



The Religious Question in Modern China

VINCENT GOOSSAERT *and*
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4. Katz, "It Is Difficult to Be Indifferent to One's Roots."

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9. Palmer, Shive, & Wickeri, eds., *Chinese Religious Life*.

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Translations, Character Sets, and Abbreviations

We use hanyu pinyin for transliterations, except when the organization, individual, or author is already known by another spelling (for example, Chiang Kai-shek, KMT) or self-identifies in English publications using another transliteration (for example, Tzu Chi).

In footnote references for non-Chinese authors, we use surnames only. For most authors whose surname and given name are Chinese, both names are used, in the Chinese order (surname followed by given name). Authors with a Chinese surname and foreign given name are listed in the Western order (given name followed by surname).

Traditional Chinese characters are used, except in the bibliography, where simplified characters are used for works published in the mainland People's Republic of China.

Frequently used abbreviations:

- CCP: Chinese Communist Party
- KMT: Kuo-min tang; Nationalist Party
- PRC: People's Republic of China



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Introduction

Until little more than a decade ago, popular and scholarly discourse on China relegated religious practices to the domain of the quaint customs of a rapidly fading past and the lofty platitudes of ancient sages. Whether the subject was yearly offerings to the Kitchen God or the abstruse learning of Confucius, these traditions, if they could even be called religion, were never considered to have much bearing on the real life of Chinese society today. But since the end of the twentieth century, a clear shift in perception has been taking place. The Chinese world has not been immune from the global resurgence of religion and from the growing impact of religion on social and political life.

In 1970, one author wrote of “the astounding fact of our time: a nation state, with one fourth of the earth’s population . . . with hardly a trace of religion as man has known it.”¹ Today, we witness instead the multiplication of new and rebuilt temples in the countryside, forming what some scholars have called a second level of government in rural Mainland China; the sixty-fold increase in the number of Protestants since 1949, the largest in all of Asia; the sudden eruption, seemingly out of nowhere, of millions of Falun-

1. Bush, *Religion in Communist China*, 9–10.

gong exercise practitioners in 1999, and their subsequent harsh repression; the religious dimensions of the Tibet and Xinjiang issues, and their impact on China's international relations; the emergence of Taiwan as a cauldron and exporter of global Buddhism and new religious movements. Yet these are but the most visible points of a rapidly shifting landscape, in which all forms of religion, be they traditional or modern, indigenous or foreign, ancient or recently invented, seem to be rapidly expanding and transforming themselves. Mainland China's Communist leadership has long abandoned the slogan of religion as the opiate of the people, has cast aside prophecies of its imminent extinction, and has resigned itself to a policy of "mutual accommodation" with religious communities, even seeking the positive contributions of religion for the execution of its social plans.

In recent years, with the reemergence of religious movements in the Chinese world and their impact on its domestic and international politics, there has been a great interest among scholars, intellectuals, the general public, and Chinese officials themselves in understanding what China's leaders have termed the "religious question" (*zongjiao wenti* 宗教問題).² We use the same term to qualify the uneasy and constantly evolving mutual adaptation of religion and the modern political and social framework of Chinese societies, beginning with the first attempts at religious reform in 1898. Indeed, religion now poses a question worldwide ever since the modernist teleology—which foresaw religion's gradual slide into social irrelevance alongside the triumph of science, reason, and economic progress—has been cast into doubt. But the question posed by religion in China is perhaps a more perplexing one than elsewhere, owing to the peculiar ways in which, until and into the twentieth century, the relationships between religion and other dimensions of social and political life have been configured. In most modern societies that have a dominant majority religion with clearly defined doctrines and institutions such as Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism, the religious question has been mostly about the adaptations and tensions between the dominant religion and the rest of society—including the state, minority religious communities, and social, political, and economic modernity. In China, on the other hand, where the religious, the political, and the social were not clearly distinguished before the twentieth century, no single religious institution or tradition has ever claimed the explicit and exclusive adherence of a majority of the population. And

2. For Chinese books that define and discuss the religious question on the mainland, see *Zhongyang dangxiao, Xian jieduan*; Wang Zuo'an, *Zhongguo de zongjiao wenti*; Chen Jinlong, *Zhongguo gongchandang*.

modernist attempts to impose such a differentiation have only added more layers and fault lines to the variegated outlook of the Chinese religious landscape. Maybe more than in most other places, Chinese modernist secularism has actually created “religion” as a foil and autonomous category.

Looking back at the span of the twentieth century, we can see the tremendous diversity of the religious productions of Chinese society during this period. Before the twentieth century, Chinese religion was also characterized by diversity, but one with an ordering center of gravity: the religio-political state. The end of the imperial regime and the 1919 anti-traditionalist May Fourth movement ejected this ordering center; the twentieth century was witness to a succession of substitutes, from the New Life movement to the Mao cult, which did not endure. The result is a de-centered religious universe, exploding centrifugally in all directions. Since traditional Chinese cosmology and society were religiously structured, the result is a de-centered society, a de-centered China: a Middle Kingdom that has lost its Middle. Thus the religious question: will there ever be, once again, a spiritual center of gravity for the Chinese world?

Our aim in this book is to provide a comprehensive overview of how this question arose and persistently resurfaced as one of the central issues in the history of modern China, from 1898 to 2008. In the summer of 1898, during the Hundred Days’ reform 戊戌變法, the Guangxu emperor and the reformist leader Kang Youwei launched a radical program for the transformation of China’s society and culture. At the core of these reforms, through the “convert temples to schools” movement, was an attack on the religious foundations of China’s traditional social organization. This was the first of a wave of political and cultural reforms and revolutions that spanned most of the twentieth century, each of which involved the rejection of Chinese religion and the construction of a new spiritual civilization, through either secular substitutes to religion or modern reinventions of Chinese religious traditions. The goal of these projects of social, cultural, and political modernization was to overcome China’s weaknesses in the face of foreign powers and establish its position as a strong and independent member of the world community of nations. With the Beijing Olympics of 2008, this goal was symbolically attained; and after the meltdown of Wall Street a few months later, when the world’s leaders turned to China to prevent a global economic depression, it became a political reality. Meanwhile, over a century of campaigns and convulsions had not wiped religion out. Religion was booming, and a confident Chinese state was increasingly willing to compose with it—opening a new chapter in the history of religion in Chinese society.

We consider the evolution of Chinese religion not as an eternal, unitary whole but as several elements in constant interaction and mutual interdependence that were in a state of dynamic equilibrium by the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). From the late nineteenth century onward, the equilibrium of Chinese religion, and with it that of the Chinese society and state as a whole, was shattered; since then, no new equilibrium or stable recomposition of the religious landscape has been achieved. From the moment it appeared as a distinct category, religion in itself became a “question,” an anomaly whose very definition and whose place in a new secular order have always been contested, and which, far from disappearing or confining itself to the Western church-style institutions established for it by the state, has consistently resurfaced in a bewildering variety of old and new forms.

HISTORIES

Much of China’s current religious question is a direct outcome of processes set in motion at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What is often described as a revival of tradition in post-1978 Mainland China or elsewhere in the Chinese world is often, as we will try to show, a wave of reinventions and innovations that have been constantly evolving and adapting to modern contexts ever since the late nineteenth century, often blossoming during the 1920s and 1930s and again one or two generations later. We therefore feel that a historical perspective is essential to understanding the players and the issues at stake in the present religious situation. Furthermore, we feel that this historical perspective should be as broad as possible, weaving into a single narrative many different histories that each follow their own trajectory, but illuminate one another.

Until now, most academic treatments of religion in twentieth-century China have focused on a single religious tradition, such as Buddhism or Christianity, in the context of a single political entity, such as the late Qing imperium, the post-Mao People’s Republic, or Taiwan. Besides separate confessional histories (of Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Christianity), historiography has also been marked by disciplinary cleavages: political scientists have looked at the laws and ideologies of contemporary regimes and the political behavior of religious groups, while ethnographers and anthropologists have looked at the survival and adaptations of local temples and religious communities. Sinologists have searched in the field for living remnants of traditions described in textual sources, while sociologists have focused on contemporary forms of religious reinvention, often testing and modifying theories developed in a Western context. Disciplinary interests

have reinforced strong distinctions between the traditional and the modern, which often do not do justice to a long century of continuous change. As, respectively, a historically minded anthropologist and an anthropologically minded historian, both of us are trained in the sinological tradition and employed by institutions affiliated with the discipline of sociology. We hope that we have been able to build on the contributions of the different disciplines while transcending their barriers.

In this book, we will also attempt to transcend the ruptures between pre- and post-1949, and between socialist and nonsocialist Chinese states; we then will go beyond a static view of Chinese religion that merely sees its “decline” in the Republican period and its “revival” in the post-Mao era. Rather, we look at the transformations of the religious landscape, not only under the impact of state policies, but also in its interactions with the overall social, cultural, and economic changes of the modern Chinese world; by so doing, we try to go beyond dominant paradigms of decline and revival, and of state repression and popular resistance.³ We consider the “Chinese world” in broad terms, including all populations under Chinese cultural influence, whether through emigration (Chinese diasporas) or through incorporation into Chinese states (ethnic minorities)—leading us to consider and compare several polities, including the late Qing regime, the Republic of China, and the People’s Republic of China; colonial and postcolonial entities ranging from Japanese-controlled Taiwan and Manchukuo to Hong Kong and Singapore; and minority Chinese communities from Malaysia to France and the United States. We also pay attention to China’s gradual integration into the global religious sphere in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, studying not only the import of foreign religions and discourses related to religion but also the export of Chinese religious movements and practices toward the non-Chinese world.

One effect of this historical treatment of the religious question is to return religion to the center of modern Chinese history. Many historians of modern China have tended to follow Communist and/or Nationalist historiography in considering the secularist narrative of China’s modernization as a fact, whereas it now rather appears to be an ideological project.⁴ Telling the history of this project, and following the many ways traditional cosmologies and practices have been transformed and recycled when rejected from the officially defined realm of religion, appear to us to be useful ways

3. On the dominant paradigms in the field, see Goossaert, “Jindai Zhongguo de guojia yu zongjiao.”

4. The best surveys of modern Chinese history, even though they do not pay much attention to religion, include Zarrow, *China in War and Revolution*, and Gray, *Rebellions and Revolutions*.

of understanding present-day Chinese societies, not specialized topics better left to religious studies departments and publications.

INVENTING A RELIGIOUS FIELD

While leaving open the question of the ultimate definition of *religion*, we have chosen to take China's religious landscape as part of an evolving ecology of elements in constant interaction with one another, and in which a major change in one element, or the addition of a new element, may lead to a cascade of changes in the rest of the system. This "ecological" approach is based on an anthropological perspective of religion as a "total social phenomenon,"⁵ which cannot be fully isolated as a distinct institution. This perspective has been confirmed by what has by now become a long and rich tradition of ethnographic studies of local religious practices in the Chinese world, inaugurated by J. J. de Groot in the late nineteenth century⁶ and exemplified by both British and American studies in anthropology,⁷ the French school of Taoist studies,⁸ and a growing corpus of ethnographies and field reports produced in Taiwan and, increasingly, in Mainland China,⁹ in addition to research in Chinese social history.

All these studies have demonstrated, not only that local religious practices and their social organization can be described and analyzed solely through their organic connection to local economic and political life, but that in traditional Chinese society, the latter find structure and expression through religious forms. What has been amply demonstrated for local society has also been attempted at the macrosocial level, beginning with Marcel Granet's early studies of the differential forms of religion among the royalty, aristocracy, and peasantry of ancient China, down to Max Weber and his project of identifying the connection between the religious

5. Mauss, *The Gift*.

6. De Groot, *The Religious System of China*.

7. Hsu, *Under the Ancestors' Shadow*; Freedman, *Chinese Lineage and Society*; Wolf, ed., *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*; Baker, *A Chinese Lineage Village*; Ahern, *Chinese Ritual and Politics*; Feuchtwang, *The Imperial Metaphor*; Feuchtwang and Wang, *Grassroots Charisma*; Watson & Watson, *Village Life in Hong Kong*; Sangren, *History and Magical Power*; Faure, *The Structure of Chinese Rural Society and Emperor and Ancestor*.

8. Schipper, *The Taoist Body* and *La religion de la Chine*; Lagerwey, *Taoist Ritual*; Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults and Lord of the Three in One*.

9. Lin Meirong, ed., *Taiwan minjian xinyang*; for more recent studies on Taiwan see Lin Meirong, *Jisiquan*; Wang Zhiyu, *Simiao yu cunluo*; on the mainland, see Wang Ch'iu-kuei, ed., *Min-su ch'ü-i ts'ung-shu*; Lagerwey, ed., *Traditional Hakka Society Series*; Overmyer and Chao, eds., *Ethnography in China Today*.