

ISSUES

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Born-again Chinese Religion

TAN CHEE-BENG, editor. *The Preservation and Adaptation of Tradition: Studies of Chinese Religious Expression in Southeast Asia*. Contributions to Southeast Asian Ethnography, no. 9. Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio State University, 1990. 145 pages. Paper US\$12.00; ISSN 0217-2992.

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SINCE this essay is not so much a review of Tan Chee-Beng's *The Preservation and Adaptation of Tradition* as a comment on some of the cultural forces that may have inspired it, it might be best to begin with a short self-introduction. I am Japanese, thirty-two years old, and have in the past resided for about two years in Singapore conducting research. I am a member of the Chinese religious sect known as Yiguandao, and I am a personal friend of one of the authors represented in this volume. The present volume was thus of great interest to me — I found its academic standards to be high, and its content to be informative and relevant. However, I was intrigued, as a non-Chinese and as a member of the younger generation of researchers in my field, by the outlook and possible motivations that might underlie a study like this.

It was significant, I thought, that the editor chose to write “Chinese Religion” with a capital *R*. This capital *R*, I believe, is an interesting manifestation of what is, in effect, a religious movement in itself. At the risk of sounding irreverent, but with an intent that is quite serious, I would like to characterize this movement as an “intellectual reconstruction of folk religiosity,” carried out by a “born-again Chinese elite.” Let me explain what I mean by these perhaps strange-sounding terms.

Chinese society in urban Southeast Asia, as I saw when I resided in Singapore, is now undergoing a rapid process of modernization and cultural globalization under the influence of economic development and the worldwide revolution in information exchange. As part of this large-scale transition the life-style of the younger generation has become increasingly Westernized (and, in a sense, “Japanized”), and the social outlook of the people more and more individualistic (in both the good and the bad sense). As a result the ethnic identity of the people has become more diffuse, and they tend to be moving away from their Chinese traditions, which are in many ways unscientific and nondemocratic.

This, it seems to me, is the stage at which the “born-again Chinese elite” makes its appearance. My use of the term “born-again,” with its

Western religious connotations, is quite deliberate. Figuratively speaking, this Chinese elite has a Western — sometimes even a Biblical — head on top of a body that is still culturally Chinese. The members of this elite are highly educated in the Western sense of the word, and well-versed in scientific thinking and democratic ideals. Yet many feel a certain contradiction between their Western “heads” and their Chinese “bodies” — their souls are torn between the West and the East. The researchers in the present collection may, I feel, have been motivated in part by an awareness of this contradiction, and their work on Chinese Religion with a capital *R* may form an element of their search for their ethnic identity and cultural roots.

One of the products of this search is the aforementioned “intellectual reconstruction of folk religiosity.” I use the word “reconstruction” because I observed in Singapore a certain gap between the perception of the born-again Chinese elite and that of the ordinary Chinese. Devoted followers of Chinese religions I knew in Singapore often complained that the academics did not really understand the traditions very well, and that their concepts reflected more their own ideas about what Chinese religions should be. I am in no position to pass judgment on this question, but I wonder if, perhaps, some form of dialog between these two groups would not be desirable. With the current leveling-up of local standards of education I believe that a dialog of this type would be extremely fruitful.

The process of intellectual reconstruction by the born-again elite may be part of a broader attempt to reconstruct the Chinese Community (with a capital *C*) and prevent further diffusion of their cultural identity. Although it is too early to predict how successful this new “religious movement” will be, I feel confident that it will significantly influence the Chinese intellectual world. The reason for my confidence is not only my experience in Singapore but also my observations of Japanese society.

Japan is often said to be a decade or two ahead of the Southeast Asian countries in its process of modernization. This is not to claim superiority, but to recognize the fact that Japan has trod very much the same path that other Asian nations are now taking, but just a bit earlier. Thus many Japanese academics worked on studies of “Japanese Religion” (again, with a capital *R*) in the 1970s and, to a lesser extent, the 1980s. To me, a member of a later generation, it seemed that this too was a case of a born-again elite attempting to reconstruct the folk Religiosity of their country in an intellectual manner. Japan, of course, is not Singapore, but it is also difficult to deny that there are certain similarities in the respective processes of modernization and trends of academic

religious research.

I wrote this short essay in the hope of promoting mutual understanding among Asian intellectuals. I believe that the day will come when the academic study of religions will make a positive contribution to the evolving culture of the Asian region. *The Preservation and Adaptation of Tradition* is a significant step in this direction.