

VIDEO REVIEW

ZHUANG KONGSHAO, Producer and Director. *The Dragon Boat Festival*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992. Videotape, VHS 39 minutes. US\$75.00; ISBN 0-295-73051-X.

This videotape is a documentary on the rituals of a Dragon Boat Race held in June 1989 in Heyang Village, a Han community on the Min River in southeastern Fujian Province. For some time now it has been extremely difficult to conduct fieldwork on the religious beliefs and rituals of both the Han and the minority peoples of China, and anthropological studies of the Dragon Boat Race are no exception. The video is of great interest because it records not only the traditional ritual but also something of the present state of local society in China, affected as it is by the great changes of recent years. A further point of interest is the fact that it comprises a visual ethnography by one of the Chinese researchers who have recently become active outside of their country as well as in.

The Dragon Boat Race, although centered in southern China, is found over a wide area of East Asia and Mainland Southeast Asia. Zhuang points out that the Dragon Boat Race's ritual functions include praying for rain or good harvests, for the cure of sickness, and for protection from disaster and from the curses of those who have drowned. The ritual displays great variety, however, because of its close links with local folk worldviews and religious beliefs.

The content of the Dragon Boat Race ritual is quite complex. Researchers have investigated the ritual's meaning, function, and organization, its relation to production and political power, the legends of its origin and related folk beliefs, and the symbolism of the dragon and the dragon's multiform powers. Confining ourselves to Mainland China, we can say that the "classic" Dragon Boat Race is held on the fifth day of the fifth month of the old calendar, and is linked to the legend of the poet Qu Yuan of the Warring States period. The race introduced in this video is of the type connected with this legend. The ritual practices and various religious customs in the documentary show the general procedures of the Dragon Boat Race. We are, for instance, introduced to a family rite related to the growth of small children, to a local sanctuary called Taishanfu and to the deities venerated there, to the rites dedicated to the dragon head at the boat's prow, to the priests and their ritual roles, to the Dragon Boat Race itself as it is performed by the villagers, to the throwing of rice dumplings into the river to commemorate Qu Yuan, and finally to the parade of the gods of the local sanctuary through the settlement. In view of the long gap in our knowledge of the detailed circumstances of the race's ritual practice on the mainland, every single piece of information recorded in this visual ethnography is of great importance.

Here, however, we must return to a very fundamental problem. The Dragon Boat Race as described above is not only a religious ritual; it also serves a variety of other functions. In Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos, for example, it is typically a rite of the royalty with direct links to the king's authority, while in Okinawa it displays clear connections with the folk worldview and local ritual organization despite cultural influences from China. In mainland China peoples like the Miao or Bai — minorities strongly influenced by the Han — possess the Dragon Boat Race. Keeping this plurality in mind we might ask ourselves what kind of cultural-historical significance the Dragon Boat Race introduced in this video may have. There is a need, I think, to reflect on this point.

Traditional rites and festivals underwent drastic changes at the hands of the government following the establishment of a socialist government in China. Especially during the Cultural Revolution many traditional rituals fell under criticism as being "feudal superstitions," and their practitioners were subject to repression. The number of rituals that declined or disappeared altogether under such circumstances was great. When religious policies were relaxed somewhat at the end of the seventies, traditional religious rites rapidly reemerged in many regions of China: the rites presented in this video are simply one example of this phenomenon. What is the significance of this revival of tradition in modern China?

In the midst of China's ongoing economic development and modernization the visual recording of China's traditional religious rituals and folk customs has only just begun. I am eagerly awaiting future developments.

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