

RELIGION IN CHINESE SOCIETY

A study of contemporary social functions of
religion and some of their historical factors



C. K. Yang

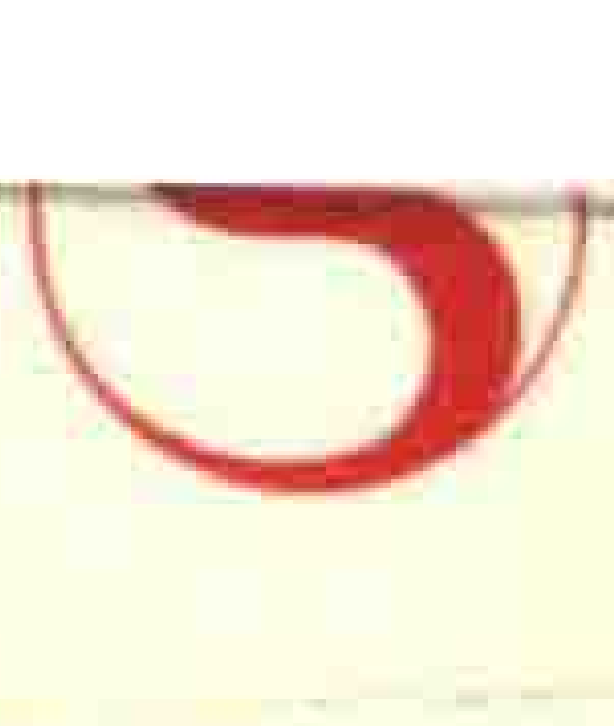
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Chinese Society*

A Study of
Contemporary Social Functions of Religion
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BY C. K. YANG



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PREFACE

FOR MANY YEARS I have been perplexed by the problem of the place of religion in traditional Chinese society, especially the functional basis for the development of religious life and the organizational system by which the religious element in traditional living was propagated and perpetuated. The present volume is a modest attempt at analyzing this problem from the sociological approach. Among the sociological concepts, that of diffuseness and specificity (Talcott Parsons) has provided the interpretive key to the structural aspect of the problem.

In preparing the work for publication I am indebted to the following: to the Rockefeller Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, and the Trustees of Lingnan University for their generous financial assistance; to the administrators and my colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh for partial relief from teaching and for providing a hospitable environment; to the late Robert Redfield for his stimulation and support of my work and his incisive suggestions on this manuscript; to John K. Fairbank for his encouragement and help; to W. T. Chan and Arthur F. Wright for suggesting sources of information; to Howard Linton of Columbia University Library for generous assistance with library resources; to Robert and Aili Chin for their critical comments and suggestions; to Joyce Langford for help in typing the manuscript. Special thanks are due my wife, Louise Chin Yang, who contributed to the improvement of the manuscript, and my two sons, Wallace and Wesley, who once more endured the curtailment of family life in the course of my preparation of this volume.

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CONTENTS

I	INTRODUCTION	I
II	RELIGION IN THE INTEGRATION OF THE FAMILY	28
III	RELIGION IN SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC GROUPS	58
IV	COMMUNAL ASPECTS OF POPULAR CULTS	81
V	POLITICAL ROLE OF CHINESE RELIGION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE	104
VI	OPERATION OF THE MANDATE OF HEAVEN	127
VII	ETHICOPOLITICAL CULTS: "GUIDANCE BY THE WAY OF THE GODS"	144
VIII	STATE CONTROL OF RELIGION	180
IX	RELIGION AND POLITICAL REBELLION	218
X	RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF CONFUCIANISM IN ITS DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE	244
XI	RELIGION AND THE TRADITIONAL MORAL ORDER	278
XII	DIFFUSED AND INSTITUTIONAL RELIGION IN CHINESE SOCIETY	294
XIII	THE CHANGING ROLE OF RELIGION IN PRE-COMMUNIST CHINESE SOCIETY	341
XIV	COMMUNISM AS A NEW FAITH	378
	NOTES	405
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	423

APPENDIX 1	<i>Functional Classification of Major Temples in Eight Localities</i>	436
APPENDIX 2	<i>Alphabetical List of Temple Names in Transliteration and in Chinese from Appendix 1</i>	452
APPENDIX 3	<i>Terms, Phrases, and Proper Names in Transliteration and in Chinese</i>	455
INDEX		459

I

INTRODUCTION



THIS STUDY is an attempt to answer the question: What functions did religion perform in Chinese social life and organization so as to provide a basis for its existence and development, and through what structural forms were these functions carried out? Hence, the basic purpose here is functional interpretation of critical facts in order to reveal a pattern of relationship between religion and the social order; no attempt is made to achieve a systematic and exhaustive presentation of data on Chinese religion.

For the purpose of this study, the structural viewpoint of Joachim Wach has been combined with the functional viewpoint of Paul Tillich in defining religion as the system of beliefs, ritualistic practices, and organizational relationships designed to deal with ultimate matters of human life such as the tragedy of death, unjustifiable sufferings, unaccountable frustrations, uncontrollable hostilities that threaten to shatter human social ties, and the vindication of dogmas against contradictory evidences from realistic experience. Such matters transcend the conditional, finite world of empirical, rational knowledge, and to cope with them as an inherent part of life man is impelled to seek strength from faith in such nonempirical realms as spiritual power inspired by man's conceptions of the supernatural.

The supernatural factor is an important component in our definition of religion here because of its prominence in Chinese religious life, the object of this study. This does not mean to ignore religious phenomena without supernatural expressions. But to lay emphasis on nonsupernatural religious forces as a factor in the social order would require extensive examination of the entire ontology and value system of a culture, as any dominant and enduring system of thought or values would inevitably be compelled to face the

ultimate problems of life and, because of the limitations of empirical rational knowledge, would develop in varying degrees concepts of the ultimate, the unconditioned, the infinite, the eternal, and lasting validity. Any elaborate consideration of this aspect of religion lies outside the scope of this study. As the supernatural element has been an outstanding mark of Chinese religious life, this study treats the supernatural as a central component of Chinese religion, instrumental to traditional Chinese social organization; nonsupernatural aspects of religion will be discussed only where they are relevant.

The above conception is in close agreement with the traditional Chinese notion of religion. In the traditional Chinese language, several terms have been used in connection with religion. The word *chiao* (guiding doctrine) is the closest equivalent to the Western term "religion." Thus, there is *fo chiao*, or the religion of Buddha, and there is *pai-yang chiao*, or the religion of the White Sun. Another Chinese term with the connotation of religion is *tao*, as used in *hsien-t'ien* (pre-birth) *tao*. *Tao* means the Way, the great cosmological principle that governs the operation of the universe, including the human world; used in connection with religious beliefs and organizations, it means a sect. There is the word *tsung*, meaning piety, devotion, or faith, and the word *men*, meaning door, the door leading to enlightenment and salvation; in practical application both denote a religious sect. In the modern Chinese language, the term for religion is *tsung chiao* or a doctrine of faith.

The common denominator in all these terms is the concept of the guidance of man,¹ and the idea of the supernatural is not etymologically apparent. But in actual practice in Chinese religious life, religion was built on the foundation of beliefs in gods and spirits and on ritualistic acts and organizations stemming from such beliefs. Chinese classical discussions on religion took the supernatural factor as the central subject and as the criterion of differentiation between religious and nonreligious matters. Popular religious life revolved around the idea of gods and spirits. The present Communist attack on religion has as its main target the belief in the supernatural. No definition of religion which omits the supernatural factor would be descriptive of the objective contents of popular Chinese religious life.

Related to the supernatural factor is the term "superstition," which has been commonly used, particularly by the West, in characterizing Chinese religious life. Objectively, a superstition is an uncritically accepted belief in supernatural powers and its resultant practice or rite; it may be regarded as a part of magic in the sense that it implies not only nonempirical interpretation of natural and human events but also the human attempt to manipulate supernatural forces by either active control or negative avoidance. But in actual usage superstition is a subjective term, for it is generally employed by nonbelievers to signify disapproval of such beliefs or acts. As a part of magic, what is regarded as superstition will be included in the present study, because of the difficulty of separating magic from religion and because of the pervasion of magic in the religious life of China.

EXISTING VIEWS ON THE RELIGIOUS CHARACTER OF CHINESE SOCIETY

Among the three leading centers of civilization, Europe, India, and China, the place of religion in society is the least clearly recognized in the case of China. The place of religion in Chinese society has long been a controversial subject because of a number of seemingly contradictory factors in the situation. Viewing Chinese religious life on the folk level, one is inevitably struck by the vast number of magical practices and beliefs; the average man's mental picture of the universe—in fact, the whole pattern of his life—was heavily colored by a shadowy world of gods, spirits, and specters. Furthermore, a large proportion of such beliefs and practices carried no apparent ethical connotation. Because of this, the Chinese people were generally regarded as a superstitious lot who had yet to experience an ethicoreligious life of a higher order. This view was most familiar to the Western world, as it was popularized for over a century by Western missionaries who found this situation to be wholly incompatible with the Christian faith and took it as the most convincing justification for their evangelical zeal.

In addition to the permeation of magical influence, which the Christian West refused to treat as a part of religion, there were other

baffling phenomena. Instead of social and political dominance by a religious doctrine and a powerful priesthood, there was the seemingly agnostic Confucian tradition of secular orthodoxy in which the leading scholar-official class were indoctrinated. There was no strong, centrally organized religion in most periods of Chinese history, and there appeared to be no protracted struggle between the church and the state. Confucian ethics dominated the system of social values, largely replacing the ethical function of religion as found in Christianity.

Great Western Sinologues such as Legge and Giles have emphasized the agnostic character of Confucianism. A later generation of Western scholars, who grew up under the influence of Legge and Giles and who became acquainted with Chinese culture through Chinese classical studies and through association with the Chinese educated class, assigned a relatively unimportant place to religion in Chinese society, leaving unexplained the universal presence of religious influence. Thus wrote Derk Bodde:

The Chinese have been less concerned with the world of the supernatural than with the worlds of nature and of man. They are not a people for whom religious ideas and activities constitute an all-important and absorbing part of life . . . Before . . . the first century of the Christian era, China produced no thinker who could be classed as a religious leader . . . It is ethics (especially Confucian ethics), and not religion of a formal, organized type, that has provided the spiritual basis of Chinese civilization.²

Again, in a footnote, he elaborated:

This does not mean that there have not been periods of intense religious activity in Chinese history . . . Nor does it mean that the Chinese masses have been free from superstitious beliefs; China is one of the richest storehouses in the world for the folklorist. Nevertheless, religion as such has been taken more lightly in China than in most other countries. It is significant that Confucianism, despite periods of eclipse, has for the last eight hundred years succeeded in retaining its dominance at the expense of both Buddhism and religious Taoism.

Modern Chinese scholars have developed the theme of the unimportance of religion in Chinese society to a much greater extreme.

A pioneer of this view was Liang Ch'i-ch'ao, who declared in the earlier part of this century:

. . . The history of religion consists of the story of theology and the change of religious organizations. Theology goes beyond the realistic world to talk about paradise, about the soul after death . . . From these two points, whether China has any religion or not is a question that merits serious study. Recently, some people who respect Confucius wish to make Confucianism a religion . . . First, for religion to succeed, it must utilize the vague emotions of man, which is incompatible with rationalism . . . Confucius is completely different from this; he confines his attention to realism, and his views are incompatible with religious elements. Secondly, there has been no religious organization by the Confucianists. If there are such organizations now, they are counterfeits . . . Since there is no religion among the indigenous products of China, what makes up the Chinese history of religion are mainly the religions introduced from foreign lands . . . The Zen School of Buddhism is a Chinese product, but it belongs more suitably to philosophy than to religion . . . Taoism is the only religion indigenous to China . . . but to include it in a Chinese history of religion is indeed a great humiliation. Their activities have not benefited the nation at all. Moreover, down through the centuries, they have repeatedly misled the people by their pagan magic and disturbed the peace . . .³

Of the cultured elite in China, Hu Shih said, "the educated people in China are indifferent to religion . . ."⁴ Of China as a whole, he said, "China is a country without religion and the Chinese are a people who are not bound by religious superstitions. This is the conclusion arrived at by a number of scholars during recent years."⁵ This view continued to characterize the attitude of a large section of modern Chinese intellectuals. The sweeping statement of Ch'ien Tuan-sheng, a political scientist, supplies another example:

. . . the Chinese are unreligious. No great religion . . . has captivated the bulk of the Chinese population as has been the case with other peoples. Mohammedanism and Christianity have come nearest to such success. But there are only 5 and 1 per cent, respectively, of the Chinese who are Mohammedans and Christians. At its height, between the fourth and eighth centuries, Buddhism was much more in vogue than Mohammedanism or Christianity at any time. But the influence of

Buddhism in China is more in the realm of thought and fine arts than in that of belief. Since the Chinese are unreligious, they may have superstitions, but rarely taboos . . .⁶

The modern Chinese scholars' argument for the insignificance of religion in Chinese society was partly a reflection of the world trend toward secularization. Modern Europe emerged from a violent reaction against the medieval church. Science has given man the most powerful weapon yet known for unlocking the secrets of nature and for providing hitherto undreamed-of tangible benefits. Intellectually, this is an age of rationalistic orientation which waves off religion with defiance and even with contempt. It is quite natural for modern Chinese intellectuals, who have followed the West in exalting science, to catch the spirit of the times and to shun religion. But perhaps an even stronger motivation for the assumption of an "unreligious" or "rationalistic" society for China lies in the Chinese intellectual's necessity of emphasizing the dignity of Chinese civilization in the face of the political and economic superiority of the nationalistically oriented Western world. Liang Ch'i-ch'ao was frank when he regarded magical Taoism as a national humiliation. The only reason why any nation should feel humiliated at having developed a magical religion like Taoism is the contempt for religion in general, and for magical cults in particular, of an age when rationalism enjoys supremacy. Occultism was certainly no monopoly of the Chinese.

GENERAL IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION IN CHINESE SOCIETY

But the underevaluation of the place of religion in Chinese society did not find much support from reality. There was not one corner in the vast land of China where one did not find temples, shrines, altars, and other places of worship. The temples and shrines dotting the entire landscape were a visible indication of the strong and pervasive influence of religion in Chinese society, for they stood as symbols of a social reality.

Number of Temples in Local Samples

There are several local sample studies with statistical figures on temples. In Ting county of Hopei province, there was an average

of 7 temples per village in 1882, and 1.9 temples in 1928. In terms of families, there was an average of 24 families per temple in 1882, and 50 families in 1928. In terms of population, there were about 600 persons per village in 1928, giving an average of one temple for approximately every 300 persons.⁷ A comparative case is found in Wanchuan county of Chahar, where there were 6.5 temples per village in a study of 86 rural villages in 1947.⁸ In Wang-tu county of Hopei province, an earlier picture of 1905 showed an average of 5.7 temples per village of 100 families or 500 persons, giving an average of one temple for every 17.7 families or 88.5 persons.⁹

These counties were all located in north China; for the rest of China there are no comparable data on a county basis presently available for this study. County gazetteers for south China contain records of only major temples, omitting smaller ones, particularly minor shrines, thus rendering the data uncomparable with those of north China. There are, however, a few samples of villages in south China that present a relatively complete record of temples and shrines. A field investigation of the village of Nanching in the vicinity of Canton in 1948 showed that there were eight temples, shrines, and ancestral temples for a total of 233 families, averaging one temple for every 30 families. In the village of Sang-yuan Wei in Shun-te county of Kwangtung province, there were five temples, shrines, and ancestral temples for a total of 161 families, averaging one temple to every 32 families.¹⁰ If we take into consideration the general opinion that the people in the southern provinces had more magical cults than those in the north, the northern figures do not seem to reflect any exaggeration of the number of temples and shrines in proportion to the population when compared with the south.

Social Functions of Temples

The permeation of religion in Chinese society may also be seen in the wide range of functions served by the temples. In a monotheistic religion people pray to one god for all their spiritual or magical needs, but in the Chinese polytheistic tradition people prayed to different gods for different purposes. Table 1 summarizes the functional classification of 1,786 major temples in eight localities distributed over five major sections of China proper. The first two

TABLE I
*Functional Classification of Major Temples in Eight
 Localities According to the Nature of Main
 Gods in Each Temple**

FUNCTIONS	NUMBER OF		
	Wang-tu	Ch'ing-ho	Ch'uan-sha
I. Integration and well-being of social organizations	48	86	70
A. Kinship group	20	20	26
1. Marriage			
2. Fertility	19	19	24
3. Kinship values	1	1	2
B. Local community protection	3	8	14
C. The state	25	58	30
1. Figures symbolizing civic and political virtues	21	54	25
a. Civic and political figures	10	2	15
(1) Historic personalities	7	1	15
(2) Legendary figures	3	1	
b. Military personalities	11	52	10
2. Deities of justice	1	1	1
3. Patrons of the scholar- official class and the literary tradition	3	3	4
II. General moral order	26	73	20
A. Heavenly deities	14	61	3
B. Underworld authorities	12	12	17
III. Economic functions	12	10	21
A. Agricultural deities	12	10	17
B. Patrons of crafts and trades			2
C. Commerce and general eco- nomic prosperity			2
IV. Health	3	2	2
V. General public and personal welfare	10	13	2
A. Pantheons	2	1	1
B. Devil dispellers	1	1	