Abstract

Thanks to its success in economic reform, China in recent decades has rapidly transformed its economic and political landscape, rekindling global academic interest in the country and its people. However, analyzing and interpreting developments in China has always been and will remain a daunting challenge for both non-specialists and even China experts. China’s diversity, a product of its enormous size, is an important feature that has contributed to the challenge. To rule the vast country effectively, China’s governance from the imperial age of dynasties to the present has to function at multiple administrative levels, but this is only a lesser aspect of its political operations.

Given China’s diversity, what then actually holds China together? Renowned American anthropologist James L. Watson argues that a perceived, perceptible unified culture is the key to holding China together. If anything is central to the creation and maintenance of a unified Chinese culture, it has to be the standardization of ritual. This view forms the essence of Watson’s “Orthopraxy Hypothesis”, which claims that for the Chinese state, the standardization of ritual practice takes precedence over efforts to legislate or control beliefs, resulting in profound consequences for the creation of a unified cultural system. By enforcing orthopraxy (correct practice) instead of orthodoxy (correct belief), state officials were able to incorporate people from different ethnic or regional backgrounds,
with varying beliefs and attitudes, into an overarching social system we now call China. Such is the strategy that has enabled Chinese culture to reach the coherence and uniformity that we see today.

Using Watson's hypothesis as a theoretical framework, this paper argues that the Chinese imperial state had indeed valued rites over beliefs in its flexible and realistic construction of a unified culture. The paper presents this argument by discussing the City God cult in the Song and Ming dynasties, and in particular how the religious cult was merged with the state as a symbiotic tool to govern the local populations which had resided far from the direct jurisdiction of the political centre. In state opinion, ritual standardization in the approved sequence performed by the people was very much cultural unity on display.

Underlying the City God cult was indeed the fabric of a unified culture that had successfully accommodated the varying backgrounds and beliefs borne by the people. By comparing Watson's hypothesis with the opposing arguments posed by other scholars, the paper will also examine the limitations and the validity of the hypothesis in exploring issues pertaining to Chinese culture. The paper will conclude that the City God cult per se and the assumption of a unified Chinese culture fostered by the imperial state was a social and ideological construct and illusion aimed at promoting effective governance over diverse populations.