

*Religion and Chinese Society.*  
*Vol. I: Ancient and Medieval China*  
*Vol. II: Taoism and Local Religion in Modern China.*  
Edited by John Lagerwey.

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Ever since Matteo Ricci set out to master the Confucian classics in order to penetrate the religious and philosophical mind of the Chinese, Christians have attempted to understand the religious traditions of China and have reflected on how their religion could plant deep roots in the soil of Chinese culture. The “dialogue” has often been fraught with misunderstandings, often caused by the projection onto the other culture of Christian models of religion, seeking to find the native equivalents of theology, doctrines, priesthood, congregations, faith, and belief – and when comparable equivalents are not found, sometimes coming to the conclusion that China does not have religion – only humanistic and mystical philosophy on the one hand, and tangled webs of superstition, on the other. This vision, which long dominated scholarship on Chinese religion, was challenged by some scholars a few decades ago and is now largely considered discredited by the circle of specialists, although it still lingers in presentations of Chinese religion to a broader audience. In this context, *Religion and Chinese Society*, a two-volume collection of essays presented at a conference jointly held in 2000 by the CUHK's Centre for Religion and Chinese Society and the Ecole francaise d'Extreme-Orient, provides an excellent snapshot of the best current scholarship on religion in China and points to several elements which will need to be considered if we are to come to an accurate and coherent picture of Chinese religion. The essays are highly specialized and touch on the entire span of Chinese history, from the Shang (16<sup>th</sup> cent. BC) to the present, using the methods of archaeology, history, epigraphy and ethnography. The first thing that becomes evident from a perusal of the volumes is the bewildering diversity of religious phenomena in China, undermining all the neat categorizations of “Confucian”, “Buddhist”, “Taoist”, “Sectarian”, “Popular”, “Elite”, etc., and making any attempt at generalization subject to extreme caution.

Bearing in mind, however, the non-specialized and mostly Christian-oriented readership of *Quest*, in this review I will summarize the essential points of the essays and consider the implications of the data for emerging models of Chinese religion and for considering the future place of Christianity in the Chinese religious system.

John Lagerwey concludes his Introduction to the work by stating that after centuries of interaction between the “Three Teachings” of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, as well as popular religion, there emerged during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) a “hybrid” or “synthesis” which could be called “Chinese religion” (p. xxix). Some scholars

have developed this model of Chinese religion seen as a single integrated whole<sup>1</sup>, within which the Three Teachings should be seen as scriptural traditions which each have their ritual specialists serving the religious needs of the people, who in their great majority are not affiliated to a single tradition and call on different classes of specialists in different situations such as funerals, exorcisms, temple festivals, etc. Such a view is most helpful to dispel the apparent contradiction between the relatively undifferentiated religious preference of most Chinese people on the one hand, and the separate identities of the Three Teachings which, notwithstanding their mutual borrowings, scrupulously and often polemically maintain their mutual distinctiveness. This model, which allows one to see how the clerics of the Great Traditions fit into the “vernacular” cults of local temples and deities, is corroborated by several of the essays in *Religion and Chinese Society*, especially those by von Glahn, Tam, and DuBois. In the latter case, we see how in many villages of North China, in the absence of Buddhist or Taoist clerics, sectarian ritual specialists play the same social function without significantly modifying the overall structure of village religious life.

The difficulty with this holistic or unitary view of Chinese religion, however, is that while it can be seen as a model of a certain equilibrium in the Chinese religious world which existed in the Ming and Qing dynasties, it does not apply as easily to the less stable periods of earlier Chinese history and the 20<sup>th</sup> century, nor can it account for major structural changes in the system which lead to a significant realignment of the relationships between its elements. One way, perhaps, of adding a dynamic dimension to the holistic model would be to see it as an evolving system of elements in constant interaction with each other, and in which a major change in one element, or the addition of a new element, leads to a cascade of changes in the rest of the system. Elements of the system would include the sum of individual needs or desires, the different traditions and knowledge systems, the different deities and objects of worship, the different groups of ritual specialists, the ideological and ritual components of the political regime, the relative wealth and influence of different social groups, and the particular economic and cultural characteristics of different localities. Taking a perspective of what I would call “religious ecology”, we might then begin to piece together the historical evolution of the Chinese religious system. From this angle, we can see that most of the essays in *Religion and Chinese Society* document the introduction of new elements to the system and their effects in Chinese religious history.

### **Chinese souls: living, dead, and immortal**

The first seven chapters deal with a wide variety of ancient Chinese concepts and practices relating to the afterlife, relationships between the living and the dead, and immortality, and their political and social implications. The work begins with a study by David Keightley of the formation and systematization of Chinese ancestor worship in the late Shang cult of the royal ancestors. The focus is on the “depersonalization” of the ancestors by assigning them a generic name which combined a kin term or descriptive term with a *gan* calendrical suffix, the latter then being used to determine the dates on which the cult of each individual ancestor or group of ancestors would be conducted within the ritual calendar. The author describes how, especially since the ritual “reforms” of the reign of Zu Jia (ca. 1177-1158 BC), the genealogy of the royal lineage of ancestors and the ritual cycle

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Vincent Goossaert, *Dans les temples de la Chine. Histoire des cultes, vie des communautés*, Paris : Albin Michel, 2000; Goossaert, « Les traits fondamentaux de la religion chinoise », *Clio*, [www.clio.fr/imprim\\_article.asp?article=316&auteur=3105\(1.4.03\)](http://www.clio.fr/imprim_article.asp?article=316&auteur=3105(1.4.03)), 2003.

were constructed and coordinated, leading to the depersonalization of the dead, noting that by becoming a generic position within a generational hierarchy and within the ritual calendar, becoming an “ancestor” involves losing one’s individual personality. He makes a suggestive comparison with cultures that did not have an elaborate ancestor worship such as Greece, where there are thus colourful and dramatic depictions of the afterlife and of the post-mortem lives of the deceased. He then discusses the consequences and implications of this system, including the emergence of a class of ritual specialists possessing the complex knowledge required to compute the ritual calendar, and considers the homology between the compartmentalizing nature of Shang ancestor worship, the Chinese predilection for modular systems of classification and correspondence, and the value attached to bureaucratic forms of administration and celestial organization. He suggests that the ritual reforms of Zu Jia were a “disciplinary revolution” which generated a series of new institutions, values, cultural codes, and even individual motivations, which in a sense became paradigmatic of Chinese culture, and the impact of which can be compared to the Calvinist reformation in the West. The further development of astro-calendrical systems of classification, correspondence and divination is discussed in Marc Kalinowski’s essay on “Technical Traditions in Ancient China and *Shushu* Culture in Chinese Religion”, in which we can identify, in pre-imperial and early Han times, a relatively homogeneous and continuous body of scriptures which was used by divinatory specialists serving the throne. These speculations led to an even further rationalized and depersonalized cosmology which was increasingly favoured by the imperial state, while at the same time its institutionalization gave legitimacy to their “vulgar” derivations in popular divination practices and beliefs.

The next two chapters, by Alain Thote and Lothar von Falkenhausen, examine burial practices of the rulers and aristocracy during the Zhou (11<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> cent. BC), analyzing regional variations and changes. Of note is the fact that around the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, a change occurred in burial culture, with tombs becoming “more personal, less status-oriented”, and, rather than containing mostly ritual vessels, attempted to imitate the environment in which the person had lived during his lifetime. It was thus a “microscopic representation of the world of the living”. The purpose seems to have been to thus keep the dead away from the living. There is thus a shift from a focus on communication with ancestors to separation and avoidance. This might have been because, in the new political order, “one’s ancestors had become largely irrelevant to the definition of one’s status below”. What appears, then, when contrasting Keightley’s chapter with these two, is on the one hand a paradigm of systematized ancestor worship in which the living and the dead are integrated and interact in a single cosmological hierarchy of roles and statuses, and a paradigm of individualized souls who have little role to play in the society and are thus sent off with all they need. As suggested by Lagerwey, “the breakdown of the all-purpose political and ritual order [at the end of the Zhou] allowed at last the expression of more personal, less abstract, even disorderly representations of reality” (p. xi).

We then move on to a study by Mu-chou Poo of the concept of ghost (*gui*) in Chinese religion from antiquity until the Six Dynasties. The author notes the pervasiveness of ideas of ghosts and spirits in ancient China, although the precise meaning of *gui* in relation to other types of otherworldly beings such as *shen*, *guai* etc. is as elusive as the beings themselves. What is clear, however, is that dead humans are considered to become ghosts; those who receive proper burial and sacrifice are in a sense neutralized as ancestors, while those who are not properly buried, especially those who died a violent or unjust death, remain powerful as evil ghosts who return to haunt the living.

In chapter 5, Michael Puett looks at early attempts to control the fate of one's own body and spirit through self-cultivation regimens which aim for the attainment of immortality or liberation from one's bodily form. The author compares a set of texts from the late Warring States (475-221 BC) and early Han (206-24 BC) periods, which he calls "ascension literature" and which describe how humans can become spirits, release themselves from their form, and journey through the cosmos. He identifies three competing cosmologies and visions of immortality in the texts. The first was a theistic view, dominant in most Warring states courts as well as in those of the early Qin and Han emperors, in which the concern was the mastery of ritual formulas which could give power over the spirits who control the forms of this world. In this cosmology the Emperor, through his access to the formulas, attains physical immortality and attains a position of "theomorphic dominance": by controlling the spirits, he was able to rule over the world. The second view posited a monistic cosmos made of vital energy (*qi*), in which, by practicing body and *qi* cultivation techniques, one could refine one's body into a state of pure, immortal spirit, and in the process gain ever more potency over the world of forms – this could be done without the formulas of the ritual masters favoured by the court. Finally, a third view, exemplified by certain passages in the *Zhuangzi*, is almost dualistic in that it advocates ascension to a state of pure transcendence, with no claim to control the natural phenomena of this world. The three cosmologies are associated with competing visions of proper rulership, and their shifting fortunes played a significant role in the evolution of the imperial cosmology, legitimation, and statecraft in the Han dynasty.

Another cosmology appears in the *Taiping jing* of the Later Han dynasty (AD 25-220), one of the early scriptures of the Taoist religion, which was composed a few centuries later than the texts studied by Puett, and which is analyzed by Barbara Hendrische. Here, instead of a concern with attaining cosmic powers through ritual or self-cultivation, a message of universal salvation is delivered by a Heavenly Master who is informed of the will of heaven. Although social and moral reforms are advocated to avert the apocalypse and bring about the ideal of Great Peace, unlike in classical Han cosmology the ruler has no special correspondence with Heaven nor a sacred mediating function between Heaven and Earth, rather his role is merely to spread the heavenly teachings among the people and persuade them to abide by them. *Qi* cosmology is extended to social relations, seen as the flow of *qi* through the dissemination of knowledge, the use of skills and physical strength, the exchange of sexual fluids, and the communication of suggestions between the people and the administration: in all cases non-circulation was seen as a dangerous rupture in the flow of *qi*. According to the author, however, the scripture's millenarian message of universal salvation was downplayed in the historical development of Taoism, while its concerns with health, longevity, and meditation techniques continued to influence the religion. Hendrische's concluding assessment of the influence of the *Taiping jing* is unclear, however, constantly oscillating between statements such as, in the final two paragraphs, "the scripture played a more decisive role in the formation of Taoism than was acknowledged by this tradition", followed a few lines later by "the historical impact of the scripture remained limited" (p. 273).

### **The emergence of Taoism and Buddhism**

The next five chapters deal with the formation of Buddhism and Taoism as distinct traditions within the Chinese religious system. Indeed, "Taoism" did not appear at a given

moment as a single, self-contained set of teachings, practices and communities, nor did the introduction of Buddhism entail the mere transplantation of a fully developed religious institution. Rather, the two traditions only acquired stable identities after several centuries of “debate, plagiarism, appropriation, revelation, and synthesis” in which they “run each other ragged and wear each other smooth”<sup>2</sup> – a process that occurred in a context of equally intense interaction with popular beliefs and practices as well as with the ideological, cosmological, and ritual systems which claimed an affiliation to Confucius and were associated with the deployment of state power. Valerie Hansen uses the archaeological record to examine some of the earliest Buddhist communities along the silk road in today’s Xinjiang province, along which Buddhism was introduced to China, showing how early “monks” lived at home with wives and children, owned property, and put on their Buddhist robes only when they conducted ceremonies, while the local people continued to bury their dead much as they had before the introduction of Buddhism. James Robson’s essay on “Buddhism and the Chinese Marchmount System: A Case Study of the Southern Marchmount” describes the Buddhist appropriation of Chinese sacred geography through transmitting precepts to local gods, giving peaks Buddhist names which linked them to a universal Buddhist history as well as to local tales of Buddhist monks and miracles, enshrining Buddhist relics on pre-existing sacred mountains, and following the path of Taoist hermits seeking for elixirs of longevity but, in the Buddhist case, doing it in order to prepare to meet Maitreya when he will descend into this world. Lothar Ledderose then explores the other common Buddhist practice of creating sacred spaces by digging caves enshrining Buddha sculptures – although here, the article describes an exceptional case of a cave containing not images but carved Buddhist scriptures, which were locked in and left for the enlightenment of people in a distant future when the Dharma will be suppressed – an ancient time capsule of sorts.

Turning to the absorption of Buddhist elements by Taoist movements, Stephen Bokenkamp (chap. 9) passionately argues against a model of religion which posits its “pure” origins followed by its “contamination” by foreign elements, which is typically described in negative or pejorative terms as “syncretism”, “borrowing” or “influence”. Indeed, in the case of the Lingbao movement, which set out to “subvert and supplant” Buddhism and ended up “domesticating” it (p. 326), Bokenkamp examines the consequences of the integration of Buddhist elements such as rituals for universal salvation and the practice of the *yuan* or votive act, into a Taoist cosmology. The result is an integration of impersonal rationality with a theistic pantheon, as the gods are in a sense automatically required to respond to the meritorious acts performed for them. Isabelle Robinet’s paper (chap. 12), is a seminal contribution to the history of Taoist philosophy and meditation as it digested Buddhist concepts over a period of almost 1000 years, from the Six Dynasties (265-581) to the Yuan (1271-1368). The chapter examines how concepts of human nature (*xing*), the mind-heart (*xin*), visualization, the body, spontaneity, immortality, etc. were transformed as they integrated Buddhist concepts which were similar in some respects but radically different in others. The original Taoist idea of human nature, for example, was linked to the Buddhist idea of the Buddha-nature of each person, which in Buddhism is but one expression of the Buddha-nature of all beings, and then recast as a corresponding notion of the universal “Tao-nature” of all beings. The early Taoist idea of a return to a “pre-natal” state of undifferentiation was replaced by training the mind to return to the first thought and the related exercise of pure intention. In meditational practice, creative visualizations were

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<sup>2</sup> Lagerwey, “Introduction”, p. xv.

replaced by analytical reasoning “whose work is to auto-destruct”. But after this “grossly and heavily Buddhist-oriented phase” (p. 491), with the *neidan* (inner alchemy) synthesis, Taoism finds a new identity and “stops wearing a Buddhist garb”, retaining the new role of the human mind in the process of salvation while returning to traditional Taoist cosmology seen as the constant unfolding and manifestation of the Tao latent in the world.

### **The institutionalization and diffusion of Taoist tradition**

The next five chapters deal with the development of Taoist institutions and the spread of Taoist knowledge in Chinese society from the 13<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Chap. 14, by Pierre-Henri de Bruyn, discusses how the Wudang mountains, located in northwest Hubei, became the centre of a major cult to Zhenwu, one of the major Taoist divinities. The article examines how Zhenwu, who began as a heraldic animal of the north represented by a snake coiled around a turtle, came to be identified with Wudang and was then adopted by the Ming emperors (1368-1644) as the protector god of their dynasty. Central to the rising fortunes and dynastic patronage of the god was the competition between the cult of Zhenwu and a that of a Tantric god of the North, Mahakala, who was the Yuan (Mongol) imperial protector god. The choice of Zhenwu by the Ming, and his great popularity during that dynasty, reflected a reaction against the Yuan religious regime, and could serve as a source of legitimacy for the new dynasty. De Bruyn’s article shows how closely the rise and fall of Chinese gods and religious institutions has been linked to changes in political authority.

The same dynamic was at play in the formation of the most influential lineage in modern and contemporary monastic Taoism, the Dragon Gate (Longmen) School, which is described in Monica Esposito’s essay (Chap. 16). While the Yuan had patronized the Complete Perfection (Quanzhen) Taoist Order, which they had appointed to be in charge of all Taoist institutions, the Ming transferred their favours to the Orthodox Oneness (Zhengyi) Order. With the end of the Ming dynasty, the Orthodox Oneness lost its privileged position and the Complete Perfection once again enjoyed imperial protection, this time from the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). The court-approved reorganization of the Complete Perfection was carried out by Wang Changyue (?-1680), a master of its Dragon Gate branch. Wang invented an unbroken lineage linking the contemporary reformed tradition to Patriarch Qiu Chuji (1148-1227), who had gained the high patronage of the Mongol emperor Chinggis Khan and had brought the Complete Perfection Order to its heyday some 500 years earlier. In Chapter 17, Vincent Goossaert, taking a perspective of social history, describes the functioning of Complete Perfection monastic institutions during the Qing, from 1700 to 1950. He begins by estimating the number of Complete Perfection monks, calculating that the number remained stable at around 20,000 monks, which was not more than 5% of the number of Buddhist monks, while no more than 5% of Chinese temples had Complete Perfection clergy in residence. In spite of such low numbers, however, the Complete Perfection has played a significant role in late imperial Chinese religious history. Its institutional structure – a thin distribution of monks living in small groups of two or three masters and novices at small local temples throughout the country, linked by a network of some two dozen large public monasteries to which monks traveled during their apprenticeship, as well as the routes along which monks circulated on their spiritual journeys between local temples, public monasteries, and famous mountains – created a relatively homogenized religious culture and a unified institutional presence which could serve to defend Taoism as a whole, including the non-monastic Taoist ritual specialists

who were so deeply embedded in local religious culture that they had no independent institution or religious authority.

The comparative weakness of Taoist institutions should not lead us to underestimate the spread of Taoist ideas and practices in the population, a theme which is explored in the articles by Alexei Volkov (chap. 13) and Richard Wang (Chap. 15). Volkov's contribution documents the close links between literati and elite Taoist circles, through the example of Zhao Youqin (1271-1335?), who was both an astronomer and a Quanzhen monk versed in inner alchemical practices. Wang's paper looks into the Taoist content of popular encyclopedias which were widely circulated among the literate population. In addition to classical tales, jokes, songs, models of official documents, erotic novellas, and moral treatises, these encyclopedias contain a fair number of manuals of Taoist inner alchemy, tales of Taoist immortals, and romantic novels derived from the Shangqing Taoist tradition. These findings give us a glimpse of the content and spread of Taoist ideas and practices outside of religious institutions during the Ming.

### **Dynamics of Local Religion**

The final four essays deal with local religious culture – the religious life of the masses, which was never fully integrated into the institutions of the Three Teachings. Richard von Glahn, in chap. 18, presents the history of local religion in the Lake Tai basin of the Yangzi River Delta, from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Refuting C. K. Yang's thesis of a correspondence between social categories and objects of worship<sup>3</sup>, the author argues instead that rather than being mere mirrors of pre-existing social groups, local temple cults play an active role in “defining social boundaries, mobilizing community resources, and configuring local power” (p. 773). Von Glahn identifies three basic types of cults in Chinese local religion as observed in the Lake Tai region: domestic, tutelary, and sovereign. Domestic deities could be influenced through personal votaries, while tutelary deities acted as the guardians of local communities, and sovereign gods “represented an unyielding regime of moral discipline, social control, and divine punishment.” In the Lake Tai area, the rural tutelary deities were subordinated to the sovereign gods of the towns, such as Dongyue – a subordination which was performed at the latter's festival, when processions from neighbouring villages brought the statues of their tutelary deities to “pay court to Dongyue”. The author concludes that rather than fostering common identities, festivals and the interplay of different types of cults tended to accentuate social distinctions between communities.

Tam Wai-Lun, in his essay on religious festivals in Northern Guangdong (chap. 19), comes to a more nuanced conclusion, pointing out that while different groups such as local lineages, boat people, and Cantonese merchants each had their own gods and festivals, which in some cases were vehicles for the competitive display of the particular group's power and territory, members of all groups participated in each others' festivals. In this way a broader local identity was created and maintained. It seems to me that this paradox can be compared to modern sporting events such as the Olympics, which allow for the non-violent display of national rivalries while fostering a broader world identity through the common participation in the ritualized event.

In chapter 20, Thomas DuBois presents the case of village religion in rural North China, where he argues that village identity is not defined by its religious practices, but that

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<sup>3</sup> Yang, C. K., *Religion and Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors*. Berkeley & Los Angeles : University of California Press

villages “support and maintain religious resources for the community.” Comparing the revival of religious practices in three villages of Cang county (Hebei) after 1979, he notes that owing to individual initiatives, religious resources have been restored in two villages, in the form of a temple in one case and a sectarian group in the other, while in the third village, where no such initiative has taken place, religious resources are absent and residents need to call on ritual specialists from neighbouring villages when needed.

In the final, fascinating chapter of the work, Paul Katz explores a hitherto ignored aspect of the relationship between humans and gods: that of the divine justice administered by chthonic deities in their temples. He describes the ritual of filing indictments in temples, in which aggrieved individuals, unable to obtain justice from this-worldly magistrates, file complaints against the known or unknown perpetrators of crimes. In some cases, magistrates solicit the help of deities to identify suspects, and at other times, deities are called on to arrest and punish ghosts who unjustly torment the living.

## Conclusion

The meticulously researched essays presented in *Religion and Chinese Society* are each significant contributions to our understanding of Chinese religion in different historical periods. In my opinion the chief virtue of this collection is its historical depth, spanning almost the entire range of Chinese history. While on the one hand affirming the existence of a Chinese religious culture through the centuries, which has always been in intimate interaction with social and political structures, the historical perspective allows us to transcend the limitations of anthropological or sociological models of Chinese religion which, in spite of the precious insights they provide, tend to be static and to lead to the idea of an essential, changeless Chinese religious structure. The essays point to the need for a comprehensive history of Chinese religion, a project prof. Lagerwey is currently working on. Here, he does offer a few general conclusions, especially regarding the bifurcation between the rationalized, bureaucratic, non-theistic forms of religion that came to be endorsed by each of the Three Teachings, and the theistic and prophetic modes of religiosity which have characterized both state and popular religion. Although the editorial constraints caused by space limitations are understandable, it is regrettable that the conference papers dealing with conceptual and methodological issues in the study of Chinese religion were published separately, in vol. 12 of *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie*, just as the contributions by members of the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient were “ghettoized” by being published in no. 87 of the EFEO's *Bulletin* (2000).

This problem merely attests to the richness of the contributions to the 2000 conference, of which *Religion and Chinese Society* provides a fine selection which should be an indispensable addition to the library of any serious scholar of religion in China. Here, I would like to conclude by sharing some further thoughts which have occurred to me as I considered the implications of this sweeping view of Chinese religious history for the present and future of Chinese religion.

None of the essays in *Religion and Chinese Society* deal with Christianity – the conference papers on this subject were also published elsewhere<sup>4</sup>. But if, as I suggest, we

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<sup>4</sup> In vol. 12 of *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* (2001): Nicolas Standaert, “Christianity as a Religion in China. Insights from the *Handbook of Christianity in China: Volume One (635-1800)*”; Norman Girardot, “The Victorian Text of Chinese Religion: With Special Reference to the Protestant Paradigm of James Legge’s



take an approach of “religious ecology”, we might move beyond the question of China as a “foreign” religion and rather see it as a new element which has been introduced into, and is now an integral part of, the Chinese religious system – a change which has had far-ranging consequences for the entire system. Beyond the mere issue of the number of Christian believers and its rapid increase in the past decades, we can consider how Christian models of religious doctrine, practice, and organization have influenced modern conceptions of religion among China's intellectual elites, modern state policies toward religion, the institutional organization of other religions, their elaboration of theological doctrines and their adoption of Christian-inspired models of philanthropy, social service and education, not to mention the impact on local religious ecologies.

Another change with profound consequences for Chinese religion has been the shift from a relatively closed system to one which is increasingly open to the outside world. Prior to the modern era, Chinese religion, with all its dazzling local variety, was loosely contained within the overarching framework of the imperial state which englobed virtually the entire known world, and had a centralized reach extending far beyond the weak and largely uncoordinated religious institutions of Buddhism and Taoism, and which could thus impose itself at the centre of the religious system, to the point where it could even claim to promote and demote gods within the celestial hierarchy. With the breaking open of this closed world, the state has lost its claim and potential ability to englobe, circumscribe, and organize the religious system. With their flexible global networks, religions – be they universal faiths or local cults connected to the overseas Chinese diaspora -- now in a sense “trump” the state whose sovereignty is confined to a limited territory. The Chinese religious system has lost its imperial centre and its boundaries, perhaps forever. But what will be the impact of an increasingly open China on an emerging *world* religious system?