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Book Review: *Superstitious Regimes* by Rebecca Nedostup

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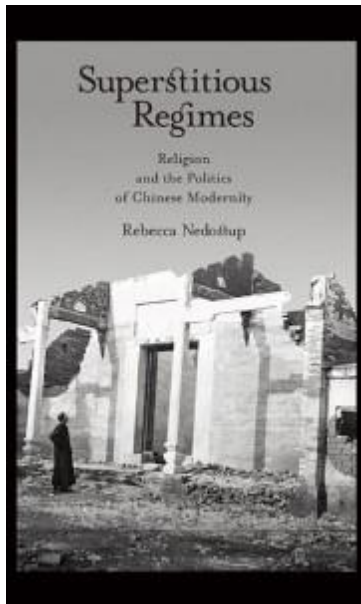
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Book Review: *Superstitious Regimes*

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Nedostup, Rebecca. *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009. xiv, 459 pp. \$45.00 (cloth).



By Stefania Travagnin

The past decade has seen the publication of several studies examining the new conceptualization and practice of religion that developed in China at the end of the nineteenth century and continued throughout the twentieth century. From a variety of perspectives, these books have connected religion with other topics, such as state, society, gender, modernity, globalization, and material culture. These books include, among others, a monograph by Francesca Tarocco (*The Cultural Practices of Modern Chinese Buddhism*, 2007), volumes edited by May-fair Yang (*Chinese Religiosities*, 2008), Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank (*Making Religion, Making the State*, 2009), and a book by Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer (*The Religious Question in Modern China*, 2011). Rebecca Nedostup's research contributes to this emergent field of study. *Superstitious Regimes* is an interdisciplinary work that sheds new light on the interaction between the state-body and the religion-body in early twentieth-century China, with a focus on the Nanjing Decade (1927-1937).

Nedostup develops her analysis from both a diachronic and synchronic perspective. The author underlines shifts and continuities between a few historical periods: Sun Yat-sen's time, the early years of the Nanjing Decade, the late years of the Nanjing Decade, and the post-Nanjing Decade.

In terms of agency, Nedostup draws a distinction between the nation-body and local offices within the political context, while within the religion-body agency is shared by communities and individuals, monastics and laity, worship leaders and worshippers. The articulation of any interaction between the political level and the believers turns around the definition(s) and the modalities of “religion.” This volume is result of extensive fieldwork-based research and the consultation of documents from the central and local governments, archive material of religious associations, local gazettes and historical journals, and previous writings from both East Asian and Western scholars.

Nedostup assesses the role of religion in the construction of modernity and political power in the years 1927-1937, as well as identifies the role of modernity in the reconstruction of religious practice. She thus addresses questions of traditionalism, modernity, secularism, and superstition through the historical narrative of the reinvention of religious practices in China.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part, entitled “Of Legislation and Ling,” analyzes the early attempts by the KMT to define the meaning and implication of “religion” and “superstition.” The chapter “Inventing Religion” covers the intellectual and—especially—political debates about what could be defined as “religion,” the role that religion should play in building the nation and in respect to patriotism (and so the role of the clergy as citizens in the renewed Chinese nation), the domestication of the concept of “religious freedom,” the new terms of integration of Christianity, and the creation of organizations such as the Buddhist Association. In “Temples and the Redefinition of Public Life,” Nedostup analyzes motives and criteria behind the anti-religious propaganda that the KMT initiated in 1928, a movement that not only affected religious infrastructures but also shook the religiosity of the masses. The consequences of attacks on City God temples demonstrated the challenges that Nationalists would face by insisting on the imposition of drastic changes in local rituals and religious power structure.

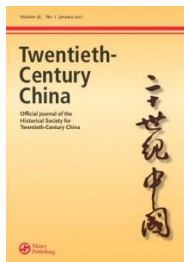
The second part, entitled “Material Motives,” unveils levels and forms of connection between temples and their communities by using Jiangsu province as a case study. In “Jiangsu temples as Target and Tactic,” Nedostup highlights the tensions between localities and the nation, local social and cultural realities and national policies, and the KMT dilemma of how to negotiate modernity while allowing for the continued practice of deity worship. The shift in local power structures, and the redefinition of terms and elements of a new religious landscape that enshrined the party and the nation as object of worship and target of pilgrimages, are all examined in the chapter “Idealized Communities and the Religious Remainder.” Nedostup demonstrates that the KMT’s previous anti-religious sentiments eventually turned to the adoption of religion as a tool for “underwriting the nation” (p. 175).

The book’s third section, entitled “Transactional Modernity,” examines the agency of religious rituals and the formation of a new modern and secular form of belief that could serve the cause of nation-building. The chapter “Embodying Superstition” discusses an anti-superstition campaign in the winter of 1929-1930, when the KMT targeted ritual specialists—especially spirit mediums, geomancers, and fortunetellers—since they were not helping to build the nation. They were thus construed as less socially useful than the clergy of established religions. A crucial part of this campaign was the attempt to replace local Chinese medical practices with modern (Western) medicine. The reasons behind, as well as the difficulties encountered during, this

campaign reveal the “embeddedness in the local social fabric” (p. 212) of local customs and old religious practices. In “Affecting Regimes,” the author describes various instances of what she terms the “religious remainder.” First, the Nationalists were merely substituting traditional beliefs with faith in the party, and so traditional Chinese festivals had to be replaced with anniversaries of (secular) political events. Then, important occasions like rituals linked to Confucius, the Ghost Festival, and funeral and burial rituals were all questioned and reconsidered in the light of the new (secular) faith (in the party and the nation). Nedostup reinforces her argument in the conclusion, where she explores the legacy of “superstition” and “religion” in the KMT government.

The book ends with the English translation of the three main regulations on religious properties and clergy issued by the KMT: the Rules for Temple Registration (寺廟管理條例 *simiao dengji tiaoli*, 1928), the Temple Management Rules (寺廟管理條例 *simiao guanli tiaoli*, 1929), and the Regulations for Temple Oversight (監督寺廟條例 *jiandu simiao tiaoli*, 1929).

Nedostup’s interdisciplinary study is of interest for a large readership: students and scholars of Chinese studies, Chinese politics, Chinese religions, and Chinese history would all benefit from reading this book, both for its contents and for the research methodologies that the author adopted.



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