

BOOK REVIEW

The Souls of China: The Return of Religion after Mao

Britta Schmitz

Ever since Europe's Age of Enlightenment many regard a society without religion as the better, more peaceful one. However, a glance at Chinese history shows that this did not always prove true. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was without doubt one of the most radical and brutal fights against all religious beliefs and practices. Countless temples, mosques and churches were destroyed and countless people arrested for their spiritual beliefs. Countless were also the immaterial losses, nobody knows exactly how much of the spiritual and religious knowledge was lost forever, when pictures and scriptures were burned and chains of oral tradition were broken. Mao Zedong died in September 1976. His wife Jiang Qing and the other members of "Gang of Four" were arrested in October of the same year. But it took until 1982 for the Communist Party to publish "document 19" - an official directive on religions and how to deal with them. Only then were many religious experts released from prison or labor camps, and a renaissance of religious traditions could begin.

The relationship between government and religion was and still is a complicated one: While it is acknowledged that spiritual belief is to some extent indispensable for a nation, the party is at the same time afraid to lose control over the people. Religious groups are still seen as unwelcome competition to the Communist ideology. This often results in violent suppression. But the growing influence of religion can't be denied. Many Chinese people are searching for some kind of spiritual values; the end of extreme communism and Mao cult certainly left a vacuum which could not be filled by the ensuing frenetic materialism.

In his book "The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao" Pulitzer prize winning writer and journalist Ian Johnson follows a cast of activists from different religious groups. The work is the result of fifteen years of researching and travelling in China. On his travels across China the author is not just observing his protagonists' spiritual activities, but actively taking part in them. Through the very personal narratives we learn about their life stories and the very individual motives that brought them to their faiths. This plurality of belief is after all those years of egalitarianism intriguing, but it does not come so

much as a surprise. It is - like almost everything else in China - rooted in the country's proverbial "5000 years of history". China has never been a country with only one religion. Even in periods of persecution of certain foreign religious groups or Chinese sects, China did not have a state religion. This is probably one reason why the aspect of religion in the life of the Chinese laobaixing ("the hundred surnames" - the common people) is often overlooked in analyses dealing with modern China. This makes "The souls of China" a very insightful, even

important work. The emphasis of the book is of course contemporary China, but the author also deals with the historical facts. The chapters of the book follow the rhythm of the Chinese lunar calendar, whose cycles still define so many events in the life of Chinese people. The Communist Party is actually emulating those cycles with its extremely ritualized congresses, five-year-plans and last but not least the highly formalized introduction process of new political leaders. And so it is with some sense of irony that the author also weaves in observations



Figure 1: Incense and offerings in Buddhist Fahai Temple, Beijing.



Figure 2: Talisman in Daoist Dongyue Temple, close to the Central Business District in Beijing.

and anecdotes about "big politics" right along with stories about priests, fortune tellers and funeral masters.

For Western readers it might be somewhat surprising that quite a lot of Chinese intellectuals and dissidents are professing Christians. One of them is Wang Yi, a former human rights lawyer who is now pastor of a reformed church in Chengdu, Sichuan. And while there have been no arrests of church members when Ian Johnson was doing his research for this book, it was reported in the international press that Wang was detained in May 2018 ("China Blocks a Memorial Service to Sichuan Earthquake Victims" by Chris Buckley, May 12, 2018, The New York Times). In the book we get a striking image of the obstructions and troubles the church has to fight with on a daily basis: from supposed infiltration with party spies to problems of finding a venue willing to a room to the church for their Christmas service. So why then does a man like Wang Yi chose to become a man of religion? Johnson tries to answer this question, his conclusion being that in a system which is politically as repressive as the Chinese one, a pastor and seminar teacher like Wang can reach far more people than any political

activist. But the book also covers the negative developments of Christian life in China: corruption of clerical staff, preachers who see themselves as the reincarnation of Christ, and sect-like communities shooting up like mushrooms, to name just a few.

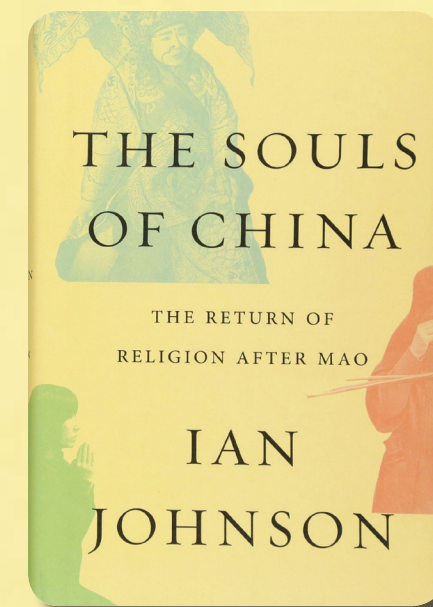
It is of course not only Christianity, but also the "native Chinese religions" - Buddhism included - which are witnessing a renaissance. And thus the cast of "The Souls of China" also includes Daoist priests, pilgrim associations and some meditation gurus. One distinctive characteristic of the three Chinese religions (Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism) is that they are far less institutionalized than the Abrahamic religions - to an extent that some religious scholars have difficulties to even call them religions. Believers are not even restricted to subscribe to only one of the schools. People might pray in a Daoist temple as well as in a Buddhist pagoda and at the same time call themselves Confucianists.

One of the many moving stories in "The Souls of China" is the one of Li Bin, ninth-generation Daoist funeral and feng-shui master. He tries to fix the broken chain of traditions with so many of the sacred writings and pieces of ritual music lost forever in the Cultural Revolution. At the same time, he has understood that there are no future prospects for him in the little village of his ancestors. This is why he moves to a bigger town, very much to the dismay of his father. Here he performs funerals for city dwellers estranged from tradition. Many of his clients are lacking even a basic understanding of the ancient rituals, but they clutch at straws, in the hope to do one last good thing for the deceased. In one touching scene we see two young children heartbroken in the middle of their mother's funeral ceremony, trying to follow Li Bin's strict instructions. The children's father seems no less forlorn, while the funeral master is annoyed by the city people's ignorance. This is of course another perspective on religion in modern society: Previously meaningful rituals become empty when the spiritual background knowledge is missing. And while Li Bin works hard to revive

the old traditions and actually manages to make a good living as yinyang man, it is very unsure whether there will be a tenth generation of funeral masters in the Li family. Li Binchang, the son and youngest family member, is growing up away from home in a boarding school, spending his days studying and playing video games, and dreaming of a future life in a big city.

Conclusion

Ian Johnson has a deep understanding of what makes the Chinese people tick. He takes the readers way beyond the surface in order to give them a glimpse of the soul(s) of China. Moreover, his writing has great literary qualities; with a gripping narrative style and a rich language. The only aspect I am missing in this work is the perspective of Chinese Muslims, as there don't seem to be many papers on Islam during the Cultural Revolution. Though this topic would of course touch some highly sensitive ethnic issues. But this aside, the "Souls of China" is indeed a must read for anyone who wants a deeper understanding of China.



Bibliographic information

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Britta Schmitz [brittabrittanika@gmail.com] has a Master in Modern China Studies and is fluent in Mandarin. She lived in Mainland China for nearly 10 years and has seen temples, mosques and churches in pretty much every corner of the country: From Kashgar in the "Wild West" to Harbin close to Siberia. However, she is still amazed by all the different facets of religion in China.