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Crowdfunding and the Family Temple Economy

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Family temples have deep historical significance for the inhabitants of Shishi. The local economy experienced turbulence in the 1990s a decade marked by the unscrupulous pursuit of short-term profit. To build a family temple was a demonstrative return to tradition and basic Chinese moral values. In the fundamental structure of the Chinese morality of personal relationships ("a differential mode of association" in the words of Fei (1992: 71)), whether dead or alive, parents always occupy the central position. Regardless of how a businessman behaved in the past, building a family temple can become an image project to show ethical propriety.

The family temple is doubtless a Confucian legacy. It is widely known that Confucian doctrines emphasize filial piety in the literal sense, but not many people know that the original Confucian temple in Qufu (his hometown) consists essentially of a grand series of ancestral temples. More than a hundred ancestral tablets display the names of Confucius' family and students around 2500 years ago. This temple pattern was disseminated through the geographical migrations of patrilineages. One could say that family temples are tangible presentations of the history of Chinese lineages and ancestral values. The hierarchy of family temples to some extent reflects what Freedman (1979: 336) describes as the "box-like" nested structural segmentation of Chinese lineages. In my field site, segmentation was often brought about by the economic improvement of a sub-lineage comprising five generations or more. Even when the dependent relation between a lineage and its sub-lineage was evident to all, I often had trouble in tracing the exact economic affiliation between the family temple and its sub-temple, because they normally maintained financial independence.





Ancestral tablets in a Confucian temple (Qufu).

Unlike Buddhist temples or Christian churches, family temples do not receive financial support from the Chinese state. On the other hand, the family is only liable for payment to the authorities if the temple is on state-owned land. Although these temples are hardly firms, their maintenance requires a considerable sum of money every year. Raising money for construction proceeds through carefully calculated subscriptions. The total amount (nowadays a minimum of 30000 euros) is determined by the family committee, consisting of elderly males, which then apportions shares to all male adults. The duty to donate is patrilineal. No matter how much a woman helps her husband, only his name will be carved on the temple wall. Only if an unmarried wealthy female makes a massive voluntary contribution can she expect to find her name added beneath the list of males.

Yet gender inequality and patrilineal bias in financing the temples should not be overemphasized, since the experience and viewpoint of women are always important in Chinese kinship (Wolf, 1972). I found that local women did not care too much about whose name was shown to the public on the wall: what mattered to them was that they controlled the purse in daily life, and that they were always actively involved in ancestor worship at the temples of lineages that they married into. This very much reflects the local terminology of *nei* and *wai* concerning the roles of women and men inside and outside the family (Brandstädter, 2009). Women *are* active, but it is not the done thing to show off the *nei* (inside the family) work of women to *wai* (the outside).

A successful family temple economy expands its clientele from lineage relatives to strangers from other villages and kin groups by shifting from the worship of a single ancestor to embrace diverse religions. In this way, the management of a temple metamorphoses into a real business. Most Shishi villages have associations for the elderly (*laorenhui*), which are formed through a "civil election" (*minxuan*) among prosperous businessmen representing their family committees. This association resembles the local government of a village, with responsibilities for popular rituals as well as public order.

When a religious festival approaches, the association calls for *zhongchou*, the fashionable term for donation, meaning literally "crowdfunding". For example, in August 2016, the celebration of the Pudu festival cost the village of Xiangzhi the equivalent of about 45 million euros, which included building new temples, organising religious rituals and parades, and entertaining families and friends from at least 18 villages in Shishi with multiple banquets, opera performances and so forth. Local inhabitants were proud of this extravagance, which

contradicted the frugality promoted by the central government. The folk religious temples of Pudu, Mazu, Guandj, and many others have all been erected in the last 20 years by the principle of crowdfunding.

This model has been extended to fund management in private firms. The local idea of crowdfunding may derive from *biaohui*, which I mentioned in my last blog post. This is a sort of informal rotating credit association still common in Shishi, though nowadays prohibited by state law. *Zhongchou*, in various styles, has emerged as an alternative. It can be practised among lineage relatives or among strangers, in private or in public, with formal or informal contracts, with or without third party regulation or usury controls by some investment companies. At present *zhongchou* flourishes in the financing of both religious and secular commercial activities thanks to its ill-defined character.



The celebration of the *Pudu* festival stretches over a month and costs about 45 million euros.

Besides the basic function of ancestor worship, family temples have many other uses for people in Shishi. First, just like the original Confucian temple in Qufu, a high-level temple of the Cai family has been creatively developed for tourism, including adjacent commercial facilities. Second, family temples play a special role in weddings and funerals and are sites of religious hybridity. Buddhist monks, Taoist Masters and even folk witches can all be invited to temples to perform funeral rituals, depending on the particular beliefs of the family. Third, the temple offers a location for elderly family members to relax by playing Mahjong or practising Nanyin (a sort of Chinese opera). Last but not least, family members rendered homeless by poverty or some natural disaster can always take refuge in the temple of their lineage. Sometimes they receive aid in the form of charity from the collective funds of the temple as well as private donations, for residence in a temple has always been an emotional trigger to arouse public sympathy in local community.

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