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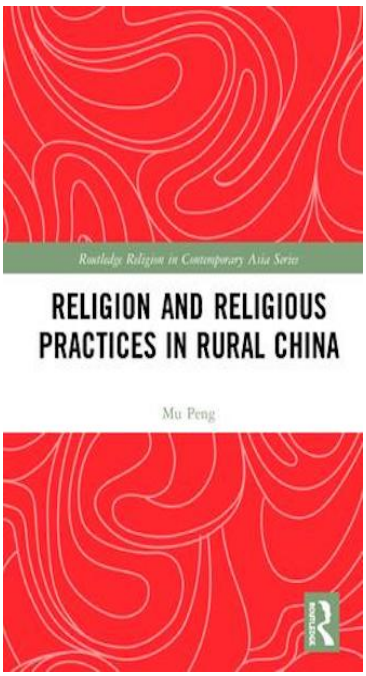

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Religion and Religious Practices in Rural China

Mu Peng

New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, November 2019.
240 pages. $140.00. Hardcover. ISBN 9780367347772.
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Review

Mu Peng's fascinating recent monograph, *Religion and Religious Practices in Rural China,* is ostensibly and primarily concerned with fieldwork studying local practices associated with Chinese popular religion. In particular, the book offers a richly contextualized account of practices relating to care for the dead and ancestors in the rural county of Chaling in Hunan province. Moreover, the book has a secondary goal of developing a critical perspective on the category of religion in Chinese history and contemporary China. In so doing, the book develops methodological approaches that may interest scholars concerned with religions in China generally. While the work is anchored in anthropology, religion scholars interested in China, theories of religion, embodiment, religious practices, and/or material religion will likely find the book to be engaging and helpful. Indeed, as a philosopher of religion interested in Chinese religions, I found the book to be immensely useful, with plentiful insights.

The first chapter, "Words and Things: A Theoretical Map," concerns the historiography of the academic category of religion as it pertains to China. Mu Peng details the different connotations of *zongjiao*, the term that typically translates the English word "religion," as well as its components *zong* and *jiao*. *Zong* is a term that has many associations and is often linked with rituals relating to ancestors or master-disciple lineages, while *jiao* generally refers to authoritative teachings. While various English-language articles and books have developed portions of this conceptual history, Mu Peng's overview is both comprehensive and methodologically pragmatic. She details this history in order to develop the relevant categories that will enable careful, critical inquiry into Chinese forms of religiosity.

The second chapter, "Dixia, Difu, and Diyu: The Contour of the Yin World," offers an account of the social and religious imaginary of traditional Chinese culture, especially as it pertains to the relations between the living and the dead. The cosmos she describes—divided into the *yang* world (*yangjian*) of the living and the *yin* world (*yinjian*) of ancestors—is populated with both individuals and institutions. One of the historical challenges for scholarship on religions in China has been the propensity of scholars to employ categories that are relevant to traditions such as Protestant Christianity or Catholicism, but that may not be so relevant to Chinese religions, for example, belief, myth, worship, ritual. Even as scholars attempt to become aware of and peel back previously unacknowledged assumptions about what a religion *must be*, the persistence of certain ways of thinking about religions may remain stuck in place (e.g., an intellectualist focus on belief or ideology as the "essence" of religiosity). This second chapter details a way of

thinking about persons, living and dead, and the rituals performed in relation to them, without replicating the foci of European religiosities.

The third chapter, "Encountering Death: Funeral Rituals in Practice," describes the overall situation for Mu Peng's ethnographic fieldwork relating to funeral rituals. In her fieldwork, Mu Peng worked as a videographer for rituals and worked alongside her brother-in-law, a videographer and paper sculptor, who introduces her to other "craftspeople." She describes in detail the local relationships that economically sustain these ritual specialists and provides background on the history of religious institutions in Hunan province and Chaling in particular—especially Buddhism and "Taoism," the spelling Mu Peng uses to when referring in English to *daojiao*. Mu Peng goes into considerable detail in accounting for the ritualized aspects of care for those about to die, the process of encoffining the dead, the conducting of funeral processions, burial, and tomb sweeping.

The fourth chapter, "Bai, Offering Incense and Hosting: Communicating with the Yin World," describes the conventional local practices of piety relating to ancestors. This chapter details the Welcoming Ancestors Festival as well as the sites for rituals relating to ancestors, such as domestic altars and graveyards. We learn in fine detail about the *xiafan* ritual meal for visiting ancestors. In these meals, almost entirely prepared and conducted by women family members, food and drinks are prepared and seating is left open for ancestors to sit and enjoy the meal. The chapter likewise describes and interprets common practices like lighting incense and bowing (*bai*), frequently drawing on insights from Pierre Bourdieu in highlighting the local *habitus* of community and practice.

The fifth chapter, "Doing Handicraft: Bridging the Yin and Yang," describes work as a ritual specialist. Here, Mu Peng narrates the experience of being seen as a ritual specialist, a craftsperson for communicating with the yin world. She depicts with considerable detail the construction and burning of well-apportioned paper houses for the recently deceased. Throughout the book, Mu Peng has included an abundance of photographs of temples, homes, domestic altars, *bai* performance, and of course, numerous paper sculptures. These images further aid the reader in envisioning cultural and religious life in Chaling.

The sixth chapter, "Esoteric Knowledge: Imitating Masters," describes her fieldwork alongside local ritual specialists. The chapter focuses on the apprenticeship of specialists, with apprentices imitating to the minutest detail the comportment of masters during rituals, especially those concerning funerals and burials. Lineages of masters and apprentices mark the institutional structure of local Taoism. Moreover, specialists visualize their masters as if they were present while performing the rituals they learned from them. Information about rituals and particular procedures for rituals were kept within these relationships, so learning them also involved Mu Peng developing relationships of trust with the network of specialists.

The concluding chapter offers an overview of Mu Peng's own complicated personal perspective on these practices and rituals. She reflects on her own inability to perform key rituals such as *bai* and the difference between this practice of bowing and the more formal sort of bowing she was familiar with from her upbringing in Western China. This difficulty she had in performing the *bai* reveals to her cultural informants that she is ultimately "different" (220).

Overall, the book provides both an illuminating and multifaceted account of religious practices relating to care for the dying and the dead in rural China and a theoretically rich account of methods appropriate for such a study. Specifically, for religion scholars interested in critical studies of embodied local practices and material religion, this book has a great deal to offer. While the core study of the book is specific to a set of traditions, relationships, and rituals concerning the dead and ancestors performed by and for local communities, the book is clearly written and accessible to non-anthropologists. The book also contains a very helpful glossary of relevant Chinese terms.

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Date of Review:
September 1, 2021

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Comments

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