

SANGREN, P. STEVEN. *History and Magical Power in a Chinese Community*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987. xii+268 pages. Maps, tables, figures, photographs, bibliography, character list, index. Cloth US \$39.50; ISBN 0-8047-1344-8.

Among the numerous anthropological studies of Chinese religion in Taiwan Steven Sangren's book stands alone as a work which is much more concerned with theory building and generalizations than with ethnographic documentation. Although about half of the book (parts one and two) represents itself as a case study of the history and culture in the Taiwanese town of Daqi and the surrounding villages, the most fascinating results are presented in part three, where the reader is confronted with a structuralist approach to explain the ethnographic facts and apparent contradictions that constitute the cultural logic of Chinese religious behaviour and symbolism.

The first two parts are more or less conventional, though highly interesting, presentations of historical and ethnographic data. Part I gives an account of local history, concentrating on the nested structure of regional economic systems and their development since the beginnings of Chinese settlement in the area in late Qing times. This diachronical review is supplemented in part II by a synchronical analysis of the ritual construction of social relations, focussing on the description of local territorial-cult and pilgrimage organization. The chapter on pilgrimage, together with its theoretical interpretation in part III, is certainly one of the highlights of the book. Sangren concludes that Daqi's culture, economy, and social institutions have interacted historically to produce a measure of spatial congruence at the market-system level.

The structuralist interpretations of part III are too complex to be presented in detail here. Central to the argument is the assertion that the power, or *ling*, attributed to gods is to be understood as a function of their mediating order and disorder with reference to the entire set of cosmological categories rather than as a function of their resemblance to social categories (e.g. state officials). Thus, the dichotomy of order and disorder, which Sangren equates with *yang* and *yin*, is regarded as the fundamental structure which provides the key for the analysis of the Chinese cultural system. According to the author, this same structure underlies both the popular concept of *ling* and the Confucian concept of virtue (*ren*). He stresses that this finding rejects any easy separation on the order of "elite / folk," "text / ritual," or "great tradition / little traditions" at the level of structures of value. This is the basis for his attempt to construct a holistic view of Chinese culture from the analysis of the relationship between history and ritual in a particular community.

By way of further illustration of the theoretical assumptions I would like to comment on some of the interpretations given in this very stimulating book. To a historian the equation of the *yin-yang* polarity with "disorder" and "order" seems to be not without problems. To be sure, in popular thought the dichotomy often bears a normative connotation, but one should be cautious to generalize. In the literary traditions of Confucianism and Taoism *yin* and *yang* are usually not conceived of as dualistic oppositions but rather as complementary aspects, which are not normatively valued. Zhou Dunyi's *Taiji tu shuo* may serve as a classical example. Sangren is too quick in generalizing his analysis of Taiwanese popular thought as representing the structure of "Chinese thought."

The same problem of rush generalizations arises in several other contexts. I would not agree that "*ling* is the key cultural operator structuring Chinese religious logic" (144). The statement may be true for Taiwanese popular religion, but hardly for the

literary traditions. Furthermore, the interpretation of the Confucian virtue *ren* as “a kind of magical power” (217) might be correct in the case of the one or the other Neo-Confucian philosopher, but it is certainly not the mainstream understanding of the concept. The author seems occasionally to fall into traps which are set by his own theoretical approach: He attempts to develop a holistic view of the structure of Chinese culture, neglecting historical differences and changes. The ahistorical view of structuralism induces him to illustrate his interpretations with examples from antiquity to the present day. But Chinese thought has changed during the past two thousand years, and to try to detect an underlying structure which is constant, cannot lead to more convincing results than to analyse the structure of “European thought” since Aristotle. This does not affect Sangren’s interpretation of Taiwanese religion, but it renders doubtful his claim to analyse “Chinese thought.”

One of the most stimulating passages of the book deals with the integration of local religion and state religion. The author shows that both refer to the same symbols, i.e. the hierarchy of territorial deities, in legitimating social structure. The meaning, however, which is given to those symbols, differs, depending on the perspective. From the view of the state religion the local and regional gods unite hierarchically the whole empire and convert it into one single household, while from the view of the local religion the gods serve as symbols of communal identity and divide society into a segmentary hierarchy of competing communities (221). One may ask, however, if this very convincing interpretation supports the author’s rejection of the great tradition / little traditions dichotomy. It is true that the common reliance on the very same symbols is an important factor of cultural integration in China, but it is, after all, an ideological integration. Ideological it is, because it disguises the fundamental differences which exist between local and national cosmologies. If from the structuralist point of view both are presented as identical, this approach obviously has to be supplemented by more conventional methods of analysis.

Sangren’s book is an important contribution to the interpretation of Chinese popular religion, bringing together ethnographical and sinological studies with up-to-date anthropological theory. It remains to be wished that he and other scholars will widen the path of theoretical understanding which he has cut into the jungle of Chinese popular religion.

Hubert Seiwert  
University of Hannover  
Hannover, Germany

#### CENTRAL ASIA

REICHL, KARL, translator. *Rawšan. Ein usbekisches mündliches Epos* [Rawšan. Au Uzbek oral epic]. Asiatische Forschungen, Band 93. Wiesbaden / Germany: Otto Harrassowitz, 1985. ix+229 Paper DM 114.—; ISBN 3-447-02506-9; ISSN 0571-320X. (In German)

The book under review is a study and translation of *Rawšan*, an ‘Uzbek oral epic.’ For many centuries marvelous tales and songs sprouted up around the figure of Koroğlu outside modern Turkey, to a lesser extent in the Caucasus than in Central Asia. As late as in the 20th century they were and still are recorded mainly by folklorists in various idioms, as dictated by rhapsodists. However, it is not clear how these compositions, which were sung or recited, were interdependent with one another in their origin.