

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://jbe.gold.ac.uk/>

Review of *Religion in Modern Taiwan*

Marc L. Moskowitz

Assistant Professor of Sociology and Anthropology
Lake Forest College
Email: moskowitz@lakeforest.edu

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Lake Forest College
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Religion in Modern Taiwan: Tradition and Innovation in a Changing Society. Edited by Philip Clart and Charles B. Jones. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003, 352 pages, ISBN 0-8248-2564-0 (cloth), \$52.00.

Because of the nature of academic analysis it is always tempting to treat religion as if it were a static and somewhat stagnant pool waiting to be explored. The contributors of this volume rise to the challenge of examining religious beliefs and practices in the context of socioeconomic and political change in modern Taiwan. The result is a vibrant and insightful set of essays that help us to understand the ways in which religious belief can, and must, shift to meet the needs of the people involved.

Chapter One, by Charles Jones, addresses religion in Taiwan during Japanese colonial rule. Jones concludes with the interesting possibility that growing secularization in Taiwan was in part the result of the gods failure to retaliate for the Japanese destruction of temples, and that Western medicine seemed more effective.

Chapter Two, by Julian Pas, is a brief though insightful examination of religious culture in Taiwan that examines material culture (the construction of temples, hospitals, and so on) and religious entrepreneurship.

Chapter 3, by Christian Jochim, examines a shift in Confucianism from nationalism to more universalistic concerns.

In Chapter 4, Philip Clart compares and contrasts books on morality from mainland China in 1921 and Taiwan in 1989. Clart suggests that the former advocated a return to traditional Confucianism whereas the latter embraced the general concerns of Confucianism with less rigid adherence to the institutions themselves.

In Chapter 5, Paul Katz uses the Royal Lords Cult to examine the effects of modernization and secularization in Taiwan.

Chapter 6, by Lee Fong-mao, explores the ways in which Zhengyi Daoism integrates both institutional and diffused religions and compares and contrasts monastic and nonmonastic traditions. In Chapter 7 Andr Lalibert problematizes the common perception that Buddhism in Taiwan has traditionally been apolitical. In doing so he compares and contrasts the approaches of Foguangshan and Ciji. He concludes by suggesting that Foguangshan promotes political activism among its members and that Ciji Buddhism, while seemingly apolitical, suggests inherent critiques of capitalist ethics through its emphasis on frugality and self sacrifice.

Chapter 8, by Barbara Reed, examines differing narratives of Guanyins miraculous deeds among Kuomintang soldiers both on the mainland, and later when they arrived in Taiwan. She then compares and contrasts this with Taiwanese narratives of the time. This is followed by a brief examination of modern examples of “Guanyin counternarratives,” in which several Taiwanese Buddhist groups increasingly emphasize the need to rely on ones self rather than wait for salvation from Guanyin.

In Chapter 9, Murray Rubinstein provides an impressive historical overview of the array of contributions by the Presbyterian Church toward democratic transition and growing Taiwanese identity.

Chapter 10, by Huang Shiun-wei, discusses Ami aboriginal incorporation of Christian practices into their wedding ceremonies. Rather than resulting in a loss of identity, Huang argues, this enforces an Ami sense of uniqueness, which protects them from the threat of Taiwanese assimilation.

The conclusion, by Randolf Nadeau and Chang Hsun, is a concise history of religious studies in Taiwanese and Western academia. The chapter is a pleasure to read in that it is clearly written and full of interesting insights. I would like to take this opportunity, however, to raise questions regarding one or two aspects of their analysis.

The authors point out that postwar American and British scholars of religion in Taiwan could not go to China and therefore used Taiwan as a window through which to view China (281). The authors argue that this distorted both the theoretical frameworks and the findings of that eras scholarship. As proof of this they point to the prevalence of the word “Chinese” in the titles of English language scholarship as opposed to Chinese language scholarship, which more commonly uses the term “Taiwan” or refers to a specific locality. (282)

While it would be foolish to argue against the notion that Western scholarship tends to emphasize the commonality of Taiwanese and Chinese religions more than Taiwans scholarship, I worry that this chapter seems to avoid the issue of whether or not scholars in Taiwan are equally culpable,

though in slightly different ways. The vast majority of anthropological research by scholars in Taiwan is on Taiwan, mainland China, or Chinese minority groups in other areas of the world. Research on groups who are not “ethnically Chinese” seems to hold little interest. One might argue that this focus innately reifies the connection between Taiwan and China far more fundamentally than Western conflation of the terms “China” and “Taiwan” as title keywords.

The chapter also seems unnecessarily dismissive of earlier scholarship. There is the implication that postwar scholars from the US somehow got it wrong by focusing on gods, ghosts, and ancestors (287) rather than exploring contemporary theoretical frameworks on “worship circles” (290), for example. I would reverse this logic by suggesting that it is precisely because that generation of scholars did such painstakingly thorough fieldwork on “the basics” that contemporary scholars by necessity must explore other, often more peripheral, issues lest they repeat what has already been done. It should also be noted that much of the contemporary scholarship produced in both Taiwan and the US draws extensively on the works being critiqued here. Thus, the implied distinctiveness of contemporary research in Taiwan and earlier work by scholars from the US seems somewhat exaggerated.

I agree with the authors that current Western scholarship should begin to problematize what it often presents as a common identity between China and Taiwan. I also agree that we need to be more careful in our delineation of terms on this matter. Yet the implication that Western scholars doing work in the sixties, seventies, and eighties missed the Taiwanese aspects of what they were witnessing seems misplaced. In looking more closely at the works under critique—those of David Jordan (282, 295), Paul Katz (295), and Arthur Wolf (287), among others—one sees wonderfully vivid portrayals of a vibrant Taiwanese society. If these scholars used the term “Chinese religion” it also referred to the fact that these religious beliefs, for the most part, originated in mainland China. Should we refer to different branches of Christianity in Taiwan as Taiwanese or Western religions? As they are practiced in Taiwan one might say both, but it seems somewhat unjust to fault a scholar if he or she refers to them as “Western religions.”

In short, I would suggest that rather than framing the development of the field in value laden hierarchies (then vs. now, Western vs. Taiwanese) it might be more profitable to explore each region's efforts and shortcomings in a more balanced fashion and to draw on the strengths of each. These few points aside, the final chapter is a most welcome addition to scholarly discussion of this very important issue. I, for one, look forward to seeing further discussion of these important matters.

The book as a whole is a tremendously successful work and will be a welcome addition both to academic discourse and the classroom. Each chapter has a strong historical component so that it could be equally suitable in a course on anthropology, modern history, or religious studies. In short, by examining such a wide range of religious beliefs and practices, this volume vividly portrays the richness of religious life in Taiwan in a commendably accessible fashion.