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# On the Religions of National Minorities in the Context of China's Religious History

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The People's Republic of China has recognized more than fifty population groups as national minorities; they do not represent any homogeneous entirety as is well known. The various ethnic groups differ not only by their languages, considerable diversities exist also in terms of social structure, economic systems and, last not least, in their cultural traditions. This circumstance includes of course religion. Hence it is impossible to treat the religions of China's minorities as a uniform phenomenon and survey them by a tour d'horizon. This applies especially to the present situation, as currently many religions are subject to processes of accelerated change, and consequently several aspects described in the relevant scientific literature have become obsolete in the meanwhile. That is why I should like to concentrate on one specific aspect by which the changes currently observed are placed into a wider historical context: the interrelations between cultures and religions of the national minorities on the one hand, and of the Han majority on the other hand.

## 1. Diversity of Minority Religions

The religions of China's non-Chinese population groups fall into three categories: firstly, there are the universal religions which are not restricted to a definite group. The religions to be mentioned here are Lamaism, a special form of Buddhism, which is widely spread among Tibetans and Mongols, and Islam which is found predominantly with the Uigurs, but also with other populations living in the North West, including the Hui minority<sup>1</sup>. Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity are of merely historical interest; these two religions had found followers among the population of Turkestan Central Asia, prior to the adoption of Islam during the Song period.

Many national minorities - especially in south China - do not profess any of the major universal religions but have maintained their own specific religious traditions; they represent the second category of minority religions and are termed as "tribal religions".

A third group of the population adopted the religion of the Han majority, which means that various forms of Taoism, Buddhism or the "Chinese folk religion" are found among them. I am going to investigate into this process of religious acculturation below.

## 2. Religion of the Han Nationality

Normally we are not accustomed to speak of "the religion of the Han nationality"; formulations like "Chinese religion" or "religion of China" are used instead. When contrasting Chinese religions with the religions of minorities, a remarkable problem emerges: what exactly is the meaning of the term "Chinese" in this context, and what is meant by "Chinese religions"?

The problem is not easily solved by substituting "Chinese" by "Han nationality". Han, the name by which the Chinese wanted to distinguish themselves from other population groups, came into use only after the Han dynasty (206 B.C. - 220 A.D.); we know, though, that the Han people was certainly not a homogeneous unity. The unitary state founded by the Qin dynasty and taken over by the Han dynasty constituted an institutional bracket by which various heterogeneous groups were held together. In this context it is important to remember that the change over from the Shang dynasty to the Zhou dynasty in the 11th century B.C. was not the result of an internal power game but of military encounters among various different peoples. The feudal states of the Zhou dynasty differed more or less greatly not only by their cultures and languages; also as to their religions they were anything but homogeneous. Particularly conspicuous dissimilarities existed between the central regions of the Zhou empire and the states located in the south (Chu, Wu, Yue) whose populations were "non-Chinese" (by currently applied standards), and had their own cultural traditions. In the regions under direct Zhou rule and in their satellite states too, various non-Chinese population groups continued to exist; unless expelled, they were only gradually assimilated.

Thus, the emerging Chinese culture was actually an amalgam of the traditions of various different ethnic groups that had managed to preserve their individual characters for a long time. Furthermore, from the very beginning close contacts had also existed with non-Chinese peoples who were termed "barbarians" by Chinese literature. Cultural diversity continued even after establishing the unitary state whose frontiers were expanded as far as to Vietnam: in wide parts of China's south, Han presence was confined to a number of military strongholds, whereas otherwise the country was populated by "barbarians" - the national minorities of the present time.

The reverse of the progressing penetration by Chinese settlers in the South during the first millennium was the gradual expulsion of non-Chinese population groups who were forced either further southwards or to the hill regions that were unsuitable for farming. Simultaneously, several of the "barbarians" became "civilized", as the result of administrative and educational measures taken by the Chinese; by and by they adopted Chinese habits and customs until, finally, they lost their cultural distinctiveness. They became "Chinese" during a process defined as "sinicization" by Western literature.

The same process exercised its impact on the Chinese culture too. Existing regional divergencies continued due to permanent contacts with minorities; their continuing assimilation introduced foreign elements and promoted the emergence of new regional and local traditions. So, the Hebei Chinese differed from those resident in Fujian or Yunnan not only by language but also in the realm of religion. Consequently, the political and administrative unification and centralization of the empire faced tendencies towards religious regionalization.

However, the trend of cultural regionalization was counteracted by the national traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. To be sure, the ideological relationship of the "three teachings" was one of competition, but sociologically they had more in common than was apparent at a cursory glance. Confucian officials, Buddhist monks and Taoist adepts did represent different groups of and within the Chinese society without any doubt, but all three of them had in common their conscious dedication to literary traditions and, together, they represented the philosophical and religious heritage of the Chinese national culture. The intellectual leaders of the three teachings, the outstanding representatives at that, - no matter whether officials, monks or private persons - did come from the same social stratum: they all were scholars of high level literary erudition and represented a fairly homogenous group in spite of divergent preferences, because their orientation was directed towards national traditions, meaning traditions based on literary language. The learned Confucians, Buddhists and Taoists being the intellectual elite stood for national culture in its very sense; these individuals constituted the counterpoise to tendencies aiming at cultural regionalization which existed predominantly in fringe areas.

When traditional Chinese culture is scrutinized with the eyes of ethnologists or sociologists it becomes quickly apparent that merely a relatively small percentage of the population was closely connected with the national intellectual tradition, while the great majority of the people had neither sufficient time and money, nor the necessary education that would have enabled them to dedicate themselves to studies of many years. The small elitarian group of literary erudites was concentrated mainly in the cities and central provinces. The larger the distance from cities and monasteries the less identifiable was the presence of national culture. The same applies to the area of religion. Buddhism and Taoism as professed and practised by the rural crowds were by no means identical with what the learned monks or Taoists studied from their books and described in erudite treatises. Although the folk religion could be regarded as popular forms of Buddhism or Taoism, it was, in fact, a merger of various different traditions. Many elements inherent in folk religion originated neither from Buddhism nor Taoism, not even from Confucianism but had their roots in the specific religious tradition of the group concerned. Folk religion can, therefore, be defined as a mix of national and regional elements of culture<sup>2</sup>.

### 3. Non-Chinese Elements as Factors of Regional Folk Religion

The question about the origin of elements that are not ascribable to any of the national traditions admits two possible answers: many conceptions and practices of folk religion can be traced back to times when neither Buddhism, nor Confucianism or Taoism had existed, and no uniform national culture either. Different regional cultures which were clearly identifiable in ancient times provided the base for the subsequently evolving folk religion. Another factor, which must not be neglected in this context, emanated from permanent culture contacts with and continuous integration of non-Chinese populations; consequently, new elements from various regional cultures were constantly added to the folk religion even after the creation of the unitary empire. This means that certain religious traditions of non-Chinese "minorities" were introduced into the Chinese folk religion. Let me turn to a few examples in South China, where the influence on non-Chinese elements are apparent.

The situation is quite clear in the case of priests and religious specialists. If Chinese folk religion were nothing else but a popular syncretism of national traditions, only Buddhist or Taoist priests and monks could have existed. Although Taoist priests indeed played an important role in South China, various other religious specialists were present there, and they cannot possibly be called Taoists or Buddhists. Mention has to be made of primarily the mediums of folk religion who were able to establish contacts with spirits and gods through trance or demonic possessions, thereby achieving various para-normal results. Their vocational experiences induced by specific guardian spirits, and the manner of their practices had many similarities with the shamans of ethnic minority groups, and consequently it is not surprising when Chinese sources refer to both types of specialists as "wu" meaning "witch" or "sorcerer".

Apart from the mediums, South Chinese folk religion has yet another group of important specialists who distinguish themselves not by any specific para-normal faculties but by their knowledge of certain rituals. They do not derive their status from any personal call by a deity but from their education; they must undergo a more or less long training by a master who teaches them the various rituals<sup>3</sup>.

The existence of ritual specialists and mediums side by side to be observed for example in Fujian and Taiwan shows close analogies to many South Chinese minorities. Ritual priests are, however, responsible not only for the performance of various religious ceremonies but also for transmitting traditional knowledge and mythology. Both faculties are acquired during a lengthy period of training; sometimes the office passes from father to son. The mediums or "shamans" on the other hand, generally obtain no systematic training or education, but they must have a particular psychic disposition which manifests itself in trance experiences and demonic possessions. Contrary to ritual priests, mediums are quite often females<sup>4</sup>.

Obvious similarities exist not only as to the functional dualism of religious personnel but also in their practices. Exorcism and healing of diseases are given priority by the non-Chinese population groups as well as by the practitioners of Chinese folk religion; the mediums master astounding feats, such as to lick red hot plough shares or to walk barefooted over sharp razor blades. Apart from these apparent convergences, there are, however, also marked dissimilarities. In this connection the existence of Taoist and Buddhist priests in the Chinese folk religion, in addition to the above mentioned practitioners should be remarked. It should not be overlooked either that the folk religion shows some tendency towards regarding its ritual priests as a type of local - although heterodox - Taoists, which implies that these figure as representatives of the national tradition.

Closer scrutiny reveals, however, that the dissimilarities to the religions of the non-Chinese population are not so significant as would appear at the first glance. This becomes quite apparent if we compare several minority groups that are currently subject to various differing stages of the sinicization process. The Miao of Hunan, for example, have also Taoist priests who officiate side by side with local ritual priests. The activities of the two overlap in the provinces of exorcism and healing<sup>5</sup>; the point is that in this area the Taoists have broken the monopoly originally held by the local ritual specialists; the entailing situation of competition will be detrimental to indigeneous priests in the long run.

The sinicization process of the Nong in Yunnan has reached a more advanced stage. Besides traditional local ritual experts, Taoist and Buddhist priests have also become active and largely taken over the function of local priests; they are beginning to replace the latter. The process has advanced to an extent where local priests are permitted to practice only if they received seal and approval by a Taoist<sup>6</sup>. Taoists have already gained pre-eminence over the local priesthood whose integration is in full flow. From that level it takes only a small step to arrive at a point similar to the situation in Fujian and Taiwan where traditional local exorcists and ritual priests are considered members of "heterodox" Taoist sects notwithstanding that they have very little in common with the literary tradition of Taoism<sup>7</sup>. The local priesthood has lost its independence, at least formally, and the regional folk religion is subordinated to the national tradition.

On the other hand it is important to note that this type of integration has been merely a formal and terminological one in many aspects. Calling local priests "Taoists" or their approbation by Taoists does not necessarily imply that they would automatically adopt the religious conceptions and practices of the Taoist tradition. On the contrary, it can be observed that Taoist priests in competition with local priests are inclined to adopt the *latter's* ritual practices and thereby also the religious ideas of the local population<sup>8</sup>. The belief that disease, infertility and other disasters were caused by demons and non-pacified

spirits of the deceased is a typical element of South Chinese folk religion and closely interrelated with the great significance of exorcistic practices as well as the appeasement of dangerous spirits by offerings and sacrifices. Neither these conceptions nor the practices can be traced back to any of the orthodox traditions of national Chinese culture. In Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism alike, illness and disaster were considered the results of and retributions for man's moral failures. Demons figured as the executors of deserved punishment but not as autonomous incentive powers. Despite repeated prohibitive measures and of partly massive attacks against the "demon cults", all efforts failed to eliminate these elements from folk religion.

The belief in demons and in spirits of the dead causing illness and bad luck is a central item in the religions of all South Chinese minority groups. This is why the implementation of precautionary measures to avert evil spirits by pacifying sacrifices and exorcism is a most important duty of local priests and shamans<sup>9</sup>. As to this specific aspect, Chinese folk religion was obviously more closely related to the religions of non-Chinese populations than to the national traditions inherent in the orthodox forms of Buddhism and Taoism, let alone Confucianism.

More parallels could be identified, for example, in connection with burial practices or mythological themes. The examples outlined above should, however, suffice to back up the statement that regional folk religion of South China contains numerous elements of neither Taoist nor Buddhist origins, whereas conspicuous similarities obviously exist to religious conceptions and practices of non-Chinese peoples; hence it may be justifiably assumed that these elements - at least partly - are adoptions from non-Chinese cultures or survivals of ancient regional or local traditions.

#### 4. Chinese Influences on the Religions of National Minorities

There is no doubt about it that Chinese folk religion has been influenced by non-Chinese peoples. The reverse process, however, is much more obvious, namely the impact of national Chinese culture on cultures and religions of ethnic minorities.

A characteristic example has been outlined above: the gradually advancing penetration by Taoist and - occasionally - Buddhist priests who take over - fully or partly - the functions of the local ritual experts. This process may reach an extent where, finally, in the hierarchical order Taoists will rank higher than the priests representing local traditions, which amounts - at last superficially - to a formal integration of the local religion into Chinese culture. As a rule, also the names of Chinese gods are taken over along with the process, which, however, does not imply that orthodox Buddhist or Taoist conceptions of God would be accepted. On the contrary, deities of a group's

indigenous tradition would in most cases be identified with Chinese gods, which is to say, they are given Chinese names while cult practices would not be affected. In the case of the originally Buddhist conceptions of the Chinese relating to the afterlife the impact seems to be more radical. The belief in hell and great judgement in the netherworld, involving punishments to expiate culpable actions during an individual's lifetime, has become an intrinsic aspect within the world-views of many minority groups. In this connection certain burial rites were often adopted (Chinese Buddhistic ones and Lamaistic ones in South West China) with the intention to ensure favourable conditions for the dead in the other world.

It would be easy to enumerate many more examples where elements of Chinese religions were included into the religions of non-Chinese groups, shaping their religious lives to an extent of almost complete merger with Chinese folk religion. In its historic dimension, the tendency towards the gradual assimilation to the Chinese religion indicates a trend which itself is part of a comprehensive sinicization process. According to my thesis, religious acculturation of the non-Chinese populations will be the crucial factor in this sinicization process, or formulated the other way round, the elimination of indigenous religions is the preliminary condition for sinicization.

This assumption is easily substantiated by defining "sinicization" as the decay of an indigenous culture and its integration into Chinese culture. The cultural and religious elites, being the prime carriers of traditional culture, play a strategically most important part in this process. It concerns primarily the local priests and shamans who are responsible for the preservation and transmission of traditional knowledge. It is them who have profound knowledge of mythology, the divine world and ritual norms besides being competent in the art of healing, astrology and calendarization. Hence it is easy to understand why local priests are simultaneously teachers and educators as, for example, in the case of the Yao<sup>10</sup>.

The increasing importance gained by Taoist and - occasionally - Buddhist priests who have come to be active working side by side with the traditional priesthood, and the progressing adaption to Chinese folk religion entail a decisive cultural re-orientation. Even though, initially, religious practices are hardly affected, autonomy and integrity of local traditions will be weakened crucially, nonetheless: Chinese tradition becomes increasingly normative and gains model character. It is not only apparent in advanced stages of the process, when local priests rank hierarchically lower than Taoists, but also in earlier phases: there are, for example, instances where it adds to the prestige of local priests if they use Taoist texts when performing their rites, even though they would hardly know the Chinese language and they cannot, therefore, read the texts but have to memorize them<sup>11</sup>. Thereby, Chinese culture is implicitly rated higher, and strange enough, emanating from within the very group supposed to be the principal carrier of the native tradition.

Religious acculturation is thus not only the preliminary condition for the loss of cultural identity but to a large degree also its implementation. It becomes apparent when considering these processes in their historic perspective: the traditional differentiation between Chinese people and barbarians, i.e. non-Chinese, is not based on race or any other "natural" divergencies, but defined culturally. All people outside the Chinese cosmos were called barbarians. Their uncivilized state was manifested *inter alia* by the fact that these people did not follow the supposedly universe customs of the Chinese in which context family structure and mourning habits were considered particularly significant. The barbarians refused also to recognize the specific type of world interpretation as transmitted by Chinese scriptures, and usually, they did not even know the Chinese language and script. Finally, they were not willing to submit to the authority of the Chinese central government, whereby this latter aspect was less important for the definition of barbarians and their discrimination than the other points outlined above.

Being established that the differences between the Chinese people and barbarians were predominately cultural ones - inasmuch as the barbarians were the people who had not realized the Chinese cosmos to be normative and valid for all the world - barbarians ceased being barbarians as soon as they were integrated into precisely that cosmos: they became Chinese.

Accordingly, China's traditional policy towards her non-Chinese populations in the South did not only aim at military and administrative control, but primarily at their cultural integration. The purpose of measures directed at the "civilization of the barbarians" was to make the local populations accept the normative conceptions of the Chinese shaped by Confucianism and to recognize them as obligatory. The measures included the enforcement of dress regulations, and they were to counteract liberal contacts between the sexes; mourning customs were "improved" in the same way as the family structure which was to follow the Chinese pattern<sup>12</sup>.

In addition to Confucianization of social norms attempts were made to educate local elites which would be orientated primarily to Chinese national culture and identify themselves with it. Political leaders were honoured for good conduct with Chinese titles, their children were readily provided Chinese education, and the knowledge of literary Chinese tradition was awarded by admission to civil services which meant increased prestige. At the same time it was obviously necessary to deprive the traditional cultural elites, the priests and shamans, of their influence. Against this background, the numerous campaigns to fight "witchcraft and sorcery", to suppress "licentious" cults and "demon worship" become intelligible<sup>13</sup>. Local religions and their officials were the backbone of cultural identity, and if cultural integration were to be achieved it was imperative to break the indigenous traditions represented by them. The successful merger of traditional local religions and Chinese folk religion sealed the doom of cultural identity and autonomy in a twofold way:

on the one hand, the local ritual priests and shamans lost their monopoly on world-interpretation, parallel to the advancement of Buddhist and Taoist priests. The very institutions decayed which were responsible for administration and transmission of intellectual culture. Subsequently, not only the political but the cultural elites as well oriented themselves to national Chinese tradition.

On the other hand, traditional deities and spirits were given Chinese names or were substituted by Chinese gods. As a result, the indigenous gods and their cults became useless as symbols of group identity. Briefly formulated it might be said that in the same measure in which the pantheon, the priests and the rites became Chinese, the believers ceased to be non-Chinese.

## 5. Religion and China's Minority Policy

Concludingly and based on the above reflections I should like to raise a few questions concerning the current situation of ethnic minorities and their religions in China's south. I am unable to answer most of the questions myself due to the lack of information but I feel they should - at least - be put to discussion.

As outlined above, the religions of all minorities were subject to more or less strong Chinese influences during past centuries. The resultant degrees of sinicization differ accordingly: the wide spectrum of various stages reaches from societies whose genuine religious traditions have survived relatively unaffected, to groups whose religions have become very similar to the religion of the local Chinese population. The continuing transmutation of minority religions at the one end into Chinese folk religion at the other end is quite obvious.

It is known that non-Chinese minorities have been assured cultural autonomy by the official policy of the People's Republic of China. The question arising in this context is whether and to what degree the right of cultural autonomy includes the maintenance of traditional religious practices. This aspect is not very clear, because, officially, the Chinese government professes a policy of religious freedom which, *expressis verbis*, covers only the great religious traditions - Buddhism, Taoism, Islam and Christianity. The decree of religious freedom does not include the protection of so-called "superstitions", i.e. the majority of what I have termed folk religion: healing of diseases by exorcism, divination, shamanism, and, in particular, the "cult of demons" come within this category.

Using official terminology, all indigenous religions of South Chinese minorities would have to be described as "superstitions", since they do not belong to any of the great religious traditions, and are marked by precisely those "superstitious" elements which also pertain to the Chinese folk religion. The question arising in this context is whether the combat against "superstition"

is directed at the religions of minorities too. The answer to this question is of great importance because - as has become apparent - indigenous religious tradition (including shamans and exorcists) operates as the decisive factor as to the maintenance of cultural identity. The drive against this type of "superstition" would not mean anything else but the continuance of the Confucian policy of "civilizing barbarians". One could certainly not speak of cultural autonomy.

My own information on the problem is poor, as mentioned above. There are, however, indications of a certain continuity in the policies beginning with the Confucian State to the Republic and finally to the People's Republic, and this continuity seems to be more pronounced than would appear at the first glance.

## Annotations and References

1. The Hui nationality is not an independent ethnic or linguistic group but differs from the Han majority only by the fact that it professes Islam. This underlines the significance of cultural factors in the question of who has to be considered "Chinese" (Han).
2. The historical interrelation of non-Chinese and Chinese religious traditions will be dealt with in some detail in my article "Religion und kulturelle Integration in China. Die Sinisierung Fujians und die Integration der chinesischen Nationalkultur", in: *Saeculum* (in press).
3. On religious specialists of folk religions refer to J.J.M. de Groot: *The Religious System of China*, Vol. 6 (Reprint 1972, Taipei), p. 1187 ff.
4. See Gernot Prunner: *Die Religionen der Minderheiten des südlichen China*, in: Andreas Höfer, Gernot Prunner, et al., *Die Religionen Südostasiens* (Religionen der Menschheit, 23), Stuttgart 1975: 133- 246, 159-151
5. Prunner, *ibid.*, 1975:210
6. Prunner, *ibid.*, 1975:190 f.
7. See Michael Saso, *The Teachings of Taoist Master Chuang*, New Haven/London, 1978:60
8. Refer to Hubert Seiwert: *Volksreligion und Nationale Tradition in Taiwan*, Wiesbaden 1985, 127-138.
9. See e.g. Prunner et al., 190-194; Wang Wing Chou: *Yao Religion and Education*, in: *Lingnam Science Journal*, 18, (Canton) 1939:397- 408/403-405
10. Wang, *ibid.*, 1939:400 ff.
11. Wang, *ibid.*, 1939:399 ff.
12. Refer to Hisayuki Miyakawa, *The Confucianization of South China*, in: *The Confucian Persuasion*, ed. by A.F. Wright, Stanford, 1960:21-46
13. See Rudolf Herzer, *Zur Frage der ungesetzlichen Opfer yin-szu und ungesetzlich errichteten Kultstätten yin-tz'u*. Phil. Dissertation FU Berlin, Hamburg 1963:25-46