

Postcoloniality and Religiosity in Modern China

The Disenchantments of Sovereignty

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Abstract

In the long 20th century, modern China experienced perhaps the world's most radical and systematic secularization process and the decimation of traditional religious and ritual cultures. This article seeks to account for this experience by engaging with postcolonial theory, a body of discourse seldom found relevant to China Studies. The article attempts a two-pronged critique of both state secularization and some aspects of existing Postcolonial Studies/theory. It shows the many ways in which nationalist elites in modern China unwittingly absorbed Western Orientalist discourse even as their words and actions were ostensibly anti-colonial, and much of the article examines the consequences of this native Orientalism upon Chinese religiosities. Finally, the article suggests that one cannot discuss governmentality in modern China without understanding how it is intertwined with a sovereign power that is both archaic and, at the same time, has experienced renewal and expansion in modernity.

Key words

Giorgio Agamben ■ China ■ Michel Foucault ■ modernity ■ postcolonial theory
■ religion ■ Edward Said ■ secularism

Postcolonial Studies and Native Religiosities

WHILE POSTCOLONIAL Studies has contributed greatly to our understanding of ethnicity, race, class, nationalism and gender relations in colonial orders, it has had much less to say about the legacy of colonialism and native religious life. Similarly, the field of Religious Studies has too often focused on the timeless features of religious

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doctrines and practices, and has seldom examined the effects of modern Western and other colonialisms upon native religiosities. This is a major lacuna, for we have reached a certain point in modernity where recent global changes have presented us with the impossibility of the secularization thesis, and propel us to question the viability of a human order without religiosities. That we have not confronted the issue of non-Western religious traditions and colonial modernity sufficiently in the past may have to do with the fact that, perhaps more than Western intellectuals, many postcolonial intellectuals have been steadfast in their secularism.

In pre-modern traditional societies, the complex of religiosity, ritual and cosmology did not comprise a category that could be isolated from the political, economic or social institutions, but interpenetrated and undergirded all social domains and discourses, so that removing or damaging the religious complex or substrate too often led to the decimation of the entire social order. Thus, under colonial conditions, secularism did not just undermine native ruling or priestly classes, but native societies as a whole, especially at the grassroots. Given the subaltern emphasis of postcolonial studies, it is all the more imperative for us to overcome our own elite secularisms and consider the impact of colonialism/postcolonialism on native religiosities, since it is usually the subaltern classes who wish to remain religious in modernity, while elite educated and professional classes become secularized more easily. Indeed, we need to explore whether the history of colonial destruction of native cosmologies, religious ethics and ritual orders might have contributed to the mounting troubles faced by most postcolonial societies today: impoverishment and class polarization; breakdown of social order; alcoholism and suicidal despair among aboriginal cultures; civil and ethnic wars; military regimes; environmental degradation; continued dependency on the West; and radical religious fundamentalism. This article suggests that postcolonial studies must trace the genealogy whereby many native religiosities came to be denied an important role in modernity, and it must also examine the social and historical consequences of this exclusion. Here I will attempt to do so by reflecting on a place not often discussed in postcolonial studies: China.

I write as a cultural anthropologist rather than historian, who has witnessed the resurgence of popular Chinese religiosity over two decades of fieldwork among rural and small-town residents of Wenzhou, on the south-eastern coast of China (Yang, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2007, 2009). These residents live in a complex multilayered and coterminous sacred-profane time, a kind of mixed temporality that most people experience today in the postcolonies. Rural Wenzhou residents read official newspapers that follow the solar Gregorian calendar based on the birth of Christ, but play down national secular holidays and mainly celebrate traditional lunar calendar festivals and birthdays of the gods, buddhas and bodhisattvas. The biographies of their gods and goddesses, as well as their deity temples, Buddhist and Daoist temples, are dated by dynastic cycles and years of an emperor's reign period, and in divination consultations they still adhere to the ancient 'Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches' (*tiangan dizhi*)¹ cyclical dating

system for identifying auspicious dates and times for undertaking important activities. They have somehow managed to resist the intense teleology of, first, evolutionary, then revolutionary linear history introduced into China in the early 20th century. In recent decades of prosperity, their gods, ghosts, demons and ancestors who lived in bygone imperial times seem to have become ever more enmeshed in their contemporary daily lives. Thus, they live a temporality that exemplifies Dipesh Chakrabarty's call for postcolonial scholars to imagine a plurality of disjunctive temporalities, coterminous with the time of gods and goddesses, where multiple pasts are folded into the ever fluid and reversible present (2000: 16). They avoid what Chakrabarty describes as an entrapment in a single universally encompassing secular historical time. This religious resurgence in Wenzhou does not stem from resistance to change, but reflects the local people's sheer collective will-power to overcome the hostility and prohibitions of their religious activities by local officials and intellectuals alike. Having witnessed these animosities toward Chinese popular religion in rural Wenzhou, I am propelled to trace the genealogy of the powerful progressive nationalist historical narrative, a product of China's semi-colonial history, which has cast peasant religious and ritual life as *anti*-modernity.



Figure 1 Jade Emperor, supreme deity in popular religion, flanked by the Sun God and Moon Goddess, Fengmen Daoist Temple, Longwan District, Wenzhou, China, 2010
 Source: Photo by Mayfair Yang.

The intellectual task of undoing over a century of colonial epistemology and historiography that has led to the near decimation of non-Western religious life requires a long journey, so it is encouraging that there are some postcolonial scholars who have already embarked on this path, and whose writings inform this inquiry. Talal Asad (1993) showed how the very category of 'religion' was a modern European invention that was far from universal or transhistorical, either in origin or content, for it was informed by a post-Reformation emphasis on doctrine and cognition, as well as a secularized Christian world where religion has been marginalized in social life into the domain of individual *belief*, resulting in a common understanding of religion that locates it *outside* the authorizing discourses and power structures of society. In modern China, the term 'religion' was introduced into China in the late 19th century via its more modern neighbor Japan, where a classical Chinese term '*zongjiao*', which meant 'the teachings of a sect or school of thought' and usually referred to Buddhism, was adjusted and used to translate the Western term into Japanese as '*shukyo*' (Nedostup, 2010; Yang, 2008: 11–14). The classical Chinese term did not possess the modern connotations that were in the Western term 'religion' when it was introduced into Japan and China. The modern term suggested a distinct religious system in contrast to secular life and differentiated from other religious systems, reflecting its modern European usages. The Western term, with its cultural baggage of post-Reformation Europe, was soon adopted in 20th-century China and the term came to be almost synonymous with Protestantism, which also came to be a standard for 'civilized religion', against which Chinese religiosities were measured (Goossaert, 2008). Indeed, the notion of 'religion' in China referred to those religious systems that had a church-like formal institution, a long-standing scriptural tradition and theology, and an ordained clergy, thus its adoption in China basically excluded two important native traditions of religiosity – Confucianism and popular religion – since they do not operate with their own separate social institutions but are embedded in the existing social and political structure.

Furthermore, we must not forget that the adoption of 'religion' in China was also accompanied by the notion of 'superstition' (*mixin*), with its pejorative connotation in the West, a catch-all category that included practices that Protestantism had rejected, such as magic, shamanism, deity and ancestor worship, exorcism, demon and ghost worship, polytheism, ritual healing, divination, communicating with the dead, etc. All of these practices were important aspects of traditional Chinese religiosity, but, in the move towards Westernization, they came to be regarded by Chinese elites and officials as 'feudal superstitions' that had to be swept away. Protestantism's emphasis on faith and doctrine, and its antipathy towards deities and ritual, were also absorbed by Chinese elites in the early 20th century. Thus, today in China, one's religious allegiance is called 'belief' (*xinyang*), which does not suit traditional Chinese religiosities with their heavier emphasis on ritual performance *rather* than belief. Indeed, James Watson (1988) has

suggested that, in China, orthopraxy has always been more important than orthodoxy. These shifts in conceptualizing religious practices in China have proved damaging for native religiosities, where ritual was central not only to Confucian but also Daoist and Buddhist practice, and deities were central to popular religion. That is why I prefer to use the term ‘religiosities’ when referring to religious phenomena in China (Yang, 2008).

Asad (2003) has also introduced the novel idea that, given the importance of religious life in virtually all human societies, what needs to be examined and compared by scholars is not religion, but different kinds of secularisms. This insight about the need for the comparative study of secularisms is especially valuable for modern China Studies, as China has experienced one of the most dramatic secularization processes in the modern world (Yang, 2008), first under the Republican government and Guomindang Party (Duara, 1991; Nedostup, 2010), and later under the Chinese Communist Party. Maoist China shared with other Soviet-type societies a radical state-led secularization effort, deploying the full resources of state propaganda and media campaigns, radical youth groups, public education and religious persecutions to bring about an ‘atheistic’ (*wushenglun*) society. This anti-religious activism also resembles the treatment by Western colonial governments of Native American indigenous religiosities, as documented by Ronald Niezen (2000) for 19th-century North America. In the case of both North America and China, the religious destruction was carried out in the name of ‘progress’ and saving the people from their ‘backwardness’ or ‘barbarism’ to join ‘civilization’, for their own survival and well-being.

Noting that colonization does not merely rely on military, economic or political domination, anthropologists Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (1997) introduce the phrase ‘colonization of consciousness’ in their social history of Protestantism in 19th-century colonial South Africa. They show how Protestant missionaries helped the European colonial project not only by introducing new modes and objects of worship, but also new prosaic rhythms of everyday life, in clothing, sanitation, medicine, architecture and agriculture, which won over the natives to Western ‘civilization’. I will attempt to show here that although China was never submitted to full military, political or economic colonization by the West or Japan, a similar process of ‘colonization of consciousness’ can be said to have taken place among China’s modern elite and official classes, with serious consequences for the religiously fueled autonomy of Chinese grassroots society.

Edward Said in China: From Western to Chinese Orientalism

No inquiry into coloniality and native religiosity can afford to omit Edward Said’s (1978) examination of ‘Orientalism’, a powerful modern knowledge structure that has underpinned Western power. Said showed how the modern West constructed and valorized its self-identity through a binary

structure of knowledge and discourse that set up a favorable contrast between itself and its colonial Others: rational/emotional; materialist/spiritualist; scientific/superstitious; advanced/backward; active/passive; mature/childlike; manly/feminine; egalitarian/hierarchical or despotic; dynamic/unchanging – and so forth. Despite the many valuable insights of Said and Postcolonial Studies, I have been reluctant until now to engage with this field for a number of reasons, not least of which is that it continues to focus on the West. I must confess that when I first came into contact with Postcolonial Studies in the late 1980s, I did not think it particularly relevant to addressing important issues faced by China at that time. After living for over two years in China's austere state-saturated Maoist society in the early 1980s, a society still recovering from the self-imposed holocaust of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), Postcolonial Studies' singular critique of the West and its obsession with the 19th century seemed to me at the time to be exercises in academic self-indulgence. It was as if Postcolonial Studies assumed that merely pointing out the past and present crimes of the West was enough to address the current problems and crises faced by the postcolonies.

Despite its ostensible critique of Western binaries, there is still a tendency in some quarters of Postcolonial Studies to preserve this binary by (1) implicitly lumping together the vastly diverse colonial situations in the world into a Third World periphery contrasted against the metropolitan West and (2) merely inverting the binary by valorizing the Others of the West. When the Other is simply valorized without any interest in examining the problems and play of power relations that were there both *before* and *after* their colonial histories, then we can say that the Other is being objectified and denied their subjectivity. Too often, Postcolonial Studies simply presents traditional Third World cultures as the objects of Western colonial acquisition, administration and modernization, and not enough attention is directed at their struggles to address their plight, their internal clash of discourses and strategies, and the dramatic social engineering projects of modernizing postcolonial states.

Western imperialism was indeed arrogant and destructive in China, beginning with the infamous Opium Wars of the 1840s,² when, faced with losing its silver to China in a trade imbalance, Western powers forcibly opened up China as a market for its opium grown with colonial Indian plantation labor. However, in the 1930s, China's Communist Revolution mobilized against imperialism and threw out the foreigners in 1949, and developments in China since then can no longer be solely blamed on the West. When a once liberational discourse was quickly transformed into a new hegemony serving a different purpose that Marxism lacked the vocabulary to confront, it seems that one must also search in China's own history and culture for answers. The danger of Postcolonial Studies' singular fixation on the West as both the origin and solution to the problems of the postcolonies is that, while ostensibly criticizing the West, it may well end up re-centering the West.

Chinese anthropologist Wang Mingming takes issue with this overemphasis on the West in his recent book published in China: *The West as the Other: On the Genealogy and Meaning of China's 'Occidentalism'* (2007). According to Wang:

In exposing the 'conspiracy for domination' of the West's 'Orientalism,' [Said] overemphasizes the Western discourse on the Orient, and overlooks the many [non-Western] people in the same period of time who engaged in an Oriental discourse on the West. Said has intentionally or unintentionally reproduced the West's objectification of the Orient. His book *Orientalism* is full of the history of the West's impositions on the Orient, yet one can find virtually no trace of the Orient's own understanding of the non-Orient. (2007: 8)

Wang's book then proceeds to trace the genealogy of China's own constructions of identity and locationality through its historically shifting notions of China's 'West' (*xifang*) or China's Other, beginning with Zhou Dynasty³ images of the Kunlun Mountains and the Western Queen Mother goddess, then the Qin–Han era notion of the 'Western Territories' (*xiyu*), to the Wei–Jin and Sui–Tang era 'West' as the sacred origin of Buddhism and source of religious texts and inspiration, to the Yuan–Ming era notion of the 'Western Seas' (*xiyang*), and finally to the modern period's new notion of the 'West' as both European imperialism against which to construct Chinese nationalism as well as the land of 'science and democracy', two new objects of Chinese desire. What Wang is clearly setting out to accomplish is to go *beyond* Said's project of critique of the West's imperial universalism, for this is only the first step to create a non-Western-centered world. Wang's project is to retrieve China's lost subjectivities in a world which continues to operate according to Western terms and standards, by tracing through China's various historical Others and remembering China's past imaginary geographies. Against China's modern nationalism, which is reactive and narrow, and can never encompass or replace China's lost notion of 'All Under Heaven' (*tianxia*), Wang wishes to reconnect with China's past cosmopolitanisms, when Chinese constructed themselves by projecting their desires and yearnings onto various imaginary 'Wests'.

In this article, I also wish to take a step beyond Said and Postcolonial Studies' critique of the West, while holding on to Said's valuable analysis of the power of Orientalist discourse. While Said did point out that the modern West is no longer the only purveyor of Orientalist discourse, and that many non-Western native or nationalist discourses have also come to accept and participate in this binary construction of the world, it is a great pity that most subsequent works in Postcolonial Studies have elided this important insight to continue to focus on Western rather than native Orientalism. I propose here that we need to pay more attention to the absorption and dissemination of Orientalism beyond the authorship and cultural/territorial confines of the West. Given the extent of globalization

today, we must take the next step in the intellectual trajectory started by Said and adopt some post-Saidian innovations. This would involve tracing the development of Orientalism *out of* the 19th century and *out of* the hands of Europeans and North Americans, and tracking its penetration around the globe as part of the subtle, often invisible process of the 'colonization of consciousness'.

China as a Postcolonial Anomaly and Enlightenment Project

Compared to most colonized places in the modern world, China represents many anomalies. These Chinese anomalies are well placed to help propel postcolonial studies out of its continuing binarism. China was not a small and weak social entity, but an ancient centralized empire with a long history of incorporating smaller tribes and kingdoms into its own imperial system of centralized bureaucracy and tributary states, and it had attained a cultural, political and technological sophistication that surpassed that of pre-industrial Europe. In addition, modern China's experience with colonialism was not merely humiliation by the West, but also severe suffering caused by the colonial ambitions of its neighbor Japan, which was the first country in Asia to modernize and industrialize. Unlike the nativist reactions of many colonized places, Chinese elite nationalists implemented their own version of a state Enlightenment project. Furthermore, unlike most postcolonial places like Africa, India and Latin America, where Western liberal capitalism and neo-colonialism held sway after independence, the Chinese Communist Revolution was a radical break from the West that was not only anti-Western but also steadfastly anti-nativistic and anti-religious. Finally, after two torturous centuries of Western and Japanese imperialism, warfare, civil strife, suffering and poverty, today's post-Mao China suddenly finds itself a new global economic power that can no longer share the same position as the Third World.

In contrast to postcolonial theory's critique of the West, most nationalist Chinese intellectuals in the 20th century were in many ways more *self-critical* – of traditional Chinese civilization and religious culture – than critical of the West. Since the iconoclastic May Fourth Movement (1917–27),⁴ China's modern intelligentsia have embraced the Western Enlightenment (*Qimeng yundong*) and its powerful knowledge-discourses of evolutionism, scientism, liberalism, secular nationalism and Marxism in the 1920s to 1940s, and did so again in the post-Mao era from the 1980s (Yang, 2008). This embrace of elements of the Enlightenment by the Chinese elite in order to address the dire crisis of the nation is a key feature of Chinese postcoloniality that existing postcolonial theory has not, and cannot, address. In China, it produced repeated waves of cultural self-laceration, religious destruction and state campaigns of secularization throughout the 20th century, reaching its apogee in the Cultural Revolution.⁵

The argument here is certainly *not* against the adoption of Enlightenment values per se by Chinese modernizing elites and revolutionaries, especially egalitarianism and feminism, for we are all children of the Enlightenment. Nor is my argument about the incompleteness of the Enlightenment project in China, although this is also an important issue. Rather, the critique is of the *manner* in which this adoption was implemented in modern China, and the fact that the Enlightenment became a dogma that was unrelieved by any critiques of the Enlightenment and modernity. Contrary to Michel Foucault's (1984) understanding of Enlightenment as a continuous critical reflection, an ethos of public reasoning and questioning of historically established truths that is grounded in the contemporary moment of limitations and possibilities, in China, the Enlightenment was adopted as an already proven universal formula of modernity and development that only needed to be instilled into a recalcitrant population with the assistance of ever stronger apparatuses of power and authority.

The present critique of Enlightenment in China has three points. First, unlike the European adoption of Enlightenment, in China there was a strong filter of Orientalist knowledge that presented the Enlightenment not as a gradual process of internal cultural transformation in transition from tradition to modernity, but as something Western and superior, that must be imposed on 'backward' Eastern cultures for their own survival. Thus, the Orientalist binary of East vs. West overwhelmed the original traditional vs. modern binary that was more important in Europe's own Enlightenment history. This unconscious association of the East-is-to-West as backward-is-to-modern, as spiritual-is-to-the-material, as superstition-is-to-science, resulted in an inability to recognize that in China's vast and diverse cultural and religious past, there were abundant cultural resources to be redeployed both for promoting Enlightenment values and for critiquing Enlightenment and modernity. The result was that, although the major agents of Chinese modernity were native Chinese-educated elites and the modern state, their uncritical absorption of 19th-century Western colonial discourses meant that modernity was often not aligned with, or did not issue out of, native Chinese culture, but could only proceed as a sudden *external* imposition, through the cavalier destruction and wholesale displacement of a rich and valuable cultural and religious heritage.⁶ Instead of a Confucian, a Daoist or a Buddhist Enlightenment movement (perhaps the Buddhists did not need a Western Enlightenment, for they have always already been modern?), or an Enlightenment evolving out of popular Chinese religious culture, nationalist elites in China demanded something much more radical and difficult, a totally secular, iconoclastic and deracinated modernity that would surpass even that of the West.

Second, Enlightenment values were implemented and disseminated in China very selectively and unilaterally, so that one set of Enlightenment values did not serve as a check on another set. For example, class struggle was officially enshrined, and equality was achieved between the peasantry

and the landlords/gentry, but the traditional gulf between officialdom (*guanfang*) and the people (*minjian*), and between the people and the sovereign or emperor, were not addressed. The latter was reproduced in the new society as the cult of Chairman Mao. Science was glorified, but freedom of religion, even in the Republican era, was not taken seriously. Nationalism seemed at the time the natural and *only* answer to China's urgent problems, but individual rights, the rights of kin groups and religious communities, and local community self-government and autonomy were neglected as correctives to the excesses of nationalism and state centralization.

Third, whether in Republican or Communist eras, social changes were mandated in such a top-down, radical, iconoclastic and unilateral manner that one could describe the process as a 'self-colonization' by Chinese urban elites and officials over the culture of rural and less educated people. While it is true that Chinese popular religion has had its share of quack spirit mediums or healers who make false claims for money, or socially destructive scapegoating that demonizes certain people for natural disasters or social strife, yet these problems can be dealt with through reform and education, rather than wholesale abolition of ancient religious systems. Western scholars have also pointed to the problem in China of an 'internal Orientalism' by the Han majority over other ethnic and religious minorities, where minorities are seen as more 'backward', thus serving to highlight the Han people's advancement (Gladney, 1994; Mueggler, 2001; Schein, 1997). Indeed, within the modern nation-state of multi-ethnic China, the Han ethnic majority have led the way in 'liberating' and developing the marginal minority areas, whose backwardness is seen to stem from their religiosity. We see this attitude in the ongoing incomprehension by Han Chinese of Tibetan people's stubborn adherence to their religious way of life, Tibetan support of a non-productive Buddhist monastic culture and Tibetan ambivalence towards material progress (Cabezon, 2008).

Scholars have often remarked upon a peculiar feature of modern Chinese intellectual culture: its capacity for cultural self-negation and merciless criticism of Chinese character traits,⁷ and the May Fourth generation's abrupt turn against China's own traditions in favor of 'total Westernization' (*quanpan xifanghua*). Shu-mei Shih has referred to this phenomenon in the first half of the 20th century as the 'masochistic denial' or 'inferiority complex' of educated Chinese (Shih, 2001: 14, 23). Subjected to repeated judgments about the 'backwardness', 'heathenism' and 'idolatry' of Chinese culture by Western Orientalism, educated Chinese soon became very sensitive to Western opinions about China, as in this utterance by the 19th-century Confucian reformer Kang Youwei: 'Foreigners come in our temples, take photographs of the idols, show these photographs to each other, and laugh' (Goossaert, 2008: 214). This sensitivity and shame has not abated in China today, as I found out during fieldwork in rural Wenzhou in the 1990s. Knowing that I was studying religious revival, a

concerned local official said to me:

You're also a Chinese, you know there are still a lot of backward things in our country. Foreigners have two kinds of attitudes towards our backward aspects. One, they are curious, they have never seen these things before. The other is they look down upon us (*kan buqi women*), they think it is backward. So in your research, please exercise some judgement (*yaoyou fencun*), don't show the backward things. (Yang, 1996: 106)

By 'backward things' he meant things relegated to the category of 'superstitions', such as divination, making offerings to ghosts, deity worship, *fengshui* or Chinese geomancy, and even ancestor worship.

In the post-Mao era, Chen Xiaomei has observed that Chinese intellectuals have again reverted to the earlier construction of the modern West as a modern object of aspiration and liberation, which she dubs an 'Occidentalism' serving as counter-discourse to statist discourse in China (Chen, 1995).⁸ This Occidentalism, or what I would rather call a 'self-imposed Orientalism', is best exemplified by the 1980s polemical television documentary, *River Elegy (He Shang)*,⁹ in which the modern West is invested with all the qualities that Chinese intellectuals desire and believe that Chinese lack: democracy, science and rationality, and cosmopolitan openness to novelty and difference. The Orientalist binary is highly visible in the program, and its color-coded symbolism is repeatedly invoked: the brownish yellow earth of China's interior symbolizes China's isolationist backwardness and autocracy, while the wide expanse of the blue ocean stands for the advanced industrialized and scientific West across the seas, to which China must open itself up. Forgotten is the fact that in the Song, Yuan and Ming dynasties, China was a maritime power well before Europeans started exploring and conquering the world. The television show presented China's rich religious traditions (encapsulated in images of ignorant peasants kowtowing to false idols) as opiates of the people at best, and supporters of Chinese autocracy and obstacles to Enlightenment and science at worst.

During the unique three decades of the Maoist era (1949–78), Chinese intellectuals adhered carefully to a regimen of Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist-Mao-Zedong thought that, while more anti-imperialist and anti-Western than in the first half of the 20th century, also expanded the critique of 'feudal' and religious China to new and destructive heights. State collectivization of land and religious properties in the 1950s meant that religious and monastic communities lost their basis for economic subsistence and their ability to sustain their religious and ritual activities (Welch, 1972). Religious personnel, along with others branded as politically unreliable, were special targets of 'thought reform' (*sixiang gaizao*), which involved the reading of Party documents and editorials, the writings of Chairman Mao, and 'criticism–self-criticism' and 'struggle sessions'. The state-led campaign known as the 'Smash the Four Olds' (*po si jiu*) campaign (against 'Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits and Old Ideas') was launched by Mao

Zedong in 1964 and implemented by the notorious Red Guards, revolutionary youth gangs that rampaged through almost every corner of the country during the Cultural Revolution. Families and communities were forced to turn in or destroy all their old things: old or foreign books, paintings, family or lineage genealogies, antiques, and religious scriptures and paraphernalia. Buddhist, Daoist and local deity temples throughout the land, many of enduring historical value, were pillaged or dismantled, their statues of deities and Buddhas hacked or defaced. Confucian 'culture temples' (*wenmiao*), Christian churches and Muslim mosques met the same fate. Buddhist and Daoist monks and nuns and Christian clerics were forced to defrock and join lay life, and sometimes forced to marry. Many were sent to labor camps and some were executed. Probably the most religious destruction sustained in this period was in Tibet, whose people possessed a more highly religious culture than the Han Chinese, having missed the secularization campaigns that took place throughout Han territories in the 20th century.

Although the 'Smash the Four Olds' campaign was perhaps the most severe and systematic decimation of religious culture in Chinese recorded history, the Maoist era did not initiate or invent Chinese iconoclasm.¹⁰ The Maoist era merely carried forward the discourse of earlier modernizing and secularizing nationalists that had been accumulating for over half a century (Duara, 1991; Goossaert, 2006; Nedostup, 2008) and expanded the movement to the masses while radicalizing these efforts to new extremes. What is shared by all the different periods of the 20th century is the fact that the dominant discourse of modern Chinese intellectuals and the modern Chinese state has been a discourse of progress and modernization, or liberation and revolution that constructed religious life as anti-modernity, with epithets such as 'backward' (*luohou*), 'superstitious' (*mixin*), 'ignorant' (*wuzhi*), 'feudal' (*fengjian*) or 'reactionary' (*fandong*) (Yang, 2008).

Thus, far from 're-inventing' Chinese tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) or building upon any kind of nativism, Chinese anti-colonial nationalism, especially the Communist movement, vigorously attempted to destroy and wipe out tradition and religion in order to start from a clean slate and construct a new and different secular national identity. Unlike various experiments with religious nationalism around the world, such as Japanese state Shinto (Fujitani, 1996; Hardacre, 1989), Hindu and Muslim nationalism in India (Mankekar, 1999; Van der Veer, 1994), Sri Lankan state Buddhism (Tambiah, 1992) and various kinds of state Islam in the Middle East, Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia (Esposito and Tamimi, 2000; Peletz, 2002), what characterizes modern Chinese nationalism is its radical secularism and iconoclasm.

Of course, there were dissenting voices to cultural and religious iconoclasm in 20th-century China. Lu Xun, the great novelist and essayist, was a complex thinker who, despite his condemnation of China's cultural backwardness, also resisted the reductionist attacks on tradition and religion (Lu, 2005). His brother Zhou Zuoren was also a scholar and an independent thinker who had more faith in traditional Chinese culture's ability to

weather the storms of modernity. Gu Jiegang steeped himself in the study of Chinese history and folk culture in the search for answers to China's modern plight. As a scholar of China's 'three religions' (Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism), Liang Shuming knew that these ancient traditions held a wealth of resources that could help address China's modern crises. There were also religious practitioners such as the Buddhist monk Taixu and the Daoist Chen Yiling (Liu, 2009), who worked tirelessly to reform and reinterpret these religious traditions for a modern world. However, these voices were drowned out and ignored in the relentless tide of what Lin Yusheng has called modern China's 'totalistic rejection of Chinese tradition' and 'totalistic acceptance of foreign ideology' (1979: 155).

While this modern Chinese iconoclasm did greatly diminish the overt forms of patriarchy that had enjoyed a safe haven in imperial Confucianism, it also laid waste to Daoism and popular religion, whose rich resources of philosophical feminine metaphors and powerful goddess cults had yet to be recognized, examined and redeployed by modern feminist reformist discourse. Modern Chinese iconoclasm, which simplistically pits religion against science, denies the close historical linkages between the history of Chinese science and medicine with Daoist cosmological, alchemical and self-cultivation traditions, as the historian of science Joseph Needham reminds us. Even the humble Chinese compass was first employed in geomantic siting of ancestral graves and ritual centers before it was taken up in maritime navigation. Another Chinese invention, paper money as legal tender, was first used in Sichuan during the commercial revolution of the Song Dynasty in the 11th century. However, this invention was *preceded* by the use of religious spirit money burned for gods, ghosts and ancestors, at least four centuries *earlier*, in the 6th century CE of the Tang Dynasty (Hou, 1975: 5–17; Seidel, 1978: 424). Thus, long before the Song Dynasty's market economy, and the economic use of paper money as legal tender, the religious transfer of wealth from this life to the divine world or afterlife through the burning of money, had already been crystallized in ritual practice for several centuries.

Although the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE) is generally known as a period of commercial dynamism, it was also a period when popular religion as we know it took shape and flourished, revealing the deep interpenetration of religion and economy in Chinese culture. This interpenetration was obscured when modern Chinese intellectuals absorbed a Western Orientalist discourse that insisted on an opposition between religiosity and economic development. The modern conviction that religion can only be an obstacle to economic development belies all the evidence for popular religion's crucial role in commercial and industrial activities in late imperial China (Gates, 1997). Indeed, in Taiwan's economic miracle since the 1970s, we have not seen religious decline but a resurgence of religious life, and in the current economic vibrancy of China's southeastern coastal areas, heir to the Song–Yuan–Ming dynasties' commercial might, we again see the

economic importance of Chinese religiosity and the religious importance of the market economy (Yang, 2000, 2007, 2009).

The urgency felt by the modern Chinese intelligentsia to build up a strong nation-state to assert sovereignty against the depredations of the West and Japan meant that they not only accepted the spiritual East/materialist West binary structure, but also sought to radically extinguish the ('backward') spiritual in themselves and embrace the Western ('modern') materialist 'forces of production' (*shengchanli*). After 'Mr Science' (*Sai Xiansheng*) emerged during the May Fourth Movement as a modern object of national desire and liberation,¹¹ 'religion' (*zongjiao*), the Western categorical opposite of science, had to be excised from the ailing national body, along with 'superstitions' (*mixin*). It may be no accident that Marxism, with its doctrine of historical materialism, won out over Western liberalism, since its stance against the philosophical position of idealism, its elevation of material economic needs, and its equation of religion with ideologies of former ruling classes were more unwavering and uncompromising. This self-critical Orientalist binary continues to inform elite and official discourse in China today, as seen in officialdom's labeling of Falungong as an 'evil cult' and its pitting of Falungong's supposed false healing claims against the power of 'science'.

Recent discussions in postcolonial studies of cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994; Canclini, 1995) and postcolonial diasporic movements around the globe (Appadurai, 1996; *Diaspora*, 1991; Hall, 2003) are salutary in breaking out of the binarism between the West and its Others, but they envision a limited role for these processes of cultural interpenetration, and their tone is generally celebratory. Hybrid forms are mainly imagined to be on the side of resistance, subversion and disassembling of Western Enlightenment projects of modernity and nation-state by natives or immigrant minorities in the West who act in a larger power formation not of their own creation. The task for Postcolonial Studies now is to address a darker side of hybridity, when projects of Enlightenment, modernity and nation-state are taken up by natives themselves to repel and even surpass the colonizers, while unconsciously accepting and assimilating the very terms of Western hegemonic culture. If Postcolonial Studies was to turn its attention to important postcolonial developments such as Chinese nationalism and state socialist 'atheism', Kemalism in modern Turkey, the Shah's modernization of Iran and Nehruvian India, we might perhaps really start to carve out an escape route from Orientalism and its unceasing reproductions around the world.

Five Points on Postcoloniality and Religiosity in China

Below, I would like to make five points on how the searing experiences of Chinese colonial and postcolonial modernity and the plight of Chinese religiosities can enrich and expand Postcolonial Studies. These points are intended to push postcolonial theory to accommodate and engage with

China's anomalous encounter with and reaction to colonialism, and to take the next intellectual step of examining Orientalist discourse *outside* the Western world. At the same time, these points may also shed light on an important and neglected issue of Chinese modernity: What happened to indigenous Chinese religious cultures as a result of China's semi-colonial experiences? What were some of the social consequences of the decline of Chinese religiosities in modernity? Hopefully, all five points will also show that a full understanding of modern Chinese history and religiosity cannot occur without an engagement with postcolonial theory.

Semi-coloniality and Cultural Iconoclasm in Chinese Modernity

The first issue in accommodating postcolonial theory to China's particular modern situation is to recognize that, unlike India, Africa and the Middle East, whose experiences have shaped postcolonial theory, China was never fully colonized by the modern West. China's humiliating defeat in the Opium Wars led to unequal treaties that forced the Chinese imperial court to open several treaty ports for trade with Western merchants, receive Christian missionaries into China and provide for foreign legations where resident foreigners enjoyed extra-territoriality in which they were not subject to Chinese laws. However, except for the Japanese occupation of Manchuria (1931–45) and Taiwan (1895–1947), the foreign powers never completely occupied modern China; their spheres of influence were confined mainly to urban areas on the eastern seaboard. Nor did they ever topple China's imperial or Republican governments, or achieve direct colonial administration. Most importantly, the Chinese language was never displaced by a colonial language, and while Christian missionaries did convert Chinese to Christianity, the numbers were small in terms of the overall population. This experience of incomplete colonization, or what Mao Zedong called 'semi-colonialism', has had profound effects on the way that religious life was understood, positioned and dealt with in 20th-century China.

I agree with Prasenjit Duara (1995a, 1995b) and Shu-mei Shih's (2001) arguments that, since China did not experience full colonial occupation, nor direct Western colonial administration, Chinese nationalist elites were much more accepting of Western modernity. Indeed, perhaps more than in other colonial modernities, iconoclastic discourses and cultural self-destructive impulses were more developed and sustained in modern China than perhaps in the history of the modern West. This is because Western colonial control in China did not rely on a sustained military occupation,¹² nor did it seek to impose a systematic transformation or colonial assimilation of Chinese culture, both of which would have drawn a sharper line of demarcation between Chinese Self and Western Other, Friend and Enemy. On the contrary in India, as Partha Chatterjee and Prasenjit Duara have shown, leaders of the anti-colonial independence movement drew great sustenance from nativism and often built into their resistance

religiously-inspired critiques of Western capitalist modernity (Chatterjee, 1986, 1993; Duara, 1995b, 2003). Mahatma Gandhi's skillful deployment of Hindu, Jain and Buddhist religious principles of a higher moral truth (*satya*), non-violence (*ahimsa*), simplicity, vegetarianism, curbing of sexual desires (*brahmacharya*), and ascetic self-discipline against the aggressive and acquisitive materialism of the Western capitalist colonizer was especially effective with the rural and laboring masses of India. Although Chinese territory and the 'Chinese race' were perceived to be at risk of being carved up, or rendered extinct in the competition between nation-states and 'survival of the fittest', China's semi-colonial condition meant that there was no direct Western or Japanese colonial administration that tried to alter or destroy native Chinese culture. Thus, in China, the integrity and very survival of Chinese culture was not felt to be threatened by imperialist forces, and therefore modernity and the cultural transformation that it entailed were not seen in China as a foreign imposition to be repelled, but an urgent self-imposed Chinese undertaking.

The tenor of Chinese anti-colonial nationalism has always been in arduous pursuit of modernization, science, and national strengthening through economic and military development, while Chinese traditional knowledge and cultures were generally positioned as obstacles to these national imperatives. Although highly critical of capitalism and Western imperialism, Chinese Marxists and Maoists were no exceptions to this rule, for they accepted the Hegelian teleology of linear history, Western narratives of progress and science as liberation, and their historical materialism meant that they regarded religious culture as merely 'opiates' (*yapian*) of the people that would recede with their liberation.

At first, in the late 19th-century Self-Strengthening Movement of Confucian scholars, there was a discourse of 'Chinese learning for the essence; Western learning for utility' (authored by Zhang Zhidong), where Chinese traditions would be preserved as the guiding core while Western technology would be applied in practical matters. However, after various national humiliations, the radical May Fourth Movement soon called for abandonment of virtually all traditional values and social institutions, as well as religious practices, in the name of national salvation. Unlike Indian nationalist leaders Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, Chinese nationalists felt no need to defend traditional Chinese culture and no desire to deploy it in nationalism. The result is that, in modern China, there has been virtually no critique of modernity (Duara, 1995b) until recently. Quite the opposite has occurred: Chinese elites, and later the Chinese state, went on a rampage against all varieties of traditional culture, so that modern China has experienced perhaps the most radical state secularization and systematic destruction of religious life and material culture in the modern world.

The standard postcolonial narrative must be changed for China: unlike many other colonial situations, semi-colonialism in China did not subject most Chinese to direct Western subjugation in everyday life, or to

large-scale suppression or loss of their language or culture. Thus, what modern Chinese elites feared was *not* the loss of their traditional religious and ritual cultures, but the loss of China's (territorial) *sovereignty*, national dignity and standing among the nations of the world. Semi-colonialism in China has meant that the modern Chinese intelligentsia has been, on the whole, less critical of the West than in fully colonized places, and more able to identify with the originally Western project of modernity. Their critiques have mainly targeted traditional Chinese culture and religion, which are regarded as unbearable burdens of the past preventing China from modernizing.

Native Agency and the Joint Production of Colonial and Postcolonial Modernity

A second issue for understanding China's colonial and postcolonial condition is the problem of *agency* in postcolonial theory. Due to its dominant narrative of imperial aggression and native victimization, postcolonial theory often does not accord sufficient agency to the native populace or native elites. The West is usually cast as the active agency, conquering the colonies, setting up colonial administration and regulations, changing native customs, building new infrastructure, exploiting native labor, or introducing new systems of power-knowledge, while natives are given the roles attendant on victimization, cast as passive recipients, or represented as merely reacting in demonstrations or riots. Postcolonial theory must adapt to the particular situation in China, where the originally Western colonial project of modernity soon became a *joint co-authored project* with Chinese nationalist modernizing elites, and later the Republican state, Guomindang Party and the Communist Party-state.

In contrast to India, where the East India Company deposed the Mughal emperor, in China it was a secular Republican Revolution (*Xinhai Geming*) mounted by Chinese nationalists themselves, rather than foreign imperialists, that overthrew over two millennia of Chinese imperial dynastic rule. The abandonment of this sacred monarchical system, with its elaborate ritual apparatus of imperial state sacrifice and court rituals (Zito, 1997), its scholar-officials and imperial examination system, its powerful Ministry of Rites, its divination and geomantic technologies for the cosmological and spatial/territorial grounding of imperial legitimacy, and its emperor who, as the 'Son of Heaven', mediated between heavenly forces and his people on earth, was a major step in the modern secularization of China. Thus, in China, the anti-colonial movement was an integral part of both a domestic revolution and secularization process, and secularization proceeded first with the state itself, through the repudiation of the sacred sovereign power, before secularizing the society. Unlike the Meiji Restoration in Japan, Chinese nationalism and modern state formation sought a rupture with, rather than reinvention of, traditional monarchy. The fact that the anti-colonial movement in China was at the same time two successive *domestic* revolutions (the Republican Revolution of 1911 and

the Communist Revolution of 1949) and a series of *civil* wars of roughly the same order as Oliver Cromwell's regicide and establishment of the English Commonwealth in 1649, the French Revolution of 1789 and the Russian Revolution of 1917, underscores both the *native agency* that carried out processes of modernity in China and the fact that secularization was *not* a gradual *effect* of economic or technological changes, but a conscious, active and eagerly pursued nationalist project.

This kind of revolutionary entry into modernity meant that, more than other colonial situations, China's experience shares structural features with the overthrowing of the *ancien regime* in the English, French and Russian revolutions, all of which had taken place in *non-colonial* contexts. In most colonial experiences, it is an *external* colonial power that overturns native sovereignty and institutes its own modern colonial administration. The clear native agency of these anti-colonial movements *cum* revolutions in modern China is perhaps one reason why there has been very little religious fundamentalist reaction-formation to either colonialism or postcolonial modernity in China, as we see with Islamist popular movements in parts of the Muslim world and with Hindu fundamentalism in India today. Since it was not foreigners who directly brought down the old Chinese imperial order, or the Republican government thereafter, but Chinese nationalists and revolutionaries themselves, for the good of the nation, then national identity was not threatened and there was little to mourn over the loss of the old order. The legacy of semi-colonial China is thus a far cry from Bruce Lincoln's (2006: 62–76) persuasive suggestion that the colonial imposition of Western Enlightenment secular governments to the Middle East in the 19th century has triggered subsequent Muslim fundamentalist reactions to preserve and return to the authenticity and purity of early Islam.

European missionaries first went to China as early as the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE) and interacted with Chinese scholar-officials as equals, but with the industrialization of the West, and after China's Opium Wars defeat, they entered China in much larger numbers in the late 19th century. The muscular Protestantism of this century had a new attitude of cultural superiority towards the 'heathen', 'idolatrours' and 'polytheistic' Chinese they were determined to convert (Reinders, 2004). The writings they left describing Chinese customs and religious behaviors make their condescending attitudes clear. Besides orphanages and hospitals, Christian missionaries also set up institutions of higher education, where many of China's elite leaders were educated. As Vincent Goossaert has shown, a disproportionate number of 20th-century China's professional and political elite were Christians or had Christian backgrounds, most notably Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen) and Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) (Goossaert, 2008). The latter put in place policies that encouraged Christian organizations and controlled traditional Chinese religious practices after his retreat to Taiwan in 1949.

These early 20th-century Chinese nationalists came to absorb and adopt a Protestant normative model for their understanding of what a

‘religion’ should look like: a ‘church-like’ formal organization (Goossaert, 2008) led by a properly ordained priesthood, adept at a corpus of sacred scriptures and theology. They also adopted a Protestant Reformation disdain for what was regarded as popular Chinese religion’s ‘excessive’ ritual performance, polytheistic deity worship, dubious ritual healing and ‘barbarous’ shamanistic access to spirits, ghosts and demons (Goossaert, 2008; Reinders, 2004). Thus was born the division between ‘religion’ as the more advanced form and ‘superstition’ as the less evolved and more backward practice that must be purged from the social fabric if China was to modernize. The Republican-era idea that China had only five religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism), and all other religious practices and traditions were ‘superstitions’ to be eradicated, was later oddly preserved in Communist state policies and regulations, so that, to this day, the State Administration of Religious Affairs under the State Council in China still recognizes only five religious traditions in which religious practice can take place legally (Yang, 2008). Thus, Chinese nationalists of different stripes came to extend the Western colonial and missionary project.

In this way, the unfinished Western missionary project of bringing Protestant Enlightenment to the idolatrous and polytheistic masses was later taken over by, first, the nationalist elites, then the Republican state and later the Chinese Communist Party, with far more success than the missionaries could ever have dreamed of. Had missionaries or foreigners directly attacked Chinese religious culture themselves, the whole process would have met with nationalist resistance. In recent years, with the astounding growth of Christianity in China, especially Protestantism, it has become clear that this rise of Christianity in China was only made possible by the accumulated state suppressions of traditional Chinese religiosities in the 20th century. Yu Jianrong (2008) of the Rural Institute, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, gives a much higher estimate of China’s total Christian population today than official estimates: 100 million, which is 13 percent of the total population, of whom 70 percent are ‘underground Christians.’¹³ Some Chinese scholars of religion, such as Li Xiangping, have also started to recognize that the damage to Chinese religiosities in the modern past is responsible for the flourishing of Christianity in China today (Li XP, 2010). This important example of the unforeseen consequences of destruction of native religiosities reinforces my point about how Western Orientalism’s subtle ‘colonization of consciousness’ can achieve more than formal colonialism.

The fact that China in 1949 took the path of a state socialist project of modernity rather than a Western-style liberal capitalist path should not prevent us from seeing how nationalist Chinese elites and Communist officialdom eagerly adopted social evolutionism, linear history and the discourses of progress, economic development and liberation, and made them their own. This joint agency in colonial and postcolonial modernity is akin to what Partha Chatterjee (1986) has described as a ‘derivative discourse’, such as that adopted by Indian nationalists like Jawaharlal Nehru.

Nehru (and other postcolonial leaders such as Gamal Abdel Nasser, Hosni Mubarak, and Shah Reza Pahlavi of Iran) uncritically took the Western secular state-capitalist approach to modernization that relies on massive top-down capital investment by the state and business interests, and an elite modernizing professional class, instead of the power of the people, local communities, and indigenous religious discourses that were emphasized by Gandhi. Bearing their deep colonial legacy, these postcolonial state projects of modernity show how they are mesmerized by the outward trappings of Western power: they sought to rapidly build up their own nation-state power of industry, trade and the military. Their approach was to engineer an abrupt discontinuity from the traditional culture of the people, rather than embark on a more painstaking reform process from *within* the internal logics of traditional culture and religious practice, which was the Gandhian path. Their approach assumes a position of externality to the religious culture of the masses of the people. Despite the fact that these nationalist projects are carried out by native agents, these agents have often been the products of Western-style schools and the projects have inherited a great deal from the former colonizers. Indeed, they seek to reproduce the basic principles, ideologies and institutions of the modern West over and against indigenous ones.

Linear Evolutionism and Provincial History

The vociferous intellectual self-critique in modern China was only possible after a radical transformation in historical consciousness. The translation of Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* in 1898 and Herbert Spencer's *A Study of Sociology* in 1902 into Chinese by the Confucian scholar Yan Fu launched a dramatic overturning of Chinese cosmology, time and space (Furth, 2002; Schwartz, 1964). Prasenjit Duara has brought to our attention how Chinese nationalists abandoned the traditional Chinese historiography of cyclical dynastic periodization and embraced a Hegelian linear progressive history in their modern narrative of the Chinese nation (Duara, 1995a, 1995c, 2003). This introduction of 19th-century Western social evolutionism punctured the older Chinese notion that human activities and social formations must conform with or be in harmony with shifting divine cosmological forces, and introduced the idea that history has a purpose that could be attained through human will, struggle for survival and enlightenment/reason. Western social evolutionism also taught that history proceeded in a linear and progressive way into the future, without reverting to new cyclical beginnings, and that the West had already attained the object or telos of history. In a movement that Johannes Fabian has called 'the denial of coevalness' (1983), or the refusal of the modern West for an intersubjective sharing of the same historic time and space with non-Western people, the Others of the West were positioned outside of this dynamic history. It was Chinese intellectuals' acceptance of this history and their insistence on coevalness with the West in this new temporality that launched the

momentous drives throughout the 20th century to catch up with the economic development of the West. The term given to one such drive, the ‘Great Leap Forward’, encapsulates the at once Faustian and sovereign nature of this powerful desire for linear advancement at all costs, for this state-driven campaign in social engineering resulted in a devastating famine that claimed 30–40 million lives, mostly peasants.¹⁴

In this new linear history, Chinese intellectuals saw China as hopelessly autocratic, backward and ‘feudal’, in need of infusions of progressive Western spirit. Prasenjit Duara shows how, in the face of the modern pro-Western and iconoclastic May Fourth and revolutionary discourses, the ancient Chinese notion of *fengjian*, or a dispersed federated system of local governance, which once served as a critique of despotic state centralization by invoking China’s pre-imperial past, was in modern times used to translate the Western term of ‘feudalism’ (Duara, 1995c). Far from denoting a past golden age, the Western notion of ‘feudalism’ was a product of an Enlightenment seeking to distance itself from ‘the Dark Ages.’ In China, *fengjian* lost its original Chinese oppositional connotation and adopted the Western connotation of ‘backwardness’ in a Western-derived linear history, becoming an Orientalist discourse of Chinese backwardness and ignorance in opposition to Western progress.

Elsewhere I have written about how Lewis Henry Morgan’s 19th-century unilinear evolutionism that traced ‘human progress’ from the state of ‘savagery’ to ‘barbarism’ to ‘civilization’ (Morgan, 1877) was to exert such a profound influence in China, due to Morgan’s intellectual influence on Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (Yang, 2008). In what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called a ‘provincial European history’, Morgan described the stage of ‘civilization’ (defined as the invention of the alphabet and the recording of written history) with examples from two places in European origin narratives – ancient Greece and Rome – and cast modern Europe as the inheritor and highest stage of civilization. In the 1930s, Joseph Stalin built on Morgan’s foundation and formulated a five-stage theory of universal history (primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism and socialism), in which the provinciality of a European history that is made to stand in for all human history is all the more glaring. Here, the stage of ‘slavery’ represents Greece and Rome, whose decline led to a reversion to the decentralization of feudalism, which is then overcome by capitalist industrialization, whose fate is to be conquered by socialism. In this way, a history found only in Europe was imposed onto China, where the ancient centralized state never broke up for very long (in contrast to the collapse of the Roman Empire), but persisted into the modern era.

The closest approximation to China’s feudal age was the era known in Chinese as ‘pre-Qin’ (*Xian Qin*), a time *before* the unification and state centralization of empire in 221 BCE. Thereafter, the centralized empire always remained a powerful Chinese ideal and was always reconstituted after temporary dissolution, down to the semi-colonial modern era. During the Song Dynasty, China experienced a commercial and urban revolution

that propelled it to the status of a regional commercial and maritime power and the social transformations these produced (a printing industry, an explosion of new knowledge and ideas, expansion of labor and commodities markets, rapid social mobility, etc.) can only be compared with European capitalism's displacement of its own feudal aristocracies in the 18th century. Given the tremendous commercialization of Chinese society since the Song, one can only call late imperial China 'feudal' by doing great violence to Chinese history. Thus, neither the important *longue durée* of the centralized state and sovereign monarchical power in China, and its role in capturing, transforming and deflecting religious energies in China, nor the transformative commercializing forces that often countered the centralized sovereign power and stimulated religious energies, were recognized or thematized in this ill-fitting imported provincial European historical narrative.

Semicoloniality and the Renewal of Sovereign Power

My fourth point about China's semi-colonial legacy has to do with the ways in which the old Chinese imperial power structure, what Michel Foucault called 'monarchical or sovereign power', was reconfigured in modernity. I suggest that any discussion of modernity and Chinese religiosity cannot ignore an inquiry into Chinese *sovereign power*, as it was such a dominant form of power in the pre-colonial imperial Chinese temporal order, as well as central to the supernatural imaginary of Chinese popular religion. Depending on which passages or works one reads, Foucault develops a line of argument that, in Western modernity, the older more visible, repressive and juridical forms of power that relied heavily on public displays of blood and death, the sovereign's power over life, and the sovereign's obsession with guarding and expanding his territory, become increasingly displaced by new forms of 'disciplinary power' and 'governmentality' (Foucault, 1977, 1978, 1991, 2003). These new forms of power are more subtly de-centered and diffused out into the population, and operate through a range of different modern social institutions rather than merely through the law, the throne or through force. Indeed, their objective is no longer to assert the sovereign's right over life, but the pursuit of a new end: the nurturance and promotion of the life of the population through political economy. The population's health, individuality and interiority had been overlooked and neglected in sovereign power's focus on territory and war.

Yet, in other passages, Foucault is more cautious and avoids suggesting that sovereign power is receding in modernity, but is joined in a new triangulation of power:

We need to see things not in terms of a replacement of a society by a disciplinary society, and the subsequent replacement of a disciplinary society by a society of government; in reality, one has a triangle, sovereignty-discipline-government, which has as its primary target the population, and as its essential mechanism the apparatuses of security. (Foucault, 1991: 102)

I do not have the space here, nor the expertise, to address whether Foucault's depiction of the pre-modern European past as one of sovereign power does adequate justice, first, to its embeddedness in religious iconography and discourse, or, second, to the pre-modern precursor of European governmentality, that is, the sophisticated disciplinary and psycho-nurturing practices of the Christian Church. I can only point out that perhaps Foucault did not pay sufficient attention to Christian political theology, to the manifold ways that the throne in various European societies was a microcosmic reproduction of a powerful Christian political cosmology in which God was not only the Father, but the King laying down the law and vanquishing his heathen enemies.¹⁵ Foucault did explicitly recognize that modern governmentality was a secular outgrowth of what he called 'pastoral power', or the old Christian project of saving individual souls through a technology of individual interiority (Foucault, 1983: 214–15). However, Foucault was only interested in how this 'pastoral power' was extended and transformed into modern governmentality, and his writings seldom delve into either the religious dimension of sovereign power or the Christian past of modern European governmentality.

An additional problem with Foucault's provocative and stimulating discussion of power in modernity is of course the issue raised by Giorgio Agamben, of the continued persistence and even extension of sovereign power's right to take life in modernity. In his friendly critique, Agamben chides Foucault for neglecting to thematize the tenacious and recalcitrant reinvention of sovereign power in Western modernity. In *Homo Sacer* (1998), Agamben examines the biopower of Nazi Germany, Stalinism and other modern societies, with their exclusion of 'bare life' in concentration camps and stateless refugee zones of exception, showing that modern biopower operates just as much through the ancient sovereign power over life as it does through the modern nurturing of life and population. In *State of Exception*, Agamben (2005) brings the discussion up to contemporary times, and shows how modern states of emergency, martial law and the expansion of executive powers continue to exhibit the viability and dynamism of sovereign power, notably in what occurred in the United States following the fateful events of 9/11.

Regardless of whether Christian pastoral power undercuts Foucault's depiction of the European past or whether the US, under the Bush–Cheney administration, engaged in a reversion towards sovereign power, what I would like to emphasize here is an important feature of modernity in post-colonial places outside the modern West. Foucault's discussion of governmentality was based on a liberal and prosperous West, which was confident of its borders and had structural and legal constraints on sovereign power. In areas of the world where modernity did not evolve gradually from within, but was rudely thrust upon them in a colonial or semi-colonial experience, it is problematical to rush to adapt Foucauldian narratives of governmentality while ignoring sovereign power, as many recent works on modern and contemporary China have. China's territorial sovereignty was

violated, first in the Opium Wars that forced China to open up to Western merchants and missionaries through treaty ports, then in the Sino-Japanese conflicts that resulted in the loss of Taiwan and Manchuria to Japan, and finally in 1937, when the Japanese mounted a full-scale invasion of China. Threats to Chinese sovereignty persisted in the proxy war with the US in Korea in the 1950s and the Sino-Soviet split of 1960, both of which involved the fear of nuclear holocaust. That is to say, in colonial situations where a native sovereign territory is violated, and the native sovereign power itself is threatened by either an external conquering force or internal domestic divisions or rebellious unrest, a typical reaction-formation to the state of emergency is the defense of sovereign power, which now takes the form of national sovereignty. Incidentally, in China's own past, the most severe despotic sovereign power, under Zhu Yuanzhang, the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty to whom Mao Zedong is sometimes compared, occurred after the conquest of Chinese territory and rule by the Mongols in the preceding Yuan Dynasty.

This defensive or reactive movement of renewed sovereign power often involves militarization, centralization of command structures, an elevation of the figure of the leader and a concomitant discourse of blood, war, sacrifice and death. The modern Western ideals of fragmenting sovereign power through juridical means, such as the democratic institutions of separate estates, checks and balances, multi-party systems or electoral politics, as in the bourgeois revolutions in America and France, seem like dangerous luxuries in the ongoing crises. So my fourth argument is that colonial and semi-colonial experiences produce a crisis of native sovereign power, and this crisis demands a *strengthening of sovereignty*, and *not its relaxation or abandonment* for either a fragmented liberal representative government or a diffuse governmentality. This is a different argument from Achille Mbembe's (2003) valid point that Western colonialism does not usually resort to sovereign power on its own society at home, but mainly in its colonies in the Third World, in the form of slavery, torture, and military occupation.¹⁶ It also departs from the liberal and anti-communist thesis of 'Oriental despotism' (Wittfogel, 1957) that essentializes and racializes what is actually a historical process for which the West is partially responsible in modernity.

Imperial Chinese sovereign power was transformed in modernity, when the modern state shed its archaic and sophisticated ritual and cosmological apparatuses for the linear histories and secular ideologies, militarisms and bureaucratic orders of the modern West. The imperial sacred 'aura' no longer connected with or sought to encompass the myriad auras of local deity cults throughout the realm, but instead, repeated state campaigns were launched to cleanse the new nation of 'backward' and 'feudal' religiosities at the grassroots. China's modern radical state-engineered secularization was accomplished through a combination of sovereign force and ban, a modern state socialist economy, a mass cult of the new sovereign, and the individual interiority of 'thought reform' (*sixiang gaizao*) and modern

confessional rituals such as public ‘struggle sessions’ (*pidou hui*), written confessions (*ziwo jiancha*), ‘red diaries’ (*hongse riji*), etc. In the process, core sovereign structures were retained or even extended: lines of top-down command, Party edicts, state documents (*wenjian*) and directives, the sovereign arbitrary pre-emption of the law itself, the reliance on capital punishment, which is the sovereign right over life, and the exile and banishment of ‘enemies of the people’ to the remote countryside, harsh frontier zones or labor camps. Thus, modern sovereign power extends what were political intrigues and struggles located in the imperial court between the monarch and the bureaucracy, out into the larger population as *mass* politics, on a huge demographic scale.

The fact that contemporary China’s rate of capital punishment has been the highest in the world, far more than the rest of the world combined (Amnesty, 2008; Yardley, 2007; Zhang, 2005), and the fact that, as late as the mid 1980s, there were public executions in sports stadiums, suggest that sovereign power may be more foundational than governmentality in Chinese modernity.¹⁷ The sovereign bio-power over life and death was also dramatically illustrated in the mass famine that followed upon the ill-conceived social engineering feat of the Great Leap Forward, which came down to the sovereign decisionism of a single person’s exception to the law. At the same time, modern sovereignty also developed innovations such as the totalizing nature of a state-ordered economy, class struggle, political labeling and punishment of class enemies, and a system of prisons and labor camps. No economic system was better devised to rid the nation of religious life than the state socialist economy, which deprived the people of surplus income for ritual expenditures and investment in local temples, monasteries, churches, religious festivals, community rituals and their individual afterlives.

Sovereign power would be nothing without the *personal* element of the sovereign himself, a lack that German legal philosopher (and later Nazi theorist) Carl Schmitt (2006[1922]) presciently pointed out in the 1920s. For Schmitt, European liberal and secular governments, with their time-consuming due-process, interparty competition and cumbersome representative majorities, would prove incapable of dealing with states of emergency. Schmitt’s longing for sovereign decisionism derived from his Catholic theology, where the sovereign God was both the source of unity and divine Truth, something that modern secular governments no longer understood as the foundation of political order (Lilla, 1997). Modern China’s Republican Revolution of 1911 dispensed with the complex cosmological and ritual apparatuses of the imperial state, and deposed the last Qing emperor, who ended his years as an ordinary mortal. Unlike the Meiji emperor, who was central to Japanese nationalism and the leader of Japanese modernity, at first in China, the sacred body of the Qing emperor was positioned entirely *outside* of and *opposed* to Chinese modernity. Later, however, Maoist China reinstated the personal element of power in the charismatic leadership and the mass cult of Chairman Mao, who was positioned

as the spearhead of revolutionary modernity (Yang, 1994). Amidst the renewed threats to China's sovereign territory from the Japanese in the 1930s, US nuclear power in the 1950s and 1960s, and the Soviet Union in the 1960s, the state of emergency reproduced a sovereign exception whose ample sacred body was both inside and outside revolutionary history and law. In the post-Mao era, sovereign power continues to be visible in the police state that deals with threats to national sovereignty in Tibet, Xinjiang and other areas.

What the Religious Imaginary Can Do with Sovereign Power

My fifth point about modern China and postcolonial theory has to do with the social consequences of the eradication of the magical, the religious, the ritual and cosmological in Chinese modernity, and the possibilities attendant upon their recent resurgence. My suggestion is that, in China's modern decimation of the religious, sovereign power was actually enhanced beyond its former imperial capacities, since the religious-ritual domain, whether within the body of the imperial state or in the larger social order, had often acted as a check and moderating force on sovereign power.

It was an explicit Confucian strategy that the person of the sovereign should submit to self-cultivation and aspire to become a sage ruler, and most emperors had to undertake extensive Confucian education and self-cultivation. The emperor's actions had to be in harmony with the movements of the seasons and macrocosmic cycles and heavenly shifts. The person of the emperor did not have free rein, but had to abide by a strict set of ritual regulations regarding all aspects of his body (diet, dress, study, sexual conduct, ritual performance) and observe the calendar for state sacrifices and historical precedents guarded by the Confucian bureaucracy. As Korean scholar Hahm Chaihark has argued, Confucian scholar-officials disciplined, put under surveillance and criticized the emperor if he diverged from the strictures of an ancient 'ritualized normative order' or *li*, and this control of scholar-officials served as a pre-modern 'constitutional check' on the arbitrary despotic power of the sovereign (Hahm, 2003). Indeed, in order to launch one of Chinese history's most severe periods of despotic terror, Zhu Yuanzhang, the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty, had to purge the Confucian scholar-officials at the court (through torture, exile and execution) and instead rely on the power of his ruthless eunuchs. As we find in the *Book of Mencius*, the whole notion of a transcendent Mandate of Heaven was preserved, as an independent and transcendent force, a higher authority that could judge the actions of the ruler, and, if the ruler was found wanting, the people could rebel. However, whenever the political theology of the empire was threatened by a popular millenarian religious movement whose teachings were deemed heterodox (*xiejiao*, *yinsi*) and rebellious, challenging the imperial state's special access to the higher gods and its orthodox cosmology, then the state could also be quite ferocious in its religious persecution.

I have argued that the ancient Confucian emphasis on producing social harmony through frequent ritual performance, instead of relying on the sovereign force of law, punishment and ban, was an ancient sort of Chinese ‘ritual governmentality’, a more gentle mode of power that does not resort to either inculcating *belief* or juridical and physical *force* (Yang, 1991, 2002, 2003). This is in line with what Roy Rappaport has argued is the way that rituals work: the ritual performer does not need to *believe* in what the rituals are teaching, but the very performance of the ritual is a bodily *enactment* of it, and, with repetition through time, these enactments create certain moral and bodily dispositions and habituses (Rappaport, 1979, 1999: 107–38). Confucian teachings of all ages up to the modern era sought to promote good government and social order through standardized ritual performances throughout the imperial realm, whether in the imperial court, local magistrates offices, lineage and clan organizations, or grassroots families. Early in the Han Dynasty (1st century BCE), Confucian ritualism and ethics were married to the harsh juridical and state penal system of Legalism, humanizing or ‘governmentalizing’ the state regime of punishment. Later developments in Confucian culture, such as the neo-Confucian renewal of the Song and Ming Dynasties (*Song-Ming lixue*), extended this ritual governmentality from the aristocracy and landed gentry to the common people in local areas, taking popular rituals and rendering them into standardized Confucian ritual forms. Thus, when modernity – beginning with the May Fourth Movement – smashed this ancient Confucian heritage, not only did it deal a blow to traditional patriarchy, it also removed the moderating force of ritualism and unleashed the full sovereign power of an ancient state system based on juridical power, punishment, surveillance, and the right of the sovereign to take life and enforce the ban.

No less than Confucianism, popular religion also provided a check and moderating force on Chinese sovereign power. The modern dismantling of local tutelary deities worshipped by local communities throughout the realm meant the loss of countless local ritual territorialities that had ritually enacted local identities, community solidarities and autonomy from the centralized state. Gods and goddesses were icons and protectors of local communities and their self-government, harbingers of indigenous civil societies and local autonomy that Partha Chatterjee (2006) emphasizes are the hope of all postcolonial societies which have overly imbibed of the modern ‘derivative discourse’ of nationalism and modern centralized state power. Statues of gods were taken out of their local temples on festive occasions and carried on palanquins in religious processions to inspect the boundaries of local communities and exterminate the demons and diseases that beset them. These gods and goddesses, most of whom were the apotheosis of virtuous human beings who had made great contributions to local communities, provided an ideal standard against which human officials were judged. They also served as a court of higher appeal against the unacceptable actions of local officials or others of rank, who would be threatened with divine retribution (Katz, 2008). In popular religion, the figure of the

Jade Emperor (*yuhuang dadi*) provided an ideal of what a good wise ruler should be, a transcendent standard against which mortal officials and the emperor himself were measured, continuing a long tradition in Chinese history (Seidel, 1969–70). Furthermore, local temples and lineages provided the organizational umbrella under which local communities and local gentry accumulated monetary donations to help the poor, provide disaster relief and social welfare, thus allowing local communities to be self-governing and avoid dependency on the centralized state.

Historians of late imperial China have pointed out that since the commercialized Song Dynasty, a ‘localist turn’ took place in late imperial China (Bol, 2003). Through economic wealth from commerce, the Chinese gentry came to adopt local identities and place new importance on local community self-improvement through such religious institutions as deity temples, Buddhist and Daoist temples and monasteries, and lineage organizations (Brook, 1993; Ebrey, 1986; von Glahn, 2003). It is significant here that the major exception to this period of localism was the autocracy of Zhu Yuanzhang in the early Ming, when Zhu made an attempt at absolutist social control by the imperial state. He issued new laws prohibiting popular religious cults on pain of severe punishment, and tried to centralize ritual cults. However, for various reasons, these ambitious moves of sovereign power were poorly implemented and, by the mid-Ming, local deity cults, temples and lineages proliferated in the assertion of localities against the imperial center (Szonyi, 2002). This late imperial history leads us to wonder whether Maoist China’s modern sovereign offensive actually conforms with or continues a deep structure of Chinese historical development, even while it adopted a Western Orientalist discourse of science vs. ‘superstition.’ If so, then the current ongoing religious revival in China and its attendant new localisms may soon also play their part in taming the sovereign power unleashed by Maoism and its inheritors.

In popular Chinese religion, there is a fascinating parallelism between the bureaucratic and hierarchical structure of the gods and that of the temporal state bureaucracy that ruled over the populace. Most gods and even many goddesses are portrayed like officials or monarchs, wearing official clothing and headgear, sitting on thrones in their temple, carried around respectfully on palanquins, listening to humble petitions for favors and blessings, presiding like judges in a court, and dispensing divine retribution on evil-doers and rewarding the virtuous. Many possess official ranks and titles, and are surrounded by retinues of attendants, priests, guards and even ritual armies and generals. Various described as a ‘celestial bureaucracy’ or the ‘imperial metaphor’ by Western scholars, this Chinese phenomenon of the image of the state embedded in the popular religious imaginary of the cosmos, or the imperial state structured according to a model of sovereign power in the Chinese religious universe, has puzzled and challenged scholars of Chinese religion such as Arthur Wolf (1974), Stephan Feuchtwang (2001), Robert Weller and Meir Shahar (1996), Emily Martin Ahern (1981) and Robert Hymes (2002). Anna Seidel (1983)

has traced the ancient genealogy of this parallelism between the Chinese state and Chinese religious imaginary, and suggested that rather than one deriving from the other, both the temporal state and the religious imaginary emerged from a common matrix of images of sacred polity in ancient China. This ancient common matrix suggests that the sacred and religious have always been about the polity, and the polity was always invested with the sacred and religious, until modernity's artificial separation, without any thought to the possible consequences of this severance.

I would submit that the parallelism of the celestial bureaucracy does not merely reflect or give expression to the imperial state, nor just help the state penetrate into the collective psyche of local communities, as Arthur Wolf argues (1974). Wolf's argument is in keeping with the modernist tendency to reduce religion to a legitimation device for power. I would suggest that instead of treating the religious domain as an afterthought to power, that is, as a legitimation for power *after* the fact, we must think of the Chinese religious domain and its structure of sovereign power as an originary and encompassing power construct, an ancient cultural template that has been reproduced with variations through each historical period. Each era's temporal state structure draws from and adjusts consciously or



Figure 2 Three rows of seating for three ranks of the gods, Qitian Dasheng Temple, Cangnan County, Wenzhou, China, 2008
 Source: Photo by Mayfair Yang.

unconsciously from this template, but is also answerable to other offshoots from the same template. Popular religion's celestial bureaucracy is another offshoot that also draws from this same template, and each era's religious imaginary engages with the temporal state in certain ways, providing alternative memories and interpretations of the template and how social reality measures up to its transcendent ideals. Thus, the Chinese religious imaginary is a realm of encompassing transcendence above and beyond temporal politics: it offers higher transcendent ideals against which mere mortal rulers and governments are measured, and to which the common people and competing leaders and governments can appeal. Although the religious construction of the cosmos *can* legitimate temporal rulers and their governments, if their actions diverge too far from the higher ideals, they open themselves to oppositional movements such as millenarian rebellions or sectarian movements that can appeal to these same higher ideals. Thus we must understand that religious rituals and access to divine realms, whether conducted in the court or out in the society among gentry and commoners, provided constant reminders of these transcendent ideals that also dictated to temporal powers.

Throughout China's 3000-year recorded history, we can see how the state form was set up to include important ritual and religious agents and mechanisms in the state's internal workings, whose task was to uphold the transcendent ideals and remind the ruler of the transcendent realm to which he must answer. In the Shang and Zhou dynasties, a class of diviner-scribes operated in the king's court, and they made sure that important decisions on affairs of state were submitted to the gods and royal ancestors for their blessings, and were in accordance with the movement of the heavens, as could be divined through the oracle bones and tortoise shells. In the Warring States era, a new class of wandering 'knights' (*shi*) emerged, who were subsequently to take office in the new imperial court of the Han Dynasty as Confucian scholar-officials whose task was to make sure that the operations of all aspects of the state accorded with Confucian ideals of 'ritual' and 'propriety' (*li*). Of course there are examples in the past of the sovereign power unchecked, such as the early Ming Dynasty when the ascendant court power of the eunuchs resulted in the persecution and mass execution of Confucian scholar-officials and the sovereign's despotic power. However, it was not until modernity that Chinese sovereign power enjoyed virtually a free hand. The severing of this crucial linkage between the sacred-religious and the polity in modernity, and the elevation and expansion of the state *without* its age-old religious-transcendent source, meant the liberation of modern sovereign power from an important moderating and restraining force. This is perhaps one reason why modern China's sovereign power has outstripped previous eras in the extent of its destructiveness, as in the famine of 1959–60, in the labeling, internal exile and persecution of 'class enemies' in repeated political campaigns and vast labor camps, and in the banning and destruction of religious organizations, sacred sites and ritual practices of locality.

Today, in the post-Mao era, there is a resurgence of religiosity that has begun to defy the consumerism and rationalization pressures of China's new participation in global capitalism. This revival of religiosity is occurring on at least two fronts. First, there is the more visible efflorescence of popular religiosity: popular religion, Daoism, Buddhism and rural 'underground' Christianity in the countryside and small towns; and Christianity and Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism among urban and educated people. An ongoing shift is also occurring among some intellectuals, from the view that Chinese popular religion is an evolutionary throwback of 'superstitions' to more positive evaluations, as the recent literature associating it with rural 'civil society' (*gongmin shehui*) (Gao, 2008) and local self-government (Ye, 2009) readily attests. Second, there is also a less visible and quieter re-awakening of religious impulses on the part of the Chinese state from centralized to local levels which will be addressed later below.

In thinking about popular Chinese religion today, we are faced with the demise of a temporal monarchical power and an avowedly 'atheistic' state, yet popular religion continues to construct the cosmos in sovereign terms. This can only indicate that beneath the superficial layers of modern secular government, the religious imaginary continues to detect a sovereign structure at work today. Thus today, the celestial bureaucracy of the gods continues to reveal to the people the nature of sovereign power, allows them to articulate and examine the punishing power of the system they live in, and enables them to deal with, counter, tame or transcend its power through the technology of religious ritual. Once people are able to make sovereign power visible to themselves, they are able to objectify it, and then to devise various means of dealing with or countering its power. This analysis is closer to that of Emily Ahern's (1981) adoption of J.L. Austin's speech act theory to explain the performative function of Chinese popular rituals. However, I am suggesting that popular rituals do *more* than teach the people how to deal with the state bureaucracy; they teach *more* than the mundane lessons of bribing and flattering officialdom. They unlock the doors to the operations of *temporal* sovereign power at its source, by tapping into and communicating with the mysterious world of the encompassing transcendent *cosmic* sovereign order.

In Daoist rituals that I observed in fieldwork in rural Wenzhou, the Daoist priest assumes the role of what I would describe as a courtier or lawyer who represents his clients to the gods at court. The priest knows the specialized court language that will appeal to the monarch/judge and powerful god-officials so they will grant favors for his clients, and he is adept at court procedures of submitting written petitions, chants and songs, and incense and food offerings to the various bureaucratic ranks of the gods. This role of the Daoist priest in intervening with the gods on behalf of his clients is displayed in the wonderful ethnographic film of a Daoist ritual of community sacrifice in rural Hunan Province by Patrice Fava, where the

Daoist priests repeatedly address, make offerings, and write petitions to gods of the Department of Thunder and other Bureaus of the cosmic state (Fava, 2005). Popular rituals, then, are technologies that enable ordinary people (with the assistance of ritual masters or Daoist and Buddhist monks) to assert their agency in matters of life, death and progeny, and intervene in the cosmic sovereign order by moving the gods to action. Popular Chinese rituals also provide a court of higher appeal above the temporal sovereign order and construct transcendent models of virtue against which temporal officials and power-holders are measured.

Accompanying the revival of popular religion and grassroots Confucian culture, there are signs that the modern secular state is also experiencing some quasi-religious impulses. Confucian rituals conducted in the sage's hometown of Qufu, Shandong Province, have been sponsored by the provincial and local governments and nationally televised, and there is a popular program on China's official state television station CCTV, featuring Yu Dan, a talk-show hostess discussing the ancient thought of Confucius. There are now several academic institutes of Confucian Studies, beginning with the one at People's University in Beijing, which trains many of China's future political leaders. Ostensibly intended to promote the academic study of Confucian thought, in the future these centers could possibly develop into quasi-religious incubators of a new state Confucianism that inculcates selective Confucian values for strengthening state order. History is full of ironies, and, after a century of pillaging Confucius, including the Criticize Lin Biao, Criticize Confucius campaign of the early 1970s,¹⁸ we may yet see the Chinese Communist Party deploy a new 'Confucian governmentality' to soften the harsher sovereign power of the earlier Maoist era. This is not implausible, as the Guomindang Party under Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) adopted state Confucianism, first on the Mainland in the 1930s New Life Movement, and then in Taiwan from the 1950s through 1970s. Significantly, a giant bronze statue of Confucius was erected on 12 January 2011 on the east side of Tiananmen Square in Beijing, facing the portrait of Chairman Mao on the Gate of Heavenly Peace.

Thus, these two stirrings of a renewed religiosity in 21st-century China indicate a range of possibilities for religion's role in modern sovereign power. On the one hand, it can be deployed as a new form of Confucian governmentality that softens the blows of sovereign might, yet insidiously extends state power. On the other hand, popular religiosity offers many possibilities: it can create mini-sovereignties of local communities with their tutelary deities, comprising a renewed indigenous civil society; it can also offer an image of a transcendent sovereign order that rules over the temporal one; and it provides a technology of active ritual engagement with this transcendental realm, allowing human agency to manipulate the gods and officialdom alike. Finally, the generosity encouraged by all the different Chinese religiosities and the increasing charitable activities organized by religious institutions today will help to counter the state-capitalist machines that have been accelerating at an astounding rate since the economic reforms began in the 1980s.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to show that, contrary to most China scholars' reluctance to think of modern China in terms of postcolonial studies (myself initially included), we must reflect upon China's modern radical state secularization in terms of its semi-colonial and post-colonial legacy. Although China was for two millennia a powerful civilization, and continues to stand up to the West today, the destruction of religious life that took place there throughout the 20th century can only appear in hindsight as the effect of the 'colonization of consciousness' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1997) that occurred among the educated elite and officialdom. This is in keeping with the distinctiveness of modernity compared to previous eras: the importance of its systems of knowledge-power in steering massive social transformation and dislocation. This kind of colonization may have been much more effective than military, administrative or economic colonization because, through native agency, the lines of collective Self and the Other are so well blurred that an alien modernity becomes naturalized as teleological necessity. The point made here is *not* against China entering modernity or incorporating Enlightenment ideals, but that China did so by unilaterally cutting off its traditions and denying them any opportunities for linking up with, finding common ground with, and negotiating with the new ideals and knowledge. There is much cultural wisdom in indigenous Chinese religious traditions that have been accumulated over millennia, and that we moderns still do not (or no longer) fully comprehend. The sudden loss of this religious heritage helped ensure that one major persistent element of Chinese tradition was privileged, unfettered and strengthened in its entry into modernity: sovereign power. All the careful work and thought that had evolved over the centuries for containing and restraining sovereign power were suddenly cast aside as anti-modern instead of being adapted and reconfigured for an important role in modernity.

This article also suggests that, instead of targeting and critiquing only the West, Postcolonial Studies must confront a new world where modernist and Orientalist discourses have penetrated to all corners of the world and native agents in postcolonial societies are no less its carriers. Postcolonial Studies must also take care not to assume that theoretical paradigms arising in the Western academy will be equally relevant or suitable for analyzing configurations of power in other places and polities. In the rush to apply Foucauldian notions of governmentality around the globe, we have too often overlooked the Western provenance of Foucault's ideas, and forgotten the manifold ways in which sovereign powers, both native and Western, have survived and thrived in modernity.

Notes

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1. The ancient Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branch system of dating and counting is composed of two interlinked cycles of time: the 10-year cycle of Stems (*gan*), and the 12-year cycle of Branches (*zhi*). The ten-year Stem cycle is based on the alternating phases of *yin* and *yang*, and the Five Elements (*wuxing*: metal, wood, water, fire, earth), and each year is represented by a Chinese character. Each year of the 12-year Branch cycle is also represented by a character, as well as a zodiac animal. The two cycles are combined, with one character from each cycle, to form a specific year of the Chinese calendar that will be repeated in 60-year cycles.

2. Every schoolchild in China knows about the Opium Wars, a bitter reminder of China's humiliation at the hands of the imperialist West. Due to the high European demand for Chinese goods in the 18th and 19th centuries, Britain and other European powers were running a serious trade deficit with China, and the silver that was mined from the New World and had enriched Europe was being drained out to China. Britain's ingenious solution to this intolerable balance of trade problem with China was to sell opium to the Chinese for Chinese goods. They found a vast and eager market in China for the addictive opium, and when the Chinese court sent Commissioner Lin Zexu to stop the opium trade, Britain led a series of European military naval expeditions against China that easily defeated the Chinese. In defeat, the Chinese court was forced to open several treaty ports to foreign trade, and to pay exorbitant indemnities to each European country. The Opium Wars mark the beginning of semi-colonialism in China.

3. For those new to Chinese history, the periodization of Chinese dynasties can be a daunting task to learn. Here is a rough timeline of the major Chinese dynastic periods discussed.

Zhou Dynasty 1027–221 BCE
 Qin Dynasty 221–207 BCE
 Han Dynasty 206 BCE–220 CE
 Tang Dynasty 618–907 CE
 Song Dynasty 960–1279 CE
 Yuan Dynasty 1279–1368 CE
 Ming Dynasty 1368–1644 CE
 Qing Dynasty 1644–1911 CE

4. The May Fourth Movement, also called the 'Chinese Enlightenment', was triggered in 1919 when Chinese intellectuals, students, workers and merchants protested against the Versailles Treaty after the First World War, when the Western powers handed over German-controlled Shandong Province to the Japanese. Throughout the 1920s, in public demonstrations and boycotts of Japanese goods, in journals,

novels, modern-style dramas and newspapers, these nationalist and modernizing groups castigated traditional Chinese culture and values, especially Confucian culture and popular religions, for their ‘backwardness’ and irrelevance to modernity.

5. The Cultural Revolution, initiated by Chairman Mao Zedong in 1966, defies easy encapsulation. In many ways it was anti-Enlightenment, in its cult of the leader, its anti-Westernism and its emphasis on indoctrination instead of rational discussion. However, its preoccupation with class struggle, nationalism and hatred of the past must be seen as a logical extension and radicalization of the May Fourth spirit. This movement of ideological persecution was a violent one, with estimates of a total death toll of 10 million in murders, suicides, and illness or starvation due to imprisonment, forced labor or persecution.

6. Of course, it is also true that the urgent and critical nature of China’s situation, the foreign imperialist threats to its sovereignty, the military invasions, the civil wars and famines, meant that the modernizing reformers and revolutionaries felt compelled to act rapidly and radically, without the luxury of reflection, scholarly study or debate about how to proceed.

7. The strong historical legacy of cultural self-critique in China can be seen even today in the popularity of such books as *The Ugly Chinese* by Bo Yang (1992), a Taiwan writer who lashes out against the weak and immoral character of Chinese people. His book was first published in 1984, but is now read on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, and is available online in Mainland China, after being temporarily banned there.

8. See Shu-mei Shih’s persuasive case that Chinese Occidental discourse, whether by May Fourth or post-Mao era intellectuals, is not a symmetrical opposite of Western Orientalism because Chinese Occidentalism never appropriated the (Western) Other to claim the universality or superiority of the Chinese Self, but conceded those titles to the Western Other.

9. *River Elegy* was a six-part television documentary co-written by two young intellectuals, Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang, and broadcast on Chinese national television in the late 1980s (Chen, 1995; Su and Wang, 1991).

10. See Anthony Yu’s (2005) vivid description of the religious persecution of Buddhism at the end of the Tang Dynasty by the Chinese court. In 2007, when I brought up this period as a historical precedent for China’s 20th-century religious persecution to Xuan Fang, a historian of Chinese Buddhism, he waved it aside dismissively, saying: ‘That persecution was nothing compared to something like the Cultural Revolution and the events of the last few decades. That only lasted a few years, and did not involve the whole society.’

11. See Danny Kwok’s (1965) perceptive discussion of modern Chinese science worship or ‘scientism’ of the 1920s to 1940s that was distinct from the actual practice of scientific investigation. Scientism was often equated with social evolutionism and mainly deployed as a potent weapon to attack traditional Chinese culture and religious practices.

12. Since the Japanese military incursions occurred in more recent Chinese history than the military thrust of the West into China in the mid 19th century, and the Japanese were more brutal and seemed to be much more intent than the West on full colonial occupation, the Chinese attitude towards Japan is perhaps marked by more animosity. In addition, Japan was traditionally a tributary state

of imperial China and therefore the Chinese were more reluctant to accord Japan the same respect as most Chinese intellectuals harbored for the West. Ironically, it was in the Japanese-controlled areas of Manchuria, north China and Taiwan that Chinese popular religion was best preserved, whereas the Guomindang and Communist areas witnessed state projects of modernity and campaigns against traditional Chinese religious practices.

13. 'Underground' churches in China refers to those churches that have not been registered or accepted by the government as legal, because they refuse to join the government Christian organizations where the clergy are selected by the state. They are also called 'home churches' because, denied permits to build their church, members attend services together in each other's homes.

14. The Great Leap Forward (1958–61) was a radical state-orchestrated mass mobilization campaign launched by Chairman Mao, calling for leaps in agricultural and industrial production so that China would equal Great Britain's steel production in ten years. In the countryside, it was accompanied by the People's Commune movement that radically stepped up the pace of agricultural collectivization, by combining several villages into giant new units of production and accounting, and households and families lost their decision-making ability. The difficulties of adjusting to working with strangers, the lack of economic incentives to work and the diversion of energies to backyard rural industries meant that agricultural production plummeted, resulting in a massive rural famine in the Three Years of Hardship (1959–62), and a death toll unprecedented in human history.

15. This passage in Psalm 47 of the Old Testament is typical, and reveals both the sovereign structure of Christian cosmology and political theology, and the divine character of European monarchical power:

For the Lord most high is terrible; he is a great King over all the earth. He shall subdue the people under us, and the nations under our feet. Sing praises to God, sing praises: sing praises unto our King, sing praises. For God is the King of all the earth; sing ye praises with understanding. God reigneth over the heathen: God sitteth upon the throne of his holiness . . . (Psalm 47)

16. Since China threw out the Western and Japanese colonizers, and continues to stand up to the West in terms of ideology, military preparation and economic might, I believe Achille Mbembe's thesis applies mainly to Africa and Latin America, but not China.

17. Estimates differ considerably on the actual numbers of death sentences carried out in China each year, from Amnesty International's figure of at least 1718 executions carried out of 7003 death sentences in 2008 (Amnesty, 2008), to as high as 10,000 per year by the *New York Times* (Yardley, 2007). Only since 2007, when the final approval for death sentences was taken away from the lower courts and placed in the hands of the highest court in Beijing, did the rate of capital punishment start its gradual descent (Yardley, 2007).

18. The Criticize Lin Biao, Criticize Confucius campaign was directed by Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution against his political rivals Lin Biao and perhaps Zhou Enlai. The campaign looked back into ancient history and criticized the Confucians as conservatives who resisted the new world of the Legalists

(*Fajia*), a philosophy of statecraft that promoted law and punishment as a means of state control of the population.

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