

SUPERSTITIOUS REGIMES

*Religion and the Politics  
of Chinese Modernity*

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*Religion and the Politics  
of Chinese Modernity*

Rebecca Nedostup

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*For my parents*



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R.N.

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## *Note on Romanization and Measurements*

I use the *pinyin* system to romanize Chinese terms, with two important exceptions. When a different romanization of personal names is more familiar to English-language readers (e.g., Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek), I have retained that term. Second, when an organization or person has an official English name or rendering, I defer to that version (e.g., Kuomintang, KMT, Taipei). The city of Beijing was called Beiping during the time period of this book; for readers' convenience, I use the more familiar name, institutional titles excepted. Land and currency are given in the local units of the time (respectively, *mu* [equivalent to 2.47 acres] and *yuan*).



SUPERSTITIOUS REGIMES

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## ONE

### *Introduction: Religion, Modernity, Nationalism*

#### AUSPICIOUS OMENS OF THE BLUE-AND-WHITE

In early 1929, a young official sat in his modest offices in the civil service examination branch of the new Nationalist government and put together an ambitious book. It addressed what he thought was the most pressing issue confronting China, the ongoing clash between revolutionary secularists and religious patriots. Zhang Zhenzhi 張振之 had spoken out on the side of secularism during one of the biggest cultural debates of the 1920s, the dispute about the proper place of Christianity in nationalism and modern civilization. Since then, Zhang admitted, the battle of the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang 國民黨; KMT) to unify the country had exacted a high military and political price. The party had defeated or assimilated local militarists only to launch a new battle against its erstwhile Communist comrades and other domestic enemies. Thus Zhang saw massing before him forces of “terroristic political partisanship” on one side and “mystical and heterodox religious ideation” on the other. As a result, the choices for thinking persons were hopelessly muddled. In order to bring clarity to the situation, he assembled a compendium documenting the recent history of the relationship between numinous and political power. He gave this work the title

*Revolution and Religion* (*Geming yu zongjiao* 革命與宗教) in order to make sure that readers understood their alternatives.<sup>1</sup>

Zhang named one of his most intriguing chapters “Auspicious Omens of the Blue-and-White” (“Qingbai de xiangrui” 青白的祥瑞), referring to the KMT’s colors. During the spring and summer of 1928, Zhang related, as Nationalist armies reached the climax of the Northern Expedition military unification drive, local newspapers reported the appearance of propitious signs. For instance, a chicken belonging to a Henan family had laid a miraculous egg. Observing raised markings on the egg’s surface, townspeople concluded that, far from being random, they in fact reproduced the twelve-pointed shining sun of the Nationalist flag. Following the mode of the time, they put the remarkable portent on display in the local social club to await “scientific inspection.” Not long after this discovery, an opium-suppression official in the southern province of Guangdong, the KMT’s previous base, brought home an apparently unremarkable crab. Upon cooking it, he discovered red markings on the shell tracing the characters *tongyi tianxia* 統一天下, “unite all under heaven.” He concluded that the animal was a supernatural affirmation of the KMT’s destiny.<sup>2</sup>

These stories disturbed Zhang Zhenzhi on secularist principles. “Auspicious omens of the blue-and-white” was a phrase meant to spark cognitive dissonance in the vernacular of the day. “Blue-and-white” symbolized not just revolution but popular sovereignty, and therefore the agency of the individual subject. But “auspicious omens,” as Zhang explained, formed part of the origin myth of each new dynastic founder, staple features of the twenty-four Standard Histories that chronicled China’s dynasties. They therefore rested on the idea of the Mandate of Heaven and the cosmological power of ruler as pivot between heaven and earth. The omens appeared, then, as if travelers from a distant age surrounded by the trappings of modernity—resting in a social club, with townspeople eager to have the wonder inspected by scientists. Zhang dealt with this problem by applying his own scientific skepticism. Noting that the newspaper stories tended to cite hearsay rather than eyewitness accounts, he remarked, “we dare not grit our teeth and call these reports ‘the truth.’”

But he added a thought-provoking suggestion. “We also have to consider,” he cautioned, “that many good omens are manifestations of the peoples’ psyche and reflections of their hopes.”<sup>3</sup> If we say that the people are spreading superstition (*mixin* 迷信), he asked, could we not also say that they are full of hopes and expectations for the future? Zhang had in mind political hopes—to be free of warlord control and live under the new

Nationalist regime—but his reference to the “psyches” (*xinli* 心理) of average people also revealed the new intellectual orthodoxy on religion in China, influenced by European and American sociological thought, that ascribed religious belief to psychological or social needs. He was thus able to reconcile the appearance of atavistic omens in the revolutionary world by rationalizing them as instrumental manifestations of desires that to him were more concrete and practical.

In many ways, we still live in Zhang Zhenzhi’s world. It is one shaped by the proposition that political authority should be separated from numinous power, a core idea of secularism.<sup>4</sup> The less than universal acceptance of this proposition—and indeed it is continually tested and contested—does not undercut its extraordinary influence. Thus, for instance, many may sympathize with Zhang Zhenzhi’s determination to find a “rational” and theoretical explanation for the appearance of the numinous in the public arena of actions associated with the politics of the nation-state: parties, representation, social reform. At its most basic, secularism proposes the division of religion from the political, social, and economic realms of public activity, as well as an inherent intellectual division between the numinous and the philosophical. When this book refers to “secularism” and “the proposition of secularization,” this is what I mean.

This is a point worth clarifying, because the separation of the realms of power historically came with a corollary: that progress toward modernity entails progress toward the secular (which is what many people mean by “secularization,” whether they think it a good thing or bad). But there is an important subsidiary step in this process. If modernity is allowed to admit religion, it will be religion in a rationalized form—not tales of magical crabs and mystical eggs. In other words, religion can be distinguished from superstition.

These two separations lie at the heart of this book, though as an empty center and a perpetual question rather than as established facts. This study investigates the role of religion in the construction of modernity and political power during the Nanjing Decade (1927–37) of Nationalist rule in China. It explores the modern recategorization of religious practices and people according to the assumptions of secular nationalism, as well as the impact of this recategorization on their social organization, political clout, and sheer ability to survive under hostile conditions. It examines how state power affected the religious lives and physical order of local communities, particularly in the Nationalist stronghold of Jiangsu province. It also looks at how politicians conceived of their own ritual role in an era when government was

stripped of its cosmological underpinnings and meant to stem instead from popular sovereignty. The claims of secular nationalism and mobilizational politics prompted KMT leaders and cadres to conceive of the world of religious affiliations and ties as a dangerous realm of superstition that would lead the nation to ruin—the first “superstitious regime” of this book’s title. At the same time, it convinced them that national feeling and faith in the party-state would replace those ties. This was the second “superstitious regime.”

### WHY IS CHINA IMPORTANT TO THE HISTORY OF NATIONALIST SECULARISM?

The combination of iconoclasm, categorization, and nationalist mobilization that constituted the KMT campaign against superstition suggests comparison to various world historical precedents and contemporary movements. Where does the Nationalist example fit into the anthropology of “the secular as practical experience” that Talal Asad called for some years ago, and what insights can it offer?<sup>5</sup> To begin with, this is a case of “nationalist secularism,” or secularism of the nation-state. Thus we have a double move: to shift the unit of power from the empire to the nation (and transfer sovereignty from the monarch to the people), and to separate religion from the realm of politics and public life more generally. The near-simultaneity of these attempted transitions in China—one by political revolution, the other by various stages of social reform and revolutionary action—allows us to examine at close range the proposition that secularism, nationalism, and the category of “religion” as a discrete entity are inextricably linked in historical development. As in revolutionary France and Russia, overthrowing the monarch and constructing a nation-state required the invention of new ceremonial and symbolic forms. But the semi-colonial status in which Chinese political elites saw themselves meant that they would not discard emblems of the past entirely. Thus, like Hindu nationalists who constructed a cultural past under colonial conditions in India, Chinese revolutionaries began to reclaim mythic heroes and other elements of the imperial past to place alongside their own martyrs and warriors in an array of civic symbols.

What the revolutionaries would not countenance, however, was establishing a state religion that was nationalist in flavor. This distinguished China from its fierce cultural rival at the turn of the century, Japan (and,

indeed, distinguished the Nationalists from some of their reformist forebears of the previous generation). Not only did the Chinese revolution decline to maintain the emperor, as the transformative Meiji Restoration had, but “national essence” (*guocui* 國粹) in culture would never amount to endorsement of a “national religion” (*guojiao* 國教) on the order of state Shinto. As a result, the Nationalists were placed in a difficult position between total iconoclasm and cultural restorationism. Their endorsement of the symbolic past would therefore always be “traditionaleseque” rather than “traditionalist.” Their attacks on religious institutions, however, were very material and very damaging. In one important respect, however, they were substantially different in nature from similar attacks in France, Russia, and Kemalist Turkey, all of which Nationalist cadres studied and emulated. (They also studied Japan, but they mentioned only Turkey after 1927.) That is, there was no single overriding ecclesiastical structure in China that supported the numinous and political *ancien régime*—no single “church” to overturn with the “state.”<sup>6</sup> The imperial system included a vast ritual network, much of which ended with the overthrow of Qing, but this was only a minor part of the overall Chinese religious experience. Attacking religion thus meant attacking a dispersed and eclectic agglomeration of institutions among various traditions, all of which in the revolutionaries’ view encouraged a *mindset* that impeded the construction of the nation and the development of modernity.

This was a characteristic that the Nationalists—and their Communist counterparts—shared with modernizing elites throughout the colonized and semi-colonized world. It was an important link to contemporary Turkey, for example, where revolutionaries wrote that the “tyranny of tradition, customs, and rooted ideas” posed as serious a threat as the tyranny of governments.<sup>7</sup> It shows a commonality between modernizing elites in China and those in Mexico, who attacked a much broader and more overarching church structure during the 1920s but in the course of the backlash dealt with a similar mix of local religious expressions, popular political response, and social friction created by an expanding and intrusive state, as is described in this book.<sup>8</sup> Finally, like Meiji Japan, late Qing and Republican China developed what Gerald Figal calls an “elite caste” who constructed new systems of knowledge and saw them enacted into law.<sup>9</sup> Among such knowledge systems was a distinction among “science,” “religion,” and “superstition,” legally enforced though both behavioral prohibitions and promotions. Chinese officials would adopt from Japan both the linguistic

innovation and the legal framework and meld them with longstanding local cultural prejudices and new revolutionary politics to create a modernizing middle ground. That middle ground would, however, prove quite difficult to hold.

## CATEGORIES

The bifurcation of “religion” and “superstition” is less frequently acknowledged as a mainstay of the idea of modernity than is secularism overall, but it is in fact its natural corollary. Both result from the emergence of the concept of religion as a discrete category of human endeavor, separable from science and politics—as Asad notes, from the “domain of power.”<sup>10</sup> Although originating in post-Reformation Europe, this conception would reverberate in what might be termed the “translingual world of colonial reach”—the places that perforce dealt with the cultural as well as the economic and political effects of colonialism. This world included countries, such as Japan, that were not directly colonized (and that themselves became colonial powers), as well as in-between cases such as China. This is the world in which translation, terminology, and categorization became powerful currency, traded not only among the arbiters of cultural modernity but among those who sought political and economic power.<sup>11</sup>

Within the capacious realm of translated and translingual terms, few words carry as much disguised legal and political capacity as “religion.” The disguise stems from the putative separation of religion from politics under modernity. Asad has described the essence of the post-Reformation definition of religion as “a set of propositions to which believers gave assent, and which could therefore be judged and compared as between different religions and as against natural science.”<sup>12</sup> This theoretically placed different religions in mutual competition in the free market of ideas; potential believers need only assess a faith’s truth or falsity. Yet the coupling of the expansion of empire with the humanistic but ultimately self-regarding European concession that other faiths besides Christianity might be admitted into the ranks of “world religions” provided many opportunities for cultural notions of religion to mesh with institutional power.<sup>13</sup>

Among the myriad encounters that resulted, two recurrent themes hold the most relevance for this study. One is the notion that, even in an age of religious pluralism and secular nationalism, the civilizational qualities of incipient nations could be represented by their “true faiths”: a concept made flesh in the arrayed representatives at the World’s Parliament of Religions

in Chicago in 1893. The parliament permitted representatives of Asian religions in particular to speak in their own voices, and some offered anti-imperialist critiques as well as arguments for their religions as a source of spiritual nourishment for a depleted world. Yet many of the “traditions” thus presented were in fact under construction at that precise moment as part of religious reform movements, which were, in turn, largely occasioned by the upheaval brought about by the missionary encounter, colonial law, and, above all, the modern redefinition of religion. What the official representatives of Japanese and Sri Lankan Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and so on offered, then, were religious portraits tailored to meet not only fractious home environments but also the Protestant sensibilities of the parliament’s organizers. Surely longstanding Chinese official sensibilities might account for the Qing Confucian delegate Peng Guang-yu’s 彭光譽 (AKA Pung Kwang Yu) denunciation of Buddhism and Daoism as prone to engendering dangerous heterodox groups. But the organizers had him present his paper in tandem with one critiquing these religions from a Chinese Christian perspective, which won a prize offered by Reverend John Henry Barrows, who had made it a point to seek out work for the parliament criticizing Daoism, the “Demon in the Triad of Chinese Religion,” in particular.<sup>14</sup>

Hence the second theme: whether religion could be permitted a role in modernity. Again, the answer depended on the definition of religion, which, although increasingly subject to both law and custom in constitutional states of all types, became a matter of considerable national and international anxiety in the translingual world of colonial reach. Such anxiety was understandable since the matter originated not only in cultural debates but in international law itself. On one hand, the law itself proved imbued with value, since diplomats and translators such as W. A. P. Martin freely admitted to bringing international law to the Chinese government with missionary intent.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, terms such as “religion” became a matter of treaty negotiation and politically laden translation as the European and American powers demanded proselytizing rights for missionaries. In Japan, shortly after the Meiji Restoration, political thinkers and translators cast about for a technical and conceptual translation that would both satisfy treaty demands and somehow emphasize religion’s—specifically, Christianity’s—distinctiveness and hence noncompetitive nature with imperial ritual. Out of many possibilities, they chose a term from classical Chinese, *zongjiao* 宗教 (J. *shūkyō*). In so doing, they sought to acknowledge a special category, discrete from other realms of human endeavor and

authority, and one that came attached with a sense of Christianity as the norm.<sup>16</sup>

The upshot of this act of triangulated translation was that the Japanese reintroduced to China an already familiar term, *zongjiao*, but in a newly unfamiliar sense—a “return graphic loan,” in Lydia Liu’s phrase. The prior existence of *zongjiao* as a compound referring to Buddhism, Anthony C. Yu writes, may well have influenced Japanese translators (and the Chinese officials and scholars of subsequent decades who followed them), but the discourse in which *shūkyō*/*zongjiao* applied was now much broader.<sup>17</sup> In fact, even before the redefined term *zongjiao* was popularized in China, the modern sense of religion as national characteristic and evangelistic instrument of social Darwinian competition had crept into the thought of politicians such as Kang Youwei; in essence, then, *jiao* 教 (teaching) had taken on the characteristics of *zongjiao avant le nom*.<sup>18</sup> It was these qualities—as well as the notion of separating religion from politics, education, science, and so on—that distinguished the realm of modern religion, *zongjiao*, from the categorization *jiao* that had preceded it, much in the way the post-Reformation secularist calculus of religion had created that category anew on the bed of earlier conceptions of European religious life. Earlier prejudices—such as anticlericalist or fundamentalist stances among the Confucian elite—were folded into the new formulation (although the stance of the Confucian elite would also be rendered suspect under the new vocabulary). Elite anti-Buddhist and anti-Daoist rhetoric, for instance, had proved compatible with the formulations of first Catholic, and later Protestant, missionaries in China, who critiqued the idolatry and excessive ritualism into which Chinese traditions had fallen, sometimes as a stand-in for intra-Christian disputes.<sup>19</sup>

The introduction of another neologism via Japan, *mixin* 迷信 (J. *meishin*), enabled the final melding of these two strands of critique into something new, as “superstition” replaced “heterodoxy” as the weighty pejorative.<sup>20</sup> The writings of Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) offer evidence of a suggestive shift in opinion on the relationship of *zongjiao* to *mixin*: in February 1902 he declared that “what Westerners call religion” consisted of “superstition and faith,” but by October he had changed his mind, deciding that “although the superstition in religion can be destroyed, the morality in it cannot.”<sup>21</sup> It was this idea—that religion could be stripped of harmful superstition—that formed the key to the cultural reform of the century to come.

Although the religion/superstition formulation bore some trace of linkages with imperial-era categories such as “orthodoxy” (*zhengjiao* 正教) versus “heterodoxy” (*xiejiao* 邪教) or “improper cults” (*yinci* 淫祠; often interchanged with “improper sacrifices,” *yinsi* 淫祀), the dichotomy discarded the Confucian righteousness and moral emperorship upon which these earlier concepts stood. Its claims rested on a declaration of universal scientific truth. As Steve Smith argues, it is rationality rather than a sense of impurity or violation that drives the post-Enlightenment conception of superstition.<sup>22</sup> *Zheng* and *xie*, by contrast, operated within a closed system of mutual opposition and, therefore, mutual need. The editors of a late Ming Zhejiang gazetteer who condemned the teachings of Buddhists and Daoists as fabrications, for instance, continued, “But since there is *yang*, there must also be *yin*. Since there is orthodoxy, there must be heterodoxy.”<sup>23</sup> Heterodoxy cannot be eradicated, the authors conceded, only warned against. This is more than simply a concession to social forces and local conditions; it is an unusually frank statement of a common underlying attitude. Moreover, as Kwang-ching Liu and Richard Shek point out, the heterodox also existed as a religious concept outside the state (within Buddhism, Daoism, Eternal Mother religion, etc.).<sup>24</sup> By contrast, although they made handy foils, *mixin* and *zongjiao* did not exist in the same kind of eternal combat as *zheng* and *xie*—perhaps because secularism stood by to undermine them both, but more inherently because the perfectibility of the modern self-conscious subject demanded that he be able to overcome superstition once and for all.

With the rise of revolution and republicanism and the fall of the Qing, the link between cosmos and ruler was severed. Sovereignty was meant to originate not from the balance of Heaven, Earth, and Man but from human agency alone. But in essence, even before the events of 1911, the rise of the concept of religion had already initiated the break between political and numinous power. Although *zongjiao* laid claim to a universal definition, it actually carried the shadow of Protestant Christianity with it as the ultimate model of religion—as Hsi-yuan Chen has noted, much as *jiao*, ostensibly neutral, often retained the assumption of Confucianism as *primus inter pares* among all possible teachings.<sup>25</sup> To have *zongjiao*—or reforming whatever went on in the country’s temples, monasteries, and shrines to look more like *zongjiao*—meant to become modern. The anarchist, atheist, and later KMT elder Wu Zhihui 吳稚暉 (1865–1953) complained about this in 1908, muttering that, in contrast to France, “in China the average person

claims that everyone needs a belief, whether it is Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Islam, frog religion, or snake religion. If not, he will be an uncivilized person.”<sup>26</sup> Part of this was due to the example set by missionaries and Chinese Christian converts as they modeled new technological expertise, educational methods, and habits of patriotism and brought the issue of conversion and religious identity to the fore.<sup>27</sup> Such quotidian models found reinforcement in the realm of state-building and national competition. The burgeoning constitutional movement brought with it the idea that freedom of religion was a requisite of the modern nation-state.<sup>28</sup> The point for modernizers, stung by the regard of the world, was precisely that religious liberty ought not extend to “snake religion” if China was to be accorded a place in the realm of nation-states. From the late Qing reform movement on, then, fixing the boundaries of *zongjiao* became an essential task of state-sponsored modernization.

Terms such as *yinci* and *xiejiao* did not disappear by any means; not only did people find it necessary to take refuge in their more familiar confines while struggling to visualize the foggy limits of *mixin*, as we will see in this book, but to this day Chinese governments continue to apply these two terms against religious societies that organize contrary to state wishes.<sup>29</sup> *Mixin*, meanwhile, has developed a broader life as a term that can in various contexts connote danger or lack of knowledge and education but also exists more generally as a category of customary and religious behavior (“doing *mixin*”). Its rise indicates the wide transformation of the idea of what proper “religion” should look like in the modern age, which in turn affects standards of personal and community behavior.

Such a shift was hardly limited to China. Webb Keane has observed that Protestant missions became key vehicles of a “representational economy” of modernity for non-elites and elites around the world, prominent characteristics of which include a suspicion of elaborate liturgical display and a concern for the correspondence of speech, act, and intention—in other words, “sincerity.”<sup>30</sup> Although Keane derives his observations from the interactions of converts and non-converts on the Indonesian island of Sumba, the resemblance to the language of liberation and agency that the Nationalists would use to justify their campaigns against superstition is striking. Keane identifies authentic speech, freedom of the subject, and a rejection of the ritual value of objects (in favor of entering the world of productive capitalism) as the keys to becoming modern in this iteration. Similarly, KMT propagandists cast Chinese popular religion as a realm of fatalism that impeded individual agency, national unity, and material

progress: “If only we can rescue the masses from the bitter sea of superstition in which so many have sunk so deep, then we might regain our lost ability for enterprise and dedication to progress and make the Chinese people independent, equal, free, and forever capable of surviving in the world!”<sup>31</sup> But as Keane notes, it is not that an emphasis on inwardness and sincerity did not exist earlier in religions (perhaps, in the Chinese case, “mindfulness” serves as a useful historical synonym as well). It is rather that in response to globalizing Protestantism and the spread of nation-state, these qualities have increasingly become the primary defining factors both of religion and of modernity. As a friend of Keane’s states, “we are *all* Protestants now.”<sup>32</sup>

## A BRIEF EVOLUTIONARY HISTORY OF THE ANTI-SUPERSTITION CAMPAIGN

The idea that religions, now with their own evolutionary existence as a natural category, competed for hearts and minds, much as political systems and nation-states did, gave rise to an extremely fertile cultural and political scene in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century China.<sup>33</sup> The full extent of the repercussions is only just beginning to be explored by scholars, and description lies beyond the scope of this introduction. Within that history, however, four important developments influence the story that I tell in this book, and so are worth highlighting and summarizing here.

The first is the growing competition for resources between an expanding, modernizing government and local religious institutions. This competition, and more specifically the government appropriation of religious resources, was increasingly justified in terms of cultural modernization and religious reform. Often, however, it originated in the costly demands of the newly expansive nation-state. One early manifestation can be found in the calls during the 1898 reform movement to use temples and temple property for new-style education, which coalesced around the catchphrase *miaoChan xingxue* 廟產興學, “temple property for schools.” Although in some ways reminiscent of earlier efforts by officials to convert heterodox temples into community and other types of schools, most notably during the Ming (some 1898 reformers took specific aim at Buddhist and Daoist sites, for example), *miaoChan xingxue* soon became a much wider concept, based on the secular separation of government and religion. For most proponents, the purpose was not to promote the orthodoxy of the imperial state, which by the late Qing was increasingly beside the point. Indeed, the temples in

question sometimes included those in the roster of official sacrifices as well (such as ones to Wenchang), and by 1904–5 the central government was itself dismissing or reconceiving its ritual duties in a radical way.<sup>34</sup> Some reformers saw their main purpose as promoting the new-style education above all, and this meant some were glad to share temple space so as to take advantage of the site's role as a social gathering place (schools sharing space with temples also had long precedent in some communities).<sup>35</sup> As Li Hsiao-t'i comments, "Despite the fact that superstition was one of the targets the late Qing enlightenment movement attacked most relentlessly, what is interesting is that religion was intimately connected to the intellectual trend of enlightenment."<sup>36</sup> Thus Buddhist and Daoist clergy also participated in the new educational reform movement by setting up reading rooms and lecture halls of their own.

Although this relationship was to grow considerably more adversarial in coming decades, it points to the second important context, and that is the religious "revival" that began in the late nineteenth century, to adapt Holmes Welch's phrase. Perhaps a better way to put it, though, is simply that beginning around the 1870s China experienced a flourishing in both new religious organizations and the intellectual examination of religious thought and practice.<sup>37</sup> This included, in Buddhism, Daoism, and Islam, the growth of study societies and lay groups (especially in urban centers); efforts to rethink the monastic and education system, revive temples, mosques, and ordination centers, and cultivate international contacts; the creation of publication programs encompassing popular magazines as well as canonical studies and reprint projects; and eventually the formation of national religious organizations. This period also saw the rise of "redemptive societies," groups that drew from both sectarian religion and the syncretic *sanjiao heyi* 三教和一 tradition, which linked Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist threads. Many of the new societies, however, addressed universal salvation and the condition of world civilization, adding other faiths, teachers, and spiritual technologies to their eclectic visions. Indeed, a strong argument can be made for redemptive societies as a major site of Chinese modernity—and a rare one that linked urban and rural developments.<sup>38</sup>

The political and cultural elites of the late Qing and Republic were heavily involved in these new iterations of religious culture, which featured Christian and Buddhist support for the Nationalists and their precursor organizations; strong links between lay Buddhists and the anarchist movement; substantial contributions to Buddhist and Daoist study groups and charities from members of the Shanghai and Beijing business class; and the

involvement of a wide spectrum of political and social leaders in various redemptive societies. Moreover, it was not unusual for individuals to take part in several of these activities at once or consecutively. More broadly, the generation that came of age politically in the 1910s and 1920s felt the cultural impact of Christian secondary and higher education, where Protestant modernity was most overtly modeled, as well as the resurgence of Buddhist studies in intellectual currents.<sup>39</sup>

In this context, then, the third development—the doubts about the place of religion in the Chinese nation and world civilization that boiled over during the New Culture Movement and the anti-imperialist movement of the mid-1920s—looks less like simple antitraditionalist critiques and more like one proposition among many for the shape of Chinese modernity to come. These debates built on the broader cultural antisuperstition rhetoric of the late Qing and early Republic, which had spread through three main routes. In addition to the political-philosophical essays of figures such as Liang Qichao and Zhang Binglin 章炳麟 (1869–1936), a broad swath of social reform literature emerged, ranging from late Qing political novels (most famously *Saomi zhou* 掃迷帚 [The broom to sweep away superstition]; 1905) to popular education lectures and press editorials.<sup>40</sup> Related to this was an intra-religious antisuperstition discourse. Naturally, Christian publications contributed heavily to the identification and cataloging of superstitious practices, but articles and separate pamphlets on the subject increasingly appeared in the Buddhist and Daoist press, where new ideas about religious reform merged with older lines of antiheterodox analysis within particular traditions.

Most significantly, what initially had been a haphazard development of ideas about what in Chinese religion might be termed “superstition” (mostly local cults, but perhaps elite practices like the planchette as well) now felt the influence of the world religions theology of Ernst Renan and Max Müller, as well as functionalist theories of religion’s social and cultural roles. These last found their greatest popularization in China via evolutionary-minded theologians such as the now largely forgotten Allan Menzies, who explored the histories of “primitive” religions—including those of China—so as to create a scale of progress ending at Christianity.<sup>41</sup> This intention of explaining the natural origins and progress of religion found literal expression in the English title of Li Ganchen and Luo Yuanyen’s influential 1924 *Pochu mixin quanshu* 破除迷信全書 (Eradicating superstition compendia), rendered as *Superstitions: Their Origins and Fallacy*.<sup>42</sup> Designing their book as a weapon for evangelism, the Methodists Li and Luo

collected evidence from church members' research on prognostication and geomancy, millenarian cults, and rival religious organizations, categorizing it according to broad types, such as river and ocean gods, Buddhist deities, or "miscellaneous." Broader theological-cum-sociological classifications filtered over into reformist Buddhist discourse as well. A 1928 lecture by the Xi'an Buddhist Kang Jiyao 康寄遙 (1880–1969), reprinted and distributed by the important Shanghai lay publishing house Foxue shuju, described superstitious belief in deities under the rubrics of nature worship, monotheism, and polytheism.<sup>43</sup>

Thus Zhang Zhenzhi's *Religion and Revolution* fit into this realm of works of religious classification as cultural argument, except with added political valence. The 1911 Revolution had broken the link between state and cosmic power. When this failed to produce a strong Chinese nation-state, unified and able to negotiate its interests on the world stage, critics blamed lingering elements of the cultural past. These now gained even greater political significance. During the relative expansiveness of the early Republic, politicians could debate the limits of the separation of religion and the nascent representative state on an abstract level. As provisional president, the ever-politic Sun Yat-sen was conscious of the support the international Christian community had shown him and his revolutionary endeavors, and he was careful not to alienate this constituency. Perhaps revealing the origin of his oft-repeated rallying phrase, "to make revolution, we must uproot hearts-and-minds" (*geming xian gexin* 革命先革心)—the future slogan of the KMT government and indeed, the antisuperstition campaign—Sun claimed that activists had adapted the concept of revolution (*geming* 革命) from the way church groups sought personal and social change.<sup>44</sup> New Culture critics, however, began to absorb other influences, ranging from the atheism of the late Qing anarchist movement to the writings of Friedrich Engels, and linked religion to autocracy and imperialism in accounting for the failures of the Qing and Republican governments. Intellectual debates posited that aesthetics, philosophy, or science would replace religion in modern civilization.<sup>45</sup>

The most important development for politics, though, was the emergence of the term *shenquan* 神權 (divine authority) as a description of both an evolutionary era and a social pathology. Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879–1942) set the tone in his iconic 1918 essay "The Von Ketteler Monument." In Chen's estimation, the commemorative arch, which the German government forced the Qing to erect as a memorial for their minister killed during the Boxer uprising, stood not only for China's humiliation by foreign pow-

ers but for the motley culture of mysticism, reverence for monarchy, xenophobia, and warrior mythology that had created the Boxers in the first place. “Now there are two possible roads in the world,” Chen wrote. “One is the bright road of republicanism, science, and atheism, and the other is the dark one of autocracy, superstition, and divine authority.”<sup>46</sup> It was a short route from this to *shenquan* as one of the “four thick ropes” binding the Chinese peasantry, as Mao Zedong famously wrote in his 1927 “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan.”<sup>47</sup>

*Shenquan* lay the rhetorical groundwork for political agitation against religion as part of the new politics of mass mobilization of the 1920s, whether in the anti-Christian movement of 1922–27 or in the antisuperstition movement that partially overlapped with and eventually supplanted it. But as Michael Murdock demonstrates for the anti-Christian movement, such rhetoric in fact could disguise a combination of populist activism in the trenches with pragmatic accommodation on the part of institution-building political leaders.<sup>48</sup> Thus the fourth element becomes significant: the application of the resources of the modern nation-state to government planning and religious classification. Such a process began fitfully in the early Republic, with plans to register temples and organize China’s major religions into national associations. The mass politics of the United Front of the KMT, the Chinese Communist Party, and other allied parties, however, coupled with the demands of state-building, made delineating targets of activism from targets of appropriation, assimilation, and accommodation an absolute necessity.

These were the conditions that created the campaigns of 1927–37. In the narrowest possible sense, the “campaign to destroy superstition” refers to a specific movement for social and customs reform, launched from within the Nationalist Party and meant to extend through both KMT and government organs into every realm of society during the early years of the Nanjing regime. Like concurrent campaigns to eradicate opium-smoking, gambling, prostitution, illiteracy, and other social ills, this movement was meant to facilitate both the creation of a nation (*jianguo* 建國) and the governance of the party (*yidang zhi guo* 以黨治國) by cleansing society of its deleterious aspects and fundamentally reordering it. In this case, social harm allegedly emanated from wealth-gathering temples, wasteful rituals, and parasitic clergy, fortunetellers, mediums, and the like. Temple seizures and conversions constituted the campaign’s most notorious aspect, but it also extended to prohibitions on temple festivals and bans on some ritual specialists. The government resuscitated these prohibitions during the

mid-1930s, especially after the start of the party's effort at directed mass cultural revival, the New Life Movement (Xin shenghuo yundong 新生活運動). In the broader view of this book, however, the antisuperstition campaigns of necessity also include the government's delineation of the limits of religious freedom and its legitimation and banning of certain religious groups; the broader effects of temple policy and social prohibitions on local society throughout the 1930s; and the KMT's own civic ceremony and customs reform, which was meant to take the place of popular religion in the spiritual life of the nation. Each of these topics is explored in the succeeding chapters.

### THE SCOPE OF THE BOOK

Having described the historical context that defined the relationship between government and religion in China during the twentieth century, I should clarify the empirical approach I take in this book by focusing on a few key areas. This study takes as its starting point the Nationalists' definition of the religion of the Chinese people as a problem of modernity and of governance during the Nanjing Decade. Their main concern was how to place the religious inheritance of the majority—Buddhism, Daoism, what is often rendered as “popular religion” but might better be termed “local religion,” and remnants of the state cult and other aspects of Confucianism—into the new rubric of religion and superstition, and what that meant for government policy and the nation's fate. Their field of activity might therefore be rendered in crude shorthand as “Chinese religion,” to contrast the KMT's post-1927 programs with the atheist or specifically anti-Christian tone of the antireligious movements that directly preceded them.

This is not to suggest, however, that Christianity, Islam, and Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhism (which the Nationalists regarded as an entity separate from Buddhism in Han China) are not “Chinese religions.” That is certainly incorrect in both the long-term historical frame and the immediate Republican context. Scholars such as Gray Tuttle and Ryan Dunch have shown very effectively how seriously Tibetan Buddhists and Protestants viewed their roles in the communities of the new nation. As we will see, from time to time Christian KMT leaders such as Niu Yongjian 鈕永建 (1870–1965) emerged to defend the interests of formalized religion and their particular co-religionists.

Two extremely important distinctions must nonetheless be made. First, Nanjing Decade policy effectively rendered these three religions ideologi-

cally and, often, administratively separate from the others. All three received special status from their perception as cultural issues that impinged on international relations and the “border problem”—the term of the day for the Republic’s dealings with non-Han neighbors and territories. This both largely removed them from the political discussion of superstition after 1927 and placed a great deal of the responsibility for administering them outside the Ministry of the Interior—despite its technical purview over all official religious associations—and gave it to organs such as the Commission on Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs or, in the case of Christianity, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (for dealing with missionaries) and the Ministry of Education (for overseeing curricula in church-run schools, which became the biggest Christian-related problem of Nationalist governance). Although Islam sometimes appeared in Nationalist eyes as a version of the “border problem,” Muslim leaders claimed a broader place in the intellectual and cultural discourse of the 1920s and 1930s, challenging the nationalist and ethnic inclusiveness of both the KMT government and leftist intellectuals alike during the course of several notorious slander cases.<sup>49</sup> Yet even when attacked as an ethnic index, Islam enjoyed a position comfortably apart from the realm of “superstition.”

The second distinction that is important here is that the personal affiliations of high-ranking government officials prove to be an extremely unreliable gauge of their willingness to defend the interests of local religion in particular, or even religion in general.<sup>50</sup> As has already been argued, religiosity along modern lines did not preclude the disparaging of superstition. For example, the prominent Buddhists within the party, such as Dai Jitao 戴季陶 (1891–1949), Lin Sen 林森 (1868–1943), and Ju Zheng 局正 (1876–1951), showed little overt opposition to the reform of popular customs and more often publicly extolled the virtues of modern science than those of religion.<sup>51</sup> Only during the national crises of the mid-1930s did they begin to engineer the protection of certain temples from government incursions. During this time, they emerged as part of a “customs coalition” of elder former radicals, military men, and young conservatives in the party, such as Chiang Kai-shek’s secretary Shao Yuanchong 邵元冲 (1890–1936).<sup>52</sup> This loose alliance extolled the virtues of reviving heroic figures from China’s past to rally a fractious and disunited public.

In fact, the call to eradicate superstition made for strange bedfellows indeed. The most virulent antisuperstition writing from the central party organization emanated from the KMT Department of Propaganda (Zhongyang xuanchuan bu 中央宣傳部) run by Ye Chucang 葉楚傖 (1887–1946),

the former longtime editor of the *Republican Daily*, a classical stylist who advocated vernacular writing and a man who had flirted with several party factions but appeared to swear fealty to none of them. He thus defies the dictum that antireligious activism came out of leftist impulses only.<sup>53</sup> Another prominent party voice on customs and superstition was Chen Guofu 陳果夫 (1892–1951), like Ye, a governor of Jiangsu during the 1930s, and one half of the leadership of the notoriously conservative, Chiang Kai-shek–allied “CC clique.” Although Chen proclaimed more sympathy for finding the inherent strengths in a Chinese cultural essence, during his term as governor the techniques of stigmatizing superstition as a mechanism of local power settled into Jiangsu communities. Although the language was less radical and the actions less violent, then, the inherent goal remained much the same.

Thus, one result of making the antisuperstition campaigns a tale of modernity is to lift them out of the limiting context of leftist and rightist politics that has weighed down modern Chinese historiography for so long. To be sure, political ideology and contestation for factional advantage played their parts, but in the long view, two things emerge about the modern redefinition of religion in China. First, self-styled modernizers from an astonishingly broad range of the political, cultural, and religious spectra agreed that superstition was an obstacle to China’s progress. Second, the commonality of this metaphor combined with the vagueness of “superstition” as a referent meant that combating superstition became a means in Chinese society, rather than an end. So it remains to this day.

### BRINGING THE STATE BACK IN

In describing the role of religion in the construction of Nationalist modernity and political power, I work from the state out, simply because it was the state (more accurately here, the party and the state) that made religion a problem. To assess the results, I have relied on sources produced outside the state (newspapers, religious periodicals, memoirs and *wenshi ziliao*, local histories, travel books) as well as those produced by and in interaction with the state (archives, petitions, legal cases, customs surveys and temple registrations, government gazettes and party publications, propaganda pamphlets). I do not wish to be apologetic, however, about creating a tale that is about modernity, but that is also about the state—for however much the nation-state may be overdetermined as an abstract force in the modern historiography, and the state overall dominant in the written history of

China, its qualities as everyday experience remain vague and elusive.<sup>54</sup> It is worth clarifying the direction in which I hope such an exploration will lead.

One problem with telling the tale of a nation-state stems from the very term “state.” This may be a necessary evil of linguistic variation (one can only say “government” so many times), but “state” also implies a univocality and a degree of overwhelming power and influence that, however much desired by the architects of modern governments, were rarely achieved. Certainly such univocality was far from the case during the Nanjing Decade. Nonetheless, the purpose of this book is not simply to provide further evidence of the limitations of the Nationalist government in Nanjing, although that element is present in the narrative. A much more interesting story, I think, is to be discovered in the details of the difficulty the Nationalists encountered sorting out their role vis-à-vis religion, modernity, and the public, and the public’s sometimes sympathetic, sometimes radically different, view on the matter. This narrates, in effect, a tale of the state, but one somewhat different from that which we are used to seeing. “States” (meaning the people who put states together) lie to themselves; they struggle under the weight of mutual disagreements; their goals shift as often as their tactics. States, it is not new to point out but salient to remember here, may act in the name of nations but need not be consonant with them.

One of the central concerns of this book is the modern state’s obsession with surveying, categorizing, and planning—with, as Timothy Mitchell says of colonial modernity, “organizing the world endlessly to represent it.”<sup>55</sup> In the case of the republican nation-state, that representation became imbued with an even heavier layer of political significance (“representing” the will of the people) even as it resembled the colonial state in its organizational mentality (“representing” society and nation in legible and comprehensible bits).<sup>56</sup> Moreover, modern statecraft, James Scott has argued, depends on an ever-increasing level of abstraction and typification; as states grow larger in scope and more ambitious in their schemes, officials grow increasingly “removed from the society they are charged with governing.”<sup>57</sup> This necessitates the creation of standardized categories, languages, and literal and figurative maps to render people, landscapes, and social practices legible to the state. Although this is sometimes taken to be a liberating process in modern politics—as with the equality of citizenship—Scott points out that much of social reality can elude this process of categorization, a theme explored at some length in this book. Becoming legible, he notes, enables access to state resources (such as medicine, disaster relief, education),

but it can also open populations up to the predations of state expansion and social engineering.

Nonetheless, the architects of modern nation-states should not be conceived solely as agents enacting governmental experiments on a subjected population. Not only did governance involve negotiation and resistance, but state officials themselves self-consciously imagined and reimagined their roles as nation-builders, giving rise to mutual disagreements and multiple subject positions among political actors. As Partha Chatterjee remarks, the rational state's emphasis on planning is ultimately undermined by the fact that the state also exists "as a site where subjects of power in society interact, ally, and contend with one another in the political process."<sup>58</sup> By taking upon themselves ever-expanding mandates of cultural and social reform, the architects of mobilizational and revolutionary governments like the Nationalist regime in fact expose themselves to further political contestation, from inside as well as out.

Thus the tale of modernity and of the state can usefully be narrated by examining both the articulation of ideas about religion at the central level and their effects on local communities. Would-be KMT modernizers saw the "old" world of superstitious associations—full of danger, unscrupulous behavior, and irrational fervor—and the "new" arena of attachment to the nation as opposing regimes. In many ways, however, this was a false distinction. Chinese religious practice admitted wide variety and relied on an array of social organizations—indeed, hence the threat to state authority. On the other side of the equation, regulated civic ceremony and government-authored rituals drew on a recent past of mass mobilization and revolutionary fervor and continuing promises of political representation and social rights. Thus both religious practice and civic ceremony constitute complex, contested, and potentially unstable areas in their own right, "affective regimes" with their own histories that can be hidden or flattened by the secularization narrative.

Therefore, linking the histories of the KMT antisuperstition campaign and the party-state's proposed civic replacements for religion provides opportunities to examine the propositions of secularization and nationalism at their very core. Although the intellectual arguments put forth by KMT leaders about the rational superiority of nationalism over religion hold some interest in themselves, framing them in the proposed and actual movements of bodies, property, and communities reveals rather more about how the conflict actually took shape and which elements proved influential over the long run.

## LOCAL AND NATIONAL

This book examines the major permutations of the problem of religion and superstition as matters of national policy during the Nanjing Decade and then explores how that policy interacted with local history in what I have dubbed the “Nationalist heartland”—Jiangsu province, the capital of Nanjing, and, very occasionally here, parts of Anhui and Zhejiang. This is where the Nanjing party-and-government established its power base and conducted its experiments in governance. Furthermore, Jiangsu offers a widely varied religious and social landscape in which to investigate the arrival of new forms of cultural and political categorization and regulation. The south both boasted powerful old-line Buddhist and Daoist institutions and served as the epicenter of China’s religious modernization movements. Many communities in the north were experiencing economic and military upheaval, but also bore the brunt of both the reformist zeal and the cultural disdain of outsiders.

Although Jiangsu therefore makes an ideal laboratory for studying the place of religion in modernity and governance, its story is certainly not the only possible one. Indeed, the Nationalist obsession with superstition began not there but in Guangzhou, during the time of the KMT central administration (1923–27). Poon Shuk Wah’s study of the antisuperstition campaign in Guangzhou not only describes the intellectual and political antecedents of this movement but also demonstrates the importance of local history to understanding the effects of activism against religion.<sup>59</sup> Local circumstances shaped religious formations as well as political developments. In Guangzhou, for instance, we see the social and political importance of religiously active charities and merchant organizations and *namb-moub* “hearth-dwelling” Daoist masters in negotiating antisuperstition activity. There were counterparts in Jiangnan—especially in Shanghai and Suzhou—but in different concentrations, types, and degrees of organization. Guangzhou religious adherents also bore the first brunt of KMT antireligious experimentation under the 1923–27 regime and, after 1929, felt the force of a local party entity, the Customs Reform Committee (Fengsu gaige weiyuan hui 風俗改革委員會), which took combating superstition as one of its main purposes.<sup>60</sup>

In the post-1927 KMT heartland, by contrast, it was the general party branches of Jiangsu province and the special municipalities of Nanjing and Shanghai that not only spearheaded antisuperstition activism in their localities but generated national policy on customs reform overall. Although the

central government and party were concerned with religion and customs as a problem of social control and cultural improvement around the nation—including in places, like Guangzhou and Guangdong province, that perpetually seemed on the brink of slipping out of its grasp—the unrest generated by activist temple seizures and social prohibitions right on its doorstep in Jiangsu was the matter of first concern. This is what spurred the struggles with local communities and the continual process of readjusting religious policy explored in this book. There can be no doubt that being in the Nationalist heartland created special conditions for religious practitioners during the Nanjing Decade. Yet there is equally little doubt that although some temples and religious groups in parts of China more loosely in central KMT hands may have had a much easier time of it, others suffered under the rule of persons who shared the Nationalists' antisuperstition goals.<sup>61</sup>

## OVERVIEW

This book is organized into three thematic parts. The reader will detect a gradual chronological advancement from Part I (which mainly covers the first three years of the Nanjing regime) to Part III (which deals more with events of the mid-1930s as well as with earlier precedents), but because this study is designed to investigate the social, cultural, and political effects of the antisuperstition campaign as it sprawled outward, some looping back in time is necessary. In Part I, “Of Legislation and *ling*” I explore the immediate policy implications of the KMT’s adoption of the keywords “religion” and “superstition” into an administrative framework. This section lays out the governmental structure for handling religion during the Nanjing Decade, which spelled out the break from the cosmological imperial state much more clearly and ambitiously than previous attempts during the early Republic and late Qing. Chapter 2 explores how the issue of freedom of religion quickly shifted away from the matter of Christianity and imperialism after 1927 and instead focused on targeting groups, such as redemptive societies, that posed organizational threats to the nascent state. In a hostile climate religious leaders scrambled to find safety in the corporate hierarchy of state-legitimized religious associations but in the process reified a restricted definition of what “religion” ought to look like under the modern nation-state. In Chapter 3 I investigate how Nationalist activists and government officials attempted to redefine public space, power, and activism by usurping the authority of City God and other temples as they spread through local communities. This generated protests at a level that

forced the central government to author a broader and seemingly more legalistic temple policy. Such regulations nonetheless instituted a “gray zone” where the state could still claim temple property under various quasi-legal and even illegal circumstances without much repercussion. Thus the Nationalists attempted to redefine public life on terms favorable to the state in several ways.

Part II, “Material Motives,” explores the ramifications in Jiangsu province of this attempt to redefine the relationship of temples and their communities. In Chapter 4, a variety of temple managers, Daoist priests, warring lineages, and elderly female temple attendants deal with the new institutions and lines of rhetoric offered by the KMT. Jiangsu social actors adopted new legal and political tactics to different degrees depending on local conditions but also demonstrated their grasp of the system and their public roles in ways that the Nationalists did not anticipate. Chapter 5 looks more closely at the spatial, economic, and ritual changes effected by temple confiscations and festival bans in the Nationalist regime’s ideal community of its capital, Nanjing, and its effective opposite in their eyes, the troubled and troublesome northern Jiangsu county of Suqian. Contestation could take place at the level of overt rhetorical opposition, ritual routes overwritten and rewritten, and the formal and informal use of property in the community. Even the most ambitious plans for Nationalist reauthorship of religious sites, however, often had to deal with a nagging “religious remainder” that lingered on.

Part III, “Transactional Modernity,” looks more closely at the idea of ritual competition and multiple declarations of modernity. Chapter 6 focuses on the ritual specialists who the Nationalists perceived as the living embodiments of superstition: fortune-tellers, geomancers, spirit mediums, and the makers of spirit money. Although the state claimed such persons to be unproductive and able to undermine the ability of others to achieve agency as modern, self-conscious subjects, many ritual specialists laid a strong claim to a place not only in the economy and society but also in the politically represented nation as well. The question of the role of the religious in the nation-state comes to a head in Chapter 7, in which I examine the Nationalists’ attempt to create their own secularist “affective regime” to replace religion, centered on revised senses of the calendar, community ritual, death ritual and burial, and the commemoration of national heroes. The KMT viewed this as a zero-sum game, wherein the dangerous, centrifugal forces of superstition would be succeeded by the unifying faith in nationalism and the party-state. Circumstances continually undermined

this assertion, however: not just the shortcomings of Nationalist ceremonial called it into question, but more important the actions of people—sometimes even within the KMT party and government—who sought ways to merge patriotic expression with religious observance. Thus the religious remainder emerged here as well. I argue that the results of this putative competition reveal the weaknesses at the core of the secular nationalist proposition.

In a similar vein, Talal Asad has pinpointed that the problem of the secularization thesis lies in the fact that “the categories of politics and religion turn out to implicate each other more profoundly than we thought.”<sup>62</sup> Although many have flocked to agree with his critique, ample room remains for understanding just how secularism and nationalism have lived with religion on a quotidian basis. In other words, what has secularism meant for the construction of nationalist politics, and what has it meant for the development of religious life in the modern age? This book constitutes one attempt toward such a history.