divided into "good" and "bad." Clearly, the criteria employed to judge whether a custom is good or bad can involve either of the considerations mentioned above. For example, to tell whether a customary ceremony can be practiced, folklorists connect it with "historical roots" of the development of the historical present.¹⁰ This process could be purely theoretical, but usually it accommodates the State's political needs. Therefore, the criteria by which folklorists judge the object of their researches often involve things such as whether the custom under consideration is "healthy," whether it does harm to social harmony, whether it is a form of "culture" or a form of "superstition," and so forth.

Therefore, the customs labeled "good" normally involve those which are conceived of as capable of providing forms of popular physical contest (*minjian tiyu bisai*) or cultural entertainment, consistent with the notion of national unity, and showing the

well-being of the Chinese people in the socialist state. These include the series of officially recognized traditional Chinese festivities — e.g., the Spring Festival, the Dragon Boat Festival, the Mid-Autumn Festival — which to a greater or lesser extent symbolize Chinese-ness,¹¹ a concept of use to the State for its cultural unification of the Chinese nation and intended economic operations such as attracting overseas Chinese investments. What have also been included in the good category are the traditional magical and semi-magical practices such as "*qi gong*" — harnessing and exerting vital energies in the body — and "*wu shu*" or traditional martial arts. All these have been related to the concept of "health" (*jiankang*), which not only refers to medical and biological well-being, but also has the meaning of "mental" and "spiritual" soundness.

The concept of "health" is a key criterion which the folklorist applies to judge popular religious practices. It provides a scientific guise for a moral judgement. By a similar criterion, other popular religious practices are classified as "bad customs and habits" (*buliang fengsu xiguan*). For most, but as we have pointed out, not all folklorists, these include local festivals of territorial gods, celebrations of ghost festivals, spirit possession, and other forms of divination popular among the rural population. These practices are considered "unhealthy" and "superstitious" on the ground that they have no legitimacy of existence under present conditions of socialism.

Social Studies

Like folklore, sociology and anthropology were introduced into China in the late 19th and early 20th century and developed in the Republican period, especially during the 1930s.¹² It is evident that before 1949 the scope and depth of these two Western-style subjects in China had developed in spite of political and military conflicts. In the 1950s, sociology and

anthropology were first regarded as significant from the Chinese Marxist philosophical perspective and then criticized as having "bourgeois tendencies" (*zichan jieji qingxiang*). From then on, these two subjects, though not totally eliminated, were confined to a restricted area of inquiries such as Morganian-Marxist studies of ancient social systems and contemporary minority nationalities in China.¹³ The problem of "superstition" or religious practices of the Han nationality, which received some attention from pre-1949 sociologists and anthropologists, was not considered a problem of sociological significance in post-1949 and pre-1978 periods.

Since 1978, sociology and anthropology have been re-established. Although Morgan-inspired studies still occupy an important position, there have been some major changes both in the objects and methodologies of social studies.¹⁴ Along with the shift of the Party's attention from class struggle to economic construction, many issues related to "development" and "modernization" have been brought into sociological discussion. In a similar way, the problems of religion, culture, and tradition have also received some attention from Chinese sociologists and anthropologists.

For most sociologists and anthropologists, religion is at once a "sensitive" and a marginal issue. To say that it is sensitive means that studying such a phenomenon is in danger of running counter to the Party's religious policy. However, this is an unspoken notion. In most of the Chinese sociologists' and anthropologists' works, "religion" is most often ignored. For those who are keen on applied sociology and applied anthropology, and thus the issues of how the social sciences can serve China's economic development, religion and culture are "trivial" areas of study since they are considered distant from the urgent tasks of economic construction with which China is faced.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, for these scholars,

popular religious practices, which are not really considered "religion," may merely be signs of backwardness unworthy of study.

Therefore little work in either sociology or anthropology has been focused directly upon popular religious practices. Nonetheless, in spite of this negligence, there have been various general theoretical discussions concerning religion and socialism. In contemporary Chinese sociological and anthropological works, "culture" and "religion" have raised two issues, indeed contradictions.

The first issue which has recently entered in Chinese theoretical discussions is the problem of whether religion is still "useful" (*youyongde*) or has become, under the conditions of socialism, merely a useless illusion born of ignorance and mischief.

In orthodox Chinese Marxist theories, religion belongs to the domain of ideology, an important part of superstructure which is said to be determined by economic bases. At the same time, ideology, involving religion, is regarded as less active than productive forces and therefore has in China become less progressive than the economy.¹⁶ Obviously, such theoretical reasoning has been an important factor in the CCP's "traditional" emphasis upon the creation of new ideologies and propaganda. It is also the theoretical basis of the notion that religion is nonfunctional under socialism.

According to this theory, religion originated at primitive stages of human social development when knowledge was not sufficient to provide a scientific and materialistic basis for understanding the natural world. As unscientific imagination, religion was then transformed into ideology and served as a tool with which ancient and feudal rulers "cheated" (*qipian*) the masses when class societies came into being. Hence, although considered illusional, religions in the historical periods before socialism are recognized as having been "useful." Primitive religion is said to involve magic which served

to comfort the primitive and ignorant people, while religion in the old days was an "opiate," arising from the suffering and the unfulfilled aspirations of the oppressed.

The implication of this "thesis" is more practical than theoretical. The suggestion that religion used to be useful in primitive phases of history and was used in class societies is often followed by another suggestion that religion has lost all its practical bases in socialist stages. The latter suggestion is almost the declaration that religion is a survival of "old societies" (*jiu shehui*) and is of no practical use in the period of socialism. Its actual implication is that religion must be eliminated gradually as a survival or as ignorance through education and ideological work.

Since 1978, concerning the "useful" aspects of religion, there have been some more or less liberal discussions among Chinese social scientists. The question of whether religion has any contemporary uses has become one of the "hot" issues (*remen*) of theoretical discussion. Among the various positions — which have seldom been based upon empirical studies — two have come into contradiction with the past dominant notion that religion is now useless. What distinguishes new discussions from the pre-1978 ones is the stress on the existence of present practical bases — in particular economic and social welfare — upon which religious beliefs and practices rise. A point of reference which serves as an authority for these inquiries is that China is still at the primary stage of socialism.¹⁷ Its relevance to inquiries into religion is the recognition that China is still backward, or not as advanced as full socialism requires.¹⁸ Along this line of thinking, post-1978 arguments postulate that religion and its existence in contemporary China is "understandable" (*keyi lijie*) in that the economic infrastructure has not yet been developed to such an extent that a religious superstructure can be eliminated totally. Obviously, economic backwardness is

considered the most important reason for religion existing in China. In most Chinese social scientists' works on religion, poverty has been a primary basis for religion, which is seen to rise out of feelings of insecurity.¹⁹

The second reason to which the Chinese social scientists assign the existence of religion under Chinese socialism is a cultural one. It is closely linked with the explanation offered for the persistence of "superstition." According to this explanation, "superstition" persists because of low levels of literacy and of spiritual civilization, not only in materially backward regions²⁰ but also in wealthy regions.

Both these reconsiderations conclude that religion in China still has practical bases: since economically and culturally China is not yet very advanced, religion is still able to grow. This position is the standard Chinese Marxist version of evolutionary development, as before, plus a social psychological explanation which has become popular among Chinese social scientists interested in the problem of religion.

Unlike Western sociological and anthropological linkages between religion, economy, and social structure, or between religion and other ideologies, for most Chinese social scientists today, religion is useful in terms of psychology. In other words, in spite of the bad sides of religion — such as economic wastefulness, ideological backwardness, and political danger — religion is recognized, in these social scientists' works, as psychologically functional, capable of fulfilling people's psychological needs, solving the problems of feeling empty, lonely, and insecure. Although the explanations have been social psychological, however, they do not recognize the institutional and social problems, the "roots" to which the religious beliefs may be traced. These feelings and the need to compensate for them are simply read into the religious beliefs and practices, in a strictly functional, not a structural-functional way.

These newly-developed views of religion are presented in general theoretical discussions and directed toward all religious phenomena including Chinese popular religion, despite the fact that the data which the discussions use are mainly from institutionalized religions such as Buddhism and Catholicism.

Chinese popular religion may be a more specified concern in the discussions over the issues of "cultural development strategy" (*wenhua fazhan zhanlue*) and "cultural reflections" (*wenhua fansi*), in which both anthropology and sociology have active roles.²¹ These cultural discussions are aimed at rethinking and transforming Chinese traditional culture. Cultural reflections involve a type of academic discussion concerning the relationships between modernization and traditional Chinese cultural structure. In these discussions, most attention has been paid to China's backwardness and the Chinese cultural tradition, hence applying a critical attitude toward Chinese tradition and traditional political culture.²²

The full complexity of these cultural discussions cannot be dealt with here. What we can point out, however, is the fact that in these discussions "superstition" becomes part and parcel of "the Chinese tradition" rather than the category of practices which were represented in folklore approaches as distinguishable *from* tradition. Here, "superstition" is the popular base upon which a backward political system is built. Modern worship of political authority, which is seen as the primary reason for the disaster of the Cultural Revolution and the post-reform politico-ideological conservatism, is perceived in analogy with popular superstitious worship of supernatural power.²³ The political passivity of the peasantry, which is seen as expressed in their backward and unscientific ways of life, is associated with the persistence of China's "feudal" political institutions at the present stage.

These cultural reflections imply some criticism of present political institutions as continuations of the feudal tradition of China, and see the transformation of the present political culture of elites as important. The common people's customs are not considered marginal to such a political transformation. On the contrary, common people and especially rural people's customs and traditional "habits" (*xiguan*) — the main manifestations of Chinese popular religion — are seen as the main conveyors of this backward Chinese tradition.

Different from but consistent with "cultural reflections" are "cultural development strategy" discussions (*wenhua fazhan zhanlue taolun*). These involve a series of theoretical and practical discussions among social scientists concerning the creation of a new culture consistent with China's modernization in the economic domain. In these discussions, attention is paid to cultural planning and education, which are stressed as important for China's modernization.²⁴

In both types of discussion, materials collected and theories developed in folklore and anthropology, especially Western anthropology, have been employed. However, rather than being analytical and empirical, the studies are mainly to identify "weak" elements in Chinese culture. Again, Chinese popular religion is represented as a sign or even the cause of backwardness. Such reasoning, which associates "feudal superstition" with "modern superstition" just as Weberian sociologists have seen tradition as an obstacle to modernization,²⁵ sees transformation of ways of life as key to modernization.

In spite of these biases, articles have now been written to stress the importance of studying Chinese popular religion, and some empirical studies have been conducted since the 1980s.²⁶ These studies have aimed at revealing the backwardness of some localities or indicating the need for cultural education in rural China, but they have also involved

detailed descriptions of ritual practices and suggestions of the directions in which "superstition" may be developing.

THE STATE AS CONTEXT OF ACADEMIC TEXTS

It seems to be the case that Chinese academic discussion of popular religious and cultural practices has diversified somewhat since 1978 in its choices of research methodology. What may be more interesting is the fact that there has been a tendency, in both folklore and sociological-anthropological studies, to promote "culture" (or tradition), religion, and popular customary practices as a set of significant or even respectable objects for academic inquiry. However, this does not lead Chinese scholars to adopt the position of seeing popular religious and ritual practices as forming a meaning system, meaningful to people who are engaged in the activities. What are considered "meaningful" instead are those aspects of Chinese popular religion which provide an object of policy.

If we may say that tracing the "true historical origins" of customary practices is what characterizes many Chinese academic approaches to Chinese popular religion, we must also say that a historical approach in folklore and sociology as well as anthropology is not simply an academic perspective. It is closely related to the politics of culture in the People's Republic of China. Such a connection can be most clearly seen in the almost singular discursive pattern which most Chinese academic discussions follow.

Geertz, when dealing with ethnographic writing, suggests that the seriousness that ethnographies appear to provide for readers is derived from the ways in which anthropologists represent their works as results of having "been there" or having conducted fieldwork.²⁷ It seems to be clear that Chinese academics in the PRC do not attempt to gain convincing power in the ways Western anthropologists adopt. In Western

social anthropology, ethnographic data and theoretical speculation can be said to be the two most important components of anthropological work. In Chinese studies of popular cultural and religious practices, it is the State's political needs and what the researchers may contribute to them that form the crucial components of the inquiry. Hence, most Chinese academic writing tends to undergo the following ritualized writing procedure:

1) Introduction, The State's Political Needs: Looking into Chinese academic discussions concerning popular culture and religion, we find that most of them start with considerations of the contemporary situation of China and the "suitability" (*shiyi*) of the discussion to follow. These often involve modest statements that the inquiries to follow are very preliminary, and praises of China's political changes, especially those since 1978. Associations are made between what the authors are doing in their articles and what the State needs, and there are calls for attention to be paid to the study.

Studies of religions and popular religious practices involve serious consideration of ways in which research can contribute to China's economic and cultural construction or, in official Chinese terms, the construction of socialist material and spiritual civilization. In particular, they involve a speculation about, for example, the relationship between the study of customs and the development of tourist cultural resources and the relevance of the study to accumulation of the State's "cultural treasures" (*wenhua caifu*).

2) The Central Bulk, The Historical "Depth": Having introduced political references into the studies, the discussions often proceed, in various ways, to trace the true historical origins of the customs and superstitious practices. The approaches taken include those analyzed earlier. Although the historical data used are diverse, the ways in which they are applied seems to be standard.

Historical data are used to demonstrate that the associations made in the introductory part are historically sound. Historical materials are not collected for academic analyses. What they serve is either to categorize popular religious and cultural practices through distinguishing their different "historical roots" (*lishi genyuan*) or show the ways in which the "better" customs were used in ancient China.

A good example is folklorist Mo Gau's article on the relationships between the study of customs and the development of tourism.²⁸ Like most other Chinese folklorists, Mo defines popular cultural practices as an object of policy and attempts to illuminate the usefulness of studying it. What makes his work more difficult than others' is the fact that the connections between tourism and customs may seem to be unclear to many people. Many people, or as Mo suggests, even officials, are ignorant of how traditional festivals can be used to develop tourism. To resolve the problem, Mo chooses to use historical materials. First of all, he selects some historically "non-superstitious" traditional festivals. Then he postulates that these "good festivals" were mainly seasonal festivities which had been times for sightseeing in Imperial China — for example, the Spring Festival as an occasion for spring season sightseeing (*chunyou*) and the First Full Moon Night for night-time sightseeing. Mo's article is not merely concerned with tourism. It is also intended to demonstrate that folklore studies or the science of customs can contribute a great deal to the development of "Chinese socialist tourism." The way in which folklore can make the contribution is defined as the subject's capacity of looking into the past for resources which may be of great use to the Party's policies.

3) Conclusion, Return Back to the State's Policies: The concluding sections of the works are far more often policy reconfirmations and suggestions than

theoretical speculations. Apart from summaries of the arguments made in the central sections, the concluding parts usually involve calls for attention to be paid, mainly by the state, either to the studies or to the objects of the studies. All these are done in consistency with the Party's policies.

Clearly, the discursive frame which Chinese academics adopt is one that serves to provide the source of discursive power for academic discussions. From an analysis of the frame, we may find that being convincing to the State, which exists outside and beyond the academic circle, has been a major goal of published studies. Chinese academic representations of popular religious and cultural activities are largely accommodated to the State and the Party's policies, particularly to their politics of culture. And it is to these politics that we now turn.

THE STATE, POLICIES, AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATIONS

The implementation of any type of policy in the PRC has always taken a holistic approach. Therefore, work concerning a single object or problem such as popular cultural and superstitious practices has been made the responsibility of Party, State and "mass" organizations (*qunzhong zuzhi*). Nonetheless, some agencies have played relatively specialized parts in the political management of culture. Among these, the Ministry of Culture and the criminal justice systems (along with public security bureaus) form two major forces for policy implementation, each of which entertains different representations of Chinese popular religion.

"Culture" versus "Superstition": The Dialectics of the Ministry of Culture's Rural Work

The Ministry of Culture (*wenhua bu*) and its provincial (*wenhua ting*), regional (*wenhua*

ju), city (*wenhua ju*), county (*wenhua ju*), and township (*wenhua zhan*) level counterparts are the prime agencies for implementing the concept of socialist spiritual civilization.²⁹ At the top level, as one of the State Council's Ministries, the Ministry of Culture is in charge of the management of "culture." Its tasks involve: 1) the creation of literary culture; 2) the management of the whole country's cinematic, dramatic, and musical arts; 3) the preservation of China's traditional culture — such as ancient architecture protection projects and archaeological excavations; 4) cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries, and 5) mass cultural activities — including the study of the common people's customs. As extensions of the Ministry of Culture, the provincial, regional, and local cultural agencies are assigned similar tasks but engaged in more specific work.

The object of the "cultural system" (*wenhua xitong*) is defined formally as the construction of Chinese socialist culture and hence is closely connected with the work of the CCP's propaganda department at various levels. However, it has also been defined in terms of providing "cultural entertainment" (*wenhua yule*) for the masses. In both of the two aspects, the cultural agencies are confronted with what have been termed "tradition" and "superstition." Therefore, the division of what is termed "culture" and what is termed "superstition" constitutes a key issue for the agencies and defines their way of representing Chinese popular religion and popular cultural practices.

Culture, in the Ministry of Culture's definition, is composed mainly of two parts: one that is traditional and the other modern.³⁰ Further, traditional culture involves two major components: on the one hand, ancient or archaeological culture, and on the other hand, customs which are regarded as survivals of ancient Chinese culture. Since 1949, the Ministry of Culture has been engaged in archaeological discoveries in China in the

names of State Treasure (*guo bao*) and Provincial Protection Objects. Another major part of its work is the selection of some "traditional customs" (*chuantong minsu*), which involve especially "healthy" traditional annual festivals such as the Spring Festival. While the archaeological relics are preserved as the cultural treasure of China and as places and artistic objects which the masses are guided to see, look at, and remember, the "healthy" traditional customs are promoted as mass sociabilities.

What is excluded in the official list of traditional cultural "heritage" is "superstition," which mainly consists in various forms of divination, popular magical practices, local ritual observances, and local forms of festivity. No clear comparisons have been made, by the Ministry, between "tradition" and "superstition" — both are Chinese "cultural survivals." We can find no overt definitions of "superstition" as distinguished from "tradition." What we may find though, is the fact that what has been termed "Chinese popular religion" in the Western social anthropological studies has usually been depicted in negative contrast with "culture" and education.

Articles by Chinese "cultural workers" (*wenhua gongzuozhe*) concerning the problem of the revival of "feudal superstition" (*fengjian mixin*) have appeared in the Ministry of Culture's official journal "Mass Culture" (*Qunzhong Wenhua*).³¹ Some treat the revival as a more or less independent and central theme, others mention it as complementing data for other inquiries. For all, the persistence of the phenomenon is a sad fact in the sense that it has not been eliminated despite all the efforts made by the Party since 1949, or because they perceive the problem as an economic issue in the backward areas. In either case, the revival of "feudal superstition" is an indication of a lack of "cultural work" in the rural areas.³²

Therefore, on the one hand, "superstition" is regarded as something which

will disappear once rural cultural life has been "enriched" (*fengfu*) or its economy developed to a sufficient degree. On the other hand, the fact that "feudal superstition" is not dead in spite of the raising of the standard of living since 1949 is attributed to illiteracy among the rural population. No structural problems have been traced.

Such vague representations of Chinese popular religion in the official discourse are not merely revelations of the theoretical and methodological poverty of the official discourse of culture. They represent a set of practical political considerations aimed at the "culture" and "tradition" that the State intends to promote. To put "culture" and "Chinese tradition" in a rank beyond "superstition" or indeed popular religion and local symbolic systems and see this order as the only one that should be "realized" is in any case an attempt to create a dominating culture and ideology.

The intended dominant culture is designed to be at once secular and sacred. It must be secular both to be consistent with the Marxist materialist world-view and because this is the framework by which the older popular culture is to be rejected as "superstition" and replaced. It must be sacred because it is promoted as the singular and ideal way of life. To a large extent, distinguishing "tradition" from "feudal superstition" and filling what is called "tradition" with "Chinese-ness," or in Chinese terms "nationalness" (*minzuxing*), form the central measure of the official culture. If the secularization of culture depends largely on the measure that makes the "tradition" Chinese may contribute more to the sacralization of the nation.

However, the division of functions is not as sharp as this, since their practical logic is flexible. We may find, in the work of "cultural workers," contradictory but understandable arguments: for example, a particular traditional festival may be considered "Chinese traditional" and

"healthy" in some works and elsewhere be regarded as "superstitious." Flexibilities are also manifested in the fact that the "sacred" can be transformed into the "secular" when necessary: for example, a transcendently "Chinese" traditional ceremony may be used in a secular way to attract tourists from abroad and become economically useful. The two are considered together as the "dialectics" (*bianzhengfa*) of two aspects of the same phenomenon.

Religion versus "Superstition": Popular Religion, Law, Public Security, and Social Order

The same flexibility in practical logic contributes to the introduction of the "trivial" object — "superstition" — into the serious discourse of the PRC's criminal justice systems.

The issue of "feudal superstition" as a confusing problem is brought into Chinese legal discussion of the policy of religious freedom. Again, the theoretical tool employed here is "dialectics" (*bianzhengfa*). On the one hand, Chinese legal representations theoretically recognize the "common root" (*gongtong genyuan*) — primitive origins — which religion and "superstition" share. On the other hand, "superstition" is radically distinguished from "religion" which refers to institutionalized religions. Although religion and "superstition" are regarded as phenomena which in theory should finally be eliminated, they are distinguished from each other tactically.

Article 36 of the PRC Constitutional Law — whose counterpart is in Article 147 in the PRC Criminal Law — stipulates that "citizens have the freedom of religious beliefs."³³ "Religious beliefs" here mainly refer to Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, and Islam. The reasons put forward for the recognition of institutionalized religions are basically three. The first is in consideration of

the Party's policies concerning minority nationalities. That is to say, recognition of the institutionalized religions which the minority nationalities "believe in" is regarded as an important aspect of the CCP's respect for the ethnic nationalities and of its stress upon the union (*tuanjie*) of China's various nationalities.³⁴ The second reason is the notion of "looking after" (*zhaogu*) the religious masses (*xinjiao qunzhong*), in order to join their activism to socialist construction, do good to the mass union, and benefit China's political stability. The third main consideration is the perception that religion is an issue related to international affairs. "Paying respects" (*zunzhong*) to religion is seen as important for international economic and cultural exchanges and mutual understanding between China and foreign countries so long as precautions are taken against the danger of "foreign religious penetration" (*waiguo zongjiao shentou*).³⁵

In striking contrast with "religion," "superstition" is considered in many respects harmful and dangerous to socialist construction. Generally "superstition" is seen as an evil power that makes people attribute their fate to "supernatural and mysterious forces" instead of to the Party's leadership, and hence is regarded as something running counter to the general principles laid down in the PRC's Constitutional Law. That institutionalized religions may have the same "bad functions" (*huai zuoyong*) as "superstition" is recognized in most of the Chinese textbooks of law. Nonetheless, this aspect of "religion" is often played down by the emphasis on the "positive functions" (*zhengmian zuoyong*) of it — such as those mentioned earlier. Hence, "superstition" has almost been made, in the legal discourse, an equivalent to "counter-revolutionary fatalism" (*fangeming shuminglun*).³⁶

A second characteristic which makes "superstition" distinguishable from religion is popular religion's tendency to "grow and spread diversely like grasses" (*fensan wuza*).

Unlike institutionalized religions which are normally recognized officially as systematized (*xitonghua*) and well-organized, popular "superstitious" activities are seen as chaotic and popular rituals as not ceremonial. Only worship in the institutionalized religions can be considered properly ceremonial, while popular rituals are merely behaviors derived from "ignorance" (*wumei*). Nonetheless, the focus of legal discussion in fact is not the "ignorant" and "disorganized" aspects of popular religion, but rather the organized aspects of popular ritual activities which may lead popular ritual to run out of the control of official administrative and security organizations. They are concerned about the risk of "superstition" being used to "conduct illegal counter-revolutionary action."

A third characteristic has helped to define popular religion as something that can be restricted. This is the relationship, supposed in Chinese legal discourse, between "superstition" and various crimes. In the PRC Criminal Law (1979), some popular religious practices are prohibited on the grounds that some people may use them to "make rumors" (*zao yao*) and "cheat people for money and property" (*zaqu qiancai*).³⁷ The former type of "crime" mainly involves spreading non-official information, especially that derived from "superstitious" beliefs, leading to uncertainty among the masses. It may at most be classified a "counter-revolutionary crime," the major political crime. The latter type of crime involving "superstition" is "economic crime" (*jingji fanzui*).³⁸ money-making through various forms of divination and fortune-telling.

Thus, popular religion has been differentiated from "normal religious activities" in Chinese legal discourse. According to the official categorization, "normal religious activities" involve the worshipping and ceremonial activities conducted by "religious people" (*zongjiao tu*), in places of "religious activity" (*zongjiao huodong changsuo*), and in religious people's

homes. The illegal superstitious activities refer to the activities conducted by witches, fortune-tellers, and other bad elements to deceive the masses, make money, do harm to other people's lives, corrupt people's mentality and social environment, to destroy social peace or the construction of socialist civilization.³⁹

However, not all popular religious practices are identified with illegal superstitious activities. Some practices, such as domestic worship, are tolerated and interpreted as "customary activities" (*minsu huodong*). Nevertheless, no clear distinctions have been made between this and popular ritual practices — such as the Universal Salvation Festival (*pu du*), one of the major popular festivals in Fujian — which are said by the public security bureaus to be socially "disturbing" (*luan*) and economically wasteful (*langfei*).⁴⁰

Politics and the Technologies of Representation

Compared to academic inquiries, Chinese political representations of popular religion are normally less complicated: the former show a great tendency to search for historically deep interpretations while the latter, though also looking upon the object — Chinese popular religion — as an historical phenomenon, pay more attention to the definition of the object as a target of policies. Hence, the distinction between what is "useful"/"good" and what is "useless"/"bad" plays a larger part in political representations than in academic interpretations, where moralistic categorization of popular religious practices figure more as an indicator of the academic work's adaptation to the political environment.

The main method or technique employed in political representations is "dialectics." This sort of dialectics is to a large degree a technology of categorization. Such a technology of categorization is nothing other

than one which serves to cut the object — Chinese popular religion — into two tidy sets of pieces, one made acceptable, tolerable, and "usable," and another eliminable and trivial — "not useful."

For the State's "cultural workers," the contrast, artificially made, between what is termed "culture" and "tradition" and what is termed "superstition" is practically significant. The recognition of some customs as "healthy" is closely related to the State's needs for a cultural source to construct "socialist spiritual and material civilization," while the denial to other parts of popular religion and culture of the right to existence may be regarded as an attempt to impose the State and the Party's culture. In a similar way, the notion that "institutionalized religions" are distinguishable from popular "superstitious" practices may be connected to the State's needs for social and ideological order. The suggestion that only the "systematized" and "well-organized" religious activities — such as those conducted by officially recognized Christians, Moslems, Taoist practitioners, and Buddhists — can be seen as subjects which are assigned to the religious freedom policy while other religious, especially "superstitious," activities should be considered as either political or economic misconduct and even crime, is again a manifestation of the State's designation of its political and ideological order.

Meanwhile, the distinctions are not totally "fixed," since a practical dialectics requires "flexibilities" (*jidong xing*). Therefore, sometimes some "superstitious elements" may be transferred into the category of "culture," "customs," and "religion" according to the State and the Party's temporary political needs, and sometimes vice-versa. As a result, some popular religious practices which were regarded as "superstitious" in pre-1978 periods have been promoted as symbols of Chinese tradition. For example, in pre-1978 periods allowing popular ancestral worship during the Clear and Bright Festival (*Qing Ming Jie*) was

considered to be against socialism. It was condemned as a superstitious practice. The policy aim was to replace this practice with visits to tombs and memorials for revolutionary martyrs.⁴¹ But since 1978, ancestor worship has been recognized as a good custom which may contribute to China's modernization, as it attracts visits by overseas Chinese to their homes and inspires them to invest in the motherland.⁴²

In the same way, "superstitious activities" were regarded in the pre-1989 reform period as having something to do with either "ignorance" derived from poverty or psychological uncertainties that will not disappear without full economic development. Since 1989 these same "superstitious activities" have been perceived as "lack of principle" and as supportive evidence for promoting ideological education programs.⁴³

WESTERN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Academics, in particular anthropologists, even more so foreign anthropologists, are institutional outsiders — beyond policy, beyond the need and the feelings of identification approaching responsibility in which observed practices present nagging questions of policy. Academic anthropologists observe and translate what they see across a greater distance than do those who observe from within the political system in which they serve or to which they are subject.

A Chinese anthropologist is also drawn into establishing such a distance, across which a mode of inquiry can be differentiated from the investigations of policy makers. But he has to cope with being identified by what is observed under the shared burden and responsibility for a long and continuous historical legacy. The Western anthropologist of Chinese practices does not have this problem. Even so, a Western academic anthropologist of Chinese popular religion

can and does adopt, at least implicitly, a political and an historical perspective. What anthropology describes is always much more likely to be the remote, the lowly and the powerless, than the near and the high. But the relativities of cultures have replaced a singular history of cultural achievement and progress as the object of anthropological study. As a result, it is a virtual principle of the anthropological calling that it will not condemn what it describes.

In the realm of fact anthropology participates in the same discipline as does a good novelist in the realm of fiction. What might by more involved accounts be condemned as backward, confused, or mischievous, the social and cultural anthropologist describes from the perspective of the condemned as intelligible and textual facts. Academic anthropological texts provide a respectable historical record and an analysis which attempts to supply the previously unrecorded, that which is without history, with terms faithful to its own vernacular, even if the language of the text and the concepts of the analysis come from outside.

But Western academic anthropology is at the same time furthest removed from those everyday phenomena for which it provides a history. All the Western anthropological studies of Chinese popular religion have this paradoxical stance. Even when they are translated back into the language from which the observations were taken, they are translations from the foreigner. Whatever reinvolvement this closer approach to the source of investigation brings, it includes the circumstances and uses of the translation and their own content — the purposes of teaching or of policy — and the fact that it is a foreign text. But that is a circumstance to which we shall have to return in conclusion. First, let us examine some concrete examples of recent Western ethnography of Chinese religion and ritual.

We will confine our comments to a selection of five recent American works. English-language writing is certainly not the

only Western ethnography of Chinese popular religion, but is by far the most extensive and numerous and most of it is American. The five works fall into two groups. The first three (those by Ahern, Weller, and Sangren) represent up-to-date extensions of a Western anthropological tradition which seeks, in the great variety of religious practices and beliefs, a local or a pan-Chinese essence. The analytic aim and the thrust of their narratives are toward a holistic structure which can account for these variations and diversities, and for all other social practices, with which they must be linked. This essence is written and posed in the tense of an ethnographic present, which is only qualified as dating from "late imperial China." The last two works (by Jordan and Overmyer and by Anagnost), on the other hand, represent a more historically conscientious and less holistically ambitious writing. It specifies a particular context for the documents and the descriptions which are its materials, and for the occurrence of what is described in them. This kind of writing is less theoretical, but it is also more politically aware.

Emily Martin Ahern, in her work *Chinese Ritual and Politics*,⁴⁴ treats the rituals of divination, cure, and festival in popular Chinese religion as performative acts which can be interpreted systematically. They have rules and meanings, and they change. Her analysis focuses on what intrigues most outsiders who observe these rituals: their resemblance to imperial bureaucratic procedures. These resemblances include the written commands which are talismans, the various kinds of spirit money for transactions with underlings, the bribery of gatekeepers, and the petitioning of superiors, the hierarchies of rank and intercession which are recited in the liturgies of salvation, exorcism, and cosmological adjustment, the gestures, designs and implements in which these are acted out. All these ritual aspects appear to

imitate the actual protocols and the paperwork of the courts and the military ranks and arts of the imperial state. But unlike the imperial authorities, to which the common household had little or no access, the gods of popular cults are accessible. What is more, they represent a possibility of fair judgement and material benefit which could not be expected from the imperial bureaucracy, though it might have been hoped for from the higher authorities to whom access was blocked by corrupt underlings. In short, the truth of these rituals, according to Ahern, is that they represent political relations and outcomes. They are realistic as a resemblance, but idealized as an expectation. They are, according to Ahern, a learning game, in which what is learned is a critical version of the real political thing. They are also a means of expressing the repeated problems faced by the needy and the powerless seeking help from authority. Sufficient similarity between the imperial and the republican bureaucracies permits the resemblance to imperial bureaucracy to stand, enhanced, as an analogy and a disanalogy to the republics in Taiwan and the mainland, a realistic idealization of current political relations.

In short, in Ahern's account, the religion of the common people is a systematic representation of the politics of the powerless and of their transactions with the agents of authority. Not simply a repetition of the legitimacy and the ideology of the ruling classes, nor a confused mixture of the textual traditions of the elites, popular religion is oppositional, as well as systematic and intelligent. Its rituals are to be respected as performances of potentially transformative models. Yet Ahern does not set them in a history of the politics of such a transformation. She simply inscribes them into a slice of such a history, to stand for a more theoretical and general moment of appreciation of the whole cultural formation.

Robert Weller's *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion*⁴⁵ does something similar, seeking to show how the religious culture of China contains often oppositional diversities. Concentrating on the annual rite of universal salvation of orphan souls, he argues that the religious practices of the common people of Taiwan, and by inference the rest of southern China, were both oppositional and different in their ideology from the dominant ideologies of the privileged and powerful. The symbolic codes of elite participation were performed in official cults and the most literate forms of divination and word-play, including the more esoteric codes of Daoism and of Buddhism. But the festivals of the ruled were different. They were pragmatic. "Pragmatic" is a respectful account of a mixture. Weller does not use descriptions such as "syncretic" or the more pejorative "superstitious" and "magic." These are rejected because the symbolic systems of the dominant ideologies are not in his account privileged by a greater truth or authenticity. They are systematizations of the pragmatic, feeding upon it, and not just feeding into it. From this perspective, Weller presents a view of the cultural whole. It implies a class structure, an historical and political slice of the whole, but not a politics.

Steven Sangren's *History and Magical Power in a Chinese Community*⁴⁶ succeeds where Weller fails. By concentrating on the institutions of festivals and pilgrimage, linking local, territorial temples and their cults, it successfully demonstrates the existence in Taiwan, and probably throughout China, of a system of popular religious practices, which is quite distinct from the systems of official temples, and from the monastic traditions of Daoism and Buddhism.

A similar conclusion can be drawn from some of the Chinese (both Taiwanese and mainland) local historians in their museum and folklore studies of local temples. In these studies, local festivals and their temples are described as the manifestations and the relics of a history of settlements, a history also of

the construction of local identities and local custom.⁴⁷ But such a history is incidental to the main thrust of Sangren's analysis. His main concern is to insert this system of popular practices, along with the others of Chinese religion, into a single cosmological structure of which each system, every ritual and symbol, is an utterance that reproduces the structure even while creating and communicating on its basis.

So with Sangren we have a respectful account of popular religion, showing it to be a distinct system with its own historical record. But once again, this account is amalgamated into a prior concern, like Weller's, to identify a Chinese religious culture as a whole and at a moment which could be any of its historical moments, and one which includes all that is differentiated in China. Sangren's work is about the record of settlement and its religious markers. It is about a resistant religious and historical tradition, yet it is not a history. No historical movement or potential is charted in his account. Cultural holism seems to have precluded it.

Historical change is a much more central concern and cultural holism no concern at all in David Jordan and Daniel Overmyer's *The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan*.⁴⁸ In their study, the historical thrust promised by the three previous studies is realized. Since it is unhampered by an attempt to insert a particular history into a cultural whole, it does not face the problem of showing how the entirety of Chinese culture is in transformation.

In observing and describing the innovatory, adaptive qualities of spirit-writing, as other anthropologists have done for spirit-mediumship in Chinese communities, and adding a longer historical dimension by tracing the emergence of the institution of syncretic sects, Jordan and Overmyer identify a source of cultural innovation which might have a political project. But they do not seek to spell out what that politics might be — a dogmatic fundamentalism, an aspirant self-cultivators'

citizenship against state and big organizations? As ethnographers they straddle the inside and the outside of the defensive thresholds of the sects. This enables them to describe the establishment of orthodoxy on one hand and the invention of new orthodoxy on the other, without taking sides with either. But just because they do not take sides, their account in and of itself stands in opposition to official condemnations of secret societies and of spirit-possession.

The narrative exemplified by Jordan and Overmyer and the whole project of ethnographic historians of Chinese popular culture is one of disclosure. A suppressed or simply a neglected creativity and its institutions is discovered behind the pejoratives of the established authorities and their histories.

The same is true of Ann Anagnost's studies of official accounts of feudal superstitions in the PRC.⁴⁹ The pejorative account is, she indicates, a frame in which information about a popular superstition is turned into a story about something else, a good tale which is the exemplary negative of scientific progress or economic development. In disclosing the framework Anagnost brings out of it a new account of the framed object, as a rich response from its own roots to the framing activities of the state and the media.

Where those who are making or securing history in leading policy-making or policy-implementing roles condemn the backwardness, brutality and ignorance of the religious practices of the remote, the lowly, and the uneducated, anthropologists find intelligence and innovation. Their texts are a resource of self-respect for the diminished. They remain well out of reach of their potential beneficiaries. But should they be translated back, what historical project, what politics, what policy would they imply? Here the anthropological texts are apparently uncommitted. But at the very least they are committed to a pluralism of many voices and many tendencies. So are we. And this may have further implications, which we will attempt to bring to light in our conclusion.

CONCLUSION

What then are we, a Chinese and a Western anthropologist, doing? As anthropologists we are commenting on the representative character, rather than the truth of all these accounts, the close and the remote. But by bringing them together, we are in addition forcing each others' issues upon them. To unreflective policy and scientific accounts, we bring critical anthropological inquiry. To the uncommitted anthropology of the distant object we ask questions about its political and historical implications.

The political equivalent of the anthropologists' straining after a cultural holism is the claim to national unity. National unity and sovereignty in China, as everywhere on the globe since the birth of nationalism in Europe, are asserted with passion. The Chinese nation's cultural soul and moral principle are in acknowledged crisis. The nation is the object of a politics of culture, which requires a research of the singular, if conflictual, history of its necessary emergence. Such a history is a teleology of the nation in the eternal existence of its tradition, already there in culture but not yet entirely apparent or alive to its population. Thus in the PRC, academics, cultural officials, ideological workers, and propagandists insist on national integration and engage in the search for its spiritual civilization. Sometimes, as at present for diplomatic and economic reasons, some provincial autonomy and its restoring of a local cultural identity is encouraged. Cultural workers still, like most Western anthropologists of China, seek answers to the question: what is Chinese-ness? In the PRC the question includes an additional word: what is modern Chinese-ness? The search for the prehistory of modern Chinese-ness for these workers therefore bears a selective project in addition to the teleology of national emergence. Their search is determined by what is meant by "modern" and therefore what is backward and represents the burden of the past, which has

then to be distinguished from what is progressive and represents the future in the past. Western anthropologists are more eclectic, and perhaps less aware, certainly less conscious of their selectivity as an historical act. In China, "modern" bears the weight of dispute over what stage China has reached in variously conceived histories of human development toward socialism. "Modern" is not a consistent or a clear set of criteria. It is a contested terrain. The emphasis on socialist modernization can conflict with emphasis on modernization of productivity, technical renewal, and keeping pace with universal scientific knowledge and education. Here is a contest of priorities between ideological and political transformation on the one hand, material incentives, school education, specialization, and economic reform grounded in political and ideological stability on the other. In either case, popular religious practices are "superstitious," representing a past that should be left behind.

But emphasis upon the necessity for ideological work means a more active attempt to eliminate superstition and in its place construct ideological institutions satisfying the spiritual needs of a new civilization, socialist with Chinese characteristics. This is itself given varied interpretations in action, for even if basic principles can be stated, they are contestable in practice since socialism itself is always in dispute, as is its accommodation to Chinese history and conditions. But such contests always receive the arbitration of one authority, and they become its internal struggles. According to the four basic principles which define patriotism as the party's monopoly of political organization, only the Party can say what the current interpretation of socialism with Chinese characteristics is. It mediates, not Heaven and Earth, but a history of the future and the Chinese people.

The second emphasis, on schooling and universal science as instruments of increased

production and efficiency, whether that of market forces or of planned growth and improvements of livelihood and social security, merely ignores popular religious practices as relics.

A third emphasis focuses upon transformation, rather than neglect or elimination and replacement, stressing the importance of cultural modernization and at the same time the importance of preserving cultural treasures and records.

The three emphases in this politics of culture distinguish three strands of state agency: the Party as a Communist organization; the Party and the State Commissions and Ministries — including those of education — as a government of urgent economic and livelihood tasks; and the Ministry of Culture. The Party as communists may hold sway over the others, or the Party and its administration as government of an economy may hold sway over its revolutionary communism. The Ministry of Culture never holds sway. It holds a line, in its task of preserving (establishing) national heritage. Between the two poles of its own emphasis, on cultural modernization and on preservation, its workers register the disputes and changing balances of emphasis coming from the other agencies.

Public security organs also hold a line, that of securing national sovereignty and unity. As guardians of Party authority they are the most severe agents of the first emphasis, the emphasis upon elimination. They are charged with the task of eliminating challenges to that authority, ideologically suspended in the current mixture of versions of socialist modernity. In performing this job, practices — such as a spirit-medium heralding a new order, or a spirit-writing sect organizing secretly — which represent counterrevolution, according to the current balance of authority, are the target. But more basically, they are charged with the

preservation of national sovereignty and its unity. Here the target is the celebration of any religious and cultural autonomy, which is interpreted as "splittist" or as "unpatriotic."

For all these emphases on modernity, popular religious practices in the countryside are local and remote. The alternative emphases of their representations are "superstition" or "survival," ignorance and backwardness, or disappearing history. Academic and museum researchers, social scientists and folklorists have passed through channels of schooling and higher education whose teachers and curricula have been among the chief generators of these very emphases on modernization and national construction. Rural and local religious practices are studied in social science as pathological symptoms of spiritual or economic deprivation, in folklore culturology as historical relics or as local elements of a national heritage.

But their research as an activity and its results as data are also resorts and resources for an inversion of the distance at which the local and the remote is held. Writers, artists, and film-makers who have passed through the same passages to modern urban life, have used research into popular rural culture rebelliously.⁵⁰ Chinese modernizing nationalists participate no less than nationalists of other countries in the romanticism which is the inverse of socialist or liberal modernization and rationality. The search for tradition is not confined to current policies of scientific progress, cultural transformation, or of governmental establishment of a national ethos.

The perspective of distance from urban heights upon the local and the remote can be turned rebelliously upon a populist leadership or into a hankering for the sources of a blocked and polluted creativity. The peasant roots of the communist revolution have been invoked to condemn old veterans and feudal workstyles. They have on the other hand been remembered as a lost but revivable sense of community and responsibility before it was

corrupted. Or they are remembered ambivalently as a continuing, betrayed, yellow earth of despair.⁵¹

The Western anthropology of Chinese rural religion and ritual is removed from the Chinese polity but participates in the same distancing perspective. Foreign social science which respects the local and the remote can be condemned as out of order, politically hostile, or shallow — not understanding Chinese culture. On the other hand, these qualities can be put in positive terms — knowledge for its own sake, acquired independently, revealing truths hidden from the partial and the Party-bound.

When translated back into Chinese, such foreign research is doubly exotic. It comes from the widest reaches of aspiration to human science, but deals in local detail and cultural holism. It can serve the purposes of the emphasis on folklorist preservation and the emphasis on the national heritage of local elements. On the other hand, it can serve the purposes of romantic rebellion. Its exoticism favors the second. In either case, it simply extends the adoption of humanist categories in the construction of national polities. But as internationally authenticated academic science, it is clearly a challenge to the modernizing social policy science of Chinese academics and policy makers. It discloses and respects the contemporary social life of what they condemn, with increasing enforcement, as backward relics, as pathological symptoms, as anti-patriotic local culture, or secret organizations.

Where does that leave us, who have brought these strands together in a single overview? Not in the comfort of celebrating a postmodern mish-mash of representations. For there are definite clashes involved in these differences of emphasis and representation, and unequal forces are involved. We do insist on resisting the temptation to see in any one of them the truth, the correct representation. We see them as histories, or rather as history-making tendencies. But we are left in the uneasy position of requiring recognition of conflicting histories and the necessity of negotiation between them.

Notes

1. Stephan Feuchtwang's report "The Study of Chinese Popular Religion in the PRC," in *Revue Européenne des sciences sociales*, No. 84 (1989), has analyzed one of the rare cases of an empirical village study.
2. Wang Wenbao, *Zhongguo minsuxue fazhan shi* (A history of the development of Chinese folklore studies), (Liaoning: Liaoning Peoples Press, 1987).
3. Zhou Zhuoren, "Foreword," *Geyao Zhoukan* (A folklore survey), (Beijing, 1918).
4. "Foreword," *Minsu Zhoukan* (A survey of customs) (Guangzhou: Zhongshan University, 1928).
5. See Wang Wenbao, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-127.
6. This revival has been praised as having been brought about by the Party's reform policies in many Chinese folklorists' works, even as a central theme of their works. For example, see Zhong Jingwen, "Minsuxue jiqi zuoyong (Folklore and its functions)," in *Minjian wenxue luntan*, (Journal of Folklore), Vol. 2 (1983).
7. Such a notion can be found in most Chinese folklorists' works on festivals. A typical example is Luo Qirong and Yang Renxuan's book, *Zhongguo chuantong jieri* (Chinese traditional festivals) (Popularization of Research Publishing House, 1986).
8. Stories about Qu Yuan have been published in official newspapers during *Duan Wu Jie* (the Real Fifth Festival or the Dragon Boat Festival) in the official interpretation of the day. The stories are cited and developed as "legends" (*chuanshuo*) in Luo and Yang, *op. cit.*, and can also be seen in other folklorists' works, e.g., Ji Xing's *Zhongguo minsu chuanshuo gushi* (Legends and stories about Chinese customs) (Chinese Popular Culture Publishing House, 1985).
9. In fact, folklorists also trace the origins of festivals to historical periods such as the Tang and Song dynasties, when China was at its peaks of imperial development.
10. However, this is a pragmatism rather than a historical determinism since historical materials are simply used to demonstrate the soundness of policies.
11. For lists of the officially recognized traditional festivals, see Shou Xiaohe et al. (eds.), *Tongzhan gongzuo shouce* (Handbook for United Front work), (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 1986), pp. 862-64.
12. Chen Guoqiang, "Zhongguo renleixue fazhan shi (History of the development of anthropology in China)," in *Renleixue Yanjiu* (Anthropology Research), No. 1 (Xiamen: Xiamen University Press, 1985).
13. This, though, has been reconsidered by some social-cultural anthropologists, such as those in Zhongshan University and Xiamen University, who stress the importance of studying the Han Chinese.
14. A direct reconsideration of the Morganian style of research can be seen in Wang Mingming, "Wenhua jinhua lun: huigu yu qianjian (Cultural evolutionism: a reflection and looking forward)," in *Renleixue Luncong* (A series of anthropological essays), Vol. 1 (Xiamen: Xiamen University Press, 1987). The "Morgan model" has also been more radically criticized by Tong Enzheng in his article, "A criticism of the Morgan model," *Zhongguo shehui kexue* (Chinese Social Sciences), Vol. 3 (1988).
15. For example, see Chen Guoqiang, "Wo guo renmin xuyao renleixue (People in our country need anthropology)," in *Renleixue yanjiu* (Anthropology Research), (China Social Sciences Press, 1984).
16. The argument is widely cited in political history and Marxist philosophy textbooks. See, for example, Jiang Xuemo, *Renlei shehui fazhan shi* (The history of the development of human society) (China Youth Publishing House, 1979).
17. This is said to have been invented by Deng Xiaoping himself. A demonstration of the

- theory's suitability to understanding the problem of religion in socialist periods can be seen in Zong Yao, "*Shehuizhuyi chujie jieduan zhong zongjiao de cunzai, yanbian he zuoyong* (The existence, evolution and uses of religion in the primary stage of socialism)," in *Shehui Kexue* (Social Sciences), Vol. 8 (1988).
18. Fang Ying, "*Shehuizhuyi shiqi de zongjiao wenti* (The problem of religion in socialist periods)," in *Shehui Kexue* (Social Sciences), Vol. 4 (1984).
 19. Xiao Zhikuo, "*Gaige, kaifang yu zongjiao wenti* (Reform, openness, and the problem of religion)," in *Shehui Kexue* (Social Sciences), Vol. 4 (1988).
 20. Ke Gan, "*Pinkun dichu wenhua jianshede ji shikao* (Some speculations about cultural construction in poorer areas)," in *Qunzhong Wenhua* (Mass Culture), Vol. 10 (1987).
 21. For an example of sociologists' engagement in the "cultural discussions," see Yan Jie, "*Gaige yu minzu wenhua xinli jigou* (Reform and the people's cultural psychological structure)," in *Shehui Kexue* (Social Sciences), Vol. 4 (1984). For an example of anthropologists' participation in the discussions, see Lin Anmin, *Piaopo de dadi* (The land of roaming), (Hunan: Hunan Peoples Press, 1988). Both of them take a "culture and personality" approach.
 22. This may imply a criticism of the notion of socialism with Chinese characteristics as a mixture of socialism with feudalism.
 23. Such an analogy is more explicit in the new generation cinematic arts such as *Yellow Earth* and *River Elegy*, where "superstitious" rituals and their peasant origins are articulated with the CCP's bureaucratic procedures and inefficiency of work. Here, the notion of "wastefulness" is again stressed targeting this time the institutional sides of it. For information concerning *Yellow Earth*, see the article by its director, Chen Kaige, *Huang Tidi* (*Yellow Earth*), in *Tansuo Diaying Ji* (A collection of film explorations), (Shanghai: Cultural Arts Publishing House, 1987). With regard to the *River Elegy*, see Zhang Wei, "The River Dies Young," *Beijing Review*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (1989). It should be noted that these two films have been criticized by the Party as polluting arts since June 1989.
 24. For an example of the "cultural development strategy" discussions, see Huang Anguo and others' report of a Shanghai Cultural Development Strategy Conference in 1986, *Shehui Kexue* (Social Sciences), Vol. 6 (1986).
 25. See Norman Long, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Rural Development* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977).
 26. See Feuchtwang, *op. cit.*, 1989.
 27. Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1988).
 28. Mo Gau, "*Minsuxue yu luyouxue* (The sciences of folklore and of tourism)," in Wang Wenbau (ed.), *Zhongguo Minsuxue Lunwen Xuan* (A collection of Chinese folklore essays), (People's Popular Culture Publishing House, 1986).
 29. PRC Ministry of Culture, "*Sanshiwu nian wenhua jianshe de huigu* (A review of thirty-five years' cultural construction)," in *Guanghua de Chengjiu* (The glorious achievements), Vol. 2 (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1984).
 30. Liu Bai, *Cultural Policy in the PRC* (Paris: UNESCO, 1983).
 31. This journal is edited by the Mass Culture Department of the Ministry of Culture.
 32. Zhou Ying, "*Fengjian mixin yu qunzhong wenhua* (Feudal superstition and mass culture)," in *Qunzhong Wenhua* (Mass Culture), Vol. 5 (1988).
 33. PRC Constitutional Law (1982) and Criminal Law (1979), in *Zhonghua Renmin Gonghe Guo Falu Huipian* (A collection of PRC Laws), (People's Publishing House, 1979-1984).
 34. Chen Yongling, "*Zunzhong shaoshu minzu de fengsu xiguan* (Respect the customs of minority nationalities)," in *Minzu Wenti yu Minzu Zhengce* (Ethnic problems and ethnic policies), (Sichuan: Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1980).
 35. Chen Shouyi and Zhang Hongshen, *Faxue Jichu Lilun* (Fundamentals of legal theory), (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1980).
 36. *Ibid.*, pp. 122-29.
 37. See Li Guancan et al. (eds.), *Xingfa Lunchong*

37. See Li Guancan et al. (eds.), *Xingfa Lunchong* (On criminal law), (Jilin: Jilin Peoples Publishing House, 1986).
38. *Ibid.*, p. 642.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 73-81.
40. *The People's Daily*, "Quanzhou hiesheng pudu fei sannian sanyi yuan (Quanzhou Spent 30 Million Yuan on Pu Du Festival Expenses in Three Years)," *The People's Daily* (Overseas Edition), August 24, 1989.
41. *Dongfang Hong Shouche* (The east is red handbook), (Beijing: Rural Reading Matter Publishing House, 1975).
42. See Luo and Yang, *op. cit.*, 1986.
43. A report appeared in *Nongmin Ribao* (The Peasants' Daily), October 26, 1989, criticizing the revival of "superstitious" practices and beliefs as a serious ideological problem, leading rural youth in particular to disbelief in Party principles and to mistrust of the Party itself.
44. Emily Martin Ahern, *Chinese Ritual and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
45. Robert Weller, *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1987).
46. Steven Sangren, *History and Magical Power in a Chinese Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).
47. See, for an instance in Taiwan, Wang Shih-ch'ing, "Religious Organization in the History of a Chinese Town," in A. Wolf (ed.), *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 71-92.
48. David Jordan and Daniel Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).
49. Ann Anagnost, "The Beginning and End of An Emperor: A Counter-representation of the State," *Modern China*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (1985); and "Politics and Magic in Contemporary China," *Modern China*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1987).
50. Literary and artistic forms have been employed by some intellectuals as "cultural critique" targeting Chinese traditional institutions and contemporary political structure. An explicit theorization is Liu Zaifu, among his many other works, "Xinshiqi de tupu he shenhua (Breakthrough and deepening in the new era)," in the *People's Daily*, September, 1986. See also note 23.
51. In *River Elegy*, earth is used as a symbol of Chinese tradition, a sign of backwardness and cause of underdevelopment, in contrast to the symbol of the sea, or the sign of political progress. The former is also a symbol of despair while the latter is a symbol of hope in the West. "Earth" implies a criticism of the rural population as the origin of backwardness. The ocean, with which the authors identify themselves, stresses the importance of intellectuals, who see themselves as having know-how and as capable of saving China. See note 23. But in their different ways, in Chen Kaige's film *King of the Children* and the film *Women of Good Family*, remote mountain people and practices are a source for revitalization and creativity, but one which is held back.