CONFUCIUS AND THE MEDIUMS:
IS THERE A “POPULAR CONFUCIANISM”?

BY

PHILIP CLART
(University of Missouri-Columbia)

In most areas of study it is the fundamental questions that tend to remain unresolved. Thus, scholars in religious studies have been amassing innumerable studies on specific religions, aspects of religious life, beliefs, doctrines and practices, but so far have not yet been able to agree on what “religion” actually is, what falls under this label and what does not. Likewise, students of Confucianism have not been able to solve such basic issues concerning their chosen subject matter as: Is Confucianism a philosophy or a religion? Should we even speak of it as an “-ism,” or should we call it more loosely “Confucian tradition” or “Confucian thought?”

The present article will deal with a related basic question that so far has not been resolved satisfactorily, namely, whether there is such a thing as a “popular Confucianism?” Or, put differently: are there sections of Chinese popular culture that can meaningfully be interpreted as “Confucian?” I approach this question not by imposing the label “Confucian” on likely elements of popular culture, but by examining the use of the label “Ru”儒 among twentieth-century popular religious groups. As I will be dealing with religious groups that self-consciously use this label as an autonym, the question will not be: “Are these groups Confucian?”, but rather: “What do they

The field research underlying this article was carried out from 1993 to 1994 with the support of the Center for Chinese Studies (National Central Library, Taipei), the Lin Pen-yüan Foundation (Taipei), External Affairs Canada, and the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of British Columbia. I would also like to thank Paul Katz for his perceptive comments on an earlier draft, as well as the two anonymous T’oung Pao reviewers for their suggestions. A first draft of this article was presented in a panel session of the Confucian Traditions Group at the 2000 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, where the positive feedback I received from the panel’s discussant Jonathan Herman and several members of the audience encouraged me to prepare my paper for publication.

© Brill, Leiden, 2003

Also available online – www.brill.nl

T’oung Pao LXXIX
mean by ‘Ru’ when they use the term as an autonym?” This method will supply us with an indirect approach to the question of popular Confucianism by providing insight into popular interpretations and uses of Confucianism. In this way it will be able to reveal one important aspect of what a “popular Confucianism” might comprise—Confucianism as appropriated by popular religion.

“Ru” in Taiwanese Popular Religion

Looking for things labelled “Ru” in Taiwanese popular religion, the first example one encounters is not one of doctrine, but of style—liturgical style, to be exact. Laurence G. Thompson, in an article published in 1981 on the Chaotian Gong 朝天宮, the temple devoted to Mazu 媽祖 in Beigang 北港, distinguished “popular” and “classical” as two modes of ritual performance. 1 Predominant at the Chaotian Gong are the typical popular observances associated with pilgrimages to a major Mazu temple, but twice a year a quite different set of observances is enacted. The “spring and autumn sacrifices” are performed as a closed ceremony by a group of men clad in “long gowns of plain hemp cloth, with black, thin cotton ‘riding jackets’.” While each step of the complicated ritual is announced by a “herald,” the officiants offer a sheep and a pig as well as incense, read out a “prayer” in praise of Mazu, perform a “threefold offering” and a “threefold libation,” and conclude by burning the prayer text. The stages of the ritual are punctuated by series of kowtows (the sangui jiukou 三跪九叩) and accompanied by the sounds of a drum, a bell, and a flute. Thompson does not tell us how the group of officiants was selected: in the prayer text they identify themselves in a stereotyped formula as “chief sacrificer N and associate sacrificers A, B, and C, together with the gentry and merchants and principal directors [of the temple]”—in other words, the local elite. Thompson does not use the term “Confucian” for this classical mode, but instead calls it “official-style” and sees it as stemming “from scriptural texts in the Confucian canon, and later prescriptions in the handbooks of the imperial government.”