

Book Review.... see starting  
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**Folk Religion in an Urban Setting.** By M. I. Berkowitz, F. P. Brandauer, J. H. Reed.  
Hong Kong: Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, 1969. pp. 167. \$4.00.

What would happen to the religious beliefs and practices of a group of Chinese villagers if they were suddenly forced to abandon their several isolated villages and move together into resettlement apartments in the heart of a bustling town? In 1967 six Hakka villages

situated around the shoreline of remote Plover Cove in the New Territories of Hong Kong were closed by the government in order to construct the Plover Cove Reservoir. The six hundred and ten inhabitants were moved to newly constructed apartments in Tai Po Market, a town serving a population of 50,000 or more people as marketing, communication, and social centre. Realizing that the situation was close to ideal for a sociological study of the effects of urbanization on rural culture, Dr. Morris I. Berkowitz of Chung Chi College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, immediately began some research projects. Shortly afterwards, the Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture began to plan a study of the situation as a first step in a programme to understand the total religious situation in Hong Kong. The Study Centre eventually obtained the agreement of Dr. Berkowitz, Mr. John Reed, a young sociologist under appointment to Hong Kong by the American Baptist Mission, and Mr. Frederick Brandauer of the Study Centre staff to work together on the project.

The religion in Chinese villages is so "diffused" and merged with concepts and structures of secular institutions that it is exceptionally difficult to separate the religious institutions from other social ones. Thus, in the opening chapter the authors try to establish a working definition of religion to use as a criterion throughout. The discussion of sociological definitions of religion is interesting and the references to various authorities whet one's appetite to pursue the subject further but in the end one is left with less than a clear idea of the authors' conceptual screen for sifting out the distinctively religious institutions from the rest. Fortunately, in the actual reporting that comprises the bulk of the book the authors, if anything, have erred on the side of liberality in their selection with the result that the reader gets a more comprehensive picture of the life of the villagers than he would have if the definition of religion were too narrow or rigid. The only danger might be in a reader wrongly thinking that some of the practices described are part of Chinese religion. For example, among the *rites de passage* described in Chapter V are some customs such as the traditional assembling of the marriage bed which are probably no more religions than the western custom of throwing confetti.

The second chapter of the book consists in a detailed description of the history, physical environment, patterns of social interaction and economic conditions in the villages and in Tai Po. Here, as in all succeeding chapters, the approach taken is a straight forward "before" and "after" approach that clearly indicates the consequences of the forced migration on the life of the people especially as it is focused in the family. The changes in economic opportunity, in social horizons and even in medical care and diet are described, presumably because they underlie some of the changes in religious belief and practice dealt with in the remaining chapters of the book.

The authors comment on the influence of secularization on religion at several points but refrain from any extensive theorizing about it. There is no concluding chapter in the book. Conclusions are made "piecemeal", so to speak, and scattered throughout the book rather than organized together in support of a thesis. As a result, the reader cannot easily summarize the results of the urbanization except perhaps to say that secularization certainly did take place as a result of the move from the villages to the town. One wonders if the strictly sociological observations might not have been enhanced by some theological interpretation, as well as *vice versa*, in order to better fulfil the aims of the Christian Study Centre to understand the religious situation of the Chinese people. Understanding is at least as much a matter of interpretation as it is of pure observation. However, this book explicitly claims to be strictly a sociological undertaking so one cannot accuse the authors of failing their stated purpose. It may be the publisher whose purposes are not fully realized by the "naturalistic approach" within a framework of "structural-functionalism."

The above reservations aside, the book is immensely interesting and could be very useful as a concise reference work for the "little tradition" of Chinese religion, that is, the religion of the peasant masses. The celebration of yearly festivals, the worship of supernatural beings, the *rites de passage*, ancestor worship and related practices are all described in the "before" and "after" context. Frequent references are made to classical studies of the various subjects in addition to substantial detail about the variations peculiar to the villagers. There are a lot of fascinating portraits of individuals and institutions involved in drastic change.

A section of particular interest to Christians deals with "Christian Missionary Efforts" among the villagers. Here, the lack of influence of Christianity on the villagers is traced to their feeling that Christianity is "confusing and complex" and to the inept and inappropriate methods of the sect-related mission centre which managed only to "amuse and annoy" the villagers.

The chapter dealing with the worship of supernatural beings was most interesting to this reader because the question of secularization is more crucially relevant to the matter of believing in God or gods than to the other subjects dealt with such as festivals or *rites de passage*. The conclusions reached in this chapter are worth quoting in part.

Indications are that the former local deities of Plover Cove no longer play an active part in the lives of the resettled villagers. The function which these deities served in the old environment is either no longer needed or has been assumed in some other way. One person made the revealing comment that people are now better educated than before. At the time of illness they no longer pray to the Bo Gong but go to a physician instead. At least one person associated sending the dieties to heaven with greater religious freedom.

The fact that the study was completed only a year or so after the villagers moved to Tai Po must be regarded as something of a limitation as far as the conclusions are concerned. No doubt the basic trends were established in the first year after the move but there must be a possibility of some re-establishing of lapsed beliefs and practices after the initial shock of change has worn off. At one point the authors dare to speculate about the possible development in the future.

This breakdown of traditionalism in ritual practices, however, may not herald the complete decline of all traditional religious practices. The villagers, allowed to choose what to each individual seems a "comfortable" religion, are likely eventually to have a highly egocentric religion based upon each individual's private concerns and emotional needs. What will survive will probably be scattered and partial representations of the total tradition.

Perhaps a future study will one day confirm this prophecy.

To sum up, this book is well worth reading. It is a good introduction to the religion of the ordinary Chinese people as distinct from the "great tradition" of Chinese religion. It would be a valuable addition to any course on the sociology of religion. While it may not rank with the great sociological studies such as *Middle Town* or *Crestwood Heights* it is one of the relatively rare studies of Chinese villagers. It has a very useful bibliography which lists many of the available books and articles about Chinese religion.

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