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# Mapping Charisma in Chinese Religion

## Introduction and Glossary

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Vincent Goossaert and David Ownby

**T**he study of Chinese religion has long been a divided field.<sup>1</sup> Philologically grounded sinologists have studied the texts of China's classical religious traditions (Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism), while anthropologists, until recently working largely in the Chinese diaspora (Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the overseas Chinese communities of Southeast Asia), have examined the living practices (particularly ritual practices) of contemporary Chinese religion. Recent events, however, have fundamentally changed the reality, the perception, and the study of Chinese religion. One of these events is a religious awakening of historic proportions under way in the People's Republic of China since the late 1970s, a revival which spans the full spectrum of religious groups, including Buddhists, Daoists, Christians, Muslims, as well as new religious groups like Falun Gong and a wide array of popular religious movements. Similarly, the lifting of martial law on Taiwan in 1987 was accompanied by a liberalization of state religious policy which has transformed Taiwan's religious marketplace into a flourishing, dizzyingly diverse panorama of religious activity and innovation. The significance of these events for the study of Chinese religion can only be hinted at in this brief introduction. Suffice it to say that China's relative openness to Western scholarship, combined with the ongoing pan-Chinese religious revival, is allowing scholars to craft new and broader narratives of the history of religion in modern China, and to bridge the perceived divide between the experience of religion in the

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People's Republic and the experience of religion elsewhere in the Chinese world.<sup>2</sup>

The sociology of religion has been a relatively neglected methodology in studies of Chinese religion since the Communist revolution, although this too is beginning to change. The French scholar Marcel Granet (1884–1940), who was Marcel Mauss' student and one of Western sinology's godfathers,<sup>3</sup> laid the basis for a sociological sinology in his work in the first half of the twentieth century. Scholars in China—where sociology, long suppressed as a bourgeois science, is now flourishing<sup>4</sup>—along with Western researchers working on Chinese religion, are focusing renewed attention on the sociology of Chinese religion. Indeed, the origin of the present issue of *Nova Religio* was an international conference on “Religion and Social Integration in Chinese Societies: Exploring Sociological Approaches to Religion in the Chinese World,” organized by David Palmer, Vincent Goossaert, and Peter Tze-Ming Ng, co-sponsored by the Chung Chi College Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society, the École française d'Extrême-Orient, and the Groupe Sociétés, Religions, Laïcités, and held at the Chinese University of Hong Kong on 28–30 June 2007.<sup>5</sup> The express goal of this conference was to bring together China scholars with noted authorities in the sociology of religion (having little or no expertise on China) in the hope of initiating a dialogue which would enrich both perspectives.

One of the key concepts debated at the Hong Kong conference was that of charisma. Until very recently, sociological concepts such as charisma have not been much in favor with the specialists of Chinese religion. To be sure, the words “charisma” and “charismatic” occur frequently in the literature on Chinese religion, but usually as a shorthand for common-sense references to awe-inspiring or otherwise impressive persons, rather than as a reflective use of the complicated theories of charisma that social scientists have developed continually since Max Weber first coined the concept. Arguably, the exercise of comparing and theorizing was long overdue. No one would deny that modern and contemporary China has had its share of charismatic figures. Revolutionaries would occupy the place of honor, beginning with Mao Zedong, but founders of new religions would come a close second. One thinks immediately of Hong Xiuquan (1812–1864), the aspiring Confucian scholar whose dream vision created a messianic, Christian-inspired Taiping kingdom which fought the Qing empire to a standstill in the mid-nineteenth century before being eventually defeated, leaving tens of millions dead in its wake.<sup>6</sup> Other candidates might include the founders of the redemptive societies, the new religions of early twentieth-century China who, in the face of the failure of both the late imperial empire and its Taiping nemesis, set out to create a new spiritual identity for a modern China. One such leader, Zhang Tianran (d. 1947) created Yiguandao during the late 1920s, a movement that now has millions of members throughout the world who

revere Zhang as an incarnate Buddha. The leaders of the redemptive societies were in some ways the forerunners of the *qigong* masters who led the *qigong* boom in reform-era China. Other charismatic figures would surely include Buddhist reformers such as Taixu (1890–1947) on the mainland, and a number of Buddhist innovators on Taiwan. Case studies of these larger-than-life charismatic figures would surely be instructive, but studies of more localized, small-scale cases of charisma can prove equally illuminating for theoretical and comparative purposes.

Any consideration of the construction of charisma in Chinese religion must begin with the signal research of Stephan Feuchtwang and Wang Mingming, published as *Grassroots Charisma* in 2001.<sup>7</sup> The very nature of the scholarly collaboration, as well as the research strategy employed in the volume, reflect the recent changes in the field of Chinese religion studies mentioned above. Feuchtwang is a British social anthropologist who first trained with Maurice Freedman, the noted specialist of Chinese kinship, and Wang Mingming is a Chinese anthropologist who did his doctoral work in England. Their collaboration marks the scholarly cross-fertilization made possible by China's openness to the outside world. In addition, *Grassroots Charisma* examines case studies of local leadership in both China (more specifically Fujian) and Taiwan, with the two scholars working on both sides of the Taiwan Straits, in hopes of transcending the narrowly political histories of the mainland and Taiwan so as to anchor their systematic findings concerning the fabric of local leadership in a more inclusive view of Chinese culture (although culture is seen as an evolving product of history and not an essentialized set of predispositions).

Beginning with a definition of charisma as “an expectation of the extraordinary,” the authors examine the evolving nature of local leadership, illustrating how claims to efficacy—as well as the moral justifications which undergird the actualization of charisma—tack between religious settings (i.e., a temple) and political settings (i.e., local government institutions), and back again over the course of the twentieth century. The authors stress that charisma is a relationship mutually constructed by leaders and followers rather than an innate set of powers possessed by an awe-inspiring leader. Achievement of charisma—the embodiment of the qualities of leadership, the attraction of followers, the representation of their interests and dreams in real or utopian projects—requires constant attention to the shifting terrain of real and symbolic domains of political and moral authority. Overlaps between local representations of good political leadership (such as the Maoist evocation of self-sacrifice and ascetic lifestyles for the realization of the common good) and of good temple leadership (devoting all of one's resources to restoring village honor and welfare through the temple) represent particularly fruitful venues for exploring the religious-political continuum where charisma is deployed.

Such a perspective allowed Feuchtwang and Wang to wed their very local case studies to broader trends in the historical evolution of the Chinese world—or to the world in general, since both China and Taiwan are intimately linked to any number of globalizing economic and cultural trends. For example, the authors convincingly link a “disenchantment” prompted by real estate speculation, gambling and other seedy aspects of boom-time Taiwan in the 1980s and 1990s to the evolution of the expression and embodiment of charisma in the local leaders they study.

Drawing inspiration from Feuchtwang and Wang’s work, our aim for the present issue is to focus on the operation of charisma as it contributes to shaping the ongoing transformation of religion in the Chinese world. Most studies of religious change in Chinese societies have granted primary agency to political factors. While not denying the importance of politics, the internal operation of charismatic renewal, in complex interplay with political authority (sometimes cooperative, sometimes confrontational, often a mixture of both) cannot be overlooked. The history of *qigong*, where China’s political leaders gave free rein to “scientists of the cosmic breath” only to find these charismatic “scientists” had in no time built huge and devoted followings, is a telling example.

In this context, the present special issue of *Nova Religio* focuses on the role of charisma in renewing Chinese religion. Not all articles deal with new religions *stricto sensu*, even though several do, but they all definitely address the topics of religious change and renewal. If charisma is a notion that indissolubly mixes religion and politics, then our essays are definitely more on the religious side, and their contributions attempt to draw attention to the dimension of individual salvation present in most, if not all, mass movements that have shaped modern Chinese societies. The very title, “Mapping Charisma in Chinese Religion,” draws attention to the numerous sectors of rapid change in Chinese society where ideas of salvation, revelations, and hope for extraordinary healing, welfare and moral re-orientation fuel a demand for charismatic leaders.

In our contributions to this issue, all authors started from a common definition of charisma as “an expectation of the extraordinary.” This definition, elaborated, as already mentioned, in Feuchtwang and Wang’s 2001 volume, seemed particularly useful as it squarely defined charisma as a relationship rather than an individual quality, and as it identified its object as something different in nature from other, more mundane expectations people have of their leaders, such as good governance, increased wealth, peace, and so on. The authors in this issue have all attempted to refine this concept by looking at how this extraordinariness can be defined, promised, negotiated, and delivered in the specific context of modern and contemporary Chinese culture. Rather than insisting on an indigenous Chinese charisma—which would diminish the comparative value of our research—this issue is an attempt to refine the concept of “charisma” to make it fully relevant to, and useful in, studying

Chinese society and religion in general, and new religions in particular, in a global context of which Chinese religion is increasingly a part.

This issue begins with an overview by Vincent Goossaert of how charisma can be used as a tool to classify and understand the very diverse world of Chinese religious specialists. Next come more focused, fieldwork-based studies on various types of charismatic leaders. Julia Huang and Ji Zhe both study the world of Taiwanese Buddhism, arguably one of the most prolific fields of charismatic ambitions in the contemporary world. Julia Huang's study of a distinctly gendered type of charisma is devoted to Zhengyan, the nun who founded and still leads a huge international charity, the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation (Ciji gongdehui; hereafter "Tzu Chi"), and the complex emotional interactions between her and her female adepts. Ji Zhe looks at a smaller group, the Modern Chan Society, and its founder Li Yuansong, who has both renounced traditional Buddhist concepts of authority to establish his own charisma, and also found within the Buddhist tradition a solution to the conundrum of charismatic succession. The following article by David Palmer examines the *qigong* movement, arguably the largest deployment of charisma in mainland China since Mao's years. Palmer observes in detail how *qigong* masters created a bodily charisma. Stephan Feuchtwang reflects on the previous essays and, in light of his earlier work on charismatic leadership in local society, offers new ways to engage theories of charisma with the Chinese experience and to use the Chinese experience to amplify the study of charisma elsewhere. Finally, in Field Notes, David Ownby examines how body charisma functions among Falun Gong practitioners in the Chinese diaspora, where they are largely cut off from Falun Gong leader and founder Li Hongzhi, as well as from one another. How can charisma work in a community that is largely "virtual?" This variety of articles serves to map charisma, then, in a number of diverse manifestations within the context of Chinese religion.

A glossary of Chinese terms used in the articles begins on page 9.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The term "Chinese religion" in the singular is used by a number of scholars in the field to address the whole variety of religious practices, ideas, and specialists in Chinese societies without over-emphasizing the opposition between the various institutionalized traditions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and others.

<sup>2</sup> For examples of such broader narratives, see David Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (manuscript in progress).

<sup>3</sup> Stephan Feuchtwang, "A Chinese Religion Exists," in *Old State in New Settings: Studies in the Social Anthropology of China*, ed. Hugh D. R. Baker and Stephan Feuchtwang (Oxford: JASO, 1991), 139–60.

<sup>4</sup> YANG Fenggang, "Between Secularist Ideology and Desecularizing Reality: The Birth and Growth of Religious Research in Communist China," *The Sociology of Religion, A Quarterly Review* 65, no. 2 (2004): 101–19.

<sup>5</sup> Sponsored by Chung Chi College Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society (CUHK), the École française d'Extrême-Orient, and the Groupe Sociétés, Religions, Laïcités (EPHE-CNRS).

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Spence, *God's Chinese Son. The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (London: HarperCollins, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Stephan Feuchtwang and WANG Mingming, *Grassroots Charisma: Four Local Leaders in China* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

GLOSSARY

Amitufo	阿彌陀佛	Amitabha Buddha
<i>arahants</i> or <i>arhats</i>	( <i>aluohan</i> 阿羅漢)	ascetic Buddhist saint
<i>ban</i>	班	bands of ritual performers
Bao Guiwen	包桂文	<i>qigong</i> teacher in the 1970s
<i>beixin</i>	悲心	compassion (lit. sorrowful compassionate heart)
<i>bendi fengguang</i>	本地風光	Inherent Scene
<i>bodhisattva</i>		Buddhist perfected being, who remains in this world to save humans
<i>chaoren</i>	超人	superhuman being
Chen Yingning	陳櫻寧	Daoist self-cultivation teacher (1880–1969)
<i>chujia</i>	出家	leaving home to enter the clergy (homonymous with to get married, for a woman)
Ciji gongdehui	慈濟功德會	Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation
<i>da`ai</i>	大愛	great love, universal love
<i>daigong kexue baogaohui</i>	帶功科學報告會	power-inducing scientific lecture
<i>danwei</i>	單位	work unit, the base-level organization of society in the People's Republic
Dao	道	Truth
Daode xueshe	道德學社	Society for the Study of Morality
<i>daoren</i>	道人	man/woman of the Dao
<i>daoshi</i>	道士	scholar of the Dao, Daoist cleric
<i>daoye</i>	道業	religious cause
Daoyuan	道院	School of the Way
<i>dizi</i>	弟子	disciple (“younger brother-son”)
Falun Gong	法輪功	The discipline of the Revolving Dharma Wheel
<i>fanfu</i>	凡夫	ordinary man
<i>fapai</i>	法派	religious lineage
<i>fashi</i>	法師	master of ritual or magical arts
Fengqiao xincun	楓橋新村	New Village of Fengqiao (in Taipei)
<i>fodian</i>	佛店	“Buddha shop”
<i>ganying</i>	感應	moving gods and/or men to react
<i>gaodao</i>	高道	eminent Daoist cleric
<i>gaoseng</i>	高僧	eminent Buddhist cleric
<i>gongfa</i>	功法	self-cultivation method
Guanyin	觀音	the name of a well-known Buddhist bodhisattva
Hong Xiuquan	洪秀全	founder of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (1812–1864)
<i>hongfa</i>	弘法	make known the Way; proselytize
<i>hui</i>	會	Congregations
Huijing	慧淨	Taiwanese Pure Land Buddhist master
<i>huishou</i>	會首	community leader
<i>huizhang</i>	會長	community leader
<i>huo pusa</i>	活菩薩	living Buddha
<i>huofo</i>	活佛	living Buddha
<i>jiao</i>	醮	Daoist ritual of offering



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<i>jingshen zhiliao</i>	精神治療	spiritual healing
Jingsong	淨嵩	Buddhist name of Li Yuansong
<i>jingtu</i>	淨土	Pure Land
Jiushi xinjiaohui	救世新教會	New Religion for World Salvation
<i>jiushi</i>	救世	to save the world
Jiuying shengong	九應神功	Divine <i>qigong</i> of the Nine Resonances
<i>kelisima</i>	克理斯瑪	Charisma
Li Hongzhi	李洪志	Li Hongzhi, founder of Falun Gong
Li Yuansong	李元松	Taiwanese Buddhist leader
Li Yujie	李玉階	founder of a new religion, Tiandijiao 天帝教 (1901–1995)
<i>ling</i>	靈	numinous, efficacious, clever, soul
<i>lisheng</i>	禮生	Confucian ritual specialist
Liu Yuan	劉沅	a failed scholar, who set up his own teaching (1768–1855)
<i>men</i>	門	doctrine/teaching/sect
Mituo gongxiuhui	彌陀共修會	Amitabha Society for Collective Practice
<i>mofa</i>	末法	Dharma decline, signaling an imminent apocalyptic event, the turning of the <i>kalpa</i>
<i>namo</i>	南無	Buddhist expression to show reverence or worship
<i>pusa</i>	菩薩	Chinese transliteration of Bodhisattva
<i>pusadao</i>	菩薩道	Way of the Bodhisattva
<i>pusadian</i>	菩薩店	Buddha shop, also <i>fodian</i>
<i>qi</i>	氣	breath, vital force, cosmic energy
<i>qianxiu</i>	潛修	Retreat
<i>qichang</i>	氣場	field of <i>qi</i>
<i>qigong</i>	氣功	breath training; mastery or discipline of cosmic energy
<i>qigongshi</i>	氣功師	<i>qigong</i> master
<i>re</i>	熱	heat; “fever” (fad or cultural craze)
<i>renjian fojiao</i>	人間佛教	This-worldly Buddhism
<i>shangren</i>	上人	Superior man, supreme person
<i>shangshi</i>	上師	Supreme Master
<i>shanxin dashi</i>	善心大士	benevolent persons
<i>she</i>	社	Congregation
<i>shenxian</i>	神仙	immortal spiritual being
<i>shenyi</i>	神醫	miracle doctor
<i>shifu</i>	師父	master (“teacher-father”)
<i>shima</i>	師媽	master’s mother
<i>shushi</i>	術士	expert of divination techniques
<i>shusheng</i>	殊勝	Wonderful
Taixu	太虛	leading Buddhist reformer (1890–1947)
<i>teyi gongneng</i>	特異功能	extraordinary powers; paranormal abilities
Tiandejiao	天德教	Heavenly Virtues Teachings
<i>Tianyin</i>	天印	Celestial Imprint
Tongshanshe	同善社	Fellowship of Goodness
Wang Junfeng	王峻峰	a Daoist in Beijing, d. 1903
Wanguo daodehui	萬國道德會	Universal Morality Society
<i>Weiyuan</i>	委員	Commissioners

<i>Wudao</i>	悟道	enlightenment of the Way
<i>Xian</i>	仙	immortal
<i>Xiandaichan</i>	現代禪	Modern Chan
<i>Xianggong</i>	香功	Fragrant <i>Qigong</i>
<i>Xiangshan xiuxingren shequ</i>	象山修行人社區	Xiangshan Practitioners' Community
<i>xiangtou</i>	香頭	community leader
<i>xiansheng</i>	先生	master (lit. first-born)
<i>Xiao Changming</i>	蕭昌明	founder of a new religion, Tiandejiao, (1895–1943)
<i>xiaonü</i>	孝女	Filial daughter
<i>xingfu</i>	幸福	greatest bliss
<i>xinxi</i>	信息	<i>qi</i> -filled messages (lit. information [conveyed through <i>qigong</i> cultivation])
<i>xiudao</i>	修道	sustained practice of self-cultivation
<i>xuanjuan xiansheng</i>	宣卷先生	ritual storytellers
<i>Yan Xin</i>	嚴新	eminent <i>qigong</i> master
<i>yangsheng</i>	養生	nurturance of life, cultivation
<i>Yiguandao</i>	一貫道	Way of Pervasive Unity, new religion founded in the 1920s
<i>Yinshun</i>	印順	leading Buddhist thinker in Taiwan
<i>yiren</i>	異人	wonder-workers (lit. extraordinary persons)
<i>you yuanfen</i>	有緣分	destined
<i>youqing youyi</i>	有情有義	affection and fraternity
<i>yuanyi wuwu</i>	緣起無我	conditioned co-arising and non-self
<i>yundong</i>	運動	(social or political) movement
<i>yuzhou yu</i>	宇宙語	cosmic language; glossolalia
<i>Zailijiao</i>	在理教	Teaching of the Abiding Principle
<i>Zhang Hongbao</i>	張宏堡	eminent <i>qigong</i> master
<i>Zhang Tianran</i>	張天然	founder of the Yiguandao (b.?-1947)
<i>Zhang tianshi</i>	張天師	Zhang Heavenly Master, hereditary patriarchs of a Daoist ordination system
<i>Zhao Bichen</i>	趙避塵	Daoist self-cultivation teacher (1860–1942)
<i>Zhenfozong</i>	真佛宗	True Buddha School
<i>Zhengyan</i>	證嚴	Taiwanese Buddhist nun who founded the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation in 1966
<i>zhenren</i>	真人	True man, Daoist term for an enlightened one
<i>zhiguan shuangyun</i>	止觀雙運	combination of Concentration and Insight
<i>Zhonggong</i>	中功	Abbreviation for “Chinese <i>Qigong</i> for Nourishing Life and Increasing Intelligence”
<i>Zhuan Falun</i>	轉法輪	<i>Turning the Dharma Wheel</i>
<i>zhuangyan</i>	莊嚴	beauty (lit. solemn)
<i>zifa donggong</i>	自發動功	spontaneous movements <i>qigong</i>
<i>zongpai</i>	宗派	religious lineage
<i>zongshi</i>	宗師	patriarch, master of a religious lineage
<i>zouhuo rumo</i>	走火入魔	erroneous <i>qigong</i> practices which produce harmful results
<i>zushi</i>	祖師	patriarch, ancestor-master