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REVIEW ARTICLE

Religion and Chinese Culture: Toward an Assessment of "Popular Religion"

Shifts in terminology may be harbingers of a revolutionary new paradigm or a repackaging of older dilemmas. Recently some terminological rearrangements have emerged with sufficient consistency in studies of Chinese religion and culture to warrant examination of their implicit assumptions and practical ramifications. In brief, the trend in the study of Chinese religion, and in the history of religions generally, has been to talk of "popular religion," "local religion," or, most recently, "popular religious cultures" instead of "folk" and "elite" religions or "great" and "little" traditions.[1] Certainly, the problems besetting the older terms have been amply debated and demonstrated. However, are the new terms more effective replacements? That is, do they actually transcend the persistent assumptions of their predecessors, enabling us to perceive and analyze dynamics barely visible on earlier horizons? From the standpoints of five recent books on Chinese religion and culture, the horizon certainly begins to look less familiar and more promising. Although these books may not constitute a revolution, both their modest revisions as well as their daring near misses suggest that the study of Chinese religion is undergoing a fascinating shift. There is a new maturity in the variety of disciplines contributing perspectives and data to an open dialogue

[1] For an excellent review of such terms in recent studies of European history, see Mary R. O'Neil, "From 'Popular' to 'Local' Religion: Issues in Early Modern European Religious History," *Religious Studies Review* 12, no. 3/4 (July/October 1986): 222–26.

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on basic issues. There is also a new deftness and simplicity in the focus on religious phenomena, a focus that does not isolate religion for the sake of a false clarity but rather explores religion as fully embedded in society and culture. Finally, one theme is central to all of these books—to uncover "popular religion" and to analyze the relationship between religion and culture implied by such a phenomenon. By exploring the treatments of this theme, I hope to discern the direction of these works as a whole and to begin to assess the innovations they introduce.

I

Historians of religions employ a variety of orientations toward the terminological debates involving religion and culture depending upon whether they are most familiar with historical studies of textual traditions, ethnographic studies of primarily oral cultures, or European religions as opposed to Asian religions. For example, a focus on textual traditions promoted an early distinction between "universal" and "folk" religions which was used to differentiate the religion of the nation-state from the religion of the tribe, either in terms of distinct societies or distinct strata within a single society.[2] Another framework based on textual criteria used the categories of "primitive," "classical," and "modern" to classify types of religions and religious experiences.[3] The concern for textual traditions vis-à-vis oral culture is also represented in a distinction between "universal" and "local" religious traditions.[4] Some terms are associated with particular cultural areas. For example, studies of European Christianity have generally worked with a distinction between "popular" religion on the one hand and "official" or "institutional" religion on the other, while studies of Asian religions have been shaped by Robert Redfield's differentiation of "great" and "little" traditions.[5] Other distinct orientations include Max Weber's typology of "traditional" versus "rational" religions, which was also adapted to various attempts to charac-

[2] Pieter Hendrik Vrijhof and Jacques Waardenburg, eds., *Official and Popular Religion: Analysis of a Theme for Religious Studies,* Religion and Society 19 (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), p. 1.

[3] Joseph M. Kitagawa, "Primitive, Classical, and Modern Religions: A Perspective on Understanding the History of Religions," in *The History of Religions: Essays on the Problem of Understanding,* ed. Joseph M. Kitagawa et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 39–66.

[4] See Bernard Faure's discussion of the universal, or "unlocalizing," tendencies of Buddhism in comparison to regionally limited popular traditions in "Space and Place in the Chinese Religious Tradition," *History of Religions* 26, no. 4 (May 1987): 337–56. Faure adapts the terms "utopian" and "locative" as used by Jonathan Z. Smith (*Map Is Not Territory* [Leiden: Brill, 1978]), which raises some interesting connections between the worldviews described by Smith and the forms of social organization indicated by Faure.

[5] Vrijhof and Waardenburg in particular have explored wider applications of the distinction between popular and official religion. Robert Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

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terize a historical transition from folk to universal religion.[6] New attention to the differences between "oral" and "literate" communities as a basic typology, however, is reminding us of the difficulties of using textually oriented models to analyze the religions of pre- or nonliterate peoples.[7]

The variety of categories and terms as well as their shifts in popularity testify to a complicated and ongoing intellectual debate. Perhaps no single scholar demonstrates recent developments in this area more clearly than the historian Natalie Z. Davis, whose work regularly cuts through the chaos of current practice to articulate directions and issues. Indeed, two articles published nearly ten years apart provide an excellent index to changing terminology in the historical study of religion. In the first, a 1974 study entitled "Some Tasks and Themes in the Study of Popular Religion," Davis challenged a model of European Christianity that distinguished folk religion from official religion and magic from religion.[8] Focusing on Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic,* whose sophisticated treatment of the complexities of medieval notions of religion and magic emphasized the historical origins and rationale behind this distinction, Davis called attention to the particular bias inhering in these terms.[9] She suggested another approach, an exploration of "popular religion" that would go beyond historically derived and socially nuanced formulas. Specifically, Davis raised three issues that effectively defined the limits of the older dichotomies and set a new agenda for analysis of "popular religion" in general. First, she maintained, lay piety (i.e., folk religion, magic, or a "ritual method of living") could not be understood adequately when set off from so-called rational beliefs; second,

[6] Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion,* trans. E. Fischoff (Boston: Beacon, 1964). Such approaches include Joachim Wach's study of primitive and "founded" religions (*Sociology of Religion* [1944; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971]); and Robert Bellah's categories (primitive, archaic, historical, and modern) in *Beyond Belief* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 20–50.

[7] See Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), and *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); also Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Methuen, 1982). The application of traditional history of religions to oral traditions is represented by several articles in Lauri Honko, ed., *Science of Religion: Studies in Methodology* (The Hague: Mouton, 1979) which address oral traditions either as a background to canon formation or through the tools of source criticism. Various correctives are proposed by Sam Gill in "Nonliterate Traditions and Holy Books: Toward a New Model," in *The Holy Book in Comparative Perspective,* ed. Frederick M. Denny and Rodney L. Taylor (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1985), pp. 224–40. In an interesting contrast to Gill's approach, William A. Graham explores the oral aspects of scriptures within literate traditions in *Beyond the Written Word* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[8] Natalie Zemon Davis, "Some Tasks and Themes in the Study of Popular Religion," in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion,* ed. Charles Trinkaus and Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: Brill, 1974), pp. 307–36.

[9] Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribners, 1971). It is interesting to note that the historical origins of the distinction between magic and religion were certainly not unknown before Thomas, yet prior to this period that did not constitute an argument for analytical bias—probably the opposite.

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such bifurcations inevitably failed to reveal the commonality among groups of laity and clergy in their recourse to various local practices and institutions; and third, the polarization of institutional and local levels of practice obscured the dynamics of change within the tradition as a whole.[10] Influenced by the cultural anthropology of Clifford Geertz, Davis went on to propose that such distinctions as religion and magic be examined for how they were used in specific historical periods to create a "whole" that structured experience and reinforced the social order.[11] The major ramification of this new approach for historians concerned with social change, she suggested, would be to make them look beyond the effects of doctrinal innovations and individual leaders to examine how the institutional contexts for popular religion shifted with economic, demographic, or political forces. Certainly, in the sense mapped out in this 1974 article, the term "popular religion" was extensively used in European historical studies by 1976.

In an article published in 1982, Davis again addressed the ramifications of the term "popular religion," lamenting that broad and ambiguous usage had obscured any analytic power it might have had.[12] At best, for Davis, it indicated what people actually did rather than simply what they were supposed to do, and thus served to extend the definition of religion "beyond formal doctrine to widespread belief and beyond prescribed piety to actual practise."[13] Still, this did not address the major problem besetting the term "popular religion." While it had been used to describe religious practices that could not be assumed to belong to just one social class or segment of society, it clearly could not simply mean "widespread" practices, as various studies of popular religion had made clear. Davis cited the example of a seventeenth-century Bolognese seamstress, whose spirituality was certainly not common to everyone in her society nor even typical of any subgroup other than single young women at that time and place.[14] Thus, on one level, it was unclear whether "popular religion" pointed to particular classes or to particularly pervasive social practices. On another level, it was unclear whether it indicated an attitude developed within medieval culture or an analytic tool developed by modern historians. Although Davis did not make the point, it appears that the growing ambiguity of "popular religion" was due in part to an increasing distance from the historical conditions in which the term first emerged as a corrective of earlier dichotomies (i.e., the debate with magic vs. religion). As a revisionist term, it was most useful for suggesting the existence of social attitudes and practices that cut across the categories of previous analyses. Yet when removed from this historiographical context, "popular

[10] Davis, "Some Tasks and Themes," pp. 307–12. Similar points attend almost every critique of two-tiered theories.

[11] Ibid., p. 312.

[12] Natalie Zemon Davis, "From 'Popular Religion' to Religious Cultures," in *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research,* ed. Steven Ozment (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1982), pp. 321–43; also see O'Neil (n. 1 above), pp. 222–23.

[13] Davis, "From 'Popular Religion' to Religious Cultures," p. 321.

[14] Ibid., p. 323.

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religion" either became a trendy substitute for "folk religion," or it was reified as a third level of social interaction that mediated the poles of the earlier dichotomies.

Given the difficulties of the term, Davis suggested yet another approach, a new "contextual and comparative" approach that would focus on "religious cultures." The term "religious cultures" appears to indicate a level of analysis that Davis came to consider more fundamental than the analysis of institutional dynamics promoted in her 1974 study.[15] Indeed, "religious cultures" defined religious practice as those symbolic activities by which people made and remade the sociocultural world in which they lived.[16] Hence, this approach saw religion as generating both cultural categories and social organization. Davis concluded her 1982 article by focusing on ritual as the activities that would most effectively disclose to researchers the dynamics of a "religious culture."[17]

These two articles portray three distinct positions or stages of analysis. In the first-stage position, expediently if not altogether appropriately represented here by Keith Thomas, European society was seen as socially bifurcated into the two levels of official elite and *das Volk,* the peasantry. A second-stage position, articulated in Davis's 1974 article, challenged the bifurcation of these terms, attempting to recognize various unities between them. Thus, in reaction to the divisiveness of "official" and "folk" religion, the term "popular religion" was appropriated to designate an emphasis on social unities. In the third stage of this procession of terms (e.g., "elite/folk," to "popular" religion, to "religious cultures") historians appear to have sought a notion of culture that would recognize how a society produces both differences and unities within its cultural categories and social organization. These historians have tended to focus on symbolic activities (such as ritual, pilgrimage, and carnival) rather than the institutional frameworks of popular practice that were the focus of the second perspective.[18]

II

As described here, these three positions greatly simplify more complex arguments, but they are helpful in sorting out the variety of approaches to Chinese religion. Certainly, Chinese religion has long been analyzed in terms

[15] Ibid., pp. 322–23.

[16] Ibid., pp. 321–23, 331.

[17] Ibid., pp. 326–36. Davis suggests that "religious cultures" is rather similar in meaning to what William Christian, Jr., calls "local religion" or Carlo Ginzberg terms the "religion of the popular classes," both of whom have also rejected the term "popular religion." All these terms attempt to reintegrate the perception of basic social differences with the existence of underlying cultural unities, that is, to affirm and analyze *both* unity and diversity, and to assert sociocultural interaction and diffusion in all directions. See Davis, "From 'Popular Religion' to Religious Cultures," p. 322; and O'Neil, p. 222, in particular.

[18] The reasons for a focus on ritual in studies which are concerned to promote a specifically "cultural" analysis are explored elsewhere. See Catherine Bell, "Discourse and Dichotomies: The Structure of Ritual Theory," *Religion* 17, no. 2 (1987): 95–118.

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of elite and folk levels, while "popular religion" is now being used in a variety of ways. Sometimes various combinations and permutations of these terms have been employed with little rationale for their selection; at other times the choice of terms has expressed basic assumptions about Chinese religion.[19] Ultimately, these terms represent a fundamental debate about Chinese society and culture.

In an early challenge to the dichotomies of "elite/folk," "great/little," or "rational religion/superstitious supernaturalism" which constituted much of the framework of the first generation of scholarship on Chinese religion, C. K. Yang proposed an analysis of Chinese religion as having two aspects, "diffused" and "institutional."[20] Maurice Freedman's seminal reading of Yang's study focused attention on a major ramification of this new approach—that "elite culture and peasant culture were not two different things; they were versions of each other."[21] Freedman's own thesis held, in the face of the field's preponderant tendency to portray a fundamentally divided social system, that Chinese religion possessed both unity and difference, having "entered into the unity of a vast polity" at the same time that it was "an intrinsic part of a hierarchized society."[22] In contrast to the "tired intellectual world of the Great and Little Traditions," Freedman argued for a latent tradition of sociological analysis of underlying unities within Chinese culture. For example, he explained, the early Sinologist J. J. M. de Groot proposed an ethnographically based explanation "from the top down" to show how an elite form of religion degenerated into the observable crude features of peasant religion. Marcel Granet, on the other hand, from the armchair of textual materials and Durkheimian theory, argued "from the bottom up" to describe the development of elite religion from its peasant origins. According to Freedman, both de Groot and Granet recognized a basic unity of ideas within the diverse social hierarchy of Chinese society, even though they variously identified an elite or peasant source for these ideas. Yang's achievement, Freedman contended, was to ground this unity not in a historical source or a single social stratum, but in a common system

[19] For example, Evelyn S. Rawski's "Popular Religion in East Asia," *Peasant Studies Newsletter* 4, no. 4 (1975): 2–6, tended to use these terms interchangeably, although a slight nuance accompanying "popular religion" seems to emphasize symbolic dimensions over social ones. Barbara Ward, on the other hand, used terms that called attention to major social differences in "Varieties of the Conscious Model: The Fishermen of South China," in *The Relevance of Models for Social Anthropology,* ed. Michael Banton (New York, 1965), pp. 113–37.

[20] C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

[21] Maurice Freedman, "On the Sociological Study of Chinese Religion," in *The Study of Chinese Society: Essays by Maurice Freedman,* selected and introduced by G. William Skinner (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1979), p. 355. (This essay first appeared in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society,* ed. Arthur P. Wolf [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974], pp. 19–41.)

[22] Ibid., p. 353.

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of religious ideas nourished by a regular exchange of ideas and practices between the elite and peasant populations.[23]

Freedman's essay made explicit the relationship between terminological choices ("elite/folk" or "institutional/diffused," etc.) and the issue of a fundamental unity or diversity in Chinese culture. Indeed, his essay and the reactions to it suggest a larger argument concerning issues very similar to those which Davis engaged. That is, an initial bifurcation of society into distinct social levels (a first-stage position) is challenged by a focus on underlying unities variously transformed by different subgroups (a second-stage position). Reactions to Freedman's position not only reiterated perceptions of a "vast gulf between the religion of the elite and that of the peasantry" but they also provided several new formulations of the case for diversity. For example, it was argued that any unities among Chinese religious practices would be so abstract as to be meaningless, and it would be equally meaningless "to incorporate the local versions of Chinese peasant religion within a single tradition."[24] Others suggested that the question of fundamental unity or fundamental diversity was simply the result of method: textually based studies dealt with the dissemination of such universal values as those of Buddhism among local religions, while ethnographic field studies constantly confronted the heterogeneity of local traditions.[25] Yet it is interesting to note that in actual fact the "unity faction" is *not* represented only by text-based historians, nor is the "diversity faction" represented only by anthropologists. For example, the anthropologist Stanley Tambiah is an outspoken critic of the "two-level theory" of society. He suggests that such theories are "an invention of the anthropologist dictated not so much by the reality he studies as by his professional perspective."[26] Yet the historian Peter Brown is equally condemnatory of "two-tier" theories.[27] On the other hand, historians may be prone by the nature of their work to inherit or absorb dichotomies basic to the literate elite who left their texts for posterity, while anthropologists may be prone to absorbing the integrated worldview of a specific group. Thus, the terminological choices are not primarily dependent on one's major discipline. Instead, they more directly reflect the various perspectives on culture and religion seen in every discipline.

Both sides of the "unity/diversity" issue describe a particular role for religion. Yang and Freedman promoted religion as the source of the cultural unity which underlay a socially diverse civilization. According to Yang, "the essential function of religion was to provide a collective symbol that would

[23] Ibid., pp. 355–66.

[24] James L. Watson, "Review Article: Anthropological Analyses of Chinese Religion," *China Quarterly* 66 (June 1976): 358–59.

[25] This argument is discussed by Watson (ibid., p. 357), who cites articles by Arthur Wolf and Robert Smith in Wolf, ed., *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*.

[26] S. J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 371.

[27] Peter Brown, *The Cult of Saints* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 13–22.

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transcend the divergence of economic interests, class status, and social background, so as to make it possible to coalesce a large multitude into a community."[28] Freedman also assumed "that a country of China's extent and political cohesion would demonstrate a large measure of agreement on religious assumptions among all its people."[29] In contrast, arguments for the diversity of religious practices have tended to see religion as variously reflecting the social distinctions of its adherents, thereby emphasizing ethnic boundaries or differentiating social groups.[30] In this debate, confrontation between an "elite/folk" bifurcation on the one hand and a single unified religious tradition on the other was a conflict between those focused on the empirical data of local-level religious practices and those focused on more abstract unities expressed as symbols, underlying structures, or values. As noted above, historians and anthropologists could be found in both groups. In a typical second-stage position, that is, one emphasizing cultural unity, the term "popular religion" is used to indicate the very basis of this unity. Popular religion may be variously characterized as a set of fundamental values, traditional practices, and attitudes that span all classes or regions, or as a distinct set of social organizations that have come to mediate elite and peasant worldviews. In both characterizations, however, popular religion functions as the medium for the diffusion of common values to a variety of subgroups, each of which may appropriate them in distinctive ways. Hence, the development of the term "popular religion" in this second-stage argument involves the appreciation of a dynamic role for religion as a sociocultural system: religion does not merely reflect and reinforce social identities and cleavages, but it also acts as medium for unity above and across social boundaries. The implications of this approach for our understanding of religion are still being explored.

Although this characterization of a typical second-stage "unity" position links scholars who would regard each other as odd bedfellows, it does suggest how they as a group contrast with what is emerging as a third-stage position. While many studies of Chinese religion published in recent years adopt some form of Freedman's second-stage position, others have ventured into a position similar to that outlined in Davis's 1982 article. A third-stage approach to Chinese religion can be said to reject both a priori bifurcations as well as synthetic entities that mediate them (i.e., the reification of popular religion in a set of institutions, practices, or values). This third position wants to suggest that the holism of culture is not a shared level of social interaction nor a diffused set of normative ideas. Culture, it implies, is neither a single ideology or a single social group identity disseminated across the society to unite

[28] Yang, p. 81. In his article "Standardizing the Gods: The Promotion of T'ien Hou ('Empress of Heaven') along the South China Coast, 960–1960," James L. Watson cites this passage and presents an effective counterargument (in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China,* ed. David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985], p. 316).

[29] Freedman, p. 367.

[30] See Watson, "Review Article: Anthropological Analyses," pp. 356–61.

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diverse communities. Rather, culture is presumed to involve the internal generation of both distinctions and unities, and its holism is described as a function of either underlying structures of some sort or the imposed limits of geography as they moderate the degrees of similarity and difference. From this perspective, culture comes to be described as the relationship of the parts to the whole, the "production" of meanings, or the "construction" of history and community. Unity and diversity become intrinsic to the dynamics of cultural holism. Third-stage approaches do not isolate religious institutions—or religion per se—as the data of analysis; rather, they focus on symbols and rituals in which they see the dynamics of culture played out. Thus, this third-stage approach presupposes a particular perspective for the definition and understanding of religious phenomena and, correspondingly, implies a distinct theory of religion as a fully embedded cultural system.

III

Four of the five books to be discussed here address Taiwanese religion, and for very much the same reasons—as a rich and ethnographically accessible example of regional Chinese religion, Taiwan raises basic questions about unity and diversity. Hubert Seiwert's study of the Taiwanese folk tradition since the beginning of the Ch'ing dynasty (1644–1911) is particularly concerned to demonstrate its autonomy—that is, as distinct from Buddhism, Taoism, and the official state cult, and as more than a mere syncretic soup made up of these three.[31] To this end he describes the distinct organizations, specialists, ritual practices, temples, and deities, etc., of Taiwanese folk religion. In particular, he contributes very useful descriptions of temple finances, lay Buddhist vegetarian sects, and both official and unofficial aspects of the state cult. In defining *volksreligion,* however, he distinguishes it vis-à-vis institutional religion so as to conclude that folk religion is made up of those practices not based on a literary tradition.[32] While there have been objections to using the "absence of scriptures" to define the popular religious tradition, Seiwert's characterization is not without some validity in the Chinese case.[33] On the other hand, it echoes the distinction between higher Sanskritic Hinduism and lower popular Hinduism which Tambiah, for one, faults for the

[31] Hubert Seiwert, *Volksreligion und nationale Tradition in Taiwan: Studien zur regionalen Religionsgeschichte einer chinesischen Provinz* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1985).

[32] Ibid., p. 17.

[33] See Julian F. Pas's review of Seiwert's *Volksreligion* in *Journal of Chinese Religions,* no. 15 (Fall 1987), pp. 101–5. The role of texts in distinguishing traditions and levels of Taoist practice is explored in Kristofer Schipper, "The Written Memorial in Taoist Ceremonies," in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society,* ed. Arthur P. Wolf (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 309–24, and "Vernacular and Classical Ritual in Taoism," *Journal of Asian Studies* 45, no. 1 (November 1985): 21–51. Overmyer's work, to be discussed below, suggests a complementary view when he delineates popular religion in terms of the production of particular types of religious texts.

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same problem afflicting the distinction between great and little traditions—namely, there is no such actual demarcation of these levels of religion in any village, while there do exist many degrees of literacy and many forms of access to the textual teachings of the literary religious tradition.[34] Although Seiwert argues that the Taiwanese folk religious tradition is common to all levels of Chinese society, even while taking quite autonomous forms in distinct regional institutions, in the final analysis his approach is more concerned with a first-stage issue—specifically, the autonomy of a distinct folk tradition—than with a second-stage concern for how common values and practices are disseminated across social differences.[35]

David K. Jordan and Daniel L. Overmyer address Taiwanese sectarianism with explicit attention to both historical and ethnographical materials.[36] Their book provides an interesting contrast to Seiwert's, for despite similar methodological concerns to integrate the history of religions with ethnographic studies, expressed in the initial sections of both books, Jordan and Overmyer go on to develop a clear second-stage position. That is, they describe a popular religious tradition (sometimes called "popular culture") with its own institutions and history that mediates the transmission of values binding the larger culture together as a whole. Their specific focus is Chinese spirit-writing (*pai-luan*) sects, which they contrast with both village religion and the "great tradition" (elsewhere, the "central traditions of Chinese culture"). They find that spirit-writing is "a popular cultic form with antecedents, history, structure, and social embodiment, and as such it helps us

[34] Tambiah, pp. 367–73. Tambiah's book, which predates Freedman's essay on the sociology of Chinese religion, probably remains one of the earliest and most influential critiques of the limits of the first position in Asian studies, developing an argument that suggests a third-stage position more than a second-stage one. Another set of terms used to describe oral and local folk practices vis-à-vis more "universal" and elite textual traditions in Southeast Asian religion is "kammic" Buddhism vs. "nibbanic" Buddhism, variously used by Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: When a Great Tradition Modernizes* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); Winston L. King, *In the Hope of Nibbana: An Essay on Theravada Buddhist Ethics* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1964); and Donald K. Swearer, *Buddhism and Society in Southeast Asia* (Chambersburg, Pa.: Anima, 1981).

[35] Taking another type of first-stage approach, Stevan Harrell's study, "The Concept of the Soul in Chinese Folk Religion," *Journal of Asian Studies* 38, no. 3 (May 1979): 519–28, argues that "it is important to remember the basic difference between the religious perspectives of non-elite believers on the one hand and the assumptions of philosophers of religion and other specialists on the other. The perspective of the Confucian and Taoist traditions is analytical; reality must be explained. The perspective of folk religion, in contrast, is fundamentally *active;* believers experience religious reality directly through purposeful behavior, especially ritual. This difference has been posited by Eric Wolf as basic to all peasant societies, and is confirmed by my own research into the religious attitudes of Chinese folk believers in Taiwan" (p. 520). Likewise, Lewis R. Lancaster argues that the distinction between folk and great traditions "remains a real one" in "Elite and Folk: Comments on the Two-Tiered Theory," in *Religion and the Family in East Asia,* ed. George A. DeVos and Takao Sofue (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 87–95, esp. p. 88.

[36] David K. Jordan and Daniel L. Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986).

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realize afresh that popular culture too is intelligible and develops over time."[37] These groups are distinguished both by a deliberate syncretism that claims to transmit the distilled essence of the Chinese tradition and by the incorporation of aspects of the folk tradition that are independent of family, locality, and occupational group.[38] Thus, it is by means of middle-level religious organizations such as these sects that individuals, rather than the kin groups of village religion, have the means for "self-conscious popular participation" in activities traditionally associated with the elite levels of Chinese society.[39]

Jordan and Overmyer appear to accept a basic divide in Chinese social experience even as they identify an organized means by which this divide between "elite" and "folk" is closed—a mediating level, represented here by sectarian groups, where elite values are appropriated by lower social classes and folk values are integrated upward into new forms of social organization. That is, they see popular religion as embodied in specific forms of social organization.[40] Indeed, they suggest that there could be no larger unity of common values without such organizations. With a nod to Clifford Geertz, for example, the authors argue that the gap which arises between cultural values and social structure frequently means that many people have no way to pursue and appropriate the idealized values of the culture. Hence, the continued existence and dissemination of these values as common ones require such organizations, however unorthodox, to enable other segments of the society to appropriate these cultural ideals.[41] This is a very interesting and useful argument in itself.

Although they assume a first-stage emphasis on discontinuity in Chinese society while formulating a second-stage position in their concern with the sectarian groups as the hearers of common cultural values, Jordan and Overmyer also anticipate some elements intrinsic to a third-stage position—particularly, the internal dynamics by which groups differentiate themselves on some levels and establish strategic identifications on others. Two examples representing the particular interests of each author will suffice to indicate these dynamics. Overmyer, for example, illustrates the important role of text production in differentiating the spirit-writing sect from both village religion and other middle-level popular religious organizations. While the activities of text production generate differences in those directions, they create unities in another by disseminating the values associated with the text-producing elite and symbolically analogizing sectarian activities with elite activities.[42] Jordan

[37] Ibid., p. 13.
[38] Ibid., pp. 10–13.
[39] Ibid., pp. 8–10.
[40] Particularly interesting is the further evidence provided by Jordan and Overmyer (pp. 26–27, 100 ff.) that these religious cult organizations establish the networks used for political activities, a subject raised by Gary Seaman in *Temple Organization in a Chinese Village* (Taipei: Orient Cultural Service, 1978).
[41] Ibid., p. 10.
[42] Ibid., pp. 17–19, 79–81.

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describes a different sphere of differentiation and unification when he explores how these groups provide the opportunity for a variety of individuals with little in common to generate highly personalized interpretations of shared symbols.[43]

Popular Culture in Late Imperial China is a collection of individually excellent papers superbly edited by David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski.[44] It opens with a clear statement that the purpose of the volume is "to help bring the study of non-elite culture into the mainstream of academic discourse about China."[45] For the authors, popular culture does not simply point to the nonelite social classes, those people "beyond the boundaries of the ruling class," but, rather, it designates a culture or, more correctly, a variety of subcultures, elements of which are "shared" by all social groups in China. Thus, the volume posits an underlying unity to Chinese culture in the mid-sixteenth to early twentieth centuries, but it hesitates to determine of just what this unity consisted. Indeed, that is the question that animates the whole work. The preface describes the dilemma quite neatly: In the last few centuries of imperial rule, Chinese culture was "both extremely diverse and highly integrated." The diversity appears rather easy to understand as "an obvious function of China's great size" which gave rise to "many varieties of popular culture," that is, nonelite subcultures with regional, occupational, and educational differences of all kinds. Elite culture also contained "significant internal variations," and popular and elite cultures were in turn "very different from each other." Yet at the same time "these diverse elements were integrated into a single complex cultural system." The integration of this system and the commonality of certain elements within "the mental worlds of all Chinese" is much harder to understand.[46] To attempt to uncover and analyze this unity, the authors focus on the agents, mechanisms, and strategies involved in "the communication of values."[47]

Hence, at the outset *Popular Culture* affirms the validity of an elite/nonelite distinction, while tending to see the distinction as both a social and cultural one. At the same time it argues for elements common to all subcultures. Unlike the second-stage positions examined above, it is not clearly stated that these common elements themselves constituted a "system"—either as values, beliefs, or institutions. Rather, much evidence is presented to suggest that these common elements may be the result of heightened social interaction across the society as a whole during this period. Indeed, it is suggested that the elements of this unity as such can be shown to exist empirically only insofar as we can map their transformations and permutations in each social group and through each medium of communication. Individual papers in the volume, however, strain in various ways at this very

[43] Jordan and Overmyer, pp. 182–202, 267–76.
[44] Johnson, Nathan, and Rawski, eds. (n. 28 above).
[45] Ibid., p. ix.
[46] Ibid., pp. xi–xiii.
[47] Ibid., p. x.

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delicate characterization of the relationship of popular culture to a fundamental unity within Chinese culture.

Two introductory articles by Evelyn Rawski and David Johnson, respectively, attempt to lay out a framework for the volume as a whole. Rawski addresses the social, political, and economic aspects of this period in Chinese history, pointing out how the "culture" of the late Ming and early Ch'ing differed substantially from that of earlier periods by virtue of the "frames of reference" that their citizens shared to an unprecedented degree.[48] Hence, Rawski suggests that late imperial popular culture was radically shaped by the historical emergence of a cultural commonality made possible by new media of communication, the growing networks of a complex economy, and the social mobility of increased literacy and urbanization. Aside from the allusion to "shared frames of reference," however, Rawski does not specify exactly what comes to be held in common when the social and economic infrastructure of a society develops in these ways. Yet she depicts very well how this infrastructure makes it possible for nonelite cultures to become open to the influence of elite values and to the dissemination of their own.

Johnson's article approaches the question of unity among elite and nonelite subcultures by asking "how the structures of communication and dominance affected consciousness."[49] He constructs a chart of nine social groups and the distinctive consciousness or *mentalité* of each which specifies three levels of sociopolitical dominance (legally privileged, self-sufficient, and dependent) and three levels of education (classically educated, literate, and illiterate).[50] This chart does not simply fine-tune the rough polarities of elite and popular, or literate and nonliterate. It graphically demonstrates a gradation of social differentiation that makes transmission of cultural values across social groups not only viable but—and here Johnson anticipates a third-stage argument—intrinsic to the very differentiation of each group. Although Johnson prefers to speak of how social "structures" affected consciousness, rather than how socially structured *mentalités* reproduced social organizations, his general approach seems to imply that Chinese cultural unity can be seen as a particular relationship of parts: that is, social levels are differentiated and linked not by specific ideas of institutions, but through the internal dynamics by which each group defines itself vis-à-vis the others. Yet Johnson does not fully develop a third-stage position because he is not concerned to demonstrate how the axes of differentiation which he charts—dominance and education—are themselves culturally constructed. Hence, the chart acts as "artificial" typology which quite effectively suggests the true complexity of society and the importance of hitherto unrecognized groups and sensibilities.

The articles by Rawski and Johnson can be said to define a position that floats between the second-stage and third-stage positions on popular religion

[48] Ibid., p. 3.

[49] Ibid., p. 35.

[50] Johnson notes that ideally the chart would include a third axis to differentiate urban, rural, and linguistic regions (ibid., p. 56).

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described earlier. Both suggest that the underlying unity of Chinese culture must be explored in a historical framework, but they maintain that such unity is not a function of the emergence of a distinct ideology, social group, or set of institutions. Rather, cultural integration has much more to do with the heightened transmission of cultural ideas and the increased ability of various groups to appropriate them in ways that generate a complex orchestration of differences and commonalities. Thus, they want to avoid the second-stage tendency to reify cultural unity in particular ideas, groups, or institutions, and they thereby anticipate the types of third-stage argument suggested in Natalie Davis's approach to "religious cultures."

Yet both find it easier to specify how elite values came to dominate late imperial popular culture rather than how elements of nonelite values came to penetrate elite culture. Indeed, Johnson observes that this period is marked by "the extraordinary degree to which values and beliefs favorable to the ruling class permeated popular consciousness."[51] Rawski's data on the new means of communication and the social networks that derive from them as well as Johnson's data on the many degrees of literacy point to the roles new social organizations might play in the cultural integration of this period. Rawski and Johnson do not address how elite values themselves might have been affected by the new socioeconomic technologies and networks for their dissemination or by the fact that these values were shaping society as a variegated whole to an unprecedented degree. Hence, both writers have much in common with the second-stage argument that appreciates the cultural mediation of elite and popular groups in particular social formations.

Despite these concerns, or perhaps because of them, *Popular Culture* is both richly provocative and scrupulously nonreductive in its concern to explore cultural holism as more than the diffusion of a set of particular ideas or institutions to act as a common denominator across the diversities of class and region. Rather, it is suggested that any "system of thought, or a religious revelation, or any other creation of the human verbal imagination, spread[s] through Chinese society . . . [coming] to exist in a number of versions, each produced by or for an important social-cultural group." Only if we identify and study "all the versions of it that were produced" will we begin to see the significance of the commonalities that afford the opportunities for differentiation.[52]

Religion is significant in every essay in this volume, but four essays explicitly address popular religion as such. Judith A. Berling, for example,

[51] Ibid., p. 46.

[52] Ibid., pp. 71–72. In addition to this "third-stage" style of statement, in a final "postscript" concerning the ramifications of the argument advanced in the volume as a whole, Rawski emphasizes the importance of looking at religion, drama, and ritual in order to understand popular culture, a focus on symbolic activities that also characterizes third-stage approaches to religion and culture (pp. 408–12). The role of the media of social communication in shaping the messages transmitted through the culture is a recent and revolutionary insight into culture. Although Rawski and Johnson do not directly address it (several other articles do give it some attention), their analyses make clear the usefulness of pursuing this point.

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characterizes the distinctive religiosity of seventeenth-century local elites of Southeast China as expressions of "middle-level popular culture"; that is, they incorporated values that spanned the culture as a whole and yet emerged with a historically and regionally distinct identity.[53] Daniel L. Overmyer's look at the values extolled in sectarian "precious scrolls" (*pao-chüan*) also reveals how people "in the middle-level of learning and status, neither scholars on the one hand nor illiterate laborers and peasants on the other," could express distinctive and implicitly dissenting versions of the diffused orthodox value system.[54] Thus, both Berling and Overmyer suggest that new socioeconomic conditions were not just communicating traditional elite values more effectively, but they also facilitated the creation of new versions of these values that were more accessible in turn to nonelite groups.

Susan Naquin's article raises several interesting points: first, she demonstrates how new sectarian religions after the sixteenth century were adapted to a variety of social constituencies, producing an incredible diversity of practice and organization as well as great continuity—all within a "heterodox" tradition.[55] She considers this sectarian tradition to be a "popular religious institution" because it drew its membership primarily from "the people at large," rarely from the elite. But as heterodox institutions, they differed from more orthodox forms of popular religion by being less able to bridge "the gap between state and society."[56] Ultimately Naquin suggests a continuum of popular religious groups mediating state and society, differentiating themselves in a variety of ways, but most choosing to remain a realistic social option for a wide segment of the population.[57] Thus, Naquin identifies what we might call a sectarian "subculture," marked by both unities and diversities, which promoted its own distinct forms of social integration across the regional and class diversities of China. Naquin underscores her conclusion that this religious culture "was neither unchanging nor a confusing blend of miscellaneous practices. It was a living tradition, with systematic variations within it, one that responded to the times and to the changing nature of the communities where it found adherents."[58]

James L. Watson's analysis of the many interpretations of the goddess T'ien Hou is one of the richest in this volume.[59] Less concerned with any distinct middle level of culture, Watson focuses on the up and down transmission of T'ien Hou beliefs whereby elite written accounts reached downward and local oral tales penetrated upward. In doing so, he explicates a

[53] Judith A. Berling, "Religion and Popular Culture: The Management of Moral Capital in *The Romance of the Three Teachings,*" in Johnson, Nathan, and Rawski, eds. (n. 28 above), pp. 188–218.

[54] Daniel L. Overmyer, "Values in Chinese Sectarian Literature: Ming and Ch'ing *Pao-chüan,*" in Johnson, Nathan, and Rawski, eds., pp. 219–54, see esp. pp. 253–54.

[55] Susan Naquin, "The Transmission of White Lotus Sectarianism in Late Imperial China," in Johnson, Nathan, and Rawski, eds., pp. 255–91, esp. pp. 255–60.

[56] Ibid., p. 289.

[57] Ibid., pp. 289–90.

[58] Ibid., pp. 290–91. For a relevant definition of subculture, see Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).

[59] Watson, "Standardizing the Gods" (n. 28 above), pp. 292–324.

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major feature or vehicle of popular culture per se: the literati's "standardization of culture" by which local cults were forced to conform to nationally accepted models. One of the ways that the elite class did this was through the proliferation of written accounts of popular deities, since a written account, by virtue of the medium itself, tended to minimize the discrepancies of local color and emphasize more universal (or national) values.[60] Watson also describes a particular "genius" for cultural integration among Ming-Ch'ing policymakers whereby they never tried to legislate beliefs or the symbolic content of deities. Rather, by imposing a "structure" (as opposed to the content) of proper ritual forms, they allowed sufficient flexibility for people at all levels of society to appropriate a few symbols in highly meaningful ways.[61] Watson's observations on this point complement those of Jordan and Overmyer on the individual appropriation of symbols in Taiwanese sectarianism. In addition, Watson's regionally focused analysis, like that of Berling, suggests that cultural unity is not so simple as the transmission of particular values or practices that are appropriated by different social groups. Instead, Watson takes a third-stage perspective when he explores how these values and practices were "reproduced" in strategically changed ways, due either to the fundamental differences of perception and expression that accompany different regional and class interests or to various forms of political manipulation.[62]

As the title of his book indicates, Robert P. Weller is particularly concerned with unity and diversity in Chinese religion and culture, and his first chapter is a careful exploration of the issues involved, only some of which are raised here.[63] Weller begins by suggesting that Freedman's argument for the essential unity of Chinese culture simply dismissed diversity by reducing it to some underlying structural unity. He sympathetically cites opposing literature, yet he sides with neither the "diversity" faction nor the "unity" faction. He sets out instead to develop a "theory of culture" able to account for both differentiation and integration, that is, a third-stage argument. Like Natalie Davis, he focuses on ritual, a single ritual, the "ghost-feeding ceremony" (or Universal Salvation Festival, *Pho To*) as performed in a small township in Taiwan.[64]

Drawing on Edward Sapir, E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, and Antonio Gramsci, among others, Weller suggests that culture is not an entity

[60] Ibid., pp. 296–98.

[61] Ibid., p. 323.

[62] Watson's essay in Johnson, Nathan, and Rawski, eds., is an interesting development of his earlier critique of Freedman's notion of a unified Chinese religious system and his own interests in the structural aspects of cultural practices, both represented in the review article noted above (n. 24).

[63] Robert P. Weller, *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987).

[64] Stephen E. Teiser also focuses on this ceremony in his recent book, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988). Teiser is similarly concerned to portray the rite "as it appears at all levels of Chinese society," rather than consign it "to the amorphous lump of 'popular religion'" (p. 217).

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to be identified on some level of social organization or tracked as it diffuses across social classes; neither is it a preset "structure" or code that inheres in all aspects of social life. Inseparable from the activities that produce it, he argues, culture is the production of meanings within the "real constraints of both society and class."[65] He suggests two "styles" of producing meaning in the Chinese religious context: (*a*) through pragmatic, context-bound interpretations which are active and personal in nature, stressing the activities of gods and ghosts, and associated at one extreme with popular religion; and (*b*) through ideologized (institutional and systematic) interpretations, which tend to be passive and impersonal, stressing moral laws and psychological themes, and associated with state, monastic, or official religion at the other extreme.[66] Weller argues that the important questions no longer center on a fundamental unity or diversity in Chinese religion and culture but, rather, on which style of interpretation is used by which group, under what circumstances, and why. He explores these questions by analyzing interpretations of the ghost-feeding ritual from three viewpoints: the popular one, that of the specialist, and that of the elite. The ethnographic contribution of this parallel material is significant. Yet Weller's more formal conclusions tend to reiterate the familiar. For example, he finds (*a*) that the diversity and unity among interpretations depends upon the social relations of the groups involved, (*b*) that ideologized groups push for more impersonal and universalized interpretations, (*c*) that interpretation changes with changing social conditions, (*d*) that popular interpretation is not automatically opposed to elite, and (*e*) that pressures toward both unity and diversity render ideologies much more complex and flexible in practice than usually thought, etc. His less formalized results are more interesting, particularly his evidence of key ways in which people reproduce social distinctions and social unities by absorbing different understandings and producing transformed meanings. Most effective in this regard are his discussions of geomancy and the use of texts and oral tradition to control access to information.

Weller starts out with a radically different notion of culture, but it appears that in practice he may have confined it simply to a level of ideology without using it to address social structure as well. That is, he does not follow the circularity of cultural production to show not only how different groups produce different interpretations, but how the differences among these interpretations reproduce the differences among social groups. Weller appears to have taken social structures as a given, assuming three social levels or types (the peasant, the religious specialist, and the elite). Thus, the poles of an "elite/folk" framework are softened only slightly by the addition of the popular religious specialist, while the interpretations of each type often appear to be mere "projections" of the "realities" of social organization.[67]

[65] Ibid., pp. 5–6.

[66] Ibid., pp. 10–11.

[67] Although Weller's third entity, the popular religious specialist, is not presented as a distinct social embodiment of popular culture per se, as suggested, e.g., in the work of Overmyer and Naquin, this middle-level specialist does appear to mediate the other

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The last book to be examined here, P. Steven Sangren's *History and Magical Power in a Chinese Community,* is specifically concerned with this circularity of cultural production and with the importance of recognizing religion as more than a projection of social structure.[68] Sangren incorporates a rather different angle on culture, one promoted by G. William Skinner's distinctive approach to the unities and diversities of Chinese culture. Skinner has pioneered a type of systems-analysis method that spatially analyzes "regional systems" formed by nested social hierarchies and temporally analyzes the history of "development cycles" within these regional systems.[69] For Skinner, the holism of culture is a matter of the relationship among the parts; hence, culture implies the unities and diversities that identify groups and subgroups as parts of a whole. This is certainly the type of theory of culture that Johnson and Weller were also pursuing. Using it, Sangren, a former student of Skinner, undertakes a "revisionist reappraisal" of Chinese folk religion.[70] He wants to go beyond the standard first-stage position in which an "elite/folk" distinction bifurcates Chinese culture, as well as a second-stage position in which Chinese cultural unity is based on watering down the "great tradition" until it has disseminated throughout the society. To do this, he presents an agenda with three basic points. First, building on Skinner's theory of hierarchical regional systems in which the "standard marketing community" is the appropriate focus of study, Sangren establishes a fuller model of social unity by arguing that ritual organization is a system congruent with the economic and administrative systems laid out by Skinner and a necessary element in any analysis of the other two. Second, Sangren also demonstrates a basis for cultural unity. He does not look for it in a particular level of social interaction or in particular institutions that spread common values, nor in any set of widespread collective representations that are mere projections of social integration. Rather, he argues that the holism of Chinese culture lies in "a logic of symbolic relations that underlies manifest differences in social institutions across class, region and time," which he variously calls "structures of value," a unified set of cosmological assumptions, or "cultural logic."[71] Third and most important, Sangren wants to demonstrate the relationship between culture and social organization (i.e., between the unities noted above) by showing the dynamics by which social interaction reproduces both cultural value structures and the social institutions legitimated by these values.[72]

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extremes and thus reinforce an "elite/folk" dichotomy. In the end, Weller's three "types" are comparable to the more complex model provided by David Johnson's chart, discussed above (n. 50).

68 P. Steven Sangren, *History and Magical Power in a Chinese Community* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1987).

69 See G. William Skinner, ed., *The City in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1977), and "The Structure of Chinese History," *Journal of Asian Studies* 44, no. 2 (February 1985): 271–92.

70 Sangren, pp. 4–9, 49.

71 Ibid., p. 1.

72 The approach developed by Sangren echoes that of Tambiah (n. 26 above). Tambiah focuses on a "total field," "ritual complexes," and "traditional networks" in

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Sangren considers the holism of Chinese culture to be a matter of those dynamics that reproduce values, classes, and social organizations over time. He attempts to portray the operation of these dynamics by breaking "the whole" down into two analytic aspects—the synchronic or semiotic dimension of the symbols that embody these values (i.e., sphere of ritual) and the diachronic dimension of the historical processes of social interaction through which such cultural unities are constantly reproduced. In this way he will call attention to particular practices that produce both unity and diversity, such as the incorporation and legitimation of contradictory values. Indeed, as in Watson's analysis of T'ien Hou beliefs, Sangren takes practices associated with the Taiwanese goddess Ma-tsu to illustrate Freedman's formula that Chinese society allowed religious similarity to be expressed as though it were religious difference.[73] Yet when he attempts to give substance to Freedman's basic description of Chinese culture—that it is both unified and hierarchically diverse—in terms of the interaction of symbols and social organization, Sangren seems to conclude that the structural unity underlying the substantive differences is simply the principle of hierarchization.[74]

Sangren may be pulled in two directions by the models of culture proffered by second-stage and third-stage positions. Taking a second-stage position, he sees culture as the synchronic religious system, defined therein as distinct from the historical processes that shape social organization. Hence, the only basis for "unity" between them is an abstract "structure" of hierarchization. But when taking a third-stage approach, he also sees culture as the dialectical dynamic by which ideologies and social conditions produce each other, affording both differentiation and integration of various subgroups. As in other third-stage positions, ritual emerges as Sangren's major focus, but the conflict of models, evidenced in the sheer density of the discussion, also shapes his portrayal of ritual. On the one hand, ritual is "constitutive" of culture itself, the synthesis of magic and history that reproduces community, religious symbols, and the socialization of individuals (while suppressing consciousness of the arbitrariness of the order imposed); on the other hand, ritual is the synchronic dimension of fundamental values that is analyzed separately from the history of social organization.[75]

Sangren's book is probably the most ambitious and difficult of all those under review here, and it is no easy task to analyze his argument and his use of data. This is due in part to the dominating role of theory—issues are delineated as problems in the history of scholarship on Chinese culture as much as they are problems directly raised by the data themselves. Yet this

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order to explore specifically the historical and sociological "continuities and transformations" that distinguish groups in time and space. He finds that religion on any one level, such as the Thai village, is a "synchronic, ordered scheme of collective representations" that includes within it a hierarchical representation of larger religious frameworks such as "the grand Buddhist literary and historical tradition" (p. 2).

[73] Sangren, p. 133; on Ma-tsu, pp. 86–92, 120–26, etc.; Freedman (n. 21 above), p. 367. Unlike Weller, who began by rechallenging Freedman's thesis of unity, Sangren ends by trying to substantiate it.

[74] Sangren, pp. 14–17, 133–34, 143, 159–65, 216–25.

[75] Ibid., p. 230.

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feature of the work makes it of particular interest since *History and Magical Power* thereby recapitulates most of this tradition of scholarship and the issues that have defined it.

IV

Since Yang and Freedman, most students of Chinese religion have recognized that the polarization of religion into "elite" and "folk" levels replicates an indigenous Chinese viewpoint. "When an educated Chinese, writing about Chinese religion as though from the outside, says that a rational agnosticism characterizes the elite and an indiscriminate superstition the masses, he is in reality writing from the *inside* and expressing the elite's view of the difference between the two great layers of his society."[76] Thus, some scholars reject these categories as analytical tools, suggesting that they not only fail to explain anything, but as indigenous attitudes such categories themselves require explanation in any theory of Chinese culture and society. As noted above, Natalie Davis took this view when exhorting scholars to examine how such distinctions were made and used in specific periods to create a "whole" that ordered experience and supported the social order. In their various ways, the authors of these five books do just that, exploring how basic distinctions created "wholes" which constructed a social order, constituted history, and located individual and group experiences, etc. However, they simultaneously question the adequacy of these distinctions within a "professional perspective." Indeed, their self-conscious and flexible sense of the theoretical enterprise is one of the ways in which these studies suggest a fresh stage in the study of Chinese religion.

By calling attention to the terms "popular religion" and "popular culture," this review has attempted to explore the relationship of these terms to the issue of Chinese unity and diversity and to our theoretical models of culture and society. The identification of three typical positions has been merely a rudimentary means to introduce some preliminary assessment of the various ways in which these issues are defined and approached. Certainly, these three positions do not exhaust the possibilities, nor do they adequately represent the significant insights of each author pigeonholed by them. Moreover, while presenting these three positions as a sequence of arguments that emerged historically, there is no intent to attach any teleological significance to that sequence. The development of positions according to these three rough categories does suggest, however, that terminological rearrangements and arguments naturally differentiate themselves from preceding paradigms while retaining many basic assumptions. Certainly, the debate over culture, society, and history evidenced in these three positions is a longstanding one and not likely to be "resolved" through the hegemony of any one position or set of terms.[77]

[76] Freedman, p. 367. Freedman echoes Yang's discussion of the elite attitude that educated Chinese are not religious (Yang [n. 20 above], pp. 3–6).

[77] See Louis Schneider and Charles M. Bonjean, eds., *The Idea of Culture in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), esp. the article by

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Altogether these books clearly shift the landscape for studies of Chinese religion—not so radically as to lose sight of traditional monuments on the horizon, but sufficiently to call attention to new spheres and avenues of exploration. Most intriguing are several directions suggested by a clustering of attention or consensus. The first concerns culture and the identification of religious phenomena within it. Weller and Sangren are convincing in their concern for an approach to culture that goes beyond a model in which common values are disseminated to act as glue holding the parts together. Recasting their insights, an effective approach might consider culture as the production of parts in relation to other parts—that is, as the creation and recreation of distinctions and unities in social organization and religious ideology so as to form a variety of meaningful wholes for persons, specific groups, or an emerging national consciousness. This approach would appreciate the holism of culture where it actually exists, on the scale of a local community or a regional system or, by virtue of new networks and technologies, as a nation. Further theoretical work is needed to address the complexity of the dynamics of integration and differentiation without bifurcating them. For example, Freedman's perception of the "elite/folk" dichotomy as an indigenous one serving the interests and identity of the elite suggests that such categorization was a strategic means of simultaneously promoting integration within that social group and its differentiation from other groups expediently lumped together. This approach tends to see religious differences and similarities not as the result of social organization, but as a major type of social and cultural activity. Exploration of why certain differences or unities are produced through specifically religious activities promises to yield a much more dynamic understanding of the role of religion in Chinese culture.[78]

A second direction concerns Sangren's expansion of Skinner's regional-systems approach so as to include ritual organization. Certainly this focus suggests a more effective body of empirical data than a single ritual, the traditional village of ethnological fieldwork, or the abstract category of popular religion.[79] While Tambiah's work is also a model of regional analysis and useful in its appreciation of the local presence of a universalizing,

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James A. Boon, "Further Operations of Culture in Anthropology: A Synthesis of and for Debate," pp. 1–32. Also see Raymond Williams's history of these terms, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950,* rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983; first published 1958). Roy Wagner develops a particularly lucid third-stage position on culture in *The Invention of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

[78] Watson, e.g., discusses the role of religion as a medium for the differentiation of group (social and regional) identities ("Review Article: Anthropological Analyses" [n. 24 above], pp. 359–62). Jordan and Overmyer's discussion of symbols and texts also hints at the significance of religion in this regard. Weller's material on the interpretive differences that distinguish social groups would figure prominently in such work, as would Sangren's analysis of how practices such as pilgrimage both differentiate and unify within a regional network. Ultimately such an approach might analyze the emergence and use of the "elite/folk" dichotomy itself in Chinese culture and Chinese studies.

[79] As David Johnson himself notes (n. 50 above), his chart could be readily "grounded" in a regional systems approach (p. 70). Berling develops her regional

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literary tradition, such as Buddhism, Skinner's "nested" and "hierarchical" system based on the marketing community is ultimately more logical and encompassing.

A third direction lies in the historical questions explicitly raised by Rawski and Johnson, and implicitly suggested by Seiwert, Sangren, Overmyer, Berling, and others. Rawski and Johnson are particularly convincing in their concern to work out the empirical basis—that is, the socioeconomic forces and real networks of social interaction—for the historical emergence of a more embracing system of relationships whereby even the most local community came to experience itself as defined vis-à-vis a larger national whole. Their analyses suggest that a historical framework would encourage us to approach the characterization of "popular religion" or "popular culture" within particular historical limits and conditions. Two rather different studies are examples of this approach. For medieval Europe, Brian Stock has described the emergence in the eleventh and twelfth centuries of descriptive terms denoting a distinction between an elite and learned social stratum and an illiterate, oral, or "popular" social stratum.[80] The emergence of this consciousness at this particular time, he suggests, was due to the ways in which literacy was reshaping both the structures of belief and the nature of social relations. Not surprisingly, the distinction between "learned" and "popular" was not a fixed one since it functioned polemically to differentiate the "true" interpretations of the "erudite" from the "untrue" interpretations espoused or defended by another group. Stock finds that this polemical language was not content merely to differentiate literate from popular, but went on to describe the latter as the "popularization" or debasement of literate culture on the one hand, or as heretical and diabolical anti-truths on the other.[81] Discussing Chinese history, Tadao Sakai has attempted to document the emergence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of a consciousness of "popular culture" that cut across the distinctions of class, education, and occupation.[82] He describes the historical evolution of terms to express such a consciousness as well as the variety of social groups that both presumed and nurtured the assumptions of a popular culture. Both scholars approach "popular culture" as a historically defined phenomenon, as data, not as an analytical tool for interpreting historical materials.

James Boon has observed that as "a community of dialogue and debate," every academic discipline needs "a fruitful paradox." In the field of anthropology, this paradox is culture.[83] Historians of religions certainly have their

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approach further in conjunction with Tambiah's notion of a "religious field" in "Revisioning Chinese Religions: A Model of Religions in Context" (paper presented at the American Academy of Religion, Boston, December 7, 1987).

[80] Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 99–100.

[81] Ibid., p. 242.

[82] Tadao Sakai, *Dōkyō no sōgō teki kenkyū* (Tokyo: Kokusho kankōkai, 1977), pp. 370–93.

[83] Schneider and Bonjean, p. 1.

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own paradox. And although it is one of the qualities of a paradox that everyone has a different formulation of it, ours surely concerns the relationship of religion to culture, particularly the priority of one in understanding the other. For this reason, historians of religions working in all cultural areas will find the voices raised in these books on Chinese religion to be lively, relevant, and challenging contributions to the familiar—and unresolvable—conversation that engages and defines us.

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