

POPULAR RELIGION

BY H. G. CREEL

THE major portion of the study of Sinism has been devoted to the Chinese "intellectuals" of our period, while comparatively little space has been given to things popular. This accords with the accepted traditions of scholarship, which has, until recently, given but little attention to popular ideas, popular religion, and cultural history, as opposed to high philosophy, sacred scriptures, and political history. Against the charge of remissness, in this connection, the scholar may defend himself, however, by pointing out that the materials bequeathed to him, with which he must work, tell him very little of the ways of the common people, but deal almost exclusively with the more "elevated" strata of society. If this be true everywhere, it is doubly true of China.³¹⁵

The reason for our lack of knowledge of the people, as distinguished from the intellectuals, is self-evident. Without archeology, we are chiefly dependent for our information upon written records. In any but a modern civilization, the very fact that a man is able to write usually signifies that he belongs in a class apart from the common people, for whom he often has the greatest disdain. He would seldom think of soiling his papyrus, or parchment, or bamboo, or silk, by recording the ordinary comings and goings of mere peasants. The "nobler" themes of philosophy, and the courtly and religious life of the aristocracy are his subjects, and concerning

³¹⁵ This is especially the case because of the absence, verging on relative totality, of archeological excavation in China. It surely cannot long remain true that the oldest of the great cultures living today is also the one about which we know least. Archeological work has already begun on a small scale, and it may confidently be expected that means will be provided, before many years have gone by, to fill this appalling and colossal blank in the history of mankind. The beginning of the great awakening may already be seen, in Bulletin No. 10 (April, 1929), of the "American Council of Learned Societies," entitled "Promotion of Chinese Studies."

these he never tires of telling us the same things over and over again.

Happy it is then when we can run across so unusual a work as the *Lun Hêng* or *Scale of Discourse*, written by the eccentric Wang Chung about 83 A. D. Wang received the usual education for a political career, but not without the necessity of struggling for himself. He acquired the usual self-confidence of the self-made man, with the result that when he received a small office he not only thought that he knew more about how to run things than did his superiors, but made the mistake of telling them so. This resulted in an early termination of his career. Embittered, he retired and wrote books, of which only the *Lun Hêng* survives. Its most frequently recurrent theme is that a man's career, and his winning of honors or failure to do so, do not at all depend upon his deserts, but only upon an utterly blind fate. Second only to this is his delight in dwelling upon the utter incapacity and imbecility of almost all of those in power, and their complete inability to recognize a man of parts when they see him. But it is not for these cleverly disguised "defense mechanisms" that Wang's book is cited here.

Wang conceives himself as a crusader against the "silly superstitions" of his day, and in preaching against them he sketches them in detail. Because of these descriptions, his lengthy volume (which has been handed down to us almost intact) is of priceless value. Certain cautions are necessary in using it, however. It must be remembered that Wang himself is after all a member (albeit not in very good standing) of the literati. His material is not all based on personal observation. Much of it is based on older literary sources, and he often quotes verbatim from the *Shan Hai King* and other works, as Forke has shown in the careful notes to his translation.³¹⁶ Furthermore, we must remember that, notwithstanding the very modern ring of occasional passages, Wang was a true child of his age, and held some ideas which we find quite as "absurd" as those which he so characterised. Lastly, Wang likes to argue, and in order to make a point will not hesitate completely to reverse a position which he has defended no more than ten pages previously. For all of these reasons, his testimony must always be taken with some reservation.

Western writers have called Wang a "heretic," and he has never been very popular in China. His heresy would seem to lie chiefly

³¹⁶ Alfred Forke, *Lun Hêng*, 2 vols. Quotations from Wang, used herein, are taken from Forke, though sometimes slightly altered on the basis of the text.

in his willingness to subject almost everything, no matter how sacred, to the scrutiny of his very keen critical faculty. It has been said that Chinese thinkers did not bother much about systematising their philosophies. Wang, although conspicuously inconsistent himself, was merciless in pointing out the most embarrassing discrepancies in the thinking of others, and even in the *Classics*. Little wonder that he has not been popular!

A careful study of the *Lun Hêng* provides a standard by which it is possible to judge, in some degree, what was the relation of that changing and evolving philosophy which has been called Sinism, to popular thought in China in the first century A. D. and thereabouts.

The first fact brought out by such a comparative study is that Sinism is a philosophy of the state, of society as a whole, while popular thought has to do with the individual, or at most with the family. Sinism is concerned with government, with people *en masse*; the individual as such counts for little with it, whereas in popular thought the individual is everything. Sinism has nothing to do with the illness of an individual, unless he be the emperor or some other very important person, but formulas for curing even the most obscure peasant have an important place in the popular lore. This body of popular knowledge includes techniques for meeting all of the life-needs of individuals, such as protection from death, provision for welfare after death, protection from ghosts, protection on journeys, the interpretation of dreams and other omens, and general guarantees of livelihood, long life, and offspring.

It is plain that these techniques would not have been confined, in their exercise, to the plebeians alone. The philosopher, the ruler and the statesman, were also men, experiencing the desires and meeting the crises of men. And while it is true that they might have trusted in the certainty of that felicity which Sinism promised for the faithful discharge of their duties, not all of them did. Confucius is a conspicuous exception,³¹⁷ but Wang repeatedly accuses the scholars of his day of having the fullest credence in every sort of charms and auguries (I,525-526; II,250,393,402). Further, it is well-nigh impossible to draw any certain line between the various techniques for divination, protection, etc., which are mentioned as appearing promiscuously among the people, and those which are mentioned and sanctioned in the *Classics* themselves. Popular Lao-ism, developing along lines foreshadowed in the *Tao Tê King*, be-

³¹⁷ *An.* 7,34.

came almost entirely a complex of techniques for securing longevity and other values for the individual.

Even to catalogue the various popular ideas and techniques which were extant would require an entire work. Such a task is quite beyond the possibilities of this chapter. The most that can be done here is to indicate their nature. Certain of them are evidently based on the agricultural life of the people, probably survivals from earlier times. Such ceremonies are the rain sacrifice (II, 335), the practice of offering the first-fruits before eating of the new crop,³¹⁸ the offerings to the five household *shên* (I, 517), the spring ploughing ceremonies in which clay figures of men and women labouring in the fields were set up (II, 355), etc. The Han emperors went to some pains to restore the ancient agricultural rituals, which had fallen into desuetude in the disorders preceding their reign.³¹⁹ While many of these practices had impressed themselves upon Sinism, and were definitely a part of it, the reverse process of modification of the ceremonies by Sinism itself does not appear to have operated conspicuously.

Another factor in the formation of the popular ideology, which we cannot, as yet, begin accurately to gauge, is foreign influence. That it did operate we may be sure. Precisely how it operated must be determined by future research. One very important ingredient, the cycle of the twelve animals (corresponding to the signs of the zodiac) has been held by Chavannes to be Turkish in origin, and of late introduction into China.³²⁰

Still another origin of these popular ideas is the pun. When we consider that the Chinese vocalize some thousands of characters with a few hundreds of sounds, and that they make up all of their characters out of a small number of basic elements, it is readily seen that puns, both auditory and visual, must occur constantly. These were, and are, believed to be fraught with the deepest significance. The characters which mean, respectively, "peach-tree" and "be gone!" are both pronounced *t'ao*. This is perhaps why peach-wood is considered a sure protection against spectres. Wang tells us:

One avoids grinding a knife over a well—lest it fall into the well, or, as some say, because the character *hsing* 刑 (capital punishment) is composed of *ching* 井 (a well) and *tao* 刀 (knife). Grinding a knife over a well, the knife and the well

³¹⁸ *Li Ki* (in *S.B.E.*) p. 75.

³¹⁹ Granet, *Religion*, pp. 63, 126. ³²⁰ *T'oung Pao*, 1906, pp. 52, 84.

face each other, and one apprehends suffering capital punishment (II, 385).

A whole system of divination was based on the dissection of written characters.³²¹ Still another sort of pun is represented by the case in which a man, suffering from a skin disease known as "rat," cures it by eating a cat, since cats eat rats. The number of such practices, based on puns, is endless.

The general metaphysical principles of Sinism are found in the popular beliefs.

People universally believe that he who is good meets with happiness, and that evil-doers are visited with misfortune. They believe that Heaven sends down happiness or misfortune in response to man's doings, and that the rewards graciously given by the sovereigns to the virtuous are visible, whereas the requital of Heaven and Earth is not always apparent. There is nobody, high or low, clever or imbecile, who would disagree with this view (I, 156).

Harmony is the ideal still, and people look back longingly to the times of "universal peace," and hope that they may be reproduced in the future as they existed under the ancient sage-kings. Omens such as vermilion grass, springs of wine, the flying phoenix, sweet dew, "the brilliant star," auspicious grain (a special variety which never grew in ordinary times), the marvelous "meat fan," the monthly plant (a kind of automatic botanical calendar), the "indicator" (a plant which grew in the palace and pointed out wicked persons), mountains giving birth to chariots and lakes producing boats, all were considered the concomitants of such a harmonious epoch. In such a time people were believed to agree perfectly together. There were no robberies, there was wind only once in five days (but it did not howl in the boughs), and it rained once every ten days but did not wash away the earth from the roots of the crops (II, 315). Here is the Sinistic "Utopia" made specific and popular. In such a time, people were taller and more long-lived than usual (I, 315), the sun and the moon were specially brilliant (II, 324), and gold and gems were plentiful (II, 215).

The *yang* and *yin* and the five *hsing* figure very prominently in the popular ideas, but they are probably older than Sinism. In order to obtain some idea of the way in which Sinism is reflected in popular thought, let us arbitrarily select certain test factors of Sinism and then inquire if these have had any influence on popular ideas.

³²¹ Doré, *Researches into Chinese Superstitions*, vol. IV, pp. 356-62.

For this purpose, the following will serve: the ruler, Heaven, the sage, the governmental officers, the four geographical quarters.

With regard to rulers, both the emperor and the feudatories, the usual formulas of Sinism seem to have been taken over by people in general. The ruler is at the center of things; if he does well, all things in his territory prosper, if he does not, all goes badly. If the ruler becomes angry, he causes droughts; his dissipation brings floods (II, 343). When the sovereign punishes, it becomes cold; he must be careful, then, to punish only in the fall, not in midsummer, lest he blight the crops. The reverse is the case with the giving of rewards (II, 119). The government has the general responsibility of keeping the *yin* and the *yang* in harmony; the growth of insects in unusual numbers is traceable to the failure of the government in this duty (II, 367).

In conformity with the ancient Chinese theory, the emperor rules as the viceroy of Heaven. So long as he is virtuous, he certainly prospers, but if he departs from the right way, Heaven warns him by causing extraordinary occurrences, such as comets, etc. If he still continues in his evil ways, calamities are first visited on his people, and finally on himself (I, 109, 119, 126). Thousands of omens, of every conceivable sort, are listed by Wang as having appeared as warnings or felicitations for bad or good emperors.³²²

An emperor is believed to be personally very different from ordinary men. The marks of his future greatness are on his body at the time of birth (I, 131). This belief is found in the Occident, also, of course. Certain of the more ancient kings were believed to be no more than half human in form, having the faces of dragons, etc. Huang Ti was able, it is said, to talk at birth (II, 124).

T'ien, Heaven, appears in the *Lun Hêng* as a very tangible entity. *T'ien shên*, the "spirit," "intelligence," or "essence" of Heaven is an appellation which Wang Ch'ung employs frequently. Heaven has a body (II, 155). The *shên* of Heaven lives in certain constellations, just as a king lives in his various palaces. In the popular imagination, Heaven did not merely punish kings, nor visit calamities only on society as a whole; it might even visit its wrath on individuals, striking them dead with bolts of thunder. Such a death was a sure sign of guilt (I, 294). It might also order the

³²² I,137,235,245. II,161,206,207,215,216,306,309. Cf. also H. G. Creel, *Chinese Divination as Indicated by the Lun Hêng* (D.B. Thesis, Chicago), pp. 10-23.

myriad spirits, of whom it was master, to punish recalcitrant individuals. This was the more usual practice, but personal manifestations of Heaven were not uncommon. The genealogies of certain royal houses were traced back to *liaisons* between *T'ien*, manifested as a dragon or a giant, and a female ancestor. It was believed that the widely used divination by the tortoise-shell was a direct interrogation of Heaven (I, 182). The noise made by wind was believed by some persons to be the voice of Heaven and Earth (II, 173). Wang goes so far as to declare that "even Heaven may be induced to respond, by tricks." Certainly, this is a far cry from the lofty conception of Heaven entertained by most of the Sinistic philosophers. Yet the place of Heaven, as supreme governor of the world, remains the same.

Popular fancy invested the sage with marvelous powers much like those which it gave the emperor. Although Mencius specifically said that sages were not different in species from common men,³²³ such an idea could not have been expected to win currency. According to Wang Ch'ung, even the *ju*, (literati) spiritual posterity of Mencius, declared that a special essence of Heaven replaced human sperm in the birth of sages (I, 318). Since the sage was distinguished by his powers of knowledge, these were raised to the *n*th power by those who would exalt him. Sages were declared to know the events of the past, for thousands of years, and to tell of the future for ten thousand generations. Their knowledge of all things came spontaneously, without any labor of learning. Upon seeing a thing for the first time, they knew all about it. Therefore, the sage was considered to be *shên*, "super-usual," "spiritual," by many persons (II, 114). Wang Ch'ung, the sceptic, does not believe that sages are *shên*; according to him they are ordinary men, but their powers of observation and inference are so phenomenally keen as to make it possible for them to accomplish the marvels of mind-reading, etc., for which they were known among the people. Wang conceived the sage as a sort of "super-Sherlock Holmes" (II, 117, 288, 289). Wang tells the following story, which he got from the *Tso Chuan*:

Hearing a cow lowing (Ko Lu) said, "This cow has already had three calves, but they have all been taken away from her." Somebody asking how he knew this, he replied that her voice disclosed it. The man applied to the owner of the cow, and it was really as Ko Lu had said (II, 122-123).

³²³ *Men.* 2(1), 2, 28.

On another occasion, Chan Ho heard a cow lowing outside the gate, and was able to tell that it was a black cow with whitened hoofs. But this, Wang thinks, was not such a great feat; why did not Chan Ho also tell who was its owner, and why its hoofs had been whitened? (II, 122). The *Lun Hêng* recounts such stories by the dozen.

Apocryphal legends concerning Confucius equal those surrounding Jesus, Mohammed, and Gautama. Although his lineage had been concealed from him, Confucius had only to blow the flute in order to discover all of the details of his ancestry (II, 115).³²⁴ He was reputed to have been able to see a thousand *li* (more than three hundred miles) with the naked eye (II, 242). When he died, he left a book of prophecies, which came true (II, 114). His tomb was on the shore of the river Sse; when he was buried there, the waters of the river flowed backwards (II, 223, 251).

It was, of course, the aspiration of every educated man to be appointed to governmental office, and every family hoped that one or more of its members might attain this dignity. Such a happy event was supposed always to be foretold by omens (II, 25), and a regular system of these auguries was developed. A man predestined to office was believed to show his happy fate, in his countenance, from birth; he was a marked man (I, 131).

Any disaster befalling the people of a district was likely to be laid to the account of misconduct on the part of its officers. If tigers carried off a number of men, that was because the high commissioners were fleecing their subordinates, since, just as the tigers were fiercest of beasts, the high commissioners were the chiefs of the officers (II, 357). Plagues of insects were considered to be caused by the misdeeds of officers; if the insects had black bodies and red heads, the military officers were to blame, but if the bodies were red and the heads black, then it was the civil officers who were the culprits. Wang says that when such visitations of insects occurred, the officers to blame were "flogged and maltreated, for the purpose of removing the calamity" (II, 341, 363). It is related that during the reign of P'ing Ti, 1-5 A.D., all of the districts of Honan province were ravaged by locusts, save only that one ruled by the

³²⁴ It is interesting to remark that Wang uses a valid principle of literary criticism to discredit these tales. They are all built, he declares, after a few regular patterns taken from old legends (II, 115).

magistrate Cho, which was spared because of the wisdom and virtue of its ruler (II,190).

The division of China into four quarters, by lines passing NE-SW and NW-SE, and the correspondence of the five *hsing* to these quarters and to the directions, provided the basis for many popular techniques of control. A citation will illustrate the way in which they were used:

When people dig up the earth for the foundation of a building, the year-star and the moon will swallow something,³²⁵ and on the land which they consume a case of death occurs. If *e.g.* the planet Jupiter is in the sign *tse* (the north), the year-star swallows up some land in the sign *yu* (the west), and if the moon in the first month stands in *yin* (east-north-east), it consumes some land in the sign *sse* (south-south-east). Some building being erected on land situated in *tse* and *yin*, people living in *yu* and *sse* are swallowed up, and being about to be thus injured, they have recourse to charms to counteract these influences, using objects made of the five *hsing*, and hanging up metal, wood, water, and fire. Should, for example, Jupiter and the moon infest a family living in the west, they would suspend metal,³²⁶ and should those luminaries be going to devour a family in the east, this family would suspend charcoal.³²⁷ Moreover, they institute sacrifices with a view to averting the evil, or they feign to change their residence, in order thus to eschew the calamity. There is unanimity about this, everyone doing like the others (II,387).

An objection which might be made to the foregoing study is that, whereas it pretends to be a description of popular ideas, it actually deals in large part with notions which were shared even by the emperors, the high officials, and the literati. The reply is that, while many of these theories and techniques were undoubtedly originated by men who had at least some smattering of book learning, there is little doubt that they were shared, at least in their fundamental premises, by the people, the peasants and the artisans. They do, then, present an accurate cross-section of a portion of the popular lore of the land.

Further, it must be remembered that in the China of the first century A.D. a man could be a member of the literati, an officer,

³²⁵ *I.e.*, will cause a disaster. This idea probably springs from the belief in the sacredness of Earth (Cf. II,394,400).

³²⁶ The *hsing* of the west.

³²⁷ The element of the east is wood, and that of the south where the inimical luminaries are placed, while menacing the family, is fire. Charcoal is a combination of wood and fire (Forke's note).

or an emperor, without necessarily being a member of what we might call the "intelligentsia." Confucius, Mencius, and Mo Tse would have laughed at much of what has been recounted, but not every man who could write was "enlightened," in these latter days. In these times, it was more necessary that an emperor be a good military strategist and a good schemer, than that he be intellectually sophisticated. It will be recalled that the founder of the former Han dynasty rose to power as the leader of a bandit gang; this is not to say that he was not an able man, but it is well known that he was not a learned one. The Chinese court of these days was likely to be the headquarters for the diviners, soothsayers, and sorcerers of the nation.

Certain fundamental attitudes and conceptions lay behind these various techniques by means of which the common people were striving, not merely to live, but to live more securely, more happily, more abundantly. This inarticulate and incoherent folk-philosophy is not by any means identical with Sinism, that flower which was the product of the labors of centuries of intellectuals. But it will be noted that it does not conflict with Sinism, either, and that where the two impinge on each other they agree in the essentials. It is as if an illiterate man were trying, with the best of will but only the vaguest understanding, to comprehend the intricacies of a metaphysical system. Of course he exaggerates the marvelous powers of the sage, of course he makes Heaven very like a big man living in the sky—not from any intention to contradict or to offend, but because of too much zeal to agree.

It is not supposed, however, that Sinism first grew up, as a high philosophy, and then was taken over and vulgarized by the masses. It is rather the case that the attitudes grew up, by the process briefly sketched in the first part of this study, as a result of racial experience. Side by side, the popular and the more esoteric expressions of this national philosophy developed.

It is this fundamental agreement between the ideas of the common people, on the one hand, and those of the high philosophers, on the other, which provides the most certain evidence that Sinism was not the chance creation of a handful of Chinese intellectuals led by Confucius, but that it was rather the expression, in philosophical form, of the historically-evolved world-view of the Chinese people.

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