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Joël Thoraval

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Heaven, Earth, Sovereign, Ancestors, Masters: Some Remarks on the Politico-Religious in China Today

Joël THORAVAL (EHESS)



HEAVEN, EARTH, SOVEREIGN, ANCESTORS, MASTERS: SOME REMARKS ON THE POLITICO-RELIGIOUS IN CHINA TODAY

JOËL THORAVAL

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THE AUTHOR

A Senior Researcher at Paris' School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales), Joël Thoraval died on 7 March 2016. His work concerned the cultural anthropology of China and the history of contemporary Chinese thought (in particular, the question of modern Confucianism).

ABSTRACT

The starting point of this study is the perspective offered by Emilio Gentile on modern “politics as religion”. This vantage point is briefly illustrated by the case of contemporary “popular Confucianism”. However, in order to show the extent to which the Chinese religious situation does not lend itself readily to such an approach, the author considers a “popular” cult that reemerged in China after Maoism, namely, the widespread veneration of five entities: Heaven, Earth, Sovereign, Ancestors, Masters (*tian, di, jun, qin, shi*). Comparing modern interpretations (whether political, scholarly or popular) of these practices sheds some light on the problematic nature of secularizing projects targeting this enduring cosmological vision.

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KEYWORDS

Heaven (*tian* 天), Confucianism, Chinese cosmology, Political religion, Chinese religion, Rite, Secularization

AUTHOR'S RECENT PUBLICATIONS

- With Sébastien BILLIQUOD, *Le Sage et le Peuple. Le renouveau confucéen en Chine*. Paris: Éditions du CNRS (« Bibliothèque de l'anthropologie »), 2014; Awarded the Pierre-Antoine Bernheim History of Religions Prize from the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (2015). English translation: *The Sage and the People, The Confucian Revival in China*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2015.
- « Le Ciel et la Terre, le Souverain, les ancêtres et les maîtres : Quelques remarques sur le politico-religieux aujourd'hui en Chine », in Silvia Mancini et Raphaël Rousseleau (éds.), *Processus de légitimation entre politique et religion, Approches historico-culturelles et analyses de cas dans les mondes européen et extra-européen*, Paris : Beauchesne, 2016, p.163-187.
- « Passage entre les espaces visible et invisible de l'univers. Perspectives sur la mort en Chine », *Fins de la Vie : débat*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2011, p.121-170.



1. GENTILE AND THE COMPARATIVIST SPACE

What holds for many sociological theories when they are applied to non-Western cultural universes also holds for Emilio Gentile's extensive writings on "politics as religion". A twofold gesture seems inevitable. First, one must recognize the necessarily limited relevance of such theories, if for no other reason than because of the already centuries old transformation of these universes on contact with the modern West: from this minimalist perspective, European theoreticians studying a foreign reality recognize what seem familiar phenomena (nation, citizenship, secularization) for the simple reason that these phenomena are themselves of partly European derivation. One must next take stock of what such an interpretive discourse leaves unexplained about behavior due to notions and attitudes that are difficult to transpose from one universe to the next. Once the vanity of a meta-discourse claiming to directly address a universal phenomenon or contrast the proposed theory with an indigenous theory that fails to take into consideration the generalized hybridity of the contemporary world is recognized, this second step of the investigation can take the form of a simple reflexive return: this emphasizes concrete experiences in contextualized manner while recognizing their specificity and resistance to generalization. This does not interrupt the discussion but rather reopens it. In other words, the work of Emilio Gentile opens the way for a general comparativism regarding the modern forms of the "sacralization of politics": "By a religion of politics I mean a particular form of sacralization of politics that has occurred in the modern era after the political realm had gained its independence from traditional religion. By taking over the religious dimension and acquiring a sacred status, politics went so far as to claim for itself the prerogative to determine the meaning and fundamental aim of human existence

for individuals and the collectivity, at least on this earth. A religion of politics is created every time a political entity such as a nation, state, race, class, party or movement is transformed into a sacred entity, which means it becomes transcendent, unchallengeable, and intangible"¹. As such, Gentile points out, this entity asserts itself as the center of a system of beliefs and practices that make it an object of faith and worship – indeed, sometimes of devotion to the point of sacrifice.

Within these "religions of politics", Gentile recognizes two major types according to their attitude towards traditional religion and the manner in which they govern relations between the individual and the state. In *civil religions*, the sacralization of a political entity adapts to a system that champions the pluralism of ideas and the religious freedom of individuals. *Political religions*, by contrast, "sacralize a political system based on an irrevocable monopoly of power, ideological monism, the obligatory and unconditional subordination of the individual and the collectivity to its laws". These are ideal-types, of course, that respectively characterize pluralistic, democratic societies and totalitarian ones².

2. WHAT FORMS DO RELIGIONS AS POLITICS TAKE IN CHINA ?

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What advantage is to be had from adopting this typology in the Chinese case? Perhaps that of offering an unusual perspective on relations between the political and the religious over the course of the past century. From this perspective, the collapse of the ritualistic order of the Empire in 1911 ushered in a new era propitious to the gradual development of specifically Chinese "religions of politics" since the ultimate legitimacy of political power no longer found its source in Heaven but in the People or in the Nation. The categorical distinction proposed by Gentile would allow one to lay out, for purely heuristic purposes, a new periodization for a century-old evolution. One might thus distinguish between three main situations: prior to and following a particularly striking case of "political religion" (that of the Maoist totalitarian

¹ Gentile, Emilio, *Politics as Religion*. (Princeton University Press, 2006), XIV.

² Gentile, Emilio, *Les religions de la politique. Entre démocraties et totalitarismes*, (Paris: Le Seuil, 2005), 14-16 (All references refer to the French edition used by the author). In order to avoid possible ambiguity, one must take into consideration the fact that, in Gentile's conceptualization, the "sacralization of politics" is a modern phenomenon that differs from the very general phenomenon of the "sacralization of political power" encountered in most pre-modern societies – the Chinese empire, for example. What's more – and within the modern perspective itself – it also must not be confused with the politicization of religion, where religious movements seek to apply their program within or with the help of the state machine, as in certain manifestations of Islamism (*Ibid.*, 14, 17, 261).

regime), various efforts to elaborate a civil religion centered on the construction of the new Chinese nation would be observable. Particular importance would be accorded the nationalist period of the 1920s-30s on the mainland, due both to the creation of secular rituals by the Guomintang state and the transformations affecting society taken as a whole (such as the emergence of mass religious organizations)³. On this view, the political religion established by the communist state on the continent violently interrupted a nationalist civil religion of this type⁴. Under the governments of Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 and Chiang Ching-kuo 蔣經國, an authoritarian form of the latter was then partly transported to Taiwan.

If one accepts such a perspective, the problem then becomes the following: how should one formulate the question of the construction of civil religion as Gentile understood it in the two contexts of the decay of Maoist totalitarianism on the mainland and the democratization of the old nationalist system in Taiwan? More precisely, what is the relationship between the present day attempts of these two states (post-totalitarian Beijing, post-authoritarian Taipei) at politico-religious reconstruction and the heritage left over from the interwar Republican period, the importance of which I have underscored? It is clear that the two states occupy very different positions in regards to this Republican experience. Under the Maoist regime, it was largely silenced and it is only gradually that it has afterwards received attention in academic circles and become the object of public discussion in the PRC. The same does not hold for the island: after the evacuation by the Japanese authorities, religious discourses and movements originating on the continent gained a foothold in Taiwanese society despite the tight control exercised by the nationalist state, which had established martial law. As soon as the latter was lifted in 1987, these discourses and movements took new forms and rapidly expanded. Sometimes, they rediscovered unexpected continuities with the heritage of Republican China, a paradoxical situation given that these partial elements of continuity emerged within a society claiming an identity both democratic and specifically Taiwanese.

3. AN EXAMPLE: THE MULTIPLE FATES OF POPULAR CONFUCIANISM

Let us try to give an example of these complicated historical relations. On mainland China, the 2000s witnessed the emergence of assertive movements claiming to represent popular Confucianism (*minjian rujia* 民間儒家): Far from official initiatives, these undertakings particularly developed in the educational (the creation of schools centered on Classic texts) and religious (the re-creation of collective rituals at various scales) domains. Those who provided the driving force for these movements – new educators and new ritualists – were drawn from the urban lower middle classes and sometimes consisted of former Communist Party officials. At the national level, internet use facilitated the creation of unstructured and sometimes ephemeral networks to promote group reading of Confucian texts, participation in rituals and, less frequently, the creation of communal living spaces. Without always explicitly laying claim to a religious identity, which would not have been recognized by the authorities, these movements emphasized ultimate values of the Confucian heritage that focused on individual and collective destiny (*anshen liming* 安生立命)⁵.

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It is a minority phenomenon that appears to have little significance in statistical terms. Nevertheless, setting it in the context of the various “religions of politics” that have appeared in contemporary China allows one to cast light on its real significance. It is tempting to compare these mainland movements to contemporary developments in Taiwan. As Richard Madsen has shown, following the Guomintang authoritarian state’s relative withdrawal from the public sphere, new mass organizations were able to contribute to the construction of a democratic culture in the context of a veritable “religious renaissance” in the late 1980s⁶. These organizations, which recruited hundreds of thousands of members among the new urban classes, often referred to Buddhist ideals of compassion and social solidarity but also promoted a Confucian ethos and values such as “Filial piety” (孝道). Forms of popular Confucianism thus developed within Taiwanese society, not just around the respect of shared values, but also around shared rituals. These ritualistic aspects were also (and are still) encouraged by the development of a syncretistic religion: Yiguandao (一貫道) or Way of Pervading Unity. Due to its attitude towards the

3 For an initial consideration of all of the problems relating to the history and anthropology of religion in modern China, see the survey by Goossaert, Palmer (2011).

4 This hypothesis cannot take into account the complexity of the historic situation, in particular the division of China under the warlords and the evolution of the nationalist regime.

5 For more on these matters, see Billioud and Thoraval (2014).

6 Madsen (2007).

Japanese occupation, the Yiguandao was in the past repressed by the Nationalist and Communist Party and reduced to a clandestine existence. With more than a million followers, it now ranks as Taiwan's "third religion" after Buddhism and Taoism. Yiguandao chose to emphasize the Confucian side of its teachings, which it spreads via collective study of the Classics appropriating methods of reading and memorization that are also encountered among mainland movements. On both sides of the Strait, these anti-intellectualist methods, which seek to incorporate the Confucian message via lived experience, today owe much to a Taiwanese educator, Wang Caigui 王財貴. Despite differences of scale, parallels thus already exist between these various Confucian-inspired movements.

But the perspective opened up by a triple succession of Chinese forms of the "politics as religion" (civil religion/political religion/civil religions) also strengthens the necessity to examine the past and future of popular Confucianism on mainland China. This is for two reasons. First, small mainland organizations such as *Yidan xuetang* (一耽學堂) and powerful churches such as *Yiguandao* both have roots in the Republican period: they are the direct or indirect heirs of the mass organizations – the "redemptive societies" lately rediscovered by the historiography – that emerged after the fall of the Empire. These organizations ("Way of Anterior Heaven", "Association for Universal Morality" and so on) in various ways combined a desire to moralize society with individual and collective aspirations to salvation and were sometimes joined by scholars literati who had been left without prospects by the abolition of the imperial system.

Of course, the rediscovery and re-appropriation of this shared religious past is more difficult on the mainland than in Taiwan. On the one hand, the development in Taiwan of powerful, ecumenically-inclined religious organizations appealing to ancient Chinese teachings contributed to the construction of what Madsen calls the Taiwanese civil religion (in a sense that is not so different from Bellah's understanding of this concept). According to him, the process of democratization thoroughly linked these organizations with the rise of a new pluralist political culture. Despite the many religious currents cutting across Chinese society, none of which enjoy legal institutional recognition, such a phenomenon is impossible in mainland China given the Communist Party's tireless imposition of the official counter-religion known as atheism or "the non-existence of spirits" (*wushenlun* 無神論). There are indications, however – for example, recent contacts between the Communist Party and *Yiguandao* for what are presented as educational

or patriotic purposes – that a highly varied and perhaps surprising future is in store for "popular Confucianism"⁷.

In short, to limit ourselves to Mainland China history, Gentile's typology offers an interesting perspective, allowing comparison between three major periods. An initial civil religion specific to the Republican period and centered on the authoritarian nationalism of Guomindang did not impede a Confucian religiosity organized on the basis of mass associations from developing in society. By contrast, the violently exclusive communist political religion, which focused on class, party and leader, banned any positive reference to Confucianism from state and society. Finally, with the weakening of totalitarian structures and in a context marked by the global rise of Chinese power, a new authoritarian ideology has gradually emerged that borrows some symbols from the Chinese cultural tradition (does this amount to a new form of civil religion in the Gentile's sense of the term?). This has only allowed minor growth on the part of Confucian-inspired popular movements, as if the present moment was merely a period of transition towards a future for which Taiwan supplies the model or, on the contrary, the counter-model.

Having taken the notion of "politics as religion" as far as it will go – albeit at the cost of a certain abstraction – I would like to consider the reasons why this perspective leaves the observer somewhat dissatisfied, as if essential aspects of Chinese reality have been neglected⁸.

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7 Billioud, Thoraval (2014), 390-398. On *Yiguandao*, see Billioud, Thoraval (2015) and Billioud, Qi Jia (2016).

8 This reflexive return is not in itself a criticism of Gentile's general theory, which moreover specifies the limits of his concept: "If one adopts a broader point of view, one will observe that, in contemporary history, the problem of the sacralization of politics embraces a much vaster and more complex reality than the religions of politics that have achieved an institutional form would seem to indicate," Gentile (2005), 266-267.

4. A FORGOTTEN WORSHIP: HEAVEN, EARTH, SOVEREIGN, ANCESTORS, MASTERS

One may begin with might seem an observation of little importance. In the homes of Chinese villagers, one today still finds five entities that are the object of domestic worship. The names of these entities were formerly written on a ritual tablet that was placed on a little altar in front of a table of offerings where a perfume burner stood. Despite prohibitions and destruction, these inscriptions reappeared at the end of the Maoist period but often on more humble material: instead of a tablet, there might be a simple piece of paper on which the five characters had been calligraphed.

From top to bottom, one there reads the following words: Heaven, Earth, Sovereign, Ancestors, Masters (*tian* 天, *di* 地, *jun* 君, *qin* 親, *shi* 師). A scale thus seems to be established that runs from several major figures of the social order to cosmic beings. Following the Maoist period of forced amnesia, in the 1980s many Chinese intellectuals wondered about the object of this worship, which had become less familiar than that of the ancestors or local deities⁹. The problem was more historical than semantic in nature: what were the origins of this form of worship and, above all, how had it spread throughout the population?



⁹ Thus, in 1983, the specialist of literature Zhang Bilai ranked among the “three questions without answers” (*sanwen sanbuzhi* 三問三不知) why the Masters were present of on these tablets (the “five social relations” of Confucianism including the friend, for example, but not the master) as well as the reason and origin of their association with Heaven and Earth (1983), 25-26.

It is interesting in this connection to consider the personal experience of Yu Yingshi 余英時, widely recognized as one of the leading figures of Chinese intellectual history.

In 1937, when war broke out with Japan, Yu Yingshi, then aged seven, took refuge with his uncle in the mountainous district of Qianshan 潛山 (southern province of Anhui). Until 1947, he lived in a remote village society far removed from the upheavals of the time. “I am convinced,” he wrote in a short text recounting his experience, “that what I experienced at the time in this village of Guanzhuang 官庄 was not fundamentally different from the situation that existed one or two centuries before, except there was a greater degree of dereliction and poverty”. In the absence of any modern educational structure, he attended traditional schools (*sishu* 私塾), where Confucian teachings based on the Four Books were dispensed. “A Confucianism, a Daoism and a Buddhism that had become customary continued to supply the foundation of the villagers’ beliefs and behaviors.”

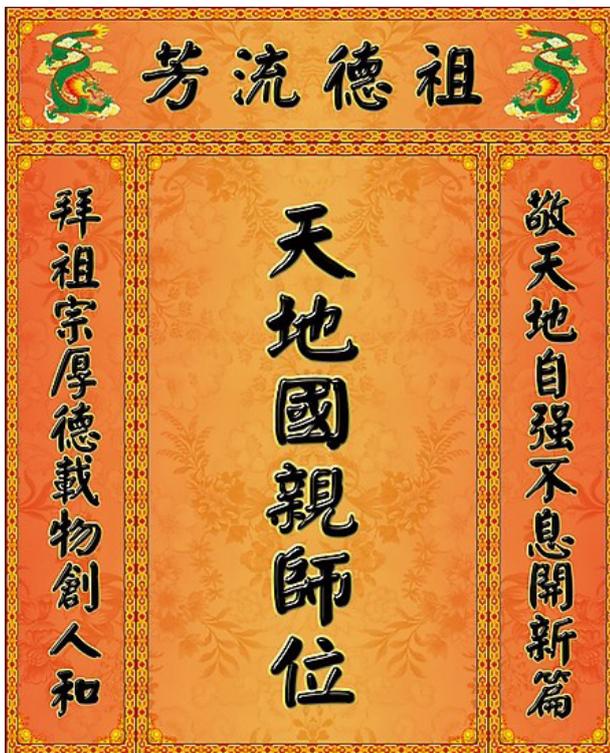
In the case of Yu Yingshi, who would later become a professor at Yale and Princeton, this existence on the margins of modern China makes it possible to “understand the meaning of the Chinese cultural tradition from within.” “Rather ironically,” he notes, “Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀, an extremely critical and satirical spirit and a leader of the May Fourth 1919 movement, was a native of the neighboring canton of Huaining 懷寧”¹⁰. But the new culture propagated by this movement (which, against Confucianism, claimed “science and democracy” as its inspiration) had yet to reach the remote villages where Yu Yingshi lived. The latter had only heard this literatus-turned-revolutionary spoken of in connection with scandalous remarks: “the first time I heard his name, it was because he was accused of having said that ‘the father and mother are first of all motivated by desire, not by the intention of having a child’. He is said to have later declared that filial piety was the worst of evils and the source of all vices.”

One day – it was Chinese New Year’s – the child for the first time watched as his uncle used a brush to write large characters on red paper:

Vertically written in the midst of these parallel maxims (*duilian* 對聯) were the words: Heaven, Earth, State, Ancestors, Masters. They were arranged on the wall at the back of the room where the ancestor tablets were located. My uncle explained

¹⁰ Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) was a promoter of the movement for vernacular language and one of the leaders of the May Fourth 1919 movement at Peking University. He was also a co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921.

the origin to me: the five characters should be “Heaven, Earth, Sovereign, Ancestors, Masters” but, since we were now under the Republican regime, there no longer was an emperor and as a result the character *jun* 君 (sovereign) had been replaced with the character *guo* 國 (country, state). This change of character was already indicative of a phenomenon of modernization and yet, in a very obvious way, the system of values in its structure had not changed. These five characters were precisely what, on the eve of the May Fourth Movement, Chen Duxiu called for completely eradicating: “most of the characters of the writing used in our society,” he wrote, “still bear the mark of the horrible customs of the monarchical period. In the main rooms of villagers’ homes is to be found a poster or tablet with the characters Heaven, Earth, Sovereign, Ancestors, Masters written on it. These completely decrepit ideas are spread across the entire country. This is why, if we sincerely wish to strengthen the Republic, it is indispensable to rid ourselves of them, to completely wash ourselves of these old ideas that continue to be spread by ethics and literature and are contrary to the republican spirit.”



Yu Yingshi readily notes the ancient association of these five notions, which stretches back to Chinese antiquity, particularly in the book of the philosopher Xunzi (IIIrd-century BCE), who is well known among men of letters. Xunzi sees in the worship of these entities the three roots of rites: Heaven and Earth are the foundations of life; the Ancestors are the foundation of family continuity; and the Sovereign

and Masters are the foundation of the social order¹¹. The question, however, is to determine when the worship of these entities became a popular practice imbuing the most modest levels of society. Yu Yingshi recognizes that this practice is not ancient and could not have predated the Song Dynasty¹². But a more recent study offers greater precision. It was only at the end of the Ming Dynasty that ritual worship of these five figures became genuinely popular, although questions remain as to the place reserved for the master (*shi* 師): can the latter legitimately be included in a single group alongside Heaven and the emperor? This is why it was only in the eighteenth-century, following an edict from Manchu Emperor Yongzheng, that this practice was formally institutionalized. Yet the master thus designated explicitly became the Supreme Master – *i.e.*, Confucius himself. The government’s promotion of this form of worship was part of a larger policy seeking to moralize and Confucianize the entire social body. In particular, observance of this ritual was made obligatory in schools, from the district level to that of the Imperial Academy¹³.

Following the fall of the Empire, the gradual decline of the small traditional schools (*sishu* 私塾) and the complete destruction of these rituals in communities and families under Maoism, it is not surprising that, beginning in the 1980s, the inscriptions perpetuating this ancient reverence for a cosmological order – one that had imbued centuries of Chinese history – only reappeared at the domestic level.

11 « Les rites ont, en fait, trois fondements. Le Ciel et la Terre sont le fondement de la vie. Les premiers ancêtres sont le fondement de la race. Le prince et le maître sont le fondement de l’ordre social. Sans le Ciel et la Terre, comment y aurait-il une vie ? Sans les premiers ancêtres, comment y aurait-il une descendance ? Sans prince ni maître, comment y aurait-il un ordre social ? S’il venait à manquer un seul de ces trois fondements, il n’y aurait aucun homme en sécurité ici bas. C’est pourquoi les rites permettent de servir le Ciel en haut, la Terre en bas, d’honorer le premier ancêtre et de vénérer le Prince et les maîtres. Tels sont les trois fondements des rites» Le Blanc, Mathieu (2009), 1076-1077. 《荀子·禮論篇》：禮有三本：天地者，生之本也；先祖者，類之本也；君師者，治之本也。無天地，惡生？無先祖，惡出？無君師，惡治？三者偏亡焉，無安人。故上事天，下事地，尊先祖而隆君師。是禮之三本也…… (Ritual principles have three roots. Heaven and Earth are the root of life. Forebears are the root of kinship. Lords and teachers are the root of order. Were there no heaven and no Earth, how could there be life? Were there no forebears, how could there be issue? Were there no lords and no teachers, how could there be order? Were even one of these three lost, there would be no peace and security for man. Thus, rituals serve Heaven above and Earth below, pay honor to one’s forebears, and exalt rules and teachers, for these are the three roots of ritual principles.) Xunzi, Knoblock, John (transl.), *A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988–1994), Vol. 3, p. 58.

12 Yu Yingshi (2014).

13 Xu Zi (2006).

5. COSMOLOGY AND THE PLACE OF POLITICS

In the eyes of one observer, the plural and hierarchized object of this worship seems to have a twofold character. On the one hand, what we recognize as the political dimension seems to occupy central place: a Sovereign (*jun*) and then State (*guo*) appears to play a mediating role between Heaven and Earth and the other figures representing kinship or the teaching of culture (Ancestors, Masters). It must not be forgotten that these practices were propagated by the systematic action of the imperial state. On the other hand, this political entity is not separable from the four other entities to which it is related via a symbolic-type association and the ritual activity that addresses them as a group.

To return to the Gentile's problematic: to what extent can the major division that is the condition of possibility for "religions of politics" – that is, secularization and the great division of the world it always implies in one way or another – occur here? For it is only after the political domain has been separated from the religious universe that, as if in return, the various modern phenomena of the sacralization of politics can take place¹⁴.

One may attempt to capture the main difficulty in one word. The Chinese cosmological tradition is in no way homogenous but it resists application of a Western-origin distinction that would dualistically contrast the earthly and the heavenly or irreducibly material and spiritual domains. The various differentiations performed there are not susceptible to reduction to a difference of "altitude" between, for example, the transcendent Heaven and the inferior world of men. At each level of the cosmic hierarchy, the principal difference is between the visible and invisible dimensions of a single universe in perpetual interaction: the dynamism of the *yin* and the *yang* permeates all beings, which are delimited and separate in Western eyes. Thus, what is expressed by ancestors (*qin* 親) on the tablet of the domestic ritual does not refer to beings who have become absent. In truth, this *qin* designates a familial or lineal continuity between the living and the dead: the latter continue to be present, although

¹⁴ Without necessarily associating them with a rigid causal determinism, Gentile takes care to enumerate the various phenomena that precede or coexist with the emergence of "religions of politics": "With the affirmation, in the modern period, of the superiority of national sovereignty, the secularization of culture, the church's loss of hegemony over the state as well as the triumph of the principle of popular sovereignty and the birth of mass politics, the relationship between the religious sphere and the political sphere, government and the sacred, evolves and enters into a new phase that will give birth to phenomena of sacralization of politics" (2005) 15. One must naturally examine each of these terms to assess the degree to which they account for phenomena that are at once comparable and nevertheless specific in the Chinese domain.

in an invisible form, and are partners in the ritual exchange (offerings for protection) of ancestor worship. The master (*shi*) is not necessarily a living master; the master may also be the ancient sages who, though now distant in time and invisible, can once again be made present like any spirit by means of sacrifice. In other words, if it is difficult to clearly demarcate the secular and religious aspects of the world, it is because the cosmology in which human action seeks to orient itself is organized in keeping with analogical chains driven by a common dynamism (of which the *yin* and the *yang* is the most recognizable illustration)¹⁵. Macroscopic and smaller entities like the human body are thus conceived in terms of the same categories and processes (energy, dispersion/concentration, etc.). As Chinese medicine continues to demonstrate to this day, it is difficult to naturalistically differentiate between matters of physiology, psychology and spirituality as they pertain to the body.

For all that, it cannot be denied that more than a century of exchanges, revolutions and wars has undermined this traditional Chinese cosmology. Entire, doubtlessly decisive portions of the experience of the Chinese individual are governed by a naturalistic logic and instrumental rationality reflected in the power of technology, the strength of political and economic management techniques and so on. Therefore, the question of what has withstood these now global processes and makes it possible to defend and reconstruct symbols and practical schemata characteristic of older behaviors is always to be raised in a highly contextual and hypothetical manner.

8

6. A STATE RELIGION? THE PHILOSOPHERS' RESPONSE

As is usually the case, the domestic worship of the five entities is subject to a number of interpretations, both past and present. Under the Empire, the importance ascribed to each of these entities has not always been the same. Yu Yingshi has shown how the category of master was promoted by Confucian scholars-literati in the Song period as well as by brigands revolting against the imperial order (the master being the rebel leader) in novels such as *Water Margin*¹⁶.

What today seems the most political category – that

¹⁵ This cosmology, named as "continuist" in *The Sage and the People: The Confucian Revival in China*, corresponds rather well to what the anthropologist Philippe Descola (2005) termed, in opposition to the naturalism of the modern West, "analogist ontology."

¹⁶ Yu Yingshi (2004), 130-131.

of the Sovereign (*jun*) – was in fact politico-religious in nature since the emperor was at once monarch and the great priest in charge of the cult to Heaven. The anecdote recounted by Yu Yingshi showed how, under the Republic, the sovereign was replaced by the State (*guo*). In the eyes of revolutionary intellectuals like Chen Duxiu, this Republican state was entirely secular. But it is interesting to note that the intrusion of a national state into the ancient cosmological order was bound to raise questions among modern intellectuals who remained committed to Confucian ideals. In particular, the philosophical movement generally referred to as contemporary neo-Confucianism, which emerged on the mainland under the Republic before taking refuge in Taiwan and Hong Kong following the Communist takeover, sought to give contemporary meaning to its teaching by reducing it to its ethical and religious dimensions: indirect heirs of the ideals of the May Fourth Movement (“science and democracy”), these intellectuals opposed any authoritarian interpretation of culture (whether that of Mao Zedong or Chiang Kai-shek). They saw the promotion of a form of worship that took the national state apparatus as its object as threatening their ideal of wisdom. Since they moreover remained deeply committed to the cosmological continuity extolled by the neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties, they felt a need to correct the names of the entities that were worshipped within what had become a domestic religion.

From this point of view, this memory of Cai Renhou 蔡仁厚, a disciple of the philosopher Mou Zongsan 牟宗三, is revealing:

The tablet devoted to Heaven, Earth, Sovereign, Ancestors and Masters was found everywhere among families in ancient society. But when there was no longer an emperor, what was he to be replaced with? At the start of the Republican period, some suggested the country or State (*guo*) but the State (*guojia* 國家) is a political organization and it is not a suitable object of cultural reverence. Others suggested replacing it with man (*ren* 人) in his relationship with Heaven and Earth. But it was too vague as an entity, too abstract for the purposes of worship. Confronted with this problem, Tang Junyi later suggested that the inscription be corrected by using the character for wise man or saint (*sheng* 聖). In 1956, when Mou Zongsan took a position at Tonghai University 東海 (in Taizhong 臺中, Taiwan), we prepared a tablet dedicated to Heaven, Earth, Saints, Ancestors and Masters for the New Year, burned incense and performed a ritual. The next day, Xu Fuguan came with his children to pay his respects to Mou Zongsan. He saw the tablet and praised it highly, which deeply impressed me¹⁷.

17 Cai Renhou (2009). Tang Junyi 唐君毅 (1909-1978), Mou Zongsan (1909-1995) and Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 (1902-1982) are three leading thinkers of contemporary neo-Confucianism. On Mou Zongsan, see Thoraval (2003) and Billioud (2012).

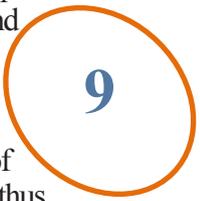


The attitude of these philosophers thus consisted in as it were bracketing a State already modern in operational and ideological terms¹⁸. The holy spirits who interpose themselves between Heaven and Earth and human communities are sages of Chinese history (Confucius and his disciples as well as the great scholars of the later dynasties). Emphasizing the religious dimension of Confucianism, these modern thinkers are thus in continuity with an ancient tradition that allowed scholar-officials to take refuge in ultimate teachings via the “way of the Sage” whenever the “Kingly way” was not respected in the empire¹⁹.

This reinterpretation of the ancient cosmic order is nevertheless the work of a minority of intellectuals. Village people continue to remain faithful to the hierarchy of the ancient entities. Its contemporary interpretation, however, is at difficulties to express itself in modern language.

18 Other contemporary Confucians seems less sensitive to the risks of national symbolism. Lin Anwu 林安梧, a well-known but heterodox disciple of Mou Zongsan in Taiwan, for his part responds thus: “I think that worshipping Heaven and Earth, the Ancestors and the Sages (or Saints) is entirely possible. In the past, one worshipped Heaven and Earth, the Sovereign, the Ancestors and the Masters. If one finds that sovereign is not acceptable, one can replace it with the state for we have today entered the democratic age, that of the sovereign state (*guojun* 國君): a Chinese must show loyalty towards his nation or towards his state. Obviously, some specify the series ‘Heaven, Earth, Saints, Ancestors, Masters’: Tang Junyi put it this way and Mou Zongsan adopted a similar formulation. The important thing is that Heaven and Earth, the ancestors and sages or saints are the three dimensions that traditional culture places at the heart of everyday life” (Lin Anwu 2012, 7). On Lin Anwu, cf. Makeham (2008), 171-187.

19 This relative de-politicization of the Confucian message among philosophers was contested by a generation of younger thinkers on the mainland who sought to restore its full political dimension to Confucianism in a constitutional order that would add to the people’s legitimacy that of Heaven and of history (that is, of the Chinese tradition). Its most prominent representative is Jian Qing 蔣慶: cf. Jiang (2012). From a Gentilian perspective, one might speak of a “politicization of religion”, except that it is a religion that is claiming to reconstruct itself.



7. THE AMBIVALENCE OF POPULAR BEHAVIOR

An anthropological study carried out by Hans Steinmüller in the 2000s in the province of Hubei offers a few insights into this ambiguous situation²⁰. After the devastation of the Maoist period, a humble place for family worship was restored in the mail hall of houses and consisted of an offertory table or sometimes merely a shelf. There, tablets were largely replaced by lengths of red paper, upon which inscriptions were calligraphed on occasions such as the New Year. They are part of what the villagers of this region of Hubei call the family spirits or gods (*jiashen* 家神), a category that encompasses ancestral spirits, the household deity and Taoist or Buddhist-origin divinities (like Guanyin 觀音).

It is a striking fact that the villagers generally did not refer to the innovations of the Republican period (placing the country or the state at the group's center) when inscribing the five characters but rather kept the imperial formula, with its reference to the sovereign (*jun*). During the Maoist period, Mao Zedong's effigy regularly occupied the sovereign's place, a tradition that continues. One today observes a difficult coexistence between representations and attitudes relating to the imperial and Maoist imaginaries. For it is obviously possible to identify the sovereign in the inscription with either of them. Was Mao a new emperor²¹? In response to the enquiring ethnologist, a school teacher remarked: "It's merely a matter of perspective. You can also interpret the *jun* character as representing President Hu Jintao or instead the State and Party"²². It is to be noted, moreover, that Mao's power may confer additional value upon his portrait: that of warding off phantoms and evil demons²³. The issue at stake here, however, is the coexistence of contradictory interpretations regarding politics is the coexistence at the center of family ritual space of contradictory interpretations regarding politics

20 Hans Steinmüller (2010).

21 For an overview, cf. Barné (2010).

22 Hans Steinmüller (2010), 82.

23 According to the rules of the cosmology discussed earlier, it is normal that Mao Zedong, like many deified generals, becomes a deity after his death due to his particular magic power (*ling* 靈). But he was not a god during his lifetime, despite Western representations of "the sun-like god Mao." However, as a living human possessing a particular power, Mao could exercise his influence, not just in the visible world, but also in the invisible world of spirits. In the course of fieldwork I carried out in the late 1980s regarding religion in the district of Danxian 儋縣 (northwest of Hainan), I was astonished to find that the spectacular interactions between villagers and their family deities (particularly via the intermediary of a medium) had been nearly completely interrupted in the decade of the cultural Revolution. "It's extremely simple," I was told, "the gods knew that the emperor would not allow them to intervene in our affairs so they (temporarily) refrained [from doing so]". The visible and invisible dimensions do not affect weakness and strength: the power of a particular human, whether he be emperor or a humble Taoist master, can be greater than that of minor spirits. This human power derives from an exceptional character, particular training or occupying a role in a ritual (the latter brings to mind what Max Weber referred to as *Amtcharisma*). Cf. Thoraval (1990), 139-143.

properly so-called. When submitted to an outsider's gaze, this "equivocality" is the source of a specific form of embarrassment among the villagers, the manifestations of which Steinmüller seeks to analyze (silence, irony, etc.)²⁴.

Although a particular gloss may be offered for each entity, the entirety of this sacred hierarchy taken as a whole must ultimately be taken into account. As historians and ethnologists have alike noted, the underlying order or structure of the series remains the same, even when its content is altered. For, under religiously defined conditions, the same script links this cosmic order via written characters governed by taboos asserting a magical dimension²⁵. And this cosmic order is the site of regular interaction between the visible and invisible universes on the occasion of small offertory rituals, however humble they may be.

This is why, in the context of a generalized return to cultural practices on the part of the population, it is only by offering radical reinterpretations of this whole set of symbols and the cults associated with them that Party theoreticians and ideologues are today able to acknowledge their persistence in the village world.

24 Despite the multiple euphemistic interpretations that surround the figure of the sovereign, the permanence of the figure of the emperor (*huangdi* 皇帝) in the popular imagination must be noted. The years that followed Maoism in the 1980s and 90s, in particular, witnessed the emergence of small peasant movements led by a charismatic figure. Having proclaimed himself emperor of a new dynasty, this figure sometimes attracted a large "court" of supporters before being repressed by the security services. By assuming the politico-religious role of the emperor reorganizing the world as son of Heaven, such figures, however marginal they may have been, testify to the vitality of certain cosmological representations. One thus witnessed the emergence of ephemeral post-Maoist "dynasties": "The Emperor of the Golden Door of Virtue" (*Daode jinmen huangdi* 道德金門皇帝), an illiterate peasant who founded a sect in 1981 in the mountainous region between Hubei, Hunan and Anhui, repressed just ten years later; "The Luminous Empire of the Central Plain" (*Zhongyuan huangqingguo* 中原皇清國) in Hunan in 1982; the "Kingdom of Great Wisdom" (*Dasheng wangchao* 大聖王朝), led by an "empress" in Shandong in 1986-88; "the Celestial Kingdom of Prosperity" (*Wanshun Tianguo* 萬順天國) in Henan in 1990-92, etc. For an overview, cf. Zhang (2012). Geremie Barné (2010, 266) briefly presents the case of the Buddhist Kingdom of Greater China (*Dazhongguo foguo* 大中國佛國) in Hunan in 1976-1983 and the dissident writer Liao Yiwu 廖亦武 conversed with Zeng Yinglong 鄭應龍, the dethroned emperor of a "Dynasty of Great Abundance" (*Dayou huangchao* 大有皇朝) in 1985. Rendered possible by a peasant mobilization against birth control in Sichuan, the latter episode displayed – sometimes in tragi-comic fashion – all of the cosmic phenomena that accompany the emergence of a new dynasty (omens, meteorological phenomena, etc.), cf. Liao (2009), 50-58.

25 Thus, the manner in which these characters are written must be slightly modified to be considered ritually effective: the mouth, which is one component of the sovereign character (*jun*), must be left open and the same holds for the eye discerned in the ideogram of the ancestors (*qin*), etc. Cf. Xu Zi (2006).

8. THE COMMUNIST STATE: THE PROBLEMATIC SECULARIZATION

A document on this subject by a Party official nicely captures the authorities' present thinking on the issue²⁶. It above all amounts to asserting that the homage paid to these entities is non-religious in nature (*feizongjiao* 非宗教) and may consequently play a useful role. In support of this position, the cult to the five entities is contrasted with the notion of religion as it is defined by the communist state in opposition to superstition²⁷. According to a now classic argument, there are three reasons why the respect shown for this tablet cannot be compared to the attitude specific to the "three great world religions" (Christianity, Buddhism, Islam): such worship consists of an intra-worldly and rational attitude that addresses the objective world rather than transcendent ideas; it is a familial, everyday custom that requires neither organization nor specialists; finally, this custom displays none of the sectarian and exclusive attitudes characteristic of religion properly so-called. So what do these symbols express? Merely "the quintessence of the traditional culture of the Chinese people". "This system of values," it is claimed, "establishes a family ethic, the need to respect one's elders and protect one's juniors in human relations and so on. Since the reform era, China has endeavored to construct a socialist state with Chinese characteristics and these characteristics come from traditional culture once what is still valuable has been separated from what needs to be discarded." The tablet represents an eminent culture and "the reverential homage paid it by the population deserves praise" for it can contribute to the harmonious society promoted by the government.

In short, since one cannot remove a given entity from the group that confers sense upon it, one must pretend to give the latter an exclusively natural and human meaning. This requires closing one's eyes to the practical attitudes that continue to animate inform popular behavior. In reality, the hierarchy ritually venerated by the population entirely reflects the interpenetration and interaction among the visible and invisible dimensions (*yin* and *yang*) of Chinese cosmology. Heaven and Earth do not refer to the natural environment but are above all the sites of forces jointly determining individual and collective destiny. With help from techniques of geomancy and divination, village populations set great stock by this. Similarly, the dimension of kinship (*qin* 親) is not just an expression of family

²⁶ Anonymous (2007).

²⁷ On the age-old discussion regarding the application of the Western concept of religion to China, see Goossaert, Palmer (2011).

values useful to society but above all a symbol of the necessary solidarity – expressed via the ritual exchanges required by ancestor worship – between living family members and their predecessors-become-spirits.

At this local level, the modern ideology propagated by the machinery of the state produces a violent rupture or discontinuity that generates equivocal attitudes: public silence or double talk.

9. MODERN STATE CULTS AND ANCIENT COSMOLOGY

Having presented the cult to the five entities in this way, one is of course in no position to directly respond to the question raised regarding the existence of a civil religion. For doing so requires one to take into account the state's role in symbolically regulating the entire political community.

Today, the five entities, from Heaven to the Masters or Sages, are above all venerated in rural contexts and within the domestic sphere. It should be noted, however, that, prior to the Republican period (and sometimes still in its early days), this sacred cosmology had spread to the entire space of the All-under-Heaven (*Tianxia* 天下) – that is, the Empire and everywhere else in what was considered the civilized world. The ritual logic or grammar that may today be observed at this very local level is identical to that practiced under the authority of the imperial state. What one may refer to as "continuism" simultaneously governed the various degrees of the socio-cosmic order and the two dimensions – visible and invisible, *yin* and *yang* – upon which its dynamic or operation was based.

Today, this logic is more readily observable at the microscopic scale (in bodily practices, for example, which inextricably associate what appears as belonging to the material or spiritual domains)²⁸. It is also expressed in social practices at a wide variety of scales: in the society of modern, democratic Taiwan, to give just one example, demands in the area of justice continue to make themselves heard in what Paul Katz describes as a "judicial continuum" joining the judgment of men (in courts) with that of the gods (in temples)²⁹. When one turns to consider the macrocosmic dimension of the ancient universe, however, it becomes clear that any such continuism

²⁸ See the short table prepared by Palmer (2011) 99.

²⁹ Cf. Katz (2008).

has been shattered. The creation of modern state machines – first nationalist then communist – seems to have definitively broken the continuity that formerly existed between the order of the sovereign and that of Heaven. Both states – that of the mainland and that of the island – lay theoretical claim to democratic legitimacy and recognize religious freedom in principle (if not in fact). In formal terms, then, it seems possible that a more or less authoritarian or liberal civil religion could marginalize ancient ritual practices, replacing them with sacralized political entities such as the nation (understood in various ways, of course).

Yet, without disproving this diagnosis, the record of state religions worshipping traditionally sacred entities allows one to qualify it. With the exception of short interruptions such as the radical Maoist period, states dominated by nationalist or communist parties continued to officially worship the Sage Confucius or the mythical Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黄帝) throughout the twentieth-century. These consisted of ancient “middle sacrifices” from the imperial period that modern ideology sought to reduce to the dimension of the visible world by endeavoring to transform the ancient sacrificial practice into an act of political commemoration. This is not the place to discuss the complexity of these practices, which have been studied elsewhere³⁰. Rather, I shall content myself with a few brief remarks.

Here, it is useful to contrast properly religious *rituals* with political *ceremonials*. In the course of a sacrificial-type ritual, the former bring living people face to face with spirits (including that of Confucius). The latter, by contrast, are at great pains to ensure that the ceremony is confined to the visible world. Such is the case, for example, of the communist authorities’ worship of Confucius at Qufu 曲阜 in Shangdong Province. But a sort of reciprocal contamination sometimes takes between these two major types and this is worth examining in detail. In the case of the mainland’s state cults (*guoji* 國祭), one thus notes the existence of rituals performed in a more humble fashion by common people, as if in parallel to official ceremonies: such is the case in Huangling 黃陵 (Shaanxi) for the Yellow Emperor and in Shandong for Confucius and his disciples. It is as if, contrary to what one might have expected, the modern state’s efforts to sideline ancient practices have not been reflected in a great divide separating a profane order now managed by politics from a sacred order freed of its intra-worldly dimensions, with immanence in this world reserved for the authorities while transcendence and a belief in spirits continue to be the preserve of the people.

³⁰ See Billioud, Thoraval (2014), 313-337.

This is not what happens, however. Religious rituals have not become *merely* religious. Instead, they continue to serve as vehicles for the entirety of the cosmic dynamism, from the humble level of the individual body to the most distant horizons of the cosmos. One and the same logic continues to exert itself: the universe, in miniature, is there in its entirety. As in the case of the five entities discussed above, in other words, a ritual that has become merely “popular” is not mutilated or broken by the supposedly secular environment. It remains the same, though the scale at which it is practiced has changed, and the potential for its display ultimately only depends on circumstances.

It will be said that this nevertheless amounts to a form of coexistence that respects the relative independence of the two orders, which it would not be wholly inappropriate to respectively call political and religious. This is doubtless so. But the frontier (more easily discernible by European dualisms) remains porous here. What is one to make of a 2011 ceremony held in Taipei to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the Republic of China in the context of the spatio-temporal space of a sacrifice to Heaven (*jitian* 祭天)? There, the highest authorities of the Taiwanese state conducted a political ceremony that was completely inserted into a ritual system of a sacrificial nature³¹.

10. CONCLUSION

The very limited intention of the present remarks should now be clear. On the basis of a general comparativist framework rendered desirable and even necessary for pragmatic reasons, I have sought to draw out the particular significance of regional ontologies in very specific circumstances. These ontologies have now been impacted and hybridized by the global processes studied by sociology. But a consideration of that which still resists comparative interpretation in globalized communication may in turn allow one to bring a critical gaze to bear on the contemporary destinies of the politics as religion.

³¹ For a description of this hybrid ceremony, see Billioud, Thoraval (2014), 343-353.

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