

Benoît Vermander, Liz Hingley, and Liang Zhang, eds., *Shanghai Sacred: The Religious Landscape of a Global City*

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Shanghai Sacred is the only book that attempts an all-inclusive survey of religious practices in a Chinese city (and indeed any contemporary Chinese locale), and in this the book succeeds admirably. The book is a product of many years of collaborative team research involving the French Jesuit sinologist and prolific writer Benoît Vermander (who did most of the final writeup), the British photographer and anthropologist Liz Hingley, the Chinese researcher Liang Zhang (based at the Shanghai Academy of

Social Sciences), and a team of students from Fudan University (where Vermander has been based).

The authors first set the stage for the book by providing a historical and spatial “mapping” of Shanghai, which is an enormous (over 24 million inhabitants and ever growing) and thoroughly globalized city. Then, over the course of the following themed substantive chapters, they introduce a dazzling array of different religious traditions through vignette-sized portraits of their practitioners, religious and ritual sites (some without any permanent building, which are extremely mobile), and observances. These chapters each have a particular organizing motif: temporal (calendrical), spatial (religious “compounds,” especially buildings, such as churches and temples, and people’s homes), and networks (especially using “waterways” as a metaphor, reminding readers of the key importance of the dense watery gridwork in the historical build-up of Shanghai, impacting in multiple ways the contours of its subsequent religious landscape).

Besides the five officially recognized religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam) and popular religion, such as local deity cults, the book also covers religious traditions not normally included in studies on religion in China: Judaism, Hinduism, Baha’i, Sikhism, Mormonism, and practices similar to what is labelled as New Age in the West; many of these are practiced by foreign residents in Shanghai, but some are practiced by the Chinese as well, including many migrants to the city from other parts of China and from the Chinese diaspora. Even sites of “civic sacredness” are included, such as cemeteries dedicated to Communist revolutionary martyrs. While the authors cast their net very wide, their coverage is far from exhaustive, as there is no mention of spirit mediums. Occasionally one senses that the book has been written for a readership presumably familiar with Christianity, especially Catholicism. For example, some Catholic terms are not explained: the Tridentine mass (80), catechumenal courses (173), Taizé prayer meetings (176).

This book covers religious sites and activities in almost all the city’s districts (including the metropolitan areas and outlying rural townships). It is a wonderful introduction to not *Chinese* religious practices but religious practices found *in* China, both rural and urban, since Shanghai, like all major Chinese cities, incorporates a very expansive rural hinterland. Even as these rural townships in the periphery of Shanghai (such as Chuansha and Jinze, both featured in the book) are increasingly linked to the metropolitan center through a dense network of roads and an underground transport system, and their residents might have the coveted Shanghai urban household registration (*hukou*) status, people’s lives are still quite “peasantry” (i.e., agrarian), as are many of their popular religious cult practices, such as temple festivals and pilgrimages (but also underground house churches). This is why the religious practices described in this book are so delightfully diverse. The presence of the Chinese party-state and its different yet often unpredictable ways of handling religion are sometimes mentioned in the book but not unduly stressed. Is the local state in Shanghai relatively liberal and hands-off in relation to religion when compared with other major Chinese cities?

The book is graced with forty-eight full-page high-quality glossy color photographs (in three sets of sixteen interspersed between sections of text pages). All taken by Hingley, these photographs are eerily beautiful and evocative. A few are interiors of religious sites or panoramic views of people engaging in ritual outdoors (e.g., the widespread “animal release” ritual by lay Buddhist practitioners on the waterfront),

but most are portraits of individuals or small groups of ordinary religious practitioners, some obviously posing or instructed to pose for the camera. In contrast with the average ethnographer's snapshots, these aesthetically oriented portraits allow not only the individuality but also the dignity of the "sitters" to shine through.

Dignity and respect are very much in evidence in these rich and wide-ranging ethnographic descriptions and personal stories. The individual practitioner's voice, even if fleeting due to the brevity of each account, comes through loud and clear (a testimony to the skills of the researchers and the excellent rapport established with the informants, perhaps thanks to some of the Shanghainese speakers among the research assistants). There are stories of clergy and religious specialists, but the emphasis is decidedly on the ordinary devotee and practitioner. All religious activities and personal stories are accorded equal status; there is absolutely no hierarchy or value judgment. This quiet celebration of such a diversity of religiosity gives one the frisson of witnessing some sort of Parliament of the World's Religions taking place in Shanghai, a sort of interfaith dialogue by textual juxtaposition (rather than actual interaction, since the practitioners of the various religious traditions seem to operate in parallel universes).

The authors' ecumenical approach rests on a reworked Durkheimian notion of "the sacred" as constructed by individual devotees and communities within certain spatial-temporal parameters. In the conclusion, the authors lay out five dimensions of religiosity using five Chinese words or concepts as shorthand: *zheng*, *ling*, *xu*, *dong*, and *ganying*. The book's appendix lists most of the fieldwork sites (over a hundred, divided into different categories: Buddhism, Daoism, Protestantism, Catholicism, etc.). There is also a very useful list of glossary items with pinyin, Chinese characters, and gloss in English. This informative book will appeal to scholars in religious studies, Chinese Studies, urban studies, and "Shanghai Studies." Lastly, the "velvety" paper used for the book cover, now adopted by many publishers, feels simply too uncomfortably "organic."

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