

In the Temples of China : The Life and History of Worshipping Communities
Dans les temples de la Chine. Histoire des cultes, Vie des communautés, by Vincent Goossaert
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It is in temples that one encounters Chinese religion as it is lived by the people – a religion that often seems far from the mystical verses of Laozi or the metaphysical doctrines of Sakyamuni. Chinese religion is typically presented in the West (and in contemporary mainland China) as the teachings of the three Great Traditions of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, which are treated as independent and timeless entities. Academic scholarship in the past few decades has gone beyond this vision to explore a « fourth » Chinese tradition, that of the « folk » or « popular » religion which is practised by common Chinese people. Numerous studies of specific cults in various periods and regions have considerably enriched our understanding of the richness and diversity of Chinese popular religion throughout the ages.

Vincent Goossaert has achieved the feat of presenting a synthesis of much of this data. He has done so not through the comparison of different cults, sects or traditions, but by focusing on the central locus of Chinese religious and social life before 1949 : the temple. By guiding us through the buildings, the practises, the organization and the history of Chinese temples, Goossaert leads us to discover temples as focal points through which the different and often contradictory strands of Chinese religion come together, interpenetrate, and radiate into social life.

The book is based on a controversial postulate : there is but a single Chinese religion. Says Goossaert : « Let us begin from a unitary vision of Chinese religion. Without trying to distinguish popular and elitist forms, nor « great » and « lesser » traditions, let us put forward the concrete existence of a common foundation : the temple, in its diverse forms, considered as the site *par excellence* of religious practise and of the coexistence of the diverse established traditions. This approach encompasses all temples, be they Buddhist, Confucian, Daoist or dedicated to popular cults » (p. 16). Such an approach may seem to carry the risk of excessive generalization, but what

emerges from Goossaert's study is a picture of the temple as a space within which the diversity of Chinese religious life plays itself out.

The book begins with a guided tour of a typical temple. The author explains the layout, the symbolic and geomantic arrangement of buildings and courtyards, the significance of the icons and ritual furnishings, the central function of the incense burner as the true heart of any Chinese temple, and the importance of stone inscriptions as the religious community's memory.

Chapter II is a discussion of different types of temples and the difficulties of classification. It begins with a presentation of Chinese temple nomenclature, explaining the different meanings and etymologies of the many Chinese terms commonly translated as « temple » (*miao, si, guan, an, gong, ci*, etc.), but concludes that it is difficult to classify temples based on their names. Goossaert then considers the option of classifying temples based on their religious affiliation – Buddhist, Daoist or Confucian – but again, most temples defy such categorization : a single temple, for instance, may combine Buddhist protector deities, Daoist liturgy, and blood sacrifice, permissible in Confucian rites but forbidden by both Buddhist and Daoist doctrine. The large monasteries, exclusively run by either Buddhist or Daoist clergy, are an exception among temples which, for the most part, cannot be classified by « denomination » as we can for protestant churches. A single temple usually contains a dozen cults to different divinities, and sometimes up to a hundred. Since the deity most solicited by worshippers is often not the highest-ranked one in the temple, it would also be misleading to classify temples based on their principal divinity.

Goossaert goes on by describing the ubiquitousness of cult sanctuaries, found at the centre of most social institutions of pre-communist China, including private academies, Confucian schools, guild halls, and compatriot associations.

Chapter III is a brief account of the history of the temple as a religious institution in China. The first « temples » were mausoleums and altars for ancestor worship, often carried out in the open air. These were followed by sanctuaries for the imperial cult of the Han dynasty. But it was Buddhism which popularized the temple, with its icons of divinities, as a space devoted to religious worship and open to all. Buddhist monasticism had an immense social and political impact in the Chinese middle ages (3^d to 6th centuries AD). The construction of opulent monasteries transformed the urban and rural landscape. The temple was adopted by both organized Daoism and by popular cults. The latter were often dedicated to nature divinities or to local heroes, and served as centres of

local resistance against central government administrators as well as the Buddhist and Daoist clergy. Under the Tang dynasty (7th – 9th centuries), the imperial state inaugurated a policy of control over all religious institutions. It established a *concordat* guaranteeing the unity and equality of the three instituted traditions (Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism) under its protection. The Tang also began the practice of canonizing popular divinities, promoting or demoting them in the celestial hierarchy. This had the effect of coopting their cults, which required official permission to build temples. It was during this period that temples became the central institution of community life in China. During the Song, however, the harmony between the « Three Religions » was broken by the hegemonic ambitions of Confucianism; in reaction, local cults tended to free themselves from state tutelage and became increasingly independent, forming vast transregional temple networks. Under the Ming and Qing, the rift between elite and popular religion grew even further. Temples and cults multiplied, until, with the social breakdown of the late 19th century, they often became the main institutions of village organization and self-defense. At the same time, sectarian movements such as the Taipings destroyed all temples in the areas under their control, while Christian converts, by refusing to contribute to the financing of temples, broke the unity of communities which had customarily treated the building and upkeep of temples as a collective responsibility. Kang Youwei's reforms of 1898 inaugurated a radical break in state policy toward temples, which were to be converted into the infrastructure of a modern state, by turning them into schools, police stations, tax bureaux, etc. This policy was systematically carried out by subsequent administrations throughout the 20th century. Thousands of temples were simply destroyed. « Their nodal role in the traditional social system, fragmented into small units and local identities, was to [the reformers] impardonable » (p. 99). Only the great Buddhist monasteries, geographically isolated and relatively cut off from the traditional social system, were spared. The Cultural Revolution merely continued a pattern of destruction which had lasted throughout the century; and today, urban planners and real estate developers routinely demolish temples to clear land for construction. Out of an estimated one million temples in 1900 – one per 100 families – only a few thousand remain today : « one of the greatest destructions of heritage in the history of mankind » (p. 101). Nonetheless, temples continue to flourish in Taiwan and overseas Chinese communities, and the mainland has seen a revival in temple construction, financed by the government, overseas Chinese, and local worshippers.

Chapter IV presents four different modes for understanding the relationship between the worshipper and the sacred space. First, the temple can be seen as an ancestral memorial : a place where one honours the deceased as if they were present, albeit without abusively seeking their intercession. In this mode, belonging to a religious community implies filiation to a lineage presided by a divinity. Second, the temple can act as a court of justice. Here the deity is not an ancestor but a celestial bureaucrat, and as such possesses judicial authority. As judges, gods can summon witnesses from the otherworld. They can also be witnesses themselves : important contracts were often settled before the gods, who would punish those who broke their commitments. Third, the temple can be seen as a home, a space for leisure and play, a space to live in. There is no radical distinction between the architecture of a temple and of a house : temples stand out only by their height, their size, and their ornamentation. Temples are the imperial residences of gods; they also provide food and accomodation to passers-by. Fourthly, the temple as mountain : the mountain metaphor is often used to describe all or part of a temple (the pagoda, the roof). Climbing mountains to reach remote monasteries is an act of devotion, giving access to the strange, wild, and otherwordly realm of the spiritual.

Chapter V explains how temples are founded, usually by individual initiative, and how their construction and upkeep is financed. Chapter VI presents the actors of temple life: the organization of the clergy; divines; and spirit mediums. It describes how most temples are managed by lay committees which employ and supervise the resident cleric. These devotional committees and their social and charitable works were the fabric of China's cultural and religious life. And chapter VII brings us to the religious life of temples: the daily cult of incense burning, paper money and sacrifices; and festivals, rituals and processions, during which the temple is livened up by music and banquets.

In his conclusion, Goossaert returns to the theme of chapter I: the relation between temples, the state, and society. "The Chinese temple is a political institution: the state uses it to govern, and the people organize themselves on its foundation" (p. 33). Temples are spaces through which institutional and grassroots culture simultaneously deploy themselves. The interior, with its "elite" state or monastic liturgy, establishes political and cosmological legitimacy, while the exterior, with its community festivals and temple associations, attracts the popular support and funding without which the entire official liturgy could not survive. The temple, then, is a "space of religious negotiation". In it, all the elements of Chinese religion come together. Although the coexistence of elite and popular strands is not always easy, compromise is seen as vital by all actors.

“The mixture of elements, in ever varying proportions, expresses the unicity of a highly extended Chinese religion, of which no part wants to radically separate itself from the others” (p. 204). The temple is a privileged space through which the content of religion is formed and expressed, attracting all kinds of knowledge and riches: gods speak through mediums and oracles, artisans and gardeners bring a sense of beauty, clerics celebrate rites, opera troupes perform sacred history, steles and paintings tell the story of gods and adepts, body arts masters teach the secrets of combat or longevity, philanthropists dispense their good works. The temple, then, is not a static monolith, but an open space within which the swirling strands of Chinese religion bloom and intermingle.

The twentieth century, however, has seen the disappearance of much of temple life. Temples which have not been destroyed have often become tourist attractions, museums of a bygone culture. In the cities, religious life has largely moved out of the temples. *Qigong* groups, for example, often banned from practicing in temples, invested parks and public spaces in the 1980s and 90s.

Religion outside of temples is not the subject of Goossaert’s book, which does not dwell on this tendency. But after discovering the cultural wealth of temples through his masterful synthesis, we cannot help but to wonder about the marginalization of temples in contemporary Chinese life. Is it a temporary state of affairs, the artificial result of state policy, or does it represent a more profound change in the forms of religiosity in China? And if the temple is no longer the centre of social and religious life in China, what, if anything, will take its place?