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The Western Misconception of Chinese Religion : a Hong Kong example

JOËL THORAVAL

ANY Westerner interested in China has heard of the “three religions” of the Chinese world. Thus it is quite natural that he should be curious about the relative strengths of these three great currents. How many “Confucians” are there in China? How many “Taoists”? How many “Buddhists”? Before long he begins to suspect that, taken literally, this question is absurd. But unless he is a specialist it is difficult for him to understand why such an apparently simple question generates such confusing and contradictory answers. What follows is an attempt to clarify the problem by relating the artificial nature of this debate to its historical origins, then selecting a particularly clear example of misinterpretation in the shape of two censuses carried out in Hong Kong a century ago, and offering a simple model to show the difference in the status of religion in the Western and Chinese contexts. A concluding section looks into the reasons for the continued existence of this conundrum.

Terminology transfer

Western puzzlement at Chinese religion or religions is nothing new. It has been there since the time of the very first contacts with China. What is noteworthy is that this confusion still lingers on today - traces of it resurfacing here and there in the scholarly literature. Simple ignorance is not the cause but rather a more complex process: the imposition of European cultural categories from within Far Eastern cultures. The exportation of Western “ideas” is not what concerns us here. Clearly a Japanese or Chinese scholar faced with ideas which do not exist in his own culture has to fall back on neologisms to try to explain what “romanticism” or “socialism” or “democracy” means. More surprisingly, he might have to do the same for such basic notions as “culture”, “science”, “politics”, “economy”, “religion”, “philosophy”, etc. After all, despite the differences in the social systems, traditional cultures of the Far East have always had something identifiable as “politics” or “economics” or “religion”.

The difficulty lies in the fact that the components into which the cultural universe of these peoples was analysed reflected conceptual structures so different from Western ones that no Western translation could be found for them either. When the European intellectual universe thrust itself so brutally upon the Japanese and Chinese elites a little over a century ago, the effect was traumatic. Japan was the first to create in a remarkably short time, shortly after the Meiji period, coherent and complete sets of neologisms by means of which the essential features of Western schools of thought could be expressed in the native language. These conceptual arsenals were then progressively introduced into China at the end of the Qing dynasty. Today they constitute a major part of the vocabulary of modern Chinese and Japanese.

Some of these “terminology transfers” are well documented. The year of birth of the category “philosophy”, for instance, has been established at 1874 when Nishi Amane (whose contribution was considerable) imposed the use of the two-character term still used today (*tetsugaku* in Japanese; *zhexue* in Chinese)(1). Its itinerary can be followed, especially its entry into China, along with the debates which ensued in its wake (2).

For the purposes of this discussion, what is important is to acknowledge the fundamental importance of, and the insufficient weight given to, this crucial moment in Chinese intellectual history. It is fundamentally important in that it required the intellectuals of that time not only to understand the “new ideas” but to reconstruct in its entirety their own cultural universe using Western categories.

The random, historically obsolescent application of these categories has set off discussions, the artificial (but not insignificant) nature of which is often missed. For example: Is Confucianism a “philosophy” or a “religion”?

And the reason insufficient weight is given to this rupture is that these notions of European origin have, for several generations now, been part of the conceptual universe of Chinese and Japanese intellectuals, and are

TABLE 1: RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION IN HONG KONG - FINDINGS OF THE 1881 CENSUS

A. Religious denominations of the European and American resident population				B. Chinese population of Hong Kong and Kau-lung: religions			
				Victoria	Villages	Total	
Church of England	278	Baptist	7	Protestant	1081	84	1165
Roman Catholic	2108	Congregationalist	6	Roman Catholic	416	32	450
Protestant	361	Unitarian	1	Confucian (u-kau)	42546	3985	46531
Presbyterian	62	Calvinist	1	Laity (tsuk-ka)	32197	11644	43841
Episcopalian	9	Quaker	1	Taoist (sic)	106	77	183
Lutheran	75	Theist	1	Mohamedan	14	3	17
Independent	11	Universalist	1	Buddhist	6	9	15
Methodist	12	None	12	Jewish	6	-	6
Christian	18	Not stated	51	Malay	3	-	3
Jewish	22	Total	3040	Not stated	20479	772	21251
				Grand Total			113462

hardly ever contested. There is therefore nothing unusual in the fact that they are applied retrospectively to the native cultures or that the specificity of Chinese "philosophy" or the history of "the sciences" in Japan are considered subjects worthy of deliberation. What further complicates the debate is that by virtue of the universalisation of Western culture these concepts are, simultaneously, values: having a "philosophy" is something to be proud of, and few cultures in this day and age would admit to not having one. This attitude is perhaps inevitable and even justifiable (a common language is, after all, a good thing) but what must not be overlooked are the distortions to which it necessarily gives rise (3).

It is also in this context that the misunderstandings which Western interpretations of religion in China engender can be understood. What, in fact, is this word in Chinese which for a century has been used to translate our concept "religion"? It also is a neologism of Japanese origin (4) made up of two characters, *zong* and *jiao*. The first of these, regardless of its etymology, has several meanings today, signifying ancestor and by extension, descent group, but also sect or school to which a monk, for example, might belong. Thus a *Chan* (*Zen*) monk is an adherent of the *Chanzong* in Buddhism. The character denotes the notion of transmission through belonging, either natural, as in the case of descent from an ancestor, or spiritual, as in the case of a tradition of beliefs created by a master and passed on to his disciples. The second character means "teaching", thus the literal meaning of the neologism which translates the Western notion religion is roughly "sectarian teaching."

One of the advantages of this translation of the term *zongjiao* is that it highlights one of the most striking aspects of our Western religious universe in the eyes of oriental intellectuals - the existence of sects and churches the rival claims of which were communicated to them

by either missionaries or simple members. The other advantage is the contrast it suggests with the unique social status of religion in China. A study of two historical documents from Hong Kong will make this difference clear.

Hong Kong censuses unrevealing

Among the reports which have been laid before Hong Kong's Legislative Council are the findings, varying in detail, of the censuses which have been carried out from time to time over the years. Only two of them, for 1881 and 1911, provide information on the religious affiliations of the Chinese population (5).

The findings also cover the religious affiliations of the European population (6), but whereas the data for the non-Chinese population falls into well defined categories, the data for the native population is, in stark contrast, highly confusing and vague (tables 1 & 2).

The figures for the Chinese population can be easily compared by reference to the chart (fig. 1). It is not hard to imagine the puzzlement of the colonial administrator as he looked at the findings of the 1881 census. It would have been no surprise to him that nearly one half of the population called themselves "Confucians" (*u-kau* is the Cantonese pronunciation of *rujiao*), but what about the fact that over a third called themselves laity (*tsuk-ka* i.e. *sujia*)? How could a sociological category represent a religious affiliation? Furthermore, if China really was the country of "three religions", why was the proportion of "Taoists" and "Buddhists" so small - the latter were even less numerous than the Muslims? Significant also is the fact that nearly one-fifth could not, or did not want to give a reply.

Confusion is further compounded by the findings of the 1911 census when "Confucians" represented nearly three-quarters of the native population. What might explain this increase? There was also a new category -

the “animists” - suggesting that more than one quarter of the population were adherents of a “primitive” form of religion. There was no sign of the “laity” component and while the “Buddhists” now outnumbered the “Taoists”, together they represented less than one percent of the

total population.

These baffling discrepancies are probably the reason why items on the religious affiliations of the Colony’s Chinese population were no longer included in censuses after 1911.

TABLE 2: RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION IN HONG KONG - FINDINGS OF THE 1911 CENSUS

A. Religions of British, European, American and Portuguese Population

	Males	Females	Total
Agnostic	43	9	52
Atheist	2	-	2
Baptist	24	20	44
Christian (sect non stated)	30	14	44
Christian Science	9	10	19
Church of England	1,112	894	2,006
Church of Ireland	1	2	3
Church of Scotland	17	7	24
Congregationalist	33	21	54
Dutch Reformed Church	-	3	3
Evangelical	8	2	10
Free Thinker	9	-	9
French Liberal	1	-	1
Greek Church	8	8	16
Hebrew	136	95	231
Independent Chapel	1	-	1
Lutheran	139	70	209
Methodist	26	32	58
Nonconformist	6	-	6
Pentecostal	1	1	2
Plymouth Brethren	3	2	5
Presbyterian	316	79	395
Protestant	270	122	392
Quaker	1	1	2
Roman Catholic	1,603	1,901	3,505
Spiritualist	1	-	1
Unitarian	2	2	4
Universalist	1	-	1
Wesleyan	70	55	125
Non stated	238	282	520
Total	4,111	3,632	7,743

B. Religions of the Chinese Population of the Colony

	Males	Females	Total
Confucian	207,622	90,605	298,227
Animist	70,442	58,816	129,258
Buddhist	1,210	1,754	2,954
Taoist	378	599	977
Church of England	1,482	1,810	3,292
Roman Catholic	1,115	1,550	2,666
Mahomedan	115	135	250
Not stated	912	327	1,239
Total	283,276	155,597	438,873

Western Religion, Chinese religion

Most introductory works on religion in China are of little help in explaining the reason for this distortion in the way Chinese religious practices are perceived. A common approach is to give a historical overview of the origins of Chinese religion as it emerges from inscriptions and archeological evidence. Sometimes a chapter is given over to basic notions common to the Chinese world, such as *yin*, *yang*, *dao*. Then comes a history of the development of State “Confucianism”, the introduction of Buddhism and its different sects, the emergence of a Taoist “church” and so on. But what is usually missing is any understanding of how these different religious practices coexist in Chinese society. How do they relate to each other at the local and national level (7)?

The deliberately simple, elementary model proposed here is concerned only with the social structure of communities of believers and not the nature of their beliefs or practices. It makes no claim to provide the definitive explanation of the Chinese religious universe. What it does do is to show how communities of believers in the Western and Chinese contexts are structured in a fundamentally different way (fig. 2).

The term “the West” is of course used to mean the modern Western world. The word religion is of ancient origin, but the concept “religion” is modern. The etymology of the Latin word *religio* has been the subject of debate since Roman times (Benveniste) but denotes primarily the religious feeling experienced by an individual in communion with the divine or, for some authorities, with coreligionists. But the actual concept of “religion”, denoting a reality which can be observed sociologically, has only existed since modern times. Our purpose here is not to compare the West and China “in general” but the situation prevailing a century ago when “modern” Westerners came face to face with a “traditional” Chinese universe, in the vaguest sense of the term.

The model highlights the distinction between the status of the laity and religious professionals. In the familiar Western world the section of the population which claims a religion can be divided into different communities or churches. Each community has its own priests, its own places of worship, its own credo and its own rites. And there is no cross-membership - exceptional circumstances apart, a Methodist will not seek out an Anglican minister, a Catholic will not attend a Lutheran service, a Baptist will not read a Catholic bible, and a Christian will not go to a synagogue, and so on. Each community is composed of the faithful and the specialists (priests, ministers, rabbis) who are at their service alone.

The situation in China is quite different. It is essential to distinguish the “lay” community from the various specialists to whom they might turn at one time or another (8). The size of the community may vary - it may be a local one or a national one - as may its nature: it may be a relational one, with members bound by family ties, by lineage, by clan or by name; or a territorial one, based on the village or group of villages or district etc.; or occupational, with members belonging to the same merchants’ guild; or an ethnic or regional one (*tong xianghui*). But in every case these communities share one thing in common - they practise their beliefs without the participation of religious professionals. In the ancestral cults of families and lineages, those officiating are members of the kinship group, seniority being the only criterion for performing the ceremonies. In the same way, in villages it is the inhabitants themselves who celebrate the ordinary cult of the territorial gods, in particular the Earth God. Temples of fishing communities placed under the protection of the goddess Tianhou (Cant. Tin Hau) or Matzu, as is often the case in Hong Kong, are without priests - they serve as a community hall for the village for both sacred and non-sacred activities. Merchants attached to a guild perform their own, very simple, ceremonies for the cult of their patron god.

This autonomy in matters of ritual is well attested and strikes European eyes as utterly different from their own practices. But it is relative; for certain specific events the community turns to religious specialists from outside. These events may be important rites of passage, catastrophes of one kind or another, or the periodic elimination of evil influences and the renewal of pledges made with the gods and the cosmic order when what Westerners call the great “Taoist rituals” (*jiao, zhai*) are enacted. So when the need arises the community invites a specialist - a Buddhist monk when someone has died, a Taoist master to exorcise a particularly malevolent demon, or a woman *shaman* (in Hong Kong cant. *man-mai-po*) to reestablish contact with an ancestor - and pays them for their specific services.

It is important to understand that the community is, in principle, undivided in relation to the various and distinct worlds of the religious specialists, who alone can be distinguished from one another in terms of their different doctrines and rituals, although these differences are less marked than in the West. Normally a celestial Master would have no professional dealings with a Zen Buddhist monk and would disparage the practices of minor village exorcists; in turn, their writings, practices and way of life would not normally be affected by some old Confucian specialist of lineage rituals or state ceremonies. The community united in its customs thus stands in contrast to the fragmented universe of the specialists who alone can be categorised by sect and school (9).

This situation explains why, for example, the numer-

ous Chinese Muslim communities (Hui) cannot by definition coexist in the same village with members of the Han community, despite the fact that they have been completely sinicised since the Ming dynasty. They cannot incorporate into their own practices the collective rituals which bring together the whole community in unanimous celebration of the earth gods, or participate in the obligatory banquet which follows. In Chinese eyes they seem to follow a “Western” structure, like the other religions of the Book, in that they are an exclusive community composed of simple followers and religious specialists (*ahong*) (fig. 2).

In the light of these differences it is perhaps easier to understand what informed the Sino-Japanese translation of the Western concept of religion. Every Western society can thus be divided up into separate and mutually exclusive religious groupings, something which in the Far East can only be done, and then only partially, in relation to the community of individuals who, by profession or vocation, are masters and practitioners of a particular brand of religious knowledge. The majority of the population are quite happy to go about their lives without categorising themselves as members of such and such a “sect”. The master who comes into a village to conduct a ritual can rightfully claim to be a Taoist (*daoshi*), but not the villagers who call on his services. They practice a “popular” religion which they would have difficulty giving a name to, calling on the specialists of the three great “teachings” when the need makes itself felt.

In other words, the neologism “sectarian teaching”, which translates the Western term “religion”, is applied in the West to society-wide categories which in the East only have meaning in relation to the restricted community of the masters of wisdom and ritual. Thus in understanding what the average European represented, the Chinese had to describe him in terms of characteristics which in their own world can only be applied to a priestly minority.

Hence the confusion in the census findings: while it was possible to show which percentage of the non-Chinese population belonged to which religious subgroup, in the Chinese community this could only be done for the specialist population of religious masters and not for the community as a whole.

An interpretation of Hong Kong censuses

A closer look at the findings for the Chinese population of Hong Kong, applying the simple model discussed above, may throw some light on what happened.

1. “Confucians” includes more than just scholars, with the majority of the population calling themselves by this name because of their own regular and frequent practice of ancestor worship, either domestic or collective, celebrating family and clan virtues (10).
2. Those who called themselves members of the “laity”

in 1881 understood the question "what is your religion?" as applying to the specialists only and thus replied "we are just ordinary villagers, just profane people (*sujia*), as we are neither monks, nor Taoist masters, nor geomancers..."

3. The small percentage of "Buddhists" and "Taoists" can be explained by the fact that only the specialists, such as monks and *daoshi*, would claim this affiliation, as probably would also individuals who had made a special study of one of these "teachings" for their own personal salvation (cf. note 8).

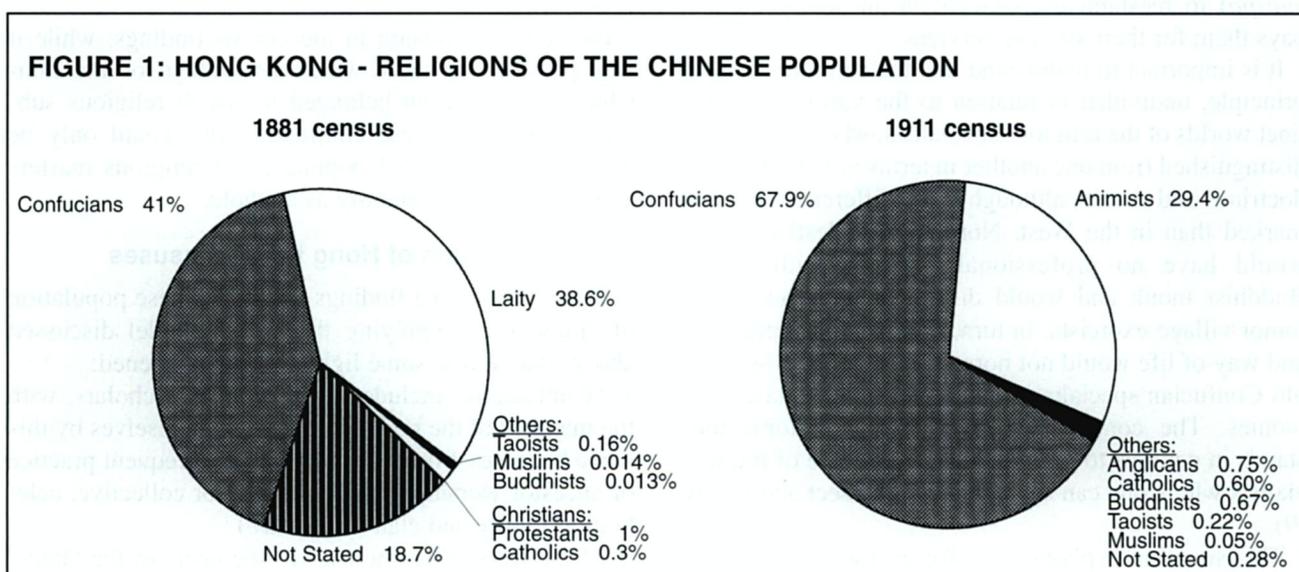
Underlining the irrelevance of the Western survey is the fact that individuals could have chosen several of the options available without contradicting themselves, e.g. "not stated" (I do not understand what you mean by the question); "Confucian" (Yes, I practise the virtues of filial piety etc.); "Laity" (No, I am not a priest); and even "Taoist" (Yes, the "great rituals" are regularly enacted in my community").

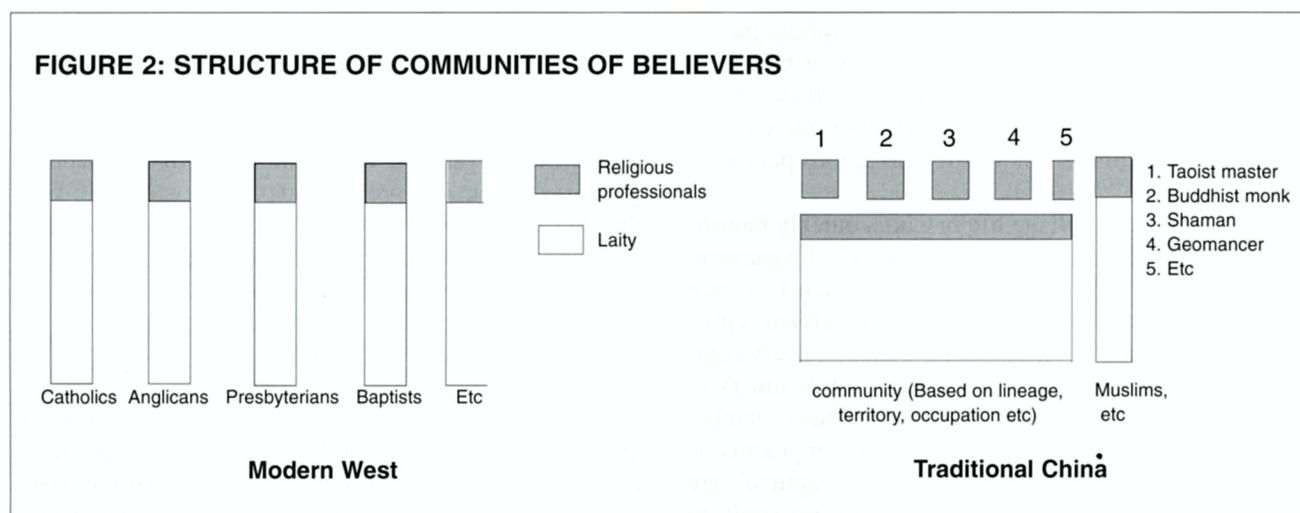
Interestingly, the second census represents in some ways a step backwards compared to the first one, which for all its naivety did show some awareness of the highly problematic - and fundamental - specialist/non-specialist distinction. By adding a new category - "animism" - it makes things even less clear than they were before. It introduces a category which distorts the facts on the ground by classifying those who previously belonged to a purely sociological category, i.e. laity, into what looks like a religious category. Covered by this catch-all imaginary "religion" are no doubt such disparate and distinct practices as the cult of the Earth God, exorcism rituals, ceremonies relating to the New Year and so on. It adds to the general confusion by suggesting that there exists another established religion which is both distinct from, and more primitive than, the other "teachings", when in fact the practices subsumed under this category are sociologically "contemporaneous".

Animism is a concept which goes back to Tylor and one which was extensively adopted by colonial administrations, especially in Africa, to describe cults which had nothing in common but their apparent "primitivism"(11)..

Another interesting point which emerges from closer scrutiny of the findings is that the proportion of individuals calling themselves "Confucians" is greater among the Chinese population living in Hong Kong's Victoria town (43.9%), most of whom were recent arrivals, than among the inhabitants of villages (23.9%). It would be misleading to conclude from this that the urban population was more "Confucian" than the rural population, nor is it possible to make a correlation between educational levels and the replies of the two populations, as in most cases they are from the same modest background (12).

A questionnaire of this kind, created and applied by a Western government, could not provide a "snapshot" of the Chinese reality - by its very existence it elicited specific kinds of behaviour. One explanation for this is that as the Chinese universe found itself under ever greater scrutiny from the West it tended to defend itself by reference to Confucianism, perceived as a source of family values and principles of social behaviour and as such, a doctrine which the dominant Western society, which was both Christian and rationalist, could the most readily accept. For colonial society, organised as it was into well defined churches, the organisation of Chinese religion could not but appear rudimentary; and as it belonged to a technical and scientific civilisation, colonial society could feel nothing but disdain for the beliefs and practices of the traditional Chinese community. Once exposed to this scrutiny, Chinese religious life dressed itself up as an ethical code or philosophy ("Confucianism"). But this strategy left everything else untouched - the everyday religious practices, which were





then either covered up, or denied any status or belittled as nothing more than concessions which had to be made to traditional “customs”. Chinese “religion” effectively disappeared, leaving nothing behind but something called wisdom and a ragbag of “superstitions”. The dividing line between the two was sufficiently vague to allow the colonial administration to describe its native population as consisting of a majority of followers of Confucius and a minority of “animist” devotees of magical and superstitious practices.

It is this extremist interpretation of Chinese religion which makes the topic so worthy of study - the imposition of a Western interpretative schema not only distorted the object of study; it made it, to all intents and purposes, invisible or indecipherable.

Shared illusions

The consequences of this Western misconception of Chinese religion are considerable, and are still present today despite the considerably greater contact between the two worlds. Two examples, one from ordinary everyday discourse and one from the official discourse of ideological and political bodies, illustrate this statement.

The *idées reçues* and stereotypes common to any discussion of the religious conceptions and practices of the Chinese can be seen as natural consequence of this truncated understanding of the nature of the phenomenon. Their force lies in the fact that they are shared not only by Westerners but by most Chinese as well.

The “pragmatism” which supposedly characterizes the religious attitude of the Chinese has its source in two illusions which, for the sake of argument, can be labelled “the illusion of eclecticism” and “the illusion of scepticism”. The illusion of eclecticism stems from a sense of bafflement at the apparent profusion of doctrines in the Chinese world - the plural nature of “the three teachings” sits ill with the unitary, exclusive nature of religious belief and affiliation in the Western universe. A Chinese is perceived as eclectic and pragmatic because he appar-

ently enjoys the possibility of choosing between different and sometimes incompatible teachings. But this is to fail to recognise, or to under-estimate, the unitary nature and coherence of popular religion, which exists as a common core of representations and practices on to which are grafted the specialist teachings. The common core remains hidden because it is “anonymous” in the eyes of the observer, in the sense of the term as it is used by Karl Polanyi when he remarks that the notion “economy”, as the term is used today, was “anonymous” in Aristotle’s philosophy - there is no concept identifying “popular religion” as a distinct reality. The designations and labels can only apply to the specific teachings of the masters of wisdom and ritual: Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism. What is commonly called “popular religion” has no doctrinal name. As the terms Buddhist or Taoist cannot be applied, perhaps “Chinese religion” is the least unacceptable label. This is a set of beliefs and rituals to which the individual gains access at birth as a member of a community, defined, for example, by lineage, by residence in a village, or by occupation. The set of these communities taken together constitute the universe of the Chinese in contrast to non-Chinese. Taken to its logical conclusion this suggests that it would not have been absurd for an individual to reply “Chinese” to the question in the British questionnaire asking him to identify his religion.

The eclectic illusion is based on an erroneous belief that all the various specialised teachings are common to everyone in the community, as though the community followed the Western model. But the villagers do not choose between exclusive, and competing religions: they remain primarily faithful to the “popular” beliefs and practices, the general coherence of which should not be underestimated.

The sceptical illusion is a natural extension of this first misconception. If Chinese are seen as simply choosing as it suits them among competing teachings, it follows that the strength and sincerity of their religious sentiment

has to be questioned. How else can one explain, but by their lack of commitment to any one set of beliefs in particular, the apparent ease with which they switch from one religion to another, depending on the circumstances? "The Chinese is not really a religious person"... (13).

But experience of village life in China quickly banishes any notion that the Chinese villager's investment, spiritual and financial, in the sacred is much less than that of his European equivalent, if the comparison is possible in the first place. After all, one cannot naively compare what is an ideal in the West, such as a missionary or a convert, with the reality in China, the ordinary member of a village or lineage. Where modern urban practice is concerned, the terms "pragmatic" and "sceptical" are perhaps not inappropriate but could probably apply in equal measure to European cities and Chinese cities, pending evidence to the contrary.

Chinese "pragmatism" is thus, in many respects, a fiction created by the unthinking adoption of Western categories. Why are these ideas still so pervasive? If they are the product of Western ignorance about religious practices in China, why have they not faded away as they come into contact with the realities of the Chinese situation? The simple explanation is that there is no native Chinese discourse to contest, with a more convincing interpretation, what they affirm to be the case.

The stereotypes about Chinese pragmatism are, as has already been stated, no longer unique to Westerners - they are part of the conventional wisdom in China itself. The naive Westerner who hopes to discuss the topic with his Chinese counterparts no longer finds his interpretation contested or criticised - instead their comments confirm his preconceived notions. The Chinese have taken over both the categories and the discourse and use them for the benefit of Westerners to proclaim the facts about religious attitudes in China.

Traditional values and practices have not disappeared from view beyond the mental horizon of today's Chinese, far from it - but in the deliberations of intellectuals and in cultivated discourse generally, they can now only be perceived through "Western" eyes. Organising an exchange of views between Western and Chinese intellectuals to bring this distortion into the open is no longer sufficient, because almost everyone shares the same basic notions. What is needed instead is a complete break with the dominant, and universally accepted, discourse and a new research effort into the concepts and practices, which are currently marginalised, of "popular religion".

The role of political discourse

The second reason this Western misinterpretation is still making itself felt is perhaps of more consequence than the first: not only has a large part of the Chinese population appropriated the Western model, but the ideology of

the political powers themselves has been profoundly influenced by it in the course of the century. This official appropriation of the Western paradigm was already apparent under the Nationalists (KMT) but it was only during the 40 years of Communist rule that it made its greatest impact. The process was a three-step one: first, the Western misinterpretation of Chinese religion; secondly, the adoption by the Chinese elite of the Western model; and finally, the desire on the part of that fraction of the elites which had become Nationalist or Communist to make the Chinese reality conform to the model.

In this respect the religious policy of the Communist government is exemplary. It distinguishes between "true" and "false" religions, with the first being allowed to survive under surveillance and the second marked down for extinction. On the one hand the followers of the various teachings are organised into national associations, such as the Buddhist Association and the Taoist Association. On the other hand every effort is made to deny the existence of, or repress as "superstitions", the vast universe of "popular" beliefs and practices.

The strategy is clear - the Chinese reality is forcibly made to conform to the Western paradigm. Firstly, beliefs are homogenised and the mutually exclusive nature of religious affiliations accentuated - one is now either a Buddhist or a Taoist. "Popular religion" is not an option - it is "anonymous" in the eyes of authority and does not exist except in perverted form as a "superstition". Secondly, the specialists and the laity professing the same beliefs are brought together within the same well-defined organisation to put an end to the traditional, fundamental structure - in which communities enjoyed relative autonomy in the enactment of rituals, and religious specialists played a restricted, complementary role. Thirdly, the authorities encourage the setting up of hierarchical and centralised organisations.

When the modern concept of "religion" was introduced into China as it came into contact with the West, it was understood to mean "sectarian teaching". Now it would seem that the religious policy of the Communist authorities could be described as an attempt at the "sectarianisation" of Chinese beliefs, following the Western model.

As 19th century European culture bequeathed Marxism-Leninism, it is hardly surprising that the model accepted by the Chinese government is so similar to the model which informed the census surveys carried out a century ago in the British colony of Hong Kong. The colonial government's "animist" believer is not very different from the Communist government's "superstitious" believer.

In a telling irony the Communist bureaucrat, for all his patriotic and nationalist intentions, has become the heir to the colonial administrator - in his hands the misinterpretation not only lives on but is given practical effect as

well. Through him, a Western fiction has become a Chinese fact.

But an end is in sight to this strange exercise in self-denial. The 15 years of reform and liberalisation which followed the Maoist period have seen a re-emergence of religious practices in the countryside, where they are increasingly observed; the towns will follow soon. Clearly one of the features of the next century will be the development of a new version of the "sacred" which will draw on the symbols and values of ancient practices, but ones profoundly transformed by the needs of modern society.

Along with this change, a growing number of Chinese specialists and intellectuals are looking afresh at the specific characteristics of popular religion (14) and the problems associated with its adaptation to modern society (15). And having denied its existence for so long, the authorities themselves will inevitably have to accept, in the fullness of time, some kind of uneasy *modus vivendi* with this unexpectedly powerful and pervasive phenomenon. But if they are to exert any degree of supervision over these practices by legal means, an essential precondition of such action is that they first of all recognise the existence of what they seek to control, encourage research into it and allow ordered discussion of it in what will be an autonomous space within a more pluralist society.

In this way the stranglehold exerted on Chinese thought by a misconception of Western origin will gradually loosen as the Chinese finally, after so long, rediscover and reconstruct the historical context of what happened in all its complexity, randomness, and traumatic impact. ■

1. cf. Havens, Thomas R.H., *Nishi Amane and Modern Japanese Thought*, 1970, Princeton University Press, X, 253p.

2. The problem of "philosophy" in China is the subject of an upcoming article in *China Perspectives*.

3. Not only are these historical origins forgotten by Chinese intellectuals, they also repress the Japanese prehistory of their own debates, for linguistic and ideological reasons: the two languages use the same characters, and the infatuation of the first modern Chinese intellectuals with Japan was soon masked by anti-Japanese sentiment when the former mentor turned into an aggressor.

4. This combination of characters can be found in classical Chinese but not with the meaning given to the modern concept discussed here.

5. Hong Kong Government notification no.204, 1881, tab. No. 7; Papers laid before the Legislative Council of Hong Kong, 1911, 103, p.42.

6. Figures for the Indian population (for the most part, in the army and the police) are recorded separately.

7. An outstanding exception is the classic, and still relevant, work by C. K. Yang - *Religion in Chinese Society*, 1960, University of California Press, viii-473 pp.

8. Obviously the modern Western term "lay" is used here for convenience - it is not totally appropriate in the context of traditional China where the borderline between "religious" and "non-religious" is defined differently; cf. Liang shuming, *Liang Shuming quanji*, (Jinan: Shandong renmin chubanshe, 19910, IV, 361-2.

9. The wider cross-hatching at the top of the rectangle representing the

"lay" community (right-hand diagram) serves as a reminder of another aspect of Chinese religious practice not examined here, namely, that the purpose of the practices referred to was the prosperity of the community as a whole. However there were always the few individuals who sought their own personal salvation through a more intensive study of one of the "three teachings". Their degree of isolation from the community varied, Taoist hermits, and scholars, for example, who had withdrawn from society, representing the most extreme cases. But they were a minority - the majority are described by the model. Messianic religious sects are not dealt with here either. Confucianism itself merits a separate study. As a rich and diverse tradition it manifested itself in a variety of quite distinct social roles. In its sociological dimension it is a "state religion" at the centre of imperial society - the individual celebrating the official cult was not a "professional" in the sense that a Buddhist monk or a Taoist master was; the magistrate performed the rites *ex officio* as leader of the political community, whether at the local district level (*xian*) or "national", in the capital. The various sacrifices for which he was responsible, such as those to the city gods, to Heaven, to the Letters, were part of his official duties. As political and religious structures were fused the mandarin could be considered as a full member of the community represented by the large rectangle in the diagram, as can now the eldest member in a lineage or the head of a village - he is not a specialist who comes from outside the group for which he is responsible. At the local level a village community may sometimes call upon a "Confucian" from outside and pay him for his services. An example of this practice is provided by the habitants of Danxian, in the north-west of Hainan province, studied by the author. Apart from the Taoist master there was also an individual called the *xianshengba*, with whom he sometimes collaborated and sometimes competed. He was the specialist in social rituals (*lijiao*) and a master scribe whose services were used from time to time for religious or semi-religious ceremonies. In the model he would be among the specialists, along with the geomancer and the exorcist.

10. As the Chinese empire was still in existence at this time, there was still an awareness, even in British colonial society, of the political dimension of Confucianism as a body of rituals legitimising the ancient imperial order.

11. A more charitable interpretation would be to see in this a first attempt to define so-called "popular" Chinese religion. Some support for this interpretation can be found among the practices unique to southern China; for example, the fact that the Earth God can be represented by a natural object, especially a rock, as in Hong Kong, instead of a human figure. But as a category which discriminates between different groups of people, i.e. "animists" as opposed to "Taoists", it is confusing. However, to be fair, the term is used by the most authoritative Western specialist of the end of the last century (J.J.M De Groot, *The Religious System of China*, 1892-1910.)

12. Moreover, in traditional China the distinction between written culture/oral culture does not correlate with the opposition town/country - one explanation for this is the institution of lineage, particularly strong in southern China (Hong Kong included), which provided villages with small schools, usually in ancestral temples, where members of the lineage, or at least the luckier ones, were introduced to the rudiments of the written culture.

13. This illusion is reinforced by a scholarly (and debatable) interpretation of Confucianism by means of which popular culture has been, wrongly, represented: the "sceptical humanism" of the "Chinese spirit" is seen as an extrapolation of Confucius' own reserve ("I respect the Gods, and keep them at a distance").

14. Ma Xisha and Han Bingfang, *Zhongguo minjian zongjiao shi*, 1992, Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1453 p.

15. See, for example, He Guangfu, "Zhongguo zongjiao gaige lungang", *Dongfang*, 1994, pp. 4, 4-11.