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Stephan Feuchtwang

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION, CHARISMA AND GHOSTS

CHINESE LESSONS FOR ADEQUATE THEORY

RELIGION AND SOCIETY

Stephan Feuchtwang

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Chapter 1
Introduction

It took several years, two decades indeed, of writing and teaching before I could seriously attempt to break out of the area of China studies and the anthropology of China into the general terrain of theory and comparison. In those decades from 1965 (the year of my first dissertation, on *feng-shui*), China had changed as a power in the world. Interest in China had turned from an area of Cold War politics into somewhere on international tourist itineraries and the source of commodities for every household. China is now the future of the world and the undercutting competitor, no longer Red and distant, but the exotic that everyone knows a little about personally in their own town and in their own houses. I know that does not make my interests in Chinese gods, ghosts and the performance of rituals, in particular the festivals of territorial temples, or even the politics of religion, a must-know for a world readership. They are certainly of great political and economic importance, but they are not of immediate interest to tourist, trader or investor, politician or advisor. Nevertheless the coincidence of my own maturation as an anthropologist able to address with Chinese knowledge general conceptions of religion and ritual and China's transformation into a centre of world gravity and attention gives me some hope that what can be learned from China in the more general theoretical area in which I have specialized may reach a sympathetic reader who is not a China specialist.

Chinese relations with the rest of the world are now a matter of common experience. But the migration of things, ideas, and people into and from China has always been substantial and significant, even during centuries of official Chinese closure on one hand and wistfully formed ignorance or fantasy – think of Chinoiserie – on the other. Things have travelled to and fro, sometimes taking centuries to arrive – such as the high hair pieces of court fashion that started in the Tang court in the ninth century and ended at the French court in the fourteenth century (Adshead 2002: 28–29). Much more speedily, the idea of 'religion' formed during the fifteenth century in Italy, reached China with the Jesuits in the seventeenth. Migrating in the other direction and at the same time, the idea of China as an enlightened bureaucratic state, governed according to the humane ideas of a philosopher, called Confucius, fed the seventeenth century revolt against feudal privilege and clerical domination in Europe, be it that of the Jesuit-led Counter-reformation or the bigotry of Protestant churches. This vision of China alternated with a notion of a backward and superstitious peasantry under an Oriental despotism. Travel transforms the thing or the idea and of course the person that travels. What was learned by the Chinese-reading and –writing Jesuits changed them into court advisors but was filtered through their own density, their Christian mission, and it was learned from their Latin and filtered again by European philosophers such as Hegel and yet again by Protestant missionaries on their way to China. It is transformed yet again in the twentieth century Chinese republican movements and governments, when China as a civilisation and 'religion' were used as a constitutional category and a tool of policy by atheist parties.

The intriguing story of such transformations and how they themselves affected reformers in China is the subject of the first chapter. But I am not writing a history. Rather, I am intrigued by the limitations and possibilities of the category 'religion' and its attendant theories. In particular I am concerned with the problem of their adequacy to a description and explication of the rituals conducted by the so-called 'peasants', supposed by intellectuals and the political classes both in Europe and in China to be benighted, and the way the category and theories have been used, as has so-called Confucianism, as a purportedly superior knowledge by those in positions of political and intellectual authority, seeking to correct if not also to raise 'peasants' from their ignorance. My subject is therefore, by necessity, the politics of religious knowledge. But beyond that is the question of the adequacy of a concept of religion, whether it can become a theory adequate to the rituals and religious practices of common people and their own intellectuals, even when the intellectuals who rule or advise rulers in China or in Europe profess that they do not have a proper religion – just superstition.

The class of people with long years of schooling and higher education base themselves on learned expositions of texts that are ranked and collected as those of great traditions. The question for me is not whether commoners practice religious rituals, but whether our (Chinese and European) concepts of ritual and religion are adequate to these very common practices and their own references to textual traditions. A concept of religion derived from Reformation Europe has proved inadequate.

How must it be transformed to become adequate? That is the subject of the third and fourth chapters, in Part 1.

As an anthropologist from Europe I have inherited an intellectual tradition in which the study of civilisations gave way to the study of cultures and in the same process the study of 'ancient' and 'archaic' civilisations was left to literary, archaeological and linguistic disciplines. Such theories of religion and ritual as were developed within the study of cultures, in every country, great and small, were based on the intensive observation of rituals usually but not always of commoners, sometimes of succession to high offices. Despite this turning away from the ancient and archaic in anthropology the theories of religion and ritual, of rites of passage, of sacrifice and of succession were often derived from studies of ancient and archaic civilisations, such as the biblical, the Greek and Roman, and the various Oriental civilisations. By including commoners in 'archaic' and, now, republican China I am drawing in the large-scale civilisational perspective from historians to the development and transformation of their theories of ritual after many decades of their exposure to local and small-scale studies

For those who are used to thinking that religion is a metaphysics, or a world view, providing an ethic of conduct in the world and a meaning to death and life – such as the cycle of karma and the goal of selflessness, or the virtue of love and forgiving kindness to others in a world of suffering – all of which can be read in scriptures and their more profound expositions, anthropological accounts of religion will seem strange. They start from descriptions of rituals, sequences of prescribed actions and the manipulations of symbols in them, accompanied by food for all the senses, costumes, masks, feasts, music, made and sought objects, medicinal plants, kinds of wood, some of them sculptured, pictorial frescoes, sometimes in elaborate buildings. By observation of the repetition of these performances and the appearances in them and elsewhere, the anthropologist's research is a long process. Noting that the colours, shapes, sounds and actions appear in several contexts, not just in rituals and differently in the ordinary lives of different participants, sometimes using their exegeses but primarily by observation, though the rituals could be summarised as, say, a requiem mass, the anthropologist constructs the associations that the actions and materials of a requiem mass are for each of the quite different participants in them, from ritual experts to obedient attendees. Words are just one of the materials, the reciting of scriptures just one of the actions. By inference as much as or more than by the words of scriptures, the poetry of ritual can be shown to construct a world. But it is not primarily a philosophy of life. First and primarily ritual is movement, a sequence of phases that convey something encompassing, inclusive and authoritative, the same for all who take part in it but capable of many interpretations. Ritual is not an explication of a scriptural message for the non-literate, as many mosaics, stained glass windows and frescoes are in the churches and cathedrals of Europe. Nor is it a retelling of myths, which are also represented in wall paintings and collected in books, even though myths do inform ritual, such as the requiem mass. Ritual is performed in and for itself, for what it conveys in its own terms. The rest is secondary and exegetical.

So from this anthropological point of departure, the religious ritual of a civilisation has to be related to textual traditions, respect for various authorities including those of ritual experts, diviners, and the political masters that determine what is correct and orthodox. These authorities may not be in harmony. To assume some form of basic social solidarity is misleading.

Comparison with the sources from which the concepts of ritual and religion were derived, ever broadening the comparison, transforms those concepts, just as if they had travelled. Indeed they have travelled, through the thoughts of scores of different observers in different places. Comparative travel of this conceptual kind is not cosmopolitan – not just an accumulation of references to different cultures. It is critical. Each adjustment is a critique of the thought as it appeared in other authors' texts after their observations.

The book before you is then a critical reworking of concepts of religion and ritual based on comparative observations of ritual among common people in Taiwan and in the People's Republic of China (PRC). It is work I have done over more than two decades until the present day (in 2009). The 'work' of writing papers for presentation at conferences and seminars, many of them rewritten for publication in journals or as chapters in edited books, but all of them revised for this book, is the work of trying to make sense.[1] I have tried to make sense of the anthropology I learned and the information I had gathered from reading about Chinese religion and ritual before living in Taiwan 1966–68, intensely curious about all the rituals, domestic and more communal, I could observe, and then trying to make sense of what I had learned in Taiwan, constantly renewing comparison and critical reading in anthropology and related disciplines, travelling to Italy and other parts of Europe, mixing with colleagues whose research in other civilisations, African, Indian, Amazonian, Melanesian, as well as with Chinese and other colleagues in the study of China. I have conducted joint fieldwork with Chinese colleagues in the PRC and with Taiwanese colleagues in Taiwan, but just as influential has been work with doctoral students, as advisor, supervisor or examiner, learning from having to think with them and what they had learned in the field. One such younger colleague, in the course of fieldwork and on into writing kept repeating, with a smile, 'it's a mess, it's a mess'. It's the mess of everything constantly being called into question that invigorates creative and critical thought. Above all what is learned from the rituals and their participants themselves in this 'mess' suggests, of itself, new concepts. Parts two and three are the results of working this out. Part two is a complete reconsideration of the concept of charisma, critical of its sociological derivation from the Christian idea of grace, the biblical idea of the prophet, and the Greek idea of the hero. Part three offers a concept of ghosts derived first from studies of China, including mine, but then broadened by a comparative effort. Both charisma and ghosts are necessarily also political. Charisma is a concept of leadership in the sociologies of religion and of political and legal authority. Ghosts must be juxtaposed with more authorised recognitions of the dead, among which are officially commemorated martyrs and heroes.

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[1] Chapter 3 was first published with the same title in Baker, Hugh D.R. and Feuchtwang, Stephan (eds) (1991) An Old State in New Settings: studies in the social anthropology of China in memory of Maurice Freedman. Oxford: JASO; chapter 4 as 'On religious ritual as deference and excessive communication' Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 2007 vol 13 no 1 pp 57–72; chapter 5 as 'Centres and margins: the organization of extravagance as self-government' in Frances Pine and Joao Pina-Cabral (eds) (2008) On the Margins of Religion. Berghahn Books. pp 135–150; chapter 6 as 'Public emotions

There is in addition another, bigger, more general reason than the particularity of charisma and ghosts for the political dimension to this study of religion and ritual. Religion and ritual are forms of authority in their own terms as prescribed action and transmitted signs, symbols

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in a colonial context: a case of spirit writing in Taiwan under Japanese occupation' in Amal Treacher, Perry 6 and Susannah Radstone (eds) (2007) Public Emotions. Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, pp 85–101; chapter 7 as 'Suggestions for a redefinition of charisma' Nova Religio 2008 vol 12 No 2 pp 90–105; chapter 8 as 'The avenging ghost: paradigm of a shameful past' in Lin Mei-rong (ed) (2003) Belief, Ritual and Society. Nankang, Taipei: Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, pp 7–36; chapter 9 as 'The transmission of traumatic loss: a case study from Taiwan' in Nicolas Argenti and Katharina Schramm (eds) (2009) Remembering Violence. Berghahn. pp 229–250.

and materialisations of hierarchy, including formations of the selves of participants. They are juxtaposed to other forms of authority, legal, customary, political or administrative. But more than that, they interact. To some extent they authorise these other forms of authority, and at the same time, they are subject to them. In particular, all the fieldwork to which I refer has been conducted, in Taiwan, China, and elsewhere, under states that can be described as modern and secular, parties in an international system of states, managers of economies whose actors participate in global capitalist economic activities, directly or indirectly. The sources of income that finance the rituals observed, the purchase of the requisite materials and objects, such as the building of temples or the buying of incense, and the means by which sacrifices are made, animal offerings bred, slaughterers paid, ritual experts entertained and paid by gift, are economies of the production and exchange of commodities, themselves taxed and regulated by modern states. 'Modern' states are distinguishable from preceding states by their sheer size and by the breadth of their competences, but most relevant for the study of religion, charisma and ghosts, they are secular in the minimal sense that they govern more than one religion and the object of their government is a people and its future – the project of endless modernisation, in which some benefit and many loose or are left to feel powerless. What this relation of secular government and the modernising project has to ritual and religion, charisma and ghosts will be extensively explored and refined in Part 1.

I have said that I am not writing history. But since ritual and religion are forms of transmission, an inevitable topic is the extent to which what has been transmitted from before the formation of modern states is retained and how much has it been transformed. This is a deceptively dramatic topic in the PRC, where the suppression of superstition begun in the last dynastic reforms, growing in extent under the Nationalist republic, culminated in the era of Maoism with the elimination of all but a very few religious institutions. The restoring of rituals and of religious institutions since 1978 has been amazingly widespread. But the drama of revival is deceptive. Since the years of suppression did not in most areas outlast memories and did not destroy all records, the fact of transmission with transformation has continued. It needs to be seen as a transformation in a far longer historical duration. The history of the spread of ancestor worship from ruling to ruled classes in the Song dynasty, of the spread of territorial temple cults, and of syncretic sects and changes in the exercises for centring vital energies (*qi*), is on a far greater timescale than the formation of a republican state. It is more in line with the increasing marketisation of the Chinese economy, and the Ming and Qing dynastic states' hardening of their imperial boundaries, processes of several centuries.

A related but quite distinct question, disguised by the apparently inclusive topic of historical change, is what senses of time and of place and of life and death in those senses is transmitted. Over the years of writing and thinking about transmission I have been drawn to the idea that different senses of long-term time are transmitted, and that the project of modernisation does not obliterate all other transmitted senses of time. Indeed, one way of more adequately describing ritual and religion is to distinguish not only sacred from profane places and landscapes, sacred occasions from other kinds of event, but also a distinct kind of temporality. This is a theme that in this book I develop in the context of thinking about ghosts, who are reminders of the margins not only of places but also of temporalities.

In all these ways of working out an adequate description of some prevalent Chinese religious rituals, I have certainly not covered all manifestations of ritual and religion in China – for an introduction to that see Feuchtwang 2009. But I hope to have done two things. I hope I have been able to convey some of the rich complexity of the sense of life and death made by very common and widespread religious rituals in China. Beyond that I hope to have made a critical contribution to saying what religious ritual is, in general. I hope also to have shown that it is not desirable, nor possible, to avoid discussing politics alongside religion. It used to be, in polite English society, that both topics were avoided. They are too interesting! In for a penny, in for a pound, the last chapter is about the politics of regulating these prevalent religious rituals in the PRC today.[2] Increasing prosperity has meant more spending on religious rituals, many new ones, many old. It is an essay on secular government, not secularisation. In it I apply the theory that I have developed in all the previous chapters. It also opens onto a topic that I have been thinking about but have reached no conclusions – whether certain forms of religion, such as local, territorial cults, will cease to exist, while others, more congregational and voluntaristic, spread and thrive, or whether they will simply co-exist.

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[2] This chapter is dedicated with thanks to Professor Gustavo Benavides, who included a chapter on policy toward superstition in China that I wrote for his edited book on Religion and Politics, and who much later invited me to put together this book for the series he edits.

I come back finally to the main point I am trying to make. It is that the religious rituals, which people transmit and to which they contribute, are creations of a sense of death and life, of hierarchy and authority, and of moral centres, the places and people who engage in rituals as their own centres of authority. They have as much if not more symbolic wealth and construct as complex a world as any textual doctrine normally accepted as ‘religion’.

Part 1
Religion

Chapter 2
‘Religion’ and its historical transfer into China

Among the magnificent incised stone icons, called graffiti, framed by mosaics on the floor of the great nave in the unfinished cathedral in Sienna, Italy, near a chapel of votive offerings, is ‘religion’. The original was done in the 18th century but it was replaced in 1870 and is thus one of the very last designs in the long history of this floor which started in the fifteenth century, so ‘Religion’ was one of its last inclusions. It is one of twelve theological virtues. She is a veiled and winged allegorical figure, modest, mysterious, and powerful, seated on a plane stone throne, which could also be a tomb, holding a sceptre in her right hand and a design of the cathedral in her left, an institution of rule. But by the time of her installation she was a return to an older meaning, more akin to the older ‘religio’, an adverbial state, a return from ‘religione’ a new noun that was a category of thought and policy, including much more than Christianity. This ‘much more’ is intimated by the earliest graffiti, the largest and most beautiful, set down four hundred years before, near the entrance to the nave. They are the ten sybils, prophetic figures from the lands around the Mediterranean who, in the various traditions and languages of their places had, so it was claimed, announced the coming of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. Next to one of them is a large allegory of Fortune, seated in a boat on a stormy sea bearing Socrates and other sages to the Isle of Wisdom.

‘Religion’ in Europe

I want to trace a path through these four centuries up to 1870, four centuries of the establishment of the category ‘religion’. Fortune and the sybils in the fifteenth century are products of the rediscovery of classical Greek and Roman writing and aesthetics causing scholarly revisions of those that had been spuriously included in Christian truth. They were also products of the discovery of Gnostic writings beside the biblical books, and the depiction not only of the Greek and Roman myths but also of the religions and symbolisms of the Persian as well as the Mediterranean, including the Egyptian empires. The cathedral floor places them in a temporal sequence as precursors of Christianity. Religion appears on the floor as a late virtue of this temporal sequence, a figure that recognises other traditions of order and discipline (religio) within the bounds of a universal history and a natural law culminating in Christ. Fortune and the saviour from misfortune are part of this *telos* of natural law.

The Italian equivalent of the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles is De Voto and Oli, *Dizionaro della Lingua Italiana.* It gives a first usage of the contemporary connotations of 'religione' earlier than those cited in the Shorter Oxford English dictionary, namely Machiavelli's, in the early sixteenth century. Before the sixteenth century, there was a condition of living 'religio', which meant simply to be bound by the discipline of a monastic order or of ascetic devotion to the one and only truth.[3] 'Religione' was then broadened to include other orders than the Christian, but always with a Christian telos.

When the Jesuits who had accommodated themselves to Chinese life by becoming Chinese literati (their term for the Chinese *shenshi* or *junzi*), becoming as learned in the classics associated with Confucius as the Chinese who passed the imperial service examinations, when these Jesuit literati translated into Latin what they had learned, they referred to the teaching of Confucius and what preceded it as *religio sinensium* (Chinese religion) still using the older term but according it to a non-Christian discipline (Jensen 1995: 123). Matteo Ricci and Nicola Trigault described Confucius as superior to the Delphic Oracle, one of the ten sybils on the floor of the nave in Sienna, because he had much more influence in China than the oracle did in Greece (ibid). According to their own construction of Confucius' prehistory, the most important element was a universal characteristic to be found there as everywhere, an intimation of monotheism, in Shangdi (supreme deity) and then the Tian whose principles Confucius expounded. The Jesuits had at first assumed the ascetic life and clothing of Buddhist monks (*heshang*), which they called 'bonzes'. But in assuming the new status of literati, they held as far superior what they now described as the order (*legge*) of the master, to whose name they added the honorific *fu* to make Kongfuzi, coining a brand new term both in Chinese and, as Confucius, in Latin and then in the other languages of Europe. They depicted the gods of Buddhism and Daoism as inferior, along with the Egyptian and Roman gods. Confucius thus joined the classical philosopher heroes, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Eventually in the eighteenth-century Confucius became with them a shedder of the universal light of reason. He joined the European emergence of secularity from post-Reformation Christianity.

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[3] Jonathan Z. Smith (1998) agrees on the sixteenth century as the period of the first appearance of 'religion' with something approaching the connotation of a universal category. But the texts he cites are those of missionary travellers, in which 'religio' etc in the languages of Europe still carry an overwhelmingly Christian outlook. I think I can show that this is not so in Machiavelli. But the main point of singling Machiavelli out is to show the kind of political discourse in which 'religion' becomes a universal category. In this I am also going a step further than Talal Asad (1983). Like him I think the important question is 'how does power create religion?' whatever religion is at one 'time' and its episteme. But instead of saying that this is the critical question, I'm trying to elaborate the landscape of power and knowledge in which 'religion' occurred.

Let me trace another path through this same history, this time highlighting the link of 'religion' with politics and policy. For Machiavelli's *Prince*, religion is the realm of beliefs in truth, good, and the institutions it sanctions, including ecclesiastical principalities of the papacy. On the other hand, 'policy' is calculation in the field of fortune and the nature of men to gain the upper hand of rivals for political mastery.[4] But religion is not only a restraint, it is also a resource of 'policy'. In his *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy* ('s history of Rome) written at the same time as *The Prince*, in the 12th discourse on the importance of religion, he treats it as an instrument of rule. It refers to the Roman gods, the Catholic Church, and to the Islam of Saladin. He writes that wise rulers should 'uphold the basic principles of the religion which they practice in' 'even though they be convinced that it is quite fallacious'. At the same time they should not allow the religious, his example is Roman oracles, to simply please the powerful in case the people become incredulous and become 'inclined to subvert any good institution' (1970 edition, p. 112). In short, for a good and not just a successful Prince, reason of state uses but is not bound by religion, including that of Christianity.

Mosse (1957) describes the religious debates on the problem that Machiavelli thus set. It is the problem of a good ruler who for the higher purpose of the preservation of the state can override the laws of God. The debates had two notable outcomes among many others. Both stressed the importance of good intent. In one outcome it must be God who guides the ruler to override God's laws. In the other, Puritan outcome, it is the body politic, the state interpreted as a good and Godly people, that guides its journey through trials of conscience and necessity in the field of fortune and policy (p. 104). In other words, in this outcome, arising from the English revolution that resulted in a constitutional monarchy in 1660 after Cromwell's brief republican reign, we see the emergence of the idea of a People as a community of religion, or confession.

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[4] For instance, The Prince (English edition of 1640 facsimile by Scolar Press 1969, p. 139): '[a new Prince] cannot observe all those things for which men are held good; for being often forc'd, for the maintenance of his State, to do contrary to his faith, charity, humanity and religion: and therefore it behoves him to have a mind so disposd as to turne and take the advantage of all winds and fortunes; and as formerly I said, not forsake the god, while he can; but to know how to make use of the evil upon necessity.'

On the continent of Europe the wars of religion between Catholics and Protestants came to a provisional end with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, an agreement on the territorial limits of principalities and kingdoms and, most importantly, on the religion, Protestant or Catholic, under their rule. The Treaty is said by many historians to have founded the basis of the international system in Europe and thence the rest of the world, which could no longer be simply described as the core lands of Christendom (or of the Holy Roman Empire). The Treaty did not end religious war, but established it on a new basis. The sovereignty of states to declare their people's religious confession soon became the division of those states, internally as well as from each other according to an explosive mix of confession and nationality.

In sum, what I have sought to establish so far in this excursion into European history is that the category 'religion' emerges in conjunction with a distinct concept and discourse of 'politics' and a new subject of politics, a people and its country. Indeed, Machiavelli's *The Prince* was itself a treatise on establishing Italian territoriality. It is also clear that after Machiavelli 'religion' could refer to any system of truth, good conduct and divination, and that it could be treated as a fact, or instrument, of human rule.

But the reason of state was, until the late eighteenth century, still largely a discourse on the right of sovereigns over territory and its contents. Over the next two centuries this political and empirical calculation changed into a new telos, a new historical temporality. As Foucault (1978, transl 1991) points out, only with the nineteenth-century revival of interest in Machiavelli was reason of state and theory of right, or of public law and the state, turned into something quite different, the art of government. The primary object of this new art is 'population', just as its primary subject in public law is a people. Together they constitute the new sovereignty of legitimation. Along with 'population' come three