

Negotiating Religion in Modern China: State and Common People in Guangzhou, 1900-1937,

by Shuk-wah Poon.

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Recent scholarship on state-religion relations in China has highlighted the continuities between republican-era and PRC anti-superstition campaigns and state management of religion, as well as the creative adaptation of religious groups within an unfavourable regulatory environment. *Negotiating religion* is an excellent addition to this literature, using the case of Guangzhou from the late 19th century to the 1930s.

The first reform to affect the traditional religious ecology was the “convert temples to schools” movement, which began in 1898. It was the large Buddhist and Daoist monasteries that were the first targets of this campaign, rather than the more numerous territorial temples. An important reason was that territorial temples were owned and managed by entire local communities, represented by their local elites, rather than by small numbers of socially stigmatized monks and nuns. With the 1911 revolution, the entire religious structure of the Chinese state was abolished; the lunar calendar was replaced by the Gregorian calendar, and most popular worship, at least temporarily, ended. More temples were also confiscated, such as the Huang Daxian 黃大仙 (Wong Tai Sin) temple of Guangzhou which was converted first into a school for girls, then into an orphanage. From 1920 to 1928, there were no direct restrictions on traditional

religious practices, but the state nonetheless heavily interfered in the ownership and management of temples. The motivation was primarily financial: starved for funds to build an expanding state and conduct its military campaigns, and in the context of a booming real estate market, the government saw the confiscation and sale of temples as a lucrative source of revenue. Some 570 temples were thus put on the market (p. 58) – although neighbourhood or religious communities were also allowed to “purchase” their own temple, so that some of the temples continued to operate even after they were “sold”. This policy, and other government infrastructure projects that were seen as damaging the landscape’s *fengshui*, triggered strong popular opposition and resistance, which was channelled by the Merchants’ Corps 商團, an armed organization of local merchant elites. This and other conflicts escalated into a military revolt in 1924, which was crushed by the government army.

With the reinforcement of KMT power, and especially after the Nanjing regime was established in 1927, the state adopted a more activist attitude towards popular religion – but it always had to deal with popular resistance and adaptation. It was difficult to enforce new regulations banning fortune telling: most of the diviners and geomancers were old, blind or handicapped, and practicing their trade was their only means of making a living and supporting their families. They were able to organize themselves and to use the new civic discourse on productive work to petition the government. They were even able to delay the government’s plan of converting the City God temple – which was fortune tellers’ main place of work – into a “Native Goods Exhibition Hall.” This project, which aimed to replace the symbol of the old superstitious order with a flagship of nationalist industrial production and consumption, was finally inaugurated in 1930. However, while the people enjoyed the exhibits, they continued to worship in a small back chamber of the building, in which a statue of the god remained.

Such incongruous juxtapositions also occurred in ritual contexts. Chapter 4, on “refashioning rituals and festivals”, describes the result of attempts to modernize the “Double Seventh” 七夕 festival, which traditionally involved single women who made extravagant offerings to celebrate the love story of the Cowherd and the Weaving Maid, and pray for a good husband. The government tried to replace this custom with a secular commemoration of Leizu 嫫祖, the legendary inventor of silkworm raising and wife of the Yellow Emperor. Exhibitions on sericulture, official ceremonies and public entertainment were offered, in an attempt to celebrate Chinese nationalism and the role of women in economic production. The common people, however, saw no contradiction between the two festivals, and participated in both simultaneously. In the case of the ghost festival, also targeted by anti-superstition campaigns, a charitable hospital in Guangzhou circumvented the ban on the rites by holding them in the guise of a commemoration of Nationalist soldiers killed in battle. While state representatives officiated at one altar according to the solemn, secular form, the masses made their offerings to the hungry ghosts at another altar.

While chapters 1-4 discuss the implications of attempts to eradicate customs and rituals as superstition, chapter 5, on “government and the remaking of religion in the 1930s,” explores the consequences of the government’s protection of those institutions which it considered to be legitimate “religion”. The government of warlord Chen Jitang 陳濟棠 (1890-1954) sought to promote patriotic civilization by encouraging the commemoration of Confucius and Guan Yu 關羽, following rites similar to the official cults of late imperial China. However, this only offered a path for the legitimation of the popular worship of Guan Yu as the deity Guandi 關帝, which had little connection to nationalist ideology, and even to the renaming of popular temples to Guanyin and other “illegal” deities as “Confucius temples,” in order to protect them from confiscation. This

chapter also reveals a shift in the fortunes of the large Buddhist and Daoist monasteries: while they had been the prime target of the earlier, post 1898 reforms, by the 1930s the few that remained benefited from their status as the embodiments of the new concept of 'religion' as well as from the personal connections between monastic and military elites.

Overall, *Negotiating Religion* is an indispensable local case study for understanding state/religion/society dynamics in Republican China. The book highlights the importance of regional variations, as Guangzhou was often under different political and warlord regimes than other parts of China. It also brings to light changes at different periods, as well as the conflicts between different government agencies, some of which (such as the Customs Reform Commission) zealously pursued anti-superstition campaigns, while others (notably the Public Security Bureau) opposed them. Meanwhile, the realm of "popular religion" is unpacked as being composed of a wide diversity of practices, groups, specialists, and temples, each of which had different interests and followed divergent strategies in adapting to political and social changes. What appears is not a struggle between monolithic entities and ideologies of the "state" and "religion", with the latter hopelessly suppressed by the former, but creative reinventions, appropriations and juxtapositions. This raises the question of the continuities and ruptures with similar "superscriptions" and "ritual disguises" in both late imperial and contemporary China, a question which is briefly discussed in the conclusion. Another question which should be addressed in future studies, is the dimension of gender. Many of the rituals targeted by anti-superstition campaigns, such as the Double Seventh, were dominated by women, while some of the modern substitutes – such as the Leizu festival, or temples converted into girls' schools, aimed to improve the status of women. How do the struggles over religion, superstition and modernity fit into changing constructions of gender in China? This would be a fascinating topic for future research.

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