

The Concept of Pregnancy, Fetal Sedative, and the Traditional Cosmology: A Perspective from Gender and Culture

Jin-shiu Sung*

ABSTRACT

In this study, I have attempted to understand the traditional “cosmology of pregnancy” and its ramifications from the perspective of gender and cultural studies. I emphasize as well the culturally constructed nature of the concepts of pregnancy from a cross-cultural point of view. My main point of entry is through fieldwork conducted in Taichung from 1998 to 2000 on the rituals associated with “fetal sedative” (*an-t'ai*), a complex of practices intended to “calm the fetus” and prevent miscarriage that forms an important part of the traditional culture of pregnancy. I have also used documentary evidence to outline a cosmology of pregnancy and the meanings of gender and culture that such a cosmology might entail.

I found that criteria for defining pregnancy (or conception) are largely cultural determined and the concepts of pregnancy can only be properly understood within the cultural context of local knowledge relating to its cosmology. Upon becoming pregnant, Taiwanese women are according to this traditional cosmology thought to enter a supernatural state occupied by all kinds of deities and spirits, especially the system of evil or dangerous spirits so-called “the primary relevance” such as the *liu-chia t'ai-shen*, *t'u-shen*, *ji-you*, *t'ai-sui*, and *liu-hsia*. I argue that such dangerous spirits are essentially *sha*, which have references to supernatural elements of Taiwan folk religion that do not belong to the realm of gods, ghosts, and ancestors and therefore belong to a fourth category. From this research, it became evident that local perceptions of disorder and pollution are two key notions that need to be explored in future studies.

While outlining a cosmology of pregnancy centered around *sha*, I also work with the social landscapes model of Chinese religion developed by Arthur Wolf (1974) and other western scholars to re-examine the four categories for classifying the supernatural and their basic nature and significance in Taiwanese folk religion. Finally, I show that through the social construction of this cosmology of pregnancy, other cultural notions of gender were simultaneously created. On the one hand, pregnant women were classified into the same category as that of ghosts. On the other hand, male deities called “the secondary relevance” and the ritual practitioners such as “*hong-tou* priests” held superior and dominant position over females. It demonstrates the relevance of gender ideology to the construction of the cosmological order.

Keywords: gender and ritual studies, pregnancy, fetal sedative (*an-t'ai*), cosmology, *shen-sha* system, traditional Taiwan society

* Research Assistant (New System), Institute of Taiwan History, Preparatory Office, Academia Sinica.