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Chang Chia-Lin (張家麟), *Chinese Religiosity (華人宗教) GPS3, Taipei: Taiwan Religion and Society Association, 2020, Hardcover. Pp. 224. \$523.*

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Imagine you live in an age of disconnection. Cut off from travel, quarantined, perhaps, and forced to depend on the accounts of others for information, you hunger for experience. Then by chance you hear of a universe so different and colorful it makes your mouth water. Such is the world described in Chang Chia-Lin's *Chinese Religiosity (華人宗教 GPS3, 2020)*. This book, the third in a series, takes on the incredible world of lived religion in current Chinese culture, broadly conceived. In particular Chang centers discussion on the variety of popular religious practices found in Taiwan.

As someone who studies Chinese religiosity, I do not find the themes tackled by Chang to be new. But his erudition and attention illuminate them in a new light. The picture that emerges is akin to what you feel when you land in a crowded night market. It is a noisy, bustling space of action. The air is filled with half-understood messages and crisscrossed movement. Like the marketplace, Chinese popular religion is a hectic world that does not allow a complete reading. But its very rawness keeps you spellbound.

Chang himself is an established expert in Chinese religion, and current chair of the Taiwan Association of Religion and Society. Yet he does not write this work for an academic audience. There are no extensive footnotes or bibliography, nor are his statements backed up with specific references. The book is clearly intended for a popular audience. At the same time this is more than a general introduction dealing in such generalities as the three teachings of Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Chang provides a wealth of detail, certainly enough for a deep exploration into each subject. The style of writing is that of a discussion between scholars, a sharing of insights about things of common interest. He does not speak down to the reader.

This non-academic yet knowledgeable style illustrates an important point about the status of religion and spirituality in Taiwan. Taiwan enjoys an impressive level of awareness of religious issues. There are probably a number of reasons for this. First, much of the population is highly educated—fully 45% of adults have a bachelor's degree.¹ Secondly, religious practice is a common aspect of life in Taiwan. Atheism may exist, but it struggles to gain a foothold. As a result, religious affiliation is widespread. According to the *World Population Review*, the category of the "non-religious" account for 24% of the population in Taiwan, compared to 39% in the U.S., 33% in Australia, and an impressive (but suspect) 90% in mainland China.² Along with a highly educated

population, the people in Taiwan have broad knowledge of religious affairs. Temples and churches dot the landscape. Processions and festivals are an ingrained part of community life. Quite apart from the presence of organized religions, popular and ethnic religion, called *minzu zongjiao* (民族宗教) in Taiwan academic writing, thrives in Taiwan. As the scholar Paul Katz has noted there is a growing literature on Taiwanese popular religion.³

All these factors mean people have an awareness of and interest in religious topics. This in turn means there is a market for substantial books such as Chang's filled with insight and color photos. Yes, color photographs. While publishers elsewhere often ignore scholars' requests for color photographs, Chang's book has at least one per page. Most of these are paired with insightful captions explaining details of a topic. The author and publisher have adopted a strategy of giving equal prominence to text and photographs (圖隨文走，圖文並茂 *tusuiwenzou, tuwenmingmao*). A full understanding of each chapter requires a careful reading of *both* text and photographs. This reflects the author's goal of increasing the awareness of popular religion (常識化 *changshibhua*).

The discussion below will illustrate how Chang deals a few important topics, starting with a look at a temple dedicated to one of the most popular deities, Guan Gong (關公).

A Guan Gong Temple

Each section lists helpful information about where to visit each site and when to experience rituals. The first section, for instance, includes a section on worship of Guansheng Dijun (關聖帝君, or Guan Gong) at the Xietian Temple (協天廟), near the northern Taiwan city of Yilan (宜蘭).⁴ This temple, founded in 1804, is one of the few to practice the Announcement Ceremony (釋奠大典 *shidian dadian*), a ritual is generally practiced to honor Confucius. The ceremony in this temple was originally carried out four times a year, and has since been reduced to two, in the spring and fall.⁵ The ritual itself is ancient—it was first mentioned in the Book of Rites as a rite to honor previous saints and teachers (先聖先師 *xiansheng xianshi*).⁶ As the author states, all official temples (官廟 *guanmiao*) dedicated to Guan Gong were instructed to carry out this ceremony from the time of the Qing emperor Yongzheng (雍正皇帝). Yongzheng enfeoffed Guan Gong with the title of Doctor of the Five Classics (五經博士 *wujing boshi*), reflecting one of the deity's enduring roles as the patron saint for scholars. Chang found this same ceremony being observed in several Guan Gong mother temples (祖廟 *zumiao*) in mainland China as well. Chang goes into detail about which of the specific Confucian rituals are followed for each of the two ceremony dates. He notes that this ceremony symbolizes the fact that the Yilan temple enjoys the status of a public temple (公共廟宇 *gonggong miaoyu*).

Chang includes a full 22 separate color photos in his explanation of the ritual complex, each with citations explaining the general outline of each ceremony, including the names of functionaries and the Confucian ceremony involved. But he does not go so far as to provide a detailed, minute-by-minute ethnographic description in the text. In fact, most of the descriptive force of his account is found in the photographs, which provide a wealth of information. This approach often works better than a belabored written description.

Chinese Religions: A Complex Religious Form

What are some of the other themes found in this book? First of all, Chang show that the category of “Chinese religions” defies easy generalizations. A deep appreciation of Chinese religious practice comes not by study alone, but through exposure to the granular practices in temples, in small groups, and in ritual acts. At the same time there are multiple threads woven through all these angles, such powerful influences as Daoist cosmology, shamanic ritual, and Buddhist textual traditions.

A Pantheon of Deities

Another such thread concerns the role of the gods. Altars in each popular temple groan from the weight of deity images, each facing the worshipper. As a visitor, your gaze is drawn to theirs. Assuming you do not avert your eyes, you may feel yourself pulled into a relationship. Coupled with some knowledge of each deity—for each illuminates a different corner of reality—this awareness of the deity’s gaze can cause discomfort. The viewer may even feel an urge to retreat. Instead of dismissing the pantheon *in toto*, the wise path is to investigate each figure on its own terms. And the scholar of religion, like the specialist, is there to guide you in discovery.

One concrete example of the pantheon concerns the star gods. Veneration of the Big Dipper and Southern Dipper constellations (南北斗星 *nanbei douxing*) in Chinese culture goes back at least 2500 years, with many references in classical sources as the *Star Manual of the Masters Gan and Shi* 甘石星經 and the *Annals of the Historian* (史記) (106). The two constellations were humanized (擬人化 *ningrenhua*) as the Lord of the North Dipper (北斗星君 *beidou xingjun*) and Lord of the South Dipper (南斗星君 *nandou xingjun*). The Lord of the North Dipper is said to control death, and the Lord of the South Dipper controls life. Together they determine individual fate. These deities figures are found in Chinese temples today, often near the Great Year (Tai Sui) spirit tablet (太歲神主神牌 *taisui shenzhu shenpai*). Each of these two Daoist deities have their own sutra text for recitation on festival days.

Another deity example discussed by Chang is the Chinese evolution of the Buddhist figure Ksitigarbha (地藏王菩薩 *dizangwang pusa*, sometimes referred to by the Japanese name Jizo 地藏). Originally a bodhisattva able to assist all sorts of beings to pass beyond their realm of existence, in popular religion Ksitigarbha has been transformed into the god who oversees hell (幽冥教主 *youming jiaozhu*, 31). Ksitigarbha is often found accompanied by the deities Guan Gong and Wei Tuo (韋馱), two major figures in the popular pantheon. Because of his close association with hell, Ksitigarbha is often confused with the god of Hell, Yama (閻羅王 *yanluowang*), in popular religion called the Old Man of the People (大眾爺 *dazhongye*). The Buddhist deity Yama, for his part, has gone through a relatively more wrenching transformation in China. From being the single deity overseeing hell in India, once in China his official position and identity was transformed into those of ten separate bureaus or palaces, each overseen by a separate judge. This transformation from one to ten (由一化十 *youyi huashi*) reflects a thorough sinification of this figure into the Chinese cosmological vision (34).

The deity images found in Chinese religious practice frequently shift between traditions in this way. Ksitigarbha is most generally depicted as a Buddhist monk holding a staff with six rings (錫杖 *xizhang*, Skt. *kbakkara*) or vajra banner (金剛幢 *jingang chuang*) in his right hand, and a bright pearl (明珠 *mingzhu*, the *cintamani*) in the palm of his left. But when the Ksitigarbha image is seated on a *diting* (諦聽), a mythical hybrid creature able to distinguish truth from lies, it is a sign the image belongs to the popular religion pantheon, as opposed to being a strictly Buddhist figure.

Sacred Sites in Chinese Religious Practice

Chang investigates a range of religious sites in the text. Not all of these are in Taiwan. At one point he takes us through a detailed tour of the Ming Tombs (明十三陵 *mingshisanling*) outside Beijing, a spot on most tourist itineraries. I have struggled for years with finding the religious significance of this site. Absolutely, it reflects a reverence for and gratitude toward the royal ancestors, through whose beneficence each of fourteen emperors attained their thrones. (The last Ming emperor, Chong Zhen 崇禎, b. 1611– d. 1644, attained the throne but did not hold it when Manchu forces descended on Beijing in 1644.) In line with its historical importance, the tombs are absolutely well-sited from a geomantic point of view. But what connects this imperial site, and all places of imperial ritual practice, to what Chang is calling Chinese religiosity? Another way to ask is to wonder if the Ming Tombs deserve their status as a UN-registered intangible inheritance, granted in 2000? I have often felt that religious sites in China feel empty, stripped of their original significance, and left as empty hulls. A bit more analysis from Chang would quell my concerns here. As it is I find little of the sacred in the Ming Tombs.

Other sacred sites explored by Chang include Beijing's Baiyun Temple (白雲觀), and Nanjing's Mt. Mao (茅山); Yuanshan Martyr's Hall (圓善忠烈祠) in Taipei; the head temple of the Tenri religion (天理教) near Nara, Japan; the Id Kah (艾提朵爾 *aidtiduoer*) Mosque in Kashgar in China's far west; the Sacred Altar (靈台 *lingtai*) of the Daesoon Jinrihoe (大巡真理會) head temple complex at Yeosu in South Korea; and the Chinese Religion and Meeting Hall (越南華人宗教與會館 *yuenanhuaren zongjiao huiguan*) in Vietnam. His description of the visit to Daesoon Jinrihoe's head temple amounts to a compact introduction to the many aspects of the religion, from mythological paintings of ideal world (理想境界 *lixiang jingjie*) to pilgrimage (朝聖頂禮 *chaosheng dingli*). Such descriptions of visits are by definition brief and experiential, and leave out what could be extracted from interviews or textual study. Yet the sensorial data is invaluable for a well-rounded understanding of a religious group. Through step-by-step narration of his visit, along with the copious photographs, we come to understand Chang's conclusion that Daesoon Jinrihoe architecture, ritual and deities are linked at a deep level with what he calls the core of Chinese popular religion (中華夏民間宗教的本質 *zhonghua xiaminjian zongjiaode benzhi*, 197).

Ritual Circuits

Chang offers a thorough description of some important ritual circuits practiced in Danshui (淡水), on Taiwan's northern coast. These ritual circuits are a major characteristic of communal religion in many, but not all, Chinese cultural areas. They involve ceremonial processions where the deity figures are moved around a fixed route in the vicinity of the temple in which the image is normally housed. The deity in focus in this case is Qingshui Zushi, "The Master of Clear Water" (清水祖師, also known as Zushi Gong 祖師公). Originally a Song dynasty (960–1127) monk from Quanzhou (泉州) in southern Fujian, Qingshui Zushi is worshipped as a protector deity and to ask for rain. There are some 98 temples dedicated to him in Taiwan. He is depicted with black face and often without a nose, characteristics said to have been caused by his various struggles with demons.

On the worship day the processions are separated into two groups, labeled respectively the secret visit (暗訪 *anfang*) and the daily inspection (日巡 *rixun*). The *anfang* procession itself is split into two parts. A small group of some ten marchers will carry the deity's image to four points in the town, performing rituals of exorcism at each spot (57). The smaller group will eventually meet up with the larger procession of some 3000-5000 onlookers and marchers. Groups carrying images of deities from affiliated temples will join these processions as an expression of intercommunal reciprocity. Since the Danshui temple is one of three primary Qingshui Zushi temples in Taiwan, many smaller temples willingly participate.

What is Meant by Chinese?

Most of the examples of sacred sites and ritual circuits cited in this work are in Taiwan. But it would be a mistake to see this work as narrowly focused on Taiwan alone. As the title indicates, it is intended as a study of the religions/religiosity of the *buaren* (華人). In Chinese this term is not simply equivalent to “Chinese.” Instead, it is perhaps best translated as “ethnic Chinese” or “the Sinophile world,” in the same way we speak of the Francophone or Hispanic cultures. This is not a perfect English rendering, but in my opinion is better than the charged term “Greater China.” Chang’s text does not dwell on this issue, but it is important to mention the raging debates over “Chineseness” and the question of whether or not this implies an identification with one particular political regime, for instance the PRC, or another.

For those of us captivated by the noise and bustle of Chinese religious practice, the main point is not politics. It is instead the never-ending fascination with the religiosity inherent in all places touched in small or large degree by Chinese cultures. This short discussion has already illuminated many facets of existing popular religious practices. There are many more. Chang’s text illustrates one of the difficulties in studying popular religion in any contemporary culture—the very wealth of information is overwhelming. Even brief visits to religious sites present the scholar with so much data that it challenges the ability to make sense of it all. At the same time information from such visits is vital, not least because it allows one to challenge existing models. What Chang’s work offers is the chance to be part of this process of sense-making, to feel and taste this new universe. It is quite possible this work will perk the interest of such readers as you. And once the appetite has been whetted, the desire will recur. We can only hope for more explorations of Chinese religious practice from competent scholars such as Chang Chia-Lin.

Notes

- ¹ “5 mil. Taiwanese hold degrees from higher education institutions,” *China Post*, 13 March, 2016, <https://chinapost.nownews.com/20160313-28397>.
- ² “Most Atheist Countries 2021,” *World Population Review*, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/most-atheist-countries>; also see Jess Staufenberg, “The six countries in the world with the most ‘convinced atheists,’” *Independent*, 23 March, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/atheists-countries-list-six-world-most-convinced-a6946291.html>.
- ³ Paul Katz, “Identity Politics and the Study of Popular Religion in Postwar Taiwan,” in Paul R. Katz and Murray A. Rubinstein, eds. *Religion and the Formation of Taiwanese Identities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 157-180, p. 157.
- ⁴ Full Chinese address: 礁溪 宜蘭縣礁溪鄉大忠村中山路一段五十一號.
- ⁵ The Taiwan temple holds the ceremony on the (lunar) 13th of January and the 24th of June each year.
- ⁶ Book of Rites 禮記：文王世子.