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Critical approaches to religion in China

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Abstract
This is a discussion of possible approaches for the critical study of Chinese religions.

Keywords
China, ritual theory, theories of religion

At first glance, the religions of classical China would appear to fit very well within the categories that have often been used to analyze religious practices from societies labeled as ''pre-modern'' and ''traditional.'' I will try to claim, however, that this first impression is potentially misleading, albeit in a somewhat counter-intuitive way. But my primary goal will be to argue that one finds in classical China an indigenous body of theory that may force us to re-think some of these categories themselves and that could thus helpfully contribute to a critical theory of religions in general. In order to develop this argument, it will be helpful first to discuss some of the general categories concerning so-called traditional religions that have been so influential thus far.

Analyzing possession rituals in Madagascar, Maurice Bloch once argued that the rituals served to allow the elders to speak the words of the ancestors. As he elaborated:

> In the political context the elder has to fight off rivals. However, in the role of religion this is not necessary any more. Indeed one can say that a political event becomes religious when individual power struggles have become unnecessary. Formalization thus not only removed what is being said from a particular time and particular place, it has also removed it from the actual speaker, and thus created another supernatural being which the elder is slowly becoming or speaks for. The creation of this other supernatural being is best seen in possession, where the notion that two beings are present, one supernatural and one natural, is explicit. The elder is transformed into an ancestor speaking eternal truth; this transformation seems to me the articulation between traditional authority and religion. (Bloch, 1989: 44–45).

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A momentary hierarchy in a contingent world of political conflict is rendered enduring by making it seem divinely sanctioned: the elder speaks not as a political actor but as an ancestor speaking an eternal truth.

Such a theoretical move is a common one in much of twentieth century critical theory concerning religion: looking at the religious beliefs of a given area, and then unmasking those beliefs as ideological constructs that serve to render a given social order as either natural or divinely sanctioned. As Durkheim had famously defined the sacred:

> Society in general, simply by its effect on men's minds, undoubtedly has all that is required to arouse the sensation of the divine. A society is to its members what a god is to its faithful. A god is first of all a being that man conceives of as superior to himself in some respects and on whom he believes he depends. (Durkheim, 1995: 208).

The sacred, in short, is society in disguised form.

Much of the force of this unmasking lies in the underlying humanistic impulse: what earlier, pre-modern societies saw as a world controlled by divine figures and/or ancestors is actually, the analyst argues, a contingent world of social relations. The often implicit normative argument would then hold that, once humans realize this, they would be better able to order the world according to their own interests. Such critiques often rely on a pre-modern/modern divide, with modernity being defined as the moment when this disguise is unmasked, allowing the social scientist to see the sacred for what it is: society.

At first glance, classical Chinese religious practices would appear to call out for such an unmasking. In classical China, perhaps to an even greater degree than in Madagascar, ancestral rituals were integrally related to a society organized around partriarchal lineages. At least part of the political culture of classical China also involved a claim that the ruler was the Son of Heaven and the father and mother of the people—rulership thus being defined as a divinely-sanctioned order, with the various partriarchal lineages being unified by the ruler into a single lineage order connected to Heaven.

But what is peculiar about these religious practices in China is the degree to which the unmasking is so, well, easy. Allow me to give another example before I make the point. The above example dealt with the divine understood in ancestral lines. But there are other images of the divine as well. Another common one is of the divine organized into a bureaucracy—mirroring, needless to say, the imperial bureaucracy of humans on earth. Here, the unmasking would require us point out that the human bureaucracy of the state is being given divine sanction.

In other words, rituals of patriarchal lineages involve gods defined in ancestral terms. Rituals of a bureaucratic state involve gods defined in bureaucratic terms. And so on—by now the pattern is becoming clear. As Arthur Wolf argued long ago, ''The most important point to be made about the Chinese religion is that it mirrors the social landscape of its adherents'' (Wolf, 1974: 131). Or, as Robert Hymes has put it more recently:

> What were the Chinese gods? Were they heavenly officials, governing the fate and fortunes of their worshippers as China's own bureaucracy governed their worldly lives? Or were they personal beings: patrons, or parents or guardians, offering protection to those who relied on them? . . . Two models informed how the Chinese saw gods, and whether they were bureaucrats or personal protectors depended on and still depends on who worships them or who tells about them, in what context, and to what purpose. (Hymes, 2002: 1)

In short, the divine world is a perfect mirror of whatever the social arrangement of the participants happens to be. Far from naturalizing or giving divine sanction to what is in fact a contingent world of social relations, the divine order itself appears to be fully contingent, and explicitly dependent on the social arrangements that are quite openly seen as contingent as well. The contingent social arrangements, in other words, are clearly seen to be such, and the divine is explicitly seen as being defined by these contingent social relations. So, in short, what are we to unmask, if the practices are already explicitly doing what we would want to unmask them as doing?

It is often the case that an analyst states that the culture she or he is studying fails to fit this or that theoretical model, and the model is then said to be in need of re-working. In the case at hand, however, the interesting issue is the opposite: religious practices in early China often involve doing precisely what recent Western theories say they should, except that what the theorists will read as the real stuff—the stuff that is being unmasked by the theorist—is often precisely what the early practices are trying to do. If Durkheim thinks that the divine is being created in the form of humanity because believers are unknowingly discussing society through the divine, the early Chinese practices involve an explicit attempt to transform the divine into forms that resemble those found in society—whether those be bureaucratic or personal. And if a contemporary analyst wants to argue that religious practices are in fact creating the gods that the believers think they are worshipping, in early China the claim was explicitly that this is precisely what the practices are doing: they are creating the gods, at least in the sense of transforming the divine powers into relations based explicitly on the social world of the worshippers. In short, what a contemporary analyst might want to unmask is precisely what the practices are openly doing.

To discuss the implications of this, allow me first to delve a bit into classical Chinese political theology. In classical China, divine powers were not commonly seen as stable or as constitutive of a normative order. On the contrary, the most common figures that one had to deal with were called *gui*—best translated as either "ghosts" or "demons." As the translation of "ghost" implies, those *gui* whose origin was known were usually deceased humans—deceased humans who would haunt the living and, in their anger and resentment, throw down harm upon the living. One would often encounter other *gui* as well whose origins one would not know. These may or may not have been deceased humans, but they are clearly highly dangerous and demonic powers. Beyond these were the higher spirits above. These tended to be more powerful than the *gui*, but also more indifferent to the world of humans below. If the problem in dealing with *gui* was one of dealing with angry and resentful demonic presences, the problem of dealing with spirits is that they tended to be indifferent and unconcerned with humans altogether.

Humans, moreover, had tendencies toward being both resentful and/or indifferent toward other humans as well. (Indeed, a common view of death at the time involved the view that the energies that would make up the ghosts and the spirits were already within living humans.) Rituals were attempts to domesticate humans and help them forge better relationships with each other, and rituals dealing with ghosts and spirits equally involved attempts to domesticate them and draw them into webs of relationships with humans. In both cases, the rituals were explicitly seen as constructing a world of relationships from what had otherwise been a world of either intense conflict or indifference.

With the ghosts and spirits, the goal would be to transform the figures into ancestors who would then relate to the humans as lineage relatives, or into officials in a celestial bureaucracy, or into personal gods and goddesses. With the living humans, the goal would be to

domesticate the dispositions of the humans such that they could also relate to each other in these lineage, official, and personal forms.

But this domestication was always limited. Within rituals, one would try to transform the participants (both human and divine), but, even if this transformation was successful, one would still have to leave the ritual space. Ritual, then, was a recurrent attempt to create, even if for limited periods of time, an artificial, constructed world of perfect lineage relationships, of perfect bureaucratic efficiency, of perfect personal connections. But the efforts were always seen as doomed.

As some colleagues and I have argued elsewhere, ritual in China (and not just China) often operates not in a register of belief but rather in a register of "as if" (Seligman et al., 2008). Within the ritual space, one is trying to act "as if" the world being created in that ritual space were a true one. One tries to have the dispositions required to relate to the other participants within the ritual space in the proper ways required of that ritual. One of the most famous statements to this effect is from the *Analects* of Confucius:

> He sacrificed as if present. He sacrificed to the spirits as if the spirits were present. The master said, "If I do not participate in the sacrifice, it is as if I did not sacrifice." (Lunyu, 3/12)

The concern is not with belief but rather with creating a ritual space wherein one can act as if a certain situation were the case. But, and this is the key point, the ritual itself serves to underline this "as if" quality. The ritual operates precisely by emphasizing the disjunction between the world being created by the ritual space and the world that exists outside of that ritual space.

Let us return to the issue of possession mentioned above. One of the most significant possession rituals in classical China also involved ancestors. But the key of the ritual was not to convince the audience to see the elder as some kind of ancestral and enduring authority figure. On the contrary, the organization of the ritual involved an explicit underlining of the fact that the ritual space was fully disjunct from the world outside of it. Imagine a scenario where a ruler has passed away. His son thus becomes the ruler, and the deceased father must be made into an ancestor. In the rituals involved in this, it is the grandson (the living ruler's son) who impersonates the deceased:

> Now, according to the way of sacrificing, the grandson acted as the impersonator of the king's father. He who was made to act as the impersonator was the son of he who made the sacrifice. The father faced north and served him. By means of this, he made clear the way of a son serving his father. This is the relation of father and son ("Ji tong," Liji, 131/26/14).

The son plays the role of the grandfather, and the father—the living ruler—plays the role of the son to his father—who is actually his own son. And it is precisely through this reversed role-playing that the relation between father and son—the living son to his living father, and the living father to his deceased father—is made clear.

The reversed role-playing is, clearly, based upon a disjunction between such ritual roles and those outside the ritual space—a disjunction that is in fact strongly emphasized by underlining the difference between the ritual space and the world outside it:

> The ruler met the victim but did not meet the impersonator. This avoided impropriety. When the impersonator was outside the gates of the temple, then he was seen as a subject; when he was inside the temple, then he was fully the ruler. When the ruler was outside the gates of the temple,

> he was seen as the ruler; when he entered the gates of the temple, he was fully the son. Therefore by not going outside, he made clear the propriety of ruler and subject ("Ji tong," Liji, 131/26/13).

Just as the reversed role-playing of the father and son is precisely the way to inculcate the relationship of father and son, so is the reversed role-playing of ruler and subject the proper way to inculcate that relationship as well.

In both cases, it is the disjunction that is emphasized. The goal is not to convince the populace that the ruler is in fact closely related to an enduring ancestral figure. Nor is the goal even to convince the participants in the ritual that the ruler is closely linked to an enduring ancestral figure: the role reversal ensures that the participants could not conceivably confuse their non-ritual social roles with those roles they take on within the ritual. The concern is rather to use the ritual space to alter the relationship between the participants: they reverse roles and then relate to each other as if they had a proper relationship. If the deceased father does join the ritual as well, then the same points would hold: instead of being a dangerous ghost, the role reversal would help to transform him into being a proper father to his living son, just as the father is learning to be a proper father to his son and the son is learning to be a proper son to his father. The clear assumption is that none of these participants have a proper relationship outside of the ritual space: fathers are not always good fathers to their sons and vice versa, the living and deceased do not always relate well to each other, and rulers and subjects do not always play their proper roles. But, strongly emphasizing that disjunction, the participants are then asked to act as if they do maintain these proper relationships, and to develop the dispositions proper to them. The perfect patriarchal lineage is thus explicitly posed in the ritual itself as a ritual construct, and one that by definition is not seen as existing outside the ritual in either the human or divine spheres.

What I have quoted from here is not a description of the ritual but rather a body of ritual theory from classical China.[1] But what is interesting to note here is that this body of ritual theory arose not, as much of twentieth century Western ritual theory arose, from an attempt to unmask the workings of ritual—workings that would be seen as serving to inculcate a contingent social order into an enduring belief system. On the contrary, the indigenous theories that arose in classical China were based upon working out the implications of the ways that rituals were explicitly operating, and thus emphasizing the disjunction between the world of ritual and the world of the everyday.

The theories, moreover, were explicitly humanistic, but not in a debunking sense: the goal was a human effort to domesticate both the human and divine realms, in an effort that was seen as always doomed to ultimate failure. Moreover, the political theology was not based on a belief structure about the divine figures. As we saw in the quotation above attributed to Confucius, the rituals could be seen as working quite apart from whether or not the spirits really took part in them.

The same body of theories would also explicitly present the formation of the ruler as the Son of Heaven in the same way: the goal was not to instill a belief that Heaven had in fact given birth to the ruler. The goal was to create a ritually constructed relationship of lineage between Heaven, the ruler, and the populace—a relationship that would be seen along the same "as if" lines: the participants should act as if Heaven was the father of the ruler and the ruler the father and mother of the people, ritually developing the proper dispositions that such a constructed lineage relationship would require.[2]

This is why, as noted above, the cultural force of a critical unmasking fails to work with these practices: a humanistic unmasking of an ideological attempt to create a belief in some

kind of an enduring order of divine sanction or ancestral precedent misses the point. Indeed, if one looks for indigenous critical theories posed in opposition to those theories that we have been discussing thus far, one sees quickly that the cultural force for critique often went the other way. For example, many of the millenarian movements that developed in China did so precisely out of a claim that there were in fact good deities that created the world and ruled over it properly, thus creating a moral cosmos in which the good were rewarded and the bad punished. The unmasking would thus be aimed at the domesticating practices of the day. For example, the *Xiang'er* commentary, one of the early millenarian texts, argued that sacrificial practices, far from transforming a dangerous and/or indifferent world, were in fact empowering the demons at the expense of the higher and beneficent deities who did not eat sacrifices (Puett, 2004). Indigenous critical theories, in other words, were often the ones that were intentionally theological in opposition to the common practices of the day.

This brings us to our larger theoretical point. As figures like Talal Asad (1993) and Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) have argued, many of our current ritual theories are based in part on a Protestant political theology. And it would appear that such a theology may still haunt some of our critical theories of religion as well. More specifically, some of our critical theories may be overly tied to Protestant definitions of belief and to culturally specific definitions of divinity and humanity. Hence, the characteristic move of reading humanism as a distinctly modern phenomenon, of reading humans within traditional societies as having believed in a transcendental world controlled by enduring divine and/or ancestral figures, and of seeing the project of a critical theory of religion to unmask these beliefs as in fact ideologies reifying a given societal hierarchy.

One of the things that is exciting in dealing with Chinese religions is that one has indigenous ritual theories, and hotly debated ritual theories at that, dealing with precisely these issues of how rituals operate and why rituals do and do not work. And these should become part of our theoretical discussions. In other words, I would like to argue that part of what would be exciting for a critical approach to Chinese religions is not just that Chinese religions would be an interesting object for our analyses (although that is certainly the case), but that in China one finds indigenous theories that themselves should be taken seriously as theory. Taking such indigenous theories seriously as theory and bringing them into our discussions would therefore help us to note the degree to which some of our current understandings are still based upon implicitly Protestant political theologies. And ritual theories based on different political theologies might bring to the fore new and exciting issues for critical theory in general. In short, I would like to argue that developing critical approaches to the study of Chinese religion should involve not simply taking Chinese religions as the object of our study but also allowing our critical theories to be expanded and challenged by the indigenous theories of religion found in China and elsewhere.

Notes

1. The ritual theory is collected in the *Records of Rites* (Liji 禮記), compiled by the first century BCE and defined as one of the "Five Classics."
2. For fuller discussions of these rituals theories, see Puett (2005, 2010).

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