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III. The Promise of Social History via the Gazetteers: A Survey of Feng-su Sections of Republican Gazetteers at the East Asian Library, University of Pittsburgh

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The Hillman Library, University of Pittsburgh, has purchased some 900 of the local gazetteers reprinted in Taiwan. About 260 of these date from the Republican period; most of the rest are from the Ch'ing period. While Pittsburgh's is obviously only one of many East Asian collections holding such reprints, attention needs to be drawn to the gazetteers in general, and to the ones at Pittsburgh in particular,
as a rich resource which has, so far, been inadequately exploited. I shall confine my comments to popular customs, or feng-su, one of the most interesting sections. I should like to describe the typical contents of the feng-su sections with some specific examples, consider some of the questions which they can answer for social historians, and conclude by taking note of the dangers and difficulties of examining social customs via the gazetteers.

Gazetteers dating from the Ming and early Ch'ing periods contain the simplest characterizations of local people—the kind of rough and ready impression useful to newly named officials to a post in the area, e.g., the peasants are hardworking, and their wives keep virtuously at home; or, on the other hand, they are quarrelsome, fond of lawsuits, and extravagant. In the late Ch'ing and early Republican periods the moralistic tone often persists, but the accounts are quite detailed and are divided into recognized sections. Most common are sections on annual observances (chiah-chi or sui-shih), on customs for marriage, and for burial of the dead. Other sections recur at least once in every ten gazetteers: capping (kuan), a kind of bar-mitzvah ceremony; dialects; local songs and games; female occupations; minority customs; rituals of social intercourse; pernicious habits, like infanticide, opium, or gambling; religious or superstitious practices, such as exorcism, which may be found in a subsection of the feng-su section, or in a separate section labeled religion (tsung-chiao, or ssu-tien, sacrificial rites).

Excluding purely folkloristic and ethnological description, four 'problem areas' should attract social historians and historical anthropologists to the feng-su sections. Particular customs, first of all, can be inspected with an eye to their social functions, and perhaps in cross cultural perspective. For example, the study of magic, defined as the effort to control the supernatural, may be a fruitful use of feng-su sections. If ordinary people are to be a subject for study by social historians, their mental world and their effort to handle, by means of psychological adjustments, the difficulties imposed by often harsh social and economic conditions must be of the deepest interest. How did people cope with critical events and fears within the family? The gazetteers tell us of a variety of annual observances to ward off infant mortality and epidemic disease; and of visits from shamans to treat a seriously ill family member, or even a sick animal on whose labor the family depended. Gazetteers describe social rituals through which whole communities tried to insure themselves against drought, rain, and flooding, plague, or annual epidemics; and they tell us of sacrifices and exorcistic ceremonies to deal with disasters when they did strike. In future years the kind of work on the history of magic that European historians have done might be attempted for China, and the subject of superstitions rescued from such antiquarian ethnologists as J. J. M. De Groot.

The frequently mentioned but little examined phenomenon of regionalism is a second large question to be explored in feng-su research. How different are the natives of Kwangtung and Honan, or of Shantung and Kweichow, and in what respects? To what extent have the homogenizing influences of trade, migration, central bureaucratic control, and the physical mobility of the gentry effectively overcome the barriers of geography? As a hypothesis, the researcher might start with W. Eberhard's
ideas on the ancient origin of modern cultural variations in Local Cultures of South and East China.

Thirdly, the evolution of customs, no less ignored, can likewise be scrutinized in feng-su sections. To give only two examples: the historical persistence of annual observances such as the new year exorcism which will be found to survive in different forms in a great variety of counties well into the 20th century; or the decline of such customs as capping; and community rituals of thanksgiving and drought praying, both of which were once conducted under official auspices at a number of county capitals, but were almost extinct by the Republican period.

Finally, demographic and ethnic relationships can also be illuminated in feng-su research. Migration patterns can be reconstructed with the help of information on dialects, supplemented from other parts of the gazetteers. The assimilation of minority groups like the Miao and the Yao can be traced in details of clothing, marriage, and funeral rites; so also can the often neglected absorption by some Han migrants of Miao customs, and the striking persistence of Hakka customs amid alien cultural influences. The Confucianization of some Han peasants can be seen in changing wedding and burial customs in some counties, but their resistance to this influence can also be seen, as was the case with Buddhist style ritual, which called for 49 days of mourning rites, much deprecated by Confucians. Western influence too can be traced through comments about the impact of opium, the spread of cotton clothing, and the activities of Catholic and Protestant missionaries.

We can get the flavor of some of the best material through the following quotations, all on the topic of shamanism, from the gazetteers of T'ung-an in southern Fukien, Hsuan-p'ing in south-central Chekiang, and Wan-yuan in south-west Szechwan. The wide variations in the practices of shamans (chi-t'ung, wu, or tuan-kung, as they are called respectively in these three sources) are particularly interesting. The first is from T'ung-an, whose customs resemble those observed among the originally south Fukienese people of Taiwan.

"...Another superstition is that of the chi-t'ung (god's lads). When someone falls ill, a god is asked to tell the sick person's fortune. The god speaks through a human being, saying such and such a devil has placed a curse, and orders at random various sacrificial animals, wine, vegetables, and rice to guarantee that nothing untoward will happen. Cases of failure are attributed to fate. Those who become god's lads are mostly good-for-nothing youths who make this their trade. His torso bare, dishevelled, and wearing a red hat and a white skirt, the god's lad holds a knife and a sword in his hands and wounds his mouth and back until the blood streams down. Some cut their tongues and write spells with the blood. Others fling an iron prick ball against their flesh, lie down on a bed of nails, climb a ladder of swords, or pass through burning ashes, stoves, or a 'fire city' (huo-ch'eng). If they are not called Chu, Huang, or Li, they are called old King Ch'i-hh, the Wu-hsien
Emperor, the Old Master of the Central Altar, or the Second Emissary. Though this vulgar custom has been proscribed again and again by the local authorities, it has ultimately been impossible to eradicate.

The second quotation is from Hsuan-p'ing, a county straddling the hills separating northern and southern Chekiang. The variation in customs from one side of the divide to the other is quite striking:

"It is the custom in Hsuan [-p'ing] whenever people are sick to tell their fortune and whenever their fortune is told, to get a wu to catch the soul (pu-hun). They sound gongs and wield a staff, calling it a "road block" (lu-t'ou-chieh) and some use bamboo skin to flail the ground dozens of times. The gongs and drums do not pause for two days and nights. This is called "beating yellow" (to-huang), and the custom is found mostly in the western districts.

In the eastern and northern districts of the county, people believe sick children have infringed upon the pass devil (fan kuan-sha) and invite a wu for exorcism. This is called "crossing the pass." When adults are ill, the wu prays, lighting forty-nine lamps to worship the birth star and the dipper. This is called "doing worship" (ta-chiao). Also there are some who climb ladders onto the roof and proclaim a "vow to heaven." Once restored to health, the patient chooses a lucky day and makes a sacrificial offering in recompense. The utensils, tables, and benches for this must all be freshly made, at no small expense. Few Hsuan-p'ing people believe in doctors and not in wu."

The third shaman account is from the area of west China where the shaman is called the tuan-kung, a term I have not yet been able to translate.

"The term tuan-kung appears in the Yuan Code; it is an ancient title. When the country people are ill, they mostly do not believe in doctors, but get wu to imprecate for them. This is called "dancing tuan-kung" or "bearing the god (k'ang-shen)."

When the wu arrives it is always night time. He puts up a small table and arranges pictures of gods, and wooden images of the Fan-t'an, the five demons (wu-ch'ang) and others. The sick person's family brings one pint (sheng) of rice, and places tablets and incense candles on top. The wu wears a kuan-yin hat or a Seven Buddha hat, and a
red Buddhist robe, holding in his left hand a ring knife, popularly called the master's knife which clatters noisily, and in his right hand a Taoist tablet (ling-p'ei) rounded at the top and square at the base, inscribed with charms and taboo words. He blows a horn, sings and dances, rises and falls, bows and kneels, in order to please his god. He spins like lightning, whirls like the wind, and scatters and burns the paper money. During this time come the motions of beseeching the master, withdrawing the sickness, summoning the soul (chao-hun) and "destroying the temple[?]." Earlier, reeds have been cut to make a human figure, dressed in the sick person's clothes. It is offered wine and food, carried in a reed boat through the door, and burnt. This is called "substituting the reeds." Also the wu bears out the mask of the dragon spirit. It is said that if it is not carried properly he will catch the disease after the substitution. Sometimes too he prays to the birth star and the dipper and requests the thirteen men (?) to present a guarantee before the god of the eastern mountain. This is called "insuring happiness" (ta-pao-fu). Wu all have their particular schools which differ.

It is not unusual that a single gazetteer account conveys a sense of how the county in question differs from other counties, and also of how customs there had changed. As an example, we can take Lu-ch'uan, a poor county on the Kwangsi border with Kwangtung, whose gazetteer includes interesting material on the local status of women. As in many other counties, girls were often betrothed before they were 10 sui. The customary dowry was so high that many poor families were said to drown their daughters at birth to escape this financial burden. Unlike the other parts of Lingnan (Kwangtung and Kwangsi), where women rarely bound their feet unless they were townsfolk or from wealthy families, Lu-ch'uan girls did have bound feet: the poor, however, unbound them on marrying.

Marketing habits were also peculiar. Not only were the women's markets of some other parts of Kwangsi not present in Lu-ch'uan, but the county women did not go to the market at all. Puritanical local customs obliged women to eat apart from men and walk on different footpaths. Yet neither feminine modesty nor crippled feet kept them from agricultural labor; furthermore, even in the busy harvest seasons they would spin thread at home in the evenings. Several recent changes in women's habits were noted. Although the poor were still binding their little girls' feet, established families (shih-chia) had abandoned the practice. All but a very few poor people had stopped cultivating cotton and hemp, and had begun to wear foreign cloth and to spin foreign yarn, while the rich were buying their cloth instead of making it.

With some research topics it is possible to confine oneself to the feng-su sections, but more often the topic will have to be placed in the full context of local society. As a result, other sections of the gazetteers, such as the sections on geography, population,
local great families, and chronological history must also be consulted. The re­searcher on changing attitudes towards death—a topic Philippe Aries has pioneered in European social history—will need to look at material on natural disasters and approved mourning ritual. This latter topic has its own section distinct from actual funeral customs, which are described among the feng-su. Information on the topic of medical practice is likewise scattered in a small proportion of feng-su sections, but we should look for medicinal herbs under 'local products' (wu-ch'an) and for biographies of doctors under fang-chi (men of skill), or occasionally under science (k'o-hs'ueh). Information on epidemics appears under 'natural phenomena' (chi-hsiang), and on dispensaries and hospitals for the poor under 'charitable institutions.' There is at least one case of a list of medical prescriptions in the 'literature' section, which usually concludes the gazetteer. Much the same kind of painstaking search is required to supplement the feng-su in such questions as attitudes toward childhood and the position of women.

A word is in order about the limitations of the gazetteers as historical sources. Ch'ing compilers were Confucian, and frequently had a missionary attitude toward local customs, especially in minority regions, tending to measure marriage and funeral practices against those enjoined by Neo-Confucian reformers. Republican compilers were often literati; even if they were not, they tended to take a disparaging view of popular customs. Detailed and disinterested accounts with ethnological flavor are more common after 1912 than before, but even by that time very few compilers felt it necessary to venture forth into the countryside, let alone make systematic first-hand observations. Local records such as those used for early 14th century Languedoc by the French historian Le Roy Ladurie are not likely to be discovered in Chinese gazetteers. Another problem is the use of earlier sources mixed with material gathered at a later time. Usually the two are distinguished, but there are cases (fortunately few) where no sources are given, and where one suspects a scissors-and-paste job. Here it is essential to check earlier gazetteers where possible. I found one puzzling case in Kwangtung province where a county (Le-ch'eng), whose people did not care at all for shamans, ostensibly had an influx of them by the time of the 1931 edition of the gazetteer. Further checking in the same region revealed the same phrase in the Tung-kuan county gazetteer, implying that both had copied from an earlier source. Yet an appended note by the Le-ch'eng compiler confirmed that shamans practiced widely in the county in 1931. Probably the earliest source had been in error, but the evidence is too contradictory to permit a conclusive answer.

One of the most promising future methods of work may be the survey—a sampling of numerous gazetteers to identify common social patterns and seek explanatory variables. Only casual preliminary surveys are possible if the researcher is confined to the Republican reprints at Pittsburgh and elsewhere. The reprint editions do not constitute a random sample, in spite of the publisher's effort to cover every province. While for some regions, e.g. Manchuria, numerous republican gazetteers survive, for others (e.g. Hunan province) there are only a handful. Gazetteers for poor counties are quite rare in Szechwan, quite common in Lingnan. Survey researchers, even in a preliminary search of reprinted gazetteers, should make sure their sample has poor and rich counties in proportions appropriate to a given region. One way of doing this is to use a list
of counties drawn up by G. William Skinner distinguishing core from peripheral counties. 14

Rich though the feng-su material is, its ease of access should not be exaggerated. Except for a few local gazetteers which contain some one hundred pages devoted to local customs, feng-su sections in most gazetteers are no more than 5 to 20 pages in length, while those published before the 18th century often contain only a page or two. This means that a practice is only alluded to, not described. My current study of magical healing began with a search of 261 gazetteers in the Republican period, which uncovered 70 references to shamans (wu, or wu-hsi); only about 20 of these were longer than 8 or 10 characters, and scarcely ten consisted of the rich detail on shaman ritual such as I have cited above. 15 A lot of digging and sorting must be carried out even for straightforward social topics. For some topics, Chu Shih-chia's useful catalog of gazetteers in the Library of Congress provides a good start, but this work rarely gives more than one or two headings. 16 For this reason I believe that the compilation of indexes both in feng-su and in other parts of the gazetteers should be given first priority in the preparation of research aids in the China field.

East Asian Library
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Tel. (412) 624-4457

Hours: Mon-Thurs. 7:00a.m.-12:00 midnight
Friday 7:50a.m.-10:00p.m.
Saturday 8:30a.m.-4:45p.m.
Sunday Noon-12:00 midnight
(During Trimester)

Notes:

1. There is a standing order for gazetteers reprinted by the Ch'eng-wen Book Co., Taipei. At present the Library holds approximately 900 titles, 400 of which are catalogued. These are arranged by province on contiguous shelves, along with other material on provincial history. The remaining 500 titles are to be catalogued when Library of Congress cards are available for purchase. In the meantime, the uncatalogued titles may be consulted without too much inconvenience since they are shelved in one place. The catalogued titles cannot, of course, be checked out or ordered on Interlibrary Loan, but they are shelved in one place and can therefore be consulted with little difficulty by the researcher. Dr. Thomas C. Kuo, the curator, or Mr. John Chiang can offer some advice in orienting students to the use of the gazetteers.


3. See especially his still useful The Religious System of China (Leiden, 1892).

5. T'ung-an hsien-chih (1929) (Taiwan reprint, 1967), pp. 610-611. [CHS DS793 F8T8 1967, 2 vols.]. I am grateful to Professor Wen-zhang Chu for help with several difficult passages in this and the following excerpts, but the translations are my own and should be regarded as tentative.

6. Hsuan-p'ing hsien-chih (1934) (Taiwan reprint), 4:56-57a. [Uncatalogued].

7. Wan-yuan hsien-chih (1932) (Taiwan reprint, 1976), 5:38b. [CHS DS793 SBW3576, 3 vols.]


12. According to the Kuang-tung t'ung-chih (1822) (Taiwan reprint, 1959), [CHS DS793 K7Y94 1959], citing an earlier edition of the Le-ch'eng hsien-chih.

13. The 1931 edition of the Le-ch'eng hsien-chih (Taiwan reprint, 1974) [CHS DS793 K7L7874, 2 vols.], pp. 114-115 cites a generalization originally applied to Kwangtung people in general, adding some details in a note about shaman practices and the failure of recent suppressions. The same generalization had been previously cited in the Tung-kuan hsien-chih (1921) (Taiwan reprint, 1967), [CHS DS793 K7T92 1967], which interposes the phrase, "particularly in Tung-kuan," after the statement, "The Yueh [Kwangtung] custom is to believe in ghosts."

14. On the concept of the nine macro-regions and their core and periphery, see G. William Skinner, chapters in The City in Late Traditional China (Stanford, 1977).
