Religion and Nationalism in Chinese Societies

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4 The Nation in Religion and Religion in the Nation

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Abstract
Two very different yet related phenomena in China's transition from a dynastic regime to a modern nation will help us better understand how the modern Chinese nation impacted on and was in turn impacted by religion. The first case is about how a rising consciousness of the nation and its impending peril allowed some grassroots literati in the early twentieth century to assign added religious significance to a traditional, primarily literati-oriented practice thus justifying, reformulating and accentuating certain religious practices (hence 'the nation in religion'). The second case is about how the nation provided the sociopolitical frame for religion while the nation itself was constituted by the 'religion sphere' (zongjiaojie 宗教界) (hence 'religion in the nation').

Keywords: religion sphere, religious sovereignty, cherishing lettered paper, script fundamentalism

Introduction
In this chapter I will attempt to look at two very different yet related phenomena in China's transition from a dynastic regime to a modern nation that are relevant to our understanding of how the modern Chinese nation impacts and is in turn impacted by religion (were it not to sound too cumbersome I would have subtitled this chapter 'How the Modern Chinese Nation Made Religion and Was at the Same Time Made by Religion'). The chapter consists of two parts. The first part is about the revaluing of a traditional religious practice at a time when Chinese civilization and the Chinese nation faced grave danger at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. This case study reveals how a rising consciousness of the nation and its impending peril allowed some grassroots literati in the early twentieth century to assign added religious significance to a traditional literati practice thus justifying, reformulating and accentuating certain religious practices (hence 'the nation in religion').
The second part of the chapter is about how the newly-founded modern Chinese nation was constituted in crucial ways by various ‘spheres’ (jie), including the ‘religion sphere’ (zongjiaojie 教界). It shows how the nation provides the sociopolitical frame for religion while the nation itself is constituted by religion and other ‘spheres’ (hence ‘religion in the nation’).

The nation in religion: Civilizational/national crisis and the cherishing of Chinese characters

In the late Qing period, China as an empire was under assault from Western imperialist powers. At the same time Chinese civilization was under assault from Western Learning (xixue 西學). In a very short time the cultural and civilizational foundations of China were questioned and the majority of grassroots literati trained in the now-useless Confucian classics faced the challenge of a new cultural-political order, one in which they could not see a viable role for themselves. At this crucial moment one religious practice came to the fore as a possible solution to dampen the process of wholesale conversion to Western culture and to reassert the primacy of Chinese civilization. In fact, the fate of the Chinese nation seemed to rest upon this religious practice. This religious practice is the ‘cherishing of written characters’ (xizizhi 惜字紙), which involves the reverence for the written word, especially the peculiar practice of picking up any scrap paper with any writing on it (i.e. ‘lettered paper’ 字紙) and burning it respectfully in a special furnace, usually located in the grounds of a temple dedicated to Lord Wenchang (Wenchang dijun 文昌帝君), the patron deity of the traditional literati. ²

Merits and demerits, rewards and punishments: Cherishing written characters in its earlier forms

Cherishing written characters as a practice probably began during the Song Dynasty and became more popular during the Ming and Qing dynasties.³ Xizi 惜字 practices were originally largely confined to the literati class. Scholars revered writing and worshipped Lord Wenchang in the hope of excelling in the civil service examination. Exam candidates were known

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1 This section is drawn and excerpted from Chau (2013).
2 For a study on Wenchang see Kleeman (1994).
to sleep overnight at a Wenchang temple hoping that Lord Wenchang would reveal the exam topics to them in a dream. Some literati members kept ‘ledgers of merits and demerits’ (gōngguōge 功過格) that included items relating to xīzì practices. However, the connection between xīzì and Wenchang seemed to be a rather late invention; the autobiography of Wenchang supposedly written through spirit-writing in the late twelfth century, which Kleeman translated and studied, did not mention xīzīzhī practices at all, though it did mention at the end of the autobiographical narrative that he (i.e. Wenchang) was put in charge of the examination results and officialdom prospects (dānguǐji 紅桂籍). The practice of xīzīzhī has almost completely died out in all Chinese communities, except in a few communities in Taiwan (especially among some Hakka communities, e.g. in Meinong 美濃 county). But it is worth noting that some older people still hold deep reverence for lettered paper.

In the Ming and Qing dynasties as well as in the twentieth century, spirit-writing was one of the most common ways new scriptures and divine messages were produced. Many of the xīzīzhī texts indicated that they were produced by spirit-writing, almost invariably through possession by Lord Wenchang. For example, in order to help people concretize the merits of cherishing lettered paper, Lord Wenchang announced through spirit-writing the different levels (or more accurately, quantities) of rewards for those who cherish lettered paper and punishments for those who do not cherish lettered paper. The following schema is translated from Examples of Merits and Demerits Relating to Cherishing Written Characters Sent by the Lord Wenchang through Spirit-Writing (文昌帝君降乩惜字功過例).

Spending all one’s life buying lettered paper and bringing it home, washing it with fragrant water and burning it: ten thousand merits; additional twelve years added to life; will enjoy prosperity and honor for a long time; descendants (sons and grandsons) will be honored and illustrious.

Spending all one’s life collecting lettered paper, washing it and burning it: five thousand merits; twelve additional years added to life; will attain prosperity and honor; descendants will all be virtuous and filial.

Spending one’s life collecting much lettered paper, washing and burning it; sending the ashes far away in clean creeks, big rivers, or the ocean: one thousand merits; descendants will be many and prosperous.

5 See Zhang (Chang) (2006); Wu (2010).
6 See Jordan and Overmyer (1986); Kleeman (1994); Clart (1996); Clart (2003).
Print and publish xizi-related books and pamphlets and distribute them widely in the world: five hundred merits; many sons.

Copying and writing xizi-related books and instructions; the entire household cherishing lettered paper: three hundred merits; descendants will be rich.

When one sees a text advocating cherishing letter paper, one keeps it so as to show one’s descendants while at the same time oneself believing and respecting the practice and spreading it to others: one hundred merits; leads a peaceful life with no misfortunes.7

There is an equal number of items for demerits warning the reader of the dangers of not respecting and cherishing lettered paper.

Because of the society-wide reverence for learning and literacy, the general populace was also exhorted to cherish written characters, though in ways that were different from those practiced by the literati. For example, in one xizi-related morality ‘book’ (pamphlet; shanshu 善書) published in the late Qing entitled Perfected Interpretation on Cherishing Written Characters by Lord Wenchang (Wenchang dijun xizi zhenquan 文昌帝君惜字真詮) (probably composed by spirit-writing), there are twelve practices targeting the literati and eighteen practices targeting the humble folk.

For those who could read and write and were therefore in positions of power and could potentially abuse the power of the written word, their way of cherishing characters primarily involved being aware of the power of writing and therefore being extremely careful when committing words to paper. One was advised to ‘cherish’ writing (i.e. be extremely careful to the point of not writing at all) in the following situations: when someone’s life is at stake; when someone’s reputation is at stake; when someone’s civil service exam results are at stake; when involving someone’s private life or causing divorce; when causing the alienation and separation of family members; when causing harm to others to benefit oneself or robbing someone’s livelihood; when bullying those who are weak and young; when deliberately ruining someone’s plans as a result of personal vengeance; when

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7 This schema is found in an anthology of miscellaneous morality tracts entitled Jiutian kaihua zhuaxia yuanhuang silu Hongren Wenchang dijun yinzhiwen zhu’an 《九天開化主宰元皇司錄 宏仁文昌帝君陰騭文註案》 (Morrison Collection catalogue info: (明)顔正註釋, (明)顔文瑞補案, (明)顔章敬成刊, (清)趙松一校, 清嘉慶二十一 (1816) 刻本, 粤東省城 心簡齋藏版; 版心題《丹桂 籍》), which the author consulted in the Robert Morrison Collection of Chinese Books (馬禮遜藏書), collected by Robert Morrison (a missionary for the London Missionary Society between 1807 and 1834), now held in the Special Collections of the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies.
causing people to have grievances against each other and when writing suits for others; when deliberately reversing right and wrong and harming innocent people; when writing erotic poems and songs or poking fun at others; when revealing someone’s secret and causing him dishonor and a lifetime of regret.8

For members of the general public (including the literate) who did not wield the powerful brush there were eighteen don’ts or ‘taboos’ (jie 戒) to observe regarding lettered paper: selling torn books to others; throwing lettered paper in the dirt; stepping or stomping on lettered paper; covering windows and walls with lettered paper; covering vats with lettered paper; using lettered paper to hold up paintings; using lettered paper to wipe desks and ink stones; using lettered paper to wipe dirt; using lettered paper to make a torch at night; using lettered paper to wrap things; using lettered paper to light cigarettes/the pipe; cutting lettered paper with a knife or a pair of scissors; tearing up lettered paper while in a rage; using books as pillows; giving books/lettered paper to women to hold needles and threads; chewing lettered paper into a paste and spitting it out; sticking lettered paper into cracks in the wall; burning lettered paper into ashes and throwing them on the ground.

The Confucian elite in late imperial China had a theory about ‘moral teaching’ (jiaohua 教化). They believed that for the educated one needed to persuade them with reason, but for the uneducated masses one needed to use stories of ‘divine retribution’ (yinguo baoying 因果報應) to lure them with rewards and scare them with punishments. Most of the xizizhi literature included stories of divine retribution. It seemed that they were targeting the lower end of the literati and the masses (including the merchant class). (Apparently the so-called ‘grand literati’ [tongru 通儒] needed no such silly stories or indeed wanted to have nothing to do with the more vulgar forms of xizizhi.) For example, the Perfected Interpretation on Cherishing Written Characters by Lord Wenchang mentioned above included a few such stories as vivid illustrations. Such narrative format of ‘proof’ (zhengyan, 證驗) of the efficacy of cherishing (and not cherishing) lettered paper became standardized for later xizizhi literature; in fact, some of the earlier stories

8 Perfected Interpretation on Cherishing Written Characters by Lord Wenchang (‘Wenchang dijun xizi zhenquan’, 文昌帝君惜字真詮. This is one of the miscellaneous morality tracts collected in an anthology entitled ‘Selections from the Three Teachings’ 《三教擇錄》 (Morrison Collection catalogue info: (清) 陸逢泰擇錄; 清嘉慶十一年 (1806) 陸逢泰等刻本, [粵東省城] 合璧齋藏版), which the author consulted in the Robert Morrison Collection of Chinese Books (馬禮遜藏書) at the School of Oriental and African Studies. Unfortunately I do not have more detailed publication information on the original morality tract.
were even reused and recycled (sometimes with modifications and embellishments) in later compilations.

**Xizizhi becoming a single-issue practice**

While in earlier times *xizizhi* might have been a virtuous practice among many other practices that a person could engage in with a view to accruing merits, towards the late Qing and the early twentieth century it became what might be called a single-issue practice, meaning engaging in this practice alone was supposed to bring good rewards. The analogy can be made using a modern example: it is as if simply engaging in recycling is enough to make one a good environmentalist and good eco-conscious citizen. Thus, *xizizhi* was advocated as a self-cultivational practice involving a single-minded devotion to written characters in the belief that such devotion will bring life-transforming benefits. The most common form of the practice in the late Qing period and the early twentieth century was to either personally do the rounds in the streets or to hire people to collect stray lettered paper. These lettered papers were collected in bamboo baskets and then brought to be burned at a specially designed ‘pagoda-shaped furnace’ (*shengjiting* 聖蹟亭 or *jingziting* 敬字亭), usually in a Wenchang temple. The ashes would be collected regularly and either buried in clean soil or scattered in rivers or the sea. It was believed that the long-term effects of cherishing written characters in this way included examination success (also for modern schools and universities), longevity, good fortune, good health, blessings, numerous and successful sons, etc. On the other hand, if one did not respect and cherish written characters, one would suffer ill health, poverty, misfortunes, early death, early death of one’s family members and children, etc.

**The nation’s fate lies in writing: Xizi zhengyanlu and script fundamentalism**

One of my current projects is a study and translation of a morality book entitled *Xizi zhengyanlu* 惜字徵驗錄 (Cherishing Written Characters: Stories of Evidence of Its Effects). Besides a number of introductory materials, the bulk of the book consists of eighty illustrated stories of *xizi*-related divine retributions that were published in 1934 by Mingshan Publishers (*Mingshan shuju* 明善書局) in Shanghai. (However, some of the stories seem to have been culled from earlier works, which is a quite common practice among compilers of morality books.) The version I am working with is a slightly
augmented 1967 reprint edition of this earlier work that was published in Taiwan by Ruicheng Publishers/Bookstore (Ruicheng shuju 瑞成書局) in Taizhong 台中, a bookstore specialized in publishing and selling religion-related books, including a large number of morality books.

The introductory materials preceding the illustrated stories included short essays explaining why one should cherish lettered paper. Judging from the rhetoric of these essays, we can tell that the xizi practice received renewed impetus during China's transition into the modern era, as modern printing technologies, journalism, and advertising were perceived to have cheapened the written word, and Western imperialism and social Darwinian discourse posed grave threats to China's civilizational superiority. Updated and reissued in the early twentieth century, the Xizi zhengyanlu blended new nationalist discourse with traditional moral values and provides a unique window into the aspirations and anxieties of the last generation of the traditional, grassroots Confucian elite. Below are excerpts from the introductory essay that give a flavor of the compiler's ideological orientation, especially how he thought that the fate of the Chinese nation is intertwined with that of the Chinese writing system:

After having done extensive surveys I have come to the conclusion that over the tens of thousands years of human history and across the hundred thousand miles of human territories, there has been no occasion when writing (literally ‘characters’, zi 字) was not essential, and there has been no place where writing was not at the foundation of lives. In primeval times people knotted ropes to help them govern their lives: knots on big ropes for big matters and knots on small ropes for small matters. It was an age without writing, and people were ignorant and unenlightened, so even if records were inadequate there was not much they could do, until one stroke (of character) revealed the secrets of heaven and earth, and the shapes of characters were formed by observing the configurations (of stars). It was then that the usefulness of writing became abundant. Characters gave rise to writing (wen 文; composition) and writing became a vehicle for the Way (dao 道). This one [i.e. first] character opened the window to rites, music, government, and law; this one character brought about the transformations of morality and social order; this one character influenced the shape of material civilization; this one character set the guidelines for the five constants (relationships) and eight virtues; this one character created the ancient classics; the one character judged between the loyal and the treacherous, praised the good and condemned the bad.
That is to say there was writing first and then there was a country and a society; there was writing first and then there was the relationship between father and son, husband and wife; there was writing first and then there were agriculture, craftsmanship, commerce, and learning. In addition, no social interaction does not make use of writing as its means, and no transmission of knowledge from the past to the present does not depend on writing as a treasure. How great has writing been to the human world!

Alas, ever since the menacing storm of Europe and America [literally ‘European wind and American rain’] blew hard on our country, the fortune of our writing has gone down precipitously. All over the country lettered papers are strewn about in a mess, being stepped on by whomever. The situation [for lettered paper] has become so dire that not a year passes without droughts, floods, epidemics, locust plagues, wars, earthquakes, and landslides. Of course one cannot say that not cherishing lettered paper alone has caused all these disasters, but writing results from the hard work of sages and virtuous men; it is the essence of heaven and earth; it is what our national treasures depend on; and it determines the fate of our culture. If we look down upon writing, it not only will not be allowed by the sages and virtuous forebears but it will also not be tolerated by heaven and earth [...].

Whether or not writing is valued or debased affects the rise and fall of the national fortune in critical ways; whether or not writing is treated well determines our lives’ fortunes. I have long wanted to make everyone aware of the necessity of respecting and cherishing writing in order to recover from degeneracy and to cultivate our vitality.9

9 Here is the original Chinese text: 閒嘗盱衡，古今數萬年，縱橫十萬里，無時而不以字為要需，無地而不以字為命脈。上古結繩為治，大事結大繩，小事結小繩。無字時代，草昧未開，記載闕然，此亦無可如何者也。逮至一劃開天地之秘，觀象造文字之形，則字之效用於焉丕備。字以成文，文以載道，禮樂政刑一字之所啟牖也，彝倫攸序一字之所開化也，物質文明一字之所薰陶也，五常八德一字之所繩墨也，邱墳典索一字之所創造也，忠奸臧否一字之所褒貶也……是以有文字而後有國家社會，有文字而後有父子夫婦，有文字而後有農工商學，甚至往往交際無不以文字為筌蹄，今古流傳靡不以文字為珍寶，夫其有益於人世不亦重且大哉……慨自歐風美雨咄咄逼人，文字之景運頓遭挫折，而字紙之狼藉，大地皆然，任情踐踏，日趨日下，以致旱潦瘟蝗，兵戈水火，地震山崩，無年不現，雖不僅為不惜字之一端，而文字為聖賢之心血，天地之精神，國粹所賴，文化攸關，苟其卑視，固為聖賢所不許，亦為天地所不容……字之貴賤，國運之興衰攸關；字之臧否，人生之休咎所繫。予欲家喻戶曉俾人盡知所敬惜有以挽頹風而培養元氣宣示久矣…… Excerpted from introductory essays written by Tang Guangxian 唐光先 and Shugu laoren 述古老人 in Cherishing Written Characters: Stories of Evidence of Its Effects ('Xizi Zhengyan Lu',惜字徵驗錄), pp. 1-2. (Highlighting added)
The first thing one notices about this rhetoric that differs from the earlier *xizi* literature is that the author does not claim to be Lord Wenchang, which is to say that this is no longer composed through spirit-writing. The second, and the most prominent feature of this rhetoric, is *the connection of Chinese writing with the fate of the Chinese nation*, which was perceived to be under threat from Euro-American imperialism (both cultural and military). It seems that there was an effort to enshrine Chinese writing as the foundation of Chinese civilization, which is why I call this effort (maybe even movement?) *script fundamentalism*. China’s traditional Confucian literati were faced with the gravest challenges to their identity and ways of life in the early twentieth century, when the ‘civil examination’ (*keju* 科舉) system was abolished in 1905, China’s national sovereignty was challenged by foreign powers, Western Learning became de rigueur for an emerging new educated class, and both state and private rituals – many of which had involved the active participation of the literati elite – were either abolished or their legitimacy and necessity questioned. It is in the context of such momentous transformations that grassroots literati in many parts of China renewed and revamped the practice of *xizizhi*.

Looking at the illustrated stories in the *Xizi zhengyanlu*, one notices some shifts in the intended audience as well as the emphasis on the benefits and harms relating to the *xizi* practices compared to late imperial versions of morality books of the same genre. In the *Xizi zhengyanlu* there are many stories of poor and even illiterate individuals who were rewarded with good fortune as a result of their devotion to *xizizhi*. There are also many stories in which the protagonists were merchants and small traders and shopkeepers. One may say that there was a democratization of the *xizizhi* practice as all members of society were thought to be capable of benefiting from the practice, and that indeed *all members of society should be engaged in the practice*.

This downward spread of the practice – at least in ideological terms if not necessarily in actual practice, i.e. targeting the lower segments of society rather than demonstrating that they actually adopted this practice – began in the Qing period, but became more insistent in the late Qing and the Republican period. Both Angela Leung and Joseph McDermott suggest that this downward spread of the practice reflected an effort to ‘Confucianize’ society, to galvanize an otherwise increasingly immoral/amoral society around a concrete practice that would yield concrete results.10 However, if we look at the stories in the *Xizi zhengyanlu*, we will see that there is

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much emphasis on the magical qualities of *xizi* practice, which is quite un-Confucian. In fact, the whole *xizi* practice is heavily indebted to Buddhism (the core notion of karmic retribution) and Daoism (the magical and exorcist qualities of the *zizhi* ashes). These karmic reward and retribution stories are a continuation of a long tradition of Confucian elites using them to cajole and scare the lower classes into line while not necessarily believing these stories themselves.\(^{11}\)

Here is a sample story from the *Xizi zhengyanlu* about a company manager who, because of his practices of disrespecting writing, became a dog in the US after he died. The loss of face for the family is made to parallel the humiliation of China by the West (Westerners, Americans) as well as Japan (which invaded China and caused the destruction of the shop with writing-disrespecting practices). Below is a translation of the text:

**Story 22. An advocate of cigarette cards turned into a dog**

There was a certain manager of a certain tobacco company in Zhabei of Shanghai County of Jiangsu Province. He was the first to promote cigarette cards, putting as cover titles the ancient characters from books such as *The Journey to the West*, *The Story of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Enfeoffment of the Gods*, *The Story of Jigong*, *The Red Lotus Monastery*, *The Water Margins*, *The Legends of Yue Fei*, *Seven Swords and Thirteen Knights-Errant*, *The Story of the West Chamber*, *The Dreams of the Red Chamber*, etc. On the back of these cards were written, in standard script tiny as the heads of flies, the stories of these characters. As soon as people finished smoking the cigarettes, these cigarette cards mostly got thrown away. One cannot have cases of disrespecting and dirtying writing worse than this! *When this manager died, he went to the United States and became a foreign-breed dog.* On its belly there was writing indicating the name of this manager of such and such company. When people called its name the dog would wag its tail and shake its head as if responding to the call. They then named the dog with the name of the manager. This manager’s brothers and nephews caught wind of this story. In order to protect and save their family’s face they spent a lot of money buying the

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\(^{11}\) What is interesting is that sometimes the elites did not mind admitting this strategy openly. For example, an apparently spirit-written preface to a morality book produced in Taiwan in 1937 has the following passage: ‘One should talk about the wondrous with superior people, morality with middling people, and stories of karmic retribution with inferior people’ (*與上等人談玄妙, 與中等人語道德, 與下等人說因果*). The morality book is entitled *Golden Needle that Awakens* (*Huanxing Jinzhen*, 喚醒金針), produced in the Venerate Virtue Hall of the Deng’an Society in Penghu (澎湖文澳登岸社禮善堂), see Li (2008, pp. 285-286). See also Leung (1994, pp. 112-113).
dog, brought it back home, and tied it in a room. In year twenty-one of the Republican era (1932), Japan forcefully occupied Shanghai. Just as soon as the war broke out, this company burnt down. Those people who were in the know recognized that it was divine punishment for the manager’s having initiated using cigarette cards. We plead that other companies will quickly change their ways and not follow his bad example. Then they will earn many karmic merits, benefiting themselves and society at large. [italics added]

The nation, language ideologies, and religious efficacy

Imagine that you are an early twentieth-century literatus in China, having spent years, even decades studying and memorizing passages from the Confucian classics in preparation for the civil service examinations and suddenly the examination system is abolished and everything you have learned so far has become completely useless. Not only are your chances of upward social mobility ruined, but your entire sense of identity and personhood is put under serious threat. What will you do? What will millions of other people caught in the same situation do? Of course many late-Qing literati were reform-minded and eager to jettison the old system for an entirely new educational system so as to strengthen the nation and to expel the foreign imperialists. But the majority of the literati, especially the vast number of grassroots literati whose livelihood and social standing depended so much on their being embedded in the Confucian social and moral order, were deeply conservative. Therefore it is not surprising that many of these conservative literati, when faced with such grave challenges and threats, became reactionary and searched desperately for some straw to hang on to. The ‘cherishing-lettered-paper’ practice seemed to be a perfect tool for these civilizational preservationists to elaborate on and to advocate as a practice, because even if they had lost the Confucian tradition as an anchor, they could still hope to hold on to the Chinese writing system as something that would never falter or fail them.12 Little did they realize that at around the

12 Constructing one’s language as the foundation of a nation’s identity has a long pedigree. During the so-called Romantic period and afterwards, when many nations in Europe were in the process of formation, one crucial ingredient of their nationalist striving was language, i.e. the genius of one’s mother tongue. However, such nationalist linguistic ideology was primarily based on the national vernacular language as a system of spoken sounds, while the script or orthographic system was rarely mobilized as a key idiom of difference and differentiation. After all, very few European languages possessed a writing system entirely their own. The newly elaborated early twentieth-century Chinese nationalist linguistic ideology, on the other hand,
same time there were radical reformers who were calling for the abolition of the Chinese writing system and to adopt an alphabetic system based on Latin letters, and that also around the same time the Chinese language was being ‘trans-lingualized’ by Japanese-invented expressions under the cloak of Chinese characters.\(^{13}\)

In the minds of the early twentieth-century conservative literati who advocated ‘cherishing lettered paper,’ it was a meritorious practice not just for some select segments of society (e.g. the educated) but for the whole of the Chinese people. It is as if while the British taught the Manchu Qing some ‘English lessons’ (as James Hevia has characterized the British ‘pedagogy of imperialism’\(^{14}\)) with the Opium Wars and the siege and looting of Beijing in the wake of the suppression of the Boxers, these grassroots literati were busying themselves teaching the Chinese people another lesson, the lesson of civilizational self-preservation via the practice of ‘cherishing lettered paper.’ Here we have an example of the fusion of the Chinese nation with Chinese civilization, both being conceived as resting upon the Chinese writing system, which could only be saved by the practice of cherishing lettered paper, a traditional practice now endowed with nation-centric valences and heightened religious efficacy.

**Religion in the nation: The religion sphere in Modern China**

**The constitution of modern society through ‘sphere-ization’ and the rise of the ‘religion sphere’ in modern China**

In the political constitution of the modern Chinese state (from the republican times through the Maoist times to the current era), a process emerged that was very much driven by a desire to conform to international (i.e. Western) standards and practices. This process involved the recognition and production of different functional spheres in society that are similar to (or rather imitative of?) the functional constituencies or interest groups in Western

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\(^{13}\) Liu (1995) and Liu (2004).

\(^{14}\) Hevia (2003).
liberal states. These spheres included the education sphere (jiaoyujie 教育界), health and medicine sphere (yiliaojie 醫療界), the manufacture and commerce sphere (gongshangjie 工商界), the labor sphere (laogongjie 勞工界), the intellectual sphere (zhishijie 知識界), the scholarly sphere (xueshujie 學術界), the women's sphere (funüjie 婦女界), the minority-nationalities sphere (minzujie), the overseas-Chinese sphere (qiaojie), the Taiwanese compatriots sphere (taibaojie), the arts sphere (yishujie), the science sphere (kexuejie 科學界), the sports sphere (tiyujie 体育界), the political sphere (dangzhengjie 党政界), etc. And of course, along with these spheres one finds the 'religion sphere' (zongjiaojie 宗教界). I have opted to translate zongjiaojie into 'religion' sphere rather than 'religious' sphere because I want to avoid any inadvertent misunderstanding of the nature of the sphere itself as religious, which it clearly is not (see below for a discussion on how the religion sphere presumes and helps constitute the secular state).

The political utility of the concept of the religion sphere in contemporary China is manifest in its frequent appearances in the speeches of the PRC top leaders as well as official press. For example, in recent years there have been debates within the CCP about whether or not the Party can welcome religious leaders into its membership (e.g. allowing a number of religious leaders and religious elites into the Party) despite the fact that in the Party constitution it says explicitly that a Communist Party member must be an atheist. And in a recent United Front speech President Xi Jinping spoke of the importance of mobilizing the religion-sphere leaders for building socialism.

Surprisingly there has not been any scholarly attention on the emergence, constitution, and transformation of these spheres in China, or indeed how

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15 In more recent years new spheres have emerged, e.g. the law sphere (‘faliuie, 法律界), the qigong sphere (‘qigongjie, 氣功界), the stocks and securities sphere (‘zhengquanjie, 證券界), the charity sphere (‘cishanjie, 慈善界), the classical learning sphere (‘guoxuejie, 國學界), the NGO sphere (NGOjie, NGO界), and even the internet sphere (‘wangjie, 網界).

16 I am still trying to determine the earliest appearance of the term zongjiaojie in the Chinese context. It is possible that this was one of the ‘translingualized’ terms that originated in Meiji Japan (see Liu 1995) or was coined in late-Qing China by translators and writers connected to missionaries. It seems that the term was already common usage as early as 1910. For example, an article in the Chinese-language missionary periodical The True Light Monthly (‘Zhenguangbao, 真光報) in 1910 (volume 9) was entitled ‘On the Shortcomings of China's Religion Sphere’ (論中國宗教界之缺點). [I thank Ya-pei Kuo for bringing my attention to this article.] The True Light Monthly was a periodical published by the Guangzhou-based China Baptist Publication Society (美華浸信會印書局). (See http://www.zsbeike.com/cd/40736491.html).

17 The Chinese original is: 允许一部分宗教界的领袖人物和精英入党.
China as a sociopolitical space has been constituted by these spheres. One main reason why this ‘sphere-ization’ of Chinese society has not been studied is due to the fact that ‘spheres’ (jie 界) as a term does not have any legal or institutional existence (though it certainly has implications for the legal management of affairs within different ‘spheres,’ and spheres in fact contribute to the production of institutions). In fact, I am prepared to argue that this ‘sphere-ization’ of Chinese society is one of the most interesting and exciting topics to study if one wants to understand how Chinese society works, especially relating to state-society relations.

A sphere is a relatively fuzzy, semi-formal sociopolitical domain comprising certain politically recognized social actors accompanied by related institutions and activities. Each sphere is comprised of social actors who, consciously or unconsciously, construct and help maintain the sphere so that they can gain from their membership, or association with, the sphere. Some of these social actors have been assigned or appointed to occupy their positions within this sphere by the authorities (not always the government) while some others self-appoint or have fought their way into it. Many other social actors not operating within a sphere can also exert considerable influence over the development and shape of that sphere. For example, journalists, scholars, and bloggers can have discussions on the activities within a sphere and thus contribute to the overall construction of this sphere (e.g. witness the recent controversy in China over the improper management of NGOs in China). Sometimes particular individuals or a group of individuals outside the sphere can have more power than some of those actors inside the sphere in influencing the sphere’s development. To the extent that the different spheres are constructed by actors and forces from both official and civil realms they might be said to constitute what Philip Huang calls ‘the third realm’, a realm of negotiation between formal state power and local elites wielding informal power. However, the spheres seem to have much greater conceptual concreteness than ‘the third realm’.

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18 A big dilemma for this study is how to translate the word jie 界. This character denotes boundaries and the area marked out by these boundaries (as in, e.g. 法界, 三界, 世界, 疆界, 邊界, 界限, 界分, 界定, 租界, 界外, 境界, 界畫, 動物界, 劇分界線). Depending on the context and intended usage the character denotes a sector, a community, a constituency, a sphere, a circle, a realm, a field, a zone, a world, a commons, a public, etc.? It is interesting to note that the word jie has a heavy Buddhist connotative baggage since it is used to refer to the different ‘planes of existence’ in the Buddhist conception of the ‘universe’ (trailokya). See Liu (2004).

19 See Huang (1993). I thank Kuo Cheng-tian for having alerted me to the relationship between the spheres and ‘the third realm’. I shall explore this relationship in more detail in future publications.
The shape, size, and configuration of each sphere are always in flux (hence its inherent fuzziness). It is usually inchoate in the beginning of its formation (inchoate because there was great confusion or disagreement over what this sphere should consist of), but as more and more people and institutions become interested in building this sphere, it will take a more definitive and seemingly solid shape. Over time the ‘rules of the game’ might also become more stabilized and clear (though of course always subject to change). Since each sphere is supposed to be the structural-functional equivalent of other spheres, those spheres that were formed earlier will serve as models for the new sphere to emulate or, if necessary and expedient, to modify. This explains why the overall shapes of these spheres are quite similar to one another. On the other hand, since all spheres are supposed to be functionally different, each sphere also engages in a constant process of differentiation from the other spheres for fear of possible mergers, hostile takeovers or elimination. But this differentiation is often about the contents within, rather than the form of, these spheres (i.e. they remain more or less structurally isomorphic). Sometimes spheres do disappear, as a result of a decline in societal interest or by force (for example, the *qigong* sphere *cum* sphere disappeared in the wake of the forceful suppression by the government of Falungong and many other *qigong* denominations in the late 1990s).20

In theory the totality of the nation-state is to be composed of the seamless working-together of these various spheres as structural-functionalist components, together forming the nation-state’s socio-taxonomical order (though admittedly this taxonomy is not as explicitly articulated as, for example, the taxonomy on minority nationalities in the PRC). Each sphere is a structural-functional equivalent of all the other spheres, while within each sphere there are sub-spheres which are in turn structural-functional equivalents of one another. For example, within the religion sphere in China today one finds, based on the five officially recognised religions, the Buddhism sphere (*fojiaojie* 佛教界), the Daoism sphere (*daojiaojie* 道教界), the Protestantism sphere (*jidujiaojie* 基督教界), the Catholicism sphere (*tianzhujiaojie* 天主教界), and the Islam sphere (*yisilanjiaojie* 伊斯兰教界). Of course the different spheres did not emerge all at once; some spheres were invented earlier than others. Nor did the various spheres follow the same logic; for example, some constitute themselves along the lines of professions (e.g. educators, health professionals) while others by assigned sociopolitical status (e.g. women, minority nationalities) or by a

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recognized set of specialized activities (e.g. sports, arts, religion). In other words, even though these spheres bear structural and organizational similarities, they are in fact characterized by heterogeneous constitutive logics (e.g. depending on the sphere’s degree of legitimacy within the polity, e.g. formal education versus religion; the degree of fuzziness of the boundaries around spheres).

The way in which Chinese society is constituted by this multitude of spheres has its origins in the transition of China from a dynastic polity to the modern nation-state form it assumed in the early twentieth century (around 1910s to 1930s). This transition saw the flourishing of civil-society organizations in a climate of enthusiastic embrace of a modern liberal nation-state in which different social groups scrambled to be recognized by the state and be given voices in an exuberant social field (accompanied by the rise of mass print media, heightened commercialism, the penetration of imperialist and colonial influences, the import of Western models of social and political forms, etc.). The first ‘spheres’ emerged during this time, including the religion sphere. In fact, the religion sphere during this time was so vibrant that dozens of new sects were founded (what the historian Prasenjit Duara has called ‘redemptive societies’).

This effervescence of social-organizational mobilization was interrupted by the long war resisting Japan’s invasion of China (from 1937 to 1945) and the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists (1945-1949). The newly emergent spheres did not disappear during these war years; instead, they consolidated themselves and often made themselves useful for the war efforts. One may say that the national emergencies during the war years were beneficial to the formation and consolidation of these spheres since the different regimes at war needed to mobilize these social forces for their respective purposes (this was true as well for Japan at the time). Notably, for example, the (patriotic) religion sphere in war-time China came together as one voice when they conducted memorial rituals for the Chinese war dead, especially the fallen soldiers. After the Communist victory in 1949, the Nationalists fled to Taiwan, but both regimes, being at their core Leninist, became more authoritarian and suppressed the growth of civil society. In mainland China during the Maoist era the Communist party-state took the initiative to form and mold certain spheres, but these spheres were little more than instruments in the state’s effort to mobilize society for building socialism. However, the construction of these spheres did contribute crucially to the perceived legitimacy of the new regime since

21 See Nedostup (2010).
the party-state wanted to form alliances with all useful elements of society (as part of the United Front strategy). For example, the historian Thomas Mullaney has detailed how the urgent need for representatives of minority nationalities to participate in the first People’s Congress in the early 1950s formed the impetus for the Nationalities Identification (minzu shibie 民族識別) project, which was essential to the further consolidation of the ‘minority nationalities sphere.’ In Taiwan, various spheres were subjected to a similar fate, to help the Nationalist regime prepare for fighting back to retake the mainland.

Becoming ‘persons of the religion sphere’ (zongjiaojie renshi 宗教界人士)

As mentioned above, within the religion sphere in the PRC one finds the Buddhism sphere, the Daoism sphere, the Protestantism sphere, the Catholicism sphere, and the Islam sphere. [In fact there is also the so-called ‘sphere of the religions of the minority nationalities’ (minzuzongjiaojie 民族宗教界) but this sphere is primarily managed by the Nationalities Affairs Commission, though of course it has multiple links to the religion sphere proper as well and therefore can be included in the religion sphere.] Even though in theory the religion sphere should include all citizens practicing these different religions, but in practice and in official and common understanding when the religion sphere is mentioned it usually refers to the top representatives who represent their respective religions in the officially approved religious associations and in the media. These people are referred to as ‘persons of the religion sphere’ (zongjiaojie renshi 宗教界人士). These representatives (sometimes self-appointed, often appointed by the authorities, but almost all needing to be consecrated by the state and the broader religion sphere) do have the power to speak on behalf of the religious constituencies they represent (or they are made to represent). On the one hand they are supposed to fight for the collective interests of their sphere; on the other hand they understandably engage in maneuvers that advance their own personal political ambitions or expand the influence of their own particular religious orders. To survive in the sphere requires astute political sensibilities and willingness to engage in protracted negotiations with state authorities and one’s political rivals. Sometimes to protect one’s religion the representatives need to make significant compromises. For example, during the Maoist period, when all religions faced extremely unfavorable

22 See Mullaney (2011).
conditions, the leaders of the major religions voluntarily submitted their religions to forms of socialist institutionalization, e.g. by becoming a work unit (danwei 單位) just like other state-run organizations. While those designated representatives of the religion sphere are given a voice in the public sociopolitical realm, those other members of the religion sphere are deliberately or by default silenced. For example, leaders of the underground Christian churches are never considered legitimate representatives of the Protestantism or Catholicism spheres. However, given how common and popular unofficial media has become in recent years, we might soon see the emergence of an *unofficial religion sphere* that is parallel to, and often against, the officially approved religion sphere.

Let us briefly look at an example of how a particular sphere, in this case the Protestantism sphere, was formed through the efforts of activists and through the construction of a *unified, national ecumenical body*. Beside the explosion of social forces relating to the formation of civil society during the dynastic-Republican transition, the emergence of the religion sphere was also a direct product of political activism and mobilization in response to the formidable threats from the modernist regimes (late Qing, Republican as well as Communist) and other social forces (e.g. grassroots reformers) that not only encroached upon the considerable assets of the numerous temples and shrines but even intended to eliminate religion completely as a social institution. One of the consequences of these threats was the coming-to-consciousness (at least among the religious leaders and elites) of the need to unify religious adherents under the banner of collective self-defense (against often militant secularist tendencies) and the formation of nation-wide, faith-based organizations. For example, in 1906, when Presbyterian pastor and Protestant leader Yu Guozhen 俞國楨 and his colleagues formed the Chinese Protestant Autonomous Association (*Zhongguo Yesujiao zilihui* 中國耶穌教自立會) in Shanghai, their manifesto included statements such as: ‘Chinese co-religionists of all (Protestant) denominations will not differentiate between one another by denomination or geographical region and will hopefully connect with one another (through this organization) and form one unified body.’ It is clear that this unification effort was meant for ethnically-Chinese Protestants (huajiaoyou 華教友) in China only, excluding Protestant brethren outside of China and excluding as well non-Chinese people.

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23 See Li (2006b, pp. 652-54); Palmer (2009).
25 The original Chinese is: ‘各會華教友無分彼此, 不限區域, 庶幾聯絡同志, 合而為一.‘(Zhang 2015: 192)
foreign Protestants in China. This was one of the first efforts to make the Chinese Protestant community independent from their originating foreign denominational authorities. This was the moment when the Protestant sphere in China emerged despite the fact that Yu Guozhen and his colleagues did not evoke such a concept at that time. The urgency of such an initiative has also to be situated in the immediately post-Boxers Rebellion broader context.

The construction of every sphere needed activists (what are usually called 好事者, literally ‘persons who love engaging in social activities and rallying support for a cause’ or 社會活動家, literally ‘social activists’), who are often self-appointed representatives of the emerging constituency (sphere) (such as Yu Guozhen for the Protestant sphere and Taixu 太虛 for the Buddhist sphere). Some of them managed to become recognized by both state authorities and the broader society (but never without contest or struggle) (e.g. Zhao Puchu, 趙樸初, for the Buddhism sphere during the Maoist and reform eras). Here is what Bourdieu has to say about these individuals or representative institutions, especially their artificiality:

> Without being completely artificial (if it were, the building would not have been completely successful), each of these representational bodies, which give existence to represented bodies endowed with a known, recognized social identity, exists by virtue of a set of institutions that are so many historical inventions – a ‘logo’ (*sigle* in French), *sigillum authenticum*, as the canonists put it, a seal or rubber stamp, an office and a secretariat having a monopoly over the corporate signature and *plena potentia agendi et loquendi*, etc.26

What Bourdieu is referring to is precisely the kind of ‘representational bodies’ such as the Chinese Protestant Autonomous Association founded by Yu Guozhen and his colleagues that ‘pretended’ (in the sense of asserting a claim) to represent all ‘two hundred and sixty thousand domestic Protestants’27 as a collective body. The different regimes in modern China also prefer to endorse the formation of such representational bodies (e.g. the officially endorsed national religious associations) because these bodies and their leaders help make religious communities and their practices more ‘legible’ to the state and therefore more amenable to control and potential mobilization.28 It is not a surprise that ‘persons of the religion

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26 Bourdieu (1985, p. 739). *Plena potentia agendi et loquendi* means ‘full power to act and speak’.
27 The original Chinese is: 二十六萬本國耶穌教徒. (Zhang 2015: 202).
sphere’ (zongjiaojie renshi 宗教界人士) as an expression most often refers to the leaders within these officially endorsed national-religious associations.

The liberalization of society and the religion sphere in the reform era

Both mainland China and Taiwan became much more liberalized from the 1980s onward. In China during the reform period (in the past thirty years), civil-society forces have grown considerably, coupled with the differentiation of societal interests along diverse lines. The liberalization of the media and the leaps in the sophistication in communications technologies have all contributed to the bourgeoning of a multitude of spheres because it has become much easier to identify a potential sphere, name it and then formalize it (with institutions, personnel, money, and other resources, activities, symbols, and discourses, etc.). The state still plays a major role in recognizing and consecrating these spheres, but it sometimes plays catch-up when new spheres are forming faster than it anticipates.

At this point it is worth noting that the Chinese conception of the religion sphere is very different from Pierre Bourdieu’s analytical concept of the ‘religious field’ (see Bourdieu 1971). For Bourdieu, the religious field is a relatively autonomous social field with relatively clear ‘rules of the game’ about the value of symbolic goods. His case study is the Catholic Church in France, which, in addition to being a centralized religious body with clear boundaries, has benefited from a long history of relatively stable development and consolidation (including during periods of relative suppression under French republicanism), resulting in a condition amenable to the kind of analysis Bourdieu deploys. The religion sphere in China, on the other hand, is much messier and in much greater flux.

The (officially sanctioned) religion sphere proper as it stands today in the PRC—but note that this is only a portion of the overall religion sphere, which consists of a lot of persons and institutions that are merely tolerated by the state but not officially recognized – has three key components: ‘persons of the religion sphere’ (zongjiaojie renshi 宗教界人士), religious organizations (zongjiao tuanti 宗教團體), and ‘venues for religious activities’ (zongjiao huodong changsuo 宗教活動場所). In other words, in order to become an institutional player in the religion sphere (i.e. in order to register to be

29 A much fuller treatment of the rise of the religion sphere in modern China and how it works in contemporary China (including the recent emergence of a ‘popular religion sphere’) can be found in Chau (forthcoming).

30 See Dianteill (2003).
recognized as a legitimate religious entity) one has to have these elements. This presents some problems for popular religious temples, which usually do not have any proper ‘religious personnel’ (shenzhi renyuan 神職人員) to speak of; but this requirement might urge local communities to find proper religious personnel to man their temples (or at least present themselves as if they had such personnel). All temples must also register to become ‘venues for religious activities,’ though in reality the vast majority of local temples in rural China go under the label ‘superstition’ and are not granted such privilege. In other words, the religious activities that take place at these unregistered temples are considered by Chinese law to be illegal.31 People who conduct religious activities in places not designated as venues for religious activities run the risk of getting arrested by the police and jailed. For example, Buddhist monks and nuns are allowed to conduct Buddhist rituals within the confines of their registered temples, but they are not allowed to conduct the exact same rituals outside the temples. In other words, religion is literally put in its proper ‘place’. Of course a vast amount of rituals do take place outside of the limited number of officially approved venues for religious activities. The local authorities have simply chosen to turn a blind eye.

The religion sphere, the nation, and state secularism

One of the most revealing aspects about the religion sphere (as well as all the other spheres) is how it fills up the sociopolitical space of the nation. Precisely because the religion sphere has to be coextensive with the nation (in its institutional and imaginary reach), it is as much an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1991) as the nation: a lay Buddhist practitioner or a Protestant church-goer is led to imagine himself or herself as a member of the Buddhism sphere or Protestant sphere of China. In theory a nation can have only one religion sphere (even if underneath this umbrella sphere there can be a multitude of local spheres or a number of sub-spheres, e.g. the Shanghai religion sphere is a local religion sphere subordinate to the national religion sphere), and each sphere can only occupy one nation. The very act of the sphere-ization of society is to accentuate and solidify the boundaries of the nation. We may even go as far as saying that the formation of the spheres is necessary to the construction and maintenance of the sovereignty of the nation (hence ‘religion in the nation’ in the title of this chapter). Each nation has its own spheres. One nation’s sphere of a

31 See Chau (2006) for a case study of how a popular religious temple came to be registered as a Daoist temple, thus gaining official protection.
certain kind (e.g. religion) can interact with its analogous bodies in other nations but they do so based on the principle of nation-based, ‘sphere-ized’ autonomy. The religion sector in China should never be invaded by foreign bodies. This is one of the conceptual-structural reasons why the Chinese state is so wary and intolerant of any foreign interference with affairs within its own religion sphere; the nation’s ‘religious sovereignty’ (i.e. the inviolability of the [imagined] borders of the nation’s religion sphere) is coextensive with the nation’s political sovereignty and neither is to be violated.\textsuperscript{32}

Another revealing aspect of the religion sphere is that it is constitutive of the overall construction of secularity (the very existence of the religion sphere as a discrete social category attests to the efficacy of state secularism); i.e. the existence of the religion sphere qua sphere presumes secularity. In fact, China’s state secularism stands out as an exception amongst many Asian nations. In contrast, most other Asian countries have placed far more emphasis on the nation’s religious identity: modern Japan from the Meiji era to the end of World War II, with Shinto enshrined as the state’s spiritual foundation; post-colonial/Independence India, with the nation considered fundamentally Hindu; post-colonial/Independence Indonesia, with the requirement that all citizens must believe in God and belong to one of five officially recognized religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism; post-colonial/Independence Malaysia, with Islam as the ‘religion of the Federation’; modern Thailand, with Theravada Buddhism as quasi state religion; not to mention Pakistan and Bangladesh, with Islam as state religion, or Nepal up to 2006, with Hinduism as official religion.\textsuperscript{33}

Conclusion

Religion and nation have had a complicated relationship in history. Religious adherence (especially the exclusivist, confessional kind) was often the foundation of ethnic group identity, which could serve as the foundation of

\textsuperscript{32} This ‘religious sovereignty’ should not be confused with any sense of autonomy which is the goal of some religious practitioners; the latter refers to autonomy from state interference. Autonomy is an important attribute of religious sovereignty but it is about the religion sphere as a key-constituting element of the nation being autonomous from foreign influence.

\textsuperscript{33} One of the manuscript reviewers pointed out that PRC secularism ‘was/is based on its monopoly power or control over cosmological truth’. I think such a monopoly was only true during the high Maoist era but is no longer true today. The considerable liberalization in the religion sphere has produced a plethora of cosmological truths, the monitoring of which by the reform-era state is nearly impossible.
nationhood (especially in early modern Europe). The nation, once formed, often served as the territorial and institutional basis for fostering and elaborating a nation-centric religiosity and religious identity (from Henry VIII's Church of England to Emperor Meiji's state Shinto, Ghandi's Hinduism, and even Taiwan's island-wide Mazu cult). Though not historically inevitable, such nation-centric religiosity and religious identity often led to more explicit forms of religious nationalism in which religious actors and institutions engaged in explicitly pro-home-nation, patriotic practices.

Neither of the two cases presented in this chapter are about religious nationalism per se but they demonstrate that the relationship between religion and nation in modernity is much more complicated than the notion of religious nationalism can capture.

Bibliography


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