

Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity, by Rebecca Nedostup.
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Book review by David A. Palmer

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In *Superstitious Regimes*, Rebecca Nedostup sketches the history of secularism during the Nanjing decade of the Republic of China, from 1927 to 1937. In the opening of the book, she evokes how miraculous signs, reported by the press following the victory of the Northern expedition in 1928—a chicken laying an egg with a twelve-pointed KMT star on it; a crab with the markings “unite all under heaven” (統一天下)—caused a malaise among secular KMT officials. While such signs were the auspicious omens of a new dynasty’s mandate of heaven, the new republican regime could only claim the mandate of the people, not of heaven—and so, one official, Zhang Zhenzhi 張振之, glossed the reports as signs of the hopes and expectations of the “psyches” 心理 of the people (pp. 2-3)—recasting the traditional, spiritual legitimation into an expression of the peoples’ will. This story shows the dilemmas faced by the KMT, as it attempted to build a new nation on foundations entirely alien to those which had integrated and legitimized the Chinese empire and local societies for over 2000 years—unable to brush away the old forms of legitimation, it could only try to recast them into its own mold. On the one

hand, this project entailed applying the Western-derived concepts of “religion” and “superstition”, institutionalizing the one and eradicating the other—the temples, rituals, and religious specialists which had been essential components of the social fabric. *Superstitious Regimes* provides a meticulously researched account of this process of elaborating new categories and imposing them on society, as it played itself out in debates among intellectuals, religious activists and politicians; as it found bureaucratic expression through surveys and regulations on temple registration and ritual specialists; as it influenced redemptive societies such as the Daoyuan 道院 and the Tongshanshe 同善社; and as its implementation encountered the resistance and creative adaptations of local communities. On the other hand, this was also a sacralizing process, involving the elaboration of new rituals and sacred places and times, to mould the citizens of the nation into a new “affective regime.” But, since the nation could not be built in a vacuum, it could only have recourse to elements of past tradition, on the condition that they be purged of their position within the traditional cosmology, and recast within the limits of the secular ideology of the nation-state. Figures such as the Yellow Emperor, Confucius, and Guan Yu 關羽 could thus be honored, but only as “worthies” and “heroes,” intended to be remembered as symbols of the nation, but which people continued to worship as spiritual powers for themselves and their families. Nedostup considers the imposition of the new, Gregorian calendar and the banning of the Chinese lunar calendar, the New Year celebrations, the Ghost festival, funerals, cemeteries, and commemorative ceremonies for ancient heroes and sages of the nation. But, as she aptly points out, “the ritual environment in China, centered as it was on the concept of efficacy, raised a very particular question regarding nationalist ceremony: what would it *do*?” (p. 284).

The desired “efficacy” of the nationalist rituals was, of course, to give body and life to the nation, through its own self-representation. Nedostup’s account, and the

questions she raises, may lead us to reflect on how the KMT were, in fact, Durkheimian modernists. Recall that Durkheim argued that religion is the expression of social unity, it is society's worship of itself; the deity or totem is the society's unconscious self-representation. And he implied that a modern society, conscious of its own reality, would be able to assure its cohesion through a civil religion, eliminating the need for a supernatural reference. The KMT project thus appears as an attempt to engineer such a civil religion as an expression of a self-referential nation, replacing the ancestors and deities who were the expression of family, clan, local and regional social organization and loyalties. These ancestors and deities, however, are not mere self-representations of social groups; they have their own stories and spiritual powers with which individuals and groups establish and maintain relations, as *others*, through their cult. Is a self-referential, secular body more efficacious than the traditional religious formation? Would the civil rites succeed in cementing a nation? Looking at the experience of the KMT described in *Superstitious Regimes*, it appears not. Most people persisted in their attachment to the traditional practices, either ignoring the new rites or concurrently practicing both old and new. The boundaries between the two regimes were far more porous than the KMT reformers had hoped and imagined. Rather than separating the two "affective regimes," the new practices, rites, and calendars introduced by the modernizers merely led to "regime mixing" and the production of multivocal juxtapositions and hybridities.

Nedostup's account also brings to mind the fascinating comparisons which can be made with the situation in the current Peoples' Republic, in which the process described in *Superstitious Regimes* is being repeated, but in reverse. The Nanjing decade represents a crucial transitional phase between the traditional, imperial sacred regime and the subsequent Maoist regime, in which political secularization and sacralization were both carried to their extremes. Under KMT rule, categories were established and approaches to the state management of religion were institutionalized, but their

implementation was found to be highly problematic when faced with the reality on the ground. Nowadays, the PRC has retreated from the extreme; popular religion, temples, and all manner of ritual specialists once again flourish in many areas; while the regulatory framework on religion remains based on very similar categories of religion as those used by the KMT. Once again, we see today the same types of disputes described by Nedostup over temples and real estate, property, urban planning, and the development and management of historical sites, in which the social reality does not match with regulatory categories. But in the 1930s the secularizing reformers were on the ascendant; today, their ideological and regulatory framework is unraveling, and, in reference to Chinese popular religion, increasingly appears to remain in place primarily for reasons of political inertia. The extent and speed of this unraveling, and the new tensions and hybridities to which it will lead, will be fascinating areas to observe in the years to come.

Superstitious Regimes is an indispensable work for understanding the origins of the contemporary religious issue in China, and for analyzing the dynamics of state-religion relations throughout China's tumultuous modern history. It is essential reading for any student of modern Chinese history and religion, and a signal contribution to the comparative history of secularism.

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