Traditions of Spiritual Guidance

A snapshot of Chinese village spirituality

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Introduction

CHINESE CULTURE IS USUALLY DISCUSSED in terms of the three 'great traditions', Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. A sociological understanding of culture, however, involves both the élite cultures and folk culture.[1] This essay seeks to contribute to the understanding of Chinese culture from the perspective of ordinary Chinese people by describing a particular religious ceremony performed in a village in South China. Many of the Chinese still follow a traditional way of life, despite the devastating Cultural Revolution in the 1960s which sought to destroy everything traditional in the name of eliminating superstition. Field observation tells us that since the introduction of the 'Open China' policy in the 1980s, many traditional religious activities are being slowly restored, especially in villages.[2] This essay attempts to give a snapshot of the spirituality of Chinese popular religion through an ethnographic description and analysis of a ritual that we observed recently in a village in the southern part of China. The preoccupation with *performance*, rather than beliefs, is an important defining characteristic of Chinese popular culture. As the majority of the Chinese population is still practising such religion, it is important for the Christian Church to have a better understanding of these practices as China gradually re-opens herself to the rest of the world.

Ritual of 'Redressing Thirty-Six Grievances'

The ritual we propose to study is called Redressing Thirty-Six Grievances. It took place in the Fengshan village in the Anyuan county of the Jiangxi province. The ritual was performed on January 11 to 14 of this year, 1999, by a forty-year-old Taoist ritual master called Falin, hired from a nearby village, together with his sixteen-year-old son and in co-operation with a sixty-year-old local Taoist. Falin belongs to a Taoist sect known as the Three Ladies Sect after its three female founders, and is for ritual specialists, recruiting its members through a

system of apprenticeship. These masters perform rituals in villages, working as farmers when there are no rituals to perform – an important reason why they survived the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

The ritual, which last for three days, was performed as thanks for the blessing of the gods. The Fengshan village always suffers from drought. In June of last year a group of seven old people of the village gathered to pray for rain. After kneeling in prayer for seven days by the riverside, they were eventually rewarded with rain. The villagers then decided to organize the performance of the ritual to give thanks to the gods.

The thirty-six grievances represent one's thirty-six sins or wrongdoings in the past. The ritual is, therefore, a ritual of repentance. It is sometimes incorporated into another longer and more elaborate ritual, such as a temple fair. Cleansing of one's sins is a prerequisite for the receiving of any blessing.

The gods to whom the villagers were giving thanks are a group of local deities led by Qihu, an obscure local deity, and the Dragon King, a deity of the rain. The gods are housed in a temple in the village where the ritual was performed. More than fifty families donated money to support the performance of the ritual. The ritual also requires each of the families to send one representative, male or female, to live in the temple throughout the ritual. All the participants were to observe a vegetarian diet during the three-day ritual.

The thirty-six grievances can be divided into three groups: twelve of them have to do with family relationships such as unfilial behaviour towards one's parents or disloyal acts towards one's spouse; nineteen of them relate to relationships with fellow villagers, such as deceit in business transactions or practising usury; five of them concern relations with nature and the super-human powers, such as failure to repay the gods' blessings or cursing the heaven and earth for one's bad luck. The distribution shows clearly the this-worldly orientation of Chinese popular religion. The belief behind the ritual is that one's fate is intrinsically linked with one's behaviour. The individual wrongdoings of the villagers in the past are together responsible for the drought problem of the village. This way of thinking, that 'as you sow, so shall you reap', comes from the *karma* theory of Buddhism. As the famous proverb states, 'In the end, good and bad actions will be repaid. It is only a matter of recompense coming soon or late.' In this connection, the folk religion shares the same view as the élite tradition represented by Buddhism. The moral emphasis as shown in the list, as well as the implicit idea that the blessings of the gods are not bestowed simply through sacrifice, that one's morality counts, demonstrates the influence

of Confucian moral teaching. This again shows the syncretic nature of Chinese popular religion. Although it is a structure in its own right, it is permeated with concepts and terms derived from the élite traditions represented by the labels of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism.

The aim of the ritual is to compensate for all sins and wrongdoings done in the past. It is interesting to note that the word 'grievance' is used instead of 'sin' or 'guilt'. To call it grievance means that the wrongdoer cannot be held wholly responsible – therefore there is room for appeal. This reflects another important characteristic of Chinese popular religion, namely, there is always something you can do about your problems. This also reflects the positive and optimistic aspiration of Chinese culture.

The ritual consists of four main parts: recitation of litanies; redressing the grievances by untying the knots; reversing the verdicts in the ten underworld courts; and sacrifice to the wandering souls. A month before the ritual, the Taoist writes a set of twenty-four memorials to the gods, stating the purpose as well as the name of all participants. These memorials are delivered to the gods during the ritual by symbolic acts such as dancing, and climbing up on the roof. Writing is used substantially in all kinds of ritual in Chinese popular religion.[3] Given the pictographic nature of the Chinese script (which basically carries meaning rather than sound), it is natural for the Chinese to put emphasis on the written form of their languages in communication, including communication with gods. Two obvious examples of its use are memorials and charms. In this ritual charms are written in the air by using the commanding rod of the Taoist rather than by brush on paper.

Recitation of litanies

This is a standard and formalized rite of repentance commonly seen in both the Taoist and Buddhist church which consists of chanting scriptures and rhythmic kneeling by the participants before the altar. This part of the ritual lasts for three hours. In the instance we observed, the Taoist chanted a section of a scripture, and he then knelt down to bow before the altar with all the participants following his lead. He then stood up again to continue chanting the scriptures and to repeat the kneeling. A wide range of scriptures, including Buddhist and Taoist, can be chosen. This once again, shows the syncretic nature of Chinese popular religion.[4] However, more important than the content of the scripture is the act of rhythmic kneeling that constitutes the repentance. In this connection, Lewis's comment on ritual is revealing. He writes,

'What is clear and explicit about ritual is how to do it – rather than its meaning'.[5] This is especially true in Chinese popular religion. In James Watson's words, it is 'orthopraxy' (correct practice) rather than 'orthodoxy' (correct belief) that characterizes Chinese popular religion.[6]

Redressing grievances by untying knots

This is the main part of the ritual and it lasted for six hours. A long rope was hung from the altar with thirty-six knots tied on it. The Taoist first announced one of the thirty-six sins or guilt that a person might have committed in the past. He then explained the nature of the sin by means of short stories handed down through oral tradition. This storytelling part of the ritual plays the role of inculcating and reinforcing the moral values such as filial piety and importance of family in the village. After the explanation, the Taoist performed a series of symbolic acts to eliminate the sin. He first walked around the hall with a comb to 'comb out' everyone's sin. All participants bowed down to let the Taoist's comb pass over their head. Next the Taoist poured water over a small wooden mill while turning it. This symbolizes the washing away of all the participants' sins, transmitting them via the mill to the four seas of China. In a nearby basin the Taoist burnt some paper spirit-money of the underworld. He also made a hand-gesture with a fork, pointing it forcefully towards the basin. This symbolizes the 'suppressing' of all sins. Finally the Taoist somersaulted towards the altar and untied one knot on a rope tied to the altar. Then he continued with the next grievance on the list. This means that the same set of symbolic actions has to be performed thirty-six times before the thirty-six knots on the rope can all be untied. This part of the ritual exemplifies the nature of Chinese popular religion: a complex system of symbolic acts.[7] Li Yih Yuan describes Chinese popular religion as a system of symbols and expressive culture through which the Chinese express their views of life and the world.

Reversing the verdict of the ten courts in the underworld

This part of the ritual can be divided into two sections. First the three gods of Magong are invited to do the job. Magongs are 'unruly gods' who are former bandits.[8] How they became gods is now obscure, but it is clear that they are famous for working forcefully and insistently in reversing verdicts. Gods in Chinese popular religion are often deified human beings. Because they were once human, they can better

understand the needs and problems of human beings. The invitation to the Magongs consists of a fairly elaborate ritual of sacrifice. Five white animals have to be killed for this purpose, namely, a white chicken, a white duck, a white goose, a white pig and a white puppy. Both the cooked meat and blood of these animals are offered to the Magong gods. Terry Kleeman has pointed out that blood sacrifice has always been an integral part of Chinese popular religion.[9] Blood symbolizes both the power of the gods and the purification of sins. The offering of blood seems to initiate the power of gods which is needed for reversing the verdicts. The animals killed for sacrifice are consumed at the end of the ritual. Schipper has argued that the consumption of sacrificial meat in Chinese popular religion at the time of a major festival functions as a means of redistributing wealth from the richest members of society to its poorest.[10] Schipper's point is revealing, as meat is still considered an extravagance in remote Chinese villages. A sharing of meat at the end of many rituals is a major event which has both transcendent and mundane meaning. Eating meat that has been offered to the gods is auspicious and brings blessing. Having the chance to consume meat is itself a blessing.

Two Taoists are needed for the second part of the ritual. The ten underworld courts are represented by two tablets placed on the two sides of the altar. In front of one tablet the two Taoists act, one as the judge, and the other as the representative of all the participants. With the help of the gods of Magong, the Taoist negotiates with the judge of the ten courts to reverse any verdicts against the participants for injustices done in the past. This is done by a dramatized dialogue between the two Taoists. The Chinese believe that a record of their behaviour is kept in the underworld. Shortly after death, each one will have to go through a journey to the underworld for judgement by the ten courts.[11] The ritual of Redressing Thirty-Six Grievances is to reverse any verdicts against the participants in the ritual recorded in the ten courts before their death. After finishing with one court, the Taoists walk to the other tablet to continue with the negotiation. The negotiations are accompanied by offerings, like the burning of paper spirit-money. For each court a memorial is also burnt. The ritual is repeated ten times until the ten underworld courts have been visited.

Sacrifice to the wandering souls

The last part of the ritual consists of sacrifice to the wandering souls. 'The wandering souls' refers to the souls of the dead who have died

violently or unjustly, or have not been properly sacrificed to by their family owing to negligence or lack of a living descendant to do the job. The wandering souls are a potential cause of trouble as they may seek revenge by causing misfortune and problems. Misfortune is caused by harmful forces represented by ghosts who, therefore, need to be controlled and driven away.

The majority of rituals in Chinese popular religion fall into the category of exorcism.[12] To perform this part of the ritual, a flag was first set up near the entrance of the village together with a notice calling upon all the wandering souls in the village to attend the sacrifice. The Taoist then chanted some Buddhist scriptures in order to transfer merit to the dead, a belief that comes from Buddhism. Large burning torches were placed around the main lanes in the villages to light the way for the wandering souls, while in an open field offerings of cooked food and dumplings were made to them. Only a few participants attended the sacrifice because of the fear of ghosts. Others took their break in the temple and then remained there to continue their participation in the rest of the three-day ritual. Side by side with the sacrifice to the ghosts was the invocation of the warriors of the gods to guard the ghosts. Provisions were first offered to these warriors who were then invoked to subdue and even exterminate undisciplined ghosts.

Towards a spirituality of Chinese popular religion

In his study of Chinese funeral rites, Myron Cohen writes, 'Because an important focus of funeral ritual was to secure for the deceased a good rebirth, there was provided within popular religious belief a positive alternative to the salvationistic ideal'.[13] 'Salvationistic ideal' here refers to the soteriological ideals taught in the élite traditions of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. In contrast to these salvation-orientated traditions, Chinese popular religion focuses on this world and its continuation after death through rebirth. In his study on popular religion in Taiwan, Li Yih Yuan has a similar observation.[14] He claims that popular religion in Taiwan has a strong utilitarian and pragmatic tendency. Its aims are to solve practical problems such as drought. Their concern is to avoid harm and increase blessing. Emphasis is put on achieving material prosperity, health, long life and family peace. This reflects the practical nature of Chinese popular religion and spirituality. It is through the tackling of life's everyday problems that the Chinese stay in touch with sacred power.

Communication with extra-human power

The whole redressing ritual is an attempt to get in touch with extra-human power for the benefit of the villagers. A total of twenty-four memorials were written to the gods by the Taoist on behalf of the villagers. Then they were delivered to the gods in the celestial realm symbolically, in a dance, and carried up to the roof of the temple to be burnt. Every part of the ritual concluded with the consultation of a pair of divination blocks. These blocks, each carved out of wood or bamboo root into the shape of a crescent moon with one side rounded and the other side flat, are believed to be the 'mouth of the gods'. They allow the Taoist to determine a god's will through a simple answer of yes or no. The blocks are held and thrown into the air. Three configurations are possible. Both blocks landing with the flat side down means 'no'. Both with the flat side up means 'equivocal'. One with the flat side up and the other with the flat side down means 'yes'. As a 'yes' answer is required to mark the success of the ritual, it has to be performed repeatedly until the correct answer is obtained from the divination blocks.[15]

Gods are but one aspect of the extra-human power. Ghosts represent the other side. They are responsible for misfortunes and troubles. One has to pacify the ghosts by offering food to them. Daniel Overmyer has argued convincingly that themes of dualism and conflict are of fundamental importance in Chinese popular religion.[16]

Interplay between two opposites

Throughout the ritual one observes an interesting interplay between opposites. The ritual is an intensive religious activity that requires all participants to stay in the temple for three days, eating and sleeping together. There is a strong sense of piety and solemnity shown through the long hours of kneeling, and the three days of putting aside mundane affairs to participate in intensive religious rituals. On the other hand, solemnity is mixed with relaxation. As well as the sharing of meals, the Taoist dresses in female clothing so as to transform himself into the founders of his sect and entertains with a stunt show: somersaulting, climbing up the roof and performing numerous styles of dance, including throwing up in the air a pile of bowls filled with burning oil. The ritual is a meeting together of the villagers, creating a carnival spirit. It helps to renew the solidarity of the whole community. In short, mundane and sacred are interfused with each other throughout the ritual. On this occasion, the transcendent concern of keeping in touch

with the sacred was expressed through the mundane concern of a problem of drought in the village. Most importantly, communication with extra-human power was carried out in a community setting rather than on an individual basis, another important feature of Chinese popular religion. This expresses a Chinese value which puts the group before the individual, another reflection of the Confucian ethics that emphasize the importance of state and family.

Conclusion

The ritual of Redressing Thirty-Six Grievances provides us with a snapshot of Chinese village spirituality. The spirituality is characterized by this-worldly orientation, positive and optimistic aspiration, a pre-occupation with performance rather than beliefs, and a pragmatic and communal emphasis. Notable in Chinese popular religion is its non-separation of the realm of sacred and profane. There has been a long history of contempt for Chinese popular religion since the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), especially in the milieu of the Chinese literate élite, because of the domination of the state Confucian ideology. This negative attitude towards popular religion in China produced various campaigns against superstition in Chinese history. Round upon round of unfortunate self-destruction, and devaluing of one's cultural past as represented by Chinese popular religion, continued in modern China driven by Enlightenment rationalism, whether of the Protestant or Marxist variety, as Lagerwey has observed.[17] Following the Cultural Revolution, many Chinese of the new generation find themselves in a position where they fail to understand and are incapable of coming to terms with their cultural past. Lagerway warns us that to come to appreciate Chinese popular religion that has been rejected, but practised for centuries, is the only path to a reconciliation of the Chinese people with their cultural past as it was.[18]

Understanding Chinese village spirituality as it really was, therefore, has a special meaning for the Chinese. It helps them to reconstruct and rediscover their wider cultural values and patterns. A constructive role can be played by the Christian faith towards this goal of reconstruction of cultural identity. This can be achieved, though a meaningful encounter of the Christian faith with Chinese popular religion aims not to convert people from their faith but to bring about a mutual transformation that results in deeper self-understanding.

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NOTES

1 *Chang desheng Shehui yuanli (The principles of society)* (Taipei: Juliu tushu gongsi, 1992, 5th edition), p 64.
2 John Lagerwey, 'Preface' in Fang Xuejia (ed), *Meizhou diqu de miaohui yu zongzu (Temple festivals and lineage in Meizhou)*, Traditional Hakka Society Series 1 (Hong Kong: International Hakka Studies Association, 1996), p 2.
3 See Wang Ch'iu Kuei (ed), *Zhongguo chuantong keyiben huipian (Anthology of Chinese traditional ritual manuscripts)* (Taipei: Xinwen feng chupan gongsi, 1996), pp 50 and 296.
4 I have argued elsewhere that the positive and optimistic aspiration of Chinese culture has determined the course of development of Buddhism in China. See Tam Wai Lun, 'The transformative power of Chinese culture as seen in Buddhism in China and the True Buddha School', *Ching Feng: A journal on Christianity and Chinese religion and culture* vol 40, no 3–4 (September–December 1997), p 239.
5 Gilbert Lewis, *Day of shining red: an essay on understanding ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p 19.
6 James L. Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski (eds), *Death ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Taipei: SCM Publishing Inc., 1988), p 10.
7 John Lagerwey, 'The rational character of Chinese religion', p 1, paper presented in an open public lecture in the Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society, Chung Chi College, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 19 September 1997.
8 This seems to be a common characteristic of many deities in Chinese popular religion. See Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller (eds), *Unruly gods: divinity and society in China* (Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996).
9 Terry F. Kleeman, 'Licentious cults and bloody victuals: sacrifice, reciprocity, and violence in traditional China', *Asia Major*, 3rd Series, vol VII, Part I (1994).
10 Kristofer M. Schipper, *Le corps taoiste* (Paris: Librairie Artheme Fayard, 1982); see also James L. Watson, 'From the common pot: feasting with equals in Chinese society', *Anthropos* 82 (1987), p 395.
11 See Neal Donnelly, *A journey through Chinese hell* (Taipei: Artist Publishing Co, 1990).
12 There are a lot of rituals which are designed for the purpose of exorcism. For a description of some examples, see John McCreery. 'The symbolism of popular Taoist magic' (Ph D dissertation, Cornell University, 1973), pp 29–30, 30–35, 84–103.
13 Myron L. Cohen, 'Souls and salvation: conflicting themes in Chinese popular religion' in James L. Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski (eds), *Death ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*, p 193.
14 Li Yih Yuan, 'Taiwan minjian zongjiao di xiandai qushi' ('The modern tendency of popular religion in Taiwan') in Li Yih Yuan, *Zongjiao yu shenhua lunji (Anthology of religion and mythology)* (Taipei: Lixu wenhua shiye, 1998), p 244 and 253.
15 Richard J. Smith, *Fortune-tellers and philosophers: divination in traditional Chinese society* (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1991), pp 234–235.
16 Daniel L. Overmyer, 'Dualism and conflict in Chinese popular religion' in Frank E. Reynolds and Theodore M. Lugwig (eds), *Transitions and transformations in the history of religions: essays in honor of Joseph M. Kitagawa* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980), pp 153–184.

17 John Lagerwey, 'The rational character of Chinese religion', p 2, paper presented in an open public lecture in the Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society, Chung Chi College, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 19 September 1997.
18 *Ibid.*