

The Social Organization of Religious Communities in the Twentieth Century

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By the turn of the twentieth century, as we saw in the previous chapter, China's intellectual elite had come to the conclusion that China needed to become a modern nation, and to seriously question the validity of its traditions. A discursive change took place that turned the relationship between state and religion on its head. Religion itself was not changed overnight, but the public discourse and the political management of religion did change quickly and deeply. New words began to appear, notably *zongjiao* ("religion") and *mixin* ("superstition"). All were adopted from Japanese neologisms crafted a few years before and were used to express Western notions that had not existed in the Chinese discourse until then. These neologisms were part of a larger set of imported categories used to reclassify the whole of knowledge and social and political practices, also including such words as "science" or "philosophy." *Zongjiao* and *mixin* seem to have been made popular in 1901 by Liang Qichao (1873–1929), an influential essayist. Religion was now understood in the Western post-Reformation sense as a system of doctrine organized as a church separated from society. The word *religion* was first equated with Christianity, and debate began (and is still going on to this day) regarding what, in the Chinese tradition, might be put under this category. Clearly, Christianity and Islam were immediately included; Buddhism, and, with more hesitation and reservations, Daoism, eventually were; Confucianism was and still is a matter of heated debate; and most of the religious communities in local society were excluded from this category. The result of these debates, which have been reflected in the policies of the Chinese state toward religion from the early twentieth century until today, is a hybrid system in which a "confessional" approach to religious affiliation, management, and academic discourse (in which people are labeled as either atheist or "believers" in one exclusive "religion" managed by a single institution) is superimposed on the Chinese religious culture in which cosmology, ritual, scriptures, practices of worship and spiritual cultivation, and temples and communities are pervasive but interconnected and organized in a very different way.

This chapter traces how this hybrid system came into being in the twentieth century. We begin with the broad contours of the traditional social organization of Chinese religion—clerical traditions and the various types of communities—first at the end of the imperial regime, around 1900, and then as it evolved under the influence of a Western-inspired normative model of “religion,” from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day. Although the top-down imposition of this model was successful in certain respects, such as making the national religious associations key public institutions, many types of communities have not adopted it. As a consequence, the official domain of *religions* does not cover the whole of lived religiousness, and the quantitative figures available for religious belonging and practice in the various Chinese societies are subject to much caution and debate.

Institutional Religions in 1900

THE THREE TEACHINGS IN THE LATE IMPERIAL POLITY

Up to the end of the Qing empire in 1911, China lived with an official religious doctrine that endorsed plurality, as there were three officially recognized and supported teachings (*jiao*), namely Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, but not pluralism, as it did not value religious difference for its own sake, and did not welcome any new religion either. There was instead a plural orthodoxy, but everything else was defined as heterodoxy, and as such banned. The situation was thus different from much of the Western experience, which was predominantly predicated on the principle of one religion per polity, even though some countries, most notably the United States, did accommodate a large variety of Christian denominations. This dual heritage—acceptance of plurality but aversion to pluralism, that is, recognizing several religions but keeping a closed list of them—was maintained throughout the dramatic changes of the twentieth century, but definitions of what was acceptable religion and what was not changed considerably. To understand the history of these changes up to the present day, it is necessary to first sketch what the situation was around 1900, when the changes began.

The Three Teachings as supported by the imperial regime were defined quite differently from what we now call *religions*. They were precisely defined, each with a distinctive clergy, a canon of scriptures, a liturgy, and training centers. A *clergy* is a body of religious specialists observing a coherent set of rules and having gone through a fairly homogenous training and ordination process. Buddhist clerics, probably around a million persons by 1900, with a large minority of women among them, were mostly celibate and vegetarian monks and nuns, living in large elite monasteries or, for the majority of them, hired as priests in local temples. Daoist clerics were either celibate and vegetarian like the Buddhists or, much more often, married; in both cases, they offered ritual services to the population at large: running temples, officiating at community festivals, performing death rituals, expelling demons, and so on. They were probably as numerous as the Buddhists (although

with a lower proportion of women) but were much less well tracked and accounted for by authorities. Confucians were defined (both legally and by themselves) as those who had passed at least the first of the three levels of civil service examinations (only the third level was a guarantee of civil service employment); most of them (around five million by 1900) worked as teachers; some also offered ritual services: Confucians performed sacrifices of animals (mostly pigs and poultry) to gods, and family rituals such as weddings, burials, and sacrifices to ancestors.

The three clergies each had their canon, a large collection of scriptures defining their doctrine, rules, and liturgy (that is, their way of doing rituals, including texts to be read, but also music and dance, and meditation); and training centers in which the canon was kept and clerics were trained and ordained: Buddhist monasteries, Daoist monasteries and large temples; and Confucian academies.¹

Within Chinese religion, the Three Teachings did not function as separate institutions each with their own believers; rather, they all served the entire society, either through the teaching of individual spiritual techniques—such as Buddhist Chan meditation (known as Zen in the West), devotional Pure Land spiritual exercises (invoking the savior Amitabha), Daoist psychophysical techniques to transform the body and make it immortal, or Confucian moral self-cultivation (like counting one's good and bad deeds and keeping ledgers of merit)—or through the providing of ritual services to associations and communities. Buddhists, Daoists, and Confucians were all routinely invited by village and neighborhood communities to officiate at their festivals, offering sacrifices and submitting prayers to the gods on their behalf.

In late imperial times and well into the twentieth century, only clerics and a small number of devout laypersons would identify themselves as Buddhist, Confucian, or Daoist, but most people at least occasionally engaged in rituals officiated by priests of one or more of the Three Teachings. That is, the vast majority of the population did not call themselves Buddhist or Daoist but found it natural, if not necessary, to invite Buddhist or Daoist clerics to perform rituals at funerals, to oversee major junctures of community life (refurbishing of the village temple, New Year celebrations, etc.), or to respond to situations of crisis (epidemics, locust invasion) or when an unnatural disease, attributed to malevolent spirits, created the need for divine help. Similarly, only those engaged in learning for the imperial civil service examinations called themselves *Confucian*, but Confucian classics, ethics, and teachings were revered by much larger numbers of persons, indeed including Buddhists and Daoists. In all such cases, people invited the most competent and available religious specialist, or specialists; the Three Teachings were seen not as exclusive but as complementary. For instance, it was considered fitting that rich families would invite, at the same time, Buddhists, Daoists, and Confucians to celebrate a funeral, each doing their own ritual in parallel, side by side but usually not mixing or merging.

This form of plurality was therefore not equivalent to syncretism, in which a conscious attempt is made to integrate, synthesize, and supersede all existing teachings. The imperial state doctrine of the coexistence of the Three Teachings reinforced

their cooperation (as well as occasional competitive tensions); at the same time, functional differences remained, with Confucians monopolizing statecraft and playing a privileged role in ancestor veneration; Daoist ritual structuring communal celebrations such as village temple festivals; and Buddhist priests usually being the preferred choice for funerals.

Some scholars have suggested that the Three Teachings correspond to an *elite religion* in contrast to *popular religion*. It is true that elites in imperial times tended to identify more readily than the rest of the population with one (or several) of the Three Teachings and their textual traditions; in each of the three, there are philosophical, speculative, and mystical explorations that can and do satisfy the most demanding intellects. Yet, most of China's population had access to and used Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian intellectual and ritual resources, while at the same time declining to be subjected to these Three Teachings' clerics and authority. For instance, many village temples hired Buddhists or Daoists to perform services but did not allow them to take leadership roles and dictate to local people what they should or should not do. Therefore, the large majority of temple communities were not Confucian, Buddhist, or Daoist: they are often placed under the label of "Chinese popular religion," but this term does not necessarily imply a lower social class, lack of intellectual sophistication, or deviation from orthodoxy. On the other hand, while the Three Teachings had nationwide institutions, cult communities were fundamentally local in nature and they have been therefore aptly described as "vernacular," "communal," or "local religion."

FORMS OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Until 1900, and long after that date in most of the countryside, people did not consider themselves members of such and such religion, or "teaching," but as members of one or several communities: households, clans, territorial communities, professional guilds, devotional associations. All of these communities had an altar where they worshipped their own ancestors and/or patron saints or gods. Most of them were organized around temples, but not all, as traditional temples (all made of wood, a highly expensive building material in a largely deforested country) were and are very expensive to build; newer and/or smaller communities could make do with just a consecrated statue of their god(s) and an incense burner (at its simplest, a clay pot) placed at a member's home.

A temple belonged either to the clerical, or more often, lay community that built and used it as its meeting place. It was devoted to one or several deities: local heroes (who had performed extraordinary feats for the community and became protective gods after their death), healing gods and goddesses, or ancestors, who all embodied local identity and history. Only temples built by and for clerical communities—that is, Buddhist monasteries, Daoist central temples, and Confucian academies—could be said to be specifically affiliated to one of the Three Teachings. For all other temples, community leaders were regularly chosen through a variety of methods,

BOX 10.1 Is Confucianism a Religion?

Ever since the notion of religion was introduced to China during the very early years of the twentieth century, and up to the present, debates among Chinese intellectuals have raged as to whether Confucianism is a religion. Of course, the answer basically depends on what one understands by both *Confucianism* and *religion*. Starting from a highly ecclesiastical definition of religion (a system of thought, practice, rules, and ritual grounded in scriptures revealed by God and followed by assemblies of believers), as most people in the West and China did in the early twentieth century, would yield a negative answer, unless one reinvented Confucianism. Starting from a more anthropological definition, more in use now (religion defined as a system of symbols explaining and offering some leverage on the universe, death, and human destiny), it is much easier to argue that in imperial times self-avowed Confucians believed and practiced a religion (as well as an ethic and a philosophy, like all religions), with deities, rituals, specialists, and scriptures.

A large array of Chinese intellectuals, from 1900 to the present, have offered their own solution to the conundrum of squaring a notion of Confucianism with a notion of religion. Some have attempted to create a Confucian religion on the Christian model (with Confucian churches, ministers, Sunday worship, etc.) but with a very limited success, even though the idea lives on in some parts of the world (Hong Kong, Korea, Indonesia). Most have rejected the idea of religion (and all indigenous religious practices; indeed, a number of them converted to Christianity), preferring to identify what they defined as their Confucianism with another Western category, *philosophy*. Since the end of the twentieth century, it has been increasingly popular to draw attention to the spiritual dimension of this kind of narrowly defined Confucianism, but it is still devoid of any ritual or communal dimension and therefore limited to small numbers of urban intellectuals. Meanwhile, religious practices—moral self-cultivation, spirit writing (whereby a medium is possessed by a god who writes with the medium's hand), and sacrifices to Confucian gods and to Confucius himself—that were until 1900 part of mainstream Confucianism have been carried on by other groups.

including bids (many leaders were wealthy locals who paid dearly for the symbolic capital of religious leadership), rotation, heredity, and election by the god through divination or by drawing lots. To the present day, and throughout the Chinese world, it brings great honor and prestige, and possibly even electoral success, to be a temple leader, and to be seen to devote time, energy, and money for the community's temple. These lay leaders preside over rituals, enforce temple regulations, hire priests to conduct rituals and manage temple assets, including landed property—a major resource for temples until 1900; after that date, the land assets were confiscated. In a minority of cases, the leaders also hired spirit mediums (who become possessed by the gods and as such can offer healing or predictions) or clerics (Buddhist or Daoist) to reside in the temple and run it on a day-to-day basis, but the supervision and control of the leaders.

The types of communities that owned temples and organized religious activities varied in the different regions of the Chinese world, between rural and urban areas, and between China proper and Chinese communities in other countries (those with a high density of ethnic Chinese, notably in Southeast Asia, being closer to the models in mainland China than more distant, smaller communities in the West). Some of these communities, such as village temple communities and clans, were identical with the structures of local society, whereas others, such as devotional societies and self-cultivation networks, were more purely religious. Many socioeconomic groups such as clans, guilds, or village communities and alliances were officially sanctioned as cult communities by the imperial state, which granted titles to their gods and tried to regulate them. After the establishment of the republic in 1912, the formal relationship between these communities and the new secular state ended. The new secular state was utterly averse to recognizing and dealing with local gods. This changed the balance of power in local society. But predictions that the end of the imperial world order would spell the end of local cults that were tied to it proved false—indeed, many local cults have proved remarkably resilient to the present day; though they are no longer connected to an imperial authority, they still symbolize moral order within local society.

What best characterizes the social organization of religion in China is the autonomy of each community. Although they could, and often did, negotiate alliances and build networks for both religious and secular purposes: staging festivals, maintaining order (training and paying militias, for instance), building infrastructure (roads, bridges, dikes), or arbitrating local conflicts. All temples and religious groups were independent, not subjected to any external authority, be it secular or spiritual, until the dramatic expansion of the modern state into villages. Even then, these communities resisted state control as well as they could. Some scholars have described the networks of cult communities as China's civil society, or its "second government." One example among many is the irrigation systems in several parts of China, where very large and expensive systems of canals have to be maintained (the cost being borne largely by the locals) and the sharing of water rights has to be negotiated between villages. Such negotiations typically take place in the framework of temple alliances, gods being the warrants of the contractual agreements, and transactions taking place during temple festivals when local leaders meet, renew alliances and contracts and vow to respect common interests. This was commonplace until 1900, and, in some parts of China, it is still observed today.

A useful distinction of Chinese religious groups is among ascriptive communities in which adherence is compulsory for all concerned households, and congregations characterized by free and individual participation. Three main types of ascriptive communities are common: territorial communities, clans, and corporations. Territorial communities, such as villages and neighborhoods, unite for the cult of either an impersonal earth god or a local hero. Participation, primarily in the form of financial contributions toward temple upkeep and the organization of the yearly festival, was compulsory for all residents of the god's territory, almost like a parish.

Such territories were delineated from adjoining territories by a procession (carefully treading the boundary lines) in the course of the festival. Throughout the twentieth century, the territorial bond almost disappeared in most urban neighborhoods, but it has remained strong in many villages. Sharp differences in religious life were created between cities and countryside that rarely ever existed before 1900.

Clans and lineages—groups tracing descent from a common ancestor—were also found throughout China. While each household honored immediate forebears, families also allied on a large scale to maintain written genealogies and worshipped at the tombs of more distant ancestors. In some cases families worshipped in free-standing ancestor halls. In China, even humble peasant families could have very detailed genealogies extending over three or four centuries. Some parts of southern China were famous for their large-scale clans, which commanded huge corporate resources, including schools, or even companies.

The third type, corporations, included professional guilds and associations of sojourning merchants from the same locale, all of which were organized around cults to patron saints, either in the corporation's own temple or in a shrine within a large temple. Corporations were the most active religious communities in the cities, organizing the largest and liveliest celebrations. However, corporately active religious communities have declined more dramatically than descent groups or territorial communities, as they were gradually replaced over the course of the twentieth century by state-owned industrial bureaucracies, secular chambers of commerce, and professional associations.

The voluntary congregations were extremely varied. Buddhist and Daoist pious societies, typically under clerical leadership, financed rituals and mutual aid among members. Devotional groups organized festivals (with opera, procession, sacrifices, and banquets) to celebrate the birthday of their god or contribute to the upkeep of a temple. Pilgrimage associations to holy mountains or major temples trained all year long to be ready for the pilgrimage season and perform, for free, short theater shows, stilt walking, displays of martial arts prowess, and so on. Many congregations ran charitable programs that, for example, offered tea or food to pilgrims or beggars; provided medicine, clothes, or coffins to the needy; or saved animals from being butchered. Finally, many congregations were oriented toward individual salvation and spiritual practice. This category included spirit writing cults formed of laypersons, in which spirit mediums received direct revelations from gods, either as advice to individuals or as general exhortations; in the latter case, the revelations were often published in book form. In spirit writing, one or two mediums are said to be possessed by a god and hold a wooden fork or another instrument that, moved by seemingly involuntary movements, writes (in sand or ashes) messages that are immediately transcribed on paper by an assistant. Many such texts were morality books, exhorting people to do good, honor the gods, respect life, study the classics, and be thrifty and useful to society. These cults also engaged in charity, and often doubled as philanthropic foundations. Other groups were also geared toward revelation, the study of sacred texts, and meditation. A distinctive body of scriptures introduced a female deity, the Unborn Venerable

Mother (see chapter 6), who is said to have created the universe and to be aghast at her creatures' drifting away from moral ways; this hints toward an apocalyptic eschatology that expects the imminent end of the current cosmic cycle. Although their moral teachings were usually not much different from the other groups, their apocalyptic worldview gained them hostility from the imperial state, which tried, with limited success, to repress them.

In short, the relative weakness of central religious authorities (the imperial state and the clerical institutions) made possible until 1900 a blossoming of a very diverse religious landscape including huge numbers of autonomous religious communities of all kinds. The imperial state tried to manage this large variety of groups using various criteria to differentiate them; it supported clans, corporations, and territorial communities; it tolerated voluntary associations when led by members of the elite but banned, and sometimes violently repressed, the others. The attitude of the modern regimes (Nationalist, Communist) has often been similar to that of the imperial state—that is, attempting to control and limit such diversity and autonomy—but based on very different foundations. The imperial state regulated on a theological basis (the emperor, as Son of Heaven, was a religious authority and could decide what was orthodox or heterodox); the modern regimes regulate on a legalistic basis (they define legal, objective standards for accepted religion and repress groups or people who ignore them).

ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY

The integration of two world religions, Islam and Christianity, into this densely woven religious system is a daunting enterprise that is still under way as of the early twenty-first century. Although there were both Christians and Muslims active in Tang (618–907) China, the modern presence of Islam antedates the presence of Christianity by several centuries. Muslims from Central Asia were an important part of the Mongol Yuan (1271–1368) regime's administrative and commercial elites, and many of them stayed on after the fall of the Mongol regime, creating small communities embedded in the larger Han society. Today Chinese-speaking Muslims claim that they are the direct heirs of these people, but it is actually likely that the early communities grew through conversions as much as natural reproduction. Throughout Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) times, the imperial regime let Muslims practice their religion, even though occasional bouts of official hostility and Muslim uprisings, which the Han claimed were caused by the Muslims' excessive sense of communal solidarity and self-defense, did create tensions and violence. Up to the present day, Muslim and Han villages might engage in feuds, often expressed as issues of ritual difference (the Han eating pork, the Muslims eating beef, both meats being abhorrent to the other), but the overwhelmingly dominant pattern is peaceful coexistence. Muslims typically have lived, and still live, in predominantly Muslim villages and neighborhoods with a strong occupational specialization. The Chinese Muslims have specialized in food, meat processing, and animal products (livestock, furs), and they are respected in this economic role.

Long considered a religious group, Chinese-speaking Muslims radically redefined their identity during the early twentieth century when, along with the spread of racial notions under Western influence, they were redefined (by both the state and their own leaders) as an ethnic group, called Hui, rather than a religious one, which guaranteed certain rights but also severely curtailed the possibility of converting outsiders. Thus the Hui were known after the 1910s as one of China's five constituent nationalities (following the Western concept of people or nation) along with the Han, the Manchus, the Mongolians, and the Tibetans; the PRC further elaborated this concept, and defined fifty-six nationalities, one of them being the Hui, made up of Chinese Muslims (who are linguistically and culturally similar to the Han), and several others being Turkic- or Persian-speaking Central Asian Muslim ethnic groups. The latter were integrated into the Chinese polity at a much later date (the Qing empire conquered what is now the province of Xinjiang, where most of them live, during the eighteenth century); whereas the Hui are remarkably well integrated into Chinese society, the other Muslim nationalities present a very different picture.² (See chapter 3.)

By contrast, Christian integration into Chinese society is a more recent and violent story. Catholics, at least those in villages converted in imperial times, tended, rather like Muslims, to live in villages that are identified as Catholic and thus form closely knit communities that can, thanks to strong solidarity and village identity, weather times of hostility or downright persecution. This was a strategy consciously pursued by missionaries during the early times of the Jesuit and other missions (from the late sixteenth century to the imperial ban on Christianity in 1724, when it was labeled as one of the "heretical teachings" to be crushed by officials), and again after the victorious gunships of the Western powers forced the Qing empire to legalize Christianity anew and allow missionaries to go into China, in a series of so-called unequal treaties from 1842 onward.

Whereas Catholics tried to build sustainable and cohesive Christian villages, Protestant missionaries, beginning in the early nineteenth century, aimed more at individuals, converting isolated persons who staffed or were affiliated with numerous but tiny mission posts throughout the huge swathes of the empire. In both cases, converts were assisted and protected by foreign missionaries who used, and in some cases abused, their consular protection—in particular, all Catholic missions were placed under the protection of the French consulate in Beijing. Beside the fact that some converts, dubbed "rice Christians," were mostly interested in the material benefits offered by the missionary institutions, consular protection that put pressure on local officials to safeguard the interests of the Christian converts were a topic of contention in local society. Non-Christians accused Christians of unduly using foreign protection to win lawsuits and escape customary duties, notably financial contributions to village institutions (including temples and festivals, which missionaries claimed were unacceptable to Christians, following a logic of exclusive religious affiliation that was very unfamiliar to the Chinese). The overall level of tension between Chinese Christians and non-Christians in local society is a matter of divergence among historians. Some claim that beyond resentment caused by the

BOX 10.2 Jews in China

China has always been a rather welcoming home for all of the world's religions. Small numbers of Jews settled in China, probably as traders, during the first millennium BCE; a community claims to have survived, isolated from other Jewish groups for centuries, in the northern city of Kaifeng. By the time they were discovered by Christian missionaries in the late nineteenth century, they had lost almost all of their religious and ethnic practices. However, during the first half of the twentieth century, several waves of Jewish migration reached Chinese cities, notably Shanghai, Harbin, and Hong Kong, some as traders and some as refugees from Russia.

occasional instrumentalization of missionary protection by unscrupulous individuals, Christianity was accepted at the village level as just one more religious option in an already very diverse religious landscape. Others point to the very numerous conflicts between converts and their fellow villagers that culminated in the Boxer rebellion, a movement of self-defense village militia in northern China that turned against foreigners and Christians and killed many between the fall of 1899 and the summer of 1900, when the intervention of the Eight Nation Alliance quelled the movement and killed even more in retaliation. Given this bloody history, the presence of Christianity in the Chinese countryside has been throughout the twentieth-century more tense and controversial than the Muslim presence.³

To further complicate the picture, there were some Protestant groups independent of the missionaries that began to emerge after the turn of the century. By the 1920s and 1930s, groups such as the “Little Flock” and the Jesus Family were well established in some parts of China. They could be categorized as voluntary congregations, using the terminology introduced above.

The Building of Modern Religions

THE NOTION OF *RELIGION*

At the same time, Christianity had a strong impact on the development of Chinese nationalism and modern religious and secular reform movements. Kang Youwei, a scholar who was called on by Emperor Guangxu (1875–1908) to enact a campaign of political reforms in 1898, hoped to turn China into a modern power by revitalizing Confucianism. A close friend of the missionary Timothy Richards, he sought to establish Confucianism as a national religion, with church-style congregations and Sunday mass. He also launched a campaign to seize local temples and convert them into modern public schools—a movement that, over the course of the twentieth century, would lead to the confiscation, and often destruction, of hundreds of thousands of temples.

The revolutionary movement led by Sun Yat-sen, considered to be the father of the Chinese nation, deposed the Qing emperor and established the Republic of China in 1912. Sun, who became China's first president, was baptized as a Methodist, and compared the idea of revolution to the notion of Christian rebirth. In his own words, it was "mostly from the church that I learned the truth of revolution. The establishment of the Republic today is due, not to my efforts, but to the service of the church."⁴ Many of the political and financial backers of the Nationalist Party (KMT) were also Chinese Christians.

Religion—understood under the Christian model—was thus considered to be a strong, moralizing, and unifying force contributing to the power of the Western nation-states and was, in the early period (1900–1937), generally considered by Chinese intellectuals as something positive. Many believed that China needed its own religion if it wanted to gain moral strength and survive foreign aggression; they were divided between those who felt that the religion to be adopted should be Christianity and those who promoted modernized versions of Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, or a combination of the above. After years of Maoism and Marxist ideology that rejected religion per se, this view has resurfaced since the 1980s. But it is still common for intellectuals to have a positive appraisal of the role of religion in modern society while condemning practices that they do not consider as proper religion and vilify as "superstition." In other words, it was, and still is common among Chinese intellectual and political elites to be religious (notably Christian or Buddhist) and radically antisuperstitious (opposed to whatever is not grounded in and strictly limited to the spiritual and moral self-perfection delineated by the theological scriptures of a world religion: Christianity or Buddhism). This distinction is quite different from the traditional orthodox/heterodox divide of imperial times: many local cults and practices independent from national organizations and textual traditions that were once regarded as orthodox were now branded as superstitious. Notably, all temple cults, not being part of a "religion," were now categorized as superstition and therefore targeted for suppression. An important aspect of this process was the "turn temples into schools" movement, which first appeared in 1898, fully developed after 1904 and continued unabated through the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). This movement turned hundreds of thousands of temples into modern schools (as well as government offices, barracks, granaries, factories, etc.), often through violence and the destruction of temple property and artifacts (statues, texts, art).⁵

By contrast to widespread antisuperstition, which found multiple expressions in popular media as early as 1905, the rejection of religion as such did not appear until the 1920s. This occurred at a time when many other societies in the West and in the colonial world were adopting militantly secular policies vis-à-vis religion. In France, the Law of 1905 had established the principle of *laïcité*, which forbade the interference of religion in public education. In Mexico, the Constitution of 1917 adopted anticlerical provisions that limited the influence of the Church. The same year, the Russian Communist Party sought to establish the first socialist state and set up

policies that were predicated on the disappearance of religion. In Turkey, Kemal Atatürk abolished the Caliphate in 1924 and launched a series of reforms that were aimed at establishing a modern secular state.

The antireligious, or atheist, movement was formulated at that time under the direct influence of European Marxists and freethinkers and primarily aimed at Christianity in its relationship with imperialism. The most brilliant and famous advocate was Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), a professor at Peking University but also a founding member of the Communist Party. But Chen's position was, until the Communist takeover, marginal among the Chinese intellectual and political elites. Most of these espoused antisuperstition as part of a *pro-religious* discourse. For the political elites then, and still to this day (even in the People's Republic where radical antireligion still exists among officials but is declining), it is acceptable to believe in one religion but shameful to take part in local festivals, pilgrimages, and other communal activities.

The Republican regime's management of the religious scene was based on a thorough promulgation of the religion/superstition paradigm. The provisional constitution of the Republic of China, proclaimed on March 11, 1912, stipulated the "freedom of religious belief." This was carried over in all subsequent Chinese constitutions. This text did not guarantee protection against the destruction and nationalization of temples, but elites saw no contradiction between protecting the freedom of religious belief on the one hand, and eradicating superstition on the other. The early Republican government indeed elaborated a new official doctrine for religious policies as early as 1912, establishing quite clearly the modern Chinese state's fundamental positions in matters of religious policies, and these positions have more or less remained the same ever since: the state was ready to recognize "religions" as doctrinal, spiritual, and ethical systems with a social organization, but only if they got rid of "superstition," including most of their ritual. It at first left open the list of such religions, which were to be protected by the constitutional clause on religious freedom, but at the same time, it granted official recognition to associations representing Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Daoism. After passionate debates, it decided not to recognize Confucianism as a state religion. Thus, during the first months of the Republic, five religions (Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Buddhism, and Daoism) came to acquire state recognition, a situation that would remain in place for the following century. National associations were set up for each of them in order to define and negotiate the scope of their autonomous organizations. Some new religious movements, such as Zailijiao (Teaching of the Abiding Principle) or Daoyuan (School of the Dao), also gained official status during the 1920s and 1930s and have maintained their existence in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and abroad, but they have been and still are strictly forbidden in mainland China. So, the list of officially registered religions has not changed much in the mainland since it was first designed.⁶

The criteria by which the modern Chinese state decided whether or not to include a religious tradition within its list of recognized religions have mostly remained

hazy, with few explicit guidelines. The Chinese state's attitude has been quite pragmatic: a religion was recognized if it could prove it was "pure" (spiritual and ethical in nature), well organized in national associations, as well as useful (patriotic and contributing to social welfare and progress). At the same time, any public ritual, devotional, or spiritual activity not integrated into these religions was not covered by any official protection. Within the field of Chinese religion, this amounted to dramatically redefining and reducing the extent of legally and intellectually legitimate religious practices, notably by excluding local temple cults. Temple communities have had to reinvent themselves as Buddhist or Daoist to obtain protection, or, more often, they live in a legal limbo, buying tacit tolerance.⁷

THE REINVENTION OF CHINESE RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

The Chinese approach to the way religion is defined and regulated in the public realm has undergone a sea of change in the twentieth century. Whereas for centuries, religious specialists, groups, and practices had to conform to certain standards of orthodoxy, they now had to conform to a category of the "good" religion, the paradigm of which was imposed from the West and modeled on Protestant Christianity: an organization of individual converts/believers, separate from other social institutions, based on scriptures, theology, and ethics, and geared toward action in this world (charity, education, publications, proselytizing). Of course, a number of Chinese chose to be modern by just converting to Christianity. But if such converts were very influential in some quarters of society (professionals, intellectuals, entrepreneurs), they never became a majority in any part of the Chinese world.

More than the number of converts and the direct action of the Christian elite, the greatest impact of Christianity in modern China has been through its normative models, in their various Catholic and Protestant versions, of what a religion should be, which were adopted by the intelligentsia, the state, and even the leaders of other religions. Not only was Christianity the model for "religion" that informed the Republican state's policies, but this model forced activists of other religions to rethink their religious engagement and how they should live, think, and act as "Buddhists," "Confucians," "Daoists," and so on. The social engagement of Christians in famine relief (as early as the 1870s) and public health (notably through the building of hospitals) pushed many members of local elites to take part in charity as Buddhists or as Confucians, in both imitation and contradistinction to Christian initiatives (see chapter 8). The Red Cross was widely seen as a model of religious engagement, and was widely imitated within both Buddhism and new religions: China's largest charity, the Red Swastika Society, was founded in 1922 by a large new religious movement, the Daoyuan. Missionary dynamism, involvement with modern media (notably the confessional press), and so on were also practices that reformist Buddhists, Daoists, and Muslims undertook enthusiastically. The native reformists also heeded Christian calls to distance themselves from

“superstition” and local cults (with which they had closely allied for centuries), and to advocate education, science, and social services.

Probably the largest and most successful reformist movement along this model was the Buddhist revival around Taixu (1890–1947). Taixu became a self-described “revolutionary monk” around 1908 after reading works by political thinkers, and he decided to save Chinese society through social reform and Buddhism. He developed plans to radically reform the Buddhist clergy through a complete overhaul of clerical training and management of monastic property, and a reorientation away from ritual and toward social service and teaching. Until his death in 1947, Taixu established countless associations, institutes, and seminars, currying favor with Nationalist politicians, traveling all over China and the world, and publishing books and tracts outlining ambitious ideas for reform. His vision of reformed Buddhism, which he called “this-worldly Buddhism,” was influential, and he is now claimed as foundational by the leaders of all the major Buddhist organizations in the Chinese world.

Another widely influential movement to indigenize Western models of the good “religion” was the creation of hundreds of new religious movements that attempted to synthesize the whole of the Chinese religious heritage into one new, modern whole. Scholars now call these groups “redemptive societies” and identify the largest ones (with apparently tens of millions of members each) as Zailijiao, Daode xueshe (Moral Studies Society), Tongshanshe (Fellowship of Goodness), Wanguo daodehui (Universal Morality Society), Daoyuan, and Yiguandao (Unity Teaching). While all different, they shared a project of combining age-old Confucian ethics, Daoist self-cultivation, and Buddhist spirituality with modern science; they taught classical culture in a modern classroom setup. They published journals and were serious about converting the whole world. Although most of these societies have now declined (Yiguandao, extremely active worldwide, is the major exception), they did play a crucial role in transmitting classical culture in a context that was hostile to most things “traditional.”

MODERN INSTITUTIONS

At the level of institutions, the most important vehicle for the adoption of reformist visions that attempted to create proper religions in China was the national religious association. This particular form of organization, as it appeared in 1912 and developed throughout the rest of the century, indigenized Christian models of clerical training, community organization, confessional identification, and social engagement. In the context in which a religion, to be recognized by the state and protected by law, had to create a national association capable of representing it, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and Islam attempted for the first time to organize themselves into unified national, hierarchical institutions. Such a reinvention was no easy enterprise, not only because it generated internal conflicts and confusion, but even more so because traditionally these religions did not operate as centralized

organizations: clerics operated independently in the service of local cults, temples, and mosques. And with the exception of Islam and some new religions, they did not have a membership of declared adherents.⁸

Many such associations, with varying sizes, degree of representativity, and reformist zeal, appeared as early as 1912. The largest were recognized by the state, which cooperated with them for managing local religious affairs. The corporatist approach of the Nationalist regime (1928–1949, and after 1949 in Taiwan) implied that there should be only one association for each religion, that religionists should settle their differences among them, and that they should offer a unified stand to the outside world. Only after the lifting of the martial law and the adoption of more liberal laws on religious associations in Taiwan in 1987 did the institutional landscape there open up, and myriads of new institutions (notably among Buddhists) appeared and flourished. The Nationalist corporatist approach was continued in the People's Republic of China, which established anew an association for each of the five recognized religions, appointed strongly reformist, antisuperstitious leaders, and gave these associations absolute monopoly over religious institutions and activities. Whereas the religious associations during the Republican period had mostly failed to conduct radical reforms, under the People's Republic, they did go much further in centralizing and unifying practices. For instance, the Protestant association abolished the denominations in the late 1950s. Some people dismiss the five national associations as just extensions of a repressive government, but it is the only venue through which clerics can negotiate with local officials for the right to organize rituals, reclaim confiscated temples, churches, or mosques, and more generally try to increase their space for practicing religion. This has been, since 1978, a long and convoluted process, but one that has delivered tangible results. The five national associations are also engaged in training clerics according to modern seminar-style teaching and a uniform curriculum, trying to replace the traditional master-disciple apprenticeship, even though at grassroots levels, most clerics are still trained in the "traditional" model.

In exchange for such concessions from officials, religious associations have to carry out the religious policies of the government and participate in mobilization campaigns when asked to. They are also supposed to work toward building modern, ethical religions, but their success in this regard has been rather limited. Notably, their influence over laypersons is very limited, as they are seen as purely administrative entities, not endowed with any spiritual authority. As a matter of fact, throughout the twentieth century, the Buddhist and Daoist associations have remained, by and large, clerical associations. Some laypersons have played very important roles (for instance, the late president of the Buddhist Association, Zhao Puchu, 1907–2000), but most practitioners are not even members. The very notion of a unified China-wide Buddhist or Daoist community remained an elusive goal throughout the twentieth century, and the institutional leaders can be excused for being at a loss for ideas on how to conjure that modern dream. Their subsequent failure can be contrasted with the situation of the Muslim community, which, through its

associations, managed as early as the 1930s, and even more so since 1978, to mobilize, notably through its print media, large numbers of militants to stage protests against perceived insults or threats.

Modes of Belonging, and Quantifying Religions in Contemporary China

The whole religious policy and public discourse on religion in modern China is predicated on a concept of religion in which people are considered to either (1) be atheist and without religion or (2) believe and belong to one religion. This, however, does not accurately describe the actual situation. As we have seen, in traditional society, and to this day in most of the rural world, the prime criterion for religious participation is not to believe, but to belong to a community, such as the village temple community, the clan, or a pilgrimage association. The notion of belief did and does exist but was conceived as a bond between a human and a god or ancestor rather than an exclusive faith. The communist authorities on the mainland have long encouraged citizens to declare themselves as atheists, so they usually do so when asked, even though they may well go to temples, pray, and so on. Some have even claimed to “believe in superstition,” since superstition is the name the government gives to what they do, such as call a geomancer to choose the place of their grave or to ask spirit mediums to find out whether their illness is due to a malevolent ghost.

The modes of belonging have strongly diverged between city and countryside in the course of the twentieth century. In the villages, it remains a dominant mode to belong first and foremost to ascriptive communities (territory, clan, etc.), and one major aspect of village life, closely linked to growing prosperity since the 1980s, has been to rebuild or lavishly enlarge the communal temples. Even people who have recently migrated to urban centers still maintain and treasure this bond; for instance, in Taiwan, many urbanites go back for major festivals to the village where their family used to live (see chapter 2). By contrast, people who have lived in cities for a longer period tend either to have no communal religious practice (they may nonetheless go to temples individually to pray if the need arises) and to engage in very individual forms of spirituality, as described in chapter 1, or to join globally oriented communities, such as new Christian or Buddhist movements. It should be stressed that these two different developments do not stand in contrast to each other: both the numbers of local temples built or rebuilt and the numbers of converts to Buddhism and Christianity rise rapidly at the same time.

In such a context, no Chinese polity has reliable official figures on religious affiliation, even though social surveys in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore do provide rather detailed pictures of the situation there. One reason for the paucity of statistics is that most people would not claim affiliation with an officially identified religion; although social surveys try to use categories like *popular religion*, *ancestor worship*, or *Daoism* in ways that overlap and intersect, such categories are often not

understood by people in the same way as those who draft, publish, and analyze the surveys. Religious institutions themselves most often cannot provide useful figures; confessional associations are usually limited to a membership of clerics and a core of activists. Furthermore, large numbers of believers or practitioners are members of illegal groups. A third reason is that figures, especially in the PRC, are devised and published for political goals. Figures released during the 1980s suggested that about 100 million Chinese were religious, thus accounting for a small proportion (less than 10%) of the population. With new policies since the early 2000s that very cautiously grant religions a larger role in building China's new "harmonious society," new figures, produced by social scientists, and published with the blessing of the government in February 2007, suggest that the figure is more like 30% of the population.⁹ For all these reasons, charts giving numbers of religious adherents are highly unreliable and furthermore difficult to compare from one country to the next, as they use different categories. Data provided in table 10.1 gives an idea of the figures that scholars, politicians, and religious leaders use and debate, rather than an accurate counting.

In spite of the very unreliable nature of the figures, it is quite obvious that the number of people claiming a specific confessional affiliation is rising, notably among Buddhists and Christians. Although the number of Christians has not continued to grow since the 1980s in Hong Kong and Taiwan, in Singapore, it grew at a rate comparable to that of Buddhism: from 11% to 16.5% between 1980 and 2000, although the growth slowed in the '90s. In North America, after Christianity had been virtually shut out of the Chinese community for a century, conversions to Christianity, typically of the evangelical variety, rapidly increased from the 1960s, so that, by the end of the 1990s, Christianity was the main declared religion (one-third of Chinese Americans, compared with one-fifth who identified as Buddhists, and half claiming no religious identification).¹⁰

TABLE 10.1 Religious Adherents, as Percentage of the Population

	Mainland China	Taiwan (2005)	Hong Kong	Singapore (2000)
Buddhism		35%	13%	42%
Christianity	2–5%	4%	7%	15%
Catholicism	1%	1%	3%	
Protestantism	1–4%	3%	4%	
Islam	2%	<1%	1%	14% (mostly ethnic Malays)
Daoism and local cults		33%		9%
Yiguandao		4%		

Sources: PRC: author's estimate of the numbers of Christians and Muslims based on the current literature (counting Buddhists or Daoists or other groups just does not make sense in the current PRC context); Pang, Choong Chee. "Religious Composition of the Chinese in Singapore: Some Comments on the Census 2000." In Suryadinata, Leo, ed. *Ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia: A Dialogue Between Tradition and Modernity*. Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2002, pp. 325–336; Ng, Peter Tze Ming. "The Changing Market Shares of Christianity and Buddhism since the Return of Hong Kong's Sovereignty to China." *Quest* 3(1), 2004, pp. 109–124; <http://www.gio.gov.tw/taiwan-website/5-gp/yearbook/2002/chpt25.htm> (accessed May 23, 2009).

But it was in the mainland that Christianity underwent the most remarkable growth. Although observers in the 1990s described this growth as occurring primarily among older, poorly educated rural residents, and in large part due to the efforts of healing evangelical preachers, it was clear by the late 1990s that Christianity also had a strong appeal among educated urbanites. For large sections of the urban population, Christianity has a positive image as a world religion intimately linked with success in this world, moral values, and science. Building on this receptivity, Christian groups and networks are growing, and younger, well-educated believers account for an increasing proportion of new converts. The growth of Christianity in the cities was largely extra-institutional: while official churches were simply unable to respond to demand, McDonald's restaurants became as likely a place to conduct Bible study sessions as private apartments (see chapter 12).

The growth of Buddhism, which has been even stronger in many parts of the Chinese world, has fed on some of the same reasons. With globalized, missionary Buddhist movements—most notably the Tzu Chi (*Ciji*) Foundation, Foguangshan and Fagushan—based in Taiwan now reaching out through universities, language programs, and charity on five continents, it has become common for upwardly mobile persons to claim a Buddhist identity as part of both a bond to traditional Chinese culture and values and an attachment to modern progressive values such as care for the environment (see chapters 6, 7, and 8).

In brief, then, a century ago, the dominant religious institutions were local communities building and managing temples. Successive modern regimes have tried to disqualify if not suppress such communities, and reclassify people as either nonreligious or as belonging to one of the world religions institutionalized within China as a national association (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism). Such top-down efforts to reorganize religious institutions and people's modes of religious belongings have had limited effect, however. Although a growing number of Chinese people identify themselves with one of these world religions, local religious communities have also resisted, adapted, and are thriving anew. Therefore, the religious field in the Chinese world is proving remarkably plural and able to accommodate not only different religions, but also different types of religious institutions and modes of belonging.

Notes

1. On Buddhists, see Holmes Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967); on Daoists, see Vincent Goossaert, *The Taoists of Peking, 1800–1949: A Social History of Urban Clerics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007).

2. Dru C. Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1996).

3. Daniel H. Bays, ed., *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 40–52.

4. Timothy Tseng, "Chinese Protestant Nationalism in the United States, 1880–1927," in *New Spiritual Homes: Religion and Asian Americans*, ed. David K. Yoo (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 19–51; quotation on 20.
5. Vincent Goossaert, "1898: The Beginning of the End for Chinese Religion?" *Journal of Asian Studies* 65, no. 2 (2006): 307–336. On the ideological side, see Myron L. Cohen, "Being Chinese: The Peripheralization of Traditional Identity," in *Kinship, Contract, Community, and State. Anthropological Perspectives on China*, ed. Myron L. Cohen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005), 39–59. Anthropologist Cohen provides an analysis of how modernist inventions of the categories of *religion* and *culture* have stripped religious elements of Chinese identity as formulated by ideologues of Chinese nationalism.
6. A good general presentation of the situation of the five institutional religions in the PRC by the early twenty-first century, along with more articles, is found in Daniel Overmyer, ed., "Religion in China Today," special issue, *China Quarterly* 174 (2003).
7. Rebecca Allyn Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009).
8. Vincent Goossaert, "Republican Church Engineering. The National Religious Associations in 1912 China," in *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, ed. Mayfair Yang (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 209–232.
9. Wu Jiao, "Religious Believers Thrice the Estimate," *China Daily*, http://www.china-daily.com.cn/china/2007-02/07/content_802994.htm (accessed May 23, 2009). See also Paul Badham and Xinzhong Yao, *Religious Experiencing in China Today* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007).
10. Fenggang Yang, "Religious Diversity among the Chinese in America," in *Religions in Asian America: Building Faith Communities*, ed. Pyong Gap Min and Jung Ha Kim (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Alta Mira Press, 2002), 71–98.