



Shuk-Wah Poon, Negotiating Religion in Modern China: State and Common People in Guangzhou, 1900-1937

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Professor Suk-Wah Poon's book is a welcome addition to the number of recent works devoted to the history of Canton in the first half of the twentieth century.¹ Like most of these, it seeks to tackle the central question of China's strenuous modernization process, as it can be observed from the country's major southern metropolis at the time. But it does so by focusing on religious matters, a historiographical lens which had not been thoroughly applied hitherto to shed light on the transformations experienced by the city and its urban community during the first four decades of the last century. As is well known to modern China scholars, on a more general level the relationship between modernization and religion in the Chinese context has drawn growing attention in the last ten to fifteen years among academic circles, giving rise to a lively and stimulating historiographical debate. Obviously related to the latter, the book under review offers interesting insights in this regard too.

Among these, one should stress the effort made by the author to go beyond the usual divide differentiating the so-called "modern rationality" on the one hand, and "superstition(s)" on the other, which has attracted its share of attention in recent scholarship. Shifting the focus from "discourse" to actual religious practices, Professor Poon tries to show how worshippers and the clergy of what she calls "popular religion" have reacted to the growing challenge posed to their beliefs, and therein-related activities, by the modernist discourse, which emerged during the late nineteenth century among China's reformist and revolutionary elites, developing to become one of the main driving forces of the watershed transformations the country experienced during the twentieth century. As religion, including its "popular" dimension, came under attack during the period, the "masses" resorted to various strategies in order to adapt to the new times, while vying to preserve parts of their ordinary spiritual environment. These efforts and strategies are the focal point of Prof. Suk-Wah Poon's study. The choice is a welcome one, for it helps provide a more complex depiction of the "dispute" between modernity and religious faith in the Chinese context at the time, one that certainly brings the reader closer to the actual reality of those years.

The book is divided into five chapters, each one dealing with a specific "wave of attack" Cantonese popular religion was confronted to according to Prof. Poon. The first brings the reader back to the late Qing years. It opens on a series of general considerations on Chinese religion in late imperial times, including a brief

1. See for example Michael Tsin, *Nation, Governance, and Modernity in China: Canton, 1900–1927* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Virgil K. Ho, *Understanding Canton: Rethinking Popular Culture in the Republican Period* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Xavier Paulès, *Histoire d'une drogue en sursis. L'opium à Canton, 1906–1936* (Paris: éditions de l'EHESS, 2010).

discussion of the notion of “religion” itself and its specific historical background in China, before sketching out how deity worship spatially and socially structured Canton’s different urban communities. The author then turns to the repercussions of the “new policies” (*xinzheng* 新政) movement of the first decade of the twentieth century on what she calls the city’s “religious landscape”, pointing out in particular the challenge posed to temples and their landed properties by the state’s drive at educational reform. One well-known component of this movement was the seizure, partial or complete, of temple space to set up new schools. In Canton, as probably in most other urban centers around the country at the time, downright seizures were not as frequent as the allocations of parts of temple or monastery premises to educational reformists through a negotiated process involving the monks and abbots of the targeted religious institutions. Nevertheless, the process set in motion at the time, which, in Canton, as Prof. Suk-Wah Poon tells us, had a wider impact on large monasteries than on local temples, did pave the way for the more aggressive stance of state and local authorities that was to develop after the 1911 Revolution.

“Modernist” almost by definition, the republican revolution had a definite impact on “traditions of old”. It thus comes as no surprise that popular religious worships figured among such traditions in the eyes of the new elites, who regarded them as remnants of a disreputable past to be obliterated. As Prof. Poon discusses still in her first chapter, this attitude was underpinned by the introduction in China of such notions as evolution, and their impact on the judgement of reformists and revolutionaries on their country’s situation. Transforming its fate meant transforming its people, including the latter’s age-old religious beliefs, derogatorily labelled as superstitions. In this regard, the fall of the empire and, in its wake, the waning of parts of China’s traditional religious framework, opened the way for radicalization. In Canton, a long-time crucible of the Republican revolution, steps were taken early on to try to do away with superstitious worships, as Prof. Suk-Wah Poon signals, a process which resulted, among other, in the weakening of collective community ties. But on the whole, rather than the *xinzheng* years or even the 1910s, the major turning point came about in 1920, with the return to Canton of the revolutionaries rallied around Sun Yat-sen 孫中山 (1866–1925) and his son, Sun Ke 孫科 (1891–1973), who had been forced to leave the city in 1913 after their unsuccessful attempt at ousting Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 (1859–1816).

Chapter 2 of Prof. Poon’s work deals with the second wave of outright attack against Cantonese religious institutions, which she traces to the period stemming the years 1920 to 1924 approximately. At this time, as the author contends, the “rationale” for targeting such institutions throughout the city departed from purely anti-religious conceptions and was rather linked to the Guomindang’s 國民黨 (hereinafter KMT) two-pronged effort to modernize Canton’s urban infrastructures and reinforce the party’s structure in order to turn it into a potentially credible actor in the struggle for the country’s reunification. To achieve such goals, the Canton municipal authorities, first setup in 1918 and led by Sun Ke starting from 1921, needed to increase their financial capacities. To do so, a series of new fiscal measures were introduced by Song Ziwen 宋子文 (1894–1971)—better known later on as T. V. Soong—, including the systematic taxation of opium, in order to replenish the

KMT's and the local government's coffers. Among the new local levies, as Prof. Poon signals, one could find taxes on religious rituals as well as on ritual goods.

In the realm of religion, the city government's decision, adopted in 1923, to put up all temples and their properties for sale is an even more striking example yet of the extent to which local resources were being mobilized at the time. According to the author, over one month in June–July 1923, some 570 temples were listed for purchase. Even though priority was granted to former “owners” for the reacquisition of these properties, the whole expropriation and selling scheme, which was grounded by Sun Ke in financial and strategic considerations rather than in anti-superstition rhetoric, was met with widespread discontent. The decision itself was of course fought against, while the corruption that soon engulfed the scheme was resulted in an outcry. Local urbanites resorted to various means of resistance, including petitions, demonstrations—some leading to actual physical confrontations—as well as seeking protection from well-connected elites. The Merchant Corps, a self-defense militia set up by the local merchants following the 1911 Revolution, opposed the sternest resistance. It climaxed in October 1924 in what is termed the “Merchant Corps Incident”, which was to seal the fate of this community-based organization increasingly considered by Sun Ke and the KMT cadres as a menace to their control over the city.

This whole 1923–1924 episode of temple confiscations and selling is highly interesting for, as Prof. Suk-Wah Poon convincingly asserts, rather than solely—or even mainly—the result of an “anti-religious” campaign, when considered in the wider Cantonese political context of those years, it reflects the KMT authorities' efforts to assert their control over the city and its resources, in view of fulfilling their upcoming national objectives. Moreover, if, as the author insists, these events ought “to be understood in the context of the booming real estate market in Guangzhou” 廣州 (p. 48), I would suggest, in later research, to consider approaching the issue from a legal perspective, for, precisely during the first two decades of the Republican regime, in Canton as in other Chinese cities, urban authorities strove to set up a juridical framework to the workings of the real-estate market, tackling, among others, the problem of expropriation and the tricky question of the property rights over temples and their landed assets.

The third chapter of the book is devoted to the late 1920s and early 1930s and aims at shedding light on the influence of the KMT's by-and-large successful reunification of the country in the years 1927–1928 on the evolution of local religious policies. New reformist institutions appeared on the Cantonese political scene, among which the Social Customs Reform Committee (Fengsu gaige weiyuanhui 風俗改革委員會), closely linked to the party's structure, whose objective it was to frame the activities of temples and clerics, with a view at eradicating superstitions. This radical stance was met with some form of resistance among the population, and even more inside the municipal government, most notably through its Social Affairs and Public Security Bureaus (Shehuiju 社會局; no Chinese is provided by the author for the latter), both instrumental in the Committee's dissolution in early 1930. If reforming “social customs” (*fengsu* 風俗), among which popular worships certainly ranked high, was obviously on the agenda of the local and central

authorities, as well as on that of the KMT's own agencies, the Cantonese example tends to show that the methods to apply in order to best achieve this goal were not necessarily the object of a consensus among the institutions involved.

A similar stance can be observed in the efforts by the local government to modernize urban space, another significant dimension of local affairs in the late 1920s and early 1930s. As Prof. Poon shows, the establishment of public parks was in some instances made at the expense of some spacious religious institutions. But this does not mean that traditions were ever completely obliterated. In the face of the removal of some temples and their ritual images, the local communities adapted at times quite swiftly, either by recreating specific spaces of worship in other near-by locations, or by reinvesting parts of the original sites, after their transformations. Prof. Poon exemplifies this through a concise study of the fate of Canton's City God Temple and of the host of diviners and geomancers who practiced in its surroundings every day. Whereas the latter—true epitome of superstitions in the eyes of the reformists of the times—were progressively expelled from the premises in the early 1930s, the temple itself was turned into an exhibition hall for native goods in 1932. But just like the expelled practitioners, who were genuine diehards and took advantage of the municipal government's absence of consensus on how to deal with them to remain on this site as long as possible—a situation at least partly linked to the revenues the local government could secure through the taxation of their activities —, the City God temple never really disappeared from the minds of the local people. Some years later, as the author recounts, part of the new institution had be turned back into a site of worship, where the local Cantonese would go express their faith in their patron deity.

The last two chapters (4 and 5) deal with the efforts by the KMT's nationalist government to infuse a new form of civic culture around the country. In this endeavor, the introduction of new holidays to replace traditional ones is treated first, followed by attempts at streamlining religions by the central government through the enactment of an official classification.

Soon after its establishment in Nanjing in 1928, the new Nationalist government introduced no less than twenty-six new commemorative days. Prof. Poon studies three in detail—the anniversary of Sun Yat-sen's death (March 12th), the Yellow Flower Festival (*Huanghua jie* 黃花節), otherwise known as the commemoration of the 72 martyrs who died in the Canton insurrection of April 27th 1911, and National Day (*Guoqing jie* 國慶節, October 10th) —, showing how these national celebrations, initiated to foster among the country's citizens a sense of belonging to the wider body of the nation, were at times accepted only lukewarmly. On the other hand, the state's effort to impose the solar calendar, and, in its wake, to relocate some of the traditional festivals in the new calendar, were met with wider resistance and commoners or local institutions often strove to find a way of inserting traditional celebrations into the new ones, as was the case of the Hungry Ghosts Festival (*Zhongyuan jie* 中元節).

A similar form of ambivalence characterized the Nationalist regime's approach to religion. The Nanjing government was prone to state its intent to promote freedom of religion, but this freedom was to be exercised inside the limits of what it considered

as legitimate religiosity. While targeting time and again “superstitious” beliefs, it also sought to define a space for the expression of permissible forms of worship. In the wake of the New Life Movement (*xin shenghuo yundong* 新生活運動), in the mid-1930s, Confucianism was conferred renewed importance, an initiative which found an active relay in Canton in the person of Chen Jitang 陳濟堂 (1890–1954), the militarist who actually controlled Guangdong province between 1929 and 1936. A series of temples dedicated to Confucius and other related divinities did appear around the city during those years, but, as Prof. Suk-Wah Poon indicates, clerics or local communities sometimes rechristened their own temples only to avoid state-sponsored anti-superstition policies. Another instance of accommodation between the local authorities’ drive to frame legitimate religiosity and the urbanites’ traditional pantheon is exemplified by the cult to Guan Yu 關羽 (160? 162?–219). Similarly revived by the city’s government in the 1930s to promote patriotism and political allegiance, it was soon seen by the locals as a way of perpetuating their age-long worships to Guandi 關帝, one of the most important deities of the country’s popular pantheon.

The two major institutionalized religions of China at the time, Buddhism and Daoism, were also brought under the heel of new regime during those years. But in this instance too, accommodation and negotiation were important features of the process. Seizures and destructions did bring their share of burdens to the institutions of both denominations, but some sites, usually ranking among the most eminent of the city, were able to dodge a substantial part of the challenge posed by the new order, in general through the support of local personalities or thanks to the close relationship they were able to build with the local authorities. The clerics of both denominations also set up local and national organizations, such as the Chinese Buddhist Association (*Zhongguo fojiao hui* 中國佛教會), to serve as representatives of the clerical communities. Cantonese Daoist ritual specialists, some of whose ritual practices had been readily designated as superstitious by the local government, entered into a debate with the latter to define what exactly was to be considered superstitious. In the process, frictions arose among the different groups of Daoists, weakening their ability to resist as a group. As a result, in Canton, the stricter and monastic Quanzhen 全真 order, whose rule fitted more adequately with the new authorities’ approach of religions than its counterpart, the more “liberal” Zhengyi 正一 order, gained government support as the “spokesman for “orthodox” Daoism” (p. 142). Serving as yet another testimony of the negotiated approach to religious practice during those years, with this support, as Prof. Poon underlines in her work, some of the local Quanzhen monasteries were able to continue to provide ritual services, which were otherwise deemed as superstitious.

To conclude this review, it is necessary to point out that if the choice of the scale of observation—the city of Canton—is understandable from a methodological point of view, it is unfortunate that Prof. Poon did not consider giving the city itself a larger place in the book. One hardly finds any description of its physical features, and even its religious landscape, to which the author repeatedly refers, is only sketchily outlined. Whereas one would have expected a detailed enumeration of the number

of local religious institutions over time, possibly their localization on a map and their religious typology, no such element is provided, the author limiting the description to the larger and most prominent institutions. Even a cursory search through the index confirms this aspect, as no more than 20 names of temples and monasteries are listed, a number strikingly low when compared to the 570 institutions put up for sale around the city during the early summer of 1923 (p. 49–51). Similarly, only few of the urban transformations brought about by the modernization drive of the new authorities over the first three decades of the Republican regime are ever presented, a loophole which weakens the author's assertion relative to the range of the impact of the city's remodeling during those years on its religious landscape. Finally, from a more general point of view, I suspect that the author's choice not to offer even a brief outline of the general history of the Pearl River delta's metropolis over the period studied, characterized by a highly volatile political context, will, at least in some instances, leave inexperienced readers at a loss.

These few critical observations should not deter scholars and students of the field from reading the book, for, as mentioned above, Prof. Suk-Wah Poon's study is a useful addition to the corpus of works devoted to the recent history of Canton and to that of China's modernization. In fact, one can only hope that this first opus, relatively short in length (only 155 pages of text), will be followed by others, in which the author might choose to propose answers to some of the above-mentioned pending questions.

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