

Book Review

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Kuo Cheng-tian, ed.

Religion and Nationalism in Chinese Societies

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This book assesses the changing nature of the relationship between the state and religious organizations in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Edited by Kuo Cheng-tian 郭承天, Distinguished Professor at National Chengchi University, this work also serves as a forum for presenting the results of that university's scholars, with 7 of its current or former faculty members among the 14 authors. These papers were among 20 first presented at a conference held at Leiden University in April 2016, where Kuo was serving as a visiting professor at its International Institute for Asian Studies.

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In studying “religious nationalism,” defined as the “interpenetration, overlapping, or syncretism of religion and nationalism,” (p. 16) this book’s authors break new ground by demonstrating its diverse forms in the three societies mentioned above. Their work reveals that in China the state has attained an unprecedented degree of control over religious life, while checks-and-balances are more common in Taiwan, and Hong Kong seems to be shifting from the Taiwanese model to the Chinese one. The authors also consider the factors underlying the advent of such vastly different modes of religion-state relations, while discussing their practical and normative implications for the future. The data presented in this book’s chapters go a long way towards resolving these issues, although their impact is at times undercut by questionable assertions advanced in the Introduction.

Religion and Nationalism in Chinese Societies opens with Kuo Cheng-tian’s Preface, which features the striking juxtaposition of a passage from the book of Matthew depicting Jesus’s powers over natural forces plus Kuo’s own experiences while attending a military parade staged in Beijing in 2015 at the invitation of the PRC’s State Administration for Religion Affairs (SARA 國家宗教事務局, merged into the United Front Work Department 中央統戰部 in March 2018). Here Kuo makes his first foray into delineating what he views as the religious elements of PRC rule, advancing the alluring view that the military parade he witnessed constituted a “sacred religious ritual.” This perspective finds further voice in his Introduction, which features a useful analysis of nationalism and imagined communities, (pp. 15-16) an enlightening summary of different approaches to the study of religion and the state, (pp. 17-18) and a thought-provoking consideration of the merits of neurotheology. (pp. 19-20, 32, 43) At the same time, however, there are also claims that warrant closer examination (see below), most notably the following, which merits quoting in full: “The ‘Rise of China’ has been fanatically propelled by a state religion called ‘Chinese patriotism’. An ‘imagined community’ of ‘China’ serves as the supreme God to be worshipped by all

Chinese. The core catechism of this state religion is a political Trinity: patriotism, socialism, and the rule by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).” (pp. 13-14)

The 14 chapters in this book are divided into three sections. Part I (“Chinese Religion and Nationalism before 1949”) commences with Chang Chi-shen’s 張其賢 study of the ethnocentric ideas of Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619-1692) as well as their impact on modern intellectuals.¹ However, the chapter has only tenuous links to religion, and contains occasional infelicities like “God-worshipping religions such as Buddhism or Daoism,” (p. 75; “deity-worshipping” would seem more appropriate) while some works are listed out of order in the bibliography. (pp. 85-86) This is followed by Julia C. Schneider’s comparison of Chinese discourses on civilizing other cultures to Western ones on missionizing, which shows the lingering influence of ideas of the “Confucian civilizing mission” in views of the Chinese nation. Again, religion seems largely peripheral to this study, and while there is mention of Wang Fuzhi, whose ideas are said to have “disappeared into (officially supported) oblivion,” (p. 112) Schneider’s own interests understandably center on renowned late Qing intellectuals like Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873-1929).

Adam Chau’s chapter, entitled “The Nation in Religion and Religion in the Nation,” is the book’s first to address religion head-on, focusing on two different yet related phenomena: the rising consciousness of the Chinese nation and its impending peril prompting grassroots literati to assign religious significance to their practices, and complex interlinkages between religion and the nation. This chapter is also noteworthy for its discussion of “state secularism.” (pp. 137-138) In their chapter on contemporary Chinese memories of many tragic events marking that nation’s modern history, Robert D.

1 A useful supplement to the ideas expressed in this chapter may be found in Jiang Yonglin’s 姜永琳 recently published article. See Jiang Yonglin, “Thinking about ‘Ming China’ Anew: The Ethnocultural Space in a Diverse Empire—with Special Reference to the ‘Miao Territory’,” *Journal of Chinese History* 2(2018.7): 27-78.

Weatherley and Qiang Zhang observe that phenomena like the destruction of the Summer Palace during the Boxer Uprising and the legacy of the Republican era have given rise to two forms of nationalism today: confrontational—featuring trauma and resentment—and consensual—stressing peaceful reunification with Taiwan (based on its coverage of the contemporary period, this chapter would seem to fit better in Part II below). Despite the lack of religion in their analysis, the authors provide a valuable perspective on how current discussions of the Boxer Uprising end up challenging CCP views of its role in issues like the Diaoyu Islands or Second Sino-Japanese War. (pp. 169-171)

The final chapter of Part I features Tsai Yuan-lin's 蔡源林 brilliant exposition on religious forms of Hui Muslim identity during the Republican era. Tsai draws on Hui experiences of pilgrimage (*hajj*), the fifth pillar of Islam and a vital facet of Muslim religious life, to explore how Republican-era Chinese Muslim pilgrims responded to Islamic revivalist calls to unify the Muslim community as well as Chinese nationalist voices to build a new nation-state. His conclusion, namely that elite discourses of that time period witnessed a mixture of pan-Islamism and Hui patriotism, provides a thoughtful viewpoint with the potential to stimulate future research work.

Bart Dessein's study of new Confucian religious nationalism leads off the book's second section ("Religion and Nationalism in Contemporary China"). Here Dessein draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu to analyze religion's links to forms of "Confucian nationalism" in ancient times, modern attempts to define Confucianism as a "religion" (宗教 *zongjiao*), and the later growth of "Confucianized communist nationalism" followed by the "New Confucian nationalism" of the post-Mao era. Next is Lin Ching-chih's 林敬智 stimulating study of how ideas of nationalism have shaped the development of the Unity Sect (一貫道 *Yiguandao*), which points out the predicament this religious movement faces in trying to situate itself between Chinese national identity and Taiwanese nationalism, with its leaders striving to present their beliefs and practices as belonging to a "civilized" modern religion that conforms to the

state's expectations. Lin also draws on John Lagerwey's idea of China being a "religious state,"² noting that different forms of nationalism (state-led, popular, and cultural) can be utilized by both the state and religious organizations.

The third chapter in Part II, by Hsieh Shu-wei 謝世維, treats Daoism's encounter with modernity, specifically the place of nationalism in the Daoist revival. Hsieh focuses on one recently-published textbook for that religion's specialists, the *Daoist Textbook of Patriotism* 道教愛國主義教程, which stresses Daoism's cultural and medicinal contributions to the Chinese nation as well as its ultimate mission of serving the people. (pp. 264-271) This is followed by Antonio Terrone's compelling analysis of ethno-religious nationalism and what it means for the Tibetan people, which contrasts the "soft nationalism" of Nyingma School Buddhist encampments with the "hard nationalism" of Gelukpa self-immolations. Terrone also provides a detailed treatment of religion's role in democratic initiatives, peace programs, economic growth, international relations, and terror prevention programs.³

Part II wraps up with the late Tsai Yen-zen's 蔡彥仁 (1956-2019) nuanced consideration of tensions between Protestants and the state in contemporary China. Tsai deserves credit for carefully examining both CCP writings on religious policy as well as the manifestos, petitions, and theses produced by unregistered Protestant communities. Moreover, he makes the key point that both the CCP and Protestant groups are willing to embrace religious nationalism yet emphasize different aspects of this notion, with many texts noting the Party's leadership but not emphasizing its religious features. (pp. 312, 331)

Part III ("Religion and Nationalism in Taiwan and Hong Kong"), the book's briefest section, consists of three chapters. The first, by Edmund

2 John Lagerwey, *China: A Religious State* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010).

3 See also Antonio Terrone, "Burning for a Cause: Self-Immolations, Human Security and the Violence of Non-Violence in Tibet," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 25(2018): 466-529.

Frettingham and Hwang Yih-Jye, uses data from Buddha Light Mountain 佛光山 and the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan to argue that previous scholarship on the relationship between religion and Taiwanese nationalism has overestimated the importance of civil society while neglecting “the more restricted and tightly regulated processes associated with government and state formation.” (p. 340) The authors posit two forms of nation-building in postwar Taiwan—religion-led and state-led, advancing secularist arguments for the creation of “a new religious realm that would be formally insulated from education, welfare, business, and politics.” (p. 355) At the same time, however, they seemingly undercut these views by pointing to the fact that “religious discourses resonate with the moral sensibility that animates nationalist politics,” (p. 358) which makes their arguments highly refreshing but not entirely convincing.

The second chapter of Part III, by Chang Hsun 張珣, explores how local politicians with links to Xingang’s 新港 Mazu 媽祖 temple (奉天宮 Fengtiangong) endeavor to use this sacred site as both a means of attracting tourists and a platform for new religious nationalism.⁴ The data is of great value, although one might want to be careful about defining the Xingang temple as an “agent” of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). (p. 392) The volume concludes with Mariske Westendorp’s thoughtful analysis of the civic engagement of Hong Kong Buddhists in the 2014 Umbrella Movement, which makes the important observation that such actions are often more linked to personal considerations of self-cultivation and salvation than issues of religion and politics.

Taken as a whole, the chapters in *Religion and Nationalism in Chinese*

4 For more on tourism’s links to both religious and state agendas, see Tim Oakes and Donald S. Sutton, eds., *Faiths on Display: Religion, Tourism, and the Chinese State* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010); Donald S. Sutton and Kang Xiaofei 康笑菲, *Contesting the Yellow Dragon: Ethnicity, Religion, and the State in the Sino-Tibetan Borderland* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

Societies shed new light on the complex links between religious beliefs/practices and forms of nationalism/national identity, providing sensitive analyses of how each phenomenon developed during the modern era as well as the ways in which their interaction has changed over time. Regrettably, the same cannot be said for the book's Introduction. This piece deserves credit as a provocative intellectual endeavor that challenges some of our basic assumptions about religion and nationalism while asking readers to entertain new perspectives. Be that as it may, Kuo's claim that Chinese patriotism constitutes a "state religion" (see above) seems far-fetched, as are his assertions that Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping are among this religion's "prophets" whose writings are treated as "holy scripture," or that the People's Liberation Army is a "guardian angel" engaged in a "holy war against domestic and foreign devils." (see p. 31) While the religious aspects of Chinese nationalism are a legitimate topic for scholarly research, the work of scholars like André Laliberté (not cited in this book) clearly demonstrates that it is possible to analyze this phenomenon without having to treat patriotism as a state religion.⁵ Moreover, in considering this problem, it seems essential to confront definitions of "religion" at a more basic level. For example, is all nationalism religious, and are all political organizations? If so, what are the exact criteria for labelling them as such? In light of such questions, the absence of any discussion of "political religion" seems particularly striking (this concept is highly prominent in social science literature, particularly as developed by Eric Voegelin and further explored in the contexts of fascism and Nazism).⁶

5 See André Laliberté, "The Politicization of Religion by the CCP: A Selective Retrieval," *Asia (Asiatische Studien—Études Asiatiques)* 69.1(2015): 185-211; André Laliberté, "Religion, Resistance, and Contentious Politics in China," *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* 4(2017): 151-166. The latter appeared after this book was published.

6 Thierry Gontier, "From 'Political Theology' to 'Political Religion': Eric Voegelin and Carl Schmitt," *The Review of Politics* 75.1(2013): 25-43. See also Stanley Stowers, "The Concepts of 'Religion', 'Political Religion' and the Study of Nazism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 42.1(2007.1): 9-24; Emilio Gentile, "Fascism as Political

Similar problems extend to the Introduction's treatment of Taiwanese nationalism, which is also viewed as a "state religion," with Li Denghui 李登輝 and Chen Shuibian 陳水扁 as its "prophets," the DPP, Taiwan Solidarity Union, and New Power Party as its "political priests," 228 as its "religious holiday," and the 228 Memorial Hall as its "only political temple." (pp. 27-28, 32-33) While such claims are worth consideration, a whole literature on the gradual coming into to being and contemporary existence of civic nationalism in Taiwan needs to be taken into account.⁷ Simply identifying Taiwanese nationalism as a form of religious nationalism would seem a rather lopsided perspective.

Kuo's Introduction also suffers from flawed understandings of modern Chinese history, especially the assertion (without any supporting annotation) that the Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧 (1835-1908) instructed the White Lotus Religion (白蓮教 *bailian jiao*) to lead the Boxer Uprising. (pp. 22-23) Such fallacies were disproved over 30 years ago by Joseph Esherick, while Barend ter Haar's seminal study of the White Lotus published in 1992 convincingly demonstrated the problems resulting from scholars engaging in the uncritical use of state labels for religious groups.⁸

Another issue is occasional misrepresentations of previous scholarship, one example being Kuo's citing Richard Madsen's discussion of the "CCP's neo-imperial sacral hegemony" to support his views about the "new political theology of Chinese nationalism."⁹ (p. 26) While Madsen did observe that

Religion," *Journal of Contemporary History* 25.2/3(1990.5-6): 229-251.

7 Timothy Ka-ying Wong, "From Ethnic to Civic Nationalism: The Formation of Changing Nature of Taiwanese Identity," *Asian Perspective* 25.3(2001): 175-206; Wu Rwei-Ren 吳叡人, "Toward a Pragmatic Nationalism: Democratization and Taiwan's Passive Revolution," in Stéphane Corcuff, ed., *Memories of the Future: National Identity Issues and the Search for a New Taiwan* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), pp. 196-218.

8 Joseph W. Esherick, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Barend ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History* (Leiden: Brill, 1992). Both of these works have been translated into Chinese.

9 Richard Madsen, "The Upsurge of Religion in China," *Journal of Democracy* 21.4

“the supposedly secular CCP [now] assumes a holy aura” and “presents itself as the carrier of a sacred national destiny,”¹⁰ he differs from Kuo in pointing out that the rapid growth of religion “has overwhelmed the CCP regime’s systems of surveillance and control,” one result being the CCP’s being forced to rely on “the old scripts of an enchanted imperial age,” including patronizing Buddhist and Daoist sacred sites as well as tolerating or even encouraging temple cults that contribute to social stability. Moreover, Madsen’s argument that public rituals like the 2008 Olympics opening ceremony “powerfully evoked the glorious cultural heritage of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, but gave no mention at all to Mao Zedong or even to socialism” seems a far cry indeed from the claims Kuo made in his Preface and Introduction.¹¹ A further problem revealed by Madsen’s work is that relying on CCP religious policy as an analytical framework may not work for temple cults, since they do not fall under the jurisdiction of the SARA due to their failure to meet state definitions of “religion.”

One unfortunate result of the arguments presented in the Introduction is an often striking discrepancy between in editorial vs. authorial agendas. The bulk of the Introduction is largely devoted to promulgating Kuo’s own views, (pp. 13-44) with the discussion of individual chapters seeming almost like an afterthought; (pp. 44-47) this can also be seen in the book’s blurb, the first sentence of which starts with “This book” and the second “Cheng-tian Kuo.” Perhaps even more striking is the fact that many chapters advance arguments that differ from those in the Introduction. Dessein’s chapter comes closest to approaching Kuo’s views by identifying three religious features of CCP nationalism: conviction about life and this world, rituals that express this conviction, moral community of adepts and practitioners, (see pp. 212, 215) yet he also states that new Confucian nationalism tolerates religion so long as

(2010.10): 58-71.

10 Ibid., 66.

11 Ibid., 60, 64, 66-67.

it fosters national unity. (pp. 218-220) Another example is Hsieh Shu-wei's discussion of Daoist textbooks, which do not seem to advance "the Trinitarian theology of Chinese patriotism" that Kuo argues for. (see pp. 35-36, 264-271) In the end, it would seem that this book's Introduction is both highly thought-provoking yet not entirely persuasive, with the merits of many of its arguments best left for future generations of scholars to decide.

Religion and Nationalism in Chinese Societies suffers from other weaknesses as well, including outdated and often nebulous definitions of "folk" religions (including "folk Confucianism, folk Buddhism, and folk Daoism"; p. 15), with even the Unity Sect being shunted into this category. (p. 41) There are factual errors as well, one being the claim that in Hong Kong "the Anglican Church was treated as equal to other Christian denominations as well as other Chinese religions." (p. 29) Actually, this has been shown not to be the case, since Anglican priests are allowed to serve as unofficial members of the Legislative Council.¹² Also, the Umbrella Movement occurred in 2014, not 2015. (see pp. 30, 35)

Finally, the book's editing leaves much to be desired. The text is riddled with typos, some of the worst howlers being "United Fronts," (pp. 25, 26) *Mingsu* for 民俗, (p. 41) *Huan Shu* for 黃書, (p. 67) *chaotin* for 朝廷, (p. 79) *fenlin* for 分靈, (p. 374) Songshang for 松山, (p. 380) and *gueizung* for 歸宗. (p. 380) And, in Hsieh's chapter, Vincent Goossaert's surname is consistently misspelled as "Goosaert."

The above flaws in no way detract from this book's overall impact, however. By drawing our attention to the many nuances that mark the relationship between religion and nationalism in modern Chinese societies, *Religion and Nationalism in Chinese Societies* has helped contribute to our understanding of these vitally important phenomena.

12 Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 351.