

Mayfair Yang argues that grassroots-initiated organisations represent an “indigenous and religious civil society”. Do you agree with this assessment?

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In this brief excursion we will look at the proposition that Mayfair Yang argues that grassroots-initiated organisations represent an “indigenous and religious civil society”, and I will seek to express whether this is an agreeable assessment or not and why.

I will draw on related content from field work by Chen and Yang, assertions, and explanations by Palmer, Laliberté, Clart, Giddens, Lagerwey, Goosseart and Ling, and we will include some personal observations related to these points. Within this content we will examine how the social, political, and cultural context brings weight to Mayfair Yang’s argument [or not]. That is to say, we will acknowledge when we are discussing the operation of religious and civil society, what constitutes “grassroots-initiated” organisations, their context, any trends, or impacts to their functions and more generally, relate definitions of and findings about what we can call the grassroots-initiated idea/ideal, to, mostly appositionally, what is recognised as the five State authorised/accepted/tolerated religions of China. [These being Islam, Christianity {Protestantism and Catholicism}, Buddhism and Daoism.]

My primary intention here is to show that, from what I understand, it is indeed almost impossible to discuss the presence and population of grassroots-initiated religious organisations without discussing what is, at its heart, ownership of a more officially sanctioned, ‘higher’ operating religious society, regardless of ignorance of officialdom from the laity or interference in civil preference by the state and legislation regarding the world of religiosity. I aim to show that in doing this, Mayfair Yang’s argument holds true. I will attempt to do this by examining definitions, exploring timelines, excavating case studies, plotting state interaction with religion, and exploring locations of practice. Through very brief excursions into these areas, I hope to show that Mayfair Yang’s argument that grassroots-initiated organisations represent an indigenous and religious civil society is an accurate reflection of the situation in China.

[DEFINITIONS]

With such an incredibly wide-ranging topic I wish to set a few parameters to dial into the areas we are focusing on. In the context of this observation and discussion we can assume that ‘grassroots’ constitutes anything that is not specifically state-sanctioned or legislated for [before or after the fact or from within any dynastic preference]. I also wish to focus and clarify on inclusion of areas both of temporal world and spiritual world; that is to say, any believed or tangible presence or action that would be an actor in the religious habits of the laity or expectation from state that has pre-ordained purpose but is more likely to be an outcome resulting from a less tangible ripple effect, be that in the immediate physical or spiritual environment of the actor.

Giddens summarises this in far more clarity than I could. The reach of included actions that might be products of an individual’s engagement with religiosity could be presented: *“all reproduction is necessarily production . . . and the seed of change is there in every act which contributes toward the reproduction of any ‘ordered’ form of social life”* (1976: 102).¹ This ‘social life’ is how we will define what constitutes a function or action of religiosity from civil society. Yang also states, helpfully, *“Attention to agency recognizes that human actors do not always carry out the injunctions and regulations of power orders; rather, they calibrate and calculate their behavior according to shifting historical conditions or contingent situations.”*²

¹ Giddens, A. *New Rules of Sociological Method*. Hutchinson, London, 1976, Pg 102

² Yang, Mayfair. “8 Of Mothers, Goddesses, and Bodhisattvas: Patriarchal Structures and Women’s Religious Agency”. *Re-enchanting Modernity: Ritual Economy and Society in Wenzhou, China*, New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2020, pp. 224-256.

Examining Mayfair Yang’s ‘Of Mother’s’³ Chapter 8, We may wish to excavate a little around how the ‘grassroots’ element of their argument is contextualised. Yang explains the lens: *“Thus, it would seem that in the late Qing, Wenzhou women’s religious piety offered a **counter mechanism and relief** from the Confucianized kinship system.”*⁴ Is this illustrative of where grassroots movements were originally generated or more an illustrative viewpoint of how they have always been operating – if we substitute Confucianized for any of the trends, dynasties or reformers, does this actually change how grassroots come about [notwithstanding the examples’ focus on the female engagement]? - are they always generated as a counterbalance to overtly oppressive [Neo]-Confucian social value systems or are they simply always referred to in counterbalance to the regime of the day, whatever they colour of that regime because it is that regime that provides the lens through which we view society. My point is that whichever lens, of whichever colour we view or define grassroots by we are still defining grassroots, for they are by their nature, evergreen. Regimes and trends are not. Therefore, grassroots, and indigenous are the owners of the people’s preference by default, not by sanction. That ownership drives the culture at that level. We will see a little later how the State drives and finances, to the layman, the same culture but at a much higher and more easily controlled level.

My more concise definition is this; anything unorthodox, stemming from self-generated habitus and influencing immediate environment – not to exclude the ripple to widest possible social environment but those ramifications are far too vast to examine and define here, can be deemed grassroots.

We can draw a parallel between Mayfair Yang’s excavation of Civil [Women’s] agency above and the activation of grassroots activity promoting religiosity.

*“Given the **ubiquity** of women’s religious participation today, this chapter tackles the question of how to conceive of rural Wenzhou women’s religious agency.”* [226]⁵

In addition, and for balance, we might look to a Westerners’ definition of what religiosity on the ground in China is understood as. We can take John Lagerwey⁶ as a starting point.

“It is a machine for the production of gods who demonstrate their existence and their power by taking possession of people; in exchange for their blessings, they then require of the people, their bloody sacrifice. . . . [The gods] “attach themselves to the body” [fushen,] of men and women, through whom they then speak. . . . This religion . . . has . . . its own officiants, gods, temples, faithful, and rituals—is that not enough to qualify as a religion? . . . I believe [popular religion] to be the bedrock of all Chinese religion, that on which the others build and over against which they define themselves. It is essentially autonomous; it is also by definition local. Possession and bloody sacrifice being its two basic features, it is to them that China’s “higher religions” had to react.” (Lagerwey 1999: 167–168)⁷

While I would also personally question the tone-setting of this assessment [Yang calls it out as ‘provocative’] we can see from this highly respected Sinologist that the principal acknowledgment of ‘localism’ is clear and helps us, in the West at least, refine the broad church of religiosity down to something more manageable. There are substantial mentions of other elements; animal-sacrifice, possession, class, and social status etc. but these will vary across Chinese geography and time so, for

³ *Ibis*

⁴ *Ibis*

⁵ *Ibis*

⁶ Yang, Mayfair. "3 Popular Religiosity: Patriarchal Structures and Women’s Religious Agency". *Re-enchanting Modernity: Ritual Economy and Society in Wenzhou, China*, New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2020, p52.

⁷ *Ibis*

our purpose, we shall hold to the idea of ‘localism’ as the primary defining factor of civil religiosity but extend this core to anything that may be defined as ‘popular religion’ and falls somewhere on the threshold of the higher religions of China, without committing to them. e.g., actions or actors directed towards localised gods or deities, to whom gifts are left, incense is burned, prayers are emitted and/or scriptures are read and chanted but none of which is recognised by the state as ‘Religion’ in legislation.

In addition to Yang and Lagerwey, Chen’s field study [of which we will learn more later] summarises an ecological definition, a definition of the tendrils of civil-society’s engagement with non-state sponsored religion, concisely

“In my study, this concept [that is, religious ecology] basically does not involve the relationship between religion and nature; instead it mainly covers the relations among religions, the relations between religions and their social environment, relations among believers within religions, relations between religious believers and their social environment, as well as the relations among religious elements within the individual psychological make-up of religious believers, and the relations between religious elements and their individual ideational environment.”⁸

Finally, on this point of definition, Yang records from their own field work:

“I have also noticed a new term creeping into common usage in Wenzhou since about 2012, which can be translated as “belief customs” or “customary beliefs”). Here the term “customs,” reconnects with the late imperial Chinese category of “local customs”, which connotes the local and the routine. A Wenzhou scholar explained to me that this new term gets around the problem of having to acknowledge that local customs are a form of “religion,” which is “still a sensitive issue”) in China. Thus, “customary beliefs” serve to renormalize popular religion as a way of life or peasant culture, by invoking a historical category of Chinese civilization, reversing a century of modern labelling as “superstition.” This new term also tones down the dangerous force that is often associated by officialdom with Émile religion, what Durkheim called “collective effervescence,” the ritual suspension of everyday norms with intense outbreaks of religious passions and wild behavior (Durkheim [1912] 1995: 218–220).”⁹

This is all to say: when we talk of indigenous and religious civil society, we talk of localised customary beliefs that have survived regardless of legislation, trends, colonialism, or importation of organised religion. It might better be described as the “cultural glue that holds society together” [Clart]¹⁰

[WHEN]

Regarding the ‘when’ of our exploration we are in something of a timeless void in relation to any self-generated religiosity, regardless of geography. However, for necessary comparison and contrast we can pin various markers to show how unorthodox religiosity has been a mainstay of civil society, certainly since the beginning of records. These comparisons are, for me, very much based in a contrasting realm of ‘infinite [unorthodox religiosity] and its relationship to more organised state sponsored/sanctioned religious acceptance [recorded time]. Both of which show further separation and contrast of the two modalities of religiosity in China with one clearly more officially documented in time than the other. For me, this helps clarify the point about grassroots generated activity being

⁸ Chen Xiaoyi, *Zhongguoshi zongjiao shengtai: Qingyan zongjiao duoyangxing ge’an yanjiu* (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2008).

⁹ Yang, Mayfair. “3 Popular Religiosity: Patriarchal Structures and Women’s Religious Agency”. *Re-enchanting Modernity: Ritual Economy and Society in Wenzhou, China*, New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2020, p54.

¹⁰ Clart, Richard. *Religious Diversity in Chinese Thought*, Ch13, 1 3 “Religious Ecology” as a New Model for the Study of Religious Diversity in China, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2013, p190

evergreen, and so, indigenous.

Mayfair Yang points to a good example of unorthodoxy during recorded time by highlighting an 9th Century Tang Dynasty inscription found in the many rural temples of Wenzhou District:

“(The Yue people of the Ou River [Wenzhou area] love to worship their gods; in their mountains and along their waterways are many unorthodox deity temples. These temples cast an image of grandeur and resoluteness. Whoever displays strength and decisiveness, people will transform him into a god and call him “General.” When there is a contagious disease, they will make vows to repay the gods if they bring relief. They will make a god out of those rare clairvoyant people, and call him “Lord” something. If there is a matron whom they greatly respect, they will turn her into a goddess with the title of “Grandmother.” If there is a beautiful woman, they will make her a goddess and call her “Lady.”) [Lu Guimeng, “Stele Inscription for a Temple in the Wilds” (Tang dynasty, ninth century)]¹¹

[The position of State religion (counterpoint)]

Having explored and defined what we mean by grassroots and indigenous religious elements and when these elements play, it is worthwhile, for countenance, to have a brief look at their parameters as set out by the opposing state-owned religious actions, if only as a balance to the grassroots customary beliefs. We should look in part to the Modern Chinese state’s position to draw contrast and understand the legal setting and therefore state sanctioned religious acceptance in which civil religiosity floats ever so slightly above the ground and yet completely below the hierarchy.

Looking at the state relationship with religion through André Laliberté’s lens in his Chinese

“The comparison between these policies and cases shows that there are many ways in which a Chinese government can assert its authority over religion, beyond the use of repressive power, but also many ways in which Chinese religious believers relate to the state, other than through dissent.”¹²

We begin by acknowledging that the Chinese Communist Party is the state ruler and ultimate legal controller and policing actor across Chinese civil geography. As an entity the party is necessarily atheist and so the existence of religiosity [of any colour or strand], I feel, can be imagined as a necessary tension to be tolerated and made use of/malleable by the state. It is from this position we will examine and attribute the idea of ownership of religiosity to civil society (as opposed to the state ownership) and from which we can begin to think about deeper acknowledgment of the grassroots emergence of religiosity (as opposed to state sanctioned/repressed) as the genesis of the acting out of customary beliefs.

This is not to say that the state does not try to assert its atheism – e.g., there is indeed legislation passed that dictates where, when, and how the Lamas of Tibet (and other sects) might be reincarnated. Logistically this is a baffling concession from an authority who might wish to be seen to have control in more lives than this one, linearly, but that is only to be questioned if you do indeed believe in other/spiritual life (which most religions do). The concession here is just to acknowledge the authority. I do not imagine militant atheism has any vested concern with lives it does not believe exists. I imagine this is a technocratic point rather than a spiritual concession, however humorous it might appear to those with one foot in the afterlife. This point is just to say that the relationship

¹¹ Yang, Mayfair. “3 Popular Religiosity: Patriarchal Structures and Women’s Religious Agency”. *Re-enchanting Modernity: Ritual Economy and Society in Wenzhou, China*, New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2020, p51.

¹² Laliberté, André, *Contemporary Issues in State-Religion Relations, Chinese Religious Life*, Oxford Scholarship Online, Oxford, 2011

between state and religion is a fluid and complicated dance of control and evasion. As such we can surely only agree with Yang that ownership of religiosity is firmly in the civil society and geography of religiosity is certainly in the local area is firmly in the civil society and geography of religiosity is certainly in the local/indigenous environment.

The heart of this at times benign and at time violent symbiosis of state a religion and laity are that both are two actors playing the same metaphorical part of being in place owing to a ‘mandate from heaven.’ So, essentially both claim divinity and require space from each other to practice or rule, but China’s journey to 21 century requires both are acknowledged by each other. I like to think of them as non-identical twins – unable to profoundly change their position or parentage but still fighting for acceptance of their people, albeit in vastly diverse ways.

In more real terms, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its relationship with religion has been through four phases in the last 100 years, none of which, regardless of support or suppression by the ruling actor, seems to have changed the indigenous response and preference for localised, grassroots religion; evidenced by its persistent survival, resurgence and well, existence.

Those phases, to show the journey of indigenous religiosity’s survival and compliment to state-sanctioned religion can be condensed to the following.

At the beginning of the Chinese Communist Party's history [1921 – 1949]; secularization of republican regimes, Marxist-Leninist principle that religion was a manifestation of an expression unequal social relationship but that there was no need to forcibly persecute or change this in society because the state could not control the conviction of the individual, but removal of the need for religion (communist utopian state) would allow the ‘opiate’ to wither of its own accord as an equal society emerged.

The United Front period [1949 to 1957]; Following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China [PRC] in 1949, a policy of tolerance and fluidity was presented which in essence ‘allowed’ religious activity and belief in private and expressed acceptance of religious behaviour providing there was no damage to the state and that all religiosity was bound up in the respectful progression of the socialist ideal. This tolerance amounted to an outward acceptance of religiosity’s existence and tolerance providing it did not interfere with matters of state.

The “leftist” excesses [1957– 1978]; This was a challenging time for religiosity in China – The Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution saw the state grab most of the momentum, property, privilege, and control from the dominating religions. The famine of the cultural revolution, resulting in over 30million deaths, by default, significantly reduced the practice of localised customary religiosity.

Reform era [1978–now]; The appointment of Deng Xiaoping, following the death of Mao Zhedong brought about the re-instatement of the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB), later renamed as the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA). In 1981, Deng could claim (p.198) that a return to the United Front policy was in line with orthodox Party policy, and he could reassure religious associations that they could safely resume their activities under the CCP guidance.

According to the 1982 Constitution, people were given the right to believe in “normal religion,” but a definition of what is normal was quite unclear and depended on decisions made at the discretion of the state actors. This remains the broad position today. *

*While this is the broad position it is increasingly concerning for normal religions that in the last few years there has been increasingly present state actors agitating members of the religious community. For a quite damning, if Christian bent, reportage on recent detentions, presumed interrogations and

administrative dictation see this article by <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/in-China-xi-jinping-thought-is-the-only-accepted-religion/>¹³

So, it is through this lens of turmoil that we can acknowledge the state’s wrestling to control religion and religiosity and the perpetuity of the grassroots elements of religiosity, in any form, to continue to grow and effect in civil society. By its very existence and the legislative prohibition [the 5 ‘normal’ religions are officially recognised by the CCP] of grassroots religiosity dictates it can only really belong to and be owned by civil society, can it not?

[Religion in contemporary China]

We can deepen the context of our exploration by looking at the wider religious ecology in contemporary China to better understand how customary beliefs survive and thrive in today’s religious and civil landscapes. But first let us define what we mean by religious ecology.

Mou Zhongjian applied Julian Stewart’s idea of cultural ecology to religion in China to bring about his establishment of “religious cultural ecology” which focuses on the symbiosis of the moving parts of Chinese religiosity within the much wider cultural ecology of the nation.

Mou outlines three types of religious ecology in China which are extremely helpful in clarifying what we mean by, and what currently operates as ‘indigenous/grassroots religiosity’:

“The unitary/dominant type (*yi yuan zhudaoxing*), *exemplified by societies with one strongly dominant religion (e.g., India/Hinduism, Pakistan/Islam, Poland/Catholicism, Thailand/Buddhism);*

the plural/contentious type (*duo yuan jin zhangxing*), *exemplified by societies with multiple religions engaged in conflict with each other (e.g., Iraq/Sunni-Shia, Northern Ireland/Protestantism-Catholicism);*

the plural/harmonious type (*duo yuan he xiexing*), *where multiple religions coexist peacefully (e.g., China, Korea, Japan, Singapore).”*¹⁴

Interestingly, for me, Clart states that Mou regards the plural/harmonious religious ecology as a “*uniquely Chinese civilizational achievement that even the leftist antireligious aberrations of the twentieth century could not destroy.*”¹⁵ The suggestion here is that a religious ecology characterised by harmony and the preservation of a global human peace is reflective of the inherent ecology of the Chinese peasantry and regardless of attempts to disband, absorb or outright destroy, that harmony and human preservation has always, and presumably always will persevere – we could, perhaps, even say that Mou is suggestion inherent Chinese human nature has endured and indeed survived a brutal persecution and societal industrialisation. This is a contrast to the many stories of the Christian and Islamic crusades to suppress and dominate through force – that is certainly my observation here. Mou finishes his description of religious ecology in China with the summary - “*A healthy religious ecology*

¹³ Nee, William, The Diplomat, Aug 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/in-china-xi-jinping-thought-is-the-only-accepted-religion/>

¹⁴ Mou Zhongjian 牟钟鉴, “Zongjiao wenhua shengtai de Zhongguo moshi 宗教文化生态的中国模式,” posted May 16, 2006, <http://www.mzb.com.cn/html/> “Religious Ecology” as a New Model 197 report/122313-2.htm (accessed September 16, 2011). Print version: Zhongguominzu bao 中国民族报, no.536/6 (2006). Reprinted in: Mou Zhongjian, Tansuozongjiao 探索宗教 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2008), 94–100. Clart’s citations are drawn from the online version.

¹⁵ *Ibis*

would give appropriate space to “Marxism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, and all kinds of healthy popular religion,” allowing none to dominate the others.”¹⁶

With a nod to observance of the live stratum of interplay between the larger moving parts of religious ecology Chen, in his field research of Qingyan illustrates it thus:

*“a three-tiered hierarchy in the religious system of Qingyan in terms of institutional and doctrinal differentiation: The bottom layer is made up of the popular religions of the Han, Miao, and Buyi ethnic groups; the middle layer by Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism; and the top layer by Catholicism and Protestantism. As the substratum of the whole system, the popular religions play a key role in maintaining its harmonious balance.”*¹⁷

Chen’s observations on the ground give us some stability and trust in the aforementioned ‘glue that hold society together’ remark made by Clart. There are many moving parts to our ecology model and far too many to discuss here in any detail but what is common is that the customary religiosity, wherever located, is necessary and binding to broader Chinese society. The ‘higher’ strata of religious ecology may well be able to exist outside of or independently of China but within Chinese borders they require a symbiotic relationship with civil society’s owned practices. For me, this really adds weight to Mayfair Yang’s argument that indigenous and religious civil society operates at the grassroots level of what we are increasingly presented with as ‘religious ecology’ in China.

[Religious spaces in contemporary China]

It is worth considering engagement of religiosity practitioners with civil spaces in China while we examine Mayfair Yang’s point. The indigenous populations have been evolving through many changes in the Chinese environmental landscape and their engagement with that landscape can tell us a great deal about the ownership of civil religiosity. The simplest way to think about religious spaces is quiet indicative of the larger discussion here. We have what are commonly known as ‘official,’ state agreed Temples and places of worship in historically significant sites and then we have what we refer to as community temples, in more rural areas, or certainly on the outskirts of large population centres. There is undoubtedly a logistical reason for this but as a reflection of the indigenous culture and the need for religiosity over state acceptance, there is perhaps more to be explored.

In Vincent Goosseart and Fang Ling’s 2009 ‘Chinese Perspectives’ article we look at examples of Daoist Official Temples compared to Community temples and both relationships with society to enhance our understanding of these two sides of the same coin. On the balance of these modalities, Goosseart and Ling open by confirming the visible *‘separation between city and country is one of the most significant results of Chinese modernity.’*¹⁸ The role or gift of the official and community-based locations also offer a highly illustrative metaphor for the roles on the religious associations, laity, and state senses importance – which, inversely, I feel, shows again more ownership of the communal religiosity in civil society. Goosseart and Lang condense this in two examples of Daoist temples in China thus:

¹⁶ *Ibis*

¹⁷ Chen Xiaoyi, *Zhongguoshi zongjiao shengtai: Qingyan zongjiao duoyangxing ge’an yanjiu* (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2008).

¹⁸ GOOSSAERT, Vincent and LING, Fang, *Temples and Daoists in Urban China Since 1980, China Perspectives*, 2009, No. 4 (80) (2009), pp. 32-41, Published by: French Centre for Research on Contemporary China

“The role of major Daoist temples as showcases for a modern religious culture is very similar to that of the major Buddhist Temples. Moreover, like their Buddhist counterparts, they are called on to play a role of political representation by reacting to major events (such as the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, major diplomatic events, the 2008 Olympic Games and natural disasters) by organising ceremonies, meetings, or billboard campaigns that demonstrate Daoism’s support for the government. However, an important difference between the major Daoist and Buddhist temples lies in the role played by the laity. The groups of lay Buddhists (jushi), who play a major part in the large monasteries where they organise lectures, training, and other dissemination activities, have no direct equivalent in the major Daoist temples.”¹⁹

There are two points we can take from this section which relate to our core exploration – 1. There is an obvious gulf between official religious activity sponsored by the state [the Daoist priests in the above examples are paid by the state – see Goosseart and Ling] and the laity are there through choice. This separation, via the examples of Buddhist and Daoist organisations, is across the main religions of China. 2. The civil society [laity] elements vary in their organisation and recognition from their [administratively] parent religion, and are recognised differently, but certainly exist as a sub-stratum without which the function of the parent would not be complete.

This is to say, and support, I feel, that the laity and their actions within the governing religious systems are necessary for those systems to function yet are not deemed officially essential to the official function of the religion. This provides us with yet more suggestion that there is a state/civil separation.

So, in summary, if we are to define religiosity, religious actions, and their locations as such we can see, I feel, an obvious dualism in the performance of Chinese religious actors today, these performances have many roots and have come through many phases and do seem to exist in a necessary but delicate balance in Chinese society. If we are to separate out state and civil engagement to think about ownership the state is responsible, and so, owns, large scale, official and funded religion in China. The peasantry, laity or civil society do seem to be respectful of officialdom but not so much as they would not pursue their own community based religious actions, ceremonies, prayer, and sacrifice. As such, for me, I think we can confidently say that Mayfair Yang’s argument that grassroots-initiated organisations represent an “indigenous and religious civil society.” At this point I cannot see how this could not be the case.

¹⁹ *Ibis*

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