

RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES AND RELIGIOUS BOOKS IN MODERN CHINA

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I

If we want to discuss the potential influence of religion upon the common man in China we should have some knowledge of the degree to which he participated in religious activities and how much he knew of religion. For the past, I do not know of any data which would allow us to make any assessment. We know that in certain periods there was a great deal of temple building activity, while in other periods few temples were built or rebuilt¹. But as the temples were often built upon the initiative of a single man or a group of men, the mere number of temples does not say much about the degree to which the common man used them. Perhaps one can assume that in periods of strong temple building activities, more people visited temples than in other periods. There seems to have been always some relation between the number of temples and the population. According to a modern estimate there was about one temple to every 100 persons², an estimate which is close to similar estimates for Western countries. However, it has to be pointed out that one temple often contains several „cult units“, just as churches often contain several side altars, and that a visitor to a temple may be attracted only by one of the cult units. A particular cult unit may be used by only a few persons who may or may not also make use of the temple as a whole. As Chinese temples do not need priests in order to exercise their functions, the number of priests in relation to the size of the population is also not an indicator of religious activity. In China, the percentage of monks and nuns, even in the times of highest monastic development, has never been estimated to be higher than 1—2% of the population³. Finally, we know that many religious texts have been produced in China, but we do not know how many people read them.

For the modern period, the situation is not better. Authors differ in their assessment of Chinese religiosity: some regard the Chinese as basically uninterested in religion, while others defend the opposite opinion. To some degree the differences of opinion seem to be influenced by regional differences in China, to some degree also in the different definition of „religiosity“ by different authors. In order to get at least some

¹ based upon an unpublished study of temple building activity in China.

² based upon W. Grotaers in *Folklore Studies*, no. 10, 1951, no. 1.

³ Chang Chung-li, *The Income of the Chinese Gentry*, Seattle, 1962, p. 322 estimates the number of monks in 1880 at around 640.000. The population of China at that time was probably over 300 million. This would give 2% of the population. The highest distribution of monks and nuns was probably before 800 A.D. and after 400 A.D.

impression about contemporary religious activities, I circulated a brief questionnaire in Taipei in 1964⁴. More than 300 Social Science students in different classes of the National Taiwan University were asked to answer these questions either personally or, if they preferred, to interview a parent or relative. The students were not too enthusiastic about the questionnaire, but a total of 185 questionnaires were returned. They are the basis of the following analysis. A big city like Taipei is not an ideal place for such a survey. But if we take into consideration that not all interviewees are Taipei citizens, that a good number of them came from Mainland Chinese families⁵ and that they belong to a variety of social backgrounds (Tables 1 and 2) we can accept that their activities reflect to some degree the religious practices of the Chinese in Taiwan today and not only those in Taipei city. Of course, our sample contains many students; in fact, almost all interviewees below the age of 25 years were students. On the other hand, more than half of the older persons were housewives. We have to keep this in mind when looking at the answers. They may not adequately represent modern Taiwan as a whole, with all its different social classes, but they give us more factual information on the subject than has been available so far and, therefore, may provide new insight, especially if the results of this survey do not contradict, but rather confirm experiences which I and others have made.

II

Let us first make the general observation (Tables 3—5) that older persons are better informed about religion and show more activity than younger persons, and that women — although perhaps not better informed — are more active than men — two results which are in agreement with what is known about religious activities in various parts of the world, and with what has been assumed to be true for China. It is certainly safe to say that most Chinese have been involved in some religious activity during their life, but probably only a few people live up to the ideal of constant piety. A believer in either popular Buddhism or popular Taoism („folk religion“) is expected and encouraged to say prayers and incantations regularly, but only one young person and only a third of the older persons said they did so. Both religions recommend at least some periods of fasting, i. e. abstention of eating meat. Strictly speaking, a good Buddhist should never eat meat. A minimum requirement is to fast one, two or three days each month. But only 13 % of the young persons and 62 % of the older persons did

⁴ I want to express my thanks to Father M. O'Hara, Professor Lung K'uanhai and Mr. Ts'ai Wen-hui, all teaching Sociology at the College of Law, National Taiwan University, Taipei, for circulating the questionnaires among their students, for explaining the questionnaires to them and for stimulating them.

⁵ This does not mean that all these persons were born and raised in Mainland China. But it does mean that they grew up in the traditions of their home provinces.

fast. It has been assumed that women pay more attention to fasting than men; the survey confirmed this assumption.

Pai-pai is a Taiwanese term for a big religious festival, usually in connection with the birthday of a deity, and it is an occasion to spend huge amounts of money⁶ for offerings as well as for food and drinks. These festivities which can be financed by individuals or by large groups, are very much in fashion at the present time in Taiwan. Two thirds of all interviewees had organized their own *Pai-pai*, and half of all had participated in *Pai-pai* which were organized by others. Some of these had never yet organized their own *Pai-pai*, others had. For many participants, a *Pai-pai* is more a social than a religious activity, while we might assume that organizers of *Pai-pai* have at least some religious motives in addition to possible social motives.

Burning of incense seems to be the most common religious practice. Normally, it implies the existence of a shrine, either in a temple or in the house. We may presume that persons who state that they burn incense occasionally, do so when visiting a temple, while at least some of the regular users of incense may have a shrine in their own house. The burning of incense is normally accompanied by prayers, either aloud or silently.

A serious involvement with religion may be indicated by financial contributions, alms giving, and pilgrimages. At first sight, it was surprising that fewer people gave alms than contributed to the construction or support of a temple, but this seems to be in connection with the different structure of Buddhism in Taiwan where monks do not walk from house to house to collect alms.

Pilgrimages mean visits of certain out-of-town temples and sacred places, usually a mountain temple, at the time of the birthday of the deity or the time of a temple fair. Taiwan has a great number of such sites. The most famous one, mentioned by 18 interviewees, is the Ma-tsu Temple in Peikang, west of Taichung. Endless bus caravans from all parts of the island can be seen going to the Ma-tsu Temple at the time of the goddess' birthday; but other temples also attract pilgrims, such as the Lion's Head Mountain near Hsin-chu with its numerous beautiful temples, or even the Lung-shan Temple in the middle of Taipei city. We know that in certain parts of Taiwan, some sectors of the population of the area customarily go to one pilgrimage place, while another sector of the population visits another place. The reason for this seems to lie in the ethnic origin and clan origin of the pilgrims. Not only places of pilgrimage, but also regular temples seem to be frequented by

⁶ Each deity has at least one „birthday“ which is celebrated like the birthday of an important person. According to newspaper reports, one *pai-pai* in Taipei cost 80 million NT, i. e., 2 million U.S. (*China Post*, June 5, 1960), another one 3 million NT (*China Post*, May 12, 1960), a third one 6 million NT (*China Post*, May 19, 1960). The last two *pai-pai* were in suburbs of Taipei.

different kinds of people. In some parts of Taiwan, temples contain a great variety of deities so that one temple can serve all needs of the community, while in other parts of Taiwan, mainly the area South of Taichung, there are separate temples for different purposes, i. e. temples containing only *one* deity with its companions. Taipei belongs, as we know, to the first type. In this case, we should expect that people visit the temples closest to their house rather than temples distant from the house. The evidence is, however, not clear in the survey. Older people and women seem to prefer temples close by the house because this is most convenient for them. Younger people and men seem to prefer to go to all kinds of temples, whether they are nearby or at a distance.

Most important for the question of religious influences is, of course, the knowledge of religious literature. How many people actually read religious books and which books are preferred? Incidentally, we found only one case in which an interviewee had memorized a text without being able to read it.

In spite of the expressed request that Christians should not answer the questionnaire, three interviewees may have been Christians⁷; 17 additional persons stated that they had read either parts of the Old or of the New Testament or other Christian treatises. Three among these mentioned even a few non-Christian books including the Qoran. All these persons, all students, evidently were not Christians since they had performed Buddhist ceremonies and they mentioned a Buddhist deity as the one to which they would most often send prayers. Excluding Bible and Qoran, 72 religious or semi-religious books and several general „Introductions to Buddhism“ were mentioned by title as having been read. Only one person had read exclusively Taoist books, but 12 other persons had read Taoist plus other books. Some persons mentioned several books, others just one. Some stated that they had read books, but did not give any titles. We may assume that they did not remember the titles.

Among the 72 books which were mentioned, the five most common books (if we leave out the Christian books) are the *Chin-kang-ching* (26 times mentioned), the *Hsin-ching*, a part of *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra* (11 times), the *A-mi-t'o-ching* (15 times), the *Kuan-yin p'u-men ching* (14 times), and the *Ta-p'ei-chou* (8 times). All other texts were mentioned less than 5 times. Actually, this result was to be expected. These five main texts are the ones which are most often seen lying around in temples and are most often used in ceremonies. We will study the main moral values expressed in these basic texts in the next section.

When we asked to which deity they most often address their prayers, the interviewees mentioned 22 different deities, including also God (once)

⁷ They did not answer most of the questions aside from the question concerning religious books.

and the Ancestors (3 times). Of all deities most common are Kuan-yin (56 times), Buddha, Ma-tsu, Kuan-ti and Amitabha (Table 6).

Kuan-yin, the Goddess of Mercy, is most famous for bringing and protecting children. So we should expect (Tables 6 and 7) that she is favored by women⁸. Ma-tsu (or T'ien-hou, though some believe that both deities are not identical) is a deity of Fukienese origin, and, therefore, little known in Central and North China. In her functions, she is quite similar to Kuan-yin, only that she is non-Buddhistic and that she is also a protector of the seafarers. She, too, is more favored by women. Several persons worshipped both, Kuan-yin and Ma-tsu.

On the other hand, it has been observed that there is some relation between Buddha (Shih-chia mu-ni) and Amitabha (A-mi-t'o-fo): when life is tolerable or good, people pray to Buddha; when life is hard and intolerable, Amitabha is preferred. Buddha seems to be more popular among the men and the younger persons, while Amitabha is specially honored by women of higher age. Amitabha is the „Buddha of the Paradise“, of the land beyond this earth in which life is good and without sorrow. He is quite similar in function to Maitreya (Mi-lo-fo), the „Buddha of the Future“ who will appear on earth and will introduce a new age of happiness and social equality at the end of a period of inequality and terror. It may be significant that Maitreya is not mentioned a single time, nor is any of his books mentioned. Amitabha is much less venerated than Buddha himself. It is very difficult to study this problem in historical perspective due to lack of usable data, but the decline of the power of Maitreya and Amitabha seems to have started already some centuries ago⁹.

These findings cannot support far-reaching conclusions, but the impression is confirmed that even today most Chinese at some time in their lives perform one or several religious acts which normally bring them in contact with a temple and the objects exhibited there, or with religious texts and their content. This means that most Chinese are or

⁸ Of the most read books, the *Kuan-yin p' u-men ching* and the *Ta-p'ei-chou* are devoted especially to Kuan-yin.

⁹ We only want to pose this problem here as a problem, in the hope that future research might supply useable data. In this respect, a comparison of dated sculptures in the caves of Lung men (Honan) made between 495 and 535 with those made between 650 and 704 is interesting, because place and purpose is the same, yet there are great differences if we compare only the 3 deities mentioned in Taiwan: In the earlier period, 44.2 % of all statues represented Buddha, in the later only 5.1 % (Taiwan: 22.9 %); Kuan-yin remained almost equally important: 19.6 % in the early, 25.8 % in the late period (today: 67.5 %), while Amitabha together with Maitreya rose from 36.1 % to 69.1 % (Taiwan: 9.6 %). Size of sample: 97 figures for the early period, 175 for the later period; source: MOCHIZUKI SHINKŌ, *Shina bukk'yō-shi kenkyū* (*Studies in the History of Chinese Buddhism, Northern Wei section*), p. 380 (Tokyo, 1942).

have been exposed to the values implied in religious practices and religious literature.

Table 1: Regional Origin of Interviewees

	Number	%
Taiwan	91	49.2
South China	46	24.8
Central China	26	14.1
North China	11	5.9
unknown	11	5.9
	185	99.9

Table 2: Occupations of Interviewees

	Number	%
Students	71	38.4
Housewife; no occupation	61	32.9
Businessmen	16	8.7
Farmers, workers	16	8.7
Government Workers	7	3.8
Army, navy	2	1.1
Professions	2	1.1
unknown	10	5.4
	185	100.1

Table 3: Religious Activities (185 Interviewees)

	Number	%
Read religious books	82	44.3
Memorized religious books	41	22.2
Prayed daily	40	21.6
occasionally (rarely)	93	54.0
Fasted acc. to a monthly schedule	38	20.5
over long periods	18	9.7
every morning	22	11.9
Performed <i>pai-pai</i> regularly	33	17.8
occasionally	89	48.1
participated in <i>pai-pai</i>	94	50.8
Burnt incense regularly	37	20.0
occasionally	101	54.6
The preferred temple is close to home	58	31.3
Made financial contribution to a temple	86	46.5
Gave alms	52	28.1
Made a pilgrimage	40	21.6

Table 4: Religious activities, according to age

	Young persons 65 persons below 25)		Older 110 persons 25 & above 25)	
	N	%	N	%
Read religious books	25	38.5	54	49.1
Memorized religious books	6	9.2	35	41.8
Prayer daily	1	1.5	39	35.4
occasionally (rarely)	35	53.9	52	47.3
Fasted acc. to a monthly sched.	2	3.1	35	31.8
over long periods	2	3.1	16	14.5
every morning	4	6.2	17	15.5
Performed <i>pai-pai</i> regularly	2	3.1	30	27.3
occasionally	34	52.3	49	44.5
participated in <i>pai-pai</i>	25	38.5	50	45.5
Burned incense regularly	3	4.6	33	30.0
occasionally	34	52.3	60	54.6
Preferred temple is close	7	10.8	48	43.6
Made financial contributions	11	17.0	72	65.5
Gave alms	10	15.5	42	38.2
Made a pilgrimage	4	6.2	25	22.7

Table 5: Religious activities, according to sex

	Males (64 persons)		Females (112 persons)	
	N	%	N	%
Read religious books	28	43.7	51	45.5
Memorized religious books	10	15.6	31	27.7
Prayed daily	7	10.9	32	28.6
occasionally	31	48.4	57	50.9
Fasted acc. to monthly sched.	9	14.1	28	25.0
over long periods	3	4.7	15	13.4
every morning	6	9.4	15	13.4
Performed <i>pai-pai</i> regularly	9	14.1	23	20.5
occasionally	27	42.1	50	44.7
Burnt incense regularly	9	14.1	27	24.1
occasionally	29	45.3	66	58.9
Preferred temple is close	15	23.4	38	33.9
Made financial contribution	27	42.1	54	48.2
Gave alms	15	23.4	36	32.1
Made a pilgrimage	10	15.6	18	16.1

Table 6: Main deities worshipped by 95 of the 185 interviewees

	Sex			Age			Origin		
	M	F	Unkn.	Young	Old	unkn.	Taiwan	Mainl.	unkn.
All 95 interviewees	26	64	5	14	76	5	48	42	5
Kuan-yin (56 times)	12	42	2	8	46	2	24	30	2
Buddha (19 times)	8	11	—	6	13	—	10	9	—
Ma-tsu (16 times)	2	12	2	—	14	2	11	3	2
A-mi-t'o-fo (8 times)	1	7	—	—	8	—	4	4	—

Table 7: Main deities worshipped by 95 interviewees (in percentages)

All 95 interviewees	27	67	5	15	80	5	51	44	5
Kuan-yin	22	75	3	14	82	3	43	54	3
Buddha	42	58	—	32	68	—	53	47	—
Ma-tsu	13	75	12	—	88	12	69	19	12
A-mi-t'o-fo	13	87	—	—	100	—	50	50	—

III

Let us now look into these religious texts which, according to our survey, are most popular today. Three statements can be made.

1) Three of the five popular texts have been most popular already since at least a thousand years. It is impossible to prove this statistically, but the following observation gives some indications. In the Tun-huang caves in northwestern China great numbers of texts and fragments of texts were found, largely religious in character, all written before 1000 A.D., mostly during the 10th Century. Many of these texts and fragments are now in the British Museum. The British Museum catalogue¹⁰ lists a total of 4047 Buddhist sutras or fragments of sutras the class of Buddhist texts to which our texts belong. Three of our five books make up 41.7 % of all Tun-huang texts of the sutra group (*Chin-kang ching* 13.3 %; *Hsin-ching* 2.5 %; *Miao-fa lien-hua-ching*, the sutra of which the *Kuan-yin p'u-men* in a section, 25.9 %). The *Ta-p'ei-chou* is not mentioned separately. This book is often appended to other texts. In a text which I found in a temple in Taiwan, it was an appendix to the *Chin-kang ching*; it can also be an appendix to the *Miao-fa lien-hua ching*. The *A-mi-t'o ching* is mentioned only once in the British Museum collection. Apparently, it was not as popular in the 10th Century as it is now.

2) All of these books are short. The *Hsin-ching* has 286 words and, thus, could be recited in about 3 minutes; the *Ta-p'ei chou* has 415 words;

¹⁰ L. Giles, *Descriptive Catalogues of the Chinese Manuscripts from Tunhuang in the British Museum*, London, 1957. — We would like to remark that there are several different versions of each of our five texts. We have taken the version which is most commonly used in Taiwan today and which can be found in any temple or religious bookstore.

the *A-mi-t'o ching* has less than 1,800, the *Kuan-yin p'u-men ching* slightly more than 2,000 words. Only the *Chin-kang ching* has more than 5,300 words, but even this book can be recited in less than one hour. It is, therefore, no great effort to memorize these books, and — as we have seen — few people today can recite them from memory.

3) The texts of four of these five books are extremely repetitive in content and sentence structure, another factor which facilitates memorizing.

Let me briefly describe these five texts from the view-point of the common man. The *Ta-p'ei chou* differs greatly from the others; it consists of non-sense syllables which transcribe Sanskrit words of magic character; their meaning is unknown to the ordinary, even to the educated Chinese and most probably was obscure even to the ordinary Indian Buddhist. For Chinese Buddhists the recitation of this book is an incantation of Kuan-yin: she understands the words which the believer does not understand. With the exception of this book, the other four have a very similar religious and social message.

The *Hsin-ching*, „Book of the Heart“ (*Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya sūtra*), states that all components of man: physical form, reception, conception, function of mind and cognition, are empty and without reality. Similarly, all senses are empty and without reality. Therefore, there is no difference between life and death, between increase and decrease, between pure and impure. There is no death, no old age, no suffering. All this is „empty“, i.e., has no reality.

The *A-mi-t'o-ching* (*Amitāyusa-vyūha sūtra*) first describes the *Chi-lo-t'u* („Paradise“), a world in which there is no suffering, only joy; a country in which everything is of precious stones or gold, where flowers rain, where beautiful birds sing to the tunes of heavenly music. Whoever makes a vow promising his intention to come into this paradise, and whoever invokes the name of A-mi-t'o, will get into this paradise after death. There is no need to do good works; belief suffices.

Similarly, the *Kuan-yin p'u-men ching* (section of the *Saddharma pundarika sūtra*, *Miao-fa lien-hua ching*) recommends that the believer recite the name of Kuan-yin as often as possible. Whoever recites her name will not burn in fire, not drown in water. Kuan-yin will save seafarers who have been stranded in foreign countries; she will save them from enemies, rescue them from prison. She will protect merchants from robbers and bandits in dangerous mountain passes. People who have many sinful wishes will change when they honor Kuan-yin and recite her name. A woman who wants to have a son, will have a lucky and intelligent son, and — if she wants to have a daughter — a good-looking daughter. Kuan-yin can assume all kinds of different forms, from divine and supernatural to the shape of common man, in order to save and to convert people.

The *Ching-kang ching* („Diamant sutra“, *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā sūtra*) belongs to the same category as the *Hsin-ching*. It tries to show how people can reach Nirvana, by showing that everything around us is empty and non-existing, unreal. No human action, therefore, has any intrinsic merit. To give away to the poor all one's possessions is not as good as to preach, to read, or to copy the book. Reading the book erases the consequences of all sins one has committed in life — because they were not real anyhow¹¹.

Thus, two of the five books set as the highest goal of the believer the attempt to get into another level of existence, either the Paradise or Nirvana. Two books stress the unreality of life on earth, especially the unreality and irrelevance of suffering, sickness, old age, and death. Three of the five books stress belief in the mercy of the savior deities Kuan-yin or A-mi-t'o, and implicitly or explicitly all five books deny that actions, specifically social actions, have any merit or sense. Life on earth has no sense; desirable is only the life in the higher level of existence. This concept of the world is directly opposite to the Confucian world-view which does not mention the beyond at all but stresses the social obligations of the individual here and now. This other-world orientation is also opposite to the world-view expressed in another set of popular books (which I have studied in another study), the *shan-shu*. These are moralistic treatises which can be found in many temples side by side with our five books; they stress the moral and social obligations of man as strongly as Confucian books, but they add the idea of sin and tie social and religious obligations together into one system. We can see from the names of the authors that the *shan-shu* were written by Chinese scholars or semi-scholars, while our five Buddhist texts are translations of books written by Indian monks. To judge from our interview data, our five books are most often read by women and older persons. These books stress simple piety, simple meditation, tranquillity; they are not books for people in the mainstream of life; they may appeal occasionally also to men in active life in certain situations or in certain moods, but most strongly to persons removed from active life. The religion which is reflected in this kind of literature may perhaps best be described as a „religion for relaxation“.

¹¹ *Guilt and Sin in Traditional China*, to be published soon.