

## THEME AND VARIATION IN CHINESE RELIGION

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### Introduction

Studies of Chinese religion (DeGroot 1912; Noss 1963; Thompson 1975) frequently divide it into the three aspects of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. While these are undeniably the three religious and philosophical traditions which have had the most visible impact on Chinese religious practices, this separation may give the unwary Western observer the impression that Chinese religions are adhered to, "joined," much as those in the west, so that participation in the beliefs and practices of one religious tradition excludes the person from the beliefs and practices of other religious traditions.

This, however, is far from the actual state of affairs. Gods with Buddhist origins are housed comfortably in Taoist temples, Buddhist or Taoist priests are hired for ceremonies on a situational basis, and many religious observances, regardless of the origins, include worship of ancestors and emphasis on filial piety. Among peasants, it can be said that religious observances of some kind occur almost every day, from the ceremonial sending of the Kitchen God to Heaven at the end of the old year to the casual daily lighting of incense at the family's ancestral shrine. Diamond (1969:84) says:

Religious life in K'un Shen cannot be considered apart from the economic and social organization of the community and the wider Taiwanese culture of which it is a part. Supernatural beliefs and rituals enter into almost every aspect of life. Nor can we neatly compartmentalize Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and the folk underlay of shamanism and spirit worship. The folk traditions and the literary traditions of China are inextricably combined in the total belief system.

An approach which tackles Chinese religious beliefs and practices more directly than an attempt to compartmentalize them into Taoism, Confucianism or Buddhism is that debated by Maurice Freedman (1974) and Robert J. Smith (1974) as to whether one can speak meaningfully of "a Chinese religion" or whether regional variation in religious practices should receive the greater emphasis. Supporting an overall approach, Freedman (1974:38) conceives

of "a religious system . . . that allowed religious similarity to be expressed as though it were religious difference." Smith (1974:341), in contrast, retorts, "It seems to me equally likely that this society may instead have treated religious differences as though they were religious similarities."

This paper is a study of religious differences and similarities as reported in ethnographies from Taiwan. Since a brief glance at a few ethnographies will confirm the truth of Diamond's statement, quoted above, the paper will be limited to the calendrical observations of the Lunar New Year and the birthday or other celebrations in honor of the patron god of the village, when reported, and to the noncyclical observations of birth, marriage, and death. In addition, the hierarchy of gods as envisioned by the villagers will be described. Ethnographies from the Taipei basin (Wolf 1972, 1974; Ahern 1973, 1974), near Taichung (Gallin 1966), near Tainan (Diamond 1969, Pasternak 1972), and near Kaohsiung (Pasternak 1972, Cohen 1976) will be utilized. The accompanying map locates the villages; Tables 1-6 summarize the findings.

#### THEME AND VARIATION

A study of the tables gives the impression that variation in Taiwanese religion appears less in what is observed than in how the observance is made. We repeatedly find the same occasions, both cyclical and non-cyclical, eliciting a religious response. However, details of the response vary from place to place.

Birth Those ethnographers who discuss birth mention that during the first month the mother is ritually unclean and that at the end of the first month there are rituals of purification. Within this framework, though, variation exists. Only Diamond reports religious observances during the actual process of birth. Gallin reports offerings to the gods on the third and twelfth days; Wolf reports offerings only on the third day. Pasternak alone reports rituals involving the ancestors; interestingly, it is the new mother's ancestors who are worshipped by the new father.

Wedding The same pattern is revealed in wedding rituals. In general, the practice is as follows: 1) families match horoscopes of the prospective couple; 2) families use geomancy to choose the day and sometimes the hour of important rituals; 3) on the wedding day the groom goes to the bride's house to get her, returns with her to

arrive at his house at an auspicious time, then acts as host while the bride and sometimes the groom pay a return visit to the bride's family, at which time they are treated as honored guests; 5) after this visit the bride takes on the work typically assigned to a daughter-in-law.

Variations appear in such rites as worshipping of ancestors. Sometimes the bride's ancestors are worshipped before the couple leave the groom's home (Gallin, Cohen). Other times they are worshipped as part of the wedding (Pasternak - Tatieh, Wolf, Cohen). Still other times they are worshipped the day after the wedding (Diamond, Cohen). There is also variation in worship of the groom's ancestors. Both Pasternak and Cohen report that the groom worships in the ancestral halls of both his mother and his paternal grandmother. Other ethnographers report only that the groom worships his ancestors. Worship of gods also varies. Gallin, Diamond and Cohen report a celebration (paipai) for Tien-Kung (Thi:Kong is the Taiwanese name for the same god). Pasternak reports that in Tatieh the group worships in the village temple, whereas in Chungshe the groom takes the temple gods home to worship them. Diamond reports that the gods on the groom's altar are worshipped, Wolf that oily rice is offered to the Bed Mother, and Cohen that the Earth God is worshipped the day before the wedding and the Kitchen God the day after.

Funeral Like birth and marriage observations, variation in funeral practices is built around a common core of ceremonies. In at least three locations, this core involves even the place where one dies: Gallin reports that death in the ancestor-worship room is preferable; Diamond's informants indicated a preference for the central room of the house; and Ahern's informants found the lineage hall to be the preferred location. Beyond this, funerals consist of: 1) coffining, which takes place on the day of death; 2) burial, which is presided over by a geomancer or by a practitioner combining this role with that of shaman, and 3) a ceremony which is designed to assist the soul in its journey to and through the underworld and which is directed by Taoist priests and their assistants.

Worship of gods is much more important in funerals than in birth and marriage rituals, whereas ancestor worship, so central to marriages, is reported for funerals only by Diamond. The death must be announced to the gods of the underworld, and during the soul's trip through the underworld they must be placated and bribed. This is done by various ceremonies presided over by priests and by the burning of paper objects and fake money. Both Diamond and Ahern report periodic masses for several weeks after the

funeral to insure safe passage of the soul to the underworld. In addition, Gallin reports that the Earth God's permission for the burial must be solicited.

Ghosts become important at funerals. Both Gallin and Ahern report rituals designed to prevent evil spirits from entering at crucial points during the ceremonies.

Variation is apparent in whether the burial is before or after the ceremony sending the spirit off, the length of time between death and burial, and the exact contents and sequence of events in the ceremonies. Much of this variation seems to stem from such considerations as family wealth and preference. For instance, Diamond reports the following variations, directly related to family wealth: 1) number of layers of clothing worn by the dying/deceased (rich families - up to 12 layers, average families - 5 or 6, poor families - 3). 2) number of masses - ideally one every seven days for six weeks, frequently limited by family finances to one before the funeral and one afterward. 3) length of time between death and burial - poor families bury their dead more quickly than do rich families. 4) postburial ceremonies - ideally held after each funeral, but occasionally one ceremony is utilized for several kinsmen because of the expenses involved.

Lunar New Year The Lunar New Year is probably the most important of the cyclical holidays. A central feature is family worship of gods and ancestors. As with the non-cyclical religious observations, this central framework allows a variety of local options. For instance, Gallin reports that the gods are sent off to heaven on the 24th day of the 12th month and stay until the fourth day of the new year. Other ethnographers report only that the gods are worshipped in various ways and at various times. Likewise, Ahern reports that the ancestors visit heaven for a few days, but other ethnographers report only that the ancestors are worshipped.

Celebration for Village God It is not until we examine celebrations for village gods that we find significant variation, as should be expected. The gods themselves vary, as shown in Table 5. Most common is the Earth god (Gallin, Ahern, Cohen): second most common is Co-su-kong (Diamond, Ahern). Other gods are either not worshipped or not reported. Also, while the method of celebration varies, central features seem to be a worship service (paipai), a feast for family and often friends, and frequently an opera.

Hierarchy of Gods Variation is most obvious in the hierarchy of gods reported in any location. While T'ien-Kung (Mandarin) or Thi:-Kong (Taiwanese) is usually regarded

as the supreme ruler in Heaven, there seems to be virtually no agreement as to his second-in-command. Wolf even apparently regards the Kitchen god, elsewhere thought of as the very lowest in the Heavenly hierarchy, as second to T'ien-Kung. And Diamond sees Co-su-kong as the first in the hierarchy of local gods, whereas Ahern thinks of him as second to Thi:-Kong.

## DISCUSSION

We are thus left to wonder about the supposed amount of variation in Taiwanese folk religion and the reasons for it. Overall, it seems that Freedman, not Smith, is right. That is, the picture which appears to emerge from a study of the six ethnographies is of a single Chinese religion with local variations. There may be at least two reasons for this seeming sameness: 1) the particular observances examined in this study may be those which are fairly uniform throughout the island. Significant variation may be apparent in other areas. 2) Ethnographic accounts may not report local celebrations fully enough for variation to become obvious. In fact, Jordan (1972), who himself complains of ethnographies as sources for comparative data, presents so little data of a comparative nature that his book was impossible to use in the present study. However, against the picture of similarity which seems to emerge from a study of these six ethnographic accounts appears a statement by Smith (1974), who, attending a conference on Chinese religion as a discussant, was struck by the variation reported by ethnographers participating in the conference:

As I listened to the discussion of the papers not included in this volume, I was struck by the extent to which the situation represented a field interview. Each participant seemed to be dealing with all the others as though they were informants. Those who had conducted their research in Hong Kong expressed great interest - and sometimes polite incredulity - when informed of practices and beliefs on Taiwan. Those who had worked in the northern part of that island interviewed those who knew the southern part, and often registered surprises at what they learned. And there were others who found all these informant's accounts at such variance with orthodox practice and belief (as they understood them from documents and interviews with members of the vanished elite) as to be offensive and perhaps not even Chinese.

The question which bothers Smith and DeGlopper (1974), participants, is less the presence of variation than the absence of variation which is systematic. Much of what variation does exist is unexplained and becomes especially puzzling when it occurs in communities which are in other ways very similar.

Smith offers an explanation, based on his own studies of Japanese religion, for the variation which appears in Taiwanese religion. Within limits, the individual is free to develop his own system of beliefs and practices. To support his stance, Smith points to a paper by Harrell (1974) which shows great variation in the pantheon of gods worshipped in various households and even by different individuals within each household. The limits to this kind of individualization of worship are reached when the social life of the groups is adversely affected by the practice of the individual, that is, when religious observances consume so much of the individual's time and energy that they interfere with the performance of his duties to his kin group. At this point the individual is pressured to conform to expectations.

Another possible source of variation in religious practices, suggested by Wolf (1974), is the crosscutting of authority of various spiritual beings. For instance, the various ethnic groups which settled the Taipei basin are still drawn together by their spiritual patrons, although, living in a dispersed pattern, they owe allegiance to a variety of supernatural regional governors. The same is true regarding a person's lineage affiliation: if he moves, he worships a different Earth God than before (and may be expected to report his move to both Earth Gods in question), but he still owes allegiance to the same ancestors.

A third possible source of variation is that of the gods who migrated with their people to Taiwan. Two questions, however, emerge: 1) As DeGlopper (1974) indicates, this merely pushes the question of the source of variation back 250 years. 2) While this might give some clues about the source of variation, it does not address the question of continuance of variation in a society which is increasingly homogeneous. A possible partial explanation to this latter question might be found in a consideration of the practices of the national government of Taiwan. Religious observances are some of the few occasions at which large numbers of people may assemble freely; being deprived of other opportunities for free assembly, the Taiwanese channel large amounts of time and resources into various religious practices. Given a more relaxed political climate, it is possible that this would not be the case.

## SUMMARY

As we have seen, the data about religious practices presented in six ethnographies from Taiwan show basically similar practices with variations which are not significantly greater than would be found in different churches in the United States. This may be due to several reasons. The most obvious is the reporting of the investigators. Not everyone gave detailed ethnographic information about each of the categories under inspection. In fact, Jordan (1972), who laments the lack of comparable data in ethnographies, give us so little data of a comparative nature that it was impossible to use his book in the present study.

Another possible explanation for the lack of variation is that perhaps the categories under examination are not areas in which significant variation is likely to occur. Jordan (1972: xv, xvi), whose study focused on the relation between religious beliefs and practices and the family and village social structure, comments, "When one approaches Chinese folk religion from this point of view . . . what attracts one's attention is not so much the customs of the great tradition, such as cleaning the tombs at the 'clear and bright' festival or giving money to the children at New Year, but rather practices that are directly relevant to the functioning of society at the local level - the constant re-ranking of local gods, for example, or the distribution of local ghosts." Perhaps birth, marriage, and death rituals belong more to the great tradition.

Assuming the variation does exist, a necessary prerequisite to a search for pan-Taiwanese underlying causes would be a systematic collection and presentation of comparable data. As indicated, this survey of six ethnographies turned up more similarities than differences, which may be due in large part to incomplete and noncomparable presentations.

Variation may be due in part, as Smith (1974) suggests, to the essentially personal nature of certain of the beliefs and practices. When the belief or practice attests the social group, conformity is expected and pressure is exerted to ensure that it is forthcoming. But in areas which do not affect the social group a person's beliefs and practices are his own business.

Besides questions related to the source of variation, there needs to be inquiry into the reason for the continuity and function of variation, and the possible relation between national restrictions on free assembly and excessive

interest in religious activities, when this is the primary excuse for which people can assemble without government-caused difficulties.

These questions might conceivably be studied cross-culturally. Do other polytheistic societies with emphasis on the individual's duties to the group also exhibit variation in the individual's personal life? Are there other regimes whose subjects fervently support activities in the areas of minimal government control (religion in Taiwan)?

Although this paper must end with more questions than it began, it is hoped that studies along these lines will provide significant insights into not just the fact or source of variation of religion in Taiwan but the whole question of the function of religion in modern complex societies.

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