RESEARCH COMMUNICATIONS

Note: The Journal of Asian and African Studies invites communications in the form of short articles and reports about ongoing research, not exceeding 5,000 words, both in the empirical and theoretical fields.

EDITORS

1. Research into the Chinese Little Tradition:
   A Progress Report

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The lack of a well organized religious structure among Chinese has led some scholars to conclude that religion is of little importance in the Chinese tradition. Other scholars although also noting the lack of unified religious institutions, have concluded that this is not indicative of a lack of important religious components in social life, just that the religious life is expressed through other media, including a profusion of localized temples and shrines throughout the country. In the past two years the present authors have been conducting a series of investigations into the religious behaviour of groups of Chinese. In the first phase, a group of uprooted rural villagers were the object of intensive field work, while in the second phase residents of a government public housing resettlement estate are now the targets of investigation. Hopefully, further groups will also be investigated.

The underlying theoretical problem with which we are concerned is to secure some understanding of the relationship between the "great tradition" and the folk or "little tradition." Thus far the urgency of the field situation has prevented systematic theoretical treatment of the fundamental issue.

The question of how to characterize Chinese religion is the obvious place to begin. Yang has dealt with the problem by classifying certain sets of behaviour as religious when people reveal a heavy emphasis on thoughts about

3 The results of the first phase of research is reported in M. I. Berkowitz, F. P. Brandauer, and J. H. Reed, Folk Religion in an Urban Setting: A Study of Hakka Villagers in Transition (Hong Kong: Christian Study Centre, 1969).
the supernatural, and on the other hand, other behaviour as superstitious when it lacks this orientation. It seems more advantageous to utilize Becker's division of religion into the supernatural and the sacred, placing the emphasis upon the traditional nature of Chinese religion rather than making the distinction between belief and pseudo-belief suggested by Yang. By so doing, it is possible to legitimately deal with the way in which society is organized. In particular, such concepts of social organization as Gemeinschaft, which includes a diffused form of religion, with theology, rituals and organization merged with concepts and structure of secular institutions and other aspects of the social order, seems appropriate to Chinese society. Becker and Barnes would call this type of society the "closed-sacred," "religion" being a subset of "the sacred" and its range being restricted to purely supernatural phenomena, as distinguished from values which may be socially and traditionally derived. In conceptualizing religion in Chinese society in this way we are suggesting that the expression of the universal religions need not be through generalized religious institutions. Our study of six villages in the northeastern part of the New Territories, Hong Kong has convinced us of the efficacy of this approach for at least one segment of the Chinese people.

The supposedly universal religions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism have existed in China for hundreds of years. For most of the population the three religions have been mixed together through the years in an often curious blending. This eclecticism is aptly illustrated by a servant who replied to a question about her religion saying that she was Buddhist. In practice, she worshipped ancestors (Confucian influences) and made use of divination (Taoist influences). The Chinese themselves have recognized this in a popular proverb, "san jiao wei yi" “the three religions are one.” One scholar summed it up in the following manner:

Instead of dividing the religious life of the Chinese people into three compartments called Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, it is far more accurate to divide it into two levels, the level of the masses and the level of the enlightened.

It is precisely this division of Chinese religion into two levels which is the concern of this paper. The religion of the study villagers is not that of the universal religions although there are elements of the universal religions present. Rather, it is a mixture of the universal religions, laced with some

1 Yang, pp. 1–2.
5 Yang, p. 25.
8 We will not enter here into the very important discussion of whether the elements of the universal religion which are found among these peasant people are derived from some.