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Female Gender in Chinese Religious Symbols: Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and the “Eternal Mother”

P. Steven Sangren

Introduction

Female deities occupy prominent positions in the Chinese religious pantheon and in Chinese ritual. Hence, it is somewhat surprising that the cultural significance of female gender in the realm of divinities has received so little attention from students of Chinese religion. Perhaps this is so because similarities between Chinese female deities and Western “mother goddesses” (e.g., Virgin Mary) make the meanings of Chinese deities’ gender qualities appear self-evident. Yet it is no more “natural” (if “nature” is opposed to culture) to attribute qualities like compassion, mercy, and nurturance to female deities than it is to characterize actual women as submissive and domestic; recent cross-cultural studies of gender convince us of that. In other words, gender qualities, be they attributed to deities or persons, are culturally constituted and embedded in symbolic matrices of meaning that vary considerably from one society to the next.

Moreover, as this paper attempts to demonstrate, the gender qualities ascribed to deities and to women are not necessarily isomorphic. Indeed, discontinuities between qualities associated with female deities and those associated with women highlight important culturally posed and, in practice, irresolvable existential dilemmas for Chinese women.

My objective in this paper, which focuses on three female-deity cults active in northern Taiwan, is to draw attention to the religious

This study is based in part on twenty months of field research conducted between 1975 and 1977 in northern Taiwan. I would like to thank James A. Boon, Allan Grapard, Dayydd J. Greenwood, Bernd Lambert, Daniel Maltz, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, Robert J. Smith, Rudolf Wagner, and Margery Wolf for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

significance of female deities for both men and women, emphasizing the role of female deities within the context of a larger set of religious symbols. I do not claim to have developed an encompassing description of the existential or subjective conditions from which Chinese women approach female deities. In other words, this paper shows how analysis of gender qualities in sacred symbols illuminates Chinese constructions of gender. Nonetheless, it raises issues of particular relevance to Chinese women's lives, for it attempts to show that the meaning of female deities is best understood with reference to the contradictory demands, roles, and expectations confronting women in the culture of Chinese domestic life.

Male Deities: Celestial Bureaucrats

Many students of late traditional Chinese society have noted that every important arena of social and economic intercourse has its characteristic symbolic and ritual expression. In one of the clearest statements of the correspondence between Chinese folk cosmology and the structure of imperial bureaucracy, Arthur P. Wolf argues that just as lower-level bureaucrats govern small administrative districts and higher-level officials control larger ones, so lesser gods reign over small local systems while more exalted gods rule the larger regions.¹

In the marketing community centered around the town of Ta-ch'i in northern Taiwan, for example, there is a clearly discernible, three-tiered hierarchy of territorially defined ritual communities, each focused on the worship of one of these celestial bureaucrats.² Neighborhoods unite each year in communal worship at the shrines of the place gods, villages come together for annual sacrifices in honor of village gods of somewhat higher bureaucratic status, and the entire marketing community participates in a yearly festival in honor of the deified general Kuan Kung in the market town. In imperial times this hierarchy of territorial cults was linked ideologically to the officially sanctioned state cult, which extended the celestial hierarchy upward from county-, prefecture-, and province-level city god (Ch'eng Huang) cults and culminated in the rites performed by the emperor on behalf of all of China.³ Moreover, despite the demise of its earthly counterpart eighty years ago, the imperial bureaucracy persists in the religion of present-day Taiwan.

But interspersed with territorial-cult temples dedicated to "super-

1. Arthur P. Wolf, "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors," in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, ed. Arthur P. Wolf (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 131-82.

2. For more detailed ethnographic description, see P. Steven Sangren, "A Chinese Marketing Community: An Historical Ethnography of Ta-ch'i, Taiwan" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1980).

3. The articulation of state religion and territorial cults is elaborated in Stephan Feuchtwang, "School Temple and City God," in *The City in Late Imperial China*, ed. G. William Skinner (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1977), pp. 581-608.

natural governors" there are others that have no clear-cut territorial associations. Most of these nonterritorial temples are linked to worship of buddhas or bodhisattvas,⁴ which are regarded by neither peasant nor sophisticate as supernatural governors. And, while it might be possible to discount these deities on the basis of their foreign origin,⁵ there are also nonbureaucratic female deities of undisputed Chinese lineage whose gender alone disqualifies them from being considered officials.⁶

The conception of deities as imperial officials, then, seems to be confined primarily to territorial cults. There are also many important deity cults not associated with clearly defined territories; included in this category are Buddhist temples, religious pilgrimage centers, and sectarian cults. In what follows, I suggest reasons why female deities are prominent in each of these.

Kuan Yin

Of the three female deities I consider here—Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and "the Eternal Mother"—only Kuan Yin might properly be considered a bodhisattva. Although Kuan Yin is clearly the most popular of Chinese deities (her image dominates on most domestic shrines, for example), anthropologists have written surprisingly little about her. Kuan Yin's importance in Chinese Buddhism, however, has long been noted by historians of religion, and philologists have also shown great interest. Fifty years ago, for example, philologists were anxious to trace the gender transformation of the Indic male divinity Avalokiteśvara to the Chinese female divinity Kuan Yin.⁷ Some attributed the transformation

4. Taiwanese laymen make little of the distinction between buddhas (*fo*) and bodhisattvas (*p'u-sa*). E.g., they address Kuan Yin, a bodhisattva in Mahāyāna texts, by both terms.

5. Whatever their historical origin, Buddhist deities are fully incorporated into Chinese religion, as the case of Kuan Yin discussed below makes clear. Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism are meaningful distinctions to the Chinese peasant, but they are not terms in complementary distribution; they refer, rather, to different aspects of what in peasant culture is a single religious system. See also Henri Maspero, "The Mythology of Modern China," in *Asiatic Mythology*, ed. J. Hacklin et al. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1932), pp. 252–332, esp. pp. 252–63.

6. There are, however, territorial cults in Taiwan centered on female deities. One way of integrating female deities into a bureaucratic metaphor is to endow them with titles, as in the case of Ma Tsu's honorific, "Queen of Heaven." The history of Ma Tsu's attainment of various imperial titles is often published in pamphlets distributed by important Ma Tsu temples in Taiwan: e.g., "Pei-kang Ch'iao-t'ien-kung: Chien-chieh" (Pei-kang, Taiwan: Ch'iao-t'ien-kung Committee, 1973), pp. 5–6. On Ma Tsu's titles, see Feuchtwang, p. 606; Michael Saso, *Taiwan Feasts and Customs*, 3d ed. (Hsinchu, Taiwan: Fu Jen University Language School Press, 1968), p. 45; Maspero, pp. 329–31; and James L. Watson, "Standardizing the Gods: The Promotion of T'ien Hou (Empress of Heaven) on the South China Coast, 960–1960," in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China: Diversity and Integration*, ed. David Johnson, Evelyn Rawski, and Andrew Nathan (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, in press).

7. See, e.g., Alice Getty, *The Gods of Northern Buddhism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), p. 78; Arthur D. Waley, "Avalokiteśvara and the Legend of Miao-shan," *Artibus Asiae*

to Avalokiteśvara's embodiment of the virtues of compassion and mercy, qualities associated in the Chinese mind with femaleness. Current scholarship associates Kuan Yin's assumption of feminine gender with the appearance of the Miao-shan legend around 1100.⁸

In brief outline, the Miao-shan legend is the story of a young princess who, wishing to avoid the pollution and travails of wifhood, defied her father's wishes and refused to marry. She retreated to a life of Buddhist meditation, whereupon her angry father (according to later versions of the tale) had her killed. During her sojourn in hell, Miao-shan's true identity as Kuan Yin was revealed, and she succeeded in freeing the tortured souls there. She later returned to earth and assumed the guise of a mountain recluse. Hearing of her father's illness, she cured him by offering her own eyes and arms in a magic potion. She was miraculously made whole again, and, having shown her father the true path, she entered nirvana.⁹

Prior to the appearance of the Miao-shan legend, Kuan Yin was generally depicted as male, but it is not clear whether the legend itself was solely responsible for the iconographic transformation.¹⁰ The popular legend formed the basis for extensive pilgrimage cults centered on the Hsiang-shan temple, Pao-feng county, Honan, and on P'u-t'o island, Chekiang.¹¹ Today in Taiwan there is hardly a township or marketing community that is without at least one temple devoted to worship of Kuan Yin.¹²

Although images of Kuan Yin are also found in temples of the territorial cults (*miao*), usually at side altars, it is as the principle deity in Buddhist temples (*ssu*) that Kuan Yin is most prominent. A significant difference between Buddhist *ssu* and territorial *miao* is that the former, unlike the latter, have no clearly bounded parishes. Anyone interested in self-cultivation, meditation, and religious study is welcome to worship at a Buddhist *ssu*. Of course most devotees live in neighboring areas; but unlike the temples of territorial cults, the Buddhist temple is not viewed

2 (1925): 130-32; Henri Doré, *Researches on Superstition in China*, trans. M. Kennelly, 13 vols. (Shanghai: Tusewai, 1914-33), 6:200-217; R. F. Johnston, *Buddhist China* (London: John Murray, 1913), p. 273; Maspero, pp. 352-58; and, more recently, C. N. Tay, "Kuan-yin: The Cult of Half Asia," *History of Religions* 16 (1976): 147-76, esp. 151; and Diana Y. Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahāyāna Tradition* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1979), pp. 249-53.

8. See Glen Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miao-shan* (London: Ithaca Press, 1978), for a thorough history of the legend and its transformations as well as an interesting analysis of the text.

9. For other versions, see *ibid.*; Getty, pp. 78-87; Doré, 6:134-96; and E. T. C. Werner, *Myths and Legends of China* (London: George G. Hasrap, 1922), pp. 251-87. Buddhist temples in Taiwan commonly distribute versions of the tale in the published form of "meritorious books" (*shan-shu*).

10. Johnston, p. 273.

11. Dudbridge, pp. 10-19, 56, 69; Johnston, pp. 122-48, 259-311.

12. A list of temples, their locations, and principle deities is included in Lin Heng-tao, *Tai-wan Ssu-miao Ta-ch'üan* [Taiwan's temples and shrines] (Taipei: Ch'ing-wen, 1974).

as a symbol of a particular community, and its deity is not considered a supernatural governor.

Though adherence to the rule varies, no animal sacrifices are to be offered at Buddhist temples. Scriptures from the Mahayana liturgy are chanted, and monks or nuns may be in residence. In contrast with communal rituals of the territorial cults, which focus on the local community's collective welfare, the stated goal of Buddhist ritual is individual salvation. In Ta-ch'i the most active group of lay participants in Buddhist ritual are members of sutra-chanting societies (*sung-ching-t'uan*). These groups are made up of middle-aged and elderly women, a point of some significance to which I return below.

Ma Tsu

Similarities between Ma Tsu (often referred to as a Taoist deity) and Kuan Yin have evoked comment from a number of Western writers. Henri Doré, for example, writes, "Both are worshipped as beneficent and compassionate goddesses who save men from misery and peril, especially from the dangers of the ocean; and both are regarded as the patrons and protectors of mothers and as the givers of children."¹³

Similarities notwithstanding, Ma Tsu's role in Taiwanese religion is quite different from Kuan Yin's. Ma Tsu is neither celestial bureaucrat nor bodhisattva, but because of her popularity in China's Southeast Coast region she was given various honorific titles, including "Queen of Heaven" (*T'ien-hou*), and incorporated into the state religion. In brief, Ma Tsu is said to have been a shy, religiously inclined young woman who suffered an early death after saving her father and all but one of her brothers from drowning. After her death she continued her miraculous interventions on behalf of imperiled seafarers. Some versions credit her with subjugating demons who have great powers of sight and hearing and who now aid her in protecting seamen. Fishermen and sailors turn to Ma Tsu to allay anxieties associated with their profession, and the original Chinese settlers of Taiwan, faced with crossing the storm-ridden Taiwan Straits, also relied on her.¹⁴

Immigrants who safely completed the ninety-mile passage to ports like Hsin-kang, Pei-kang, and Lu-kang on Taiwan's west coast thus felt a special attachment to the goddess. Temples in Ma Tsu's honor were established early in the history of Chinese settlement in Taiwan at the immigrants' ports of disembarkation. As settlers moved inland from these ports, they are said to have taken with them incense ash from the Ma Tsu temple centers to use in setting up branch temples in the new settlements. In addition, some of the original temples serve as centers for

13. Doré, 6:202; Johnston, pp. 274, 284; and Dudbridge, p. 60.

14. See also Saso (n. 6 above), pp. 41-45.

a system of island-wide pilgrimages.¹⁵ Every year tens of thousands of Taiwanese join pilgrimage groups (*chin-hsiang-t'uan*) on visits to Ma Tsu temples in Lu-kang, Hsin-kang, and, most importantly, Pei-kang.

It is significant that the kinship metaphor used in describing the related phenomena of pilgrimages (*chin-hsiang*) and temple branching (*fen-hsiang*—literally, “dividing the incense burner”) is affinal rather than agnatic. The deity images present in branch temples are similar to brides who return on a customary visit to their natal homes (*lao-niang-chia*). During annual pilgrimages these images are taken from branch temples (or from the temples of local territorial cults where Ma Tsu may be worshiped as a subsidiary deity) and returned to home temples where they are passed over the incense burners and ritually rejuvenated. An agnatic metaphor, such as the branches of a lineage, would imply a hierarchical, corporate relationship among temples; but branch temples are organizationally independent of the older temples. Consequently, the strong affective relations between women and their natal homes provide a better analogy for the relations between temples that are expressed in pilgrimages.¹⁶

Pilgrimage groups from the Ta-ch'i area are generally organized at the village-cult level. The first village group from the Ta-ch'i marketing community to go on pilgrimage each year brings back images from the three major cult centers and places them on its own altar. The next two days are devoted to worship of both Ma Tsu and the village temple's main deity. After the celebration, the three Ma Tsu images are passed in rotation to nine other village temples (all within Ta-ch'i's marketing area) before they are finally returned by the last village pilgrimage group to the cult centers. In the course of these visits, charcoal is ignited from the incense burners of the Ma Tsu cult centers and carried home to branch temple censers. Individual households, in turn, light incense from their temples' censers to renew censers at domestic altars. The incense thus links cult centers directly to most of Taiwan's households.

The Eternal Mother

The Eternal Mother,¹⁷ known by a variety of names—Wu Sheng Sheng Mu, Yao Ch'ih Chin Mu, Wang Mu Niang Niang, among others—is the supreme deity in a group of ideologically related sectarian

15. For a comprehensive study of the history of the Ma Tsu cult, see Li Hsien-chang, *Matsu Shinkō no Kenkyū* [Studies on belief of Ma-tsu] (Tokyo: Taiwan Bunbutsu Kai, 1979). See also Donald R. DeGlopper, “Social Structure in a Nineteenth-Century Taiwanese Port City,” in Skinner, ed. (n. 3 above), pp. 633–50, esp. p. 646; and Kristofer M. Schipper, “Neighborhood Cult Associations in Traditional Tainan,” in Skinner, ed., pp. 651–76, esp. pp. 652–53.

16. For other symbolic aspects of affinal ties in Chinese society, see Emily M. Ahern, “Affines and the Rituals of Kinship,” in Wolf, ed. (n. 1 above), pp. 279–308.

17. I follow Susan Naquin, *Millenarian Rebellion in China: The Eight Trigrams Uprising in 1813* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1976), in the use of this gloss.

traditions.¹⁸ She is conceived by cult members as preceding in time of creation, in status, and in authority all the other deities of both Buddhist and Taoist pantheons. Thus, for example, Kuan Yin is considered to be her daughter and the Jade Emperor her son. Similarly, those who become full-fledged members of the sect are said to become her adopted children.

In Taiwan, the most visible and probably the most popular of these sects is the Tz'u-hui t'ang. The home temple is in Hua-lien, but presently there are more than 100 branches throughout the island.¹⁹ Branch temples organize yearly pilgrimages to the cult center in Hua-lien. A distinguishing feature of sectarian cults is that members have a definite sense of belonging to a group that sets them apart from the larger group of nonmembers; believers become the Eternal Mother's sons and daughters through special rites of initiation. Cult ritual is characterized by revelation and by spirit possession, not only among leaders, but among most members. Like some sects in the West, Chinese sectarian cults claim a monopoly on salvation. Various secret forms of ritual further differentiate them from the larger Chinese religious tradition and from competing sects, and their teachings are viewed by outsiders as heterodox. In short, sectarian cults in China are heavily infused with a sense of their own ideological and organizational separateness, and they tend to emphasize ecstatic ritual to a greater extent than do territorial cults or orthodox Buddhism.

Interpretation

Clearly, then, female deities are important in Chinese religion, and their meanings contrast sharply with those of the male bureaucratic deities. But the significance of gender in the realm of divinities cannot be viewed as a simple transfer of men's and women's social roles to the pantheon. In addition to the contrast between male and female, the meaning of female divinities is equally informed by the contrast between purity and pollution.

Women and Pollution

Recent anthropological analysis of Chinese conceptions of gender has concentrated on the complex of ideas associated with female pollu-

18. Sources on sectarian religion in China include J. J. M. de Groot, *Sectarianism and Religious Persecution in China* (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1903-4); Naquin; Daniel L. Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religion: Dissenting Sects in Late Traditional China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976); and Marjorie Topley, "The Great Way of Former Heaven: A Group of Chinese Secret Religious Sects," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 26 (1963): 362-92.

19. In Taiwan, as in China, heterodox cult centers are often located in remote areas, partly to avoid the notice of the government. See also Topley, p. 384.

tion.²⁰ Emily M. Ahern, for example, considers three different interpretations for Chinese belief in the dangerous power of menstrual blood: "The first looks to the emotional significance of death and birth, the second to women's social role, and the third to the system of ideas about pollution."²¹ Accepting the first and third, Ahern rejects (with qualifications) the idea that belief in the power of menstrual blood reflects the social role of young women because, while young women may manipulate family relations to ends antithetical to the ideals of patriliney, they do not consciously and deliberately manipulate the power associated with menstrual pollution to these ends.

However, in my view, the relationship between female-pollution beliefs and women's social roles becomes evident when these beliefs are juxtaposed with those pertaining to female deities. As one might expect, there are positive as well as negative qualities associated with femininity in China; yet female deities are unambiguously positive. As idealizations of womanhood, then, female deities must overcome the stigma of pollution associated with menstruation, sexual intercourse, death, and childbirth. Hence, analysis of the purity of female deities serves to highlight what is polluting in women.

These themes are clearest in the case of Kuan Yin, and specifically in the Miao-shan legend. By denying the wishes of her father and refusing to marry, Miao-shan preserves her purity, but only at the expense of filial piety. As Kuan Yin, her true identity, she intercedes on behalf of not only her father, but all souls tormented in hell. Ultimately, the stain of pollution is removed only with death and the sojourn in hell, and Kuan Yin's apparent resolution of the conflict of purity with filial piety (in the Miao-shan legend, filial piety involved assuming the social role of wife) serves to highlight its insurmountability for Chinese women.²² For in the process of attaining bodhisattvahood, Kuan Yin has essentially denied her role as daughter and wife and taken on (as I argue below) the role of mother.²³

In Taiwan, worship of Kuan Yin is explicitly associated with purification rituals. In annual rites of communal purification (*p'u-tu*),

20. Emily M. Ahern, "The Power and Pollution of Chinese Women," in *Women in Chinese Society*, ed. Margery Wolf and Roxanne Witke (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975), pp. 193-214; Gary Seaman, "The Sexual Politics of Karmic Retribution," in *The Anthropology of Taiwanese Society*, ed. Emily M. Ahern and Hill Gates (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1981), pp. 381-96.

21. Ahern, "The Power and Pollution of Chinese Women," p. 212.

22. Dudbridge (n. 8 above), pp. 92-93, argues that Kuan Yin's sojourn in hell is analogous to a rite of passage, miraculously accomplishing the resolution of filial piety and purity.

23. Kuan Yin thus represents for Chinese women much the same kind of double bind that the Virgin Mary represents in the West. As Marina Warner (*Alone of All Her Sex* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976], p. 77) puts it, "the very conditions that make the Virgin sublime are beyond the powers of women to fulfill unless they deny their sex. Accepting the Virgin as the ideal of purity implicitly demands rejecting the ordinary female condition as impure."

Kuan Yin in her role as savior of the damned protects the community from the pollution of death.²⁴ But more to the point, women who come daily to recite Buddhist sutras at Kuan Yin temples generally conceive of this activity as one of ritual purification. In Buddhist religious systems, one gains merit by renouncing those activities of daily life that are polluting. These renunciations generally involve assuming a vegetarian diet, but they may also include vows of sexual abstinence.

Such renunciation is practical for middle-aged and elderly women, but the legends of Miao-shan and, to a lesser degree, Ma Tsu provide a model for more radical rejection of wifedom. For example, Marjorie Topley cites Kuan Yin as an important inspiration for a marriage resistance movement in nineteenth-century rural Kwangtung.²⁵ Particularly in areas where women labored in the silk industry, some women took vows of spinsterhood and organized themselves into sisterhoods. Others, known as *pu lo-chia* ("women who do not go down to the family"), refused to join their husbands after marriage. After the wedding ceremony, *pu lo-chia* returned to their natal villages where they might remain several years. According to Topley, "Some women subsequently returned to their husbands, presumably to consummate their marriages and bear children. Others took the further decision to stay away until they were past child-bearing age, and never consummated their marriage."²⁶

Husbands and their families apparently acquiesced with the understanding that the separated wife would support her in-laws and her husband, and provide her husband with a concubine. Children produced by the husband and his concubine were counted as belonging to the *pu lo-chia*. This remarkable form of marriage thus circumvents a cultural dilemma with a creativity reminiscent of the more widely discussed institution of woman-marriage among the Nuer. For whatever its other advantages to the *pu lo-chia*, this arrangement permitted them both to avoid the pollution associated with sex and childbirth and to preserve their status as mothers in their husbands' descent lines.

It is noteworthy that, while Chinese women sometimes subjected themselves to social ostracism or resorted to suicide to avoid wifedom,

24. On *pu-tu* see Dudbridge (n. 8 above), pp. 93–97; Duane Pang, "The *P'u-tu* Ritual," in *Buddhist and Taoist Studies I*, ed. Michael Saso and David W. Chappell (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1977), pp. 95–122; J. J. M. de Groot, "Buddhist Masses for the Dead at Amoy," in *Transactions of the Sixth International Congress of Orientalists*, sec. 4, Far East (Leyden: Brill, 1885), pp. 1–120; Justus Doolittle, *Social Life of the Chinese*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1865), 1:191–97; Stephan Feuchtwang, "Domestic and Communal Worship in Taiwan," in Wolf, ed. (n. 1 above), pp. 105–30; Liu Chih-wan (Liu Chi-wan), *T'ai-pei shih Sung-shan ch'ü an chien chiao ssu tien* [Great propitiary rites of petition for beneficence, Sung-shan, Taipei, Taiwan] (Taipei: Institute of Ethnology, 1967).

25. Marjorie Topley, "Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung," in Wolf and Witke, eds. (n. 20 above), pp. 67–88. See also Marjorie Topley, "Chinese Women's Vegetarian Houses in Singapore," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 27 (1954): 59.

26. Topley, "Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung," p. 67.

not even the radical marriage-resistance sects seem to have questioned the ideology of female pollution. Women could overcome the pollution associated with their gender only by emulating Miao-shan and resisting marriage. The attainment of ritual purity was indicated by the use of male terms of address for women in marriage-resistance cults;²⁷ Buddhist nuns in Taiwan are also sometimes addressed by male honorific terms. In sectarian cults that I observed in Ta-ch'i, revelations that postmenopausal women have attained male divinity status are common. In short, although exceptional women might occasionally resolve the conflict between purity and wifehood by rejecting the latter, there is little evidence that they ever questioned the fundamental female-pollution beliefs. Thus, in the logic of Chinese culture, escape from female pollution requires that a woman's connection to procreation be denied. For the majority of Chinese women severing this connection is in life impractical, but in death imperative. Hence, one of a son's deepest filial obligations to his mother is to perform the ceremony of the "blood bowl" at her funeral. At this ceremony, a son symbolically drinks his mother's menstrual blood and breaks the blood bowl, thereby freeing his mother from her polluted state and opening her way to heaven.²⁸

Like Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu retains her purity by avoiding the socially prescribed but ritually polluting role of wife (in her case, through the expediency of early death and deification). Both legends highlight virginal purity, filial values, and transition to a status very similar to the "Virgin Mother" of Christian tradition. In Marian lore the problem of pollution associated with sex and childbirth is linked to the notion of original sin and is proximately resolved through the doctrine of immaculate conception.²⁹ The status of the virgin mother in China is not explicitly rationalized and elaborated to the degree that it is in Christian tradition, but worshipers unquestionably stand in the relation of children to Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and the Eternal Mother; all three deities are addressed as *ma*. Indeed, the divinity of Kuan Yin and Ma Tsu rests partly on their standing as mothers who have never borne a child. In contrast, Mary is marked as divine by her conceiving and giving birth without the stain of pollution. The two cases shift the location of paradox, perhaps, but both are equally miraculous.

The Eternal Mother is also a virgin unstained by the pollution of childbirth, but her tradition differs from that of Kuan Yin and Ma Tsu

27. Topley, "The Great Way of Former Heaven" (n. 18 above), p. 382.

28. Cf. Marjorie Topley, "Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung," p. 75. Seaman (n. 20 above), following Ahern's ("Power and Pollution [n. 20 above]) suggestion, argues that the ideology of female pollution supports male exploitation. William A. Christian (*Person and God in a Spanish Valley* [New York: Seminar Press, 1972], pp. 153-60) makes a similar argument regarding the impurity of women in the context of Spanish local religion.

29. Marina Warner (n. 23 above), pp. 236-55. See also W. Lloyd Warner, *The Family of God: A Symbolic Study of Christian Life in America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1961), pp. 267-306.

in that she lacks earthly incarnation. She is the “unbegotten mother” (Wu Sheng Sheng Mu) whose purity is intrinsic. She need not avoid the polluting role of wife since she precedes all else in creation.³⁰

In sum, female purity as manifested in female deities involves the negation of woman as wife and affirmation of her role as mother (if not childbearer). In this way, Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and the Eternal Mother each manage to embody purely positive aspects of womanhood. Chinese conceptions of male deities, however, are more like their earthly counterparts—paternal and powerful figures to be sure, but susceptible to the foibles and foils of humanity. They may be bribed, manipulated, threatened, and cajoled.³¹ In contrast, Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and the Eternal Mother are perfect in their generosity and purity; one need only ask with a pure heart, and all will be granted. In my view, this difference between male and female qualities among divinities corresponds to a contradiction associated with women’s roles in Chinese family organization.

Women in Domestic Groups as Divisive and Unifying Forces

Recent studies of women in domestic groups suggest that women frequently wield considerable informal and sometimes manipulative power even where formal authority is rigidly patriarchal. In patrilocal Chinese families, young women are often dominated by mothers-in-law, and they receive little support from husbands, who are bound by strong emotional and filial ties to their mothers. These young wives have little other recourse than to turn to their children for emotional support.³² From the child’s point of view, the mother is frequently an ally in confrontations with paternal authority. Elder sisters may similarly mediate between younger siblings and parents.

There is equal significance structurally, if not emotionally, in the mother’s role as a unifying force in fraternal competition. Strong bonds between mothers and sons can postpone division of extended patrilineal households as easily as can the formally emphasized ties between fathers and sons. Brothers who are intensely competitive with one another may agree to remain under one roof (or, as the Chinese put it, to continue sharing a stove) out of loyalty to their mother. Just as it is in the young wife’s interest to push for early household division as a means of escaping the authority of her mother-in-law, so is it the mother-in-law’s interest to postpone division as long as possible. For it is only by keeping the

30. W. Lloyd Warner (p. 302), notes that Mary is similarly “without beginning (birth without the human consequences of original sin) and without end (deathless).”

31. A. Wolf (n. 1 above), pp. 143–45.

32. My understanding of the dynamics of Chinese domestic groups draws heavily from the collected writings of Margery Wolf, especially *The House of Lim: A Study of a Chinese Farm Family* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968), and *Women and Family in Rural Taiwan* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1972).

larger family united that she can enjoy the leisure and emotional support denied her when she was newly married.

In short, women in Chinese domestic groups are both divisive and unifying forces. As mothers and sisters, Chinese women act to soften the competition for authority between brothers and to mediate between authoritarian fathers and occasionally rebellious sons. As daughters-in-law and wives, Chinese women tend to exacerbate domestic tensions, often agitating for early division of extended families.

Seen in light of this bifurcation of women's roles in domestic groups, the sharp contrast between idealized feminine characteristics embodied in female deities, on the one hand, and beliefs about female pollution, on the other, becomes more intelligible. It is their unifying role, particularly their role as mother, that corresponds to the symbolic significance of female deities. Conversely, pollution is more an attribute of women in their procreative years—the period in their lives when, from the standpoint of the domestic group, they are most threatening. Other mainly negative female qualities emerge in the myriad folktales of demonic seductresses who divert sons from fulfilling their filial obligations. In sum, my conclusion that there is a closer association between women's roles in domestic groups and female-pollution beliefs than that posited by Ahern follows from viewing these pollution beliefs as part of a larger contrastive set of ideas about female gender in Chinese religion, a set of ideas that encompasses positive as well as negative female qualities.

As mothers, the Eternal Mother, Kuan Yin, and Ma Tsu may all be seen as unifying symbols. The sociological correlates of this unity vary but can always be interpreted as a metaphoric transformation of the relation between a mother and her children. This relation seems to have at least three salient dimensions—inclusivity, mediation, and alliance.

Inclusivity

When I use the term “inclusivity,” I am referring to the ways in which female deity cults tend to encourage notions of solidarity that cut across particularistic ties to kin groups and local communities. Terms like “inclusive” and “exclusive” are, of course, relative. In one sense, any social group that recognizes a distinction between insiders and outsiders is exclusive. For example, a village-level territorial cult is more inclusive than the several neighborhood-level parishes that it encompasses. At the same time it is exclusive vis-à-vis other village-level units. But the inclusiveness of female-deity cults is ideological rather than sociological. They recognize no legitimate ascriptive social distinctions. There are, of course, differences between the saved and the damned, the pure and the polluted, and believers and nonbelievers, but the hope is always that the latter will convert and join the former.

Female deities, unlike their male counterparts, do not favor the wealthy and influential over the poor, insiders over outsiders, or men

over women. Kuan Yin, for example, is generally described as a mother who hears the sufferings of her children, regardless of their earthly station. The Eternal Mother is similarly responsive to all who acknowledge her, and Ma Tsu, in her selfless concern for those imperiled at sea, manifests a merciful and indiscriminating personality much like Kuan Yin's and the Eternal Mother's. Moreover, in uniting groups of people who may have no other reason for solidarity, female deities are like mothers who do their best to ameliorate fraternal competition in an effort to preserve family unity.

But more enlightening in this regard than the nurturant personalities of the three deities is the nature of their constituencies. The theme of inclusivity is clearest in the case of Ma Tsu pilgrimage cults. As the focal symbol of the pan-Taiwan pilgrimage community, Ma Tsu brings together again the many groups of Taiwanese settlers who, in their own villages and market towns, worship deities that differentiate them from their neighbors.

The culturally integrating effects of pilgrimages have been elaborated in the works of Victor and Edith Turner.³³ One effect is the emergence of a higher degree of cultural unity among local systems than would otherwise exist. At the same time, pilgrimages tend to draw from areas that share at least some cultural characteristics.

In the case of Ma Tsu pilgrimages in Taiwan, the entire island is included, but there is an ethnic and potentially political tone to the pilgrimages as well. For while the Ma Tsu cult has an inclusive effect among Taiwanese (uniting otherwise competitive Hakka, Chang-chou, and Ch'üan-chou factions), it clearly differentiates Taiwanese from mainlanders who migrated to the island after the Communist revolution.³⁴ Ma Tsu, after all, is closely associated with the history of earlier Chinese migration to Taiwan from Fukien and Kwangtung, a fact that highlights differences with recent migrants who came primarily from more distant areas of China.

While not all pilgrimage cults center on female deities, those that do seem to be more numerous and popular. A Kuan Yin temple in Ta-ch'i, for example, hosts pilgrims from the surrounding townships, including many from competing subethnic groups. The home temple of the Tz'u-hui t'ang sect in Hua-lien, Taiwan, is also the object of an annual pilgrimage in honor of the Eternal Mother.

The appropriateness of female deities' association with the inclusivity of pilgrimages is implicit in the bureaucratic model of cosmology. If male deities are associated with hierarchy, authority, and legiti-

33. Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974), esp. pp. 116-230; and Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

34. Philip C. Baity (*Religion in a Chinese Town* [Taipei: Orient Cultural Service, 1975], pp. 27, 30-33) also notes that Ma Tsu ritually represents unity among diverse ethnic groups.

macy, it makes sense that, as Victor Turner puts it, "the sentiment of ultimate wholeness of the total community [be] assigned to female, especially maternal symbols."³⁵ Let me add that the subjective spirit of community that Turner attributes to the pilgrim need not be a salient motive or part of his or her experience; what is essential is the belief that the focal deity, like a mother, forgives all and grants all without distinction. The wider cultural community that emerges from pilgrimage is thus at least as much an effect of the inclusive (structurally nondiscriminating) values implicit in its core female symbol as it is a conscious goal or psychological need of its participants.³⁶

In the case of Kuan Yin worship (and, to some degree, orthodox Buddhist ritual in general) in Taiwan, the theme of inclusivity has a somewhat different social meaning. If there is a common thread uniting Buddhist temples in the Ta-ch'i area, it is that each is concerned with the ritual reintegration of people who are in some way socially anomalous or marginal. Buddhist ideology, values, and ritual provide a locus of religious (and sometimes social or psychological) identity and expression for individuals and groups that is denied by the territorial cults and rites of ancestor worship. Moreover, Buddhism's concern for individual salvation assures it an important role in the religious life not only of the socially anomalous, but also of others who see it as a necessary complement to the primarily social focus of the rituals of ancestor worship and territorial cults.

I noted earlier that the most active group of lay worshipers in the cult of Kuan Yin in Ta-ch'i are the middle-aged and elderly women who form the sutra-chanting societies. For these women the meditative chanting, the quasi-monastic vows of abstinence, and the emphasis on world rejection constitute something similar to what Sherry P. Ortner has termed a ritual of postparenthood.³⁷ Chinese women, once all their children have grown (and especially if they have moved away), are said to turn toward religion in their newfound leisure and thus prepare for

35. Victor Turner, p. 152.

36. My argument differs from Turner's on another, related point. Female deities are appropriate inclusive symbols in China not because mother figures are intrinsically and universally "antistructural," presumably because of a deep psychological or affective association growing out of universally shared childhood experiences (though this may be a contributing factor), but because of the particular meaning of motherhood (as contrasted with fatherhood) in the culture of Chinese families. Consequently, it is not surprising that resemblances between Marian cults and the cult of Kuan Yin seem most striking in Western societies where the organization of family life, particularly the role of mother, is most like that in China. On this point, see Marina Warner (n. 23 above), pp. 191, 288; and William A. Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 97-98, 207-8. J. K. Campbell (*Honor, Family, and Patronage* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1964]) provides a rich description of family life in pastoral Greece that evokes comparison with Chinese families. On the role of Mary, see pp. 342-43.

37. Sherry P. Ortner, *Sherpas through Their Rituals* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 35-60.

the next life. But why is it that women more than men turn to Kuan Yin in their later years?

Filial piety and respect for the aged are important values in Chinese family ideology. But expressions of such values notwithstanding, the transition from parenthood to postparenthood in traditional Chinese society, and even more in present-day Taiwan, often involves a major shift toward dependence on one's adult sons. For men the transition is mitigated to some degree by their retention of ownership (if not active management) of the family estate. But for women the transition is a potentially traumatic one. It is roughly at this stage of their lives that Chinese women are confronted with competition from their daughters-in-law for their son's loyalties. For aging women who feel that they are losing in the classic struggle to hold their sons, life itself may seem to lose its meaning. Margery Wolf points to rising suicide rates among late middle-aged women as evidence of this crisis in family relations, a crisis in which the balance of power in recent years is increasingly shifting against mothers-in-law.³⁸ Buddhism, with its emphasis on severing worldly ties, offers a less drastic solution to the same sorts of conflicts. It also provides a sense of community and daily contact with other members of the group. Kuan Yin, in part because of her gender, thus serves as a focal symbol for a social group not united by any formally sanctioned ties of kinship or territory in a way that patrilineal ancestors or the male deities of the territorial cults could not.

Kuan Yin is also viewed as protectress and savior of the structurally anomalous dead, particularly those who do not have descendants to care for them in the rites of ancestor worship. It is a common practice in Taiwan, for example, to place the memorial tablets and ashes of both unmarried daughters and other structurally anomalous relatives in Buddhist temples. Rituals on their behalf are performed there by monks and nuns. These souls thus receive the attention necessary to prevent them from suffering in purgatory or becoming orphaned ghosts (*ku-hun*).³⁹ At the same time, relatives are freed from placing the relics of these structural outcasts on their domestic altars, where they might offend the patrilineal ancestors.

A similar logic underlies the popularity of Buddhist temples in Taiwan's mainlander community. Like Taiwanese, mainlanders commonly place the cremated remains of deceased kin in Buddhist temples, but they may include those of lineal relatives along with those of such relatives as unmarried daughters. Many mainlanders still feel strong ties to their native places and do not wish to be buried permanently in Taiwan. Chiang K'ai-shek, for example, is said to be interred in Taiwan only until the mainland is recovered and his remains may be returned to

38. Margery Wolf, "Women and Suicide in China," in Wolf and Witke, eds. (n. 20 above), pp. 111-41, esp. p. 127.

39. Cf. Baity (n. 34 above), p. 212.

his native place. Ashes placed in an urn at a Buddhist temple may be conveniently returned to the mainland should the opportunity arise.

Buddhist temples are favored by the primarily middle-class mainlanders partly because they are associated with prestigious "great tradition" and lack the associations with "superstition" and backwardness ascribed to local Taiwanese cults. But the theme of inclusiveness is apparent in what is probably a more important reason for the popularity of Buddhist temples among mainlanders. For mainlanders, whose presence in Taiwan has effectively cut them off from the territorial cults of their own native places and from worship at the graves of their ancestors, the inclusive values of Buddhism offer a religious option that implies no ties with a particular locality. Ancestor worship, burial practices and associated beliefs, and territorial cults all reinforce strong ties to one's native place. The rootlessness of Taiwan's mainlander population thus effectively separates them from what are mainstays of religious life for most Chinese.

Kuan Yin is also important to a third anomalous group, Taiwan's Hakka minority. In my view, Kuan Yin's special prominence among Hakkas is related to their generally weaker commitment to the hierarchical values of the bureaucratic model of the universe. Minorities almost everywhere they live, Hakkas have suffered consistent social and economic discrimination, and periodic official discrimination as well.⁴⁰ In contrast to the Chang-chou and Ch'üan-chou groups in Taiwan, Hakkas have never been upwardly mobile in either bureaucratic or commercial terms. Their generally marginal economic position which is indicated by the term of reference used to describe them—*k'o-chia-jen*, meaning "guest people" or latecomers—undoubtedly contributed to their alienation from the bureaucratic structure.⁴¹

This argument also sheds some light on Kuan Yin's special appeal to young women. A common observation about Chinese women is that their position in life is never secure until they have borne a son. In a sense, then, young women who appeal to Kuan Yin to give them a son (Ma Tsu and the Eternal Mother also consider such petitions) are seeking reintegration into society. A childless woman in China is anomalous, and even if her soul technically is entitled to be worshiped on her husband's ancestral altar, without descendants her position there, as in life, is problematic.

Buddhist inclusion of the socially marginal is also extended to physically and mentally disabled people who commonly find a place as custo-

40. Cf. Myron L. Cohen, "The Hakka or 'Guest People': Dialect as a Sociocultural Variable in Southeastern China," *Ethnohistory* 15 (Summer 1968): 237-92.

41. It is also relevant in this regard that Hakkas have played a prominent role in sectarian movements in the past, notably the T'ai-ping rebellion, and continue to be prominent in the leadership and membership of sectarian cults in Taiwan.

dians and assistants in Buddhist temples. Kuan Yin is also a favorite among prostitutes, social outcasts in China as elsewhere, and no doubt there are other examples. The common theme that links these disparate groups is the unity of humanity (and, by implication, the rejection of divisive social distinctions) that arises under Kuan Yin's protection.

Mediation

The role of Chinese mothers as mediators is well developed in descriptions of Chinese family life. The authoritarian emphasis in formal ties between fathers and their children puts mothers in the position of being closer to both. Children may approach mothers with requests and problems that they dare not bring up with fathers. Mothers can nearly always be expected to side with their children, while fathers, because they occupy a structurally pivotal position, may have to take into account the conflicting interests of other members of the patrilineal group. Conversely, mothers (and elder sisters)⁴² may intercede with fathers in order to protect children from overly harsh discipline.

It should come as no surprise, then, to find female deities in the role of intercessors and mediators.⁴³ Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and the Eternal Mother, in their shared role as savior, all intercede on behalf of those who beseech their aid. Kuan Yin, as rescuer of the damned, short-circuits karmic justice and normal bureaucratic procedures of the netherworld that her children might not suffer. Ma Tsu's primary role is rescuer of the living from the cruel fate of drowning, and, like Kuan Yin, she is believed to attend to the cries of her children through her great powers of hearing and sight. The Eternal Mother, like Kuan Yin, is concerned with the salvation of her children, but she represents not so much the promise of intercession or mediation with celestial authority as the offer of a way to circumvent such authority altogether.

As mediators or intercessors, female deities are approachable in ways that bureaucratic deities are not. While one has access to the ancestors or territorial-cult deities only as a representative of a patriline or household, one can approach female deities as an individual.⁴⁴ Though all deities entertain requests for assistance, bureaucratic deities are expected to react as officials, moved in part by the intrinsic justice of the request but influenced as well by bribery and promises of payment for

42. G. William Skinner, "Filial Sons and Their Sisters: Configuration and Culture in Chinese Families" (Stanford University, Department of Anthropology, 1966), argues that sisters play an important moderating role in the socialization process by diffusing harsh paternal authority.

43. For a similar argument regarding Mary's role as mediator in Christianity, see Marina Warner (n. 23 above), esp. pp. 288, 320.

44. Cf. Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (n. 36 above), pp. 207-8 for a Christian parallel.

wishes granted. In contrast, female deities are moved less by concern for justice and the expectation of repayment than by a worshiper's devotion and dependence.

I suspect that it is this dimension of the cosmological division of labor as much as belief in women's uncleanness that accounts for male domination of leading roles in ancestral and territorial ritual. Men, after all, are the formal representatives of their lines and households and must therefore act as such in the associated cults. But women are not thereby excluded from playing a major role in ritual associated with high gods,⁴⁵ for there are few if any gods higher or more powerful than Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and the Eternal Mother, and women do play important roles in their worship. This is not to say that women do not suffer ritual discrimination as a consequence of Chinese pollution beliefs, for they do. Moreover, even in female-deity cults, men tend to take over many leading roles in public rituals.⁴⁶ But it seems to me that the distinction between men's and women's participation in deity worship is less that men co-opt ritual associated with "high gods," leaving only "low gods" to women, than that men assume leadership of the more prestigious, public rituals and leave domestic and individual worship to women. Such a view is consistent with the frequently noted observation that domestic ritual is generally the preserve of women;⁴⁷ moreover, it may partly explain the prominence of female deities, particularly Kuan Yin, as domestic icons.

Alliance

Sectarian worship of the Eternal Mother shares with worship of Ma Tsu and Kuan Yin an inclusiveness among its constituency that cuts across ties of kinship and locality. But, intriguingly, the female deity of the sectarian cults seems to embody a subversive dimension of motherhood lacking in the other two. The subversion in this case is based on an alliance between mothers and children against fathers. Margery Wolf has vividly portrayed the pivotal role that mother-son coalitions (what she terms "uterine families") play in Chinese extended families.⁴⁸ On the one hand, young mothers, outsiders in their husband's natal families, place their hopes on and reserve their affection for their sons. Boys, on the other hand, find their mothers to be sympathetic allies in confrontations with frequently overbearing, authoritarian fathers. Mothers and sons typically collude in various ways to circumvent, if not directly to

45. Ahern ("The Power and Pollution of Chinese Women" [n. 20 above]) argues that women are excluded from worshipping high gods because of their unclean status.

46. This is true even of sectarian cults that theoretically and explicitly grant equal status to women. Cf. Topley, "The Great Way of Former Heaven" (n. 18 above).

47. Cf. Maurice Freedman, *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China* (New York: Humanities Press, 1958), pp. 85–86, who notes that very exalted divinities as well as ancestors are addressed—mainly by women—in domestic rituals.

48. M. Wolf, *Women and Family in Rural Taiwan* (n. 32 above).

subvert, paternal authority. Eventually, when sons achieve maturity, mothers and sons together can exert enough influence to become the real locus of power in the household. One consequence of this shifting balance of power is that the father's natal family is pushed toward division. The cycle begins anew, of course, when sons marry and grandchildren are born.⁴⁹

The millenarian ideology of sectarian cults explicitly challenges the superiority of male celestial bureaucrats. It is thus reasonable to suggest that, just as boys learn to circumvent formal authority in the family by turning to their mothers, so, too, do members of sectarian cults seek to subvert (at least symbolically) the hierarchical structure of celestial bureaucracies through appeal to the Eternal Mother. For just as a mother exercises undeniable, though formally unrecognized power in the domestic group, so does the Eternal Mother exercise power in the Chinese pantheon. Since the Eternal Mother is mother to all the divinities, even the Jade Emperor must heed her will. To those who perceive little chance for success or happiness through orthodox routes, who lack the formal connections that ensure power and status in Chinese society, the idea of direct access to such a supernatural ally is particularly appealing.

Through most of Chinese history, millenarian cults have been concerned mainly with salvation in the next life. But if the foregoing analysis is correct, the occasional transformation of these religious sects into rebellious political movements against mundane as well as celestial authority is not difficult to understand. Just as mother-son coalitions bring about the eventual overthrow of patriarchal authority in the family, so, too, alliances between the Eternal Mother and her children bring recurring rebellion to the Chinese state.⁵⁰

But family division does not bring an end to patriliney any more than successful rebellion brings an end to the bureaucratic, hierarchical structure of the Chinese state; for, while the metaphor of uterine coalitions provides a model for rebellion, it lacks a corresponding model for an alternative structure of authority. The end result in either case, domestic or dynastic, is merely another cycle. That successful millenarian rebellions in China tended to become ideologically more orthodox as they achieved some measure of success (as, for example, in the case of the rebellion led by the founder of the Ming dynasty, Chu Yüanchang)⁵¹ can thus be attributed in part to this feature of their ideology.

49. Theodore Caplow has developed an interesting theory of coalitions in this regard. When junior coalitions (in this case, the coalition between mother and son) achieve sufficient power, they become "revolutionary" (and result in family division). See *Two Against One: Coalitions in Triads* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968).

50. For a thoroughly documented example, see Naquin (n. 17 above).

51. Cf. John W. Dardess, "The Transformation of Messianic Revolt and the Founding of the Ming Dynasty," *Journal of Asian Studies* 29 (May 1970): 539-58; Romeyn Taylor, "Social Origins of the Ming Dynasty, 1351-1360," *Monumenta Serica* 22 (1963): 1-78; and

Conclusion

In some respects, my interpretation of the significance of female deities in Chinese religion parallels Arthur Wolf's study of gods, ghosts, and ancestors. We both argue that folk cosmologies parallel the peasant's social world. However, in Wolf's analysis, this correspondence is more in the nature of a direct projection of social categories onto the supernatural—gods are officials, ancestors are kin, and ghosts are strangers. I have argued that, although female deities are maternal figures, they differ in important ways from their earthly counterparts. First, they are much more powerful than women in the mundane world. Second, they condense only the positive attributes of female gender while male deities have both positive and negative characteristics. I explained the power of female deities as similar to the power of women in domestic groups (in this case, the positive power of mothers) and their purity and perfection as a consequence of a symbolic separation of women's unifying (positive) and divisive (negative) roles.

Of course, one person's mother is another person's daughter-in-law. I think it follows that it is not women as a social category that are symbolized in female deities, but the idea of women as they stand in a particular relationship to worshipers, that is, as mothers to children. The symbolic connection is relational rather than categorical; just as mothers act as mediators, intercessors, and allies in domestic groups, so do Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and the Eternal Mother represent their own "uterine families" expanded to include all humanity, or at least the community of believers. There is thus no equivalent in the worship of female deities to the interpenetration of celestial and human realms that characterizes territorial cults, in which as Arthur Wolf puts it, "the bureaucracy of the other world is not thought of as superior to the human bureaucracy with authority over it. Rather the two are parallel systems, in which the higher-ranking members of one bureaucracy have authority over the lower-ranking members of the other."⁵² For example, a ranking official may publicly punish a celestial bureaucrat for such malfeasance as failing to bring rain. But, lacking the disruptive imperfections of actual women in their roles as wives and daughters-in-law, female deities in their perfection as virgin mothers could never be subjected to such coercive manipulation. And why should they be? As embodiments not of womanhood in general, but of motherhood, they cannot be conceived as less than totally responsive to the needs of their supplicants.

Moreover, the relation between female deities and their devotees cannot be seen as a simple projection of relations between mothers and

Robert P. Weller, "The Buddhist Alternative in Chinese Religion" (paper presented at the 78th annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Cincinnati, Ohio, November 27–December 1, 1979).

52. A. Wolf (n. 1 above), p. 144.

children because this would imply that the norms of family relations are “real” while religious ideas are not. Since “mother” is as much a cultural category as “mother-goddess,” neither symbol can be explained as derivative of the other. Also such categories cannot be said to derive directly from the behavior of women in domestic groups, but must instead be understood with reference to the social-structural norms and the religious system of which they form a part.

Nonetheless, the conflicting expectations and requirements implicit in the Chinese social categories “mother” and “wife” clearly bifurcate women’s behavior vis-à-vis domestic solidarity into unifying (mother/sister) and divisive (wife/daughter-in-law) roles. In other words, women simultaneously constitute a means for continuation of domestic groups and a threat to their solidarity. But this bifurcation is not isomorphically paralleled in sacred symbols; for while the connection between mothers as unifying forces and female deities is explicitly recognized and positively valued, women’s divisive potential as wives is implicitly denied normative legitimacy and given only an indirect (if not unconscious) religious expression in pollution beliefs. In short, female pollution beliefs do not seem to be linked to any normative model for behavior, but rather to what the Chinese (both male and female) believe women to do.

In this regard, a debate between Margery Wolf and Maurice Freedman regarding the causes of family division is crucial.⁵³ Freedman argues that Chinese perceptions of women as disruptive to domestic solidarity constitute a mystification of the real cause of division, fraternal competition. Women are blamed because the admission of tension between brothers is unthinkable. Wolf disagrees and, in my view, marshals convincing evidence to support the idea that the Chinese view of women as divisive is based on their behavior. If Wolf is correct, that is, if women are believed to be divisive because they are divisive, then I think it follows that at least some aspects of pollution beliefs are best understood with reference to what women do.

In making this point, I am not attempting to unmask Chinese systems of belief as reflections or mystifications of either social-structural norms or behavior. Chinese religion as a cultural system is not reducible to either social or psychological terms.⁵⁴ But it seems to me that the “logico-meaningful integration” of cultural systems cannot always be as clearly separated from the “causal-functional integration” of the social system as many writers have argued.⁵⁵ In the present case, for example,

53. Freedman (n. 47 above), p. 27; and M. Wolf, *Women and Family in Rural Taiwan* (n. 32 above), p. 167. For more on the dynamics of family division, see Myron L. Cohen, *House United, House Divided: The Chinese Family in Taiwan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976).

54. Cf. Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (New York: Free Press, 1951), p. 6.

55. Clifford Geertz, “Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example,” *American Anthropologist* 61 (December 1959): 991–1012; reprinted in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 142–69, esp. p. 145.

Chinese pollution beliefs become intelligible in the context of the wider system of religious symbols only when the presumably autonomous sphere of women's social action is taken into account.

It is much easier to demonstrate a logical consistency between family and religious symbols than to demonstrate a functional relationship between such symbols and people's behavior. But such issues aside, I hope that even the skeptical reader will agree, first, that this analysis establishes a connection between Chinese ambivalence toward women and the meaning of female deities and, second, that female deities are important (perhaps even necessary) counterpoints to the hierarchical, bureaucratic orthodoxies of state religion, territorial cults, and ancestor worship. By providing a ritual focus for solidarity among worshipers not united by formally recognized patrilineal or territorial ties, the cults of Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and the Eternal Mother make Chinese religion more than a sterile reification of the social order. The counterculture embodied in the worship of female deities, understandably diminished in the propaganda of the traditional Chinese establishment, should not be underestimated in anthropological studies of Chinese religion.

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