“CONFUCIAN” ELEMENTS IN THE GREAT TEMPLE FESTIVALS OF SOUTHEASTERN SHANSI IN LATE IMPERIAL TIMES

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From the Ming dynasty at the latest, the region centering on the city of Ch‘ang-chih 長治 in southeastern Shansi province was characterized by exceptionally large temple festivals called sai 賽. The liturgies of at least some sai emphasized the central importance of ritual in human life, included prayers for the reigning emperor, and prescribed that a tablet representing him occupy a place of honor among the tablets of the honored gods in the temple’s Incense Pavilion, where the all-important food offerings were made. In addition, the plots of the operas that were an integral part of the sai’s ritual program were usually based on stories from Chinese history, which, whatever else it was, was the locus par excellence of orthodox social and political values. Prominent among the gods honored at the sai were deities such as Shen Nung 神農, the Divine Farmer; Yao 堯, the first of the sage-kings; and Hou I 后羿, the archer who saved the world from drought by shooting nine suns out of the sky. These myths had been taken into the high literary tradition as early as Chou and Han times, [rest of text]

I would like to thank the following organizations and individuals. Fieldwork in Shansi in 1992 and 1993 was supported by the Project on Chinese Regional Theater in its Social and Ritual Contexts (Wang Ch’iu-kuei, director) with funds from the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange. Research was begun during a leave year made possible by a grant from the ACLS-SSRC Joint Committee on Chinese Studies, using funds provided by the CCK Foundation, and by sabbatical leave support from the University of California, Berkeley. In Shansi I was given generous assistance by many people, including Chang Chen-nan 張振南, Chang Chih-ch’üan 張枝薰, Ch’en Te-chien 陳德俊, Chia Pao-yü 賈寶玉 [sic], Kuo Shih-hsing 郭士星, Li Shou-t’ien 李守田, Li T’ien-sheng 李天生, Li Yuan-hsing 李元興, Liao Pen 廖奔 (Beijing), Wang Hsü-feng 王旭峰, Yuan Shuang-hsi 原雙喜, and above all, my friend Yang Meng-heng 楊孟衡.

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and hence were an integral part of elite culture.\(^1\) Moreover, a few saî were actually sponsored and led by local officials. It is clear therefore that the most important rituals of communal popular religion in late imperial southeastern Shansi were profoundly implicated in the values and symbols of the state and the state’s unofficial representatives, the educated elite.\(^2\)

The conceptual terrain covered by the terms “Taoist” and “Buddhist” is fairly well mapped in a broad sense. We generally recognize the scriptures, symbols, or rituals of those two religions when we encounter them, for example in the ceremonies in and around a village temple on the birthday of its main deity. Such ceremonies also contain many symbols and rituals that are neither Buddhist nor Taoist, however, and that are usually just labelled “popular religion,” “local beliefs,” or the like. Popular religion in this sense is little more than a residual category of miscellaneous superstitions and customs that have no theological or sacerdotal coherence.\(^3\) The inadequacy of this analysis is made painfully obvious by the Ch’ang-chih saî.

If the saî in some ways expressed a larger religious or ethical system that was neither Taoist nor Buddhist, what was it? Is there a name for it? The quotation marks around “Confucian” in the title indicate my discomfort with using that word as a label. In what sense was a cult to Hou I Confucian, after all? Strong emphasis on ritual as a transforming influence is surely Confucian, but can we call the values of operas based on legendized history Confucian? They certainly tended to uphold the status quo, but does that make them Confucian? If not, what should they be called? I do not at the moment have a good answer to this question. This is interesting, because gaps in vocabulary indicate gaps in understanding, and it may well be that we do not adequately


\(^2\) I am of course not suggesting that the ideas and beliefs of the educated elite living in the provinces were uniform and homogeneous, but it is true enough to see that group as, in general, supportive of the orthodoxy that was promoted by the Ming and Ch’ing states.

\(^3\) It is not that scholars have not found patterns or systems in Chinese popular religion—there have been many who have, including P. Steven Sangren, Robert Weller, and Stephan Feuchtwang, to name only three of the most recent. What has not been seriously considered, as far as I know, is the possibility of a “third religion,” that, like Buddhism and Taoism, had both elite and popular expressions.