CHAPTER 6

The Revival of Traditional Culture and Religious Experience in Modern Urban Life: The Example of the Changchun Confucius Temple

Ishii Tsuyoshi

Introduction

For a long time, classical theories of secularization anticipated a necessary decline of religious life. As it is well known, they proved to be wrong and religious life is still striving in most places around the world even though deep transformations and reconfigurations are everywhere at work. Some good amount of research has now been produced about the limitations of the secularization paradigm, providing evidence that “multiple modernities” also translate in multiple secularities. The specificity of the Chinese case stems from a century of ruptures, a chaotic Maoist episode of religious repressions (that also gave birth with the Mao cult to a real “political religion”) and an enduring official atheist ideology. After the Cultural revolution, in an overall context of trauma, anxiety but also hope, discussions flourished again in society about the meaning of life and the issues of value and spiritual quest. The so-called “Pan Xiao discussion” of the 1980s studied by He Zhaotian exemplifies this trend. Besides, “high speed growth and GDP ideology” promoted by the authorities in the following decades—to some extent as substitutes to Marxist teleology—proved insufficient to channel deep-rooted aspirations for a meaningful life or provide relevant existential orientations. It is in this

---

1 The discussion also known as “the great discussion on the meaning of life” which took place in 1980 was triggered by the publication of a letter from a woman named “Pan Xiao” (潘曉) in Zhongguo Qingnian (中國青年). Two other newspapers, Zhongguo Qingnian Bao (中國青年報) and Gongren Ribao (工人日報) subsequently published papers on the topic. “Pan Xiao” was not a real person but a name given by an editor of the journal to personalize a set of discourses stemming from letters and interviews of two people called Huang Xiaoju and Pan Wei. Pan Xiao’s letter reveals skepticism about common moral values in society and raises the issue of the meaning of life. Since the discussion took place only four years after the end of the Cultural Revolution and at the very beginning of the “opening and reform” policy, Pan’s letter stirred sensation in Chinese society. See He Zhaotian 賀照田, “Cong Pan Xiao taolun kan dangdai Zhongguo dalu xuwuzhuyi de lishi yu gainian chengyin” 從潘曉討論看當代中國大陸虛無主義的歷史與觀念成因, Kaifang Shidai 7 (2010): 5–44.
context that China experienced a multifaceted religious revival of which the Buddhist revival or the quick expansion of Christianity are blatant illustrations. However, the administrative framework for the management of religions—only five religions are officially recognized—proved completely unable to take into account the diversity of forms taken by the revival of religious or “quasi-religious” (one knows well the difficulties of applying the category of “religion” in an Asian context) aspirations. The “qigong fever” documented by David A. Palmer, the development of popular religion analyzed by Adam Yuet Chau or the rapid expansion of sectarian movements such as the Yiguandao explored by Sébastien Billioud provide clear evidence of the diversity of ongoing developments. The Confucian revival studied through multiple cases in this volume can also be understood within such an overall background. Thus, one of its functions is to provide an answer to spiritual or existential aspirations, both at the level of the individual and of the community, that may or may not be defined in religious terms. At the same time, as it is reminded in the introduction to this book, such a grassroots movement also maintains ambiguous relations to a political context where Chinese authorities, both at the national and at the local levels, do not hesitate to instrumentally use and promote traditional culture. Many of these elements crystallize in activities organized around the Changchun Confucius temple studied in this chapter, on the basis of fieldwork carried out in 2010 and in 2012.

1 General Overview of the Changchun Confucius Temple

The Changchun Confucius Temple was built in 1872, during the 11th year of the Tongzhi reign of the Qing dynasty. Like many other Chinese historical artifacts, it was badly damaged during the Cultural Revolution. It began attracting renewed interest from the local government in the 1980s, and in 1987 it was listed among the important historical monuments marked for preservation in Jilin Province. The Changchun municipal government put up the capital to properly rebuild it in 2002. The temple’s reconstruction and subsequent development went smoothly, and the first post-reconstruction grand ceremonial offering to Confucius was held there in 2003. The ceremony continues to be

---