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"GREAT" AND "LITTLE", "GRID" AND "GROUP": Defining the Poles of the Elite-Popular Continuum in Chinese Religion

This essay aims to express what is, at first sight, a simple insight: when viewed from the perspective of Mary Douglas' grid/group cosmological typology, China's quintessential "great tradition," the Literati Tradition, betrays a preponderance of "grid" features, while the "little tradition" in Chinese religion betrays a preponderance of "group" features. However, exploring this insight against the background of recent refinements in theory concerning the elite-popular continuum in traditional Chinese culture turns out to be a complex matter indeed. Thus, in what follows, it will be necessary, first, to summarize Douglas' grid/group typology, second, to review some of the ways in which application of the elite-popular division to Chinese culture has been refined, and then, finally, to consider how we can further refine our thinking in this area with the help of Douglas' typology.

GROUP AND GRID

In *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, Mary Douglas presents a model for showing the extent to which the social experience of people determines their cosmological views. the model is best approached through its two variables: group and grid. As indicators of the nature of social experience, group and grid refer to the way in which one's identity, one's sense of self, is defined within a society. Where the group variable is strong, one is acutely aware of being part of a bounded unit, an ingroup clearly distinguished from other groups (as in a clan or caste system) or from the entire outside world (as in radical sectarianism). Relations with those outside the group will be guarded, but, within the group, the

rules of interpersonal relations are poorly articulated. Where the grid variable is strong, one's sense of self is conditioned by a system of differentiations based on such classificatory factors as age, sex and hierarchical status. There is careful articulation of rules for interactions within the group and, partly as a result, a stronger possibility of fluid relations with outsiders.[1]

Other salient features of Douglas' model can be explained by considering the four ideal social types at which she arrives by combining her two variables: (1)strong group and grid; (2) strong group, weak grid; (3) strong grid, weak group; (4) and weak group and grid. The first type (strong group and grid) and fourth type (weak group and grid) are important ideal opposites. But the second and third types, differently balancing group and grid features in various ways, are more important for differentiating among the actual societies that one confronts in research. Therefore, in explaining Douglas' models, I will emphasize the second type (strong group, weak grid) and the third type (strong grid, weak group), calling them the "group-oriented" and "grid-oriented" types, respectively.

The first social type, with grid and group determinants of personal identity both operating at full strength, is linked with what Douglas calls a "complex regulative cosmos." The cosmology in question is "rational" as well as "regulative," routinely providing punishments for misdeeds and rewards for good deeds. It depicts a world that is "dangerous for the rebel, good for the conformist," replicating in cosmology the maximal determination of roles that is found at the level of social experience. This is the cosmology, Douglas tells us, that anthropologists expect to find and most often describe. In a sense, every cosmology is a variant of it. As Douglas says, it "tends to provide the model on which [anthropologists] assess the deviant character of other systems."[2] She has little else to say about it, perhaps feeling, as I do, that the differences between the cosmologies of various social groups are best identified by determining the extent to which each one is, on balance, group-oriented or grid-oriented.

In describing the group-oriented type, Douglas is most fascinated with its propensity toward using the symbolism of the physical body for expressing the inviolability of the body social. Indeed, it was just this with which she was

[1]Mary Douglas. *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. (New York: Pantheon, 1982; previously 1970 and 1973), pp. 57-61.

[2]*Ibid.*, p. 105.

concerned in her earlier book, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, where she asserted that "the body is a model which can stand for any bounded system."[3] The tendency to use the body to express group inviolability is marked by rituals enforcing bodily purity as well as dietary rules regulating what kinds of food and drink may enter the body. It is also usually accompanied by the idea that divinity is separate from the world and anthropomorphic in nature; by a view of evil which associates problems within the physical or social body with external enemies (demons or witches); and by metaphysical dualisms (good and evil, spirit and matter, spiritual inner self and corporeal outer self, this-worldly misery and otherworldly bliss).

We should not be surprised that these are among the qualities of "religion" as such, according to the criteria of the average person in our society. After all, ancient textual tradition as well as recent history in the Judeo-Christian tradition reveal "group" roots. The Hebrew Scriptures were the product of a community that had strong concern with distinguishing itself from its neighbors; the Christian Scriptures were no less the product of such a community; and many of the Protestant groups that have so dominated American religious history were born of a radically sectarian ingroup/outgroup consciousness.

Just as the group-oriented cosmology has much to recommend it as an ostensibly " religious" one, the grid-oriented cosmology has a seemingly pragmatic "secular" tone. It lacks key features of the group-oriented type, paying more attention to impersonal rules of cosmic operation than to judgemental acts of anthropomorphic deities, showing little concern for witches or demons, and shunning fixed metaphysical dualisms. It approves of efforts to manipulate cosmic forces to one's own advantage, reflecting a "grid" concern at the social level for advancing oneself by mastering the rules of social interactions. Moreover, the grid-oriented society views itself as part of a larger cosmic network. Its members are believed to bring misfortune on themselves through failure to master the rules of the network. "Evil", if we can call it that, is attributed more to ignorance than to either sin or witchcraft. "Good", on the other hand, is tantamount to success accomplished on the basis of a superior knowledge of the rules of cosmic operation.[4]

[3]Mary Douglas. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), p. 115.

[4]Douglas. *Natural Symbols*, pp. 125-139.

Douglas even refers to a "success cosmology" as prevailing in societies of the type in question. Using the example of Melanesian societies that are built around a kind of individual called the "Big Man," she states:

> Everyone else depends on the Big Man for their livelihood and security. He creates the political and ritual framework in which ordinary men can work out their cycles, patterns of reciprocal exchanges in grander and grander patterns. His glory enhances the lustre of theirs. He creates large-scale local alliances, controls violence, settles disputes. He does it all by generosity, hard work, skillful manipulation of the rules of feastgiving and compensation.[5]

Some inevitably experience the ladder of success as something oppressive; for the success cosmology is built on an egalitarian principle that can never favor more than a small minority. Its survival, Douglas concludes, depends on recurrent millenarian outbreaks, such as those of the so-called "Melanesian cargo cults."[6] To explain this, I must make brief reference to her fourth type: weak group and grid.

Those who come to experience the social grid as oppressive give expression to their experience of social marginality by means of a "weak group, weak grid" type of cosmology. They reject all rules and differentiations, embrace the idea of an imminent benign unstructured cosmos, and stress ecstatic or even frenzied behavior in acting out, or attempting to bring in, the millennium. Obviously, neither they nor their cosmology can last for long. Thus, as already noted, the "weak group, weak grid" social and cosmological type frequently exists as a temporary negative reaction to the grid-oriented one.

THE ELITE-POPULAR DIVISION IN THE CHINESE CASE

Even before I present any evidence, some will sense that correlations exist, on the one hand, between Douglas' grid-oriented cosmology and the world view of traditional China's literati elite and, on the other hand, between her group-oriented cosmology and aspects of Chinese popular religion. The value of these

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 128.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 137-139.

correlations will be small, however, if the elite-popular division itself is essentially flawed or, perhaps, irrelevant to the Chinese case.

When the shortcomings of a prevailing theory become evident, there is a tendency for scholars to reject it using the same kind of enthusiasm with which they once embraced it. I consider this a major reason for recent attacks on the elite-popular division, especially Redfield's great tradition *versus* little tradition version of this division. I believe it will weather the current storm over its shortcomings and re-emerge in strengthened form.

What are its shortcomings? First, of course, a shortcoming is inherent in its dichotomous nature. For any dichotomy can lead us to see reality in simple black and white, rather than in all its color and complexity. But this is not a fatal flaw; for as we will see later, the elite-popular division is susceptible to refinements that can make it applicable to complex cultural wholes. Second, a necessary shortcoming of any particular version of the elite-popular division derived from the study of one culture is that it may not be applicable to another culture, at least not without extensive modification. This has been an especially serious concern of China scholars, since most theory in this area was developed in ignorance of the Chinese situation. Some China scholars, such as G. William Skinner, for example, has reacted by declaring all such theory irrelevant to the Chinese case.

Two decades ago, amidst rapid growth of interest in peasant societies, Skinner wrote a biting critique of the supposedly universal models then in vogue. These included Redfield's great tradition/little tradition model as well as Eric Wolf's open community/closed community model. In fact, his article, titled "Chinese Peasants and the Closed Community: An Open and Shut Case," was aimed primarily at Wolf's model and only secondarily at Redfield's.[7] Nevertheless, the lessons to be learned from his article apply to any effort to contrast elite and popular culture in China.

Skinner gave us several good reasons to accept his opinion that "the whole body of inherited anthropological wisdom concerning peasantries seems somehow alien and irrelevant to students of Chinese society."[8] First, traditional Chinese society was multi-leveled, not two-leveled. Second, there was a signifi-

[7]G. William Skinner. "Chinese Peasants and the Closed Community: An Open and Shut Case". *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 13, 3 (1971), 270-281.

[8]*Ibid.*, 270.

cant degree of mobility along both the political and economic tracks out of peasant communities upward into higher socio-economic levels. Third, upward movement did not estrange one from one's village past because of a moral orientation in which loyalty to local origins was highly valued. For these reasons, homogenization of culture was the rule; and the closure of local peasant communities to outside influence was an exception realized only during the chaos of dynastic decline. Conversely, periods of relative peace and prosperity during the dynastic cycle guaranteed homogenization of culture for reasons just given. To quote Skinner:

> Thus were peasants, in the context of their wider community, exposed to diverse customs, alien values, and exogenous norms—elements originating not only in other communities like their own but also in cities, elements drawn not only from other little traditions but also from the great tradition of the imperial elite.[9]

Skinner's vision of the complexity and mobility of traditional Chinese society thus prevents one from imposing any simple, two-level model on traditional Chinese culture.

Moving beyond a two-level model need not, however, mean abandonment of the elite-popular division. A good example of a recent effort to refine the use of this division in the Chinese context, which is multi-leveled and, moreover, benefits from two decades of theoretical work not available to Skinner, is David Johnson's article "Communication, Class, and Consciousness in Late Imperial China." Johnson says the terms "elite culture" and "popular culture" are probably indispensable; though, echoing Skinner's cautions, he adds: "But if we use these terms without a full awareness of the complex social realities they denote, they will only create confusion."[10] The model he offers to cover the complex social realities of late imperial China has nine socio-cultural groups. Sharing Douglas' desire to show how social experience influences world view, or in Johnson's case

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[9]*Ibid.*, 277.

[10]David Johnson. "Communication, Class, and Consciousness in Late Imperial China", in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China.* Ed. David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 68.

"consciousness," he argues that the consciousness of members in each group is determined by their position in two distinguishable but interrelated systems: (1) the structure of dominance and (2) the network of communication. Within the structure of dominance there are three categories of people: legally privileged, self-sufficient, and dependent. Within the realm of communication there are also three categories: classically educated, literate, and illiterate. When charted, the nine groups that result from combining all categories look like this.[11]

Chief Socio-Cultural Groups of Late Imperial China

	Dominance	
Greatest		*Least*
Classically educated/ legally privileged	Classically educated/ self-sufficient	Classically educated/ dependent
Literate/ legally privileged	Literate/self-sufficient	Literate/dependent
Illiterate/ legally privileged	Illiterate/self-sufficient	Illiterate/dependent

The highest and lowest groups are still the familiar literati officials and common peasants, now known as the "classically educated/legally privileged" and the "illiterate/dependent." However—and this is Johnson's key message—we must investigate the role of several in-between groups before we will have a complete picture of the elite-popular continuum in traditional Chinese culture.

For those of us interested in the religious dimension of Chinese culture, Johnson's multi-leveled model is particularly valuable. For, as borne out by several articles in the same volume where we find Johnson's piece (*Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. Johnson, et. al.), the majority of key figures on the religious scene—from Taoist priests and Buddhist monks to geomancers

[11]*Ibid.*, p. 56, Figure I.

and sectarian leaders—belonged to Johnson's in-between groups.[12]

More important for present purposes, Johnson makes good use of cross-cultural theory about elite and popular culture and refines it in a way that accords with the complex cultural situation of traditional China. If anything, he implicitly disavows any notion of the homogenization of culture and seems bent on giving us tools to identify the particular version of Chinese culture that corresponded to each particular socio-cultural group. In his concluding remarks, we find the following two statements:

> In short, the members of each group defined above had a characteristic sense of where they stood in the great structure of dominance and subordination, and also a distinctive style in which they expressed the ideology that reflected that sense... [And] as a system of thought, or a religious revelation, or any other creation of the human verbal imagination, spread through Chinese society, it must have come to exist in a number of versions, each produced by and for an important socio-cultural group.[13]

As inherently reasonable as it seems, Johnson's idea of several different versions of Chinese culture, ranked along an elite-popular continuum, will not be the last word on such matters. Other recent work has led me to believe there is a certain danger in the project of investigating the content of a cultural object, such as a religious text, as an expression of a particular version of culture, "produced by and for an important socio-cultural group." In particular, I am thinking of the work of the French historian Roger Chartier and the American anthropologist Robert Weller.

In "Culture as Appropriation: Cultural Uses in Early Modern France", Chartier questions the assumption that it is possible "to identify popular culture

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[12]In *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China* (previously cited). See, for example, James Hayes, "Specialists and Written Materials in the Village World", pp. 75-111; Judith A. Berling, "Regional and Popular Culture: The Management of Moral Capital in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*", pp. 188-218; Daniel L. Overmyer. "Values in Chinese Sectarian Literature: Ming and Ch'ing *Pao-chuan*", pp. 219-254; and Susan Naquin. "The Transmission of White Lotus Sectarianism in Late Imperial China", pp. 255-292.

[13]Johnson "Communication, Class, and Consciousness", pp. 71-72.

by describing a certain number of corpora (sets of texts, gestures, and beliefs".[14] His key example concerns the *livrets bleus* of 17th century France, which some had considered to typify the French popular culture of that period after studying the content and distribution of this type of text. Chartier argues it is possible that "the *livrets bleus* did not have a specific public but constituted reading matter for different social groups, each approaching it in ways ranging from a basic deciphering of signs to fluent reading."[15] Although his argument incorporates some new evidence, its most important feature is methodological. One could almost consider it a "paradigm shift." Consider this statement:

> I argue that it is pointless to try to identify popular culture by some supposedly specific distribution of cultural objects. Their distribution is always more complex than it might seem at first glance, as are their appropriations by groups and individuals. A sociology of distribution implying that the classification of professional groups corresponds with a classification of cultural products and practices can no longer be accepted uncritically. It is clear that the relation of appropriation to texts or behavior in a given society may be a more distinctive factor than how texts and behavior are distributed. The "popular" cannot be found readymade in a set of texts that merely require to be identified and listed; above all, the popular qualifies a kind of relation, a way of using cultural products such as legitimate ideas and attitudes. Such an argument evidently changes the work of historians, because it implies identifying and distinguishing not cultural sets defined as "popular" but rather the specific ways in which such cultural sets are appropriated."[16]

Will we have to wait years before this new paradigm has an impact on the study of Chinese religion? Fortunately not; we already have an excellent example in

[14]Roger Chartier. "Culture as Appropriation: Popular Cultural Uses in Early Modern France", in *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century.* Ed. Steven L. Kaplan. (Berlin, New York, and Amsterdam: Mouton, 1984), p. 229.

[15]*Ibid.*, p. 231.

[16]*Ibid.*, p. 233.

Robert Weller, *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion.*[17]

Weller's book is based on recent field work in Sanxia Township, Taiwan, as well as on historical research reaching back into 19th century Taiwan. Although Weller presents a fairly complete picture of Chinese religion in Sanxia, his focus is on one ritual activity, the seventh month ghost-feeding, or Universal Salvation, rites. In fact, to be more specific, it is on what he calls the "ritual media" involved. His main point is that, while all of Sanxia's social groups participate in the rites, each has a different interpretation of the ritual media they confront. He resists putting the label "popular" on the ghost feeding rites for the same reason that Chartier resists putting it on 17th century *livrets bleus*. It is not the content of the cultural object that is "popular." It is a certain "style of interpretation" of the cultural object that can be labeled "popular." Moreover, the style of interpretation that Weller calls the "popular tradition" is not uncritically opposed to an "elite tradition" within a two-level model. Instead, he contrasts it with five other styles of interpretation, those of Buddhism, Taoism, the modern elite, the premodern state cult, and the five-element system.[18] Weller thus goes beyond a simple elite-popular dichotomy to a multi-tradition model. At the same time, he abandons the type of paradigm that seeks a version of culture (a "tradition") in the cultural objects of a certain socio-cultural group, using a paradigm that seeks it in a group's style of appropriating ("interpreting") cultural objects that are shared with other groups.

Is David Johnson's nine group picture of traditional Chinese society compatible with the type of paradigm to which Chartier and Weller have moved? Of course it is. Moreover, one may sometimes be on safe ground assuming that certain cultural objects are a more or less unique repository of the values of a certain socio-cultural group, such as the state documents written by literati officials in Johnson's highest group. Nevertheless, Chartier and Weller are wise to encourage us to focus on the interpretive framework that a socio-cultural group brings to its encounter with particular cultural objects, regardless of whether they turn out to be uniquely linked with that group or widely shared with other groups.

But what does it mean to shift our focus from the content of cultural objects

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[17]Robert P. Weller. *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987.

[18]*Ibid.*, p. 159.

supposedly linked with a group to the group's interpretive framework? After all, cultural objects will remain our key sources of information, even if we begin to pay more attention to how such objects are differently interpreted by different groups. And only the anthropologist studying a contemporary society will be able actually to observe how members of different groups interpret shared cultural objects.

Now the question is: How does Mary Douglas' model help us out of this quandary? First of all, its two variables, grid and group, are formal constructs. Using them places the emphasis squarely on structure, not content; on interpretive frameworks, not cultural objects. Secondly, it allows us to predict from the study of a group's social experience, even before we know what cultural objects it appropriates, the *kind* of interpretive framework it is likely to adopt, at least within the limited range of the variables grid and group.

Of course, this second benefit of Douglas' model accrues to us only if we can, in fact, gain access to the social experience of a group. This becomes a crucial issue as we attempt to deal with the social experience and cosmology of groups at the poles of the elite-popular continuum in traditional Chinese society, Johnson's highest and lowest groups. For, as is so often noted, the literate and privileged members of a society leave a far more detailed record of their lives than do their peasant counterparts.

GRID AND GROUP IN CHINESE RELIGIOUS CULTURE

There are many aspects of Chinese religious, culture, including the use of bodily symbolism, that exhibit opposing interpretations. The best examples include (1) geomancy, with the professional *feng-shui* master's version of it coexisting with a popular interpretation that gives a greater role to disembodied spirits and moral retribution than to the impersonal operations of yin, yang, and the five phases;[19] (2) divinatory practices which use the impersonal yin-yang

[19]Debate over whether or not there were two versions of "geomancy" in China probably began with comments in Maurice Freedman. *Chinese Lineage and Society: Fukien and Kwangtung*. London School of Economics Monographs in Social Anthropology, No. 33. (London: Athlone, 1966), pp. 124-126. Elements of the popular version were well treated in Emily M. Ahern. *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973), pp. 175-190. Recently, a good summary of the situation has been presented in Weller. *Unities and Diversities*, pp. 147-155.

system (such as we find in the *Yi-jing*) or, conversely, a human medium who is empowered by the spirit of an anthropomorphic deity that has entered his or her body;[20] (3) ancestral ritual, with its motivations, on the one hand, in the desire to celebrate the continuity of an extensive spatial and temporal network of familial influence and, on the other hand, in the desire to propitiate isolated and potentially malevolent spirits;[21] and (4) rites of felicity for gods, sages, or other honored personages which, while similar in most respects, either minimize or maximize the role of bloody sacrifices, entranced mediums who mutilate their bodies, and ecstatic outbursts of emotion.[22]

Each of these pairs of opposing interpretations can be explored beneficially using the grid/group model. But in this essay certain limits must be set. The emphasis here will be on bodies: human individual and social entities. Moreover, the nature of opposing interpretations will be exhibited in an intensified way by comparing the social experience and cosmology of literati *men* and peasant *women*.

As far as I know, opposing interpretations of the nature and processes of the female body have not been among typical examples of the elite-popular division in Chinese culture. In fact, only during the last couple of decades has the Chinese case in this area gained the attention of social scientists. Initially, these were anthropologists interested in the social and symbolic import of ritual observances related to menstruation, childbirth, and related matters.[23] Their conclusions

[20]One can find interesting information on the nature of spirit mediums in late imperial China as well as on the view of them in Literati sources from ancient until late imperial times in J.J.M. de Groot. *The Religious System of China*, Book VI. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1910; rpt. Taipei, Southern Materials Center, 1982), pp. 1187-1341.

[21]To balance the view of ancestral ritual as a merely celebratory or commemorative activity, which late imperial and modern Chinese elites have claimed to hold, many anthropologists have documented its role in propitiation of troublesome ancestral spirits. See, for example, Ahern. *Cult of the Dead*, especially pp. 191-219, and David K. Jordan. *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), especially pp. 138-171.

[22]A brief discussion of this general contrast, along with the comparative examples of the Ch'ing Dynasty state cult, on the one hand, and the Mazu birthday celebration in Beigang, Taiwan, on the other hand, is present in Christian Jochim. *Chinese Religions: A Cultural Perspective*. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1986), pp. 143-156.

[23]In particular, see Emily M. Ahern. "The Power and Pollution of Chinese of Chinese Women",

generally conform to the prevailing crosscultural theory that at least part of the reason why menstrual and birth discharges are defined as ritually defiling, or worse, is because they are symbolically linked with social disorder. In Douglas' model, of course, they become so linked because the body as a bounded system is a perfect symbol for the inviolable wholeness of a social group.

For example, describing the situation of a young woman at menarche in rural Taiwan, Margery Wolf writes:

> She discovers that her body is a source of filth that can endanger others as well as herself. She may not enter a temple during her menses, for her unclean state would anger the gods, perhaps to the point of causing illness to strike her in revenge. A menstruating woman cannot attend the annual firewalking lest her presence cause the men who walk on the coals to burn their feet.[24]

Since menstruation is sometimes called a "minor birth," one can imagine how ritually defiling childbirth is considered. Indeed, the ritually contagious miasma of this event is second only to death, and it likewise extends from the affected person to relatives and others who are close enough by kinship or physical proximity. In fact, James Watson has argued that women's generally more defiled status as "yin" beings, helps explain their role in the most contaminating aspects of burial rites among rural Cantonese, concluding that "the role of women at funerals highlights the ultimate androcentrism of traditional Cantonese society."[25]

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in *Women in Chinese Society*. Ed. Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), pp. 193-214; Gary Seaman. "The Sexual Politics of Karmic Retribution", in *The Anthropology of Taiwanese Society*. Ed. Emily Marten Ahern and Hill Gates. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1981), pp. 381-396; Marjorie Topley. "Chinese Traditional Ideas and the Treatment of Disease; Two Examples from Hong Kong", *Man* 5:3 (1970), 412-437; Marjorie Topley "Cosmic Antagonisms: A Mother-Child Syndrome", in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*. Ed. Arthur P. Wolf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 233-249; James L. Watson. "Of Flesh and Bones: The Management of Death Pollution in Cantonese Society", in *Death and the Regeneration of Life*. Ed. Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 155-186; and Margery Wolf. *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972).

[24]Wolf. *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan*, p. 95.

[25]Watson. "Of Flesh and Bones," p. 178.

Also, as all accounts agree, not only is postpartum discharge a more potent source of ritual pollution than menstrual blood, and the placenta an object that must be disposed of carefully at some distance from the home, but both mother and child must spend a month in seclusion, undergoing purification through a variety of hygienic, dietary, and ritual observances.

None of this should surprise us. For, unfortunately, it is paralleled by data from many other traditional societies. The significant question is whether or not Chinese exploration of the symbolic potential of female physiology was limited to popular ritual observances that betray a group-oriented cosmology. In other words: Was there also an elite, grid-oriented interpretation of female physiology? There surely was; and it has been vividly brought to life in the recent work of Charlotte Furth. Furth's writings reflect awareness of work on popular ritual observances as well as sensitivity toward the complex way in which "popular" and "elite" interacted in traditional China. In "Blood, Body, and Gender: Medical Images of the Female Condition in China 1600-1850," she states:

> My strategy in this paper is to look beyond popular attitudes to medical symbolizations of female blood in China. The presence of a premodern, literate, massively documented Chinese medical tradition enables us to see theories about female biology in complex historical development, and to trace alternative perceptions of social roles based on them... The tradition recorded in the medical literature was not merely an elite alternative to folk practice, but an eclectic system which constantly borrowed and adapted grass roots ritual and medical ideas, and then fed them back into the mainstream of popular culture, often in altered form... Without exception [the medical texts] reflect a mixture of scholastic, ritual and empirical modes of reasoning, in the course of which female biology was redefined, not around symbolic poles of power, purity and pollution, but around those of vitality and loss.[26]

Of course, it was the organicistic yin-yang cosmology that provided the basis for medical theories of female physiology. In the medical model, blood (*xue*) and *qi*

[26]Charlotte Furth. "Body, Blood, and Gender: Medical Images of the Female Condition in China 1600-1850"," *Chinese Science* 7 (1986), 29.

correlated with yin and yang; and blood naturally had a larger role in theories about the health of women, since they were considered "yin" beings. As Furth indicates:

> Female health evoked metaphors of easy circulation, reliable periodicity and free flow of blood. These images resonated with an organismic [sic] cosmology of harmonious parts, orderly in their movements and interpenetrating without hindrance... the rhetoric of female illness began with evocations of stoppage, congestion, stagnation—of blood diverted from its normal paths, chaotic and unpredictable in its movements... This ambivalent model of a woman's pathology led naturally to a focus on menstruation, the bodily function which displayed blood ideally in its harmonious, reliable rhythms of health, or else revealed in incipient signs an underlying disorder.[27]

Interestingly, this model led us as surely to female anxiety about menstruation as did popular views that a menstruating woman would offend the gods, although for different reasons. The popular views were grounded in a set of beliefs about bodily pollution that attributed dangerous negative powers to a woman's menstrual discharge. By contrast, the physician's model of a woman's pathology was grounded in a set of beliefs in which her body was seen as operating, like society and the cosmos, according to principles of interrelatedness, cyclicity, and harmonious cooperation. What was the same in both contexts was that men considered women uniquely prone to certain physical problems, just as they saw them as a special source of social problems.

In a second article, "Concepts of Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infancy in Ch'ing Dynasty China," Furth draws an even broader conclusion in this regard, namely, that elite medical texts and popular religion shared a common value system within which women were defined, physically, as the "sickly sex" and, sexually, as a danger to themselves and others. To be specific, she concludes that "the high medical tradition" in part "represents a rationalization of pollution beliefs." To wit:

> Ritual avoidances are reinterpreted as health precautions: the disposal of the

[27] *Ibid.*, 51.

> placenta protects the child's health; the month's seclusion aids maternal recovery; birth tonics, ritual baths, and cleansings are medicines against childhood disease; and, medically speaking, fetal poison is a susceptibility to contagion.[28]

While Furth's use of the concept "rationalization" may be adequate to explain the fact that a difference existed between the two styles of interpretation, popular and elite, it is not adequate to explain the nature of this difference. To explain its nature, we need to discover the interpretive frameworks that laid beneath the opposing uses of common symbolic resources by the literati men who wrote medical texts and the peasant women who observed popular ritual avoidances. Following Douglas' model, the process of discovery incorporates the investigation of social experience as well as cosmology.

Literati Social Experience and the Philosophy of Organism

The hierarchical organicistic world view of traditional China's literati, their "bureaucratized Heaven," is known too well to require any detailed exposition here. However, it is necessary to comment on the appropriateness of the metaphor of "organism" to describe this cosmology both on its own terms and with reference to Douglas' model. Douglas' name has become linked with the view that the primary symbolic use of the body is to express social and cosmic boundedness. Unfortunate as this is, from my viewpoint, it is largely her own fault. Although she is aware that the symbolic potential of the body is rich and varied, she nevertheless concludes that, when "grid" dominates social experience, "the human body is inevitably less cogent as a symbol of society."[29] Saying this, she forgets that the body is not only a bounded system, it is also an organism: a complex system of interrelated parts, each in some way mirroring the whole yet serving a unique function necessary for the whole's survival. In other words, the body viewed as an organism is a perfectly cogent symbol for a social network with rules that carefully articulate interactions within a group yet allow for fluid

[28]Charlotte Furth. "Concepts of Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infancy in Ch'ing Dynasty China", *Journal of Asian Studies* 46:1 (1987), 29.

[29]Douglas. *Natural Symbols*, p. ix.

relations with the outside world.

The body is so viewed in the medical texts Furth has studied, and cosmological implications of this have already been mentioned. As for cosmology itself, Joseph Needham, who was probably first to identify the cosmology in question as a "philosophy of organism," has documented a variety of ways in which the human body was used in China to represent reality in two larger forms: the state and the universe. He termed one usage the "state-analogy," and the other the "universe-analogy."[30]

The organicistic quality of the literati cosmology is a feature that has made it appear "modern" or even "secular" to many. Even more important in this regard, however, are the features which it lacks, but which characterize a group-oriented cosmology: personal divinity, as opposed to nonpersonal self-regulating processes; a cosmic battle between Good and Evil, as opposed to harmonious cooperation between cosmic forces; and fixed metaphysical dualisms, as opposed to complementary opposites of the yin and yang type. Whether or not, lacking these features, the literati cosmology was in fact nonreligious is here beside the point. Our interest lies in the kind of social experience in which its grid-oriented, apparently nonreligious nature was rooted. We can discuss this experience in three areas: official life, local community life, and family life.

We can cover literati experience at the level of official life by treating, first, the path to official status and, second, a key example of "grid" features in official behavior. Those who have studied the system of examinations and appointments that prevailed in late imperial China, including E.A. Kracke, Jr., Chung-li Chang, and Ping-ti Ho, have shared a common question: What degree of social mobility did the system allow?[31] This is also an important question for us because mobility is an aspect of social experience that should accompany Douglas' grid-oriented "success cosmology". At the very least, Douglas' dictum that a success cosmology is built on an egalitarian principle that can never favor more than a small

[30]Joseph Needham. *Science and Civilization in China*, Volume II. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), p. 294.

[31]See E.A. Kracke, Jr. "Family vs. Merit in the Examination System", in *the Chinese Civil Service: Career Open to Talent?*. Ed. Johanna M. Menzel (Boston: D.C. Heath and Co., 1963), pp. 1-8; Chung-li Chang. *The Chinese Gentry: Studies on Their Role in Nineteenth Century Chinese Society*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1955; and Ping-ti Ho. *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China: Aspects of Social Mobility*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962.

minority applies to the Chinese case as described by Kracke, Ho, and Chang, who cover, respectively, the Song, Ming-Qing, and late Qing periods. To quote Chang for example:

> If there was not equality in the examination system, there was a general belief in the "spirit of equality," and this belief together with the fact that some social mobility did exist helped to stabilize the society and maintain the status quo.[32]

The three authors cover different periods and offer slightly different views about the degree of social mobility that existed. Nonetheless, they agree that China's official class was not a self-perpetuating aristocracy, they give much evidence of both upward and downward mobility along the Chinese ladder of success, and they stress that keen competition remained a dominant feature of the system. Ho gives the most optimistic assessment of the system where social mobility is concerned, and his views on downward mobility, in particular, help us to imagine the nature of literati social experience in late imperial China. He states:

> Long-range downward mobility of high-status families could take place for any of the following factors: failure to provide children with a proper education, the competitive nature of the examination system which was based in the main on merit rather than on family status, the limited *yin* [hereditary] privilege of high officials, the mode of life and cultural expressions of the leisured class, and the progressive dilution of wealth due to the absence of primogeniture.[33]

Thus, while China's future officials were often sons of present officials who, statistically, had some advantage over others, their concern was with the keenness of competition rather than with statistical advantage, and their experience was conditioned by a system that was as anxiety producing as it was complex and hierarchical.

Turning from competition for official status to the nature of official life

[32]Chang. p. 187.

[33]Ho. p. 165.

itself, we see that anxiety over status and security did not disappear when one possessed the highest degree that the examination system offered (*jin-shi*) and attained an official post. Despite their class status, individual officials were subject to continual scrutiny, possible demotion or expulsion, and intermittent purges. In the words of Etienne Balazs: "The first thing that strikes one about this stratum is the precarious position of its members individually, contrasted with their continuous existence as a social class."[34]

There was also much else about official life that allows us to call it grid-oriented. The ranks and functions of officials were carefully delineated; they participated in decision making and exercised power according to carefully stipulated rules; they expressed themselves in official documents that reflected a keen concern for ranks and rules; and they held ceremonies in which they consciously acted out their organically conceived, concentric, and hierarchical world view. While examples could be given in any of the areas just listed, the last one interests me most. In fact, it was while studying the ritual behavior of Chinese officials that the grid-oriented nature of their world view and social experience first impressed itself on me.

The object of my research, Qing Dynasty imperial audience ritual, provides a striking example of how officials experienced their public world as a complexly ordered grid. Imperial audience ritual not only provided the context for official interactions with the emperor but also established the model for official meetings at lower levels of government. Moreover, this kind of ritual was not only performed on purely ritual occasions, it was also performed on occasions involving governmental affairs. In other words there were both "ceremonial" and "business" audiences.[35]

The most fundamental as well as grandiose example of imperial audience ritual was the Grand Audience (*da-chao*) held annual on each of the "three great

[34]Etienne Balzas. *Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy*. Trans. H.M. Wright and ed. A.F. Wright. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 6.

[35]The distinction between these two types of audiences in discussed in Christian Jochim. "The Imperial Audience Ceremonies of the Ch'ing Dynasty", *Society for the Study of Chinese Religions: Bulletin*, 7 (Fall 1979), 89-90. More complete coverage of this general subject can be found in Christian Jochim. "Imperial Audience Ceremonies of the Ch'ing Dynasty: A Study of the Ethico-Religious Dimension of the Confucian State". Diss. University of Southern California, 1980.

festivals" (*san-da-jie*: New Year's Day, the Day of Winter Solstice, and the Imperial Birthday). *The Collected Statutes of the Qing Dynasty (Da-qing hui-dian)* gives the following description of the arrangement of participants in front of the Hall of Supreme Harmony in Beijing during the rite.

> The audience ranks [are as follows]. On top of the imperial steps stand the Princes of the Blood of the first degree, the Princes of the Blood of the second [third, fourth, fifth, and sixth] degree. Divided into left and right hand flanks, they stand in two rows on each left and right, facing east and west, with the most highly ranked on the north... Within the courtyard [below the Imperial Steps] civil and military officials, divided into their [respective] left and right hand flanks, stand to the outside of the Imperial Regalia. [They stand in] nine rows on each east and west, facing east and west, with the most highly ranked on the north... Tribute bearers from foreign nations are placed at the end of the western [i.e., military] ranks.[36]

The focus of the arrangement thus described was the Imperial Dragon Throne inside the Hall of Supreme Harmony. Each participant in the rite stood at a distance from this sacred center appropriate to his geographical, political, or familial relationship to the emperor. Moreover, the idea that the human social order replicated a natural hierarchical order was expressed by the fact that the emperor represented the dragon by his attire, while all officials had on their robes the creatures that stood for their specific ranks (animals on military robes, and birds on civil ones).

While this ceremony was a highly formalized and idealized version of the grid-oriented public world of Chinese officials, it was paralleled by literati social experience of various kinds both in and outside official life. This meant, among other things, that it provided an experience that reinforced the grid-oriented world view to which an official had become accustomed in working his way up the ladder of success toward official life.

Furthermore, the experience he had in working for a place in the imperial bureaucracy was paralleled by that at the level of the local community, to which

[36]*Da-qing hui-dian* (1899), 27:2a. Compare the translation of the complete passage in Jochim. "Imperial Audience Ceremonies" (article), 92-93.

we now turn. In fact, we can compare him in this context to the "Big Man" of Melanesian societies, who is for Douglas such an exemplary product of grid-oriented social life. It may seem odd to compare a member of a class of bureaucrats to such an individualist as the "Big Man." But let us remember another observation made about officials in China by Etienne Balazs: "in the absence of any control over their activities from below it was inevitable that they should purloin from society what the state did not provide."[37] In a more positive vein, a literatus could serve his local community in various capacities, regardless of whether or not he held office. And this was a direct result of his individual efforts to build a network of relationships that would enable him to serve a community as advisor, power broker, peacemaker, civic leader, and man of wealth.

With regard to the family, a literatus would have been among those in Chinese society most likely to experience life in the stereotypical Chinese family: large, complex, hierarchical, and determining individual identity by means of dyadic relationships in which the ideal of filial behavior was to be realized. Of course, this reinforced the grid-oriented nature of his social experience at the levels of community and official life, even though his family/lineage identity was perhaps the strongest "group" feature of his social experience. For, while identification with the family group as such was important, it was not a prime consideration, as in Japan, for example.[38] It is therefore interesting that Douglas' model predicts that this difference between Chinese and Japanese society would be accompanied by a greater general emphasis on ritual purity in Japanese religion.

Social Experience and Cosmological Views of Peasant Women

I have already mentioned salient features of the ritual practices among Chinese peasant women that relate to the body's potential for making cosmological statements. Now it is time to look at elements of their social experience that

[37]Balazs, p. 10.

[38]This contrast is discussed, for example, in George DeVos. "Religion and Family: Structural and Motivational Relationships", in *Religion and the Family in East Asia.* Ed. George A. DeVos and Takao Sofue. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 22.

correlate with their concern over such sources of ritual pollution as menstrual discharge. We can proceed by commenting on the extent to which they were removed from the strong "grid" dimension of literati social experience at its various levels: national bureaucracy, local community, and family. Where the national bureaucracy was concerned, peasant women, along with their upper class counterparts, lacked the very opportunity to compete for a role. If their low class status meant anything, it was that even their husbands and other male relatives were probably estranged from official life. In other words, they had no direct experience of official life. Any "experience" they did have of it was vicarious, through novels, plays, and hearsay.

Turning to the local level, one reason why a woman's awareness of the actualities of official life was limited was that her world was so "bounded," in the literal as well as in Douglas' more figurative sense, whether its boundaries were those of a market region, a village, or her own household. Here again there was little difference between the peasant and upper class woman, except that the "world" of the latter may have been even more bounded than that of the former. Hui-chen Wang Liu's fascinating study of clan rules from Qing period genealogies provides many interesting details about customs related to the seclusion of women from affluent families. Perhaps most interesting is the fact that the prohibited out of home activity mentioned most often was visiting temples, and it was an activity condemned specifically because it prevailed "among ordinary people."[39] The general picture presented by Hui-chen Wang Liu shows, in fact, that the situation in late imperial China paralleled that which existed elsewhere in the traditional world. One way a family could establish and maintain high social status was by preserving the "purity" of its women through seclusion. Of course, due to the tendency of peasant families to imitate elite ones, Chinese peasants also expressed their concerns for female "purity" by practicing seclusion, though less strictly, together with the aforementioned ritual practices. The result was that peasant women were even more limited in their social contacts outside the home and village than their male relatives.

A woman may have been linked through her husband to local economic or political networks, but, assuming he was also poor and illiterate, these would not

[39]Hui-chen Wang Liu. *The Traditional Chinese Clan Rules.* Monographs of the Association for Asian Studies, No. 7 (Locust Valley, N.Y.: J.J. Augustin, Inc., 1959), p. 95. The "Sex Segregation and Seclusion of Women" section on clan rules is on pp. 93-97.

have been of any significant scale. If her husband did "experience" them, it was probably from the side on which one sees an oppressive grid rather than a ladder of success. As for her own case, based on the study of contemporary rural Chinese society, the "networks" to which she belonged were probably limited to her own kind: village women.[40] In fact, in this instance, we are no longer dealing with "networks" in the sense of social units with a predominance of grid elements. On the contrary, we are dealing with local social units in which identification with the group was a prime consideration and for which there were few carefully articulated rules of social interaction.

Turning, finally, to the social experience of the peasant woman within her own family, we have the greatest likelihood of finding her in a grid-oriented social world. For even a woman secluded at home would experience "grid" elements in her family life, where sex and age distinctions provided the basis for differential treatment in human relations. Nonetheless, her experience could lack such elements precisely to the degree that it did not match up to the stereotypical ideal of the large and complex Chinese family. And, as has become obvious in recent decades to students of the Chinese family, this ideal was rarely actualized within the social and economic situation of Chinese peasants.[41] It is therefore reasonable to assert that even the family life of a peasant woman and her husband, when compared to that of their literati counterparts, was relatively lacking in grid elements. Generally, the former lived in a small household composed only of parents, their children, and possibly their parents or unmarried brothers and sisters; the latter lived in a large household, which definitely included the family members just mentioned as well as married brothers and their families, probably other relatives, and perhaps servants and concubines.

Moreover, since the peasant woman is of special concern here, we must also consider whether or not she was even further removed than her husband from a grid-oriented family experience, and her sense of self therefore even further defined by group identity rather than by roles played within social networks.

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[40]This is the conclusion one reaches, at least, from reading about village women in Wolf. *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* and, also, Margery Wolf, *The House of Lim: A Study of A Chinese Farm Family*.Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968.

[41]A good summary of the situation with reference to this issue can be found in Hugh D.R. Baker. *Chinese Family and Kinship*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), pp. 3-10.

Patriarchal, patrynomic, patrilineal and patriarchal, the Chinese family system was designed to provide men rather than women with social roles. Thus, despite the complexities of Chinese kinship, the standard for of reference to a woman used only a family name. She was "woman Wang" (Wang-shi) or "woman Lin" (Lin-shi). A woman received her identity through her links with men: first her father, then her husband, and finally her sons. According to one theory, because she was born into one male lineage and would be married into another, she never fit comfortably and unambiguously anywhere in the kinship system.[42] As a result, she experienced herself as an anomalous entity and, especially after marriage, as someone suspected of divided loyalties. Faced with this situation, she had a need to identify strongly with her husband's family or, perhaps, with an even more narrowly defined social unit.

Thinking along these lines, Margery Wolf proposed her well known theory of the uterine family. In simple form, her theory is that, since the male oriented Chinese kinship system is so irrelevant to a woman's own experience, she willy nilly creates her own "family." In her words: "The uterine family... has no public existence, and appears almost as a response to the traditional family organized in terms of male ideology."[43] A woman creates the uterine family, physically, by giving birth to children and, psychologically, be recreating her warm memories of the security of the family her mother created. Lacking authority and property rights, she uses her role as mother to build deep bonds between herself and her children, forming a unit within the larger family that develops and defends its own integrity and interests. This social unit quite obviously has more "group" than "grid" features. It not only lacks public existence, explains Wolf, it has no ideology and no formal structure. She states: "It is built out of sentiments and loyalties that die with its members, but it is no less real for all that."[44] Its reality as a dimension of a woman's social experience is especially notable. For, according to Wolf, the uterine family is important precisely at the level of lived experience, rather than at the level of abstract clan rules or formal kinship

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[42]See Ahern. "The Power and Pollution of Chinese Women", pp. 199-201; and Evelyn S. Rawski. "Problems and Prospects", in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial Culture*. (cited previously), p. 413.

[43]Wolf. *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan*, p. 41.

[44]*Ibid.*, p. 37.

structures.

CONCLUSION

The human body as a symbolic vehicle can speak with two voices. As a bounded system, it speaks of "group"; but as an organism, it speaks of "grid." But Wolf's symbol, the uterus, speaks of "group" alone. It speaks of a womblike existence without social distinctions, occurring within an inviolable whole carefully guarded from outside interference. If the social experience of the women of rural Taiwan studied by Wolf typifies that of Chinese peasant women more generally, we can more easily understand why they embraced a group-oriented cosmology, along with its symbolic uses of female physiology to express anxieties over social order. We will never know whether or not these symbolic uses were male creations, expressing male anxieties about order. We do know, however, that women in traditional China were willing partners in their own subordination, and that the symbolism of the ritual observances they performed as acts of socio-religious subordination correlated extremely well with their own social experience.

Furthermore, the symbolism of these ritual observances fit well with much else in the peasant's group-oriented interpretation of Chinese cosmology. For, to a far greater extent than the literati's grid-oriented interpretation, the popular one gave a central role to sources of ritual defilement other than menstruating women, such as corpses; to good and evil forces embodied in otherworldy anthropomorphic beings; to states of possession in which these forces entered human bodies and, in the case of evil ones, had to be exorcised; to disembodied spirits that were considered responsible for a variety of cosmic and social mischief; and to the power of blood flowing from living bodies, human or animal.

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