



The Immanent Frame

Secularism, religion, and the public sphere

The state of religion in China:

Chinese religions in comparative historical perspective

posted by [Prasenjit Duara](#)

This short essay draws up the principal ideas from a chapter in my forthcoming book concerning the historical *field* of Chinese religions in comparative context in order to identify its distinctive problems and possible pathways. In order to distinguish religions in the Sinosphere from other state-religion relationships in the *longue durée*, we need to identify how the state and religions have managed the question of transcendence. Scholars working with the Axial Age theories of religion have often expressed confusion or hesitation with regard to Chinese notions of transcendence. I argue that Chinese religions have transcendent dimensions often missed by analysts because they operate with an Abrahamic notion of radical transcendence and dualism rather than what I call “dialogical transcendence.”



Transcendent authority, embodied most frequently in the ideal of Heaven (*tian*), in the Sinosphere was fundamentally autonomous from imperial power and has authorized religiously based rebellion for millennia. However, state power has developed many powerful means to control this autonomous realm. A quotation from a minister explicating cosmology to the king of Chu is recorded in the fourth-century BC text *Guoyu* (as translated by K.C. Chang):

Anciently, men and spirits did not mingle...(there were special men and women called xi and wu) who supervised the position of the spirits at the ceremonies, sacrificed to them, and otherwise handled religious matters...(But later) Men and spirits became intermingled, with each household indiscriminately performing for itself the religious observances which had hitherto been conducted by the shamans. As a consequence, men lost their reverence for the spirits, the spirits violated the rules of men, and natural calamities arose. Hence the successor of Shaohao, Quanzu, charged Chong, Governor of the South, to handle the affairs of heaven in order to determine the proper places of the spirits, and Li, Governor of Fire, to handle the affairs of the Earth in order to determine the proper places of men. And such is what is meant by cutting the communication between Heaven and Earth.

K. C. Chang [notes that](#) this myth is the most significant reference to shamanism and its central role in ancient Chinese politics. He argues that the king himself was the most important shaman and that he and his priests sought to monopolize access to the sacred authority of Heaven. In other words, the emperor, aided by his ritual specialists, claimed a monopoly on communication with the sacred powers vis-à-vis not only other clergy but the people as well.

Thus there was a kind of vertical division between state and people in relation to transcendence. This relationship to transcendent authority was very different from that of other so-called Axial Age civilizations which often integrated states and believers vertically through the clergy.

Although there were several episodes of what Max Weber called Caesaropapism in Eurasia, in the Abrahamic and Indic traditions, the realm of the transcendent was controlled by the religious clergy, whether Brahmins, priests, or the ulama. In China, however, this intermediate realm was weakened by the powerful role of the imperial state. Indeed, in a classic Caesaropapist move, the first emperor, Qin Shi Huang (ruled 221-210 BC) defied the Mandate of Heaven and proposed to set up his own dynasty and moral order for all eternity. Nonetheless, by the beginning of the succeeding Han dynasty, ritualists of various faiths and Confucians in particular succeeded in re-establishing their interpretive control of the omens of Heaven. According to one view, the history of authority in China reflects the contest between the imperial institution and Confucians to exercise interpretive control over the will of Heaven. In his studies of Ming-Qing neo-Confucianist thought, Huang Chin-shing argues that Confucians had lost out to the emperor by beginning of the Qing dynasty in the seventeenth century.

There were several reasons for the growing power of the imperial state over the Confucians. First, as is well known, the Confucian bureaucracy ultimately served under the authority of the emperor. . But while bureaucratic power might in theory have been able to displace that of the emperor—as it did in other places—the patronage mechanisms of the imperial court played a powerful role in its management. Second, as Anthony Yu has pointed out, the Chinese emperor's power was reinforced by the cult of the ancestor—what we now call lineage ideology—which he had helped to cultivate. Thus, in the cosmic realm of the relations between Heaven and Earth, the emperor derived his sovereign power from Heaven; in the realm of human relations, however, he derived it from a non-transcendent but no less powerful cult of the imperial ancestor, who was also endowed with sacral potency.

Indeed, during the Han dynasty, Confucius was “made” into a lineal descendant of the Shang dynasty. Thus he was converted into an imperial ancestor, which gave the emperor the privilege of ancestral access to his worship and transformed him into the paragon of filial virtue, a crucial Confucian value. Third, by patronizing different religions and ritualists, the imperial court fostered rivalries among the Confucians, Daoists, and Buddhists. The threats posed in particular by the Buddhists—with their challenge to familism and filial piety—to the cosmology of Heaven and ancestral worship drove the Confucians further into the arms of the ancestral cult and the imperial court.

At the same time, the imperial court was able to control institutionalized Buddhism and Daoism through a policy of licensing and regulations that limited their activities in popular society. By the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), an orthodoxy had thus been built around the imperial state, which included the lineage ideology, a state-oriented literati, and an elaborate state cult. But if the institutions of official religion and Confucianism were controlled relatively successfully by the imperial state, its reach into popular society was much more limited and intermittent.

The vertical division that I am suggesting between orthodoxy and popular society was by no means clear cut. Rather, the durability and capaciousness of the Chinese imperial system derived precisely from the fact that this frontier was ideologically polyvalent. I have discussed this interface as a translucent canopy

in which the forms and shapes, but not the details, of popular activities could be made out. Thus, in addition to disguising alternative approaches to transcendent power among the populace, it provided opportunities for elites to participate in popular activities as long as they also participated at least nominally in orthodox activities such as the state cult or the lineage order.

Periodically, both the state and the elite conducted campaigns to sweep out popular religions that were not state-oriented or part of the official state-cult, such as those led by official Chen Hongmou in the eighteenth century. But these campaigns tended to drive many of the ideas and practices related to alternative conceptions and popular access to Heaven still deeper into popular culture, where they mingled and often camouflaged themselves in the thicket of popular religiosity. There, it was difficult to execute the policy that the minister of the state of Chu had counseled: “to cut the communications between Heaven and Earth” so as to prevent “each household from indiscriminately performing for itself the religious observances.”

Behind the translucent canopy, popular religiosity turned out to be a vibrant field of communication and negotiation, accommodation and adaptation, camouflage and resistance between state orthodoxy and the popular cultural nexus. This was possible in part because different groups of elites also participated in several different spheres of religious and community activities, thus giving popular culture considerable cover. In an [earlier study of the Guandi cult](#), I tried to show how the imperial state sought to appropriate the popular and apotheosized hero of the Three Kingdoms era (220-280) as an orthodox figure elevated to the status of the highest of gods and represented as carrying the classics in one hand, even as popular lore told martial stories of his bandit-like exploits and vows of brotherhood and loyalty. The figure and myth of Guandi was superscribed by various groups and communities at all levels of society, drawing on older and contemporary versions, but each marked by a distinctive interpretation that served its own charter. At the same time, the imperial version of the Guandi myth was acknowledged and mobilized for other purposes. Villagers in North China would duly worship him on his imperially sanctioned birthday, but also on his locally celebrated birthday. As such, the myth of Guandi, in its malleability, not only preserved diversity within a capacious culture, but also served as a medium of communication and negotiation among different groups.

Buddhist and Buddhistic sectarian groups often utilized the tropes of popular culture to accommodate orthodoxy and to negotiate the salvationist aspects of the religion that were sometimes viewed as heterodox. In particular, renunciation was regarded as anti-filial. The popular story of Mu Lian, which instructs that children who have taken the vow of celibacy nonetheless perform the greatest and most valorous deeds of filial piety, rescuing their immoral parents from evil forces, represents this kind of accommodation. Indeed, Guandi was first deified by the Buddhists as a Chinese protector of Buddhism.

At the same time, the canopy enabled many popular groups to pursue their religious ideals by invoking Heaven and other, especially Buddhist, sources of transcendence. Even orthodox religious groups in popular society could and did invoke the gap between transcendent ideals and the present order. They were, as David Ownby [has put it](#), “both *against* and *from within* the mainstream.” For example, some of them condemned the Buddhist church “for having abandoned its own mission of self-abnegation and transcendence.” Ownby’s [study of the apocalyptic Way of the Temple of the Heavenly Immortals](#) exemplifies how these societies mediated deeply orthodox or “fundamental” values from Confucianism or Daoism with popular cultural traditions to

reconstruct community according to traditional, even utopian prescriptions. These societies call on the ideals of transcendent authority to change the established order; they thus recall the characteristic propulsion of Axial civilization to reorient society toward a transcendent ideal as opposed to worldly power.

Many of the popular religious—or, as I have named them, redemptive—societies entered the modern public sphere during the chaotic early years of the Republic (1911-1949), when state power was relatively weak. They modernized, established charitable wings and sought to work with the state as long as they were given the space to fulfill their spiritual obligations in relative peace. In other words, their conception of transcendence made it possible for them to attain salvation through this-worldly activity. However, neither the Nationalist nor the later Communist state had a place for them.

The opposition between imperial orthodoxy and sectarian and redemptive societies over the course of Chinese history developed a certain cultural logic: Orthodoxy and the state repeatedly make the claim that this kind of popular religion represents a cover for politics. At its core, however, is the question of access to transcendent power. The cosmology of religious believers tends to empower those inspired by transcendent authority, but that empowerment is not necessarily political. It is the state that, by banning religious groups, effectively politicizes them.

Despite its hostility, the imperial state had to tolerate a great many of these societies as long as they superficially acknowledged the orthodox order and as long as a fair segment of the elites were involved in them. The modern, nationalist and homogenizing states of the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were much less tolerant of these groups and banned them. The imperial logic that they inherited was reinforced by the certitude of scientism as the condition for nation-building and national competitiveness. The KMT regime (1927-1949) classified them as superstitious cults and launched attacks on them. During the 1930s, they relented somewhat, separating the charitable functions from the religious ones and legalizing the former. But particularly after the Japanese invasion of China, they were unable to enforce the proscription of religious activities. The CCP regime, on the other hand, pursued a brutal campaign of elimination throughout the 1950s. Although the cultural liberalization of the 1990s witnessed a cautious re-emergence of religious groups, they continue to be stamped out with considerable ferocity.

Turning to the history of modern secularization in China, for most Sinologists, the conception has a distinct air of irrelevance. In Europe, secularism developed to contain the religious warfare among Protestants, Catholics, and other confessional communities, which were particularly susceptible to politicization partly because of the kind of the vertically integrated, proto-national formations that I have identified. The institution of secularism was designed to contain this competition by bringing religions under an enlarged state order and giving them limited protection from their enemies and, gradually, from the state itself. Thus religion became privatized or otherwise subordinated in the modern nation-state.

The Chinese historical situation was such that it did not develop an environment in which confessional faiths could openly thrive—except perhaps for the brief but massive Taiping Christian movement in the mid-nineteenth century—thus limiting their ability to mobilize the population. Yet despite the absence of a historical legacy of faith-based communities, the Republican state in early twentieth-century China quickly adopted the Western concept of secularism.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, when it adopted this conception, the state suddenly found itself required to develop church-like organizations in order to deal with a legitimate religious counterpart. In his study of national religious associations in the early Republic, Vincent Gossaert [has demonstrated](#) that the state actually sought to create or foster church-like institutions, thus calling into existence national-level Buddhist and Daoist organizations. It came to understand that the modern state could secure the advantages of the secular system only by mobilizing such organizations and resources within a new framework of state regulation. This was not a successful strategy, in part because the licensed forms of institutional Buddhism and Daoism did not as such command their flocks. The sources of religious loyalty among ordinary folk continued to lie elsewhere.

At the same time, the Republican successor to the imperial state in China was able to refigure the problem of religiosity in a novel way. Since the bulk of popular religiosity was neither organized into faith-based religions nor in institutionalized churches, it was easy for the state simply to deny their status as religions. Popular religions, including sectarian and redemptive societies, were variously classified as superstitious or heterodox. They were not only denied the limited protection that a secular state was obliged to furnish but, throughout the twentieth century, were proscribed and severely attacked. In many ways, the secular state was much less tolerant of popular religiosity than the imperial orthodoxy had been.

Although at considerable cost, the modern Chinese state in the Han heartland has avoided the communalization and politicization of religion that has elsewhere taken place through the global spread of identity politics. The latter is an intertwined process of the nationalization of religion and the sacralization of the nation. Neither India nor Japan has escaped this fate. Both Hindutva and State Shinto represent at once the confessionalization of religion and their transmutation into ethnic or national regimes of authenticity. Yet the Chinese state has still to tackle the transcendent aspirations of those of its people who are seeking out a faith-based religion, be it Christianity, Buddhism, or one of the various redemptive traditions of dialogical transcendence. Examples such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, among others, show that when the state does not deny religions their right to express their aspiration to transcendence, religious organizations tend to remain happily non-political. At this point the burden of undoing this imprisoning logic lies on the shoulders of the People's Republic of China.

[In conjunction with this series of essays on [the state of religion in China](#), we have published a companion piece on the history of religion in China, written by The Immanent Frame's Wei Zhu. Read [What is religion in China? A brief history.](#)—eds.]

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