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Standardizing the Gods: The Promotion of T'ien Hou ("Empress of Heaven") Along the South China Coast, 960-1960

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It can be argued that, in comparison with many other peasant societies, late imperial China had a remarkably high level of cultural integration. Of course, important variations existed at the local level with respect to kinship, ethnicity, and economic organization. Nonetheless, one need only read Eugen Weber's account of nineteenth-century France to appreciate just how integrated Chinese society was during the late imperial era.¹ Like their French counterparts, Chinese political leaders had great difficulty converting the peasantry to an ideology based on modern nationalism. But, unlike the French, Chinese leaders did *not* have to forge a new national culture based on urban models that were alien to the mass of rural people.

In China most villagers already identified themselves with an overarching "Chinese culture," an abstraction they had no difficulty understanding. The general peasantry did not need urban leaders to remind them that they shared a grand cultural tradition. This was true in spite of the fact that the Chinese spoke mutually unintelligible dialects (or languages) and were linked closely to their regional cultures—a pattern that would seem to parallel that described by Weber. An important difference between nineteenth-century France and late imperial China was that the regional elites played contrasting roles in the two societies. In France, if I understand Weber's thesis correctly, indigenous leaders became the champions of pluralism and did everything in their power to resist Parisian cultural imperialism. In China, by contrast, local elites shared a common cultural imperialism. In China, by contrast, local elites shared a common cultural tradition (fostered by a standardized educational curriculum²) and were anxious to participate in the affairs of state. They could, in

the process, retain their regional identities as long as they were loyal to the idea of a unified whole. Chinese national-level authorities were themselves likely to have strong ties to kinsmen in the countryside and, hence, allegiance to the center did not necessarily preclude loyalty to one's region. In this sense China may have been unique.

The present paper examines one aspect of China's tradition that played an important role in the standardization of culture—namely, the promotion of "approved" deities by state authorities. At first sight, it is easy to gain the impression that Chinese temple cults are a manifestation of cultural anarchy rather than integration. Literally thousands of deities were worshipped in temples of every conceivable description throughout the empire. In most parts of China religious activities were not organized by a professional clergy. Local people built their own temples, installed their own deities, and ran their own festivals. On closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that the state intervened in subtle ways to impose a kind of unity on regional and local-level cults. The mass of peasants were seldom even aware of the state's intervention. A surprisingly high degree of uniformity was attained through the promotion of deities that had been sanctioned by the Imperial Board of Rites and recognized by the emperor himself.

Local elites, defined here as literate men with interests in land and commerce, were eager to cooperate with state authorities in the standardization of cults. Assisting in the construction of an approved temple was one of the many ways that an educated gentleman could "gentrify" himself and his home community. The unsanctioned, purely local deities gradually disappeared as new, recognized ones were installed in these temples. Local gods were never completely eradicated, of course, and it is still possible to find cults dedicated to deities known only to the residents of one or two communities.³ Nevertheless, the promotion of state-approved cults in South China was so successful that, by the mid-Ch'ing, local gods had been effectively superseded by a handful of approved deities.

This paper focuses on the cult dedicated to the goddess T'ien Hou (T'ien Hau in Cantonese), also known as Ma Tsu. Her temples are found all along the South China coast from Chekiang to Kwangtung, including Taiwan. She will be known to many readers as the patron goddess of fisherpeople, sailors, and maritime merchants. The study of this cult is particularly interesting because T'ien Hou was originally a minor deity that emerged on the coast of Fukien during the tenth century. For a number of reasons to be discussed below, the state found it expedient to adopt her as a symbol of coastal pacification in the twelfth century and, by virtue of imperial sponsorship, she eventually became

¹ Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).

² Evelyn S. Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979); see also her chapter in this volume.

³ Minor deities of this nature are found in villages throughout Kwangtung and Fukien. See, for example, Keith Stevens, "Three Chinese Deities," *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 12:169-195 (1972).

the leading goddess in South China. T'ien Hou's rise to pre-eminence is conveniently marked by a progression of illustrious titles conferred on her by grateful emperors (*T'ien Hou* itself is a title Western observers often translate as "Empress of Heaven"). Not surprisingly, the elevation of T'ien Hou and the promotion of her cult are paralleled by the gradual rise of state authority over China's southern coastal region.

In this paper I examine the T'ien Hou cult from two perspectives. First I look at the southern coastal region as a whole and chart the spread of her cult in geographical and historical terms. I then concentrate on two small districts (*hsiang*) on the Kwangtung coast and show how T'ien Hou cults were organized at the local level. This study is thus an attempt to address one of the central themes set out by the editors of this volume. In what ways did the ideas and symbols of China's bureaucratic elite "penetrate" to the local level? And how were these symbols interpreted by the peasant masses? Here we have an interesting case of a minor deity that was adopted by the state, transformed in important ways, and then reimposed on local communities as an officially recognized goddess. The flow of ideas was both up and down the hierarchy of power.

These concerns are not always evident in the literature devoted to Chinese temples and their cults. As I argue below, most anthropologists have underplayed the power dimension and focused instead on the collective activities of cult participants. Chinese cults are thus seen as expressions of community values (i.e., cooperation, solidarity, social equality); the shadow of Émile Durkheim looms large in this literature.⁴ As demonstrated below, the Durkheimian approach glosses over some important aspects of temple organization and makes it difficult to trace changes over time. The analysis that follows is explicitly historical in the sense that it charts the transformations of two local cults from their foundation in the early Ch'ing to the present.

I begin with the assumption that people at all levels of the social hierarchy in China try consciously to align themselves with temples that best represent their own interests. This means that participants in the T'ien Hou cult were (and are) aware of the symbolic messages conveyed by their deity. The pantheon of Chinese deities, together with the symbols they invoke, can thus be viewed as the basic elements in a complex system of communication. The exploration of two local cults demonstrates how deities mean different things to different people, depending on their position in the hierarchy of power. To the boat people, for instance, T'ien Hou promised mastery of the seas and protection from storms; to the landed elite she symbolized territorial control and social stability; to Ch'ing authorities she represented the "civilizing" effects of approved culture. The physical attributes of the cults (i.e., the temples and the

⁴ The "Durkheimian approach" to religion stresses the integrative aspects of ritual. This approach, first developed in Émile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912; reprint ed., Glencoe: Free Press, 1954), had had a profound influence on Anglo-American anthropology.

images of the deities themselves) are usually—but not always—controlled by literate males near the top of the social hierarchy. Local elites kept a firm grip on their own cult organizations (including temple lands), but state authorities were ultimately responsible for deciding which deities would be sanctioned by the emperor.

The study of religious cults thus provides an opportunity to determine how values and symbols are transformed as they cross social boundaries. In the following pages the transformation of T'ien Hou as a religious symbol is traced through several links in the power hierarchy of traditional China. The analysis begins with state bureaucrats and passes down to the local elite, then to educated peasants, illiterate tenants, and finally to illiterate women and boat people.

ORIGINS OF THE TIEN HOU MYTH

The goddess we now know as T'ien Hou was first recognized as a deity by the coastal people of Mei-chou, P'u-t'ien hsien in Fukien Province, during the late tenth century. Like many Chinese deities, T'ien Hou is in fact the spiritual representation of a living person who attained special notoriety in her home district. According to most accounts, the woman in question was born into a Mei-chou seafarer's family (surname Lin) in A.D. 960 and died in 987.⁵ In childhood, it is said, she never cried or showed any emotion and, as an adult, she did not marry. She was, in short, an unusual person who did not fit any of the stereotyped roles set aside for women in Chinese peasant society. Toward the end of her brief life, local people were convinced that she had supernatural powers that allowed her spirit to guide seafarers safely home through storms. The first hint of this came when she dreamt of saving her brothers at sea, only to learn upon their return that they had in fact been aided by a mysterious female spirit. Soon after her death, seafarers along the Fukien coast began to report similar incidents, which they attributed to "Aunt Lin," Lin Ta-ku⁶ (*ta-ku* is an honorific title that peasants confer on illustrious women; it derives from the kinship term for father's elder sister). Later, as we shall see, the Lin goddess was to be recognized by the imperial court and known by other titles. However, for the first two centuries after her death, the goddess of Mei-chou appears to have been treated like any other local deity capable of supernatural feats, of which there were thousands in China. It was, I would contend, the intervention of the state that ultimately transformed the local worthy "Aunt Lin" into the nationally prominent "Empress of Heaven" (T'ien Hou).

The account presented above gives only the bare outline of the T'ien Hou

⁵ A reliable summary of these accounts is provided by J. J. L. Duyvendak, "The True Dates of the Chinese Maritime Expeditions in the Early Fifteenth Century," *T'ung Pao* 34:341-412 (1939).

⁶ Jen Yu-wen, "The Southern Sung Stone Engraving at North Fu-t'ang," *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 5:55-68 (1965).

myth. There are, of course, many lengthy versions of the myth, which differ with respect to the circumstances of the Lin woman's life and the nature of her spiritual exploits after death. Some of these are preserved in written records that have been standardized over the centuries.⁷ Others are passed on orally and, hence, even today the goddess's story is undergoing transformation. The study of myth in China thus presents a special problem to anthropologists who draw their inspiration from the structuralist tradition of Lévi-Strauss and his followers. Most structuralist theories of myth derive from research on nonliterate people and, as such, the problem of competing written versions does not arise. Those anthropologists who do work on written myths have, for the most part, focused on classical traditions (e.g., ancient Greek or Hebrew texts) that are extinct and thus no longer undergoing oral transformation.⁸ Chinese myths like that of T'ien Hou are difficult to analyze systematically because they are very much alive—at least in the area under study here. Later in this paper I attempt an analysis (although not necessarily a "structural" one) of the T'ien Hou myth, showing how different sets of people choose to emphasize certain elements of the goddess's story and downplay others. Those at the top of the social hierarchy accept the standard written version of the myth as "true" or "correct," while those at the bottom, notably boat people and illiterate women, are oblivious to any but the oral versions.

David Johnson has worked on similar problems in his study of the myth of Wu Tzu-hsu,⁹ a Chinese minister-hero who lived during the fifth century B.C. T'ien Hou and Wu Tzu-hsu were both, according to their myths, paragons of virtue and both were recognized as deities after death—but here the similarities end. It is Johnson's method of analysis, rather than the parallels between the two mythic characters, that warrants our attention here. According to Johnson, the records of such characters are preserved at many levels in Chinese society, primarily by the literate elite but also by the unsophisticated peasantry. In the Wu Tzu-hsu case, the written documents tend to incorporate aspects of the myth from numerous sources, and thus, after several centuries, it becomes difficult to distinguish those elements that were once part of the oral tradition. This blending of oral and literary traditions is complicated by the fact that the authors of published accounts do not always write for the same audience.¹⁰

⁷ See for example Wen Pao-chai 文寶齋, comp., *T'ien Hou pen-chuan* 天后本傳 (Foochow, 1816). This booklet, an inexpensive tract typical of its type, appears to have been compiled largely from an earlier edition of the Fukien provincial gazetteer. Other evidence of standardization is found in the broadsheets handed out at T'ien Hou temples and published in annual festival booklets. Several of these popular texts are in my possession. One, collected at the Lukang (Taiwan) Ma Tzu temple (see n. 32, below), and another, collected in one of Hong Kong's leading temples (near Yuen Long), are almost identical in their rendering of the T'ien Hou myth. (See also James Hayes's essay, chap. 3 above.)

⁸ See, for example, Edmund Leach, *Gentle as Myth and Other Essays* (London: Capra, 1966).

⁹ David Johnson, "The Wu Tzu-hsu Pen-chuan and Its Sources," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 40: 93-156, 465-505 (1980).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 97-103.

Similar problems exist when one examines oral and written versions of T'ien Hou's life and death. As we shall see, these variations in the basic mythic structure are important because they allow people of all social stations to claim T'ien Hou as one of their own and, hence, their patron goddess. It is notable that the literate elite made use of T'ien Hou's story to enhance its own position by ensuring that the written versions stress her "worthy" social origins in the family of a virtuous official of low rank. The elite versions also tend to ignore the fact that the woman who was to become T'ien Hou lived to be 27 and did not marry, deviating from the norm of her era and place. T'ien Hou's death is also glossed over in the written versions and little is said about it except that she was freed to become a spirit and rose on a cloud to Heaven.

In contrast to the written versions, the goddess emerges as the daughter of a poor fisherman among the peasants of Taiwan.¹¹ When asked, illiterate people in the New Territories usually replied that the goddess was the seventh child of a *shui shang jen* (a caste-like category of boat people often referred to as "Tanka", an ethnic slur). Many of the oral versions of T'ien Hou's myth contain strong hints that, in addition to her services to male seafarers, she had a special relationship with spinsters and other unmarried women. In some accounts, for instance, she refused to marry and became notable as a seer or medium.¹² One oral account from Taiwan reports that she voluntarily ended her life with a total fast.¹³ A number of women in the New Territories maintained quite firmly to me that T'ien Hou killed herself rather than marry an older man chosen by her parents. Duyvendak, in his study of this cult, gives an indirect hint that suicide may have been accepted as the means of death in other versions of the T'ien Hou myth. After her death, he notes, the goddess often appeared in a red dress.¹⁴ Although Duyvendak offers no explanation, the appearance of a female spirit in a red gown is an unambiguous symbol of suicide in Chinese peasant society. Women who have reached the end of their patience sometimes commit suicide in a red wedding gown. This extra measure gives the deceased's spirit awesome powers.¹⁵

Whatever the circumstances of her life and the means of her death, the

¹¹ Michael Saso, *Taiwan Facts and Customs* (Hsinchu, Taiwan: Chabanel Language Institute, 1968), p. 41.

¹² C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), p. 73; and Lewis Hodous, *Folkways in China* (London: Probsthain, 1929), p. 105.

¹³ Saso, *Taiwan Facts*, p. 42.

¹⁴ Duyvendak, "True Dates," p. 344.

¹⁵ The red wedding dress symbolizes the liminality of a woman as she is transferred between two families; see Rubie S. Watson, "Class Differences and Affinal Relations in South China," *Man* 16: 593-615 (1981). Suicide in this liminal state creates an uncontrollable ghost, one without ties to any kin group. On suicide in traditional China, see Margery Wolf, "Women and Suicide in China," in *Women in Chinese Society*, ed. Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975) and Wolfram Eberhard, *Gull and Sin in Traditional China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 94-116. To my knowledge, at least two women in the New Territories village of San Tin committed suicide while wearing their wedding dresses in the late 1960s. In each case the house in which the suicide took place was abandoned and has not been occupied since.

written versions of the T'ien Hou myth show a certain degree of uniformity concerning the charitable characteristics of the deity. The heroic deeds for which she is noted concern seafarers who were threatened by storms or freak waves. The most popular written records¹⁶ of these exploits present T'ien Hou as a universalistic deity who saves everyone in need, from the emperor's favorite official to the poorest sailor in the realm. Written versions of the myth always make a point of crediting the goddess with the suppression of pirates and other "opportunists" (reading between the lines this can only mean boat people) who take advantage of disorder along the coast. As outlined in more detail below, this view of T'ien Hou as a queller of social disorder is not stressed in all oral versions of her myth, particularly those told by fisherpeople. Among landed peasants in South China, however, T'ien Hou is revered primarily for her ability to tame the sea and bring order to the coast.

Before proceeding to a consideration of the state's involvement in this cult, something needs to be said about the goddess's relation to other Chinese deities. It is by now commonly accepted that the so-called folk traditions of religion in China cannot be understood with reference only to the three Great Religions (Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism).¹⁷ Nonetheless, the special characteristics of T'ien Hou as a savior and a guardian spirit have led some observers to speculate that she is grounded primarily in the Buddhist faith and is, in fact, a transformation of earlier deities.¹⁸ The impression is further strengthened by the proliferation of tracts dedicated to T'ien Hou and written in the style of Buddhist incarnation manuals.¹⁹ Other commentators maintain with equal resolve that T'ien Hou is a Taoist deity consciously created to "offset" the popular Buddhist deity, Kuan Yin.²⁰ Another theory of T'ien Hou's origin is presented by Wolfram Eberhard in his study of South China's aboriginal cultures. According to Eberhard,²¹ T'ien Hou is often identified with, or confused with (the distinction is difficult to unravel), a set of female water deities that predate Han Chinese settlement of the south. One of these deities, associated with river transport and rice transplantation, was known as Lin-shui

¹⁶ Abbreviated broadsheets and festival booklets referred to in note 7.

¹⁷ This problem is treated at length in the conference volume *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, ed. Arthur P. Wolf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).

¹⁸ Hodous, *Folkways*, pp. 104ff., argues that T'ien Hou is a female transformation of earlier male Buddhist deities.

¹⁹ A booklet of this nature, entitled *Hung-jen pu-shi T'ien Hou sheng mu ching-shan (hai t'ien hou-sheng mu ching-shan)* (海天仙佛), can be found in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies. The book, compiled by Fang Hsing-shen 方行懌 and published in 1722, gives a long list of Buddhist-style incarnations for various problems. It is written in highly sophisticated literary language.

²⁰ See, for example, V. R. Burthardt, *Chinese Creeds and Customs* (Hong Kong: South China Morning Post, 1953, 1955), vol. 1, p. 13, and vol. 11, p. 105; and John Shyrock, *The Temples of Anking and Their Cults* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1931), p. 79.

²¹ Wolfram Eberhard, *The Local Cultures of South and East China* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), pp. 402-403.

fu-jen (lit. "Near Water Lady") and originated in the same Fukien coastal district as T'ien Hou (whose surname, Lin, is an exact homophone of the term *lin*, "near"). It is entirely possible, therefore, that T'ien Hou may have originated as a Chinese (i.e., ethnic Han) transformation of a non-Chinese (aboriginal) water deity. Although this line of enquiry is interesting, I do not propose to pursue it in this paper. Suffice it to note that T'ien Hou eventually became one of the leading deities of the Chinese "folk tradition" and, as such, it is difficult, if not impossible, to chart her origins with any degree of precision. We are on firmer sociological grounds when we deal with the uses to which this deity was put in the services of cultural integration.

STATE INTERVENTION: THE CREATION OF AN "APPROVED" DEITY

The process of incorporating a Chinese deity into the state-approved pantheon was, like the validation of saints in the Catholic church, governed by well-established bureaucratic procedures. It began with an imperial decree citing the deity for some special service to the nation. These citations took the form of honorific titles conferred by the grateful emperor. The first of T'ien Hou's many titles, Ling-hui fu-jen (lit. "Divine Kindly Lady"), was granted in 1156 in response to a request by an imperial emissary. The goddess had, it was claimed, guided this official and his fleet safely through a storm. Soon afterwards (1192), she received a slightly higher title, Ling-hui Fei (adding the designation *fei*, "Imperial Concubine").²² These minor titles were important at the time, but the guardian of maritime travelers did not attain national prominence until the Mongol era. In 1278, Kublai Khan himself singled out the goddess for meritorious service to the state and conferred upon her the title T'ien Fei ("Celestial Concubine").²³ A series of related titles followed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, including a particularly revealing one in 1499: Hu-kuo pi-min chih T'ien Fei ("T'ien Fei who Protects the Nation and Defends the People").²⁴ The goddess became even more important to the state as the Ch'ing emperors sought to tighten their grip on the southern coastal region. The founder of the Ch'ing (1644-1662 reign) attributed his own deliverance from a storm to T'ien Fei and granted her the illustrious title T'ien-shang sheng-mu (lit. "Heavenly, Sainly Mother"). And, finally, in 1737 the Ch'ien-lung Emperor elevated her to the exalted position of T'ien Hou, "Empress of Heaven."²⁵

²² Duyvendak, "True Dates," p. 344. See also Von Bodo Wiethoff, "Der staatliche Ma-tsu Kult," *Zeitschrift für Dainikem Morgenländischen Geschichte* 11:6:311-357 (1966), for a discussion of the chronology of imperial titles.

²³ Clarence B. Day, *Chinese Peasant Cults* (Shanghai: Theological Press, 1940), p. 84.

²⁴ Duyvendak, "True Dates," p. 344.

²⁵ Saso, *Taiwan Facts*, pp. 45-46, gives this date for the T'ien Hou title but adds that the goddess was popularly known by the title as early as the Ming. Laurence G. Thompson maintains that the

Once T'ien Hou was recognized by the court, her cult fell under the jurisdiction of the Imperial Board of Rites which saw to it that the goddess was treated according to the rules and regulations of the *su lin* (Register of Sacrifices). As C. K. Yang notes, this system of state sponsorship created a distinction between unrecognized cults and state-approved cults.²⁶ Many of the latter enjoyed special privileges, including the construction—at state expense—of elaborate temples in centers of government throughout the empire.

An excellent example of the promotion of approved cults is found in Harry Lamley's study of Taiwanese urban development. When Ch'ing authorities first took over the administration of the eastern Taiwan region of Ko-ma-lan, they discovered that the inhabitants (Chinese fisherpeople and farmers) did not have temples for any of the deities in the state pantheon. One of the first things the officials did was sponsor the construction of three new temples in the city of I-lan, the region's administrative center. Images of T'ien Hou, Kuan Ti (God of War), and Kuan Yin (Goddess of Mercy) were brought from the mainland and installed in I-lan. The officials in charge saw temple construction as an integral part of the government's mission to "civilize" the Taiwanese frontier.²⁷

Official temples like the ones described by Lamley were used by government functionaries, but common people were expected to follow their lead. The highest ranking bureaucrat in every administrative center in China was charged with the duty of worshipping the deities in the state pantheon twice each year, during the spring and autumn festivals.²⁸ These occasions were prescribed by the Board of Rites and were normally at odds with the deities' popular festival dates (the so-called "birthdays" of the gods, or *tan*). For instance, T'ien Hou's annual festival falls on the twenty-third day of the third lunar month, while the dates set aside for her worship in the state-supported temples do not correspond with any major celebrations in her honor. This system of separate worship meant that many Chinese cities had two major temples dedicated to T'ien Hou, one administered by the bureaucratic elite and another controlled by local businessmen. The distribution of Ma Tsu (T'ien Hou) temples on Taiwan shows this process very clearly. In Taipei, for example, the official

²⁶T'ien Hou title was conferred in 1683, see *Chinese Religion* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1979), p. 61. The process of recognition did not end with the fall of the Ch'ing. In 1929, for instance, the Republican government issued an order that T'ien Hou temples throughout the country were to be kept in good order; see Chen Ts, *Emigrant Communities in South China* (Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, 1939), p. 239.

²⁷On the distinction between official and popular cults see Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, pp. 145-146; on the *su lin* see Stephan Feuchtwang, "School-Temple and City God," in *The City in Late Imperial China*, ed. G. William Skinner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), pp. 584-596.

²⁸Harry Lamley, "The Formation of Cities: Initiative and Motivation in Building Three Walled Cities in Taiwan," in Skinner, *The City*, p. 195.

²⁹Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, pp. 145-146.

temple was built inside the old walled city²⁹ but it did not become the primary focus of popular worship. Another temple outside the city is commonly regarded as northern Taiwan's leading center of devotion to Ma Tsu.³⁰ The pattern of dual temples is even clearer in the Taiwanese city of Lukang. Here the official Ma Tsu temple is a magnificent stone building; government officials spared no expense in its construction. Yet, from the day of its inauguration in the eighteenth century to the present, it has hardly been used by local people. Lukang's unofficial Ma Tsu temple is located only a few streets away and, in striking contrast to the state temple, it has become one of Taiwan's leading pilgrimage centers.³¹

On the face of it, the unpopularity of official temples in Taiwan's cities would appear to contradict one of the central propositions set forth in this paper—namely, that state authorities played a leading role in the propagation of the T'ien Hou cult. The question here is whether the state *led or followed* the masses in the promotion of specific deities. Did officials impose their own set of religious symbols on the Chinese people or did they simply respond to local pressure by aligning the state with deities that were already popular with the masses? This problem is pursued in more detail below, but it would appear that in the case described by Lamley state authorities led the masses, while in the port city of Lukang their efforts to "go-opt" the deity did not succeed. It is important to note, however, that religious cults in Taiwan developed under a special set of historical circumstances. The island was settled very late by Chinese standards (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) and the pioneers came mostly from coastal Fukien, the original home of the T'ien Hou cult. In effect, these settlers brought the goddess with them when they emigrated to Taiwan. In Taipei and Lukang, therefore, the Ma Tsu (T'ien Hou) cult was well established by the time Ch'ing authorities made their presence felt.³² There was little likelihood

²⁹Stephan Feuchtwang, "City Temples in Taipei Under Three Regimes," in *The Chinese City Between Two Worlds*, ed. Mark Elvin and G. William Skinner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), p. 281.

³⁰Philip C. Baily, *Religion in a Chinese Town* (Taipei: Orient Cultural Service, 1975), pp. 25-27. ³¹Based on personal observations in 1978, with the aid of a guided tour by the director of Lukang's folk museum. The famous temples of Lukang are the subject of two excellent essays by Donald R. DeGlopper, "Religion and Ritual in Lukang," in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, ed. Arthur P. Wolf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), and "Social Structure in a Nineteenth-Century Taiwanese Port City," in Skinner, *The City in Late Imperial China*.

³²The oldest Ma Tsu temple in Taiwan is the unofficial one in Lukang; see DeGlopper, "Religion and Ritual," pp. 50-51. The local committee for this temple claims that it was built during the early Ming (pamphlet entitled *Lukang T'ien Hou Kung*, 1977). This date, however, is probably exaggerated and a late Ming foundation is more likely (personal communications, W. S. Atwell and H. Lamley). The earliest Ma Tsu temple in northern Taiwan dates from 1661, when a monk brought her statue from the home temple in Mei-chou, Fukien, and built a shelter for it at Kuantu, on the Tanshui River (see Baily, *Religion in a Chinese Town*, p. 67). The important Ma Tsu temple in An-ping, Taiwan, is dated 1688 (see Lin Ho-t'ing 林鶴亭, "An-ping T'ien Hou kung chih 安平天后宮志," *T'ai-wan Jang-wu* 台灣風物, 26:37-71 [1976]; I am grateful to Harry Lamley for drawing my attention to this interesting article).

that the official temples would be viewed by local people as anything other than unambiguous symbols of state control. Unofficial temples, on the other hand, are to this day identified with the indigenous political and cultural interests of Taiwan.³³ "Branches" of these unofficial temples have been founded in villages throughout the island.³⁴

The glaring opposition between official and unofficial Ma Tsu temples in Taiwan's major cities may thus be a consequence of the island's unique settlement history. Nonetheless, the Taiwanese pattern of dual temples does illustrate one of the main themes developed in this essay: T'ien Hou, like most Chinese deities, symbolized different things to different people. Government officials (most of whom were born outside Taiwan) promoted her as a symbol of imperial pacification and "approved" culture, while the Taiwanese people accepted her as the embodiment of their own independence. In this respect, it is significant that the goddess is known by her familiar name, Ma Tsu, in Taiwan and *not* by her imperial title, T'ien Hou. The historical circumstances were quite different in the region where I did my own field research. Official and unofficial temples also appeared in Kwangtung's major cities,³⁵ but they evolved *together* over a six-hundred-year period; hence, the distinction did not carry the same emotional charge that one finds on Taiwan. And, perhaps as a consequence, Cantonese fisherpeople and farmers have always referred to the goddess by her imperial titles, first T'ien Fei and later T'ien Hou.

Although space does not permit a full discussion of the subject, it is necessary to mention the geographical distribution of the T'ien Hou cult and its close identification with Chinese maritime interests. The earliest known T'ien Hou temple (dated 1122) is located in her home district on the Fukien coast.³⁶ From there the cult seems to have spread up and down the coast. The oldest temple in the Hong Kong region is dated 1266.³⁷ If the claims made for Lukang's unofficial Ma Tsu temple are to be believed (see note 32), the cult reached

³³ Personal observations in Lukang and elsewhere. Emily Ahern presents a similar argument for the local "earth gods" that have become the focus of Taiwanese cultural nationalism. See her "Taipei King Festival" in *The Anthropology of Taiwanese Society*, ed. Emily Ahern and Hill Gates (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1981), pp. 397-425.

³⁴ "Branch temples" are formed by transferring ashes from the major temple's incense pot to smaller temples. Ma Tsu branches are found in the villages studied by Burton Pasternak, *Kinship and Community in Two Chinese Villages* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), pp. 111-112; Bernard Gallin, *Hsin Hsing, Taiwan: A Chinese Village in Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), pp. 251-252; David Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 8; and Stuart Thompson, "Ch'ing Han Village, Yun Lin Hsien, Taiwan," Field Report, School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London, 1981).

³⁵ John H. Gray, *Walks in the City of Canton* (Hong Kong: De Souza, 1875), pp. 172-177, notes that there are at least two major T'ien Hou temples in Canton. It appears that, in contrast to the Taiwanese pattern outlined in the text of this paper, the temples in Canton developed together over a longer period of time.

³⁶ Eberhard, *Local Cultures*, p. 403.

³⁷ Jen, "Southern Sung," p. 67.

Taiwan in the early Ming (1370s or 1380s). T'ien Hou temples were found as far north as Weihaiwei on the Shantung coast from at least the fifteenth century.³⁸ The cult was not confined to the coastal fringe of China, however. Generations of Fukien emigrants adopted T'ien Hou as their patron goddess and built temples for her in Thailand, Java, and California—to name only a few overseas extensions.³⁹

By the mid-Ming, T'ien Hou had become closely identified with Chinese commercial interests from Fukien to the Malayan peninsula and beyond. This was due, in part, to the testimonials of merchants and government officials who attributed their success to the goddess's divine intervention. Perhaps the most influential of T'ien Hou's many supporters was Cheng Ho, the imperial eunuch who became famous for his maritime adventures. Cheng Ho claimed that the goddess was responsible for guiding him through uncharted seas, thereby allowing the Ming court to extend its commercial empire far beyond the shores of China. Upon returning from his first expedition, in the early fifteenth century, he built a temple to T'ien Fei (as she was then known) near the city of Ch'ang-lo, Fukien. This temple became the rallying point for Cheng Ho's later expeditions.⁴⁰

T'ien Hou also became the patron goddess of several merchant guilds that drew their members from cities on the southern coast. In Taipei, for instance, one of her major temples was the headquarters of the Amoy guild⁴¹; a similar arrangement was found in Anking, Anhwei, where the T'ien Hou temple doubled as the Fukien guild hall.⁴² This is not to imply that T'ien Hou was monopolized by merchants from her home province. Doolittle notes that the largest T'ien Hou temple in what was then Fukien leading city (Foochow) was in fact built by traders from Ningpo, Chekiang Province.⁴³

As we have seen, T'ien Hou was a multifarious deity in the sense that she symbolized many things. It should not be surprising that maritime merchants and imperial officials chose to portray her as a queller of disorder on the seas. The sea was, in fact, the last frontier; disorderly elements (pirates, Ming loyalists, smugglers) could always find temporary refuge somewhere along South China's vast stretch of coastal estuaries and islands. Government and

³⁸ R. F. Johnston, *Lion and Dragon in Northern China* (New York: Dutton, 1910), pp. 385-386.

³⁹ G. William Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957), p. 84; Chen Ta, "Emigrant Communities," p. 240; Eberhard, *Local Cultures*, p. 403. Skinner notes that, in Southeast Asia, the worship of T'ien Hou is an ethnic marker and is closely associated with Hokkien migrants from the Chang-Ch'uan (Amoy) region (personal communication).

⁴⁰ This sequence of events was confirmed in the 1930s by the discovery of a stone tablet in the Ch'ang-lo temple; dated 1431, the stone carries Cheng Ho's seal (see Duyvendak, "True Dates," pp. 342-345). Interestingly enough, Cheng Ho himself became the object of a cult and is deified by the Chinese in Java and elsewhere; see Stevens, "Three Chinese Deities," pp. 192-195, and D. E. Willmott, *The Chinese of Semarang* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960), pp. 213-217.

⁴¹ Feuchtwang, "City Temples," p. 274.

⁴² Shnyock, *Temples of Aiking*, p. 26.

⁴³ Justus Doolittle, *Social Life of the Chinese* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1865), I: 205.

commerce could not be expected to survive for long in an unstable frontier. Cheng Ho, the Ming emissary referred to above, expressed these sentiments in a tablet detailing T'ien Hou's services to the imperial court. The goddess, it was claimed, had a "calming" and "civilizing" effect on the sea peoples encountered by the Ming expeditionary forces. Those who resisted were either killed or captured. The tablet concludes that "the sea route was cleansed and pacified" with T'ien Hou's assistance.⁴³ This vision of the goddess as a guardian of stability and order was later to be adopted by the powerful, landowning lineages that emerged along the coast of Kwangtung.

TWO LOCAL TEMPLES: THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND

In the following sections, two specific T'ien Hou temples and their local cults are examined in detail. These temples are situated in the northwest corner of Hong Kong's New Territories, near the Anglo-Chinese border. Both are closely identified with powerful lineages that have dominated this region for at least three centuries. One temple, called Tung Shan Miao ("Eastern Mountain Temple"), is located in the village of San Tin—home of the Man lineage.⁴⁵ The other, Sha Chiang Miao ("Sand River Temple"), faces a stretch of coastline claimed by the Teng lineage. The Teng were the first to settle in this part of southern Kwangtung and now inhabit five major villages in the New Territories. Sand River Temple is controlled by a branch of this Teng higher-order lineage located in the village of Ha Tsuen.⁴⁶ As Chinese lineages are already so well documented in the anthropological literature,⁴⁷ I do not propose to outline the internal structure of the Man or Teng lineages in any detail here. Suffice it to note that these two lineages are representative of the landowning collectivities that dominated much of rural Kwangtung and Fukien prior to the Communist victory in 1949.

The Man and the Teng each control a *hsiang* of approximately twelve square miles surrounding their home communities. Ha Tsuen *hsiang* is one of the largest in the New Territories and incorporates a four-mile stretch of open coast that fronts on Deep Bay. San Tin *hsiang* is also located along the coast, but the Man

⁴³ Duyvendak, "True Dates," pp. 345, 350.

⁴⁴ A general study of the Man lineage is presented in J. L. Watson, *Emigration and the Chinese Lineage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

⁴⁵ An account of Ha Tsuen's history can be found in Rubie S. Watson, "The Creation of a Chinese Lineage: The Teng of Ha Tsuen, 1669-1751," *Modern Asian Studies* 16: 99-100 (1982).

⁴⁷ Besides the above, see Hugh Baker, *Shung Shui: A Chinese Lineage Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968); Maurice Freedman, *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China* (London: Athlone, 1938) and *Chinese Lineage and Society: Fukien and Kwangtung* (London, 1966); Jack Potter, *Capitalism and the Chinese Peasant* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); Rubie S. Watson, *Inequality Among Brothers: Class and Kinship in South China* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

and their clients have reclaimed thousands of acres of saline marsh over the centuries and the sea front has long since been encased by brackish-water paddies and fish ponds.⁴⁸ The people of Ha Tsuen developed a fresh-water ecosystem, but they could not rely on local fields to feed everyone in the community. From at least the 1750s until the 1960s, nearly half of the farming households in Ha Tsuen engaged in subsidiary occupations associated with oyster production, shellfish collection, and shore fishing. Wealthier Teng developed a number of lucrative industries that produced lime, cement, oyster sauce, and salted fish. Teng middlemen also nurtured patron-client relationships with full-time fisherpeople (*shui shang jen*) who anchored regularly in Ha Tsuen's territory. As members of a landed lineage, however, the Teng were always careful to keep the *shui shang jen* at arm's length; there was no intermarriage between the groups and social relations were restricted to the conduct of business. There is evidence that the Teng engaged in salt production, besides processing fish and oysters, from a very early date—beginning in the Southern Sung and lasting until the mid-Ch'ing. Salt pans were maintained on the tidal flats that once surrounded Ha Tsuen's present site.⁴⁹ The pans are said to have been owned by a wealthy Teng merchant who involved himself in Ming loyalist activities and consequently fled the village in the 1650s, never to be heard from again.

The people of Ha Tsuen, therefore, were heavily dependent on coastal products. A steady supply of oysters, fish, salt, and lime is what made the difference between commercial success and economic obscurity. Among the Man, reliance on the coastal environment was even more essential. The people of San Tin had no fresh-water paddies to fall back on and were completely dependent on the brackish-water reclamations. In addition to producing a single crop of red rice every year, they could manipulate the reclamations to trap large quantities of shrimp, crabs, and fish. The Man built stake nets along the outer perimeter of the dikes and leased these to boat people who lived in nearby anchorages. All of these activities were regulated by San Tin's main ancestral hall, which, in fact, owned some of the largest reclamation projects.

The Man and the Teng were dependent on the sea in other ways as well. Both lineages operated coastal ferries that plied between the area's major markets and population centers. The San Tin Man monopolized much of the boat traffic to and from Sham Chun, a leading market town. The Teng concentrated on the route to the Ch'ing administrative center at Nam Tao and the market in Yuen Long. By the 1850s, several landlord-merchant families in Ha Tsuen had also diversified into the coastal shipping business. They owned

⁴⁸ On the technology of land reclamation in the San Tin area see J. L. Watson, *Emigration*, pp. 31-42.

⁴⁹ On salt production in this region see Lin Shu-yen, "Salt Manufacture in Hong Kong," *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 7: 138-151 (1967). This topic is discussed in the study mentioned in n. 58.

flat-bottomed freighters that carried local products (sugar, salt, fish, preserved vegetables, and the like) to markets throughout the Canton Delta region. These freighters were staffed primarily by members of the Teng lineage.

As an expression of territorial claims, the Man and Teng chose to build their T'ien Hou temples near the piers that serviced this coastal traffic. San Tin's Eastern Mountain Temple stands on what was once the high-water mark above the original beach. Lineage tradition has it that this was also the location where the Man established their first pier. Over the centuries, this pier has been moved several times to accommodate the lineage's massive reclamation projects. Today, Eastern Mountain Temple is located nearly a mile from open water, but the local people are still very much aware of its historical significance. T'ien Hou is seen as the guardian of the reclaimed fields. In Ha Tsuen *tsiang*, the T'ien Hou temple still faces the open sea; the oyster beds have not altered the basic ecology of the tidal lands along this expanse of coast. Sand River Pier, which stood nearby, is listed in the 1819 edition of the region's gazetteer⁵⁰ as an important communication center for Hsin-an *hsien*. Although this original pier was supplanted in the 1930s by another Teng-owned facility two miles down the coast, Sand River Temple is still perceived as the guardian of Ha Tsuen's commercial territory. T'ien Hou presides over the coast and, according to Teng elders, "she has a special relationship with those of us who are the original settlers (*pen-t'ien*) in this place."

T'IENT HOU AS A SYMBOL OF COASTAL PACIFICATION

The origin of the T'ien Hou cults in San Tin and Ha Tsuen can be traced to the turbulence that marked the Ming-Ch'ing transition. The collapse of the Ming and the early efforts to establish Manchu control over the South resulted in a period of unparalleled chaos for the coastal peoples of Kwangtung and Fukien. There is good evidence that the ancestors of the Teng had settled in Hsin-an perhaps as early as the Southern Sung (twelfth century); the Man also maintain that they have local roots dating from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but their claims are more difficult to substantiate. In any case, the pre-Ch'ing social structure of the region under study was nearly obliterated during the period from approximately 1640 to 1670. The local gazetteer presents a grim picture of the first two decades of Manchu rule, with famine and disorder combining to devastate the local population.⁵¹ But the most important watershed of this chaotic era was the Great Evacuation of the southern coast ordered by the K'ang-hsi emperor in the year of his enthronement, 1662.⁵² The people who

lived along a strip of land up to 50 *li* (approximately 17 miles) from the coast were driven inland and the area was sealed off by imperial troops. The evacuation was undertaken to deprive Ming loyalists of sanctuaries among local inhabitants. The oral history of the Teng is replete with stories of the suffering experienced by their ancestors during this period of disruption. (Significantly, the Man of San Tin do not have a corpus of myth relating to the evacuation, leading me to suspect that they did not settle in the region until the 1670s.) Finally, in 1669 the emperor relented and permitted the recolonization of the coastal strip. The Teng, Man, and other lineage groups rushed into southern Hsin-an to stake new claims and to reclaim old territory.

In the aftermath of the evacuation, I would argue, T'ien Hou was embraced by coastal settlers as a symbol of social stability and tranquility. We have seen how the goddess already embodied these qualities in the cults fostered by maritime merchants and imperial emissaries. There is no evidence that the many T'ien Hou temples built by landed interests in the New Territories dedicated the Great Evacuation. There were, as I have noted, earlier temples primarily to the goddess in the Hong Kong region, but these were controlled primarily by fisherpeople and merchants who catered to the floating population; pre-Ch'ing T'ien Hou shrines are *not* associated with the major lineages. Sand River Temple was built by the Ha Tsuen Teng during the early 1670s, and the bell, installed during its first major renovation, is dated 1707.⁵³ Eastern Mountain Temple in San Tin also dates from the 1670s or 1680s, as does the T'ien Hou temple in the village of Kam Tin, Hong Kong's wealthiest lineage community.⁵⁴ The same pattern of postevacuation construction is found in many other temples controlled by landed lineages in the New Territories.⁵⁵ It would appear that there was a major boom in the popularity of the T'ien Hou cult along the coast of Hsin-an in the decades immediately following the evacuation.

At this point we must pause for a moment and ask an important question: Why T'ien Hou? There were, of course, dozens of deities from which to choose. One lineage in the region selected Pei Ti as their main patron deity, while another chose Hung Sheng.⁵⁶ And yet six major lineages in Hong Kong promoted T'ien Hou as their patron, together with at least four other

⁵⁰ *Hsin-an hsing-yueh shih-nien tsai-p'ing ch'ing-chiao* 廈門縣約十年太平清醮 (Ha Tsuen, 1974), p. 36, and personal observation at Sand River Temple.

⁵¹ Sung Hok-p'ang, "Legends and Stories of the New Territories: Kam Tin," *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 14: 160-185 (1974), p. 184, and inscription evidence in San Tin.

⁵² For example, the T'ien Hou temple at Tun Mun (controlled by two lineages) was erected on its present site in 1698, according to a stone inscription. The bell in the T'ien Hou temple at Shung Shui (Liao lineage) is dated 1721 (see Baker, *Shung Shui*, p. 109) and the bell in Yen Long Old Market's temple is dated 1716 (personal observation). Bell dates do not always correspond to the actual foundation of the temples concerned; in the New Territories temple bells were usually installed during the first major renovation, when the local people had become more affluent.

⁵³ The Pang lineage at Fan Ling and the Teng lineage at Kam Tin respectively.

⁵⁰ *Hsin-an hsien-chih* 新安縣志 (Canton, 1819; reprint ed. Taipei: Ch'eng-wen 成文, 1973), pp. 258-259.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 270, 364-373.

⁵² On the Great Evacuation see R. Watson, "Creation," and Hsieh Kuo-ching, "Removal of Coastal Population in the Early Tsing Period," *Chinese Social and Political Science Review* 15: 559-596 (1993).

lineages—to my knowledge—just across the border in that part of Hsin-an County that remained in Chinese territory after the 1898 lease. It is not T'ien Hou's association with the sea as such that made her appeal to so many coastal lineages; both Hung Sheng and Pei Ti are categorized by the local people as sea deities. The best clue to T'ien Hou's overwhelming popularity with landed interests can be found in the written documents distributed by temple committees during the goddess's annual festival. Following are some highlights of a broadsheet collected at Sand River Temple (it is almost identical to the documents distributed at other lineage-controlled temples). The sheet begins with a standardized version of T'ien Hou's origin and her services to the state; a long list of pacification incidents is then enumerated.

During the Sung, pirates caused troubles along the coast and T'ien Hou materialized to make a storm which overturned their boats, killing them all.... [In another incident] T'ien Hou appeared at the mouth of a pirate's island cave and kept him captive until imperial troops arrived.... [Incident] T'ien Hou poisoned the drinking water of a pirate fleet, killing them all in their sleep.... [Incident] During the early Ch'ing, T'ien Hou helped the emperor vanquish pirates who raided the coast....⁵⁷

The broadsheet continues with many more examples of the goddess's involvement in the suppression of disorderly elements.

T'ien Hou in this guise is an active, aggressive deity whose wrath is visited on the enemies of order. Note that she not only suppresses pirates but acts as the agent of their extermination. Here, for the first time, we learn that T'ien Hou is capable of creating storms as well as quelling them. It is not hard to see how this image of the goddess as a champion of social stability appealed to the founders of the landed lineages that emerged in the chaotic aftermath of the evacuation. Those who settled nearest the coast were never safe from the pirate gangs that roamed the Canton Delta. The history of piracy, banditry, and kidnapping in the two *hsiang* under study are explored elsewhere,⁵⁸ but it should be noted that delta pirates raided Man and Teng territory well into the 1940s. To the people of San Tin and Ha Tsuen, it is not a mystery why T'ien Hou was chosen as the patron deity for their respective lineages. As one elder put it to me, "Our ancestors needed all the help they could get."

No doubt there were other, more practical reasons why so many lineages erected temples to T'ien Hou. The local elites that emerged during the post-evacuation period were aware that the adoption of approved deities would give their lineages certain advantages. The state did not actually underwrite the

construction costs of these unofficial temples, but it did offer recognition in the form of wooden plaques (bearing T'ien Hou's imperial titles) that hung above the altars. The most important aspect of recognition, however, was the listing of approved temples in the *hsien gazetteers*. In effect, the editors of gazetteers had the power to censure lineages that failed to comply with state guidelines concerning the promotion of approved cults. Communities such as San Tin and Ha Tsuen stood to gain nothing by fostering the unrecognized deities that they inherited from pre-Ch'ing inhabitants (see below). The construction of a T'ien Hou temple, on the other hand, placed the community in the mainstream of "civilized" society and—perhaps more to the point—served notice to state authorities that the local elite was not involved in heterodox cults. As we have seen, the coastal people of Kwangtung suffered greatly because of government suspicions that they were involved in Ming loyalist activities (which, in fact, may have been true for some of the Ha Tsuen Teng). Adopting T'ien Hou as their patron goddess was one way the leaders of powerful lineages could signal that they were prepared to cooperate with Ch'ing authorities.

The boom in temple construction coincided with a campaign to re-establish government control over the major sea routes leading to and from Canton. During the Kang-hsi emperor's reign (1662–1727), a string of forts and cannon stations were built along the shores of Deep Bay.⁵⁹ Two of these were located at strategic points near Ha Tsuen and San Tin.⁶⁰ Partly as a consequence of this pacification campaign, the Man and the Teng (along with other lineages in the area) enjoyed more than a century of prosperity beginning in the 1670s and 1680s.⁶¹ The lineages expanded their populations and consolidated their hold on the regional economy during this period. Some of the newfound wealth was used to construct the T'ien Hou temples owned by these powerful kin groups. The elaborate multichambered temples that one finds in the New Territories today are a consequence of that golden era.

Not everyone who rushed into southern Hsin-an in the aftermath of the Great Evacuation fared as well as the Man and the Teng. There were many losers in the scramble for land. Some of these less fortunate pioneers, together with migrants who arrived in subsequent decades, became tenants of the major lineages. The postevacuation period saw the emergence of a dual-ownership system of land tenure, with tenants holding hereditary rights over the "surface" (*ti p'ü*) of fields while landlords—in this case, ancestral estates of the major lineages—paid the land taxes and thereby claimed ownership of the "subsoil" (*ti ku*). These hereditary tenants congregated in smaller "satellite villages" in

⁵⁷ Broadsheet collected in 1978; the selections offered here are rough translations of relevant sections.

⁵⁸ J. L. Watson, "The Protection of Privilege: Self-Defence Corps and Local Politics on the South China Coast," manuscript.

⁵⁹ See for example Siu Kwok-kin, "The Fat Tong Mun Fort," *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 18:209–210 (1978).

⁶⁰ *Kuang-lung Fu shuo* 廣東圖說 (Canton, 1862; reprint ed. Taipei: Ch'eng-wen 成文, 1988), pp. 156–157. See also *Hsin-an kuan-chih*, pp. 350–359.

⁶¹ See R. Watson, "Circulation."

the hinterland of San Tin and Ha Tsuen.⁶² More will be said about the satellite village system later in this essay. Although hereditary tenants played an important role in the region's T'ien Hou cults, their view of the goddess was quite different from that held by members of the landlord lineages.

THE PROCESS OF RELIGIOUS STANDARDIZATION

A closer look at the T'ien Hou temples in San Tin and Ha Tsuen gives some insight into the process of religious standardization in China. T'ien Hou, in her local manifestation, was a jealous and—at times—vindictive goddess who did not tolerate rivals. The oral traditions of the Man and Teng make this very clear. In 1977–1978, I spent a considerable amount of time attempting to reconstruct the microhistories of various cults in the two *hsiang* under study. One of the more interesting findings was that, according to informants, T'ien Hou actually ate, or ingested, earlier deities when she rose to preeminence during the postevacuation era. The myths relating to T'ien Hou's "conquest" of the coast are vivid in their imagery; we will begin with Sand River Temple near Ha Tsuen.

The Teng claim that an earlier deity, Sha Chiang Ma (Sand River Mother), once presided over the strip of coast now governed by T'ien Hou. Sand River Mother is a parochial goddess who is not recognized outside Ha Tsuen *hsiang*. The accounts of this goddess and her demise are part of the region's oral tradition and, as such, they must be treated like any other body of myth. It is not the historical veracity of the Sand River Mother stories that should preoccupy us here. My own interest in analyzing local myths is to find clues to the way local people *think* about their deities. According to most informants, Sand River Mother was the patron of the original inhabitants who lived along the Ha Tsuen coast prior to the arrival of the Teng. Some time in the misty past, so the story goes, a cone-shaped stone was dredged up by a fishing net. The stone was taken to be the representation of a deity and installed in a shrine near the place where a small stream (Sand River) emptied into the sea. This minor deity, it is said, was worshipped by fisherpeople and itinerants who lived along the coast—sedentary farmers (i.e., "proper people" in the Teng's own conceptual scheme) were not involved in the cult. When the Teng returned to the region after the evacuation, they built a temple to T'ien Hou on the same spot and took possession of Sand River Mother's stone representation. Rather than discarding the stone, they used it as the foundation for the Teng's own molded statue of T'ien Hou. At this point in the story, local people maintain that T'ien Hou "ate" (Cantonese *shik*), or "digested" (Cantonese *shu-fa*), Sand River Mother. As evidence that their version of the story is correct, numerous informants—

⁶² The satellite village system is outlined in J. L. Watson, "Hereditary Tenancy and Corporate Landlordism in Traditional China: A Case Study," *Modern Asian Studies* 11: 161–182 (1977).

Teng and non-Teng alike—pointed to what appears to be a pumice stone core near the base of T'ien Hou's image in today's temple. In my view it is largely irrelevant whether or not Teng ancestors actually used the original stone as the foundation for this statue; the important point is that local people believe they did.

Sand River Mother may have been ingested by T'ien Hou, but she did not disappear entirely. Once every ten years, during Ha Tsuen's *ta chiao* festival (discussed below), Sand River Mother materializes for a brief time along with other obscure local deities. All the deities known to have existed in Ha Tsuen *hsiang* are gathered together in a special shrine to witness a five-day opera performed during this festival. Most of the deities, like Sand River Mother, no longer have statues or even stones to represent them and, hence, their names are written on slips of red paper. They appear on the altar as rows of small placards, along with the portable images of major deities and the tablets of founding ancestors. In my experience, this is the only time it is possible for the fieldworker to collect a complete list of deities that play a role in the local pantheon. During ordinary times, the people of San Tin and Ha Tsuen worship only a handful of deities that appear in the region's temples, but as many as a hundred obscure gods and goddesses may be "invited" to attend important rituals. Elders explained that they dare not risk offending even the most insignificant of deities during the critical *ta chiao* rituals. This is the only context in which Sand River Mother retains a separate identity.

Here we see, in its most elementary form, the process by which a state-recognized cult is formed at the local level. Sand River Mother is only one case in point. A similar set of myths surround the installation of T'ien Hou in San Tin's Eastern Mountain Temple. The Man also claim to have taken possession of a fisherpeople's shrine and "raised" (*th'i*) a T'ien Hou temple on the same spot. There are also hints that the T'ien Hou statue in San Tin incorporates a stone representation of another deity. In every case that I have investigated in the New Territories (seven in all), T'ien Hou has superseded a parochial deity and become the leading cult figure of the *hsiang*. It will be noted, however, that she does not actually destroy or obliterate the original incumbents. Rather, in the words of one informant, T'ien Hou takes on the spiritual essence, or "steam" (Cantonese *ching hai*), of those she assimilates and "grows stronger every time she eats a local deity like Sand River Mother." As I hope to show in the next section, T'ien Hou's spiritual conquest of the Kwangtung coast can be seen as a metaphor of political domination in the real world.

T'IENT HOU AS A SYMBOL OF LINEAGE HEGEMONY

In most parts of China, T'ien Hou is identified primarily as a guardian of scapars and a defender of the coast. However, in the two *hsiang* under study, the goddess has taken on an additional representation as a symbol of lineage

hegemony. By adopting her as a patron deity, the Man and Teng converted T'ien Hou into a territorial deity with jurisdiction over land as well as sea. T'ien Hou's role as a guardian of lineage territory is clearly expressed in the recurrent rituals performed in her honor. Space does not permit a full discussion of these rituals but the most important is a purification ceremony (*ta chiaò*) held every ten years to placate lost souls that may cause trouble for the living.⁶³ Traditionally, every *hsiang* in Hsin-an had a recurrent *ta chiaò* supported by everyone in the territory concerned (the Teng of Ha Tsuen sponsored a spectacular *ta chiaò* in 1974 and plan another in 1984; the Man have not held a proper *ta chiaò* since the 1940s). The *ta chiaò* rites as such are extremely complex and last for five days and six nights, during which the local population is entertained by an opera troupe. T'ien Hou, as the *hsiang* patron, is physically transferred from her temple to the seat of honor in a special shelter near the opera site (she is represented by a small statue). Here the goddess presides over the rites and, according to informants, enjoys the opera. For the purposes of this discussion, the most important aspect of the *ta chiaò* sequence is a procession of men who carry a pot of burning incense (also pronounced *hsiang*) around the boundaries of their *hsiang*. The procession, known as *hsing hsiang* ("walking the *hsiang*" or, alternatively, "walking the incense"), is thought to purify the territory controlled by the lineage and mark out T'ien Hou's domain.

The processions have all the attributes of a military operation. Only men are allowed to participate; women stay in the village and attend to domestic rituals. In Ha Tsuen, upwards of two thousand men take part. Until the 1950s, when colonial police began to patrol such events, *ta chiaò* processions sometimes led to violent confrontations between neighboring lineages. Rivals used the occasion to claim bits of disputed territory for their own lineages. Another important feature of the processions was that tenants who lived in the *hsiang* were "encouraged" to participate along with members of the dominant lineage. The route always passed through satellite villages controlled by the landlord lineage and, if tenants or other dependents did not show proper deference, trouble was certain to follow.

The political dimensions of the T'ien Hou cult are even more salient in the rituals performed during the goddess's annual festival, her so-called "birthday" (*lan*) on the twenty-third day of the third lunar month. T'ien Hou *lan* is celebrated in this part of Kwangtung by a colorful and exciting competition. Small associations, known as *hua p'ao hui* ("flower cannon societies"), gather at major temples and young men fight over lucky coins shot from small cannon. The prizes are elaborate altars, made of bright paper, brought to the temple by participating associations (every altar is numbered and thereby ranked in order of "luckiness"). The associations are composed of neighbors and work mates

⁶³ On *chiaò* ceremonies see Michael R. Saso, *Tz'aoim and the Rite of Cosmic Renewal* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1972).

from hamlets or commercial enterprises in the *hsiang*; every satellite village has at least one such association. Should a village choose not to participate in the annual festival, this is tantamount to a declaration of independence and is viewed as such by members of the dominant lineage.

The territorial exclusivity of the T'ien Hou cult is illustrated by the regional organization of these annual festivals. Among land people in Kwangtung, T'ien Hou *lan* is observed on the same day in every *hsiang*. It is impossible for a Man or a Teng (or their clients) to attend more than one festival. The local cults are thus mutually exclusive and temples are not linked together in a hierarchical fashion, as one finds on Taiwan. Furthermore, the landed peasants of Hsin-an do not engage in regular pilgrimages to T'ien Hou temples outside their own *hsiang*. This, more than anything, explains why T'ien Hou is perceived by the local people as a jealous and vindictive goddess. Her festivals are arranged in such a manner that local people are forced to make a clear and unambiguous statement of their territorial loyalties once every year.

This does not appear to be true for the fisherpeople who live on boats along the Kwangtung coast. T'ien Hou festivals that cater primarily to the floating population are often staggered to allow devotees to attend *hua p'ao hui* celebrations in several locations. In the Hong Kong region, these observances sometimes occur two or three weeks after T'ien Hou's accepted *lan* date. If a pilgrimage complex devoted to this goddess does exist in Kwangtung, therefore, it is largely associated with boat people.⁶⁴ Boat people occasionally observe the festivals associated with lineage-controlled temples, but, as they are not considered to be permanent residents of the *hsiang*, they are not expected to bring an altar. Once they settle on land, however, the fisherpeople are treated like any other group of clients and they are encouraged to pay allegiance to the local T'ien Hou temple. More will be said about the boat people's vision of the goddess later in this paper.

THE ORGANIZATION OF LOCAL CULTS: LEADERSHIP AND CONTROL

The T'ien Hou temples associated with major lineages were (and are) managed by a handful of wealthy men and not by members of a professional clergy. Full-time keepers (*chiaò chu*) were sometimes employed but they were not involved in decision making. Temple records⁶⁵ show that managers were the same individuals who served as trustees for the lineage's ancestral estates. As rep-

⁶⁴ Two T'ien Hou temples located on islands in Hong Kong waters have become pilgrimage centers for the region's boat people. The annual festival at one of these temples, Tsing Yi Island, is held a week after T'ien Hou *lan*; see Graham Johnson, "From Rural Committee to Spirit Medium Cult," *Contributions to Asian Studies* 1: 123-143 (1971), p. 142.

⁶⁵ Handwritten accounts and records dating from 1910.

representatives of the region's landlord-merchant class,⁶⁶ these men had attended schools in Canton, Nam Tao, and Hong Kong. Ordinary members of the lineage progressed no further than the three to five years of elementary tuition offered in local ancestral halls. Most adult males in San Tin and Ha Tsuen were "semiliterates," to use Rawski's designation,⁶⁷ because they could not read or write beyond an elementary level. Nonetheless, this modicum of learning set them apart from hereditary tenants and other clients who, almost without exception, were totally illiterate. Local women (as outlined in more detail below) were also largely illiterate, irrespective of class or social background.

Landlord-merchants were the only men in the *hsiang* capable of handling the complex accounts and sophisticated records required for the smooth operation of temple organizations. Although the members of this class constituted an "elite" in the sense that they dominated the region's economic and political life, few attained the status of imperial degree holders. The Hsin-an gazetteer lists only three men from Ha Tsuen (and none from San Tin) who passed low-ranking exams—and they did not serve in government posts.⁶⁸ James Hayes has argued that the merchants who lived in Hong Kong's island districts were quite capable of managing local affairs without help from degree holders and imperial officials.⁶⁹ With certain qualifications,⁷⁰ Hayes's generalization also applies to the lineage-dominated *hsiang* on the Kwangtung mainland.

The T'ien Hou temples controlled by the Man and Teng were endowed with property to help defray expenses. In San Tin, for instance, Eastern Mountain Temple owned 1.49 acres of land in 1905.⁷¹ The property concerned is located in one of the *hsiang*'s commercial centers and generates a considerable income in shop rents. The most important sources of income, however, are the contribution drives held to support temple renovations and decennial *ta chiao* festivals. Temples in this part of China are renovated, at great expense, approximately once every 70 to 100 years. The renovations are organized by committees of up to 30 men who live in the *hsiang*.⁷² Every community in the catchment area of the temple, including satellite villages, has at least one representative on the

⁶⁶ For a discussion of the local class system, see R. Watson, "Class Differences and Affinal Relations."

⁶⁷ Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy*, pp. 3ff.

⁶⁸ *Hsin-an hsien-shih*, pp. 442, 449. A larger number of local men purchased degrees.

⁶⁹ James Hayes, *The Hong Kong Region, 1850-1911* (Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String Press, 1977), pp. 181-193.

⁷⁰ There is evidence that some lineages in the region under study were heavily influenced by degree-holding gentry. The economic success of the Teng lineage at Kam Tin, for instance, is due in large part to the work of one ancestor, Teng Pao-sheng, the only *chin-shih* to have lived in the area that is now the New Territories. He was responsible for building at least one T'ien Hou temple at Yuen Long Old Market during the immediate postevacuation period.

⁷¹ Land records, 1905, held at the Yuen Long District Office, New Territories.

⁷² Evidence that such committees existed from at least the 1850s can be found in stone inscriptions at major temples. For a case study of one temple renovation see J. Watson, *Emigration*, pp. 141-143.

committee. It is taken for granted, however, that the key decisions are made by members of the landlord-merchant class.

Contributions are collected by the self-defense corps (*tzu wei lui* or, alternatively, *hsun ting*), a body of men drawn from the less advantaged sections of the dominant lineage. The history and organization of these local security forces are described elsewhere (see note 58) but, in the context of the present discussion, it is important to note that one of their primary functions was to enforce a kind of religious orthodoxy in the territory controlled by their lineage. This was accomplished by "encouraging" hereditary tenants and other dependents to attend the T'ien Hou festivals at Sand River Temple and Eastern Mountain Temple. Satellite villages that failed to present an altar at the annual gatherings ran the risk of collective punishment (i.e., the loss of livestock and the burning of property—including homes). Corpsmen also saw to it that clients of the dominant lineage participated in the decennial *ta chiao* processions. Colonial police put an end to many of these bullying tactics in the 1950s, but corpsmen still make the rounds of every household in their territory to collect donations for renovations and *ta chiao* celebrations. Residents of satellite villages deeply resent these intrusions, but they continue to pay rather than incur the wrath of their powerful neighbors.

Prior to the 1950s, the security forces of dominant lineages also made certain that minor temples (of which there are more than twenty in each *hsiang*) did not become the foci of independence movements. Many satellite villages had their own cults dedicated to deities other than T'ien Hou, but they remained small and did not compete with the *hsiang*'s central cult. Until British authorities interceded, the Man and Teng did not permit satellite villagers to hold processions on the *lan* dates of minor deities. In recent years, a number of satellite villages have made feeble attempts to promote independent processions, but the routes have never extended beyond the immediate boundaries of the communities concerned. Residents of these small villages are very conscious that their actions are interpreted as an intrusion into T'ien Hou's traditional domain and, by implication, the processions constitute a direct challenge to Man and Teng hegemony. Satellite villagers are, therefore, always careful not to push their former landlords too far. Corpsmen from dominant lineages are still capable of making life difficult for anyone living in the *hsiang*.

PERCEPTIONS OF T'IENTEN HOU: A STUDY IN CONFLICTING REPRESENTATIONS

As I have demonstrated in the previous section, T'ien Hou is generally perceived by land people in rural Hong Kong as a jealous goddess who reigns over an exclusive territory. In many areas she has become a symbol of lineage hegemony and participation in her cult is enforced by coercive means. How does this picture of local organization fit the image of temple cults presented in the general literature on Chinese religion? The most common view is that

temple activities serve to reinforce feelings of social solidarity; periodic festivals are often seen as the concrete expression of collective values. This approach is summarized by C. K. Yang in his important book *Religion in Chinese Society*:

In such communal events [i.e., temple festivals] the essential function of religion was to provide a collective symbol that would transcend the divergence of economic interests, class status, and social background, so as to make it possible to coalesce a large multitude into a community. People from all walks of life thus could tread the common ground of popularly accepted cults.

• • •

... the temple was a visible expression of the community and its collective interests, and public worship in it represented the periodic mustering of the community for the demonstration of common beliefs and common interests.⁷⁵

The influence of Durkheim is readily apparent in these passages. Yang's view of temple cults is supported by many other anthropologists, especially those who have worked in Taiwan. Jordan found that "religious allegiances" centered on temples were the primary means of organizing and unifying Taiwanese rural society.⁷⁴ Diamond, in her study of a Taiwanese fishing community, states that the local temple was the "strongest organizing force in the village."⁷⁵ A similar view is presented for one of the villages studied by Pasternak; the interesting point about the latter's analysis, however, is that he demonstrates that not all village cults in Taiwan are expressions of collective values.⁷⁶

Turning to the Hong Kong region, Brim argues that collective rituals at major temples serve the function of maintaining political alliances. Ritual, in his view, thus solves the "latency problem" that organizers of these alliances have in ensuring that local people will always be ready to defend their territory.⁷⁷ Brim's analysis does not hold true for all the cults included in his study but, in one respect, it does correspond to the publicly expressed views of local elites. One must bear in mind, however, that not all categories of people in the "village alliance systems" described by Brim share the same set of values and expectations. The Durkheimian view of Chinese cults, as expressed in the work of many anthropologists, seems better suited to multisurname communities in areas where powerful lineages did not dominate the political scene.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, pp. 81, 96.

⁷⁵ Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors*, p. xvii.

⁷⁶ Norma Diamond, *K'un Shun: A Taiwanese Village* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 77.

⁷⁷ Pasternak, *Kinship and Community*, pp. 111-112, 125-126.

⁷⁸ John A. Brim, "Village Alliance Temples in Hong Kong," in Wolf, *Religion and Ritual*, p. 102. See also Marjorie Topley, "Chinese Religion and Rural Cohesion in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 8:9-43 (1968), p. 19, and James Hayes, "Chinese Temples in the Local Setting," in *Some Traditional Chinese Ideas and Conceptions in Hong Kong Social Life Today* (Hong Kong: Royal Asiatic Society, 1965), pp. 92-93. Eugene Anderson also notes that the Durkheimian approach is useful when analyzing many of the T'ien Hou cults which serve Hong Kong's boat people (personal communication).

Although the approach adopted in this paper is different from that espoused by C. K. Yang and others, I would not contend that my findings necessarily contradict those of earlier fieldworkers. Rather, I prefer to think of the two approaches as complementary. It is possible, for instance, to attend a T'ien Hou festival at Eastern Mountain Temple and gain the impression that everyone present shares an identical set of collective values. When asked about their role in the local cult, people in all walks of life express such views as the following: "We all work together to run this festival," or "Eastern Mountain Temple belongs to everyone in this *hsiang* and T'ien Hou helps us all." If the fieldworker is willing to restrict the analysis to publicly expressed values, the two cults under study do indeed serve the needs of everyone concerned. However, on closer inspection, it becomes apparent that these public expressions of solidarity conceal more than they reveal.

The best way to approach this problem, I discovered, was to ask people to tell me their own versions of the T'ien Hou myth. In particular, I asked informants from every settlement in the two *hsiang* to explain how they and their ancestors related to the goddess. When the results were compared, I found that every category or class of people had a different representation of T'ien Hou. These findings are not unique to the area under study. Arthur Wolf has argued, for instance, that a common feature of Chinese peasant religion is that "it mirrors the social landscape of its adherents. There are as many meanings as there are vantage points."⁷⁹ Wolf's insight helps explain how religious cults like the ones under investigation can incorporate people from such diverse backgrounds. As long as tenants or clients participated in the public rituals and professed an allegiance to T'ien Hou, they were free to develop their own representations of the goddess. Those at the top of the regional and national hierarchies (i.e., local elites and government officials) were only concerned with actions, not beliefs.

In earlier sections of this paper I argued that T'ien Hou was promoted by imperial authorities because, to them, she represented "civilization" and approved culture. This view of the goddess is projected in official documents that circulated at the national level. Government functionaries may have had private beliefs regarding T'ien Hou but these did not find public expression. At the local level, members of the landlord-merchant class had their own reasons for promoting T'ien Hou cults. Being literate, men in this category related more easily to the vision of T'ien Hou presented in government publications. The goddess appealed to them primarily as a symbol of coastal pacification but she carried other, "deeper" messages as well. In effect, by building temples to T'ien Hou the local elite signaled that they wished to join in the mainstream of Chinese culture. Educated men who lived in the countryside were anxious to have their temples, and by implication their lineages, mentioned in the hsiang gazetteers. The vision of T'ien Hou as a bearer of "civilization" and a guardian of social

⁷⁹ Wolf, "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors," in Wolf, *Religion and Ritual*, p. 131.

order thus appealed primarily to literate decision makers at all levels of the political hierarchy in China.

When one looks at other categories of people, the pattern is rather different. For ordinary, semiliterate members of the landowning lineages T'ien Hou is perceived as a symbol of territorial control. Since the foundation of the local cults in the postevacuation period, most people in San Tin or Ha Tsuen have been unable to read the documents pertaining to T'ien Hou's exploits. This does not mean that they are unaware of the goddess's associations with the imperial court, but rather that they choose not to dwell on these points in their own renditions of the T'ien Hou myth. When asked, men in this category (the views of women are discussed later) refer almost exclusively to the goddess's ability to quell pirates in the nearby delta and her conquest of parochial deities such as Sand River Mother. T'ien Hou's assistance to lineage ancestors is the most common theme of these stories.

In many respects, ordinary members of the lineage have taken on the religious attitudes of their educated kinsmen. The local elites are keenly aware that "uncivilized" behavior lowers the status of the entire lineage. This, I would argue, is one reason why spirit possession, flagellation, and self-immolation play no role in the local T'ien Hou cults. The Man and Teng do have female mediums who communicate with the spirits of deceased people, but these activities have not evolved into cults as such.⁸⁰ It is significant that males in San Tin and Ha Tsuen do not themselves act as mediums. This concern for "proper" behavior (in their own terms) sets lineage members apart from many of their clients and neighbors in the surrounding countryside. During my stay in San Tin (1969-1970), I attended a spirit medium session held by Teotiu immigrants in the city of Tsuen Wan. When I returned to the village with photographs of flagellation and tongue cutting, my neighbors were horrified, and yet fascinated. They had heard of such behavior but had never actually witnessed anything like it themselves. Their reactions were revealing: "How can anyone who calls himself 'Chinese' act like such a barbarian."

In contrast to what I have seen in other parts of Hong Kong and Taiwan, the temple festivals in San Tin and Ha Tsuen are remarkable for their utter lack of religious fervor. The *hua p'ao hai* competitions sometimes dissolved into brawls and the *ta chiao* processions occasionally led to organized violence, but the religious content of the two T'ien Hou cults under study is understated in the extreme. Nor is the efficaciousness of the local T'ien Hou temples a matter of great concern. In my discussions with Man and Teng (male) elders, it became apparent that T'ien Hou's divine intervention on their behalf is perceived in generalized, abstract terms. The goddess is thought to have assisted their ancestors but she is not credited with specific miracles in living memory. Women, as demonstrated below, have a different vision of T'ien Hou, but local

⁸⁰ On female mediums see Jack M. Potter, "Cantonese Shamanism," in Wolf, *Religion and Ritual*.

males are not particularly concerned with the spiritual powers of their patron deity. For men who belong to powerful lineages, she is, above all else, a symbol of territorial hegemony.

Moving down the hierarchy of power, we must consider the residents of satellite villages. Until recently, people in these small communities had little choice but to participate in the T'ien Hou cults. Although they are no longer tenants as such,⁸¹ many remain clients of their former landlords and continue to play a subordinate role in local politics. Being clients, they cannot, of course, accept T'ien Hou as a symbol of territorial control; to do so would mean that the goddess would represent their own oppression. Accordingly, most satellite villagers have reinterpreted the T'ien Hou myth to "explain" their position in the social hierarchy and to gloss over the fact that they play such a minor role in cult activities. This method of ideological self-justification is common among oppressed minorities who find it difficult, if not impossible, to affect a change in their political circumstances.⁸² If asked, therefore, people in smaller villages deny—often aggressively—that there is an exploitative dimension to the T'ien Hou cults. They do not hide their resentment of the local security forces but, they argue, this has nothing to do with their relationship to the goddess.

Clients of dominant lineages were traditionally illiterate (this is still true for those over 45) and, as a consequence, their myths and legends were never recorded in writing. In collecting T'ien Hou myths from satellite villagers, I found that their versions all have one thing in common: the Man and Teng are presented as usurpers who are unable to harness the power of the deity. An interesting, and revealing, myth was told to me by elders in Sa Kong Wai ("Sand River Village"), a satellite of Ha Tsuen. As the name implies, residents of this community claim a special relationship to Sand River Temple. In their version of local history, the founders of Sa Kong Wai arrived on the scene prior to the Teng and were responsible for starting the T'ien Hou cult. The Teng took control of the temple after they had destroyed Sa Kong Wai's favorable *feng shui* ("wind and water," geomantic influences) and usurped the land in Ha Tsuen *kiang*. To this day, however, the goddess will not help the Teng and will only respond when she is approached by a descendent of the people who first installed her in Sand River Temple. Once every ten years, according to the story, Teng elders bribe a male resident of Sa Kong Wai to initiate the casting of lots required for the selection of ritual leaders who preside over the *ta chiao*. The goddess will not "cooperate" unless someone from Sa Kong Wai starts the procedure, supposedly under the cover of darkness to hide his actions from fellow villagers. In punishment for tricking the goddess, however, the man who breaks ranks and accepts the Teng bribe is said to die before the next *ta chiao*. No

⁸¹ In 1905, colonial officials gave full ownership rights to sitting tenants, but these rights were largely unenforceable until the 1950s.

⁸² A similar theme is explored by Barrington Moore, Jr., *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (New York: Random House, 1978).

one has actually witnessed any of these events, of course, but the people in Sa Kong Wai are convinced that the goddess is really their patron and not the Teng's. This is only one of the ways that satellite villagers use myth to justify their participation in the local T'ien Hou cults.

The discussion to this point has concentrated almost exclusively on local males. Women, as indicated earlier, have a very different vision of T'ien Hou from that held by any category of men—so different, in fact, that one begins to wonder if we are dealing with the same deity. Women play no role whatsoever in the formal organization of the temple cults, not even to the extent of forming a women's auxiliary to complement the activities of their husbands or fathers. For women the worship of T'ien Hou is usually defined in personal or family terms. Wives appear at the annual festivals with individual sets of offerings, which they present to the goddess on behalf of their households. Men never make these prestations, as they are said to be "too busy" attending to the collective rituals associated with the cult.

In considering the religious conceptions of village women, one must bear in mind that until recently all but a handful were totally illiterate.⁸³ Most women over 45 are not even able to recognize the characters for common surnames or the names of their own villages. It is not surprising, therefore, that they know little about the traditions of T'ien Hou preserved in writing. And, yet, I was amazed to discover that women's conceptions of the goddess did not seem to reflect their own (or their husbands') position in the social hierarchy. The myths told to me by women varied somewhat in content, but the underlying messages were basically the same: T'ien Hou is a personalized deity who, if approached properly, will answer individual pleas for help. Women usually refer to the goddess as T'ien Hou Niang Niang, adding a feminizing suffix that (in the local dialect) carries maternal connotations. In this guise, T'ien Hou is perceived primarily as a fertility goddess and her efficaciousness is very much at issue. Land women (I cannot comment on the views of boat women) bring their gynecological and childbearing problems to the goddess and make personal appeals for divine intercession. In anthropological terms, a dyadic contract is established between supplicant and deity,⁸⁴ should T'ien Hou keep her side of the bargain, the woman presents a special offering in repayment. These individual arrangements have nothing to do with the formal structure of the T'ien Hou cults and the prestations are made at times other than the goddess's annual festival. Men, at least those I am familiar with, do not make individual contracts with the deity; they rely on their mothers or wives to handle this aspect of religious life. Thus, the women's personalistic vision of T'ien Hou is

⁸³ R. S. Watson found only five women in Ha Tsuen over the age of 45 who were literate. These women belonged to the wealthiest family in the village. I did not discover any literate women over 45 in satellite villages.

⁸⁴ George N. Foster, "The Dyadic Contract: A Model for the Social Structure of a Mexican Peasant Village," *American Anthropologist* 63: 1173-1192 (1961).

not necessarily opposed to the various male representations outlined above. Nonetheless, the differences are so striking that I am led to speculate that village women and men inhabit separate conceptual worlds—at least in respect to religion.

Before concluding, one further category of people remains to be considered—namely, the *shui shang jen* ("people on the water").⁸⁵ Many observers of the Hong Kong scene assume that T'ien Hou originated in this region as a boat people's goddess and that land people began to worship her only after the cult had become popular. As I have tried to illustrate in earlier sections of this essay, the historical origins of the T'ien Hou cult are difficult to trace and, although the deity has always been associated with the sea, she was not monopolized by a single category of people. In the two *hsiang* under study, boat people play a very minor role in temple activities. Only twice in twenty-nine months of fieldwork did I encounter boat people worshipping in the local T'ien Hou temples. I overheard one of the women concerned ask the keeper for permission to worship the goddess because, as she put it, "this temple does not belong to us." (Women from the dominant lineages, in contrast, worship whenever they please and treat the keepers like servants.) Even those boat people who maintain regular anchorages in Ha Tsuen *hsiang* rarely use Sand River Temple. They prefer to worship at temples located on Hong Kong's smaller islands where the local population is more receptive to boat people (see note 64).

My own research among people who call themselves *shui shang jen* has been restricted to the inhabitants of two client settlements (actually shanty towns built from the remnants of boats) along the Ha Tsuen and San Tin coast. These people no longer rely on boats, but they continue to fish from the shore and work in oyster fields. Nonetheless, it is doubtful that they can still be categorized as boat people and it is unclear (to me) whether their views are representative of those who live on boats and make their living at sea. The residents of these small communities have been co-opted into the T'ien Hou cults controlled by the Man and Teng in the sense that they are expected to present altars at the annual festivals. However, they also pay regular visits to the temples that cater to the floating population. In my talks with sedentary fishermen (not women), it became clear that their vision of T'ien Hou had very little in common with the representations held by land people. For these men the goddess symbolizes

⁸⁵ On Cantonese boat people see Eugene N. Anderson, Jr., *Essays on South China's Boat People* (Taipei: Orient Cultural Service, 1972) and *The Floating World of Castle Peak Bay* (Washington: American Anthropological Association, 1970); and Barbara E. Ward, "A Hong Kong Fishing Village," *Journal of Oriental Studies* 1: 195-214 (1954) and "Varieties of the Contractual Model: The Fishermen of South China," in *The Reliance of Models for Social Anthropology*, ed. Michael Banton (London: Tavistock, 1965). Barbara Ward's article "Varieties" is particularly relevant to the theme of this paper because she deals with the boat people's own conceptions of their place in Chinese society.

mastery of the sea; she appealed to them primarily for her ability to quell storms—not disorderly elements. In fact, the myths presented by my informants (all, incidentally, illiterate) had nothing to do with social stability or coastal pacification. Their stories dealt primarily with T'ien Hou's divine intervention on behalf of people who make their living at sea.

In a real sense, therefore, boat people and land people in this part of China have diametrically opposed representations of a religious symbol that, on the surface, would appear to unite them. They both claim T'ien Hou as their patron deity, but this does not mean that they are part of the same "moral community." In this respect, there are some intriguing hints that, among sea peoples, the goddess is associated with pirates and other entrepreneurs of violence who operated along the South China coast. Many researchers claim to have found a connection between T'ien Hou temples and pirate outposts, particularly in the islands of the Canton Delta. Da Silva notes, for instance, that the famous eighteenth-century pirate Chang Pao-tzu was a lavish contributor to the T'ien Hou temple on Lantau Island—according to local tradition, at least.⁸⁶ Lo also argues that two of Hong Kong's island temples were associated, in legend, with pirates: a stone tablet, dated 1752, in one of these shrines commemorates Cheng Lien-ch'ang, a "notorious pirate," who paid for the temple's renovation.⁸⁷ It is quite possible that T'ien Hou, in her guise as a mistress of the seas and a queller of storms, could have been adopted by pirates as their patron deity. The ultimate irony is that the landed elites of the Kwangtung coast worshipped the same goddess, and accepted her as their own special patron, precisely because she was—for them—a symbol of coastal pacification and an enemy of pirates.

CONCLUSION

In concluding, I return to the problem of cultural integration in late imperial Chinese society. The literate elite, I have argued, played an important role in the standardization of culture by ensuring that religious cults conformed to nationally accepted models. The question remains, however, whether the state led or followed the masses in the promotion of specific deities. Were Chinese peasants "easy material for ideological molding," as Kung-chuan Hsiao has suggested,⁸⁸ or were they detached and self-confident enough to resist those

⁸⁶ Armando M. Da Silva, "Fan Lau and its Fort: An Historical Perspective," *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 8:82-95 (1968), pp. 87-88.

⁸⁷ Lo Hsiang-lin, *Hong Kong and Its External Communications Before 1842* (Hong Kong: Institute of Chinese Culture, 1963), pp. 129-130 and plate 34. On the pirate connection see also S. F. Bellour, "Hong Kong Before the British," *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 10:134-179 (1970) and Dian Murray, "Sea Bandits: A Study of Piracy in Early Nineteenth Century China," Ph. D. diss., Cornell University (1979), pp. 159-160.

⁸⁸ Kung-chuan Hsiao, *Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1960), p. 225.

who attempted to change their religious traditions? The answer, of course, lies somewhere in between. The state both led the masses and responded to popular pressure; it both promoted and co-opted deities. T'ien Hou is an excellent case in point. As outlined in the first part of this paper, she began as an obscure, parochial deity on the Fukien coast and rose to become one of the luminaries of the imperial pantheon. Obviously, a transformation like this could not have occurred without state intervention. But it is equally true that imperial officials did not have the power, or the resources, to impose an unpopular deity on the masses.

Rather than relying on coercion, therefore, the state exercised control over the religious lives of ordinary people by more subtle means. For instance, it was made "advantageous" for local elites to promote deities that were represented in the imperial pantheon. Recognized deities such as T'ien Hou carried all the right messages that literate decision makers wished to convey about their communities: civilization, order, and loyalty to the state.

One's perception of cultural uniformity in late imperial Chinese society depends entirely upon perspective. At the highest level of abstraction, the acceptance of religious symbols such as T'ien Hou does indeed indicate unity and integration. Although I have not made a complete survey, a glance through Fukien and Kwangtung gazetteers reveals that literally thousands of local cults were dedicated to three or four state-approved deities. State officials might have accepted this as evidence that they had had a "civilizing" effect on the masses and that they had succeeded in their efforts to introduce a standard form of religion. Members of the national elite preferred not to probe too deeply into the religious beliefs and conceptions of ordinary people. Herein lies the genius of the Chinese government's approach to cultural integration: the state imposed a structure but not the content. The actual organization of temple cults devolved to local elites who had a vested interest in maintaining good relations with state officials. The system was flexible enough to allow people at all levels of the social hierarchy to construct their own representations of state-approved deities. Put another way, the state promoted symbols and not beliefs.

The fact that deities such as T'ien Hou represented different things to different categories of people does not in itself make the Chinese pattern of cultural integration particularly unique. One need only consider how a primary symbol of Christendom (the Virgin Mother) is variously interpreted in European peasant societies. Nevertheless, one characteristic of the Chinese political system that does set it apart from other traditions is that state authorities did not try to legislate beliefs. As long as proper ritual forms were observed, including the worship of approved deities, the state did not intervene. The educated elite at all levels of the national and regional hierarchies thoroughly understood the rules of acceptable behavior. By observing proper forms, therefore, the local elites cooperated with state authorities in the construction of a national culture that appeared—on the surface—to be re-

markably integrated, especially when compared to the cultural systems of other premodern societies.

The conflicting and at times contradictory representations of T'ien Hou must be understood in this national context. The cults dedicated to the "Empress of Heaven" were like microcosms of Chinese culture. They incorporated people from a wide variety of social backgrounds, all with their own visions and beliefs regarding the deity. But, to the outside observer, a T'ien Hou temple symbolized respectability and "civilization." The ambiguity of fundamental symbols was thus an important element in the creation of a unified cultural tradition in China.