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No. 8/ 1996

## **Strange Notes on Modern Statistics and Traditional Popular Religion in China:**

### **Further Reflections On the Importance of Sinology For Social Science As Applied On China**

by

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#### **1. Translating Symbols and Handling Data**

This short note argues that there are some astonishing similarities between the organization and management of national statistics in contemporary China and the ways how the state dealt with popular religion in Imperial China. The note builds upon a more general and longer paper devoted to reflections about the importance of social and economic history for the application of modern social science in the context of modern Chinese studies (Herrmann-Pillath, 1995a). In recent times there is a strong trend towards the substitution of sinology as a philological discipline in the broad sense (or, a hermeneutical in the narrow sense) by "Modern Chinese Studies" based on the application of social sciences on China. In Germany, the movement affects, for instance, the distribution of funds and the structural changes of departments for Chinese studies.

The intellectual legitimacy of these changes is provided by the assumption that there is a stock of knowledge about societies in general which can be applied on certain data that can be defined and compiled independently from those general research tools (for a related discussion in Asian studies, see e.g. Buck, 1991). However, the question can be raised whether such kind of a clear distinction between data and analytical instruments can be upheld in the majority of the cases. I would like to discuss this question by comparing two completely different realms of social phenomena, i.e. religion and statistics. The latter is, of course, the paramount example of drawing a neat line between data and instruments: If certain conventions are followed how to define,

how to gather and how to organize data, the economist's analytical toolbox can be used all over the world and at any point of time without essential modification. Seemingly, there is no dependence of data on the theories applied, sometimes going as far as simply putting even theories aside in order to detect pure causal relationships within a certain set of data (e.g. Granger-causality tests) (but see Hoover, 1993).

The case of traditional religion in Imperial China is just at the opposite of this kind of positivistic reasoning. In order to understand the meaning of certain religious symbols one cannot simply rely on a set of universal rules governing the construction of data about religious behavior. Instead, we have to use theory already when taking our first steps toward understanding the symbols, albeit of a different kind as the economist's theories. If we want to understand single symbols of religion as data we cannot but rely on a full-fledged interpretive theory about the whole universe of symbols because there is no "objective" reference of those data independent from the context of the entire system of religious ideas. That is to say, we cannot first understand single symbols and then go ahead with gathering additional "data" in order to construct that symbolic universe as an empirical phenomenon. We need to develop a general idea about a certain religion, namely, an interpretive theory, already before and during the accumulation of additional empirical knowledge about that religion. This is, basically speaking, Quine's problem of the indeterminacy of translation, and the way how to deal with it (see Gochet, 1984, chpt. four).

Hence we realize that there seems to be a substantial difference between the data used by economic theorizing and the data used by sinology: In the first case there is no need for translation and therefore no need for putting the meaning of the data into the framework of a complete symbolic system which is constructed by the sinologist's interpretive theory. Philological knowledge features a strong interaction between the observer's theories about the meaning of the symbols and concepts of another culture. The symbols themselves cannot be treated as something objective like economic data.

However, at a closer look the situation is not as easy for economics. Most data in economics which are used to prove certain theories implicitly depend on the application of certain theories already when defining the data or more general empirical phenomena (see Lind, 1993). Aside from very simple quantitative data like statistics on population most economic data either presuppose a certain interpretive stance (like interpreting GDP as indicator for welfare) or even take a full-fledged economic theory already for granted (for example, interpreting aggregate factor incomes as being determined by marginal productivities in order to do growth accounting presupposes neoclassical theory). Most economists do not treat those methodological prerequisites openly, suggesting that their data reflect reality in a direct way (see the actual relevance of the problem of growth accounting in East Asia, Krugman, 1994). Hence at a second

look there seems to be a closer methodological relationship between philology and general theory than generally accepted (however, see Stegmüller, 1979). In the case of economics this affinity can be even stronger because many economic theories are partly determined by certain views of the world which belong to the "ideographic" realm (Gudeman, 1986).

In the case of statistics this possibly closer relationship comes to the fore in a different context, too. Statistical data are not simply manna from heaven but have to be gathered and organized by human beings. The data presuppose the existence of a complex system of norms and institutions which govern the behavior of the people who actually do the statistical work. Therefore the question should be raised whether there can be an interaction between certain cultural determinants of human behavior and the activity of doing statistics. If this is the case, we could argue that data are not simply objective data but that data feature certain characteristics which are not universal but which are context-dependent with reference to the society within which they are processed.

In that regard the problem of data would come very close to the problem how to understand symbols in other areas of social life. For if there are certain general cultural determinants of using symbols and applying rules there could emerge a common pattern of behavior in superficially unrelated special fields of symbolic behavior (for a theoretical foundation, see Herrmann-Pillath, 1993, 1994). For instance, the two activities of using data as symbols which are processed within certain administrative structures and of handling religious ideas as symbols disseminated within a certain polity may feature certain family similarities because both kinds of human action take place within the same political culture. If this political culture does not change too much within a certain historical period we could even venture the hypothesis that such family similarities can be observed between unrelated areas of social action in different times.

Let us substantiate this presumption by analyzing traditional popular religion in China and modern statistics. In both areas we observe a certain tension between the society interpreting symbols autonomously and the state imposing certain rules how to interpret and how to use symbols. Therefore we observe an interaction between structures of power and the use of symbols in society. Our hypothesis results to be that the constancy of certain structures of power is reflected in certain family similarities of using symbols in both realms. We try to lend support to this hypothesis by short sketches of the relevant areas in isolation and then comparing both observations. Our conclusion will make the methodological point that even in the case of allegedly "objective" data there is a strong need of basing the interpretation of those data on sinology as philology.

## **2. Statistics in Contemporary China: The Challenge of Imposing Discipline on Administrative Behavior**

One of the most intriguing observations on modern statistics in China is the fact of the very strong interaction between sociopolitical change and statistical work. Since 1949 the Chinese state has faced enormous difficulties in building a reliable statistical system (the story is told by Yue Wei et al., 1990). The devastating results of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution are well known, leading to a complete detachment of political action from economic reality. Since 1978 most observers would agree that the state has been successful in developing a modern statistical system and the respective institutions and organizations, thereby considerably enhancing the capability of the government to survey and to control the economic process (Naughton, 1992).

Notwithstanding there are still many problems with statistics which became more serious during the recent years. The rapid changes in Chinese society pose a challenge to statistical work: For example, the mere growth of the number of autonomous economic organizations altered the dimensions of the statistical task tremendously. Statistical work presupposes a certain level of organizational capability of the state: The state should be able to get access to the relevant information, to control its accuracy and to impose sanctions on deviant behavior.

This is a general problem of any statistical system. In the development of the Western states statistics was closely linked with the rise of the nation and in particular, in the 20th century, with the world-wide wars (see Abramovitz, 1989, chpt. one). Governments needed to know about the comparative economic potential of their nations and they had to control the use of resources in order to maximize the input into their war-machines. Without this immense pressure on Western societies the empirical foundations for applying economics on macroeconomic phenomena would never have been built. From the viewpoint of economic theory, this is evident because complying with the tiresome demands of governments for statistical figures means providing a public good which sometimes (as in the case of taxation) even runs against private interest. Therefore, the development of the statistical system is part and parcel of Western state-building like the tax system or the police. So it deserves the same attention in comparative studies which try to assess the relative position of Chinese state building (like Mann, 1987, or Cohen, 1988).

In 1994 and 1995 the Chinese government has faced and is facing considerable problems in statistical work. In many reports published in the Chinese press we could read about fake figures and misreporting by local governments (e.g. Zhongguo tongji,

No. 11, 1994, pp. 10ff., *Ya Tai jingji shibao*, 8 December 1994). Some people have begun to argue that the degree of data falsification has reached a level where serious problems for policy analysis on part of the Central government emerge (FBIS-CHI-95-123, 27 June 1995, p. 36f.). Delegates of the 1995 NPC meeting have been quoted with statements that faking and even fabrication of figures is a widespread problem ("shifen pubian, shifen yanzhong", in *Zhongguo tongji*, May 1995, p. 9f., compare also FBIS-CHI-95-119, 21 June 1995, pp. 44f.). Some people have begun to compare the situation with the times of the Great Leap Forward. During the recent survey on the state of the statistical system more than 70.000 cases of deviant behavior in statistical work have been uncovered (FBIS-CHI-95-043, 6 March 1995). Therefore, there is now a close link between the campaigns and investigation against corrupt cadres and the tough government measures against deviance in the statistical system.

Of course, we cannot know the real extent of the problem. But judging from the many examples quoted by the Chinese reports cases of data fabrication can be of a Potemkin kind, meaning that, for instance output is outrightly inflated by 100-200%. The problem is particularly serious in the area of rural industries where estimates hint at a "water content" ("shui fen") in output figures of between 30-40%. Whether any of the reported cases is representative or not remains difficult to assess (e.g. FBIS-CHI-95-054, 21 March 1995).

Notwithstanding, the Central Statistical Bureau argues that Chinese statistics are still reliable (*South China Morning Post*, 21 January 1995). The crucial argument supporting this optimistic view refers to the fact that the most important statistical indicators like price indices, grain production or urban average incomes are no longer inferred from the data handled by the respective government departments on different levels of the administrative hierarchy. Instead, today the State Statistical Bureau relies on a system of representative samples which are investigated into by the Bureau itself, without any direct participation and hence interference by local governments (see the statement in *Zhongguo tongji*, May 1995, pp. 11ff.). The results of those direct surveys are used to correct the data provided by other institutions: For example, the 1994 governmental data on the growth of industrial production resulted to indicate a growth rate of 27% whereas the samples of the Statistical Bureau only indicated a growth rate of 18% which was eventually published by the Bureau.

It is still too early to assess the final success of the efforts on part of the State Statistical Bureau since so far the scope of the sampling techniques is limited and the organizational support in certain areas is still weak (for instance, independent research teams on industry are just being established).

All the reports on deviance from administrative regulations on statistics refer to the behavior of local governments and dependent statistical organizations. Thus the new

approach by the State Statistical Bureau may also be seen as an indicator of the serious problems of coordination and of conflicts between the local and the central level, which now simply should be circumvented by getting direct access to local information. That is to say, the issue at stake is not only related to the challenge of gathering data within the context of a rapidly changing economy of a developing country. The deteriorating quality of statistics is caused by outrightly deviant behavior of the people in charge of that work who distort information in spite of being able to do better.

Since 1949 statistics in China is part and parcel of her political economy. In recent times two different aspects of statistics seem to have contributed to the problems just mentioned, which have also been important in former decades. First, reports about the results of economic development are an important yardstick for assessing the work of local cadres. Second, at the same time manipulation of figures can be a useful weapon for the protection of local interests against higher-level governments. Although both factors seem to work in a different direction, the first fostering compliance with Central demands, the second deviance, the final result is a strong inclination of lower-level cadres to manipulate the statistical data and breaking Central rules. In 1994 the Central government even had to rely on the practice of sending work teams all over the country in order to check and sanction local cadres dealing with statistics. The national investigation on the implementation of statistical regulations produced a somewhat awkward picture in particular of the situation in the rural areas (Zhongguo tongji, December 1995, pp. 19ff.; FBIS-CHI-95-061, 30 March 1995): For example, villages produced output figures for companies which did not even exist. There is now the saying that "statistics raise cadres, and cadres raise statistics" ("shuzi sheng guan, guan sheng shuzi").

But why is this possible at all, given the fact of tight control in other areas of the polity? There seems to be something more involved because there is another source of statistical inaccuracy which is somewhat legitimate. As a matter of fact, statistical rules and regulations can be applied with considerable local leeway. Many readers of the State Statistical Yearbook may have hit upon the small note that the procedures of National Income statistics might differ between the Central and the provincial level (e.g. Zhongguo tongji nianjian 1993, p. 40, no longer noted in the most recent 1994 edition). Indeed, the Chinese statistical system is built along the same lines as the general administrative structure of the People's Republic, meaning that there is a systematic distinction between imperative authority ("lingdao guanxi") and professional authority ("yewu guanxi") within a generalized "dual track" approach to political-administrative leadership (see Ma Hong et al., 1986, pp. 58ff.).

Since January 1984 statistical work has to follow the "Law on Statistics" ("Zhongguo renmin gongheguo tongji fa") as well as a parallel resolution by the State Council

released on January 6, 1984 ("Guanyu jiaqiang tongji gongzuo de jue ding") (cf. Yue Wei et al., 1990, pp. 97-101). According to those regulations statistical work should be highly centralized ("shixing tongyi lingdao, fenji fuze de tongji guanli xitong"). The "Resolution" even announced that from that time on personnel on the county level and above will be organized by the State Council and that all basic administrative expenses will be born by the State Planning Commission. Yet, on the other hand the local Statistical Bureaus continue to be parts of the local government organization and, in most cases, to be the executive institutions. That means that they should obey to central regulations on statistical work but at the same time should pay respect to local conditions (compare explicitly Chen Dong/Niu Zhili, 1990, pp. 1300f., and Wei Yue et al., 1990, pp. 118ff.). Therefore, independently from the unified legal framework the administrative system is still one of dual leadership ("shuang zhong de lingdao tizhi"). One of the quoted surveys explicitly assigns the administrative leadership ("xingzheng shang de lingdao") to the respective local governments and the professional ("yewu shang") leadership to the upper-level Statistical Bureaus.

Hence the Central Bureau of Statistics has no full-fledged imperative authority over all the organizational copies of its organization on the different levels of government, and the same is true for the relation between provincial statistical bureaus and the counties. We find a similar pattern of organizational replication without hierarchical integration as in most other areas of the Chinese political and economic system (compare Potter/Potter, 1990, pp. 143ff., and my analysis of inflation and the financial and fiscal system in Herrmann-Pillath, 1991). Hierarchical authority focuses on certain procedural rules and formal patterns of administrative design but does not encompass the whole organization, in particular the way how the administrative rules have to be applied under certain circumstances, i.e. the application of conditional rules.

How far this may lead becomes obvious in extreme examples like the almost crazy figures on provincial urbanization in the provincial statistical yearbooks (see Herrmann-Pillath, 1995b, p. 26, and table 1-5). There are sometimes pronounced changes of the urbanization rates from one year to another as well as incredibly high figures for poor provinces like Anhui and Guizhou. The observations give rise to the question whether the category makes sense at all. Since the mid-eighties, when urbanization rates were manipulated by local governments for the first time the national statistical administration is not capable of implementing general and binding rules outside the scope of the national census (cf. Chan, 1994; Wu, 1994).

In this case obviously there are systematic differences in interpreting the unified rules between the provincial statistical bureaus. But there may be many other examples where we simply cannot realize whether rules are applied differently because on the surface no difference can be discerned. For instance, data on investment might refer to



many different special categories in different provinces. That is to say, we need to distinguish clearly between the formal aspects of defining and systematicizing kinds of statistical data in China and the reference of the data which is established by the statistical work on the different levels of the administration.

If we try to get out of the mess by using leading handbooks for Chinese statistics, we are disappointed. Nobody seems to know how the rules are applied exactly. In official publications there is no clear cut information even about the normative formal framework, not to speak of implementation. Most important and highly sensitive figures like the Consumer Price Index and hence the inflation rate are simply left in a cloud of indeterminateness (South China Morning Post, 18 March 1995). We do not know how this index is constructed and how the different statistical organizations of the provinces deal with the regulations and definitions. Although the general procedures give the impression of a comprehensive and accurate methodology (Zhongguo tongji, May 1995, pp. 30f.), on the other hand the sheer quantity of goods included in the reference basket of goods (more than 1500) raises doubts whether such a complex system can be handled in the Chinese setting. Perhaps such an almost perfect system of price measurement overstretches the administrative capabilities of the statistical system by far.

Taking both topics together which we have considered so far, namely deviant behavior and procedural fuzziness, we might conclude that the overall quality of Chinese statistics is still in doubt. This is in stark contrast with the increasing availability of data from China and moreover, with the convenience how they are presented to the Western observer (with, for instance, the Statistical Yearbook of China now being edited bilingually). To put it bluntly, there is now a nice surface but still a deep and troubled water. Many Chinese economists finally agree if doubts are raised regarding the quality of data. But nobody is able to assess the severity of mistakes which finally occur on the aggregate level. Sometimes people simply adopt the view that mistakes in the average will cancel each other.

If we try to put these insights in positive terms we conclude that resulting from different reasons modern Chinese statistics reveals a high degree of structure and complexity but a very low degree of semantic definitiveness. That means, categories and definitions are well developed but the real interpretation of content is highly variable. The latter observation refers to the local level in particular. Therefore we can characterize the symbolic system of statistics in China as featuring a formally homogeneous syntax on the national level but a localized semantics.

Since we cannot but discern this difference by analyzing single cases on the local level we are not able to assess the aggregate situation. Within one statistical category on the national level many different referents can be lumped together. Of course, this

amounts to the simple insight that aggregate figures in China maybe meaningless unless they are produced by one single national organization which imposes certain procedural rules upon all of its members, and unless its members are able to apply those rules in a uniform way all over the country. This is precisely done by the State Statistical Bureau since a couple of years. But we still need to wait for the final result. Meanwhile we might venture the hypothesis that the cleavage between formal rules and semantic reference may have some deeper reasons. We could interpret our observations in terms of the problem of state-building and emerging state-society relationships during modernization. We could refer to theories of administrative behavior and political culture. Or we could indulge in some strange comparative reflections.

### **3. Traditional Religion and Localized Belief Systems**

The reader familiar with some aspects of traditional popular religion in China will immediately realize that the last summarizing description of the modern statistical system fits remarkably well into our growing knowledge about the relation between state and popular religion in Imperial China. Basically speaking, the Chinese state tried to impose structure on folk rituals but at the same time left a very broad range of actual interpretation. Evelyn Rawski (1990, p. 97) put it into the following statement:

"(...) the essential ambiguity of Chinese symbols reflects the state's emphasis on standardization of structure, but not of content. Cultural integration took place on the level of formal ritual, but there was no doctrinal unification. The Empress of Heaven was popular precisely because she could mean different things to different people."

In a well-known parlance, there was no orthodoxy but orthopraxy (on those concepts see Schmidt-Glitzner, 1983). Conformity and deviance were not defined according to inward subjective beliefs but outward behavioral performance. In popular religion this difference became visible in the widespread use of certain religious symbols, gods and ghosts all over China which at the same time was (and still is) linked with a myriad of different stories and interpretations of those symbols, in particular regarding local differences of story-telling. Those differences go back on a long history of diffusion and metamorphosis of meanings of certain symbols which nevertheless have retained their formal identity. The formal stability of use provides means of identification throughout space and time while at the same time even the most basic features of meaning could be changed. For instance, in contemporary Taiwan the Earth God (Tudi gong) has now assumed the role of a family-centered protective God whereas in former times the Earth God was closely related with the territorial unit (neighborhood, village etc.) (see

Pennarz, 1992, pp. 67ff.). But this fundamental change does not affect the outward appearance of that God. Beliefs seem to be virtually independent from the use of symbols.

Conventionally, the distinction between orthopraxy and orthodoxy refers to the interpretation of Chinese religion and worldview exclusively, in particular regarding Max Weber's analysis of the relationship between Confucianism and other so-called Chinese religions in terms of a possible tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. But if we recast the argument simply into the more general statement that there was a distinctively Chinese way how to handle important symbols in social life we might be able to draw far-reaching comparisons between distant areas of social life. The only common aspect needs to be the basic distinction between formal features of certain symbols (e.g. material structure of temples) and semantic reference, e.g. meaning. Going ahead from that baseline, we can even compare traditional religion and modern statistics in China.

The Imperial state invested a lot of effort into the symbolic integration of China in the field of popular religion although on the other hand there was no encompassing church which would have been capable to impose one belief system onto the people (a useful introduction into popular religion is offered in Eastman, 1988, chpt. three). In comparison to the Christian parish the religious communities of China were highly fragmented although there was a remarkable formal similarity of symbols all over the empire, for instance regarding the identification of a territory as community by means of the Earth God just mentioned and the artistic features of the temples. But whereas the Christian priest indeed was an instrument of the Church for implementing actual changes of people's behavior and beliefs (for the case of kinship rules and behavior, see Goody, 1983), the Chinese state stopped at a certain line and left the actual organization of the temples and rituals to the laymen. This attitude, of course, provided the basis for the local variety of meanings.

The decisive causes of the fragmentation and fuzziness of popular religion were first, the indeterminateness of meaning of the core symbols, and second, the essential openness of certain rituals.

Regarding the former we can tell the story of many traditional Gods which referred to very different ideas during the times and at different places with interpretations diffusing between the regions of the empire (Watson, 1985). This semantic variety was possible although during the last millenium the Confucian state constantly tried to integrate the myriads of local gods into the bureaucratic heaven of the state cult. In periods of a strong autocratic rule like the early Ming this amounted to administrative procedures of standardizing Gods and temples and convoking the territorial Gods from all over the Empire in order to give them Imperial blessing (for a survey see Wang Yi, 1994). Hence

the religious practitioners all over China regarded many Gods as being part and parcel of a supernatural copy of this-worldly government, or even simply as two aspects of the same cosmic bureaucracy (Duara's, 1988, pp. 132ff. expression). However, those administrative procedures did not impose a more than diffuse and general meaning of the symbols which therefore could be interpreted fairly differently by the people, and the State had to focus its efforts towards standardization on single Gods in order to achieve a near-monopolization of meaning, as in the case of the Confucianization of the Guandi myths under the Qing (ibid., pp. 139-148).

Regarding the second cause of fragmentation, orthopraxy e.g. in death ritual did only mould certain parts of the ritual, leaving other parts completely unaffected which could diverge widely in the empire (Watson, 1990). The funeral ritual was highly homogeneous all over the country probably because, amongst others, funeral rites were closely connected with the ritual of inheritance which in turn is linked with basic notions of kinship. Mourning and inheritance were only two sides of the same coin of organizing the sequence of generations and were therefore in the center of attention during the process of confucianizing Chinese society since the Neoconfucian revival (Ebrey, 1991). However, the burial rites were fragmented to a large and conflicting degree such that sharp subethnic differences in behavior were displayed. Burial rites had an important practical significance, too, since territorial claims were asserted by the distribution of gravesites, so that the high degree of variety cannot be explained by insignificance of that part of the death ritual. Hence, the two parts of the death ritual were not systematically linked within one single, overarching belief system because the different parts could be at variance with each other without affecting the outward unity, for instance, of ancestor worship.

As is well known, a similar variety did occur in other areas of religious and social behavior, too (see Liang Zhiping, 1994). For instance, the Confucian state tried to impose one set of marriage and kinship rules onto society but finally did only succeed in regulating certain areas and leaving others unaffected. Hence there was a considerably regional and temporal variety, for instance, regarding the relationship between married daughters and their natal families. But such a variety did not mean that there was not a certain baseline on which every Chinese would agree as being a reliable indicator of "Chineseness" even in the very flexible field of traditional religion (Freedman, 1979). This baseline is the common reference to a certain basic set of formal distinctions between symbols.

Where did these limits to standardization of meaning and ritual come from? Many people will be inclined to refer to the state of economic development and hence the infrastructural constraints for the Imperial State which seemingly could not invest the administrative resources in order to achieve a complete monopoly of meaning e.g. by

means of the village compact ("xiang yue"). This argument has been made, amongst others, by Ray Huang (1988) with his point about the final failure of establishing an "arithmetic" system of rule after the Song dynasty. But in Europe the Church was able to standardize marriage rules and belief systems to a remarkable degree long before the West attained a level of economic development surpassing that of China. In general, the trend of standardization in Europe seems to be completely independent from the level of economic development. Instead, the crucial difference between Europe and China seems to lie in the relevant structures of power, like, for instance, the absence of a competing system of different loci of power in China (compare Bünger, 1987) and certain cultural principles of ordering the relationship between power and knowledge (called "core principles" in Hallpike's, 1986, comparison between Chinese and Indo-European societies).

Our contention now results to be that a crucial aspect of those structures of power refers to the ways how the authority to give meaning to symbols is shared between local communities and the ruler, and how this authority over meaning determines the allocation of other sources of power like the use of violence.

Max Weber pointed out that Daoism, which belongs to the intellectual roots of popular religion, is implicitly heretic and counterbalances Confucian orthodoxy. However, this interpretation simply transfers the European structures of power into traditional Chinese society where the conflict between orthodoxy and heterodoxy was not the main issue. Indeed, a larger part of Daoist doctrines and symbols of popular religion was fully integrated into the spiritual mirror of the social structures of power which the Confucians developed vigorously since the Song dynasty (Ge Zhaoguang, 1994). Just because content was not as important as form the state was flexible enough to draw many possibly heterodox symbols into the official symbolic cosmos, reflected in the bureaucracy of Gods and Ghosts and the Confucian pantheon. But this also meant that heterodoxy was integrated into orthopraxy in an essential way. Just as the state was able to reinvent the meaning of symbols in order to get them under orthopractical control, this interpretive force could also serve heterodox ambitions. To overemphasise a bit, the same symbol could be used by both sides in order to express their beliefs. As long as this conflict was not linked with real clashes of interest both meanings could coexist, giving rise to the much quoted "tolerance" of Chinese religion, which however, has its limits in the unity of ritual behavior.

This kind of a potential heterodox orthopraxy is often neglected by descriptions of Chinese religion, which might be also explained by the fact that most field studies have been realized in Taiwan. There indeed the government succeeded in controlling most possibly heterodox aspects of traditional religion in order to integrate it into a national cultural system which at the the same time reflects bureaucratic integration (see

Pennarz, 1992, esp. pp. 138ff., and Chun, 1994). However, as Feuchtwang's (1992) careful attempt at reinterpretation has been able to demonstrate, even this standardization of formal structure (e.g. regulating the days of religious feasts) did not succeed in monopolizing meaning. To put a complex story in simple terms, even the cosmic bureaucracy can be interpreted in a heterodox way because any God who is invoked to give protection against demons may herself attain a demonic nature (*ibid.*, p. 51, 56ff.). Feuchtwang argues that this essential ambiguity is reflected in the two views of the hierarchy of Gods either as a civil bureaucracy or as a military order (along the old *wen/wu* distinction). The successful use of violence against demons implies demonic power, and precisely because the heavenly bureaucracy includes means for the identification of territorial units and other groups, this kind of demonic violence could also be seated in the community as distinguished from the "Others", possibly including even the physical power of the representatives of the ruler (*ibid.*, p. 73ff., 198). And indeed, Gods like the Tudi Gong have their firm roots in the cosmic bureaucracy as well as in the tradition of religious mass movement closely related to Daoism (see Schipper, 1977).

Such kind of a complete reversal of meaning is implicit in Daoist ritual where the priest as an individual is believed to be able to identify with the Jade Emperor, which implies that a member of the local group could reach close to the upper spheres of Heaven, even beyond the top of worldly power (Feuchtwang, 1992, pp. 165-179. In this sense we could indeed speak of heterodoxy but should immediately refrain from doing so because as a matter of fact the underlying values and most fundamental beliefs were not conflicting ones. This is why one could even argue (as Ge Zhaoguang, 1994, does) that the Daoist value system is by no means in contradiction with the Confucian one. Yet, those values are to a large extent formal variables, like the virtue of loyalty: Depending on actual reference, loyalty may be devoted to the real Emperor and his bureaucracy or to the local community and its militia (compare again Feuchtwang, 1992, pp. 160ff.).

So we may understand Chinese popular religion to a large extent as a means for regulating the use of violence within a certain structure of power, where the actual use of violence is regulated by the adoption of the authority to give meaning to a certain set of shared symbols. Of paramount importance is the relation between locality and center. The shared set of symbols provides the base for cultural integration, whereas the variety of meaning provides the base for competing claims to power (for a related view, see Siu, 1989, pp. 76ff.).

The difference between this kind of symbolic integration and the Western kind of intellectual standardization of meaning became explicit when in the first decades of our century the modernizing Chinese state tried to fight against popular religion as a

superstitious practice (Duara, 1991). Truly integrating religion in the structure of the state was a formidable task which met considerable and sometimes fierce resistance by society. When the Nationalist government released the "Standards for Preserving and Abandoning Gods and Shrines" in November 1928 the main problem resulted to be the completely arbitrary distinction between "superstition" and "beliefs" which could be seen as being useful for society. This distinction simply could not work out because within traditional religion reference was not universal, and because only reference could have been linked with social function. Distinguishing symbols according to function was impossible, yet did mean a fundamental change of the formal structure of the symbolic realm of Chinese religion.

This point can also be made against the background of the more common distinction between "ritual" and "belief" (Feuchtwang, 1992, pp. 8ff.): Distinguishing between superstition and socially beneficial beliefs would mean that the unity of ritual and belief in traditional Chinese religion has to be broken into two parts. But what if just the ritual itself is the social function, with people even sharing the formal symbolism without caring for the reference, i.e. the beliefs? From that point of view, even the distinction between "orthopraxy" and "orthodoxy" is misleading because the distinction between belief and behavior is still upheld. We realize that our topic may lead us to even more basic categories of the Chinese world view but we cannot follow this way now (compare the discussion about the "aesthetic" character of Chinese culture which essentially means unity of form and content, Liu Dong, 1994, elaborating on Li Zehou, in particular).

Let us conclude our short discussion of traditional popular religion by going back to Evelyn Rawski's remark quoted at the beginning. We cannot discuss the reasons why such a peculiar system of using symbols has developed in Chinese society. Suffice to note, amongst others, that it should have been quite well adapted to the fluid state of Chinese society as being in a state of constant inner colonization where one of the crucial problems of social order was the relationship between autonomous local communities and central power (this view of China as an extremely mobile "inner frontier society" does not seem to be shared by the majority of historians but is developed convincingly by Nishizawa, 1992, and seems to emerge from Naquin/Rawski, 1988, too). Such an argument would fit well into a similar ambiguity of the Imperial propagation of kinship norms which served at the same time as a means of establishing decentralized order and supported the possible rise of community (i.e. lineage) power against central power.

The observation, that the relationship between local and central power is of crucial importance for the process of imbuing symbols with meaning, leads us back to our original interest: Is there any similarity between the ways how symbols are handled in contemporary Chinese statistics and in traditional popular religion? Evidently, we are

now able to describe both areas in terms of symbolic systems where formal structure is determined by the Central authority but semantic reference is determined at least partly on the local level.

#### **4. Sharing the Authority Over Meaning: Methodological Consequences for Chinese Studies**

Let us hammer down the main items of similarity between both areas of social behavior we have discussed.

- 1. The Central State claims a monopoly of using and defining symbols in society.*
- 2. However, there is a certain constraint on the full monopolization of the meaning of symbols. The State focuses on the standardization of formal structure.*
- 3. Meaning is given to symbols through the interaction between local community and the Center. A localized semantics emerges.*
- 4. The process of assigning meaning to symbols is an important medium of balancing power and of realizing conflict between local community and the Center.*
- 5. Precisely the restraint of the Center from monopolizing meaning seems to provide legitimacy to Central power because ambiguity of meaning means sharing authority with the local community.*
- 6. State building in the sense of establishing the structure of power inhering the modern Nation State therefore means the introduction of a completely new relation between power and the authority to assign meaning to symbols.*

These observations match both of our descriptions of the statistical system and of traditional popular religion. Hence we may speak of certain family similarities in the sense of Wittgenstein.

In Contemporary Chinese Studies researchers with a more detailed knowledge of the Chinese past refer to such family similarities between past and present fairly frequently (for example, Shue, 1988, chpt. three, and Zelin, 1991). The main objective of this approach is to learn something about China's present from the comparison with her past. Yet, by means of such a comparison we do not learn anything about the possible reasons of the similarities. For instance, we could refer to the theoretical construct of "Chinese culture" in order to explain the similarities, or we could refer to the same structural constraints (e.g. infrastructural constraints of state administration) and at the same time reject cultural explanations. Our attempt at discovering family similarities in completely unrelated areas of social action does not favour one exclusive explanation but stresses cultural factors: Of paramount importance is the relation between social



psychology and patterns of power (following Elias, 1969a-c, developed in Herrmann-Pillath, 1993, 1994, and linked with aspects of traditional China in Wang Yi/Herrmann-Pillath, 1992). However, our main interest in this note is not how to explain the family similarities but to ask for the methodological consequences for Chinese studies (more on this see Herrmann-Pillath, 1995a).

Methodologically, the common topic of our treatment of contemporary statistics and traditional religion is translation. Our starting point was the economist's presumption that translation is not needed in order to apply theory on data from China: a certain category like gross investment is exactly determined by certain rules how to use the category, and possible differences between Chinese rules and other rules can be ascertained exactly and objectively. That means the categories would not be context-dependent, and aside from the need to list certain pairs of two different phonetic expressions for the same meaning in the two languages there is no need for true philological research. The case of traditional religion is completely different. Obviously, there is the need to put every use of certain symbols into their context because otherwise reference cannot be identified. There are no general rules providing the meaning of a symbol in traditional religion aside from those ones governing their formal use and appearance. Actual reference depends on the setting and people using the symbols. To link denotation and connotation is a philological task, be it realized by the historian dealing with written sources, be it realized by the anthropologist talking with people.

But as we have learned from our short look at statistical practice in contemporary China this assessment of relative methodological status can be wrong. In fact the use of statistical categories reveals certain characteristics which are very close to religious practice in traditional China. In particular, in both cases there is a strong interaction between state and society on the local level. Certain statistical rules are imposed by the state on society in order to give it a shape which conforms to the needs of stabilizing the system of rule: The state claims the monopoly of defining and processing statistical data about the economy in order to have a sound base for policy making. But at the same time as society accepts (or, has to accept) this kind of symbolic standardization, people also start to use the symbols in their own way in order to balance the state's intrusiveness. The result is an astonishingly complex semantics of superficially clear-cut symbols. In both cases of religion and statistics this refers to local variety of reference in particular. Moreover, the conflict about the allocation of authority over meaning is at the same time the conflict about the legitimacy of Central power and the political order it represents. As in the case of the fundamental ambiguity of the symbols in traditional religion, resistance against the Center finds expression in reaping the authority over meaning from the Central government in the local statistical system.

Which conclusions can be drawn out of our strange comparative exercise? The first one simply is that the study of traditional China contributes to setting our perspectives on contemporary China right. We have started with statistics, but in most cases the direction of thought and discovery will be the other way round: Someone who has knowledge about traditional China may interpret certain items of information about contemporary China differently as compared with the general social scientist. But this observation should also be turned the other way round: Without a thorough knowledge of China's past there is no way to deal with contemporary statistics effectively. If we put it this way, the emphasis will meet much more resistance. However, the dismal story of the West using data about China should teach us that there is indeed the need for a cultural approach to economic analysis even on the field of interpreting data. The data are imbued with connotations which are rooted in the social process of statistical work in China. This process displays sharp conflicts between the modernizing state and local interests which we need to understand in order to understand the meaning of the data. Hence, the economist, too, has to do the work of the philologist who explains the connotations of the concepts of a foreign language to the reader.

On a more basic level we learn that economic concepts and theories cannot be applied directly on data but under certain, fairly narrow conditions. There is a need to insert intermediary concepts which refer to particular societies and periods. In the case of China, this point has already been made in detail by Little (1990) who argued that local knowledge is of paramount importance for linking theory with empirical data in China. Our reflections on social semantics support this view. In the same way as Chinese religion can only be properly understood as a localized belief system, statistical data have to be seen in local context. Only if the linkage between local knowledge and theory is interpreted as a mirror of the structure of social processes, an empirically valid analysis of causal processes can be realized (see the attempt in Herrmann-Pillath, 1991).

Finally, there seems to be a very close relation between processing symbols and structures of power in Chinese society because political power rests upon the legitimacy of representing a common cultural universe of Chineseness (Fitzgerald, 1994). However, this means that power cannot be used to change this cultural universe without losing legitimacy. In many different areas legitimacy of power is based on a certain implicit agreement on the way how people deal with symbols, or more specifically, items of information. Therefore, introducing a modern statistical system in China may not be a mere technical act but an act of changing an essential feature of the order of the Chinese body politic.

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