

CHAPTER 12

The Disruption of Tradition

The Chinese civilization was, until the mid-nineteenth century, essentially an original, self-contained system. It was a civilization that historically had been superior to its neighbors and that had indeed been the source of the high cultures of all East Asia.

This Chinese civilization was immensely long-lived, rich, and satisfying to the Chinese. It had the scope and the local variations of a grand continental scale but the pervading unity of a great traditional culture. The only imported influence of significance in this civilization was Buddhism—which in its turn was profoundly modified in its accommodation to Chinese ways. The Chinese view of nature and man, and the Chinese social practices (*li*), have not changed in any great measure since ancient times. That is why in this book we have been able to describe Chinese religion without specifying the historical tense.

During the past century and a half, however, China entered a new era. Its civilization was no longer self-contained, evidently superior, or even satisfying to the Chinese people. By the rude insistence of the aggressive Western powers during the nineteenth century, and by the even more irresistible impact of modern science and technology and all that these bring in their train, China was forced into an unprecedented situation. Part of the problem was the necessity to modernize without the gradual evolutionary process that brought Europe from medieval to modern conditions. Even more serious was the trauma resulting from the realization that the whole position of China had altered so that, far from being the center of human culture, she was now, in fact, a backward culture in a modern world.

THE TURBULENT TWENTIETH CENTURY

During the first half of the twentieth century, the most salient characteristic of China was turbulent change—political upheaval, rampant militarism, an economy struggling to emerge from medieval limitations, a

dangerously burgeoning population, a succession of tremendous natural disasters resulting in famines and plagues of unimaginable dimensions, a society torn between tradition and modernization. The political and military chaos that had always accompanied the "change of the Mandate" when one dynasty replaced another was exacerbated to unprecedented degrees by the involvement of Western and Japanese imperialistic pressures and interventions, culminating in the full-scale invasion and occupation of much of China by Japanese armies from 1937 to 1945.

There was not one but several revolutions in this era. The revolution of 1911, although militarily a minor incident, accomplished a major change: the overthrow of the imperial system that had existed for two thousand years. The victory of the Nationalists in 1927 brought a first measure of unity to a nation that had since 1912 been torn by sectional strife and warlord rivalries. The revolution of 1949 brought to a successful conclusion the epic, thirty-year struggle by the Communists to impose a socialist system on China. Thus the revolutions of the twentieth century were fundamentally different from revolutions of China's past. Those had changed the dynasty but preserved the system: New actors simply replaced the old, and tradition was restored. The twentieth-century revolutions changed the actors, but much more important, they attacked the whole traditional system.

Although not a revolution in the political sense, another upheaval of the most profound consequence should be mentioned here. That is the New Culture Movement, or Renaissance, which began with an attack on the old literature and education in 1917, erupted into a nationwide student protest in May 1919, and developed on many fronts throughout the following decade. In its original form, the attack was against the persistence of the use of a "dead language"—classical Chinese—in a world in which young Chinese desperately needed to think (and hence to write) in modern ways; it was also against the monopolization of education by the few who could afford the time and effort required to master the classical language in a day when republican and democratic movements called for universal literacy.

The great student demonstrations, which erupted on May 4, 1919, in protest against the "sellout" of China's national interests at the Paris Peace Conference, were significant as the first unified expression of the determination of the younger generation to bring to a halt the almost century-long series of humiliations inflicted on China by the Powers. The New Culture Movement was driven by this strong determination, although there was no unanimity about the best way in which to proceed. But although on the surface the destiny of China seemed to be in the hands of those representing only ignorance and reaction—the warlords—the real wave of the future moving powerfully underneath was the young intellectuals (the term in China meant anyone with so much as an elementary school education) who were going through an agonizing struggle to find China's new Way. What they demanded was national union, restoration of sovereignty, modern education, a new society purged of all the traditional evils, and, in fact, a new China that would take its rightful place as a great nation in the world of the twentieth century. Thousands of these students went abroad to Europe and the United States (whereas a couple of decades or so earlier

most went to Japan) and brought back with them the new ideas gained from their experiences in foreign lands. As would be expected, these ideas were varied and often self-contradictory as well as antitraditional. Out of a thousand debates and literary battles, lines were formed; groups advocating one or another position in regard to science, education, politics, religion, literature, and art combined and dissolved, attacked and were attacked. In the decade following the May Fourth Movement, such struggles may have seemed almost fruitless, but they were part of the great effort to overthrow the weight of tradition and found a modern China.

As a part of this traditional system, religion could not, of course, escape this effort. In the discussion that follows, we shall analyze some of the ways in which religion has been subjected to powerful forces for change during recent decades.

The Worldview

The rise of scientific secularism in the West occurred coincidentally with the strongest impact of Western political and economic power on China, at the end of the nineteenth and during the early twentieth centuries. In this period the Chinese were subjected both to a strong barrage of Christian propaganda and to its counterinfluence, atheistic, or at least scientific, materialism. By the 1920s and 1930s this warfare of Western ideas had become the most important factor in the intellectual world of China, where it was, of course, complicated by the existence of native traditions opposed to both foreign creeds. Every shade of opinion, from the most conservative to the most radical, was represented. Slowly but surely the conservative views gave way as the weight of the most able intellectuals shifted to the side of "science"—whether physical or economic (Marxist).

Still, it cannot be said that the worldview of the Chinese as a whole was much affected by the conquests of Western science and philosophy. This particular battle was fought among a tiny handful of intellectuals and hardly touched the thinking of the vast majority of the people. The small number of Buddhist thinkers had no reason to feel any erosion of their basic premises. The higher philosophy of Buddhism, far from being antagonistic to the spirit or methods of science, is readily adaptive to the new ways, regarding as it does all knowledge of the phenomenal world as being on the level of relative truth. No more sophisticated or final theory of Reality is ever likely to be devised by the mind of man than the "non-theory" of *śūnyatā*. The native cosmology based on *tao*, *yin* and *yang*, the five elemental operative qualities, and all their associated concepts were by no means swept away. Perhaps they never will be swept away, since Western science and philosophy can hardly offer more satisfactory alternatives. Even on the formal philosophical level, the victory of Western concepts might ultimately prove ephemeral, since there is apparently a surprising vitality in the New Literati Tradition.

Family Religion

The strong family system of the Chinese was under great stress during this period. As industrialization progressed, the cities drew increasing numbers of workers from the rural environs, and urban conditions of life

tended to break down family cohesion. With economic independence derived from factory wage earning came a certain amount of freedom of choice for the individual and the weakening of the authority of family elders. Modern education furthered this process, both because many students lived away from their homes and because their books were strongly influenced by Western individualistic thought. Even the chaotic conditions brought about by political instability and continual fighting contributed to the same result, as millions of persons became homeless or were pressed into military service.

The result of these and many other factors was the erosion of parental control, the weakening of lineage loyalties, and a sense of isolation and alienation among individuals. When the Communist regime came to power, it was able to capture the allegiance of millions of persons who welcomed a new focus for their loyalties—and of course that regime has given its most determined efforts to substituting loyalty to the Party and State for loyalty to the family. It would be overstating the success of these efforts to claim that the traditional family has already succumbed, but there is no doubt that the regime has succeeded in bringing about a considerable degree of nationalistic feeling and a consciousness of wider social responsibility.

The implications of these developments for the ancestral cult are obvious. If that cult was in essence the symbolic cement holding together a structure of families and lineage, then the disintegration of family and lineage is *prima facie* evidence of the weakening of the ancestral cult. If our view is correct—that this family cult has been the basic, universal religion of the Chinese—then it is further apparent that its disruption implies the most serious consequences for Chinese civilization. Indeed, it is not difficult to find many examples of profound changes that have already occurred in specific places where the process of dissolution is far advanced.

Community Religion

Community religion, as we have described it, is equally caught up in a vortex of change. Formerly isolated communities are being exposed to many outside influences. Their exclusiveness and unity are breaking down. Their inhabitants travel to the cities, work in factories, serve in the army. Roads and railways bring the world closer. Education arrives, and the efficacy of the gods is called into question. The rudiments of modern schooling spread scientific explanations of cause and effect, and the animistic beliefs lose their rationale. This process has been going on for more than a century, and long before the Communist government pushed its campaigns against "superstitions," temples throughout the country had been allowed to fall into disuse or had been converted to secular uses. However, the persistence of traditional popular religion is remarkable, and against all repression and modernization it was clearly reasserting itself in the late 1980s and into the 1990s.

State Religion

On the collapse of the imperial polity in 1911, the whole structure of the State religion disappeared. Subsequent governments were generally indif-

ferent, if not hostile, to religion. The Nationalist regime in the early 1930s sponsored a revival of the ancient Literati ethic as a matter of official policy. This included annual observance of the ritual in the *wên miao* on the birthday of the Sage, the celebration being named Teachers Day, however. The position of the Communist regime is naturally in accord with the dictum of Marx and Engels, that "religion is the opiate of the people." For a brief time, during the so-called Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s, it seemed that a new "State religion" was being established, as the nation was flooded with busts of Chairman Mao, and copies of the Little Red Book of his sayings were in every hand. But the "cult of Chairman Mao" was as transient as other propagandistic movements whipped up by the Party, and with Mao's death in 1976, it faded away immediately. By the late 1980s, the general "religious" fervor of Communism in China seemed to have vanished, one of the many evidences that Communism could not live up to its utopian visions. With the collapse of the regime in the Soviet Union, utopianism in China practically disappeared.

On the mainland of China, there is hardly a vestige of "State religion," as cynicism about the Party and its ideology has become widespread. Under the Nationalist-controlled government on Taiwan, the grandiose memorial hall to the late leader Chiang K'ai-shek and the more modest memorial hall to the Founder of the Republic, Sun Yat-sen, provide evidence of the persisting tradition of erecting quasi-religious monuments to great leaders. The ritual of bowing to the portraits of the Leader (Sun Yat-sen and Chiang K'ai-shek in Taiwan and—at least formerly—Mao Tse-tung in the mainland) might be considered as quasi-religious in nature, although such a ritual is better compared to the American practice of schoolchildren saluting the flag and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

Mao Tse-tung will perhaps never regain the status he once had in Chinese eyes because his epic accomplishments as leader of the Communist struggle to power and his undoubted achievements in the early days of the Socialist State have been overshadowed by the tragic results of his radicalism during his later years. Chiang K'ai-shek suffered the ignominy of defeat and loss of the mainland, but during his later years in Taiwan, he regained considerable stature as a leader. Whether this will be sufficient to give him lasting status as a "good emperor" entitled to national worship remains to be seen. It is Sun Yat-sen, acknowledged by Communists and Nationalists alike as the Founding Father, the man who brought about the overthrow of the two thousand and more years of the imperial system and the establishment of the first "modern" government in China, who has long since acquired, and still retains, the potent mythic qualities of a "semi-divinity."

Institutionalized Religion

As the more conspicuous of the institutionalized religions, Buddhism is naturally of special interest when we are considering the travails of religion in the twentieth century. Despite a small flurry of activity during the first four decades of the century, which sometimes led observers to conclude that they were witnessing a revitalization of Chinese Buddhism, it has become apparent from more careful study¹ that this was an illusion.

Much of this activity was superficial, an attempt to "modernize" the religion in competition with Christianity, a series of social, political, and economic moves that were more a desperate defense against the forces inimical to Buddhism than a manifestation of re-creative vitality.

The forces referred to are the same ones we have already mentioned, including scientific secularism, Christian propaganda, complex processes of industrialization and modernization, and disruption of the traditional family and social systems. If young Chinese intellectuals turned to any religion it was apt to be Christianity, which was somehow associated with the power and progress of advanced Western nations (despite the incongruity of that association within Western civilization itself). Buddhism, a religion advocating withdrawal from the world rather than struggle within it, was completely unrelated to the urgent needs of China as these young people saw it. The more Buddhist leaders tried to bring their religion and its institutions into some sort of relevance to the situation, the further they took these from their true character. *Irrelevance* to social and political movements was inherent in Chinese Buddhism; a "social gospel" was incongruous. The Chinese ideal of the monk or nun was precisely the recluse devoted to holy ritual and yogic meditation.*

Under Nationalist control the State did not persecute Buddhism, but neither was it interested in nurturing it. As for the Communists, Buddhism fell into the same category as all other religions—an instrument of a "feudal" exploitation of the masses that would not be tolerated. Communist policy toward religious institutions has been to use them when they could be made to serve the interests of the Party line and otherwise to encourage their demise. Because there was some small value in international relations with the so-called Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia for the Chinese to seem to patronize the religion, this game was played. A malleable group of monks was organized into the Chinese Buddhist Association (continuing a name from Republican times), which could "represent" Chinese Buddhism to the outside world and which attempted mollification of international Buddhist outrage at such harsh anti-Buddhist actions as the persecutions in Tibet. A few of the well-known temples and monasteries were maintained as showcases for Buddhist visitors, and a few books and magazines were published for external consumption. All of this could not disguise the fact that Buddhism had ceased to play an institutional role in Communist Chinese society.

During the excess of the Great Proletarian Revolution in the late 1960s, it seemed that practically every monastery in China had shut down. Without the economic basis of land rentals, the monasteries could hardly survive in any case. And in the new society of the People's Republic, it was difficult indeed to justify the monastic life, when all activities must be measured against the obligation of "service to the masses."

As for institutionalized Taoism, until very recently it has received very little attention from scholars in this century. One can only say that its fate has, in general, paralleled that of Buddhism. It had far fewer monastic

*But see footnote on p. 142 in "Taiwan and Overseas" subsection.

centers than Buddhism, but, on the other hand, it had a much more intimate association with the popular religion: As we know, most of its professional religious served as priests, mediums, and exorcists. Therefore, its survival power may be greater than that of the Buddhist Saṅgha.

This close association with popular religion is not an unmixed advantage, however; it brings Taoism under the same rubric as "superstitions" and causes it to be an object of contempt of the intelligentsia and an object of persecution by the government. The Communist regime has been even more outspokenly opposed to superstitions than are the Nationalists: Although article 88 of the constitution of 1954 guarantees "freedom of religious belief,"² such freedom explicitly does not extend to "superstitions."

The single most important symbol of institutionalized Taoism was the Master Designated by the Heavens (Chang T'ien Shih) of the southern school (see Chapter 6). The incumbent, sixty-third in the line, fled when Communist forces arrived, and his great ancestral estates in Kiangsi province were confiscated. Thus was eliminated the only nationally important center for certification or ordination of Taoist priests. However, in Taiwan a young successor, the sixty-fourth Master Chang, revived the authority of his sect to ordain Taoists; and institutionalized Taoism seemed, beginning in the late 1980s, to be enjoying something of a renaissance in Taiwan.

Master K'ung and the Literati Tradition

The most important casualty of these revolutionary times is Master K'ung: by this is meant the whole religious, ethical, educational, literary, and political backbone of the traditional Chinese civilization based on the Canon of the Literati. The damage done to the Chinese Great Tradition by the collapse of Literati authority is even more serious than the profound changes wrought in Western society by the attacks of scientific secularism on traditional religion.

The outward signal of the death of Literati authority was the abolishment in 1905 of the imperial examinations with their degrees, thus doing away with the very *raison d'être* of traditional education. Increasingly, as Western influences penetrated the minds of China's intellectuals, Master K'ung came to stand for an anachronistic system of values that was a veritable millstone about the neck of progress. With the victory of modern education—that is, textbooks written in the colloquial language rather than the language of the Classics—in the early 1920s, study of the traditional Literati texts became not only irrelevant to the attainment of status in the modern society but an antiquarian pursuit of interest only to the limited number willing to spend the considerable effort required to comprehend those ancient texts.

It is true that when the Nationalist government in the early 1930s felt the need to counter the ideological program of the Communists, they turned to the Literati Classics as the only viable source of an authentic native tradition. But their efforts to inspire youth through required courses on the Classics in the middle schools and universities cannot be said to have been successful.

Thus if one takes the most extreme view, one concludes that the Chinese civilization molded by the Literati Tradition is really dead and that some entirely new national character must replace the old tradition. This is, of course, the thesis of the leadership on the mainland. The apparently erratic policies of Mao Tse-tung had as their unvarying goal the extirpation of "feudal" remnants in China's society (most of which are the creation of Master K'ung and the Literati Tradition), the creation of a new people whose ideals are those of revolutionary socialism, not those of the Literati Tradition, and, of course, ultimately, the utopia of a true communist society. In Taiwan, on the other hand, there is an outspoken challenge to this effort, as the Nationalist government continues—perhaps in a somewhat more effective manner than before—to assert the values of the Literati Tradition as the true Chinese culture, while at the same time pursuing completely modern goals in the social and economic spheres.

Taiwan and Overseas

In considering the religious situation of the second half of this century, one must thus look not only at the mainland but also at the island province of Taiwan and the many millions of Chinese residing overseas (mostly in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia). Although there is great variety in the religious picture from place to place, in general it is accurate to say that traditional religion is flourishing more among Chinese outside than inside the mainland. Certainly in the case of Taiwan, one would need to modify many of the generalities offered above. There one finds a strong family (although not necessarily a strong lineage) system operative. There the popular religion is flourishing. There Buddhism is enjoying a genuine renaissance, both as a popular religion³ and as a monastic vocation.* Christianity, whose missionaries operate in force on the island, has made a strong impression. Temple building in Taiwan redoubled as if in direct challenge to the iconoclasm of the Cultural Revolution on the mainland, and all the government's stern injunctions against "waste" have failed to dampen the exuberant extravagance of the Taiwanese religious festivals (*pai-pai*).

THE CLOUDED CRYSTAL BALL

We opened our discussion in this book with the statement that we viewed Chinese religion as primarily an expression of the Chinese culture. It is an obvious concomitant of that view that as the culture changes, so must the religion. The future of religion in China is thus integrally bound up with the question of cultural change; therefore, the basic question is the outcome of the gigantic experiment that has been taking place on the mainland of China since 1949. It seems self-evident that it is as much a misjudgment to find that Communist China is something entirely novel as

*There seem never to have been any Taoist monasteries in Taiwan. There are, however, many professional Taoists who function at the level of popular religion.



Local opera troupe performing at a pai-pai, or religious festival, in Taiwan. Notice painted faces and costumes and the very casual attitudes of stage hands and audience, which does not mean the performance is irrelevant to the religious purport of the celebrations.

it is to find that it is merely a continuation of the old in a new guise. Yet long before the Communists established their control, China had changed and was changing drastically, as our earlier remarks have indicated. It seems most unlikely that we have yet come to a point of stability in this process, and indeed it was the most basic premise of Chairman Mao and his followers that revolution must continue for a long time to come if Communist goals were to be achieved. Although it is still too soon to judge how much of this philosophy of "continuing revolution" will survive Mao's death, there is the undeniable fact that the attainment of "modernity" in a society in itself assures a condition that seems part and parcel of that modernity: ceaseless, restless change.

During the first decade and a half of the Socialist regime, to some observers it seemed that the utopian idealism of Chairman Mao and his more radical followers had, in fact, brought about a dramatic and unexpected change in Chinese social consciousness. The shibboleths of welfare of the people and sacrifice for the good of all seemed to have become a new way of life for Party and masses alike. But sea changes of this sort are inherently suspect, and the events of the mid-1960s—of which the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was the culmination—and the following years have shown how superficial was the real impact of those idealistic slogans and movements. The "continuing revolution" of Mao is indeed a prospect, but it is a different sort of revolution—that of struggles for political power and not for the victory of Communism as a Way. As far as our subject is

concerned, the most significant fact to emerge in these post-Mao years is the unmistakable vitality of the traditional popular religion and all its cluster of age-old customs—not that the philosophy of the Party has changed in regard to “superstition,” but that every moment of relaxation of the repression has seen the practices of popular religion springing up “like weeds.”

Any attempt to predict the forms Chinese religion will take in the future, especially in view of these continually new developments, would obviously be foolish. What we can assert is the necessity of understanding the traditional forms in our effort to understand the whole culture of the past and in the broader task of understanding religious humankind in the universal framework. And we can be sure, as we reflect on history, that even the seemingly most drastic changes or suppressions of forms do not guarantee the outcome: Religious forms, like certain plants, can remain dormant for a very long time, only to spring up again when the environment becomes favorable.

Chinese Religion

An Introduction

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