MAX DEEG, BERNHARD SCHEID (EDS.)

RELIGION IN CHINA: MAJOR CONCEPTS AND MINORITY POSITIONS

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Religion in China

Major Concepts and Minority Positions

Edited by Max Deeg
and Bernhard Scheid

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Nanjing's Sanzang Pagoda with the Zifeng Tower, a modern architectonical landmark, in the background. The Sanzang Pagoda is named after the famous Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang and is said to treasure some of his relics.

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Dedicated to the memory of Prof. Dr. Otto Ladstätter (1933–2005)

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Foreword – “cum apologia”

The fate of this volume of collected articles needs a slight variant of the usual “habent sua fata libelli”: “habent sua fata auctores libelli”. The focus on the authors’ fate becomes obvious when the reader looks back at the event where the papers collected in this volume were originally presented. This was an international workshop on Chinese religions organized by Prof. Dr. Otto Ladstätter (†2005) at the Institute for the Cultural and Intellectual History of Asia (IKGA) of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Sadly, Prof. Ladstätter passed away before work on this volume could be finished. Incidentally, one of the authors, Prof. Dr. Erich Zürcher (†2008), followed him a few years later. The loss of the project’s “father” put the task of publication on the probably most inadequate shoulders imaginable. After Professor Ladstätter’s untimely death, I simply happened to be the only contributor available in Vienna to continue the editorial task. Consequently, Prof. Dr. Ernst Steinkellner, then Director of the IKGA, asked me to continue Professor Ladstätter’s project as a single editor. While the work on the volume first ran smoothly, not least thanks to the editorial assistance of Mrs. Cynthia Peck-Kubaczek from the IKGA, my move from Vienna to Cardiff caused considerable delays. In addition, the IKGA was relocated and restructured twice during the same time, while Mrs. Peck-Kubaczek left the IKGA without finishing her editorial work. I had already given up hope that the volume could be published at all, when Dr. Bernhard Scheid, japanologist at the IKGA, contacted me and offered his assistance. It is therefore due to his efforts that the last obstacles in the complicated production process of this volume could be solved in the end. We had to make a principal decision whether to fully update the contributions or to edit and publish them in the form they had reached up to the last major revision by Mrs. Peck-Kubaczek. In order not to postpone the publication of the edition any longer and considering the inconvenience and – in the case of Professor Zürcher’s essay – impossibility for a fundamental revision by the authors, we decided to publish all contributions as they were. I have only updated the “Introduction” with the most important recent publications in the field of Chinese religions,

while Bernhard Scheid brought footnotes and references into a single format and took care of the layout and the index. I still hope that the essays collected in this volume will be of interest especially since they cover such a wide range of Chinese religions, including contributions on the so-called Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which are normally either restricted to very specialised contexts or treated separately from the standard set of the “Three Teachings” (*san-jiao* 三教) – Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism – attributed to the Middle Kingdom. With this in mind I do not expect to have gained much merit (*puṇya* or *gongde* 功德 in the Buddhist sense) by this belated publication, but at least have repaid a small amount of my “Bringschuld” for the support and friendship I have received during my time in Vienna and afterwards from the directors, Professor Steinkellner and his successor, the late Dr. Helmut Krasser († 2014), and other members of the IKGA.

Cardiff, 24th March 2014

Max Deeg

Contributors

CHIAO Wei, professor emeritus, contributed significantly to the establishment of a department for Chinese Studies at the University of Trier. He received his PhD in philosophy, ethnology, and linguistics at the University of Vienna. Since 1971 he has been working as Professor of Chinese Studies in Bonn and Trier. His major research topics include: linguistics (also lexicography and neologisms), Chinese philosophy, Chan Buddhism and Daoism.

Max DEEG is Professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of Cardiff. He received his PhD in Indian Studies at the University of Würzburg. From 2002 to 2006 he was professor at the Institute for Systematic Theology at the University of Vienna. His research interests include in particular Buddhist narratives and their roles for the construction of identity in premodern Buddhist communities.

Irene EBER is Louis Frieberg Professor of East Asian Studies (emeritus) at the Department of East Asian Studies, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and senior fellow of the Truman Research Institute. She has published widely on religion in China, the Jewish diaspora in China and on Chinese literature.

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Roman MALEK, S.V.D., is Professor of Religious Studies at the Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule St. Augustin near Bonn. He is a missionary of the Steyler Order (S.V.D.), sinologist and former editor in chief of

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WANG Jianping is Professor of Muslim Studies at the World Religion Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. He received his PhD in History of Religions at the University of Lund, Sweden. From 1993 to 1998 he was a research fellow at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He has published widely on Islam in Asia.

ZHUO Xinping is Director of the World Religion Research Institute and the Christianity Research Center of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. He received his PhD in Religious Studies at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich. He is interested in theoretical approaches to religions in contemporary China, particularly in their relations to Western religious theories.

Erik ZÜRCHER (†2008) was Professor Emeritus of East Asian History at the University of Leiden, where he chaired the Institute of Chinese Studies from 1974 to 1990. His research interests included the reception of foreign complex systems of thought in premodern China, in particular of Buddhism (The Buddhist Conquest of China, 1972), but also of Christianity and the Jesuit mission.

Major Periods in Chinese History

Shang 商 dynasty, ca. 1570–1046 BCE
Zhou 周 dynasty, 1045–256 BCE
Qin 秦 dynasty, 221–206 BCE
Han 漢 dynasty, 206 BCE – 220 CE
Three Kingdoms (Wei 魏, Shu 蜀, Wu 吳), 220–280
Jin 晉 dynasty, 265–420
Southern and Northern Dynasties (Nanbeichao 南北朝), 420–589
Sui 隋 dynasty, 581–618
Tang 唐 dynasty, 618–907
Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (Wudai shiguo 五代十國), 907–960
Song 宋 dynasty, 960–1279
Yuan 元 dynasty, 1271–1368
Ming 明 dynasty, 1368–1644
Qing 清 dynasty, 1644–1911
Republic of China, 1912–1949
People's Republic of China, 1949–present

Religion in China

Introduction

Max Deeg

In the West, “Chinese religion(s)” and “Chinese spirituality” have received a great deal of attention in the last years. This can generally be observed in the popular interest in such esoteric themes such as Fengshui 風水, and interest in the intellectual and spiritual background of the highly popular Chinese medicine and pre-“wellness” phenomena Taiqiquan 太極拳 and Qigong 氣功. Qigong has also brought Chinese religions into the headlines of the newspapers: through the controversy between the Chinese government and the Falungong 法輪功 and its leader Li Hongzhi 李洪志 the public has become aware that there is at least conflict concerning religion in the Peoples’ Republic of China, a modern communist-socialist state which, since the coming to power of the Communist party and especially after the brutal sweepings of the Cultural revolution, was popularly believed to have gotten rid of its “opium for the people.” Despite official Chinese descriptions and census-like documents, it seems that the real status quo of religions – those organized in state-recognized associations, the religious underground organizations, as well as the diffuse range of “folk religions” that flow as an undercurrent in Chinese traditions – in the Peoples’ Republic is rather unclear and in constant motion,[1] and the notion of “religious fever” (*Religionsfieber*, Ch. *zongjiao-re* 宗教熱) in China as it has been described by Roman Malek[2] still has to be proven in situ. The study of religions in mainland China and their development there must counterbalance the previous focus on Taiwan that has, until recently, dominated the Western discourse on traditional Chinese religions. This stands

[1] The description of the state of religions in mainland China in MacInnis’ *Religion in China Today* (MacInnis 1989) is already outdated and needs a sequel.

[2] See, e.g. Malek 1995; see also Malek 1996, pp. 203–207.

Max Deeg/Bernhard Scheid (eds.), *Religion in China*, pp. 1–12.

true, even though religious studies have begun to develop in Taiwan, after a long period of state-supported secularity, for a while now. A new development is also to be seen in mainland China where Chinese religions are now not only studied in the context of historical and sociological studies but as an academic subject in the framework of an emerging Religious Studies discipline, established as independent disciplines e.g. at Renmin University (Beijing), and Fudan University (Shanghai).

The popular interest in Chinese religion(s) in the West has its correlation in academic research. The number of publications on Chinese religions has increased considerably over the last few decades. A journal exclusively dedicated to the study of Chinese religions published in a Western language[3] is just one indication of this development, and introductions and anthologies in the form of textbooks[4] show that, at least in North American universities and colleges, Chinese religions have gained a place in the curricula of humanities departments. Extensive bibliographies and overviews on the subject have been published[5] and a useful survey on the current state of affairs has been made available[6] which, for the earlier periods, has now been complemented by a series of monographs[7]. This trend will hopefully continue for the sake of scholars who, in addition to their individual fields of expertise, want to maintain a general overview of this branch of Religious Studies, a subject that, due to its wealth of historical sources and contemporary developments, is virtually exploding in terms of research and publications.

In this context, the title of the present volume reads rather presumptuous. Collecting representative papers on "Chinese religion" tries to achieve the impossible. The contributions to this volume also seem to underline this very point: they had to decide between providing a general overview of their subject-religion (Chiao) or a detailed study of a single aspect in one religion (Deeg, Zürcher).

Owing to the particular history of the present volume (see the Foreword), certain lacunae in this collection of essays must be frankly admitted. The question of the religious nature of Confucianism, for in-

[3] The *Journal of Chinese Religions* of the Society for the Study of Chinese Religions.
[4] Thompson 1969; Sommer 1995.
[5] Thompson 1987; Thompson/Seaman 1993.
[6] Overmyer, et al. 1995a and 1995b.
[7] Lagerwey/Kalinowsky 2009; Lagerwey/Lü 2010.

stance, would certainly have deserved a chapter of its own.[8] The reader may also wonder why there is no chapter on folk religion or popular religion (*minjian zongjiao* 民間宗教). In fact, important work has been done in these areas in recent years,[9] which was, however, not available at the time when the present contributions were written.

To give an outline of this volume, we may divide Chinese religions – in a quasi traditional sinocentric manner – into two main groups: autochthonous and foreign in origin.[10] From such a perspective, the present volume has a clear emphasis on the latter group: one paper on Buddhism (Deeg) and another on Judaism (Eber) and two each on Islam (Gladney, Wang) and on Christianity (Zürcher, Malek), while only one article is about an "autochthonous" religion, Daoism (Chiao). Reasons can be brought forward for this imbalance and particular emphasis on "minority religions" such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. From the advent of Chinese studies in the West, promulgated by the Jesuit missionaries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (see the article by Erich Zürcher in this volume), the imperial state "religion", so-called Confucianism, was primarily studied as it was conceived by traditional Chinese scholars as well as Western missionaries and scholars of sinology as the Chinese mainstream religiosity, whereas Buddhism, as a foreign and thus corrupt and inferior religion, was rather neglected.[11] On the other hand, sinologists of the first generation – e.g. the French scholars Abel Remusat, Édouard Chavannes, and Paul Pelliot – were especially interested in Buddhist material in Chinese because it provided sources that documented the connection between China and what the Chinese called "Western Regions" (Xiyu 西域), although in general the study of Chinese Buddhist texts never reached the same degree of importance for the study of (Indian) Buddhism as their Tibetan equivalents. Dealing mainly with "foreign" religions, the overall framework of this volume can be seen as mirroring the way in which religions have

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8 The discourse on whether Confucianism is a religion or not reaches back to the Jesuit mission and the Rites Controversy but also has been taken up again recently by the representatives of New Confucianism or Neo-Confucianism such as Du Weiming 杜維明.

9 See, for instance, Seiwert 2003, Chau 2005, Overmyer 2009, or Chamberlain 2009.

10 This division is, of course, heuristic and does not comply with critical scholarship; it does not take into account the blending of religious traditions often considered typical Chinese and called syncretistic. On this point, see the article by Roman Malek in this volume.

11 On the "Orientalist" development and background of sinology, see Deeg 2003.

been adapted and integrated into Chinese society in the past and in the present, how they have become amalgamated with Chinese culture, but also how they have kept their own inherent features in the midst of the Chinese cultural mainstream discourse. Concentrating on "minority" or "marginal" religions[12] not only makes sense in quality – the mutual cultural process of attraction and repulsion can be studied more easily in the case of Islam, Judaism and Christianity than with acculturated and historically diversified phenomenon such as Buddhism, with its long history in China – but also based on the argument of reversed quantity, namely, that neglected topics of study are to be promoted.

The diversity of topics in the papers of this volume definitely has the advantage of showing that we should beware of rashly speaking of Chinese religion in the singular, postulating, of course, not the existence of a single Chinese religion, but rather something like a typical Chinese "religiosity" projected by the traditional concept of *sanjiao heyi* 三教合一, "The three teachings (Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism) are one." A careful approach should, however, not prevent us from looking for unvarying elements in the development of religions in China – which leads us back to the topic of the acculturation and adaptation of foreign religions into a Chinese environment.

As the only "autochthonous" religion in this volume, Daoism is treated in an overview by Chiao Wei. After giving a condensed survey of the beginnings of Daoism with the (philosophical) writings of Laozi (*Daodejing*) and Zhuangzi, the establishment of institutionalized Daoism through Zhang (Dao)ling and the development of Daoist canonical scriptures, Chiao goes on to explain the basic ideas and elements underlying Daoist religion (cosmogony, soteriology, alchemy for longevity or immortality, etc.). Chiao describes the development of the different branches (or schools) of Daoism (Zhengyi 正一, Quanzheng 全真), their present state and their (historical) relationship with the relevant imperial rule. He sees a relation between Daoist virtues and the strength and endurance of the Chinese in the hard struggle of survival. He then discusses basic Daoist concepts (*dao*, *ziran*, *wuwei*) and their meaning for the past and, possibly, for the future. Chiao finally points to the revival of Daoism in modern China, especially in the southern provinces; the success of Daoism lies in its giving a model or orientation both to

[12] Cf. Malek in this volume.

the lower classes and the intellectual classes in a world of increasing disintegration.[13]

Max Deeg takes up the topic (and problem) of the sinification (or sinicization) of the foreign religion Buddhism into the Chinese self-awareness of their culture, an awareness that was already strongly developed at the time of Buddhism's appearance. Deeg concentrates on the early centuries of reception and acceptance of Buddhism in China, especially the period of the Southern and Northern Dynasties (Nanbeichao), and shows how early Chinese Buddhism tried to make the concrete historical timetable of Chinese antiquity compatible to the *Heilsgeschichte* of Indian Buddhism, as defined by the dates of birth, enlightenment and *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha. Deeg argues that a pro-Buddhist interpretation can be found in some of the earliest Chinese efforts of "writing times and spaces together:" the death of the Buddha coinciding with the shift from the Shang tyranny and the beginning of the reign of the Zhou, which thus portentously interconnects traditional Chinese historiography with the Buddhist calculation of time. In the model of history that is discussed, the Chinese idea of the rise and fall of dynasties – specifically that of the Zhou – is made compatible with the Buddhist idea of the decay of the Buddhist teaching, the decay of the dharma, which itself is closely connected to early Chinese Buddhist messianic ideas surrounding the figure of the future Buddha Maitreya (Mile). This, on one hand, proved very fertile, but at the same time, in the subsequent development of Buddhism it attracted the suspicion and hostility of most of the later Chinese dynasties.

Zhuo Xinping, director of the Department of Religious Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Science (Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan), in his article "Religious Policy and the Conception of Religion in China" touches on the highly sensitive topic of how and under which circumstances religions in the Peoples' Republic of China are recognized as such. Zhuo gives an overview of the different positions of various intellectual and ideological groups towards the concept of religion, especially the critical voices in late imperial and early republican China. He finally gives an outline of the official position of the Communist Party

[13] To the selected bibliography of mainly German works – the original paper was written in German – one might add, in addition to other numerous books on the subject in English, recent important publications like Kohn 2000 or Pregadio 2008. Now also a chronologically arranged, bibliographical overview of the Daoist canon has been published: Schipper/Verellen 2004.

concerning the role and function of religion in a socialist society and state, including the recent positive development of the Party's recognizing (world) religion as an important and indispensable element of society. Most interesting is the fact that a theory such as Huntington's "clash of civilizations" can be considered a factor in the conceptualization of an acceptable relationship between religion and a socialist state. Zhuo's paper shows how closely religious policy and the problem of a theoretical – and one may add: normative – concept and definition of religion are interwoven. At the same time, however, it is astonishing how similar the modern approach in the study of religion is to this understanding of religion in its social and cultural function – despite a rather normative tendency. This might point to more liberal tendencies in religious policy developing in China, as Zhuo indicates in his paper.

Irene Eber, writing on Jews in China, divides her paper into two main sections. The first is dedicated to the Jewish community in Kaifeng beginning with the erecting of a synagogue in the southern Chinese city in 1163. Eber is even quite convinced of being able to trace the first Jews in China to the Tang period, based on indications of Jewish merchants having been in China at that time. The Kaifeng community, though still attested by early Catholic missionaries in China, ceased to exist at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Eber sees the slow loss of Jewish identity connected to the fact that social affiliation was defined rather by lineage and agnatic groups than by affiliation with a ritual community. Nevertheless, within the framework of this lineage identity, the Jews of Kaifeng managed to retain their Jewish identity by means of sinicized practices (holidays, keeping of the Torah, calendar). Interestingly enough, today there is a revival of Jewish identity through conversion in Kaifeng, with some of the converts even studying in Israel. In the second section, Eber discusses the case of the Jewish diaspora in Shanghai that existed from the middle of the nineteenth century and that was of quite heterogeneous origin (both Oriental and European). She shows how the different communities developed organizational structures (synagogues, schools, publication organs) that lasted until the gradual exodus at the end of the 1950s after the breakdown of the treaty port situation. The Shanghai communities were clearly an atypical case of a religious community, as they existed in the atypical environment of the most westernized city of China. Today, a small Jewish community has survived only in Hong Kong.

Erich Zürcher presents the topic of how early Jesuit missionaries and autochthon Christians in the South Chinese area of Fujian acted and reacted during the late Ming dynasty in the process of adopting and maintaining a religious self-identity. He focuses on the aspects of "guilt – sin – remorse – confession – absolution – penance." Dealing with this complex of religious concepts is more than justified, because some of them – especially the Christian concept of "sin" – have been used in the past to show the uniqueness of the Christian world view and soteriology, a world view that is not found in this particular way in Chinese religion (!) nor in other religions. Zürcher, not restricting himself to Jesuit writings but also using original Chinese sources, shows where Christianity was able to build upon already existing religious ideas in Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism. He shows thereby which of its features were actually incompatible with traditional Chinese religions and thus felt to be "foreign" by the Chinese Christians as well as their Chinese fellowmen. This has led to the contemporary Chinese judgment of Christianity as a "strict" religion. The paper clearly shows that both statements concerning typical Chinese religiosity and also questions of how far a foreign religion was adapted – sinisized – must be tested and validated by thorough and careful study of original sources and documents; it is worthwhile mentioning that Zürcher stresses the quality of some of his sources as being prescriptive and normative, thus avoiding the decontextualization and defunctionalization of sources that is so often met with in the study of historical religious documents.

Roman Malek, in his contribution on "Christendom in China," stresses the fact that the history of Christianity, as a foreign and "marginal" religion and with regard to its function in the respective historical Chinese context, reflects the state and the changes of Chinese society as well as Chinese "Christendom." The term "Christendom" is deliberately used throughout because of its broader generic meaning. Malek gives an overview of the history of Christianity in China under the rule of the Communist Party; he presents the wide variety of Christian organizations, from those officially recognized to underground communities, but also stresses the fact that Christianity has also taken on other forms of social appearance such as so-called Cultural Christianity, Elite Christianity, etc. Malek gives a clarifying sketch of a variety of categories that at first glance seem puzzling, as for instance "Christendom" between illegality and a status that is officially recognized, both in its Catholic and Protestant forms, and describes in detail developments in

the Underground Catholic Church as well as its relation to the official Church, which is still an open issue in China. He refers to the increasing number of newly founded Christian groups and sects, which are primarily located in the countryside and grouped around charismatic leaders. One tends to ask – after Malek's description of these groups in the categories used by Christian "cult"-specialists in the West, though he rejects the official Chinese terminology of "subversive" and "orthodox" – why these groups are still labeled as Christian. If one retains the attribute "Christian," the problem of sinicization slips in here through the backdoor again, and could be expressed by the term "synchretism." The relatively open character of Chinese "Christendom" is also seen in the notion of "Cultural Christians," that is, members mainly of the intellectual elite who do not belong to one of the organized forms of Christianity in China and who therefore lack the formal "requisites" of membership such as baptism, but who derive their "Christendom" in the form of a weltanschauung. It seems that "Cultural Christians" form the bridge between "formal" Christianity and the phenomenon that Malek calls "Christianity as an object of academic research." For Malek, the future of "Christendom" in China is safe, although it is clear that not all its forms as described here will survive.

In his paper, Wang Jianping presents an astonishing and detailed overview of Muslim activities in today's China, correcting, as it were, the general idea that this religion is concentrated in China's most Western areas. He shows how in the relatively stable political structure of Chinese Muslims, traditionally organized in small, independent communities (*jama'at*) with culturally and linguistically different regional backgrounds (Uighurs, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Hui, etc.), a kind of "ecumenical" self-awareness of Islamic universality (*umma*) has started to develop that crosses ethnic and denominational borderlines and thus sometimes is even able to oppose state authority successfully. Wang clearly points out that the conditions for this change of attitude and options is due to the liberalized economic situation in China during the 1980s that lead to a higher degree of mobility and economical independence of Chinese Muslim community members, creating interregional as well as international movement (pilgrimage, exchange of *akhonds*, i.e. Islamic teachers), and also the necessary educational infrastructure (*madrasas*, i.e. Quran schools, materials distributed by traditional media such as books and periodicals, as well as modern media such as videos, CDs, websites, etc.) to nourish the "Revival Movement of Is-

lam" (Wang) in China. It also becomes clear that within the framework of the Chinese policy of recognizing Muslims as ethnic minorities with the corresponding privileges, this new search for a common identity leads to a kind of encapsulation. It has also led to the "radicalization" of – for instance – the independence movement in Xinjiang and to social friction in other regions, problems that the authorities have had to deal with. The example of Chinese Muslims shows how a traditionally well-rooted and united religion with influential connections to the international community is able to become a strong partner in the state-religion dialogue, but also how the suspicion of the state can be aroused against such semi-independent groups that have a long history in China. As Wang stresses at the end of his article, the future of Muslims in China will strongly depend upon how the centralized government and the Communist Party navigates between the Scylla of control and the Charybdis of tolerance in yielding religious, administrative and economical freedom.

What is touched on in Wang's paper is the very topic of Dru Gladney's contribution: the question of accommodation (sinicization) of Muslim communities into Chinese society, especially the group labeled as the Hui. Gladney emphasizes the problems of expressions such as Hui or Uighur in terms of ethnicity as well as cultural, historical and linguistic aspects. He touches on current difficulties, such as Muslim separatism within the Uighurs in Xinjiang and the connected problems (alleged terrorism, international reactions, economic decline) and their handling by the Chinese authorities, thus adding, as it were, the puzzle piece of Islam in China that was missing in Wang's paper. Gladney's focus is on Chinese Hui Muslims, their establishment in China and their integration into or adaptation to the Chinese cultural environment; he describes the different waves, forms and layers of Islam in history: first, the traditional Chinese Islam, called *gedimu* in Chinese (from Arab. *qadīm*, "old"), with its strong mosque and village-centered structure, and then the advent, development and characteristics of the different Sufi orders (Qadiriyya, Naqshbandiyya, etc.) that were able to create trans-regional network structures. A third wave was caused by the higher degree of mobility and a strengthening of Muslim self-identity after the fall of the Qing dynasty and during the republican period. Muslims, coming back from pilgrimages to Arabia, introduced Wahhabi reform Islam (Ikhwan Muslim Brotherhood) to China. Most interestingly, this group was in line with the Chinese reformers' ideas of nationalism and modernism.

This group also initially supported the communists because of their concepts of equity, autonomy and freedom of religion, until being disappointed by the development of religious policy in the PRC. This changed again with Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic reform policy after 1978, creating, however, a new group of problems similar to the ones caused by the rising Han domination of social and economic resources. Gladney does not consider the friction and contradiction between orthodox Muslim concepts and the adaptation to traditional Chinese practices to be part of phenomena such as synchretism/"sinification," but rather – referring to Max Weber – as an ongoing process of "inculturation" of Islam in China, a process of making sense of a religious tradition in a cultural environment that has not risen from this religious tradition. The outcome of this process is not at all clear, not least because of the current mobility of Chinese Muslims across the borders of China into Islamic "internationalism."

Both articles on Islam in China excel in their detailed knowledge of primary and secondary sources, and reflect extensive field work in the regions, thus delivering a picture of the changing and shifting state of this religion, which has existed in China from the days of the Arabian conquest of Central Asia during the period of the Tang dynasty. It was able to keep its stronghold in this region under centuries of Chinese administration, and even spread to parts of China that were culturally dominated by the Han ethnicity.

The volume thus presents historical facets of religions in China spanning a period of more than two thousand years in an open framework that is supplemented by an overview of the state of religions in China from an "inside" view (Zhuo) and – in the case of the two contemporary religions "Christendom" and Islam – an "outside" view (Malek, Gladney). The book hopes to contribute to the study of aspects of Chinese religions – namely, foreign and/or minority religions and the religious situation in present China – that have been somewhat neglected topics in mainstream Western sinological circles, and also in China itself due to the political situation there during most of the second half of the twentieth century.

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