

## China

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**Stephan Feuchtwang, ed., *Handbook on Religion in China***

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Edited by one of the foremost anthropologists of China and containing contributions by a mix of well-established and junior scholars, this fabulous handbook presents the state of the art of research on religion in China. One particular strength is its organization along sociological topics in addition to institutionalized religions. This allows for several of the chapters to be read in tandem. Besides an all-pervading focus on the politicization of religion, two further concentrations connect the individual chapters, namely the relationship between tradition and modernization, and the complex connections and contrasts between rural and urban China. In his introduction, Stephan Feuchtwang sets the tone, adopting a broad definition of religion as “ways of transmitting and forming moral personhood, transcendence and immanence” based on “principles of change” and “circuits of vital and substantial energies (*qi*)” (2). As he points out, in a secular state that aims to regulate both public and private realms as well as the “religious” and “cultural” spheres, it is close to impossible to meaningfully separate the religious from the secular.

The rest of the book contains four parts, with four to five chapters each. In this reader’s opinion, parts 1 and 2 are of especially high quality and make for good reading materials in introductory classes on “popular” religion in contemporary China. In chapter 1, on religious policy, Richard Madsen gives an overview of the major policy shifts in the People’s Republic of China since 1978. First, the “1982 framework” (17) adopted an ambiguous attitude based on shifting definitions of what constituted “normal” religious activities protected by the constitution. However, controls have systematically become tighter and geared toward the nationalist goal of homogenizing culture under Xi Jinping. Nevertheless, despite the state’s ambitions of interfering in the everyday activities of its

citizens, the following chapters show that “many rituals . . . , most forms of divination, and many continuing forms of self-cultivation . . . escape [its] controls” (14).

The making of (religious) selves takes center stage in the next two chapters. Chapter 2, co-authored by Robert Weller, C. Julia Huang, and Keping Wu, deals with the growth of religiously motivated philanthropic activity since the 1980s. While acknowledging continuities with earlier forms of philanthropy, they highlight the larger scale and bureaucratic organization of what they term “industrialized charity” (38). This form of charity is based on the idea of autonomous individuals acting on cosmopolitan ideals of civic responsibility and the “political merit-making” by which charitable organizations frame their interactions with the state (39). Based on a Buddhist idea, the latter concept—shown to exist in a “defensive” guise in China and a “collaborative” one in Taiwan—offers an evocative theoretical tool for understanding state-society relations. Chapter 3, by Anna Iskra, Fabian Winiger, and David Palmer, focuses on several “fevers” of “remaking the self” (54), such as Qigong, Crazy English, and Success Studies. These self-cultivation methods have in common that they help individuals deal with the rapid changes in contemporary China. In contrast to older techniques of the self, however, the authors note that they are no longer premised on an overarching cosmo-political order, such as the “cosmological language” of Confucianism (69). As suggestive as this point is, it could have been elaborated further and validated empirically; how are contemporary individuals any more conflicted in their worldviews than those of imperial times? And how do we know this? Perhaps reflecting the self-centered nature of these techniques, the authors forward a critical interpretation that decries their commercialization, guru followership, and success worship. This contrasts with chapter 2, which, while not uncritical, recognizes the positive contributions of charity to society—whence its use of the term “civic selving” over individual-centered “moral” selves (45).

In chapter 4, Sebastien Billioud puts the Confucian revival of the 2000s in historical perspective. He argues that, rather than top-down, it started out as a grassroots (*minjian*) movement that was subsequently supported by “massive elite involvement” (87) in academic and economic circles and finally adopted into political propaganda. Chapter 5, by Yijie Zhu, discusses the impact of the discourse of intangible cultural heritage on religion. This new category has offered an avenue toward quasi-legalization of religious practices and sites, particularly those of “popular religion” not institutionalized within the Buddhist or Daoist national associations. At the same time, such “culturalization” has placed many of the practices and sites in question under direct state control. Seen in this light, Zhu argues that “heritagization” (96) continues the imperial policy of cultural standardization, to the effect of symbolically displacing local cultures in favor of national(ist) heritage.

Part 2 engages the modernization of widespread, popular traditions. In chapter 6, Ellen Oxfeld introduces life-cycle rituals with a focus on the differences between urban and rural areas. Following an insightful discussion of the family as a “moral universe” (111) founded on relations of moral debt and obligation between generations of members, she notes that burial and wedding rituals have changed more profoundly in urban than rural areas, especially because traditional hierarchies within the family have flattened here. Some changes have been drastic, such as replacing the traditional rituals celebrating the first month of a newborn with birthday parties, preferably at McDonald’s. Adam Yuet Chau then discusses deity worship and temple festivals in chapter 7. He outlines the central sociological value of a deity’s ability to respond to requests and prayers (*ling*) and

the “tyrannical force” of a cultural imperative toward “hot-and-noisy” (*honghuo*; *renao* or *lau-jiat*) festivals (146). He notes the involvement of “religious entrepreneurs” in rural temple rebuilding (138) and the professionalization of temple leadership due to state pressures. By contrast, religious life in the cities is much more subdued and privatized.

Continuing the topic of the urban-rural divide, William Mathews examines the “massive resurgence” of divination practices (156) in chapter 8. Based on whether such techniques involve communication with gods, he distinguishes correlative and communicative types. The former include calculative techniques, such as *suan ming* or *ba gua*, and *fengshui*, and have become increasingly privatized and individualized in urban settings, partly due to their contested status between science and superstition. Communicative divination involves equipment or a human medium and is more visible in rural areas but simultaneously more unambiguously “superstitious” and thus vulnerable to persecution. An ambiguous existence on the verge of superstition also characterizes the redemptive societies introduced by Matthias Schumann in chapter 9. In a largely historic overview, Schumann describes redemptive societies as a specific phenomenon of the Republican era with roots in an earlier tradition of syncretic, millenarian movements. The apocalyptic and eschatological legacy of these groups lives on in other movements of self-cultivation, like Qigong. This chapter fits better next to those on self-cultivation and Confucianism in part 1.

Parts 3 and 4 are dedicated to more institutionalized religions. Stephen Jones starts off part 3 with chapter 10 on (Daoist) household ritual specialists in rural areas, often families of peasants rather than temple-based specialists. The author relies on his material from northern China in part as “an attempt to rebalance a picture largely conditioned by southern Daoism” (226). One of his key points concerns the centrality of sound as what “animates” ritual performance (223), and this should thus be an integral part of analysis. His fieldwork shows that only “ritual fragments” have withstood the loss of knowledge and personnel even in the Chinese countryside (240). The following chapter, by Stephan Feuchtwang, concentrates on the organizational side of Daoism. With visible regret, he notes that the Daoist Association’s training programs for new monks have elevated textual-theoretical, even political, learning over ritual and musical training, and thereby increased the “quality” of adepts largely according to secular standards of education. This centrally planned education system is progressively replacing the older line of religious transmission based on master-disciple relations. Secularization also affects Daoist sites, such as holy mountains, which have been remade into tourist spots but have driven away many monks.

In chapter 12 on Chinese Buddhism, Daniela Campo investigates Buddhism’s ability to recover from the destructions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which she illustrates through the life story of a successful abbess. Part of the abbess’s strategy was, as in the case of Daoism, to focus on intellectual learning over religious practice. However, more optimistic than Feuchtwang’s critique of materialist changes, Campo attributes Buddhism’s success to its ability to adapt to modern changes while retaining its religious core. Chapter 13, by Chen Bo, turns to Tibetan religions, which the author characterizes as cultural hybrids between different schools of Buddhism and the Bön religion. The chapter is a rough overview, but it notes transformations such as the eastward migration of Tibetan Buddhist ideas among Chinese intellectuals in Mandarin and to the West via the emigration of critical figures from China. In chapter 14, Peter Guangpei Ran discusses the origin myths of people from southwest China and how these

continue to shape social lives, for example by determining the seating order inside the home and during mourning rituals that narrate these migration myths in reverse order, so that the soul can find its way back to the ancestral lands in the north.

The first two chapters in part 4 deal with Islam, and the last three with Christianity. Chapter 15, by Guangtian Ha, explores the fundamental paradox in Hui, or “ethnically Chinese” Muslim, identity. He argues that, by adopting a narrative of superiority over other Chinese, the Hui sought recognition from the majority Han while simultaneously reifying them as an ideal-typical Confucian society excluding the Hui. Following the otherwise interesting discussion of the Hui “savior complex” (323) is made difficult by a vocabulary indulging in paradoxical statements, such as: “His Han ethnicity was both unmarked and hyper-marked; he became so non-Han that he could not escape being a Han. He was set free from and held captive by his ethnicity at one and the same time” (329). Interestingly, Hui Muslim identity is completely disconnected from non-Sinophone Muslims, such as the Uyghurs, the subject of chapter 16 by Ildikó Bellér-Hann. Narrated in a more traditional, historiographical style, the author argues that “Uyghurs today thus find themselves in a double bind” between being granted rights on religious and ethnic grounds on one hand, and growing state repression on the other (347). Although critical of state suppression, Bellér-Hann barely mentions the labor camps, which by comparison receive more direct treatment even in Madsen’s overview in chapter 1.

Chapter 17, by R. G. Tiedemann, takes an in-depth look at Protestant Christians since 1978, but I am not sure why this chapter should be twice as long as the other contributions. Tiedemann discusses the post-denominational, national-patriotic church organizations at some length. The seeds for Protestantism’s growth post-1978, however, had been laid in the cessation of official activities during the Cultural Revolution, which in some sense opened spaces for clandestine congregations, predecessors to today’s unregistered “house churches,” which are the subject of Jie Kang’s chapter 18. Both descriptively and analytically, she distinguishes urban from rural types that appear to be dichotomous in an ideal-typical fashion. Rural and urban environments inform entirely different lifestyles, to the extent that “conversion” between them takes place in rural-urban transitions: while people in the countryside seek physical healing and expect their preachers to be charismatic amateurs, as urban folk they look to reconcile materialist desires with spiritual meaning and follow properly educated, professional pastors. Finally, Richard Madsen’s chapter 19 provides a historically and sociologically informed account of Chinese Catholicism. Due to separation from the Vatican and its reforms, the official church retains a very conservative outlook in China, which may be one of the reasons for its stunted growth, compared with Protestantism, even while the church has found more common ground with the Chinese government recently.

The exceptional quality of the chapters, particularly parts 1 and 2, makes this handbook an excellent introduction to religion in China. The book contains a useful index, and each chapter features its own glossary of Chinese terms, although in many cases these glossaries are regrettably incomplete.

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