Southern Fujian: Reproduction of Traditions in Post-Mao China

C. Fred Blake

China Review International, Volume 14, Number 2, Fall 2007, pp. 558-561 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: 10.1353/cri.0.0066

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/cri/summary/v014/14.2.blake.html

One of the intriguing questions in the anthropology of China is how China sustained its sense of unity over the millennia despite its diversity of cultures and languages. The question becomes more acute in the twentieth-century shift from dynastic to republican formations, a shift that valorized local traditions along with the work of anthropology. The book in hand looks at how local communities in the Quanzhou area of southern Fujian (Minnan) negotiate their traditions vis-à-vis the higher orders of political and economic power, especially since the end of the Mao era.

In the first chapter, “Great Tradition and Its Enemy,” Wang Mingming describes how state agencies try to shape Quanzhou traditions to maximize tourism, manage the government’s political agenda, and elevate the cultural tastes of ordinary people. In one of many examples, the Quanzhou Bureau of Culture selected the city’s Tianhou temple to refurbish its religious value and also to serve as a museum exhibiting the region’s cultural connections with Taiwan. Higher levels of government re-created festivals and promoted new forms of mass entertainment to compete with the people’s traditional festivities, considered by the state as backward and superstitious. Wang’s provocative term, “enemy,” refers to the ways in which China’s ruling regimes, first imperial, later republican, attempt(ed) to “civilize” then to “mobilize” the masses while declaring heterodox their local traditions and religion-based organizations.

The next chapter by Fan Ke takes a different tack. Here the state agencies are complicit in local efforts to revitalize the Ding-lineage, ancestral cult under the aegis of minority (ethnic Islamic) status. Ancestral cults are generally prohibited by the state because they are regarded as pernicious and backward, but in the case of the Ding-surname group, agents of the state and local leaders finagle their ostensibly opposing interests in ways that facilitate de facto the revitalization of the Ding ancestral cult, which includes refurbishing halls, collating and publishing genealogy, and re-siting graves. For example, the local ceremonies for the 1997 Spring Festival celebrated the publication of a Ding-lineage genealogy. The township’s party secretary welcomed the publication, which he referred to as a “gazetteer” instead of a “genealogy.” Compiling historical records to write a local gazetteer is politically correct. Compiling genealogy is not. Or as one township cadre told the author concerning revitalizing the ancestral cult, “We try not to look at them when they are doing things like this since they are a minority nationality” (p. 56).

Fan Ke analyzes how each level in the political structure of revitalization participates: From below, the “folk agency” uses its Hui minority status to extenu-
ate official proscriptions on reconstituting the ancestral cult. The ancestral cult and lineage organization continues to retain Chinese identity despite decades of official efforts, from above, to shift the grounds of Chinese identity to affiliation with a nationality or ethnic group. Fan challenges the idea that marginal or grassroots voices—here, the Ding lineage who are ethnic Hui—constitute a form of resistance against hegemonic discourses. Ding-lineage ancestral rites have been completely rescripted in terms of ideologically correct offerings, changes of venue, dress, and hall function to combine with a celebration of the Ding people’s Hui identity. “Therefore, one can always find ways to do things in a direction welcomed by both the state and the ordinary people” (p. 59).

Pan Hongli continues this theme in chapter 3 by showing how lineage revival for the Han majority is accomplished under the umbrella of the Old Folks’ Association (Laorenhui) found in many parts of China. Pan illustrates this widespread pattern in his study of Rongqing township near Quanzhou, dominated by a single surname. The lineage system was replaced by the system of collective production during the Mao period, which afterwards was replaced by new civic associations like the Old Folks Association. This association has developed a multiplicity of civic functions and acts as the major conduit between local society and state agencies. Therefore, despite the upheavals in rural social life, we can see remarkable continuity with the old lineage system in the way the Old Folks Association elevates elders to positions of influence. The fact that most members of the local Old Folks Association are agnates facilitates the reestablishment of their ancestral lineage. Thus, the Old Folks Association provides the milieu and the cover within which the lineage system reconstitutes itself. It mediates and cushions the bureaucratic operation of the state and the traditionalism of social life.

In the next chapter, Tan Chee-Beng provides a scenario that seems less vexed by state intervention, which is likely due to Tan’s sense of question and the fact that the place he studied is furthest removed from the urban scene. The religious traditions in a single-surname village are fundamental to its social life, and they are not revivals of traditions that disappeared under the ultra-left, but “re-expressions” of what were merely suppressed, although suppression took a certain toll on the continuity of worship practices. The religious forms are continuously shaped by changing social relations. Religious activities, which were shaped by production teams originally organized around lineage segments, now increasingly center on individual family or joint households. A poignant expression of this narrowed focus is the ritual attention paid to the Bedroom Guardian Spirit for the protection of children. The intensification of this rite, Tan believes, is due to the state policy that limits birthing, which makes protecting the lives of children more imperative. Tan is devoted to describing the religious expressions that envelop villagers’ lives with meaning and a sense of solidarity, a psychological and social function of which villagers themselves are entirely cognizant.

The last three chapters are about Minnan women. Kuah Khun Eng continues the theme that economic development helps to fuel the revival of popular religion,
in this case large communal religious fairs and ancestral worship in the emigrant villages of Anxi County, west of Quanzhou. The financial backing for this revitalization effort comes from overseas relatives, which gives the effort political cover since local officials welcome the flow of foreign money into the regional economy. Kuah's main point is to show how religion arguably rules the lives of these villagers, and how the revival of public religious festivities has redounded to the work of women and elevated their social position in the last few decades. Kuah emphasizes that this is a big change for women since the conduct of public festivities was in the hands of men in “traditional China.” Kuah's assertions should be read, in my view, as conjectures since the author offers little exact information on which or how many leadership positions women take in organizing public religious festivities. A number of questions come to mind. For example, what kind of status does leadership in public religious festivities confer on persons in the post-1979 milieu? Kuah richly describes how older women lay out offerings at public festivities and thus display a genuine religiosity, while younger persons show indifference to the religiosity or merely enjoy the commotion, and most villagers, not to mention local officials, see it as “a means to an end,” the accumulation of “socioeconomic capital” (p. 141). This picture seems consonant with “traditional China,” so, it is not clear how or why, short of any explanatory theory, participation in public religious festivals has changed women's standing.

In the penultimate chapter, the patriarchal system reproduces itself in the life-worlds of Quanzhou area women whose husbands sojourned abroad. Siumi Maria Tam narrates the life histories of women whose labored lives were spent separated from husbands due to changing circumstances of national and international political economies. Husbands seeking work in the Philippines often left wives with children behind to eke out a living with little or no help from husbands abroad. These wives are found at all points of the sojourners' route: many stay in the home village; others end up living at the point of transit, in Hong Kong; and a few venture overseas, where they encounter their husbands' overseas wives and families. These women, nonetheless, regarded themselves as keepers of their husbands' families, and as such they “helped to construct and maintain the Minnan patriarchal world in which female individuality had no place.” Yet, paradoxically, they “became successful entrepreneurs, calculating mothers…and managers of kinship networks” (p. 145). Tam documents her narrative with the voices of her interviewees. In the process, she theorizes a feminist sensibility that holds accountable a culture that does not recognize persons as substantive individuals but only as nexuses of social relations grounded in patriarchal precepts. Tam makes the reader understand that her interviewees do not see their plight conditioned by the patriarchal system but rather in terms of personal fate. The outstanding question goes to the heart of anthropology: How and why does the patriarchal system, under these circumstances or any other circumstances, turn itself into personal fates?
The last chapter analyzes how the women of Xunpu fishing village have raised their status, especially since 1979. Ding Yuling argues that the rise in the status of the women with whom she worked is due to their relation to the means of production. Women control the sea-farming (mainly oyster beds) and also the trade in seafood. Although labor intensive, the control over the production and trade is in women’s hands, while their male counterparts concentrate on the more technologically intensive deep sea fishing. The separate control over the means of production is amplified by the extended periods men spend working away from home, which leave women taking care of the domestic routine outside the constant purview of male counterparts, although both women and men shoulder economic responsibility for the family. In this way, “women attain economic independence” (p. 163). Still, this sense of control does not extend to village administration, which remains in men’s hands. Although Ding’s thesis is that women are much more independent than under the feudal system, we need a more nuanced analysis of the differences between this class of laboring women today and in the historical past. Given the limitations of space, Ding, nonetheless, provides a rich and compelling description of women’s labor. Ding’s descriptive analysis finally addresses most cogently the pressing question, how do modes of production affect the people’s social and cultural lives?

Each chapter in this book, based on fieldwork by a different anthropologist, develops the common thread of revitalization and change in expressions of Quanzhou regional culture and social organization. The rationale behind the book, according to Tan’s introduction, is to provide the anthropological view of traditional culture in a region that is undergoing economic development at breakneck speed. The book’s theme is all the more significant because it looks at the cultural traditions in the context of this development and finds that the economic development facilitates the revival of religious customs and draws attention to the work of women, just as it lets loose political and economic forces that challenge and distort the old customs and organizations. Although there is no overall or explicit theorization of these relationships, many of the discussants employ the terms of practice theory in framing an empirical problem and describing the dynamic tensions, mediations, transpositions, and mutual finagling between official agents and “folk agents” of the Quanzhou region. As for Quanzhou culture and society, there are references to its uniqueness, but other than the effects of its maritime orientation, it seems to me that every generality that can be adduced about Minnan or Quanzhou tradition is transposable to what being Chinese is like in other places, near and far.

C. Fred Blake

C. Fred Blake is with the Department of Anthropology at the University of Hawai‘i. He specializes in the anthropology of China with special interest in political economy and religion.