

Mayfair Yang, *Re-Enchanting Modernity: Ritual Economy and Society in Wenzhou, China*

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Throughout the past decade, there has been growing attention given to the survival and revival of local religious life in post-Mao China, and Hunan and Guangxi in the south as well as Shanxi and Shaanxi in the north have been major hotspots in the study of religion and locality.* Mayfair Yang's *Re-Enchanting Modernity: Ritual Economy and Society in Wenzhou, China*, however, turns to a distinctive spot on China's eastern coast: Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province. Wenzhou's claim to fame is due to the fact that it is the birthplace of the private economy in China, known as the "Wenzhou model" (*Wenzhou moshi*). Also known as "China's Jerusalem" (*Zhongguo de Yelusaleng*), Wenzhou is populated by one million Christians out of its 8 million population, and by Buddhists, Daoists, and practitioners of popular religions. As an economic powerhouse and home to multiple faiths, Wenzhou is a vantage point for observing the relationship between economy and religion. *Re-Enchanting Modernity* provides us with a picture of grassroots initiatives for pursuing religious vocation in a rapidly changing socioeconomic context, offering a unique and in-depth insight into ritual economy, religiosity, and modernity.

This book is based on twenty-six years (1990–2016) of ethnographic fieldwork. The author spent forty-two weeks, distributed over thirteen trips, conducting research on religious and ritual practices of local people and grassroots organizations in Wenzhou. Trained as a cultural anthropologist, Yang is able to combine the contemporary ethnographic material collected from her fieldwork with a historical inquiry into the local religiosity of the past six hundred years of the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. Taking a bottom-up approach, the author, rather than exploring the elite and orthodox practices of religious traditions, focuses on Chinese "popular religion," including "deity worship, shamanism, ancestor worship, divination, and Chinese geomancy (*fengshui*), as well as popular Daoist and Buddhist practices" (5). Throughout her rich ethnography, Yang masterfully deploys theories and responds to scholars—such as Max Weber, Marcel Mauss, Georges Bataille, Émile Durkheim, and Saba Mahmood—to explore issues such as religious ethics and capitalist logic, gift-giving, local identity, and female religious agency, among other topics.

The book is composed of three parts. In part 1, "Introduction" (chapters 1–2), Yang sketches a brief social and cultural history of Wenzhou from the nineteenth century to the present, focusing on the secularization accompanying its economic and industrial development. The introduction sets the scene for the rest of the book, and the readability of this part is greatly enhanced by the author's rich and up-to-date ethnographic notes on her fieldwork experience, including some odd and awe-inspiring moments in modern Wenzhou. For example, she describes her "supervised" field trips and monitored communication with her local informants via WeChat. She also notes that the Wenzhou dialect, once a language barrier for the author, is much less so today as it is no longer used by younger generations, who now speak Mandarin.

In chapter 2, the uniqueness of the "Wenzhou model" and its impressive economic achievements are discussed in relation to "private family enterprise" (36), "indigenous self-generating capital" (38), and the "high mobility of people and goods" (42), as well as the environmental degradation that comes with industrialization. This discussion of the "Wenzhou Model" not only responds to Hill Gates's (1996) notion of "petty capitalist

mode of production” in late imperial China but also paves the way for the exploration of the local religious resurgence and religious economy of Wenzhou in the modern era.

Part 2, “Religious Diversity and Syncretism in Wenzhou,” is divided into three chapters, on popular religiosity (chapter 3), Daoism (chapter 4), and Buddhist religiosity (chapter 5). This part is comprised of historical surveys and descriptive accounts of the local pantheon and cults and includes descriptions of diverse religious and ritual practices as well as performances of religious storytelling in Wenzhou, which researchers on the history of Chinese popular religions, popular religious literature, and oral and performing arts will find of exceptional value. The panoramic sketch of the religious landscape in Wenzhou is supplemented by silhouettes of and interviews with peasants, businessmen, bureaucratic officials, abbots, abbesses, laypeople, and religious practitioners. This part also includes stories on religious competition and syncretism, the feminization of Buddhism, and digital religion, among other topics, all of which provide a piquant glimpse into dynamic and competitive religious markets in Wenzhou and the religious practices in the new (media-influenced) world.

Part 3, “Religious Civil Society and Ritual Economy,” contains five chapters and concerns a variety of interesting issues, including religious civil society (chapters 6 and 9), lineage (chapter 7), female agency (chapter 8), and ritual economy (chapter 10). One of the major themes that runs through this book is the notion of “religious civil society.” Yang suggests that civil society has become a modern and global category, and that in contemporary Wenzhou, the non-state “realm of people” (*minjian*)—grassroots-initiated temple organizations, local lineages, and the management of religious associations—represents an “indigenous civil society” (269). Drawing on Anthony Giddens’s (1984) work on “discursive” and “practical consciousness,” as well as Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “bodily habitus” (1977), in chapter 8 Yang tackles the question of “how female agency works historically to reproduce, as well as to configure or detail, patriarchal structures” (227). By uncovering five different modes of women’s religious agency in Wenzhou—such as lay Buddhist women’s self-sacrifice, self-cultivation, religious sisterhood, grassroots initiative, and leadership—Yang demonstrates there are diverse forms of women’s religious agency, which “contributed to strengthening, adjusting or transforming patriarchal structures” (253), and that resistance should not dominate our understanding of agency. In doing so, Yang argues that Saba Mahmood’s (2005) postcolonial approach to women’s agency can also be applied to non-Western religious cultures.

Chapter 10 is one of the book’s most fascinating and innovative contributions, as it provides an answer to the overarching question this book asks: What is missing in the Wenzhou Model of economic development as conventionally conceived by economists and sociologists? Yang suggests that what she calls the “ritual economy”—religious and gift expenditures on sacrifices and offerings, rituals and festivals, donations and charities, construction of ritual sites, gift circulation, and ritual services, such as ritual performances, spirit possession, divination, geomancy, and scriptural chanting (282)—has stimulated Wenzhou’s economic boom. Yang proposes that Wenzhou’s ritual economy resonates with Georges Bataille’s (1985) notion of “excessive ritual expenditures” and that the so-called “wasteful” and “gratuitous” consumption of ritual and religious expenditures, which in the 1980s and 1990s was dismissed or condemned as “superstitious” and “ignorant” behavior in Wenzhou’s official discourse, in fact, plays a key role in “redistribution of wealth, reconstruction of community, and promotion of the public good” (282). In her conclusion, Yang validates the research on decoding

Wenzhou's economic success through the perspective of ritual economy and the call for a post-secular and re-enchanted society.

Re-Enchanting Modernity is a compelling and insightful work offering an in-depth exploration of Wenzhou, meticulous analysis, and fruitful dialogues with a variety of theorists. Filled with fascinating ethnographic narratives, this wonderful work takes us on an engaging dive into the mundane and sacred activities of life in Wenzhou, urging us to meditate on re-enchancement and modernity, religion and economy, state and community, gender and agency, as well as loss and gain in life and the afterlife. This work would be of greatest interest to scholars of Chinese history, religion, and Asian studies, as well as anthropologists, sociologists, and economists.

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