

WELLER, ROBERT P. *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987. Ix+215 pages. Illustrations, maps, appendixes, character list, notes, bibliography, index. US\$22.50; ISBN 0-295-96397-2.

This study is based on the author's twenty-month research in Sanxia, Taiwan, between 1976 and 1979. Unlike other anthropological books on Chinese religion it is not a straight-forward description of the religion with some theoretical discussion in the introduction and conclusion. Instead the author uses his data to provide theoretical discussion in every chapter, often relating his discussion to other relevant works. Through an analysis of the ghost festival, in particular the ghost-feeding rite, the author shows how the people—"the majority of ordinary worshippers, the religious specialists and the secular elite"—"understand and use the ritual, how it relates to pragmatic and ideologized styles of interpretation, and how it connects to social organisation" (14).

Readers are advised to read the introduction (Ch. 1) carefully in order to follow the author's argument. The book contains six chapters, an appendix on geomancy, and another one with a "character list."

Chapter 2 ("Ancestors and Gods, Family and Politics") provides, appropriately, a general discussion on the popular tradition of Chinese Religion, especially about the gods and ancestor. The author relates religion to the social spheres, especially kinship and community. He argues that while there is religious unity in [the form of] the ideological interpretation of gods and ancestors, the worshippers can also interpret their religion pragmatically according to changing social and political environments.

Chapter 3 on "Pragmatic Ghosts" contrasts ghosts with gods and ancestors, and shows how people interpret ghosts. According to the author popular interpretations change as a result of changes in the political economy, resulting in a perception of ghosts which sees them as politically dangerous to pitiful kinship ghosts.

Chapter 4 ("Specialist Ghosts") discusses how Taoist and Buddhist specialists interpret ghosts and contrasts their "systematized, ideological interpretation" to that of the ordinary worshippers. Their interpretation is related to the more "institutionalized social relations of the people involved" (20).

Chapter 5 ("Elites, Ideologies and Ghosts") expands the distinction of pragmatic and ideological interpretation of ghosts to the elite, and shows how these people seek to manipulate religion for political purposes.

The last chapter ("Unities, Diversities and Reinterpretation") brings into focus again the basic arguments and further illustrates them by discussing geomancy and communication with the gods. The first two sentences of the chapter summarize the author's approach: "Chinese religion is neither simply unified or simply diverse. The varying social relations of its adherents allow interpretation and reinterpretation of religious symbols to create both unities and diversities" (144). With this perspective, he identifies three main features of Chinese religion in Taiwan: 1) Different groups utilize fundamentally diverse styles of interpretation; 2) Religious interpretations may change as social conditions change; 3) Unities and diversities across styles of interpretation rest on the particular social relations of the people involved.

These three main points—which are what the book is about—are actually very simple. The book does not offer any significant new material on Chinese religion. However it emphasizes the need to look at the pragmatic interpretation of religion from the perspective of various groups in relation to their changing social situation.

The result is a description of "culture." For the author, the approach should be to examine how "people use, manipulate and create culture (including religion) as part of everyday life within a system of social relations" (172).

While I congratulate the author for stressing the need to hold a more "pragmatic" view of culture, I also wish he had told us more about the underlying structure of the culture as he encountered it at the time of his study—the unconscious views of the people in general and of the social groups in particular. Naturally, he bases his interpretation on his understanding of the unconscious views of the people studied. The acting out of "culture" by individuals is shaped not only by social, economic and political factors but also the unconscious system which represents the collective and gives a certain cultural continuity. Furthermore a cultural system, such as the Chinese religious system, may already contain "pragmatic complexities" in addition to the more generally recognized ideology, as is illustrated in the author's own analysis of a wedding (33–37). In other words, the flexibility of interpretation should not be reduced to merely the social conditions for pragmatic interpretation. It is also very much based on the existing symbolic system which contains both unities and diversities.

This calls for a definition of what the author means by "pragmatic interpretation." For example, there should be a distinction between ignorant interpretation and pragmatic interpretation. Surely there is a distinction between the explanation of one who lacks Buddhist knowledge and one who is aware of the Buddhist teaching/knowledge but seeks to explain in a way which is again different from the explanation of the specialists. In this connection, it is not wise for the author to begin his book by using the example of a worshipper who mistook all the three Buddhist statues in a Buddhist temple as Hut Co<sup>1</sup> (Buddha Patriarch) in contrast to the nun who explained that they were Buddha and two Bodhisattvas. While this illustrates the worshipper's explanation in contrast to that of the specialist, it also illustrates a weak point of this book, that is, a tendency to overlook that the ordinary worshippers are a very heterogeneous bunch. More should have been said about their diverse styles of interpretation and reinterpretation which are the result of different degrees of religious knowledge. What needs to be explained is not so much the diverse interpretations of the specialists and the non-specialists but rather of the ordinary worshippers.

The main contrast between [these] interpretations is such that those of specialists are systematized and passive while those of ordinary worshippers are pragmatic and active. The ordinary people's interpretation of the symbolic order is less structured by a systematic ideology. They also view the gods, ancestors and ghosts as actively intervening in their worldly life. This distinction reminds us of C. K. Yang's "diffused and institutional religion" and Wing-tsit Chan's two levels of religion, the level of the masses and the level of the enlightened. These works are relevant to Dr. Weller's discussion, and one would expect him to comment on their analyses. In fact, Wing-tsit Chan's *Religious Trends in Modern China* (1953) is not even mentioned, although the author does acknowledge his intellectual debt to C. K. Yang (1961).

A more thorough description of the historical interaction between the various religious traditions in China and religion in present-day Taiwan would be desirable. The nature of "folk religion," especially its incorporation of Buddhist and Taoist traditions, enables individuals to employ a wide range of interpretations of the symbolic order, including "pragmatic" interpretations. However, in order to make it easier for the reader to better follow and evaluate the author's argument, more description would be needed. Furthermore it is not clear what Buddhism means for the ordinary worshippers. Indeed the author seems to associate Buddhism with the Buddhist clergy

only. Partly because of this a comment like "the alternative world-view of Buddhism rests on its isolated monastic institutions" (160) is questionable on the background of the historical development of Buddhism and its nature. What about the ordinary worshippers? Do they see Buddhism in terms of the monks and nuns only (117)? It is also questionable to associate faith with Buddhism but not with popular religion as the author does (114).

I have raised a few questions to provoke further thought and not to discredit the author with whose basic argument I agree. I feel the book is not suited for beginners in Chinese religion as they may not yet be in a position to appreciate or evaluate the author's approach. On the other hand I recommend this book not only to scholars on Chinese religion, but also to those interested in the definition and application of the concept of culture like anthropologists.

NOTE:

1. On p. 163 the author mentions that the ordinary worshipper refers to all the three Buddhist images as Hut Co. Is this due to ignorance or "reinterpretation" as claimed by the author? Different ordinary worshippers may just have different levels of religious knowledge. In this case a particular semantic complexity is involved which the author may have ignored. For example it is common for the Hokkien in Malaysia to refer to any Buddhist image as *put* 佛 or *put co* 佛祖 (colloquial, as contrast to the literary *hut co*) and a specific name may be used to distinguish one kind of *put co* from another (*put co* literally means Buddhist Patriarch). The Goddess of Mercy (Guanyin), for instance, can be referred to as *Put Co* or more commonly *Put Co Ma* 佛祖媽. Rev. Douglas' dictionary (1899) also has *put co* for both Buddha and Bodhisattvas, such as Koan-im Put-tso 觀音佛祖 for Guanyin and Sek-hia Put-tso 釋迦佛祖 for Shakyamuni or Buddha. Some Hokkien worshippers in Malaysia refer to Buddha as Chia<sup>n</sup> Put 正佛 or Real Buddha. Actually the complexity here has to do with the Southern Min Chinese (in Malaysia usually known as Hokkien) using *put* to refer to not only Buddha but any Buddhist idol.

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