Review: Making Religion, Making the State

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November 2, 2009 in In Case You Missed It by The China Beat | 1 comment
By Miri Kim

A collection of essays on the religious revival in the People’s Republic of China, *Making Religion, Making the State* (Stanford UP, 2009) focuses on how the state has influenced the development of Chinese religious institutions and practices. But, as the title suggests, the state’s rehabilitation of different religions has been far from a one-way street, with both clergy and laity prompting the state to adjust its strategies. The essays demonstrate just how complicated this process has been thus far, and suggest that the dynamics of the current religious revival will remain subject to change, albeit under the shadow of a state very interested in maintaining social order.

The editors, Yoshiko Ashiwa and David Wank, frame the book’s essays using the work of Talal Asad, an influential scholar of religion, who argues that political and intellectual developments in Europe in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries made religion a category distinct from science, history, and culture, while opening it up as an object of scientific study (6). This concept of religion strongly emphasizes individual belief, and is seen as an essential component of a modern state; in China, as elsewhere, elites have historically grappled with the issue of how to fit diverse religious beliefs and practices that often defy simple categorization into a form that can accommodate and support state formation (7). Religious revival in China today, the contributors argue, is indicative of a process where the institutionalization of religion and modern state-building processes buttress one another (8). Working within this framework, the contributors to this book cast recent developments such as the growth in the membership of many different religious denominations as an ongoing process of coming to terms with modernity in addition to contesting it in its Chinese iteration.

Many China observers have noted that economic reforms and the easing up of state control over private life have been crucial to the recent upsurge of religion in China. To give just a few examples from the volume, even in conservative government estimates, the number of Chinese Protestants boasts a 10 percent annual growth rate, going from 3 million in 1982 to 15 million in 1999, with even higher rates in some urban areas (96), and there has been a sharp interest in restoring Daoist temples, with some tens of thousands of Daoist ritual masters, monks and nuns active in many provinces today (193).

It would seem that much of the current growth has to do with economic reform. Chapters from Timothy Brook and Yoshiko Ashiwa, however, argue that while religion most vibrantly re-emerged in the 1980s, we should not lose sight of how those post-economic reform religious practices resonated with historical continuities from preceding decades. Brook, in chapter one, gives the reader a brief
manifest. Yang argues that 1) the modern category of religion invites a misleading distinction between beliefs and practices, which may gloss over or misrepresent what people are actually doing, saying, and thinking about their religious beliefs and practices. This raises the question of what alternatives are by a one-size-fits-all paradigm, and examines the mismatch between the perspectives of local religious leaders and local officials in the running of a multi-village temple (196-198).

In a fascinating chapter on a popular Marian shrine near Shanghai, Richard Madsen and Lizhu Fan describe how successive Shanghainese authorities and the central government have sought to use (or suppress) the worship of Our Lady of Victory, and in doing so, give us a first-hand look at some recent Chinese Catholic responses to these attempts. Intriguingly, Madsen and Fan suggest that the lure of consumerism and its attendant distractions, not socialist repression, may be more detrimental to the growth of Catholicism in China's largest urban area in terms of the younger generation (93). Conversely, modern things can also be harnessed for the sake of religion; Utiraruto Otehode, in the last chapter, describes how Western medical science and scientific/academic research have been used by qigong promoters to make it more palatable to authorities and more appealing to practitioners/consumers (245-246; 255). In another examination that puts the battle between state and church at its center, Carsten T. Vala looks at the robust but troubled Protestant churches and finds that the growing disparity between the limited number of pastors and ballooning congregations has deepened fissures between state-sanctioned and unofficial churches. Vala suggests that the theological wishy-washiness of the state-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) churches, which promote service to the state as their primary raison d'être, may be alienating potential leaders, leading to further schism and an undergrowth of non-sanctioned churches, and weakening the state's control (109-111).

In chapter six, Wank takes a look at different ways believers have tried to modernize Buddhism in Xiamen, Fujian, and paints a lively picture of how clergy, lay believers, and local officials seek to institute their particular spin on how the local temples and congregations should handle religious affairs in relation to national policies. The tension between the local, the national, and the global is strikingly clear in chapter seven, where Dru Gladney provides an overview of Islam in China, stressing the need to recognize the linkages between ethnic and religious identities when it comes to those who self-identify, or are identified by the state, as Muslim. Depending on their historical relationship with the Chinese state and level of alignment with the dominant Han culture, Muslim groups like the Uyghur and the Hui have different relationships with the state (164). It is moreover essential, Gladney argues, to account for different attitudes about the nation even within such groups (164). From the essays, it is clear that more work remains to be done on how religion is constructed and transmitted in rural China; Adam Yuet Chau's chapter on popular religion in Shaanxi is a good start, examining in detail how local authorities and villagers have managed the restoration of a well-known temple.

All the contributors deal with the tendency of modern religion to generalize and universalize diverse beliefs and practices, which may gloss over or misrepresent what people are actually doing, saying, and thinking about their religious beliefs and practices. This raises the question of what alternatives might be used in the place of 'religion.' Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, in another recent collection of essays dealing with similar themes, Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), suggests that religiosity, not religion, serves as a more apt description of the ways people believe and choose to make those beliefs manifest. Yang argues that 1) the modern category of religion invites a misleading distinction between
'religion' and 'superstition,' a distinction that privileges elite and Western beliefs and practices over those of lower classes and the non-Western; and 2) the strong distinction between individual belief/piety and religious institutions does not serve non-Christian religions that "prioritize ritual performance and collectivity over individual faith" very well (Yang: 18-19).

Although Making Religion, Making the State stops short of employing a concept like religiosity in place of religion, the volume’s authors are also dealing critically and productively with the issues raised when strict analytical categories are brought to bear on fluid practices and beliefs. Making Religion, Making the State strikes an easy balance between substantial recent fieldwork and synthesis of previous research. Scholars who study religion in China will find things new and old presented clearly and coherently, and anyone with an interest in how religion is mediating and redefining state and society relationships in China today will find this book useful.

Miri Kim’s most recent piece for China Beat was a review of the Cambridge Companion to Modern Chinese Culture.