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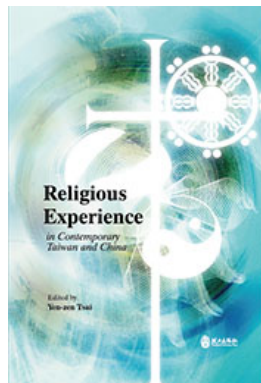
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RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN CONTEMPORARY TAIWAN AND CHINA



Thomas Jansen

08 Jun 2015

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Tsai Yen-zen, ed., *Religious Experience in Contemporary Taiwan and China*. Taipei: Chengchi University Press, 2013. xi+388 pages. Paperback, 500 NT\$. ISBN: 978-986-6475-46-7.

Written by Esther-Maria Guggenmos

This book presents and discusses the results of the *Religious Experience Survey in Taiwan* (henceforth REST), a new survey that complements existing statistical data sets, such as the *Taiwan Social Change Survey* (TSCS). It compares individual results with the outcomes of the *Religious Experience among the Han Chinese* survey (REHC 2004-2006; henceforth REHC), using a comparative approach that offers fresh insights regarding religious behaviour and experience in Taiwan and China.

The *Religious Experience Survey in Taiwan* (archive no. E97056 in the Survey Research Data Archive by Academia Sinica; <https://srda.sinica.edu.tw/search/gensciitem/1687>, accessed Jan 2, 2015; full data available upon request) is the main result of a three-year research project entitled “A Comparative Study of Religious Experience in Taiwan” (2008-11), funded by the National Science Council, ROC, and conducted by Prof. Yen-zen Tsai 蔡彥仁 (National Chengchi University, Religious Studies) with the support of Prof. Xinzhong Yao 姚新中 (King's College London) and Prof. Roger Finke (Pennsylvania State University). The sociologist Finke is Director of the Association of Religion Data Archives, which provides the standard reference worldwide for survey data on topics linked to the field of religion (<http://www.thearda.com>; accessed January 2, 2015). Yao and Badham developed the predecessor of REST for the mainland (Xinzhong Yao and Paul Badham, *Religious Experience in Contemporary China*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2007; questionnaire: REHC); a questionnaire that was inspired by the mission of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (founded in 1969). The layout of the questionnaire by Yao and Badham inspired REST, and it is the results of the REHC that enable the comparative perspective of the reviewed publication.

The task of gathering the REHC data sample was influenced by China's complex political and geographical situation as well as by demographic challenges. The outcome – and therefore all comparisons with the case of China – has to be “treated as illustrative of general tendencies” (p.157), especially if one restricts the comparison with Taiwan to one of the 10 investigated provinces and municipalities (REHC: each province/municipality has about 300 valid samples, total n=3196, details see Yao/Badham 2007, pp. 11-28 and 246-256). REST, in contrast, is based on a stratified random sampling procedure based on the household registry of Taiwan. It closely follows the *Taiwan Social Change Survey* (TSCS), a longitudinal study of highest reliability in Taiwan conducted annually by the Academia Sinica. Although the sample contains only 1,714 valid responses, which is below the target sample size (about 2000), the validity of REST has to be estimated as “reasonably representative” (p. 276, for details about the questionnaire design and sampling design see pp. 271-276).

While REST also offers rich data on religious conceptions, behaviour, ideas and beliefs, it is centred on tracing “religious

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experience” – a concept according to Finke inspired by William James (1842-1910) (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1961) and Alister Hardy’s (1896-1985) categorization, culminating in a definition of religious experience as “the experience of encountering alterity deemed religious, mystical, transcendental, extraordinary or anomalous.” (p.12) The main part of the questionnaire is divided into four sections: (1) “power” (*liliang* 力量), (2) “insight of life” (*rensheng* 人生), (3) “dreams” (*mengjing* 夢境), and (4) “mysterious feelings and visions” (*yijue, yixiang* 異覺, 異象). Each of these categories has been carefully developed by looking at indigenous ways of expressing what in the internationally comparative perspective might be associated with the far vaguer idea of “religious experiences”. In one question (no. 59), short narrations of mysterious or extraordinary experience have been collected that are employed throughout the whole book.

The publication presents articles that analyse the data gathered by the survey. In Part I, a general overview is followed by chapters about individual religious traditions. The self-denotification of interviewees with regard to the question of religious belonging largely forms the basis for a short account of the respective religion’s history in Taiwan and the outcome of the survey. Anyone who knows about the short history of the differential category “religion” in China and Taiwan (see Goossaert, Vincent: *The Concept of Religion in China and the West*, in: *Diogenes* 52:1 (2005), 13-20), also knows about the problems caused by a categorization based on self-denoted religious belonging. As the main analytical framework such a categorization may prove highly distorting. The problems show themselves, for example, in the volume’s discussions on “syncretism” (p.64 and elsewhere throughout the book). The use of the term “syncretism” is the logical, if unreflected, consequence of an analytical framework that is premised on the western idea of distinct religious traditions that are clearly demarcated at first and then enter into “syncretistic” mixtures. Part I concludes with a reflection on the responses to question no. 59, short narrations of “religious experiences” that are interpreted using the categories of occasion, modes, and object and interpretation.

Part II focuses on a thematic exploration of the relations between religious experience, on the one hand, and education, conversion, political conservatism, and gender on the other. The book’s appeal lies in its repeated comparisons with China. The chapters on Buddhism (chap. 3), Christianity (chap. 6), the Non-religious (chap. 7), and Confucian Culture (chap. 8), as well as the thematic explorations all benefit from this comparative perspective, while the chapter on “Embodied Modes” (chap. 9) contains a compelling analysis of the terminological options, the inherent structure of which matches well the findings of the analysis of the narrations.

In general, this book is a highly welcome complementary source of information about contemporary religion in Taiwan. Its particular value lies in its comparative perspective on Taiwanese and mainland Chinese religiosity. The contributions show a high level of reflexivity and offer insightful background explanations. It is presented in well-written, academic English (despite a small number of typos). Chinese terminology is given in brackets, when helpful. The appendix provides an outline of the English and Chinese questionnaire responses with percentages of simple frequencies given in brackets. Regrettably, this dataset is not freely available online as is the case for the TSCS.

While the statistical and sociological methods applied in this study are sound, the questionnaire is highly sensitive to local imaginations and concepts. The articles would have benefited from a critical discussion of the concept of “religious experience” as well as the problems inherent in the use of non-indigenous categories of religious belonging as a structural principle of the volume (see e.g. the article by Goossaert mentioned above). The concept of “religious experience”, with its close connection to William James and Alister Hardy, dates back decades and is suspected of continuing a mission to search for an “unconceivable mystery” thought to persist and to be experienced in “modern societies”. Religious studies as a discipline has reflected intensively on such implicit assumptions (e.g. Robert H. Sharf: “Experience”, in: *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor, Chicago: Chicago UP 1998, 94-116). The volume would have benefitted from explicit references to this discourse.

Current research on contemporary religion in China based mainly on qualitative data and in-depth sociological and anthropological fieldwork has been rapidly developing over the last few years and might put future comparisons on a new basis (see, for instance, the studies by Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous response: Doing popular religion in contemporary China* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006]; Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* [Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011]; Zhe Ji and Vincent Goossaert, “Social implications of Buddhist revival in China,” *Social Compass. International Review of Sociology of Religion* 58:4 [2011]; Thomas Jansen, Thoralf Klein, and Christian Meyer, eds., *Globalization and the Making of Religious Modernity in China: Transnational Religions, Local Agents, and the Study of Religion, 1800-Present* [Leiden: Brill, 2014]).

Nevertheless, this book is to be strongly recommended to scholars and students interested in the religious field in contemporary Taiwan and China. Anyone with a knowledge of the statistical data on religion in East Asia will find it a highly useful, well-designed study which both complements the findings of the *Taiwan Social Change Survey* and allows to draw comparisons with the Chinese mainland – comparisons that are destined to attract increasing academic interest in the future.

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Rawnsley
I just want to echo Gary's comments and to alert to readers who may be interested in Routl...

24 May 2015 / Gary Rawnsley
Thanks for the inclusion, Jon. Readers may also be interested in the newly published Routl...

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