

Chronicles of China's Spiritual Revival

ROBERT P. WELLER

Until about a decade ago, much of the countryside east of the booming city of Suzhou was dominated by agricultural villages laid out along the canals that crisscross the Yangzi delta area on China's eastern coast. Nearly all the villages had rebuilt their temples in the 1980s or 1990s, after the destruction of the Mao era. Sometimes they were torn down again, but people always rebuilt almost immediately under the guidance of spirit mediums and other local religious leaders.

In the early 2000s, however, urban planners decided that the entire region should become a modern and progressive new city. In practice, this meant that bulldozers flattened every village, every temple, and every ancestor's grave. All were soon buried under asphalt and concrete. The former villagers now live fully urban lives in new apartment complexes, not far from where their families had farmed and fished for generations, yet totally separated from the village ties that used to shape their lives. Such stories have been repeated, more or less, across the entire country.

Less typically for China, though, the local government in this case decided to help build two large Daoist temples to house handsome new images of all the village deities whose temples had been destroyed. They also offer space where ex-villagers can store paraphernalia for dragon dances or hold rituals for their gods. Village life can continue in the temples, in a sense, even though the villages no longer exist.

The Daoists are proud of the way they have standardized the look and size of all those deities, and the way they are neatly lined up. Many of the spirit mediums are just as proud of less formal altars they have been able to place in the nooks and crannies of one of the temples, subverting the Daoists' and urban planners' attempt at standard-

ization. Their messy little altars can be found in underground back rooms, in broom closets, and in storage spaces under staircases.

Many of the spirit mediums seem quite happy about all this. There may have been some chaos at first, they reported, because the gods' homes had been destroyed, and so they had less control over the dangerous *yin* forces.

Things had settled down after a few years, though, and almost everyone reports that more people are burning incense than before, and more people are becoming spirit mediums

as well. This makes the gods more powerful and more satisfied, and therefore more willing to help people, who burn ever more incense in a virtuous circle of request and response.

What is going on here? Why would an actively atheist state be building temples for people (and for that matter a large Protestant church, as part of the same project)? Why, in a country where surveys indicate very low levels of belief in formal religion and where the state had so thoroughly destroyed religious infrastructure, do we see such a rapid revival? And why, in contrast to what studies of the sociology of cities might lead us to expect, is this very local kind of religion thriving under rapid urbanization?

On a much broader scale, these are the key questions that concern Ian Johnson in *The Souls of China*. His latest book examines a broad range of religious growth as it is occurring across China right now. He focuses on its most puzzling aspects: the relationship to the state (which is much more nuanced than most scholars recognize), the reasons for the growth (which he ties to problems of moral life), and how religion relates to China's very rapid urbanization.

Johnson is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist with an impressive portfolio of writing for *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New Yorker*, and other leading publications. He occasionally also writes in a more academic mode,

**The Souls of China:
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where he has earned the respect of many of us who work on similar topics. *The Souls of China* is written like top-flight journalism—it is driven by the stories of real people, and the analysis flows out of their lives. At the same time, a reader who knows the literature (and who reads the endnotes) will see just how thoroughly grounded Johnson is in the broader range of scholarship.

NETWORKS OF FAITH

The book tells all kinds of stories, ranging from the dusty countryside of the northwest to the booming cities of the east, and from meditation masters to charismatic preachers. Most are granted only a single chapter, but there are three religious networks we come to know more intimately because we revisit them throughout the book. One is a pilgrimage society in Beijing, dedicated to the worship of a deity at a celebrated temple in the hills nearby. The second is a family of “*yinyang men*” (Daoists, in a loose sense) in rural Shanxi. The third case is the network of people around Wang Yi, pastor of Chengdu’s Early Rain Reformed Church, one of the most famous independent congregations in the country.

All too often, it’s assumed that the Chinese state is an enemy of religion. Johnson is too honest a reporter to accept such a simplification. He points us instead to the complications and ironies that pervade state/religion relations in China. Even Early Rain—whose fame comes from its refusal to accept state-sponsored Protestantism and from Wang Yi’s past as a human rights lawyer—has a surprisingly open relationship with the local authorities. There is no attempt, for instance, to hide the names of congregation members from the security apparatus.

The book also includes a revealing chapter on how President Xi Jinping became involved in the revival of a Buddhist temple early in his career. For the most part, however, Johnson stays away from cases where the state continues to have a policy of active religious repression and control, most obviously for Buddhism in Tibet and especially for Islam in the far northwest. With the exception of the one chapter on Xi, he also tends to have little interest in the many religious groups that are thriving in a cozy relationship with the state, including the official Protestant churches and many large Buddhist temples.

Overall, the book offers a good selection of a broad range of religious currents, and very few writers can cover both Christianity and folk practices as well as Johnson. On the other hand, it would have been nice to hear more about Islam, and even Buddhism receives less attention than one might expect.

FILLING A VACUUM?

Johnson shows convincingly that all the statistics we have on religious growth in China are almost useless. This is because they are based on a category of “religion” that fits poorly with people’s own understandings, leading to questionnaire responses of little utility; this problem is compounded by official estimates that are sometimes misleading and sometimes complete inventions. Nevertheless, no one examining the situation has any doubt that the growth is rapid, and covers a wide range of diverse religious forms.

Part of the explanation is obvious: the state is no longer crushing all externally visible forms of religion the way it did until the late 1970s. That helps us understand why religion *could* grow, but not why it *did* grow. For that, Johnson turns primarily to religion’s ability to offer a moral compass in a world where the end of the old Maoist vision and the rise of a culture of putting profits above all else have combined to create a widespread feeling of living in a moral vacuum.

One hears this explanation constantly from people in China, and it surely must be an important part of the story. It does run the risk, however, of reducing religion simply to moral codes, when in fact the embodied, ritualized, or transcendent experiences of religion can be just as vital. Nor does the need for morality help us understand why people might choose one religion over another.

Still, Johnson’s focus on morality reveals something important about the Chinese state, particularly in its current incarnation under Xi Jinping. “Belief” has suddenly become a slogan, plastered on walls all over the country along with other hortatory phrases. This means belief in the Communist Party, of course, but the vagueness of the slogan tells us that the state is also thinking that any sort of belief is better than no belief.

In that sense, the slogan fits easily with the anticorruption campaigns of the past few years: the answer to corrupt greed is moral guidance. The

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result is that we see ironies everywhere in looking at how the state relates to religion, from the Morality Halls that the Propaganda Department has opened in some cities, whose Sunday events emulate Protestant services (complete with songs and sermons), to the way that spirit mediums suddenly find new room to operate because they have become exemplars of “traditional culture” instead of “feudal superstition.” Johnson excels at showing us these complexities.

Finally, he shows us how all religion is struggling to adjust to the country’s extremely rapid urbanization. The *yinyang* men in Shanxi are experimenting with potential new markets (including global tours of their music), while their clients are looking for less elaborate rituals. The number of pilgrimage societies in Beijing is increasing rapidly, but they are also dealing with the loss of their old village and neighborhood bases. In general, Johnson quite properly leaves these stories very much up in the air. Neither the religious followers nor any of us observers have a good idea about how it will all turn out.

Only for Protestant Christianity does Johnson seem to see a clearer path, one that leads from

an earlier, rural, relatively uneducated, more charismatic and Pentecostal-style Christianity to a new urban, more educated, more rationalized and liberal set of beliefs. The story may not be so simple, though. There are thriving urban congregations in China where speaking in tongues is a regular occurrence, and it is worth remembering that the global Pentecostal movement (probably still the most rapidly expanding variant of Christianity) was a completely urban phenomenon from the beginning. Early Rain certainly represents one important strain of Christianity in China, but it is far from the only one that appears to be thriving.

In any case, such predictions are not at the heart of what Johnson aims to accomplish in this book. Instead, he wants to show us how people are living the religious revival, and thus reveal to us a world that is very little known outside of China. Johnson’s stories are captivating, and scholars of Chinese religion will gain as much as ordinary readers from his ability to cover a wider range of material in greater depth than almost anything else written about the contemporary situation. ■