

## Orthodoxy From a Local Perspective

Judith A. Berling  
Graduate Theological Union

This essay was originally written for a conference on orthodoxy and heterodoxy in traditional China, but the dichotomy between orthodoxy and heterodoxy is too simple to fit the broad range of attitudes in late traditional China. In addition to state orthodoxy backed by law, there were local perceptions of orthodoxy by people outside of or marginal to the national elite. Local orthodoxy was not subversive: it provided no alternative which would threaten the basis of the existing order. However, it did express some independence towards attitudes promoted by the state. Local orthodoxy was relatively anti-elitist and popular in its content and sympathies. It was also syncretic, since at the local level efforts at cooperation to pursue the public good cut across religious lines. Local orthodoxy, to earn this cooperation, needed a level of public discourse which could unite a broad spectrum of the populace; such discourse had to be accessible and syncretic, minimizing of differences.

### *State Orthodoxy and Local Variations*

The state saw Confucian norms and values as the core of an ideology of social harmony which could be used to pacify and unify the realm. Through education and the legal system the state sought to promote Confucian values as a force for stability. In the hands of officials the individual program of self-development envisioned by Confucius became a set of social obligations with a distinctly authoritarian flavor. Confucius' five human relationships (*wu-lun*) were a descriptive schema of basic human interactions with general principles for reciprocal ethi-

cal obligations. In the Han dynasty (206 BCE–200 CE) the five relationships were supplanted by the three bonds (*san-kang*) in the interests of establishing Confucianism as a state ideology and legal standard of behavior. The three bonds, as the name itself suggests, bind people into hierarchical relationships infused with obligations, with emphasis on the obligations of inferior to superior.<sup>1</sup>

The Ming government (1368–1644) went further than any previous dynasty in seeking to make Confucian orthodoxy a means of social control. The village compact (*hsiang-yüeh*) system legally mandated public village lectures to inculcate in every citizen proper Confucian values; the ceremonies included civic awards for local moral paradigms. The mutual defense system (*pao-chia*) legally bound families in the name of security to report any suspicious behavior or unauthorized persons in their neighborhood. The Sacred Edict (*sheng-yü*) of Ming T'ai-tsu (r. 1368–1398) and imperially sponsored morality books were widely disseminated and incorporated into village compact rites.<sup>2</sup> In the Ming and Ch'ing (1644–1911) lectures on the Sacred Edict were often condescending to the audience, more in the tone of an irate school principal lecturing his charges on civilized behavior than in the inspirational tones of a good sermon.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the powerful integrating force of state orthodoxy, however, there was room for variation. Anthropologist Arthur Wolf has illustrated how different social perspectives in China produced different views of gods, ghosts, and ancestors. The view of ancestors among poor villagers, given their experience of the family, was far more ambivalent than the Confucian idealization, which represents an elite view.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, it is reasonable to expect that when a farmer paid allegiance to Confucian values, they might mean something different to him than to his landlord, the local magistrate, or the emperor.<sup>5</sup> For instance, the state might encourage the peasants to keep peace with their neighbors in order to prevent unrest and maintain peace, but if peasants obey, it is probably because local quarrels can threaten arrangements about water usage which are crucial to irrigating their crops.<sup>6</sup>

There was room for local variation in matters as sacrosanct as marital arrangements, burial, and adoption.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, these variations were believed by the locals to be orthodox; they represented "the way things are done."<sup>8</sup> The Chinese term for orthodoxy allowed for this "extension" of the term: *cheng* (orthodox) also means correct, or upright. Orthodoxy, then, was as much a product of consensus or social perception (of what is seen as correct) as a canonical or legal standard.

*Ming Neo-Confucians and the Local Audience*

Although the Ming government sought to enforce and disseminate a rigid state orthodoxy, a group of Ming Neo-Confucians proclaimed their intellectual independence. They turned to private academies to avoid the sterile state curriculum, based on the commentaries of the Ch'eng Chu school. The truth of the classics, they believed, rested not in commentaries, but had to be verified in the mind and experience of each individual.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps because many of them came from families without long records of national prominence,<sup>10</sup> they believed that the sagely mind was universal, not the monopoly of an intellectual elite. The streets were full of sages, and sagehood could be produced in workaday activities (*jih-yung*). They took to the streets, lecturing on Confucian values to large audiences. In the process, they broadened their discourse to find points of compatibility with Buddhism and Taoism, which had shaped the religious thinking of broad segments of the population.

The popularizing and syncretic tendencies of Ming Neo-Confucianism are well represented by Lin Chao-en (1517–1598), founder of the Religion of the Three Teachings. The scion of a nationally eminent family of P'u-t'ien, Fukien, Lin in his thirties abandoned examination studies to seek enlightenment. Years later, he was called in a vision to re-establish the true transmission of the Three Teachings (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism). At first he established a modest Confucian school, sensitive that his "commoner" status (without an advanced degree) undermined his authority as a Confucian teacher. Later, during three years of pirate raids, he assumed a position of local leadership in the fields of philanthropy, public organization, and rituals for the dead. Firmly established as a local leader, he expanded his school into a religious organization for all social classes and religions, and began to spread his ideas and writings around the region. The Three Teachings Religion grew during his lifetime and flourished after his death, its shrines dotting Southeast China.<sup>11</sup>

Lin Chao-en, like his peers, was a committed popularizer. To reach a broad audience, he lectured along the roadways and published simple vernacular tracts and formulaic pieces for "responsive reading."<sup>12</sup> He was a syncretic teacher, convinced that the Three Teachings represented a single Way; he wrote Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist versions of his core teachings.<sup>13</sup> Since Lin's vernacular tracts, however, form only a tiny portion of his corpus, it is difficult to reconstruct the world of his intended audience. There is, fortunately, another source which provides an extensive portrait of what that audience may have been like.

*A Local Religious Novel*

P'an Ching-jo, a graduate of the military examinations, wrote a hundred-chapter, twenty-*chüan* novel called *San-chiao k'ai-mi kuei-cheng yen-i* (Romance of the Three Teachings Clearing up the Deluded and Returning Them to the True Way). It was published in Nanking between 1612 and 1620, but did not, it seems, survive long in China.<sup>14</sup> P'an wrote the novel to spread the teachings of the Three Teachings Religion of Lin Chao-en, which at the time flourished in the Southeast. P'an claims that his purposes are purely orthodox:

This tale only stresses the constant principles of relationships taught by Confucians in order to unite Buddhists and Taoists with the strictly orthodox teaching. It uses their doctrines of manifesting the nature and enlightening the mind to expunge heresy and purge depravity, to encourage the good and transform the wicked in order to aid the orthodox teaching [*fan-li*, general plan, which prefaces the text].

P'an consciously aims his novel at a popular audience:

This tale includes popular tunes because I want people to be able to understand it. Yet in the vulgar is hidden something wonderful; even the coarse places are pure and sincere. This is not the work of a clumsy artist. [*fan li*]

The basic plot of the novel is as follows: Lin Chao-en visits his disciple Tsung K'ung (He who honors Confucius), also called Ta-ju (Great Scholar). Scholar has gone off with his friend the Taoist (Tao-shih) Yüan Ling-ming (Originally Enlightened; I call him Spirit Power because the *ling-ming* is the source of his ritual prowess) to visit the Hun-yüan Miao (Temple of the Undifferentiated Origin) in the mythical town of Ch'ung-cheng li (Town which Emulates the Orthodox). Lin's visit attracts a Buddhist monk called Pao-kuang (Precious Ray; I call him Inner Light, since this ray powers his meditative vision, which is his spiritual weapon). In the town live ten *ch'u-shih* (lit. local scholars), members of the local elite.<sup>15</sup> These gentlemen ask Lin to teach there, but since he has other obligations he leaves the Three Teachings—Scholar, Spirit Power, and Inner Light—to teach in his stead.

Things do not go well. The public lectures of the Three Teachings go completely over the heads of the local audience. Nor do they provide answers to a pressing local problem: several young men of the town are delinquents. They drink, gamble, and womanize, the poor poaching off

their wealthy friends, and the affluent filching cash from their parents' coffers. Scholar tries politely to reform them, but they grow wild and upset an ancient stele to release a long-confined fox spirit (*yao*), who begins to wreak havoc, stealing wine and money, assuming various forms and genders to seduce local youths. While the masters pursue the fox spirit, a father of a delinquent accidentally suffocates in a box he is trying out as a coffin because he believes that his wastrel son will make him die a pauper. A Buddhist monk named Chen-k'ung (True Emptiness, or in this case, Really Empty!) feels sorry for the old man, and in an act of excessive compassion ritually opens a crack in hell to release the man's soul. The crack allows ten thousand deluded souls to escape from the darkest reaches of hell. Chen-k'ung retreats into a trance, and does not reemerge until the very end of the novel. The escaped souls invade and settle in living persons who share their sins, exaggerating the flaws of their victims until they become caricatures of themselves.

The Three Teachings are chagrined by these disastrous results of their public lectures. They set out to seek help from Lin Chao-en, vowing to cure the victims of the deluded souls and to capture and return them to hell. With them on their journey is a reformed delinquent called Chih-ch'iu (Seeker), who was formerly Hsing Fang (Lost Nature).<sup>16</sup> Seeker represents every man, slowly learning to control his unsteady heart, which is profoundly agitated by lust.

On their journey, the Three Teachings gradually learn to diagnose delusions (read character) and to cure afflicted persons through persuasion, gentle satire, playing out the consequences of behavior, or ritual arts. Scholar, always representing the rational ethical judgment of the Confucian, is aided by Inner Light (meditative vision) and Spirit Power (ritual arts), who can use men's dreams and fantasies, their secret feelings and wishes, to make them see reason.

In the end the Three Teachings capture all the deluded souls, and return to Ch'ung-cheng li, where they again meet Lin Chao-en, although they no longer need his guidance. They have learned through experience. The captured souls are given a last chance to repent and be cleansed by a *chiao* ritual of renewal.<sup>17</sup> The temple is repaired, a new bell cast and donated, a Three Teachings hall constructed, and the village is healthier and happier than ever.

Under the structure of religious quest the novel is about orthodoxy and heterodoxy, understood as correct as opposed to depraved standards of behavior. *Mi* (delusion) is wrong thinking, resulting in misbehavior, an error of judgment which clouds the mind and heart and obscures vision of the right way (*cheng*), lit. the correct, or orthodoxy. *Mi* is the first step toward *hsieh* (depravity, or heterodoxy); the *hsieh* mind-and-heart completely ignores the tug of conscience and blatantly flouts

correct standards of behavior. The fox spirits (*yao*) in the novel are the embodiments of *hsieh*; they demonstrate the trouble caused by the total abandonment of decency and orthodox standards. In the novel, however, the struggle of the right way against delusion and depravity is not abstract. The focus is on the *mi* (faults and flaws) of quite ordinary people who represent the social landscape of the market towns of Southeast China in the late Ming.

### *The Religious Attitude of Local Orthodoxy*

As a syncretic thinker, Lin Chao-en was very concerned with orthodoxy and heterodoxy. He assaulted the latter through outright attack, reinterpretation, and remythologizations, in which he used analogical interpretations to uncover the "deeper" correct meaning of a tale or story.<sup>18</sup> His *San-chiao hui-pien* (Joint Chronicle of the Three Teachings) traced correct as opposed to deviant transmissions of the way from the days of the sages down to his own time.<sup>19</sup> Lin's reinterpretations of heterodox views are part of his program to establish a common religious discourse which could serve as the basis of a teaching accessible to a broad audience. It is skillful means, both extending the arena of Confucian discourse to embrace tales and symbols usually outside of its realm, and simultaneously using those tales and symbols to point to a higher truth.<sup>20</sup>

However, if Lin Chao-en was concerned with orthodoxy (correct doctrines), his most concerted attacks on heterodoxy were reserved for unacceptable behaviors (heteropraxy). Ming syncretic thinking, with its stress in verifying the teachings in practice and the unity of knowledge and action, stressed the behavioral implications of doctrines. As Wang Yang-Ming (1472–1529) put it, "If learned correctly, even a heretical teaching could be useful in the world, but if learned incorrectly, even Confucianism would be accompanied by evils."<sup>21</sup> This statement stresses proper learning (understanding doctrines), but links it vitally to the behavioral implications; one knows its correctness or error by whether it is useful in the world, or accompanied by evils.

In *The Romance of the Three Teachings* the emphasis is heavily on practice, or orthopraxy. Early in the novel the Three Teachings attempt to teach basic doctrines to a town audience, but they fail miserably (1.8a–14b).<sup>22</sup> The people could only comprehend very basic ethical principles, and then only if presented in a concrete manner. It is not surprising that the notions of orthodox religion in the novel stress the behavioral implications of practice and the motivations of the believer rather than the correctness of doctrine.

Some of the exposés of religious error in the novel mirror the attitudes of elite orthodoxy. For instance, at a seaside temple a gang of rat



spirits (*yao*) masquerading as gods exact exorbitant offerings from terrified travelers. Lavish offerings, which fleeced the superstitious flock, were often mentioned in memorials and essays as an indication of heretical practice.<sup>23</sup> The novel also criticizes false monks who, although unlettered in sutras and rituals, put on religious garb to make money, running a small hermitage which served tea to pilgrims in exchange for alms (13.32b). The Ming government took a dim view of such unlettered monks; the law prescribed that monks who failed to demonstrate knowledge of the scriptures were to be defrocked and punished.<sup>24</sup>

The novel also criticizes excessive concern with geomancy (*feng shui*). Episodes in the novel suggest that in the scramble to procure propitious grave sites to ensure the future success of the family, people spent huge sums of money or hired shady types to dig up the bones of neighbors' ancestors to make room for their own. The fear that the grave had been disturbed and geomantic properties harmed drove people to consult geomantic and ritual specialists, again at a price, to fix the graves and comfort the souls of the dead.

In one long "midnight ghost story" (9.36aff), the Three Teachings chide two souls who are angry about having been moved: "Your incorporeal souls should have reverted to the great void, and your corporeal souls to the earth. In these two places, what obstacle would you pose to the wealth, honor, or length of your descendants' lines?" Inner Light reminds them that they could be worse off; many souls never had a decent burial. He suggests a better alternative to demanding a new grave site: "You could be released in a realm of the utmost happiness (i.e., the Pure Land). Why not call on the name of the Buddha?" (9.36a) Ancestral souls in the Buddhist Pure Land, he seems to suggest, would not be a continual burden on the living.

To a man who is worried that his expensive grave site has been ruined to the detriment of the future of his clan, Scholar says:

From what you say, sir, you have no reason to worry. Your years are approaching fifty and your wealth is ample. You certainly won't have impoverished sons; indeed they have not yet reached their peak. I doubt that your ancestors worried about divination and geomancy, so why do you now endlessly divine and seek to grab good land facing south for your private advantage? If retribution for this does not fall on your sons, it will on your grandsons. (9.36b-37a)

Scholar suggests that his family's prosperity is due not to geomancy, but to past achievements; likewise the family's future will rest on achievement and moral behavior. Geomancy, if improperly pursued,

might actually destroy the moral heritage built up through generations of good works.<sup>25</sup>

Thus on the issue of geomancy, the novel encourages Pure Land for the comfort of souls, and moral action for the sake of the future.

If to some extent the novel's views on lavish offerings, illiterate monks, and geomancy support elite and legal standards of "orthodox" religion, it is more broad-minded on other religious matters. The novelist, like Lin Chao-en, sees the kingly way (*wang-tao*) of Confucianism as the base line of orthodoxy, but this entails no denigration of Buddhism or Taoism. They are necessary, as Scholar explains, "We Confucians have established a life-vein of ancient and constant principles of relationships for human life, but because our teachings (*cheng-chiao*, lit. orthodox teaching) cannot transform every spot in the world, Buddhism and Taoism provide some principles to aid us" (13.35a). In the novel, Scholar often has to call on Inner Light's meditative powers or Spirit Power's ritual arts. The Confucian way (unaided reason) is insufficient; to save the whole world, they need a broad, syncretic vision, a common discourse and set of strategies to combat delusions.

The line between correct and heretical religion is in part determined by the motivation of the action. Thus Inner Light defends Scholar against the charge of discussing strange affairs (*kuai-i*), which was proscribed by Confucius.<sup>26</sup> Scholar, however, discussed these things only to support the cause of Confucian ethics; it was an example of skillful means, or good pedagogy.

The standard of inner motivation is also used in an episode about a shamaness, who was exposed by the Three Teachings when she was unable to control a fox spirit. She and her husband are very upset, since her shamanic rituals are the family's means of support. Spirit Power tells her that her rituals will not be successful; his rituals succeeded because he followed the Orthodox Single Way (*cheng-i tao*) of Taoism. She begs to learn the rituals, but he retorts, "If you preserve your one spark of true mind to save others, then the evil arts will revert to the true way. If you preserve one spark of selfish mind to swindle a lot of money, the true arts will become false." (9.18a) It is the inner motivation of the practitioner, not the form of the rituals, which determines whether they will produce good or ill.

### *Orthodoxy as an Arm of the State*

In Ming and Ch'ing times, the state increasingly assumed the role of arbitrator and enforcer of orthodoxy, not only by means of the examination curriculum and laws governing religious groups, but also by means of the local magistrate's involvement in promulgating and en-



forcing a code of moral behavior to maintain social harmony and peace. Thus the Confucian ideology became increasingly authoritarian (imposed from the top down) and rigid (enforced with the none too gentle arm of the law). It is difficult to gather evidence about the local response to these pressures, but our novel offers some interesting clues.

The Sacred Edict of Ming T'ai-tsu appears once in the novel, but in a context quite unlike the public lectures sponsored by the government. The Three Masters have met the friends of Hsiao Yao (Free and Easy Wanderer),<sup>27</sup> who are discussing why they beat their wives. They have their reasons: the women fail to perform their domestic duties to suit their husbands; they insult their men when they try to be romantic; they misbehave when out of sight and earshot. Scholar, appalled by their conversation, writes out the Sacred Edict for them. They laugh and say, "These sayings (*k'ou-t'ou hua-yü*) are everyday household words! We didn't know they were the Eminent Founder's Sacred Edict!" Scholar replied, "If you could follow these everyday sayings, not only would your households be pure and prosperous now, but your descendants would also prosper." (13.31a)

The Sacred Edict seems designed, and was generally used, to instill obedience to authority:

Filially obey your parents.  
Respect and honor elders and superiors.  
Keep the peace in your town.  
Instruct your sons and grandsons.  
Be content with your lot in life.  
Do not do anything wrong.

But in this incident it is used to instruct men who are abusing their superior positions to beat their wives. These husbands feel vulnerable about their authority; they neither trust their wives nor do they believe they have their respect. Scholar uses the Sacred Edict to suggest a general standard of ethical behavior in the hope that this will improve the sorry conditions of these marriages.

According to official orthodoxy, the government and its agents embodied the norms of Confucian sagely wisdom. The emperor was the son of heaven, the incarnation of sagely principles. His officers were wise Confucian gentlemen who aid him in maintaining cosmic order. The local magistrate was the direct representative of the ruler, responsible for public education and for upholding the spirit of the law to promote the rule of virtue.<sup>28</sup> As a bureaucrat, however, the magistrate had to maintain a defensible record of arrests and convictions. In reality the functioning of the magistrate's office was far from the ideal; the

magistrate's office was experienced locally more as an agency of corruption and harsh treatment than as the dispenser of Mencian justice.<sup>29</sup> It is this latter reality which is attacked in the novel. Except in its rhetorical bow to the glories of the Ming in its opening lines, the government depicted in the novel is either the county office or local military officials; both are rather severely criticized.<sup>30</sup>

The first group of government representatives singled out for censure are yamen (county office) functionaries: a clerk, a secretary, and a gatekeeper. When they politely ask the Three Teachings for instruction, Inner Light insults them:

All the people in the world catch delusions, but you have the worst! You are no better than petty monks! But at least monks have compassion and piety, which your type totally lacks. If the words skillful means are used to mean compassion, then there will be no delusion.... You wear the uniforms of those who accept the official service, but when you enter the yamen gate, who knows how many arts you use to deceive and betray people! (10.24a)

The secretary attempts to defend the common practices of the yamen:

We at the yamen hold the brush of governing. If we do not squeeze criminals for money, how would we make our living? Moreover those who bring suits to the yamen are hardly good and reasonable people who deserve gentle treatment. We don't put the squeeze on the good and innocent, but on that class who cause trouble through litigation. If we don't squeeze them, would they be willing to pay what they owe? (10.24a-b)

His rationale is based on the "orthodox" view of the role of the official, on prejudices against litigation, and on the presumed guilt of the accused. But Inner Light does not accept his argument.

Among those are there not some whose grievances go unreported, who have been harmed and forced to sell wife and children? Rather than always applying the squeeze, would it not be better to consider the circumstances and preserve some skillful means?<sup>31</sup> (10.24b)

In another episode, Scholar tries to teach An Pien (Pacifier of the Borders), a military officer, that courtesy, not intimidation, is the best

strategy for dealing with the retainers and functionaries who serve him. If he desires respect, he will have to emulate the civilian ideal of the Confucians. (14.12a-13a)

The criticisms of the yamen functionaries and the military officer are safe in the sense that these people have low status in the Chinese bureaucracy. However, although the criticism is gentler, the Three Teachings also attempt to reform the magistrate Wang Ching (Kingly Respect). Wang has arrested the delinquent Ch'i Ch'ing (Miserable), who has trumped up a charge against the Three Teachings to avenge the fact that his old friend Seeker refused to help him steal from his masters. Wang, learning how thoroughly bad-hearted and unrepentant Miserable is, feels he deserves death. Scholar intervenes:

Miserable was originally a good man of the world. It is only because his heart is imbalanced that he has caused a hundred problems .... It is hard indeed to obtain birth as a human being. If he has not taken a human life, it is best to spare his life. There is a slight chance he will reform and become a new man; then you will have not lost any of the life-supporting virtue of Heaven and Earth. (20.8b)

Scholar's words make Wang Ching repent the many times that he has in anger sent someone to his death; he has learned the necessity of compassion.

While Wang Ching is not seriously corrupt, his lack of compassion is a symptom of the loss of the Mencian ideal in the functioning of the bureaucracy. While at the top levels of government, there is tension between Mencian idealism and the need for bureaucratic efficiency, the perception of those looking from the bottom up focuses on the harshness and occasional injustice of the magistrate's judgments.

If Mencian ideals, however, can rectify some injustices, others are beyond their reach. In one episode, Spirit Power and Inner Light watch the haulers of the boat on which they are traveling trying to work in the midst of a downpour, while their overseers beat them to urge them on. They use their ritual arts to relieve the suffering of the haulers, stopping the rain and clearing the clouds, but they make no attempt to still the whips of the overseers. (17.34a-b) This episode illustrates not moral reform, but religious compassion. The powerless boat-haulers have a cruel job; they can seek comfort from spiritual, not secular powers.

The novel is critical of corruption and the harshness of local government, but it stops short of any critique of the social system as a source of injustice.

*Orthodoxy for Sages in the Streets*

The Three Teachings in the course of the novel learn effective ways to teach ordinary men and women, on whom classical allusions are lost. As they come to understand their audience, their teachings are more often illustrated with a proverb, or simply by the notion of moral retribution. Although the plot of the novel (ten thousand deluded souls escaped from hell) might suggest that retribution would be otherworldly, in fact the novel portrays retribution as the implications of one's behavior, either immediately or in the future. Immediate retribution comes in the form of reactions to behavior: Will it cause others to envy, sneer, or seek revenge? Future retribution will determine the lot of one's children and descendants; is the sinner sowing seeds of disaster for those who must live under the shadow of his or her name?

This notion of moral retribution is intensely practical, grounded in the realities of everyday life. It should not be surprising that the ethical principles taught should be colored by the social perspectives and sympathies of ordinary people.

The novel, for instance, espouses compassion for animal life, a traditional tenet of Buddhist piety for monk and laymen. Associations for releasing living things (*fang-sheng hui*) were popular in the Ming.<sup>32</sup> In the novel, Scholar adds his Confucian support for this Buddhist principle, arguing that the mind of humanity should feel compassion for all creatures. These issues have some immediacy to the lives of the middle and lower levels of society, since farmers, shepherds, hunters, butchers, small shop owners, servants, and cooks are the ones likely to be directly involved in animal slaughter. Moreover, vegetarianism is among the least expensive of the pious acts: it offers spiritual merit at little cost. For some, it makes a virtue of necessity.

For the wealthy, however, abstention from meat to save animals is a relatively abstract notion; they eat meat without thinking about it. In one episode, the eloquent demand of a guest at an inn for a vegetarian menu moves the other guests to a disdain for meat; they had never thought about it. (16.25a-b)

Local orthodoxy portrayed in the novel also affirms ambition. The Wang Yang-ming school, by identifying knowledge and action, made daily work a means of practicing sagehood. This idea could be used to valorize work as a means of spiritual fulfillment, or to thwart ambitions (the sagely way of a farmer is to remain a farmer). The Ming government tended to stress the latter aspect (see the Sacred Edict, cited above). Lin Chao-en in this case followed state orthodoxy; his school regulations explicitly stated that people were to keep to their callings and not to mix with other groups.<sup>33</sup> *The Romance of the Three Teach-*

*ings* is critical of romantic adventurers who leave home to pursue their private dreams, but aspiration for long term prosperity of the lineage is another matter.

Pa Kao (lit. Hand High: Ambitious), a man of the people (*min-jen*), has high hopes. He confesses,

One day I saw an official in all his glory, and since then my heart has been set on becoming an official. I am slow at reading, and there is no money in quoting classics all day long. I have worried about this until I am sick, and at night my dreams are confused. How can I become an official? (15.6b)

When Spirit Power tells him that this requires "a firm foundation in fate," Pa Kao retorts, "You are wrong. Common households produce great officials.... Those who study become officials. It's wrong to speak of fate." (15.6b) Ambitious resists a notion of fatalism which will take away his dream; he knows that study is the key. Spirit Power warns him that it may take generations of study to reach the goal: "The ancestors (of successful officials from common households) must have accumulated virtue and skillful means to produce loyal ministers and filial sons." (15.6b) He urges Ambitious to teach his sons and grandsons so that they will be able to achieve his goal. Thus Spirit Power uses the notion of moral retribution to give hope and support investment in education for long term social mobility.<sup>34</sup> At the upper levels of Ming society students were angry about the sterility of examination studies, but at this level the issue is aspiration and a commitment to education as the key to success.

The local orthodoxy in the novel is also sympathetic to abused women. State orthodoxy during the Ming and Ch'ing were increasingly rigid about standards of female chastity, but at the same time there were currents of a nascent feminism among some thinkers and writers.<sup>35</sup> *The Romance of the Three Teachings* attacks female infanticide (13.22a23a), wife-beating (*supra*), and in several incidents the evils of concubinage. The critique of concubinage does not center on its deleterious effects on the male, squandering his time, money, and sexual vitality. It focuses rather on the tensions produced within the family, blaming the husband for causing the situation. There is a remarkable episode about a club of women led by six beautiful sisters, who defy their parents to sneak out at night, seeking friendship and some romantic adventure. They air their grievance, "We sisters resent the fact that matchmakers receive men to look us over as potential concubines. If they love us, we don't love them. If we love them, they don't choose us." (10.10b) The speech asserts the right of women to find romance and

have a say in their marital arrangements. This may well reflect the influence of fiction, especially love stories. Although the sisters turn out in the end to be willow spirits (and are therefore exceptionally deluded; they have gone beyond the acceptable limits of protest), they are nonetheless given their voice. They are not "right" in seeking romance on their own, but they have right on their side in their complaints against concubinage.

Finally, the local orthodoxy of the novel is sympathetic to children in its depiction of parent-child relationships. State orthodoxy in Ming and Ch'ing increasingly stressed the authoritarian aspects of parent-child relationships, seeking to stabilize society by enjoining obedience of children to parents, thus ensuring the dominance of time-tested virtues of the past. However, the novel tends to hold parents responsible for serious character flaws in their children. The novel teaches that it takes two parties to cause a problem; while the socially inferior party is advised to reform lest he or she be liable to punishment, the superior is held responsible for allowing the situation to continue.

Wang I-pen (by pun: Forgetting the One Root) loves his second son more than the first. The eldest has become a bitter and sullen young man. The Three Teachings spend many persuasive words trying to straighten out this family. Scholar advises the wronged eldest son:

You must simply begin to be respectful and filial. Even if your father beats you until the blood flows, you must not harbor any resentment. You must also love your brother. Over time, your father will gradually have a change of heart. (12.19a-b)

Inner Light takes on the father:

There must be something incomplete in you. In Heaven and Earth loving fathers have filial sons. If you exhaust this principle, how could your son not be filial?.... In the world the treatment of sons is the same whether they are good or bad. When the heart is treated like a son, it will have no quarrel with its siblings. (12.21b)

He warns him that if unequal treatment persists, the elder will take his hatred out on his brother when the father is dead, and no one will blame him for it.

When all their arguments have failed, Spirit Power resorts to ritual, producing a shadow play on a pillow in which the future retribution of this sibling enmity is played out over several generations until the lineage is in ruins. (12.24b) The sight of this disaster is enough to bring father and sons to patch up their differences.



Although the local orthodoxy of the novel shows sympathy for the ambitious poor, concubines, and wronged children, it is not universally sympathetic to the oppressed. There is an incident dealing with runaway servants (*k'o*, lit. serfs or tenants).<sup>36</sup> The man has served his master by running a small meat and wine shop. He recently married and set up an independent household, but has fled because his wife was beaten by her mistress. Spirit Power chastens them because they are better off than many servants:

You are not a good man. Why, when your master has treated you kindly and gotten you a wife, have you no thought of repaying his kindness, but instead rebel, grab your wife, and run off? The laws ought not be flouted. (17.18b)

Although in the course of the story Inner Light notes that the master is also wrong for allowing such cruelty, the message to the servants is clear; they were wrong to flee the suffering of their position.

### Conclusions

*The Romance of the Three Teachings* provides a relatively detailed portrait of local orthodoxy written by an author and for an audience outside of the national elite. The plot of the novel is about finding effective ways of conveying orthodox attitudes to this segment of Chinese society. The Three Teachings begin with the elite curriculum, lecturing on the classics. They soon learn that this is too abstract for ordinary people and that it doesn't heal their delusions, the errors of which grow out of the tensions of their everyday lives. The Three Teachings gradually learn to confront these delusions directly and effectively, by using pedagogical techniques which are accessible and syncretic.

Ordinary people understand orthodoxy in terms of practice, not doctrine. Correcting behavior leads to understanding; orthopraxis leads to orthodoxy. Confucians had always stressed that right thinking and right practice go hand in hand, but at a popular level, practice is the starting point. Knowledge without action is a meaningless show. Near the end of the novel, the masters meet Ming Pu-mi (Bright and Undeluded), whose clear understanding initially delights Scholar. On further acquaintance, they say that he is all knowledge and no action. Inner Light and Spirit Power cure him with a frightening dream. In it, Ming is shunted back and forth between the gates of heaven and hell because he has no record of either good or evil; he is caught in the limbo of the armchair moralist. (10.31a-39a)

The local orthodoxy of the novel reflects the point of view of the townspeople the Three Masters seek to cure. It depicts families and local government as riddled with problems, but it blames all parties, rather than stressing obedience to authority in the manner of state orthodoxy. It encourages people not to rely on the yamen to solve their problems, but to take matters into their own hands, developing strategies for arbitrating local disputes.<sup>37</sup> Rather than stressing the transforming influence of the ruler, the novel seeks to reform society from the bottom up, starting "close at hand," as Confucius might say, with the personal and family lives of ordinary people.<sup>38</sup> Local orthodoxy offers hope for the common people in its valorization of work, affirmation of long term ambition, and stress on grassroots cooperation for the common good, but it is not revolutionary; it accepts the social order as it is.

In advocating grassroots cooperation to resolve disputes, the novel is necessarily syncretic. Local groups (clans, neighborhood associations, and guilds) were in China bound together by common rituals, so that their successful formation required a common religious discourse and common symbols. *The Romance of the Three Teachings*, like the Three Teachings Religion of Lin Chao-en, offers such a common discourse; not a philosophical synthesis of the three religions, but a means of seeing them as compatible and of finding the common ground.

When the town builds a Three Teachings Hall for the public lectures, there is an argument about how to represent the image of the Three Teachings. Author P'an Ching-jo appears to resolve the dispute; he suggests that instead of a painting of the three sages in which one will have to have the central place of honor, they carve a plaque reading "Sages of the Three Teachings," representing them as a unity. (1.16a-b) This compromise represents the spirit of syncretism in local orthodoxy; it does not resolve all of the issues, but finds ways of depicting the common ground which can serve as the basis of cooperation across religious lines. Syncretism at this level facilitates broader patterns of voluntary association.

The compromise works because there is sufficient literacy in the town that a plaque with the written name could be substituted for an image; they are no longer limited by visual representations. The townspeople depicted in the novel are not learned, but most of them, representing the growing "middle level" of Chinese society, have a little education, if only for the purpose of conducting business. The novel, like the religion of Lin Chao-en, offers a version of the elite religions which is related to the lives, problems, and interests of this segment of the population; it is a middle ground between localized popular cults (such as shamanism) and the sophisticated philosophies of the great traditions. It is the "orthodox" religions understood through the eyes of ordinary people outside of the national elite.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Hsü Fu-kuan, *Chung-kuo ssu-hsiang shih lun chi* (Collected papers on Chinese thought) (Taiwan: Tung-hai University Press, 1959), pp. 155–200.
- <sup>2</sup> See Sakai Tadao, *Chūgoku zensho no kenkyū* (Researches on Chinese morality books) (Tokyo: Kokusho kankōkai, 1960), chapter one.
- <sup>3</sup> See paper by Victor Mair on “Language and Ideology in the Written Popularizations of the *Sacred Edicts*,” in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 325–359.
- <sup>4</sup> Arthur P. Wolf, “Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors,” in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 131–182.
- <sup>5</sup> James C. Scott elaborates this argument in *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), chapters one and two.
- <sup>6</sup> On the pull between local cooperation and violent quarrels, see Johanna M. Meskill, *A Chinese Pioneer Family: The Lins of Wu-feng, Taiwan, 1729–1895* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).
- <sup>7</sup> See Margery Wolf, *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), chapter 11.
- <sup>8</sup> Barbara E. Ward, “Varieties of the Conscious Model: The Fishermen of South China,” in Michael Banton, ed., *The Relevance of Social Models for Social Anthropology* (New York: Frederick Praeger, Publishers: 1965), pp. 113–138.
- <sup>9</sup> See Wing-tsit Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings by Wang Yang-ming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 159.
- <sup>10</sup> Li Chih (1527–1602) came from a merchant family, and Wang Ken (1483?–1540) had only five years of schooling before joining his father in the family business; later he became a salt dealer. See William Theodore deBary, “Individualism and Humanitarianism in Late Ming Thought,” in deBary and the Conference on Ming Thought, *Self and Society in Ming Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 157–158 and 188.
- <sup>11</sup> See Judith A. Berling, *The Syncretic Religion of Lin Chao-en* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), chapters four and eight.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 206–207.
- <sup>14</sup> See Sawada Mizuho, *Bukkyō to Chūgoku Bungaku* (Buddhism and Chinese Literature) (Tokyo: Kokusho kankōkai, 1975), pp. 164–166.

- <sup>15</sup> *Ch'u-shih* is generally used to mean "retired scholars," but in this novel there is no indication that these are examination candidates or have ever held office. The novel's *ch'u-shih* are leaders in the local community who sponsor religious events, entertain visiting dignitaries, and have some leisure to worry about their families' fortunes. Paul S. Ropp reviewed the scholarship defining the elite in China, and noted that the *chin-shih* and perhaps the *chü-jen* degrees gave entry to a national elite, while *sheng-yüan* degree holders, like Lin Chao-en, were elite only at the local level. *Dissent in Early Modern China: Ju-lin wai-shih and Ch'ing Social Criticism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1981), p. 22 and fn. James Hayes has suggested that, depending on the community, the actual local elite may come from more modest levels of society; this seems to be the case in our novel. *The Hong Kong Region, 1850-1911: Institutions and Leadership in Town and Countryside* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1977).
- <sup>16</sup> Both names are allusions to *Mencius* 6A:6: "Seek it (i.e., the nature) and you will find it; let it go and you will lose it."
- <sup>17</sup> On the *chiao* and its communal significance, see Michael R. Saso, *Taoism and the Rite of Cosmic Renewal* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1972).
- <sup>18</sup> Berling, *The Syncretic Religion of Lin Chao-en*, pp. 207-211.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 200-204.
- <sup>20</sup> Skillful means refers to the Buddhist concept of *upaya*, according to which the Buddha tailored his teachings to what his audience was ready to understand; when their minds were sufficiently prepared, they could be exposed to the higher truth. Skillful means is an example of the Buddha's compassion; he adjusts his presentation of the Buddhist law to the circumstances of his audience.
- <sup>21</sup> *Wang Wen-ch'eng kung ch'üan-shu* (The collected writings of Wang Yang-ming) (Hong Kong: Kuang-chih shu-chü, 1959), 31/603, cited in Araki Kengo, "Confucianism and Buddhism in the Late Ming," in William Theodore deBary, ed., *The Unfolding of Neo-Confucianism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 44.
- <sup>22</sup> All references to the novel are by *chüan* and page number; hence the reference means: *chüan* 1, pp. 8a-14b.
- <sup>23</sup> See Rolf A. Stein, "Religious Taoism and Popular Religions from the Second to Seventh Centuries," in Holmes Welch and Ann Seidel, eds., *Facets of Taoism: Essays in Chinese Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 57.
- <sup>24</sup> Laws governing Buddhist monks are discussed in Hsü Sung-peng, *A Buddhist Leader in Ming China: The Life and Thought of Han-shan Te-ch'ing* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979).

- <sup>25</sup> This aspect of the novel is discussed at some length in "Religion and Popular Culture: The Management of Moral Capital in *The Romance of the Three Teachings*," in Johnson, Nathan, & Rawski, *Popular Culture*, pp. 188–218.
- <sup>26</sup> *Analects* 7:20
- <sup>27</sup> The name alludes to chapter one of *Chuang Tzu*. However, Hsiao Yao is little more than a pathetic caricature of Chuang Tzu's carefree and free-spirited person of great knowledge.
- <sup>28</sup> This ideal was lionized in fiction, especially in tales of virtuous and clever magistrates.
- <sup>29</sup> See John R. Watt, "The Yamen and Urban Administration," in G. William Skinner, ed., *The City in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), pp. 353–390.
- <sup>30</sup> P'an Ching-jo was a military graduate and quite probably a local military officer; he knew the patterns of local corruption firsthand.
- <sup>31</sup> Skillful means in this passage denotes compassion because of circumstances; cf. the passage cited immediately above from 10.24a.
- <sup>32</sup> See Chün-fang Yü, *The Renewal of Buddhism in China: Chu-hung and the Late Ming Synthesis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), pp. 64–100.
- <sup>33</sup> Berling, *The Syncretic Religion of Lin Chao-en*, pp. 81–82.
- <sup>34</sup> On clan and village investments in education and other economic activities as strategies for social mobility, see G. William Skinner, "Mobility Strategies in Late Imperial China: A Regional Systems Analysis," in Carol A. Smith, ed., *Regional Analysis I* (New York: Academic Press, Inc., 1976), pp. 329–363.
- <sup>35</sup> See Joanna Handlin, "Lü K'un's New Audience: The Influence of Women's Literacy on Sixteenth Century Thought," in Margery Wolf and Roxanne Witke, ed. *Women in Chinese Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), and Paul S. Ropp, "The Seeds of Change: Reflections on the Condition of Women in the Early and Mid-Ch'ing," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2.1 (1976): 5–23.
- <sup>36</sup> Mark Elvin discusses this class and their disappearance in favor of salaried hired hands during the Ming in *The Pattern of the Chinese Past: A Social and Economic Interpretation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973), pp. 235–255.
- <sup>37</sup> See Berling, "Religion and Popular Culture: The Management of Moral Capital in *The Romance of the Three Teachings*," (cf. note 25).
- <sup>38</sup> Paul Ropp argues that *Ju-lin wai-shih* has a similar "bottom up" view of Confucian reform. *Dissent in Early Modern China*, p. 112.