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# Towards a Better Methodology for Understanding Religion, Culture and Chinese Modernity

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## Summary

There is a lack of fit between Western categories (derived from the European experience of modernization and secularization) for studying religion, on the one hand, and Chinese realities on the other. Since the academic study of China is dominated by these European categories, it is difficult to gain an accurate understanding of Chinese cultural history. This is not simply a problem for Western intellectuals. Insofar as Chinese intellectuals and government have adopted Western categories for studying religion, they have difficulty understanding their own society, sometimes with tragic consequences. By expanding their horizons to engage in a deeper encounter with Chinese history—by truly learning from Chinese history, not just employing Western-derived preconceptions to learn about it—scholars (in both the West and Asia) can develop new, more subtle ways of understanding the interplay of sacred and secular in the modern world.

**Key Words:** Religion, Secularization, Western categories

In the late 16th century, Matteo Ricci and his Jesuit colleagues claimed that China had no religion. As Ricci saw it, the Chinese were guided by a very rich and profound moral philosophy derived from the teachings of Confucius, and this philosophy was completely compatible with the best moral philosophy in Christian Europe. But the Chinese did not worship any supernatural deities who would be incompatible with worship of the one true Christian God. They could thus accept Christianity without having to modify any aspect of their moral life.<sup>1</sup>

But what was one to make of the elaborate rituals that Chinese emperors carried out to worship Heaven and to ensure that the world maintained its proper place within the cosmic order? Or the complicated funeral rituals that people at all levels of Chinese society carried out to send their deceased family members to another world and to maintain contact with them? Or the temples that dominated every major community? The Jesuits said that the rituals of the imperial cult were only expressions of moral aspiration, they were not really religious. Likewise, the life cycle rituals of family life were simply an expression of an admirable filial piety. The temple worship of the common people, on the other hand, was “superstition” *mixin*—a term introduced into Chinese by the Jesuits. Such superstition was the product of ignorance, just as it was when it appeared among the common people in Europe, and it would steadily be eliminated through the teaching and guidance of China’s enlightened leadership.<sup>2</sup>

The Jesuit claims were, of course, challenged by rival missionaries, who argued that Chinese rites were indeed practices of an idolatrous religion. The resultant “rites controversy” ended in the early 18th century with a papal edict against the Jesuit position. In response the Yongzheng emperor in 1724 declared Christianity to be a heterodox religion.

At the root of this problem was a lack of fit between European categories for understanding religion, on the one hand, and Chinese realities, on the other. Because of this mismatch, there was no clear way for Western missionaries to determine whether or not Chinese rituals were religious or not. Since the resulting

controversy within the Catholic Church could not be resolved through reason, it could only be resolved through papal authority. The incommensurability of China thus led to bitter political infighting within the Church, not to fruitful theological debate.

Similar problems persist to this day, and are highlighted in the problems that scholars face when they try to comprehend Chinese ritual life through the categories based on Western religious experience. One difference between our predicament and that of European Catholic missionaries and theologians at the time of the rites controversy is that analytic categories rooted in Western religious experience have now been transmitted to China and dominate the discourse of Chinese intellectuals as well. So not only do Western scholars have a difficult time understanding Chinese ritual life, but Chinese scholars have a difficult time as well.

For Western scholars of religion, religion is usually defined in terms of beliefs in supernatural realities. Rituals are symbolic ways of expressing these beliefs. The beliefs and rituals are preserved, developed, and enacted through religious institutions. Modern scholars of religion have a somewhat different understanding of the relation between religious institutions and society than did the Jesuits and their rivals in the 16th century. We usually place our analysis of religion against the backdrop of secularization. In present usage the categories of religion and secularization grow out of a narrative of the modernization of Western societies over the past four centuries.

The narrative goes something like this: In the middle ages, European culture was dominated and unified by a common Christian faith and by a Catholic Church that was in practice tightly intertwined with—although in theory potentially separate from—European politics and economics. The unity of the Catholic faith was shattered by the Protestant reformation. The resulting intra-European warfare was brought to an end by political arrangements that “secularized” politics, that is, separated religion from politics, legitimated public life on the basis of reason rather than faith and relegated religion to the sphere of private life. Modern European nation states are based on common cultures, which are connected to a common European culture that at one time was based on Christianity and to some degree, for better or worse, still bears the marks of its Christian origins. But contemporary political life is based on secular rationality, although there are “fundamentalist” political forces that would like to once again impose Christian principles on public life.<sup>3</sup>

This way of thinking about religion defines it in terms of individual, subjective belief, it makes clear distinctions between religion, on the one hand, and science, economics, and politics on the other, and it sees as problematic the attempt by people of faith to impose their private faith on public life. Scholars like Jose Casanova and Talal Asad have recently that this account of religion in Western cultural history is, in important respects, misleading.<sup>4</sup> However, for many generations of scholars, these categories have worked reasonably well in making sense out of Western cultural history, and in my view this demonstrates a rough correspondence between these categories and Western historical realities.

There is not even a rough correspondence, however, with Chinese cultural history. If we apply these categories, drawn from European historical experience, onto the history of modern China, we get a mass of confusion and a host of anomalies. First of all, imperial China was full of “teachings” (*jiao*) and “rituals” (*ji*), but these do not correspond to what Westerners have come to call “religion.” As Kristofer Schipper has put it, “The very notion of religion as we define it in the West is an obstacle (to understanding Chinese society), and a great number of observers have fallen into the trap of failing to see that in a society so dissimilar from ours the religious system must also be very different.”<sup>5</sup> For one thing, the various Chinese teachings (whether derived from Confucian, Daoist, or Buddhist texts) were not simply a matter of subjective belief. They consisted of stories, discourses, and practices that formed a comprehensive framework for understanding the nature of social relations and the proper ways of living a good life. They did not concern “supernatural” matters, supposedly separate from material life. They sometimes explained parts of ordinary life visible to the senses by reference to forces invisible to ordinary observation, but this is not different in principle (though it is different in substance) from how modern science explains

empirical phenomena. For example, teachings in the Daoist tradition held that everything was made up of *qi*, including dead people, including those *shen* that in Western translation are called “gods.” The *jiao* that we translate as “teachings” led to “knowledge” which lumped together and did not differentiate between what we would call scientific, moral, and religious knowledge.

The teachings were intertwined with a rich and varied array of rituals, the meaning of which was only partly explained by the teachings. But the rituals were not segregated into specifically religious institutions. The great state rituals were an integral part of imperial politics. Community festivals, centered on local temples, combined commerce and local politics with enactment of legends and imprecations of the *shen*—so much so that it is almost impossible to tell where one begins and the other ends. Family rituals, like funerals, were expressions of status, wealth, and power as well as expressions of belief in a world beyond the present. And the rebellious activities of “heterodox” sects were motivated as much by economic and social discontent as by heterodox teachings (*xiejiao*).

Not only did the realities of “traditional” Chinese teachings fail to fit into Western categories for thinking about religion, but the history of China’s passage to modernity fails to match the Western narrative of secularization. At the beginning of the 20th century, for example, Chinese modernizing reformers did not seek to banish religion to the private sphere but actually “discovered” within their tradition new religious bases for public life. Thus, in 1906 the emperor elevated worship of Confucius to the level of a Grand Sacrifice at the imperial court. (Before this, Confucius sacrifice was only a “Middle Sacrifice.” The Grand Sacrifices were reserved to worship of Heaven and Earth and the imperial ancestors.) Around the same time, rituals for worshipping Confucius were made a part of newly reformed government schools. (The Chinese modernizers were influenced by Japanese modernizers’ use of State Shinto to create a basis for national unity under a divine Emperor. But the Chinese approach actually diminished the prestige of the emperor and sought the basis for national unity in a Confucian ethos that transcended the agency of the emperor.) Immediately after the 1911 revolution, Chinese leaders began to create new nation wide Daoist, Buddhist, Confucian, and Muslim associations organized along the model of Christian denominations in the West.<sup>6</sup>

The May Fourth movement represented deep criticisms of traditional teachings and both the Guomindang and the Communist party followed the Soviet Union in seeking modernization by suppressing religion. But even while engaged in what would seem to be a project of secularization, these political movements created great public rituals. The Guomintang had the great memorial to Sun Yat-sen in Nanjing, as well as the New Life Movement of the 1930s aimed at moral regeneration of Chinese citizens. And of course the Maoist regime eventually created its own rituals of worship for a quasi-deified Mao Zedong. Were these rituals “religious”? Strictly speaking, probably not, in terms of Western definitions of religion. But one might argue that they were at least as religious as the grand rituals of the Imperial courts.

At the same time, both the Guomindang and the Communists carried out campaigns against “superstitions” which were defined in terms of local rituals and teachings that resisted organization into nationwide “church-like” associations that could be easily controlled by the state. If in the West, secularization entailed a separation of religion from the public sphere and its relegation to the private sphere, in the modernization of China the process went in an opposite direction. There was an attempt to suppress “superstitious” practices that in Western terms might be considered relatively private and to put into their place new public, state-directed rituals. Western categories for analyzing the relationship between religion, secularization, and cultural modernization are incapable for making sense of these Chinese developments.

This is not simply a problem for Western intellectuals. Insofar as Chinese intellectuals and government leaders have adopted Western categories for understanding religion, they have difficulty understanding what is going on in their own society, sometimes with tragic consequences. During the Maoist era, the main categories for defining religion and understanding its place in modernization came from Marxism, which shared the assumptions of other forms of Western enlightenment thinking that religion was

connected with feudal society and would be eliminated in the course of secular modernity. This way of thinking left Chinese leaders poorly prepared to anticipate and to evaluate the persistence of popular traditions despite government attempts to suppress them and the reconstitution and efflorescence of these traditions during the Reform era.

During the Reform era, the problem has been further complicated by the adoption of categories from Western European social science. For example, the practice of *qigong* was encouraged during the Maoist era because it was seen as a kind of science based on the traditional wisdom of the masses and it was promoted and developed, along with traditional Chinese medicine as part of the policy of “walking on two legs.” It continued to be promoted as such in the 1980s and early 1990s. But then certain aspects of *qigong* came to be seen as incompatible with modern science and therefore religious or superstitious. When the Falungong and some similar *qigong* movements began to engage in activities that appeared to the government to threaten social stability, these movements were defined as “heterodox teaching” (*xiejiao*). This term was commonly used during the imperial era but had not been widely used during the 20th century. (Groups that during the imperial era had been called *xiejiao* tended to be called *hui dao men* by the Guomintang and the CCP. In the 1950s, PRC scholars developed a narrative whereby these *hui dao men* represented true peasant revolutionary forces during the feudal imperial period but became reactionary under the Guomintang during the Republican period.) But now by the year 2000 *xiejiao* became defined in terms of the Western sociology of “cults.” Although “cult” is now given a universal definition, so as to encompass groups like the Branch Dravidians in the United States and Aum Shinrikyo in Japan, the sociological term “cult” bears the marks of the Christian background of the Western sociologists who first used the term. The term “cult” in Western sociology usually refers to religious groups that are far removed from the mother religion of a given society—eg., in the United States, cults are those new religious groups that do not base their teachings on the Hebrew or Christian bible. But in China, *qigong* groups—even extreme ones like Falungong—are drawn from some powerful currents of Chinese tradition. So the term “cult” does not seem to capture the realities of practices like Falungong, and this lack of fit makes it difficult for Westerners concerned about religious freedom to fully accept Chinese government claims that Falungong needed to be suppressed.<sup>7</sup>

To understand the role of Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist teachings and rituals in Chinese history and to evaluate their continuing development in recent years we need better categories than those of the Western sociology of religion. Western scholars of China need to become critically aware of how their categories of thought are grounded in their own narratives of how Christian Europe became divided and eventually secularized (and how a once privatized Christianity is now in some places struggling to re-occupy the public sphere). By expanding their horizons to engage in a deeper encounter with Chinese history—by truly learning *from* Chinese history, not just employing Western-derived preconceptions to learn *about* it—scholars (in both the West and Asia) can develop new, more subtle ways of understanding the interplay of sacred and secular in the modern world.

## Notes

- 1 See: George Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy: From its Beginnings to Modern Times* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985); D. E. Mungello, ed., *The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning* (Sankt Augustin, Germany: Monumenta Serica, 1994); and Donald F. St. Sure, S. J. trans., *100 Roman Documents concerning the Roman Rites Controversy (1645–1941)* (San Francisco: Ricci Institute, University of San Francisco, 1992).
- 2 Kristofer Schipper, *The Taoist Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 16–17.
- 3 For a summary and critique of this view, see Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 11–39.
- 4 Casanova, *op. cit.* and Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 27–54.
- 5 Schipper, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
- 6 Chen His-yuan, “At the Threshold of the Parthenon of Religions: Confucianism and the World Parliament of

Religions”; Kuo Ya-pei, “Recasting Confucianism: From Religion to National Symbol, 1902–1911”; and Vincent Goossaert, “The Modern Secular Chinese State Likes Church-Like Religions: Early Republican National Religious Associations.” Papers presented at International Conference on Religion, Modernity, and the State in China and Taiwan, at University of California, Santa Barbara, October 28–30, 2005.

- 7 David Palmer, “Labelling Heterodox Religion in Socialist China: From *Huidaomen* to *Xiejiao*”. Paper presented at International Conference on Religion, Modernity, and the State in China and Taiwan, at University of California, Santa Barbara, October 28–30, 2005.