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Religion and Manifestations of Chinese Modernity

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One of the most frequent questions that scholars and writers hear is “I’m interested learning more about your field. What should I read?” Answering this query is surprisingly tricky, as often the books that specialists love the most are far beyond the introductory level that many general readers are seeking. China Beat would like to help; below is the inaugural post in our new series, “Where to Begin.” In these essays, we’ll be asking authors to suggest a broad range of books that might make up a good beginning reading list for someone setting out to explore an unfamiliar topic. Here, Paul Katz surveys the literature on religion and modernity in China and Taiwan, providing readers with a sense of recent developments in the field and offering many suggestions for further reading.

By Paul Katz

In recent years, a growing body of scholarship has begun to consider the importance of religion in modern Chinese history, including the ways in which religious movements adjusted to state policies as well as their role in shaping social and cultural development. The fact that so much previous scholarship in this field has tended to overlook religion seems to be symptomatic of a tendency to uncritically rely on Enlightenment models that posit the decline of religion as marking a harbinger of secular modernity. Such views have constricted our ability to fully describe the complexities of the past, especially when it comes to those non-Western nations that experienced strikingly different processes of modernization. As the books described below clearly show, however, religion was an integral force that shaped the formation of Chinese modernity.

Two edited volumes reflect exciting developments in the field. The first, Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China (Stanford University Press, 2009), sheds new light on the interaction between religion and the state. The editors, Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, both of whom are social scientists working in Japan, have put together an impressive set of papers based on a 2004 conference held at Stanford University. Topics covered include the range of responses to religious activities on the part of the late imperial state (Timothy Brook), modern Chinese Buddhism as seen in two case studies of the Nanputuoshan 南普陀山 monastery in Xiamen 廈門 (Ashiwa; Wank), Christian organizations and their ritual activities (Richard Madsen and Fan Lizhu 范麗珠; Carsten T. Vsala), Muslim ethnic identity and religious life (Dru Gladney), and the intricate interplay between communal religious traditions (a.k.a. “popular religion” or “local cults”) and the state (Kenneth Dean; Adam Chau; see also the recent books by Chau and Thomas DuBois). The book concludes with a paper by Utiraruto Otehode on qigong 氣功 (but see also the authoritative study by David Palmer).
A second edited volume, Mayfair Mei-hui Yang 楊美惠’s *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation* (University of California Press, 2008), benefits from a broader time frame and conceptual framework. The book is divided into four main parts. The first, which features essays by Prasenjit Duara and Kuo Ya-pei 郭亞珮, examines the mediation between religious beliefs and ideas of the nation and citizenship. Part II centers on the impact of state discourse, and includes essays on ritual competition (Rebecca Nedostup; see also her new book *Superstitious Regimes*), heterodox labels (David A. Palmer), Falungong 法輪功 (Benjamin Penny), Christianity (Ryan Dunch), and Islam (Dru Gladney). The book’s third part opens with Vincent Goossaert’s study of Republican-era national religious associations (see also his recent book on *Peking Taoists*, as well as Liu Xun’s study of *Taoism in Republican Shanghai*). This is followed by two essays on modern Buddhism, including its Chinese (Ji Zhe 汲喆) and Tibetan (Jose Ignacio Cabezon) forms. Part IV is devoted to Taiwan, including Richard Madsen’s study of religion and the middle class and Mayfair Yang’s examination of Mazu 媽祖 as both a national and transnational goddess.

Speaking of Taiwan, inasmuch as this reviewer’s other role for *The China Beat* involves authoring pieces for “Tales from Taiwan,” it seems only appropriate to discuss three recently published books that further clarify the importance of religion in this nation’s democratic development. Since the end of martial law in 1987, religious movements have been more than passive observers of Taiwan’s changing state policies; they now play active roles in political life. Another striking facet of religion in Taiwan is that democratization and modernization have not resulted in the decline of religious practice; on the contrary, many men and women who participate in political affairs and regularly surf the Web feel no qualms about joining religious groups (for early studies of such phenomena, see the edited volumes *Religion in Modern Taiwan* and *Religion and the Formation of Taiwanese Identities*).

Each book enhances our knowledge of modern Taiwanese religions in different ways. *Religion and Democracy in Taiwan*, by Kuo Cheng-tien 郭承天 (SUNY Press, 2008), draws on the author’s expert understanding of Taiwan’s changing political environment to assess the ways in which Taiwanese religions contribute to (or hinder) democratic development. Chapter 2 focuses on a wide range of Taiwanese Buddhist groups, including Buddha Light Mountain (佛光山), Dharma Drum Mountain (法鼓山), Zhongtai Zen Monastery (中台禪寺), and the Buddhist Compassion Relief Merit Society (佛教慈濟功德會). Chapter 3 describes the importance of Christianity in Taiwan’s democratic development (particularly the impact of ideals of social justice), while Chapter 4 examines Taoism and
so-called "folk religions". Chapter 5 presents a statistical analysis of the religious aspects of Taiwan's democratization.

Richard Madsen's study, *Democracy's Dharma: Religious Renaissance and Political Development in Taiwan* (University of California Press, 2007), differs from *Religion and Democracy in Taiwan* in a number of important ways. Madsen, a professor of sociology at UC San Diego who was first exposed to Taiwanese religions while working as a Maryknoll missionary during the 1960s, also explores the links between religion and democracy, yet devotes considerable effort to exploring the cultural conditions that led to the growth of new forms of religious life. Moreover, *Democracy's Dharma* eschews statistical surveys and questionnaires in favor of an interdisciplinary approach combining the reading of historical documents with qualitative fieldwork, including recollections of the author's own experiences during and after the horrific 921 Earthquake as well as participation in various rituals. Madsen's book presents extensive information on Taiwanese Buddhism (Chapters 2-4 describe Ciji, Foguangshan, and Fagushan), but also includes a chapter on one of Taipei's most popular temples, the Xingtian Gong 行天宮.

The newest of the three books on Taiwan, *Charisma and Compassion: Cheng Yen and the Buddhist Tzu Chi Movement* by Julia C. Huang (黃倩玉) (Harvard University Press, 2009), is a path-breaking study about religion's role in the formation of Asian modernity based on a case study of the Buddhist Compassion Relief Merit Society (佛教慈濟功德會). One of the book’s most noteworthy features is its demonstration of the power of charisma and emotion in modern religious life, which surpasses earlier work by Weber and other scholars by demonstrating how the Merit Society blends charisma, Buddhist discipline, and modern organizational structures in ways that allow these seemingly contradictory features to positively shape each other. Huang also considers her data in light of Taiwan's democratization and civil society, while her multi-site ethnography reveals that the Merit Society's charitable relief and proselytizing activities have helped it spread worldwide along Taiwanese transnational networks.
Finally, I should mention Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer’s forthcoming book entitled *The Religious Question in Modern China, 1898-2008*. Due to be published later this year, it is a pioneering work of scholarship that rethinks religion’s contribution to Chinese modernity, and may well end up being the work of choice for people just starting to learn about modern Chinese religions. Unlike many of the works mentioned above, its scope is not restricted to one or two major religious traditions; it also pays close attention to the significant roles played by large-scale redemptive societies (救世團體 in Chinese) like the well-known Unity Sect (一貫道), which helped shape modern Chinese culture due to their commitment to progressive morality, civic education, and social ideals (including opposition to opium, prostitution, the selling of daughters, etc.). In addition, the authors adopt a broad conceptual framework that encompasses overseas communities and ethnic minorities, while also considering China’s integration into world religious landscape. Another striking feature of this book is its portrayal of how rapid and ruthless urbanization has proven even more effective than CCP policies in wiping out many of the ascriptive religious communities that once thrived in Chinese cities (most notably temple cults). As a result, urban religious life now centers on voluntary groups devoted to self-cultivation regimens and individual salvation, with believers often flocking to new sites like bookstores, vegetarian restaurants, and the Internet, all of which facilitate the spread of religious information in new ways that bypass state control.

Taken as a whole, the above works reveal that modern Chinese religious life defies easy labeling by current academic categories, constituting a cultural realm where “religion” and “science,” or for that matter “tradition” and “modernity,” coexist and interact; where men and women work to “make it” in business or politics, yet also join religious movements and devote themselves to spiritual pursuits. The more we learn about Chinese modernity, the more it becomes apparent that it encompassed a wide range of meanings and possibilities, including not only standard features like capitalism, consumerism, and scientism, but also the beliefs and practices that molded people’s lives.