

BOOK REVIEW
Xiaoxuan Wang,
*Maoism and Grassroots Religion:
The Communist Revolution and the Reinvention of Religious
Life in China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020)

Daniel Knorr, University of Chicago

The title of Wang Xiaoxuan's *Maoism and Grassroots Religion: The Communist Revolution and the Reinvention of Religious Life in China* contains two *ands*, both of which are thick with meaning. Readers may be tempted to interpret the first *and* as versus or against, in light of the common-knowledge view that Maoism was intractably hostile to religion in all forms. The second *and* may be taken to imply *followed by*, since, as many readers will be aware, the People's Republic has seen a resurgence of religious activity in recent years, a development usually dated to the period after the end of the highly destructive Cultural Revolution and the beginning of Reform and Opening.¹ If anything, readers might come to the book wondering if the antagonism between the party-state and religion has really abated, given the persistent and, in recent years, increasingly harsh suppression of religion, especially Islam.

Wang's book, however, turns these readings of the title and the historical understanding of religion in Mainland China between 1949 and 1978 that underpin them on their head. Wang builds on recent studies that have exposed the resistance and survival of diverse religious groups (as opposed to the emphasis on their destruction found in earlier scholarship) in local contexts but shifts the conversation to how Maoist policies toward not only religion itself but also land reform transformed religious practices in "unintended" ways (10).² The unintended nature of these consequences resulted from both the episodic nature of political campaigns in the Maoist period, which created space for religious groups to reconstruct and even expand in their wake, and the different qualities of the groups that Wang surveys, which include territorial cults, Buddhist monasteries, Protestant and Catholic churches, and various "salvationist" groups. In broad terms, religious institutions that depended on landed estates for income and were attached to defined territorial units struggled to stem the tide of "deterritorialization" generated by the confiscation and redistribution of land. Religious practice continued and was rebuilt in the wake of destructive political campaigns, but it has only been in the post-1978 period (following the decline of collective institutions) that communal religious groups have re-achieved a degree of institutional stability. Although facing harsh suppression themselves, Christian groups were less dependent on land-holdings, moved more easily into house meetings, and, particularly Protestants, were able to expand—

even during the Maoist years—thanks to denominational diversity and the formation of translocal support networks.

While broad in terms of the religious groups it covers, Wang's book is spatially narrow, focusing on the rural area around Wenzhou, Zhejiang, especially Rui'an County. As Wang acknowledges, Wenzhou is a particular kind of case: before the Communist victory, Zhejiang had more Christians than any other province, and over forty percent of these lived in and around Wenzhou (29). Although the narrative never leaves Wenzhou itself, in several places Wang compares it to other parts of China and provides evidence that it was at least not completely exceptional (e.g. 103).

As one might expect for a "grassroots" project like this, Wang's sources include oral interviews with residents of Wenzhou.³ However, to a surprising extent, he relies on documents from local archives, particularly Rui'an County. Wang notes the limitations of these documents both in terms of the politicized language they use to describe religious groups and the silences they produce. For example, the broad application of the label "superstition" makes it difficult to trace the history of communal religious groups in as fine-grained detail as is possible with Christian churches (14–15). Of course, government documents on Christian groups cannot be read too credulously, but the fact that they consistently speak to the remarkable size of Christian churches in Wenzhou even before 1978 enhances the credibility of Wang's argument rather than diminishing it.

The book is organized roughly chronologically, although it also moves back-and-forth between religious groups. Chapter 1 provides background on Wenzhou and religious activity there prior to 1949, and chapter 2 addresses the effects of early PRC policies, especially land reform, on communal religious traditions, Christian churches, and salvationist groups. This chapter contains what amounts to the first half of the argument about how the revolution affected religious groups differently, with Buddhist and Daoist institutions particularly suffering under the parceling out of temple estates, the disruption of temple leadership and patronage networks caused by purges of local elites, and the limited opportunities available to recoup lost revenues through the performance of ritual practices. Meanwhile, Protestant and Catholic churches also lost land, but this was not so consequential since most of their revenues came

from member donations. They also lost some leaders but mostly those who had ties to the Guomindang government. Likewise, the establishment of the Three-Self Reform Committee did not pose an existential threat to the independence of churches, since it continued to allow considerable autonomy to groups operating in the villages, although it did introduce the problem of government registration, which would cause divisions in later years. Perhaps most interestingly, salvationist groups experienced a surge in popularity in the early years of the PRC. However, becoming a vehicle for expressing popular discontent with Communist policies proved to be their downfall since it brought them greater attention and, predictably, suppression at the hands of the government. Although it focuses on a relatively narrow time period (the early 1950s), chapter 2's attention to nearly the full range religious groups covered in the book and vivid exposition of both the expected and surprising effects of PRC policies on religion combine to make it perhaps the most attractive individual chapter for casual readers and teachers looking to extract a selection from the book.

Chapter 3 picks up the history of communal temples where chapter 2 leaves off in the early 1950s and follows it all the way through to the mid-1970s. It demonstrates that successive political campaigns in these years did not completely eliminate communal ritual activities: in fact, there was a "resurgence" of communal religion in the early 1960s after the disruptions caused by mobilization for the Great Leap Forward and the subsequent famine. However, repeated revivals notwithstanding, Wang concludes that "followers of communal religion were never able to break the cycle of destruction during the Mao years" (82).

Chapters 4–5 cover this same period but from the perspective of Christian churches and tell a very different story. The pressure Christian groups faced from the party-state were no less than those that affected communal religions, including repressive policies during the Anti-Rightist campaign that were even harsher than those promulgated by the central government and severe persecution of Christian leaders during the Cultural Revolution. However, Christian churches, especially Protestants, adapted starting in the early 1960s by shifting towards smaller congregations and secret meetings. Meanwhile, continued use of healing and exorcistic practices and deployment of eschatological discourse helped churches win followers, especially Wang argues, amid the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. Chapter 5's discussion of the complex effects of the Cultural Revolution and churches' reactions to it is especially fascinating. For example, Wang traces how the emergence of a new generation of young pastors in the wake of the repression of 1966–67 led to the formation of inter-denominational exchanges, including churches sharing preachers with each other. This general trend toward exchange characterized Adventists also, but, owing to their distinctive practices, they were forced to look outside Wenzhou for opportunities to connect with their fellow co-religionists (115–116). Shifting the origins of the growth of "underground" churches back from the post-Mao years to the early 1970s might seem like a small intervention to some. However, in so doing Wang exposes how the Cultural Revolution itself created

opportunities for church growth as well as frictions that characterized later years.

Chapters 6–7 bring the narrative to a close by examining some of these frictions in the context of religious growth after 1978. Chapter 6 focuses, again, on Protestant churches, a large number of which were able after 1980 to regain properties previously appropriated by the government while others were allowed to build new church sites. Cooperation with the government entailed registering with the re-established Three-Self Church, which, while advantageous for a number of groups, faced opposition from others, including Catholics generally. Much of this opposition was rooted in past experiences of persecution and residual distrust. However, the question of registration was not the only force that produced schisms in the church, since the slackening of religious policies allowed denominational divisions to reemerge and, in fact, be reinvigorated by theological positions informed by contact with foreign churches. Again, though, competition between churches actually fueled overall growth. Chapter 7 details how, unlike Christian churches, which by virtue of their growth prior to 1978 and political sensitivity ironically benefited from "regulatory priority," local people seeking to revive communal religious institutions initially received little direct support from the government. The decline of collective institutions that had occupied temples in the wake of land reform created opportunities for temple reclamation, but the lack of a legal framework for doing so and the resilience of the "superstition" label applied to these practices posed obstacles. Wang shows that village Elderly People Associations, which have become economic and political players in their own right, have, as government-sanctioned civic institutions, provided a stable vehicle for temple reclamation and have reintegrated ritual organizations into village life.

Although the book is seven chapters long, with a separate introduction and conclusion, it clocks in at under 200 pages (including footnotes), which should give some sense of the briskness of the narrative and conciseness of the argument. One of the most impressive features of the book is that despite focusing on a relatively small area, the argument is by no means built on a small set of anecdotes. Wang introduces readers to many individual institutions and covers a wide range of types of religious groups. He also includes a number of statistics to provide context for the specific cases he discusses. Not focusing on a single religious organization or individual also keeps the book a safe distance from the genre of hagiography and helps readers focus on the broader argument, which is never far from sight. Admittedly, there are downsides to this approach, but these are perhaps inevitable. This book's strength is more in the realm of institutional history rather than lived experience, which may be quite different from what readers would expect given the topic. Moreover, not following any single individual or institution through the course of the book makes it harder to identify with the actors discussed and means that to a large extent, the narrative continuity derives from the major events (Land Reform, Great Leap, Cultural Revolution, and Post-Mao) that structure the text. The fact that chapters on communal religion (3 and 7) book-end the central chapters on Christian groups (4–6) also means that anyone reading the book front-to-

back will have to wait for some time to hear more about communal religion. This structure does make it easy for those primarily interested in either communal religion or Christianity (or specific time periods) to isolate the chapters of most interest to them, although doing so would cut against the value of comparing the experiences of different groups, which is one of the strengths of the book.

The core argument—that grassroots religion was not so much destroyed as transformed during the Maoist years—is effectively prosecuted. Likewise, the argument that this transformation consisted of deterritorialization (the loss of property and the disruption of communal ritual practices) between 1949 and 1978 followed by a reterritorialization in the years since is convincing. Readers familiar with this terminology may be justifiably disappointed that the book largely limits itself to the institutional (property) dimensions of these processes. There is discussion of translocal and even international inter-personal exchange in the case of Christian groups, although the glimpses of it we get seem only to scratch the surface. Moreover, Wang deals hardly at all with the relationship between religious practice and senses of space, which are key to anthropological discussions of “deterritorialization” and “reterritorialization.” Scholars looking to follow up on this question will likely need to adopt a different methodological approach, relying less on government archives and engaging in more close reading of sources produced by religious institutions themselves. Those interested in this question should nevertheless find Wang’s argument that the pre-1978 period was one of religious transformation not just repression to be a valuable launching point.

I will close with a few questions that this book left with me. First, like all case studies, this book walks a fine line between painting a picture of Wenzhou as representative or exceptional. It may be more interesting, though, for readers to think about what kinds of hypotheses could be generated for the study of religious institutions in other places based on the undoubtedly distinctive features of Wenzhou. For example, it seems highly plausible that the dense and diverse Christian communities in the area made the emergence of the kinds of inter-denominational networks Wang describes particularly likely and lent local churches the durability needed to survive periods of suppression while maintaining an ecumenical outlook. I also wonder how the presence of such a strong Christian community has affected the revitalization of communal religion. We see hints of this in chapter 7, where we see the reclamation of church properties created a precedent for communities to reclaim temple spaces (160), but we do not see much direct interaction between groups of different faiths. Has the presence of such a vibrant religious community in Wenzhou promoted inter-faith cooperation or generated conflict? Or, has the co-existence of so many Christian groups in particular obviated the need to look for allies (and enemies) beyond one’s co-religionists? Do these patterns differ from areas with different configurations of religious communities?

As a book about the “grassroots,” the Maoist state is understandably not the primary focus. Nevertheless, readers

will come away with some fascinating insights into the operation of the state between the sub-county and provincial levels, which is no doubt at least partly a reflection of Wang’s use of archival documents. Local cadres play a particularly complex role in the narrative. At times they appear as the protectors and patrons of religious groups, but there are also instances of animosity. While the narrative focuses largely on the perspective of religious institutions themselves, historically, the question was not just what the state could do for religion but what religion could do for the state. We see this in the years leading up to 1949 in cooperation between various religious groups and the Communists or Nationalists and after 1978 with the reintegration of temples, ritual life, and local politics, in which, Wang notes, “there are echoes of imperial times” (178). However, this observation seems to cut against the grain of the book’s larger argument that the Maoist period was one of transformation. Is it possible that while religious institutions have changed, their relationship to the state has actually remained relatively stable from a broader historical perspective? How do differences of opinion among Christians about participation in the Three-Self movement affect state-building? Does some churches’ refusal to participate undermine the utility of this institution? Or, does the additional power accrued by local churches through alliance with the Three-Self movement, which they have wielded against village officials at times (156), actually pose more of a problem?

Finally, what is “Maoism”? Like other scholarship in this vein, *Maoism and Grassroots Religion* both de-centers the perspective of top political leaders in favor of a local framework and offers a highly nuanced account of a period that is far too complex for a single chronological label. Nevertheless, Mao(ism) is always there, at least as a point of reference. The label has value insofar as the rhythm of political campaigns structures both the book and the transformation of religious practice Wang discusses. However—circling back to the question of what the *and* connecting Maoism and grassroots religion means—are we supposed to understand the form of religion that emerged from these years as something standing apart from a Maoist political mainstream? Or, should religion broaden our perspective of what Maoism entailed and how it continues to shape contemporary China in surprising ways? Or, is “Maoism” an empty signifier, retained only by dint of its convenience?

¹ See, for instance, Ian Johnson, *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion after Mao* (New York: Penguin, 2017).

² Works in this newer generation of scholarship on religion and traditional culture under Mao that depart from the more pessimistic portrayals of the effects of the Maoist period which Wang cites include Stephen Jones, *Plucking the Winds: Lives of Village Musicians in Old and New China* (Leiden: CHIME Foundation, 2004); Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, “Politics of Faith: Christian Activism and the Maoist State in Chaozhou, Guangdong Province,” *The China Review* 9, no. 2 (2009): 17–39; Chen-yang Kao, “The Cultural Revolution and the Emergence of Pentecostal-style Protestantism in China,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 24, no. 2 (2009): 171–88; Paul Mariani, *Church Militant: Bishop Kung and Catholic*

Resistance in Communist Shanghai (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Henrietta Harrison, *The Missionary’s Curse and Other Tales from a Chinese Catholic Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye, *China and the True Jesus: Charisma and Organization in a Chinese Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

³ Readers will note that various aspects of Wang’s book (and some questions raised by my review) resonate closely with Jeremy Brown and Matthew Johnson, ed., *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China’s Era of High Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), which includes an essay by Wang.

Response

Wang Xiaoxuan

I thank Daniel Knorr for the careful review and the PRC History Review for the opportunity to respond to questions raised. Let me start with the one on how the book may help study religious institutions in other parts of China. The Wenzhou case shows great unevenness in the revolutionary experience of religious communities in many dimensions, among which is variance across space. This implies that what happened in Wenzhou should not be assumed for other regions. For example, Protestant churches elsewhere might not have fared as well as churches in Wenzhou, needless to say experiencing expansion. On the other hand, however, readers may likewise see unevenness of religious changes under Mao in other places that is crucial to the structuring of local religious landscape today. More importantly, local factors such as local politics and religious culture, as the Wenzhou case suggests, featured prominently in religious communities' encounter with the 1949 revolution. They often significantly shaped if not determined how national campaigns/policies transformed local religious life. The pre-1949 history of local religious institutions, for instance, had great bearing on their capacity to adapt to the storms of the Maoist campaigns. Parameters discussed in the book like this may prove useful for the discussion of other places.

On whether rich religious diversity has promoted inter-faith cooperation or generated conflict in Wenzhou: in the local religious world prior to the arrival of Christianity, different traditions were closely engaged with each other as they sometimes competed and sometimes cooperated in serving the communities. Yet Christianity is perceived as a belief system separated from the rest of the local religious world by both non-Christians and Christians themselves. Since the early twentieth century, the region has not seen large scale violent anti-Christianity incidents. On the other hand, on religious matters, there is not much cooperation between local Christians and non-Christians either. It may be worth noting that, follower-wise, Christianity was and still is a minority religion even in Wenzhou.

Based on anecdotal evidence from fieldwork, my best guess is that during the Mao era when waves of political campaigns muted traditional village life, they also muted (but not necessarily eradicated) frictions between Christians and non-Christians. Disputes over the participation of village traditional activities were often the source of tension. Official documents of the Maoist era that I came across hardly mention any faith-induced conflicts among followers of different religions. Tension (and indeed cooperation) instead came from within the church as various denominations all had to struggle for survival. After the Cultural Revolution, especially in the 1980s, evidence shows instances of faith-related frictions related to, for example, contribution to communal rituals or genealogy

compilation among Christians and non-Christians. Though in the new century, tension has rarely gone beyond everyday cultural stereotypes and prejudices.

“Echoes of imperial times” only points to certain similarities of contemporary China with imperial China in terms of the role of traditional rural organizations. Religious institutions' relationship with the state had certainly not been stable for a while following a strain of reforms, revolutions and wars in the long twentieth century. Yet the revitalization of traditional rural organizations shows the amazing ability of religious communities to adapt and re-forge connections to the state. What is highlighted in the book is the reinvention process that stabilized state-communal religion relations. It is certainly not a return, which I make clear in the conclusion.

The Three-Self churches, like national associations of other religions, are the channel to exert control over and inculcate state ideology among religious followers. The resistance inside church against the Three-Self movement certainly affects its utility as an institution. From the state-building perspective, the rejection of the Three-Self movement is also resistance against bureaucratization, making it difficult for the state to effectively reach out to Christian communities. Therefore, house churches out of the reach of the state today remain an unstable element and potential threat.

The association with the Three-Self Movement is better conceived as a legalization process that does not lend power to local churches. State recognition, though, does put them in a better position, especially when they sought to claim back or reopen churches after the Cultural Revolution. For local cadres, dealing with a state-sanctioned church may be more delicate than dealing with an unregistered home gathering. However, for policy-makers in Beijing in the early 1980s, as my book mentions, the biggest concern was that the underground status of most churches at that time would push Christians further into antagonism and hostility against the government. The guideline therefore was to channel them into meeting at churches approved by the state.

I do not define “Maoism” in the book. As critical as it is to the PRC and twentieth-century global history, the concept of “Maoism” is elusive and defies definition. However, I hope that I have made it clear that in the book Maoism is primarily associated with the Party's ideology that entailed certain ways of governing. This is how Maoism became relevant to local life, including religious life, after 1949. Along this line, the book demonstrates that the totality and temporality, especially the latter, of Maoist governance are the keys to understanding the vicissitudes of religious life in the PRC. The rhythm of political campaigns after 1949 punctuated religious life and to a large

extent structured the behaviors of both state agents and ordinary local residents, a phenomenon that readers will find helpful to explore other aspects of life under Mao, from the evolution of private economy to the construction of memories.

As totalitarian and coercive as it is, Maoist governance especially at the grassroots level, as the books shows, also at times involved negotiation, compromise and manipulation. Grassroots actors— followers of village religion, village cadres, ritual masters, and religious organizations—were not policy makers, but they quickly learned/relearned to cope with or even manipulate policies and political campaigns. From that perspective, a new understanding of Maoism as governance has to look at the emergence and evolution of new ways of being governed that have helped reshape the fabric of local society.